

Building a professional identity in flexible times: The case of Chilean university professors

Construyendo identidad(es) académica(s) en tiempos flexibles: Profesores universitarios chilenos

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Background

In Chile, approximately 60% of university professors have a flexible or hourly workday similar to other countries in Latam. The flexible modality arose from the need to maintain a link with the professional field. This logic would allow the teacher not to have commitments that constrain their independence for the development of their professional activities but also contribute to society or alma mater. However, this strategy has been positioned, in many cases, under conditions of job insecurity. In the field of academic identity, research has focused on the figure of the academic whose main task would be research and secondarily teaching.

Aims

The research was aimed at reconstructing the central axes from which the development of an academic identity in Chilean university professors would be sustained, taking institutional linkage as a disintegrating dimension and teaching work as a congregating dimension. The purpose of the research is to reveal the multiplicity of conditions in which the university works in the XXI century in Chile and how these expand or limit the possibilities framework for meaning construction of academic work.

Method & procedures

We used a qualitative approach with a biographical-narrative approach through case studies with life story techniques. One way of approaching identity construction is through the idea of narrative thinking proposed by Bruner (2003), who emphasizes that properly human narrative allows the construction of stories that define a self in situations in which we will continue to live. Thus, identity would derive mainly from the stories that "we tell ourselves to put those fragments together" or those events and situations that become experience and material to build stories. The narrative would offer a flexible and easily accessible means of dealing with project results and expectations. In this context, Ricoeur (2006) provides a central element in the conceptualization of narrative operation, namely, the construction of the plot. This would be a temporary synthesis of heterogeneous elements that includes the succession of events, their integration, culmination and closure, thanks to which the story receives a configuration. Thus, the narration reaches crucial importance on two levels: an action (the act of narrating) and a product. This story allows organizing and giving a sense of continuity and rupture to the vital experience. Under a qualitative approach, 12 academics (with diverse assignments in contract, tasks and disciplines) participated from universities of different complexity. We developed common categories and differentiating aspects by constructing practice reports and their subsequent analysis using narrative and structural techniques.

Results & discussion

Four lines of results are presented. First, how important is higher education as a starting marker in the professional story and its subsequent academic career milestones (specialization, finding or losing a job, hierarchy, research funds). Second, the institution-academic relationship that places the narrator in a specific position (inside or in the border). Third, is the teaching practice assessment (creating links, responsibilities, and difficulties). And fourthly, the central motivations of teaching work: mission, curiosity and recognition.

Conclusion

It is discussed how the stories make visible the current problems of the construction of meaning of university work in a markedly managerial context. Despite the above, according to the stories, teaching is still a relevant identity marker. It has been proposed that teaching in higher education should be studied in the light teaching horizons (Guzmán & Barnett, 2013). These allude to the fact that the meaning that people build when carrying out the teaching would have a greater scope than the concrete level of the practice. We consider this proposal consistent with the results found. The participants point out their work not only as a teacher at the level of individual experiences and the actions they carry out for teaching, but also the purposes and value that this task has for themselves and others. This complexity places the effort of work in a less pragmatic and more professional dimension in the broad sense of the concept (Kreber, 2019). Thus, the teaching task becomes a complex activity. The multiplicity of tasks, the teaching position in the institution and its appraisal can stress the effort associated with teaching excellence (Arvaja, 2018; Brew, 2020).

Keywords: academic identity, narrative teaching, managerial university

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