

TRAIL: Navigating multiple identities of Teacher/ Researcher/ Artist/ Leadership in Academia

Introduction:

Conceptualising one's academic self in relation to the multiple roles and identities that present themselves in academia can be an overwhelming, consuming and isolating experience. We, Una and Michael, have similar professional biographies in teacher arts education in Ireland. This chapter maps, tracks and unpacks the trail which we have followed as we pursue our multiple identities of Teacher, Researcher, Artist and Leader over the past two decades in the field of initial teacher arts/ education. Our arts based explorations investigate the lived experiences of these disparate, but often intertwined and sometimes conflicting roles. Grounded by theory concerning arts leadership, identity, and self-recreation, and using a narrative inquiry and arts-based approach, we interrogate our respective professional biography within the broader context of educational change and development to seek points of alignment, intersection and collaboration. We critically and dialogically reflect on how we strive to remain true to our values, beliefs and ambitions whilst progressing the priorities, needs and strategies of school, university or external stakeholders.

Introduction-Arts Educators as Leaders in Academia:

To contextualise the leadership roles which we have both experienced, we examine literature with specific reference to arts educators as leaders: A comprehensive study of the perspectives of academic leaders in Ireland (The Irish Universities Association,

2016) reports on the multiple roles of Heads of Schools/Departments and the extensive administrative duties to which they must attend. Leaders interviewed reported a desire for their role to be more strategic, more academic and less operational. A study of creative arts teaching and learning leadership finds that leaders in the arts identify the importance of and desire to work beyond the operational sphere to focus on the visionary, knowing and thinking strategically, innovating, communicating, motivating and inspiring aspects of their work (de la Harte and Mason, 2014, p.136). Arts pedagogy, regardless of the art form, requires the educator to be facilitative, open, imaginative, focussed on possibilities and interested in communication through multiple methods. For those characteristics of the arts educator to be evident, the environment must be supportive. In particular, for the educator who has an artistic practice, the desire to have a working life which enables spontaneity is important. The structures and processes associated with the heavy administration demands of academic leadership cannot always by their nature include opportunities for imagination and spontaneity.

So what leads academics in the arts, as we are, to leadership roles? It is the case that academic leaders are often selected on the basis of having proven themselves as capable scholars, but they may have little experience in leadership (North, Patton and Coulter 2021, p. 704). Leadership roles are complex and the transition from academic to leader can be overwhelming. A quality that makes a department leader successful is becoming advocate rather than adversary (Brody Nooner 2024) and it may be this that attracts or convinces the arts academic leader to take on the role and enables them to succeed. Arts educators are usually familiar with sustaining a collaborative fight for the status and even existence of their subjects in

curricula and policy (Beveridge 2021; Saunders and Stinson 2016). That struggle often drives a passion to advocate for the arts areas, and those who teach them, both in their institutions and in the public domain. Furthermore, the personal trait of creativity, while not exclusive to arts academics, enables the application of imagination to the complex scenarios and situations in which an academic leader will find themselves, thus enabling success (Hovanec 2023).

Creativity as a characteristic may both enable and constrain the complex, multifaceted identities that arts academics often embody. A counter argument can be found in sociological research which suggests that “the individual is not simply defined by one identity evolved from societal structures, but rather by various ones” (Scheuringer, 2016, p. 397). All of us navigate multiple identities in some way, behaving and interacting differently depending on the role and the sociocultural context in which we find ourselves. In the university context, arts leaders are teachers, researchers, mentors, managers, administrators, collaborators, colleagues, and also artists. Each of these roles comes with its own set of institutional and societal expectations and responsibilities, even though the role of head of department is a temporary one. We embarked on this research to explore the intersections of these tensions, using the method of thinking to which we are drawn, which is an arts based approach.

Personal/Professional Biographies:

We have both worked in teacher education for approximately twenty five years. Our undergraduate degrees were: Drama Studies, followed by a postgraduate qualification in teaching (Una), and a Bachelor of Education (Michael). Both of us taught in schools for a number of years. We studied at Masters and then Doctoral level, related to Drama

and Visual Art respectively, while also working full time. A new primary school curriculum was introduced in Ireland in 1999 which created a number of new arts posts in teacher education, enabling our transition to academia. We agree that our passion for our subject areas was formed in childhood and schooling experiences, and we both feel that continued curiosity about our subject areas is what has sustained our academic journey. We both worked in smaller colleges before joining the same larger education faculty in a university. Our leadership experience is as follows: Michael-Head of department from 2006 until 2019; Una-Head of department since 2022. We both consistently pursue research and our own practice in the arts. Una's professional identity as a drama practitioner shapes her personal values, emphasising the importance of honouring each individual's contributions, perspectives, and emotions. She values risk-taking, playfulness and experimentation as essential aspects of learning. The drama-based principle of collaborative growth and discovery has inspired her to explore new roles within the university. Michael's professional identity as an art practitioner with a generalist teaching, and community/ arts/ education background values the expressive, integrated and empowering nature of learning. Principles around inclusion, collaboration, and innovation inspired him to explore new roles within the university. Both Michael and Una saw leadership as an opportunity to promote, support and advocate for the arts within the university context.

Methodologies:

In order to explore our experience of our multiple academic roles, we adopted an arts-based approach of inquiry using "frottage: a process of 'finding' images by making,

and then erasing, an uneven ground” (Pindyck, 2018, p. 13). Frottage is a technique of creating textured rubbings from surfaces and uncovering hidden patterns, meanings, and narratives. We chose the method as it enables an engagement with the material world in tactile and intuitive ways, which then renders a form of visual storytelling. The process requires deep observation and reflection, enabling researchers to explore questions in order to arrive at findings which emerge aesthetically and are “a result of chance, choice and invention” (Pindyck 2018, p.23). To commence the process we went to an open area on our campus grounds as it is a place to which we are both drawn, due to its bucolic nature, in contrast to the utilitarian buildings in which we spend much of our time. The process involved physical and tactile interaction with our campus trees as means of reflecting deeply and metaphorically on the *textures, patterns and rhythms* of our TRAIL identities and experiences. Using several sheets of paper and a black crayon, we obtained many crayon rubbings of leaves, twigs and tree bark. While we stayed in the same vicinity, we searched and captured our prints independently and mindfully with limited conversational exchange. When we returned to our art teaching studio, we laid out the rubbings and began a process of attentive looking and reflection while framing sections of symbolic significance with black paper from our frottages (figures 1-7). To extend the richness of the approach we added discussion in the form of dialogic reflection (Adj, 2021; Brown and Sawyer, 2016; Wakeman, 2018), whereby we presented, responded and connected with respect to what the rubbings conveyed in relation to TRAIL. This performative exchange was followed by a few days of individual time to concretise our thoughts about TRAIL in print (text). Utilising a thematic analytical

approach, we extracted three key themes of commonality from our written reflections (Braun and Clarke, 2022, 2022b).

Our research questions asked:

1. How have we navigated the opportunities, expectations and challenges encountered when various teacher/ researcher or leadership opportunities come our way?
2. What resolutions, compromises or deficits have we experienced in meeting the needs of these disparate, but often intertwined and sometimes conflicting roles?
3. How has our arts based approach of frottage and reflection helped us with this inquiry?

Mapping, Tracking and Unpacking using Frottage as Inquiry:



Figure 1: Leaf Frottage (Michael) Figure 2: Branch Rubbing (Una)

Roles which are “interacting but not quite connecting”:

Una: “The section that first resonated with me was the branch rubbing (Figure 2). The lines in the central scaffold visually represent the dual roles that I feel I must visibly occupy and inhabit as a leader and an academic colleague. The shading between the lines shows the blurring between those roles and how the separation or distinction between them can be muddy rather than clear. The darkest line represents to me the role of academic leader as that is the one that dominates my current existence as it inevitably is the most time consuming and demanding role”.

Michael: “When I look at and reflect on my “leaf” frottage (figure 1), I am drawn to a particular section that shows different leaf shapes interacting but not quite connecting. It reminds me of the task in hand of trying to conceptualise one’s academic self in relation to one’s multiple roles and identities of Teacher, Researcher, Artist and Leader. The diversity of leaf impressions remind me of previous leadership experiences that served several disciplines, programmes and departments. Each had different dynamics, cultures, processes, personalities and needs. The challenge was ensuring everyone felt valued, supported and led while trying to find connections, alignments and complementarities in order to progress the department or school as a whole. While the leaf rubbings are different in relation to shape and scale, their vein structure is similar, reminiscent of how different disciplines and programmes within any given department or school share common responsibilities and ambitions regarding the quality of their teaching, learning, research, strategy and vision”.

“New insights and avenues to explore”:

Una: “As the stem extends in Figure 2, the lines evolve from two clear lines to three more disjointed lines which are less defined. This aligns with my lived experience of the role because, as I have now been in the role a number of years, I feel that my skills and multiple roles have expanded. Experience creates new insights and avenues to explore, through which the department can be enhanced and expanded. This has to happen within the same envelope of time, so inevitably each role is less defined or distinct but I am better able to navigate them simultaneously. The spur lines helped me to reflect on those aspects of my role which are essential to my identity as an arts education academic but require a departure from the core task of the demands of leadership. They represent the societal and academic expectations of research and teaching which, if they are to be of quality, need dedicated time which can be difficult to find”.

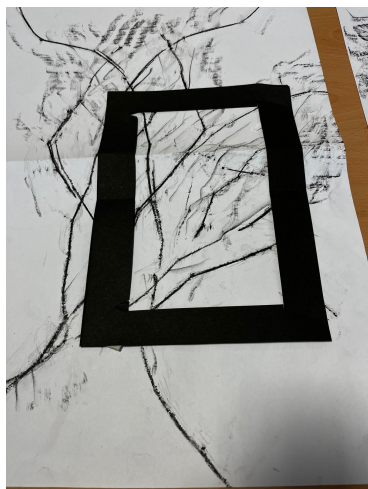


Figure 3 Twig Frottage (Michael)

Michael: “When I look at, reflect on my “twig” frottage (figure 3) I think about different leadership roles, responsibilities and challenges I had with regard to aiding or initiating programme growth, development and innovation. Tree twigs as opposed to more seasoned branches grow buds akin to new ideas, initiatives and innovations. Like twigs,

these three I's are flexible, adaptable and responsive to organisational change. The challenge of course is that a lot of twigs and buds can be developing at the same time but not all ideas, initiatives and innovations are feasible or fruitful. I think part of one's role as leader is to give due time, patience and support to any given initiative but also equip oneself with the research, disposition and intuition to decide to either propagate or prune".



Figure 4 Bark frottage (Michael) Figure 5 Woodgrain frottage (Michael)

“Dealing with the urgent to the neglect of the important”:

Michael: “These images (figures 4 and 5) remind me of how leadership feels.

Leadership entails taking the rough with the smooth. At times it can feel heavy and relentless especially if one feels one is mostly dealing with the urgent to the neglect of the important. But leadership at other times can feel exciting, positive and rewarding. I can recall key times when I felt a sense of accomplishment of having made a positive impact on people, a policy, a project or programme. There is also the privilege of getting to know colleagues in a different light with regard to their professional ambitions or

insecurities and helping them to achieve the former or overcome the latter by providing constructive advice or other tangible support. The woodgrain frottage fragment framed by the viewfinder depicting multiple knots reminds me of trying to balance multiple identities. Self as artist, researcher and teacher have a leadership dimension that necessitates lifelong learning through studio work, reading, writing, researching, planning, evaluating, conferencing and disseminating. Adapting, evolving and innovating to emergent technologies, pedagogies, and research priorities is an ongoing expectation and activity of leaders in academia. Self as leader, in addition to all of the former, also requires continual professional development and much learning on the job. Hence, my library of reading materials evidences a learning to lead as much as a learning to create, teach, research and publish”.

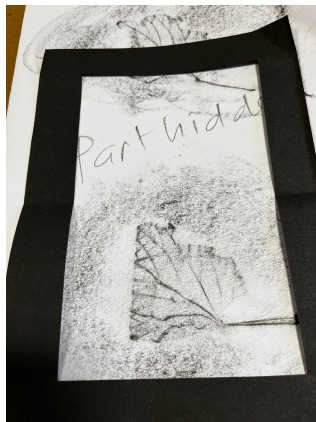


Figure 6 Leaf frottage (Una)

Una: “The image that resonates with me in a similar way is the leaf rubbing. (Figure 6). I found the lines creative aesthetically pleasing which documented for me the importance of creativity as a foundation for how I want to approach my leadership role and the values I wish to promote. The truncated section depicts a part of myself which I feel is hidden while I undertake a leadership role, as the demands of the role mean that I cannot always apply imagination or progress my artistic self. Additionally, I am aware

that my personal circumstances or needs must be concealed. The caring, pastoral dimension of being a head of department is pivotal to success and satisfaction, but typical academic structures don't provide for the same pastoral care for the person in the leadership role".

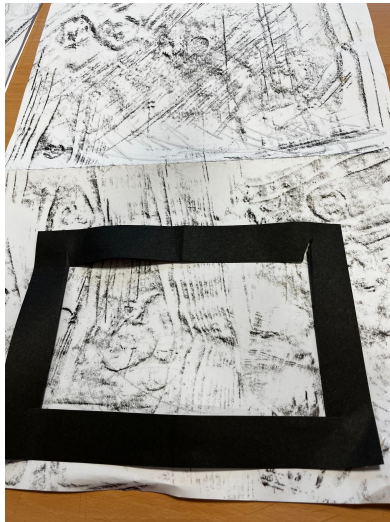


Figure 7 Ground Surface frottage (Una)

“It can feel like one has abandoned the arts completely”:

Una: “Here (figure 7) I moved the viewfinder to locate what I see as a representation of the map of my journey over the last decades. There are clear tracks, and they are separate yet aligned over time. They are the multiple interests which have sustained me throughout my academic career to date, of drama pedagogy, theatre practice, research, writing, early childhood education and play. At the start of my career I felt like a wanderer in the arts, at times directionless. Now looking back I can see that those passions led me from origin to destination even if at times the tracks weren't clear to me. The image reminds me that all of my colleagues are on similar journeys which are usually deeply connected to passions formed by experiences early in their lives, and all of us want to make our mark in some way. In a leadership role, the marks we leave

behind take on a particular significance in our desire to leave the department we lead in some way improved as we depart. Other shapes are evident in the image, and one seemed to me an enclosed forest. This represents for me another option perhaps not taken, at some fork in the road unrecognised by me. It has been said to me at various times in various ways throughout my career- “you’re creative-would you not have done something different?”. This reflects an often held perception from those outside academia that it is an uncreative career and in an academic leadership role, given the time spent on policy, human resources, budgets, etcetera, it can feel one has abandoned the arts completely”.

Michael: “The section framed with the viewfinder comprises layers of line reminiscent of the piles of documentation relating to the likes of vision, strategy, quality review, policies and procedures, performance reviews, budgets and programme handbooks. Also included in the frame is a cluster of more amorphous texture and pattern which reminds me of managing the complexity of everyone’s lives and how it can impact work. I see a similar narrative in my “woodgrain” frottage, (figure 5), I notice the wood fibre patterns, concentric ring patterns and knot designs. Woodgrain pattern varies depending on the species and age of the wood. Some fibres run in parallel, creating a layered and uniform look. Some patterns undulate, forming smooth and flowing lines. Other patterns move in different directions, creating a kind of cross-hatched or concentric effect”.

Teacher/Researcher/Artist/Leader: Navigating the Crossroads

Our dialogic reflections indicate shared experiences and thinking regarding the intersection of TRAIL identities in relation to expectations, relationships, professional

development and general emotional load. Each discrete identity requires time to learn, grow and evolve which can be difficult to navigate especially when a specific leadership role calls. The latter demands meeting and surpassing other and more external ambitions and expectations set at a departmental, institutional or societal level. Consequently, self as leader tends to overshadow the others as it inevitably becomes a more time consuming and demanding role. Our reflections lament an inevitable temporary loss, dilution or neglect of our creative practice as leadership necessitated the transfer of that care, oversight and persistence to the likes of policy, projects and personnel concerns. Interestingly, that lapse in practice is not mentioned in our reflections in relation to our teacher and researcher identities indicating that from a TRAIL perspective, creative practice is the first to be 'pruned' to allow space for leadership to 'blossom'. Like our campus trees, our reflections indicate the time spent on seasonal operational maintenance to protect, nurture and secure a university's steady growth and progression. Echoing de la Harte and Mason (2014), they describe a shared yearning to move leadership work beyond the procedural, operational but essential level to a more visionary, missionary and transformative plane to realise the more aspirational aims and ambitions that drew us to leadership in the first place.

Intersection and Alignment:

Analysis of our reflections on our leadership experiences to date reveals the integrative nature of working in academia. While the notion of the lone scholar, researcher, teacher and artist is outmoded, there are indications in our reflections of a kind of othering or self as outsider when undertaking a leadership role. Leadership necessitates other engagement with, and contributions to various managerial committees that many

colleagues do not need to attend. Our reflections indicate while those experiences expand our skills set and offer new insights and oversights beyond our immediate teaching and research foci, it can lead to some identity disorientation. Interaction with other university schools, departments and partnerships opens eyes and minds to how one's department can be enhanced and expanded and how the complexity of the university entity components align and intersect. What especially resonates from our reflections is the importance of creativity in our leadership role (Hovanec 2023) and the process of self-recreation from leadership opportunities. Whilst structures and processes associated with the heavy administration demands of academic leadership may impinge imagination and spontaneity, we still utilised creative competence attributes in other leadership initiatives. Being creative intersects our experiences of leadership in meaningful and impactful ways just as much as it pervades our other various identities (Scheuringer, 2016).

Arts and Academic Leadership: Conflict or Creative Opportunity?

Our arts based reflections indicate that while leadership presents many personal conflicts for those in the arts, it may also suit those with the characteristics and personal traits of those who have developed and sustained a career in the arts field. The muddled separation of the images in Figure 1, which represent the dual roles as academic and leader, could be seen as reflective of the duality present in art which can be both functional and aesthetic. The reflections indicate that over time and with experience, the many roles held by the academic leader come to be lived in a manner which is multiplicitous, more blurred, but therefore co-existent. This permits a more expansive, interconnected approach to the demands of an academic leader which is

more reflective of the interdisciplinary approach of many artists and creative practitioners. A leader who can apply interdisciplinary thinking is likely to view organisational challenges and problems with adaptability and innovation, as reflected in Michael's buds in Figure 5. Both of us are drawn to images which reflect their experiences of supporting colleagues, which they see as central to academic leadership roles. Again, interdisciplinary, affective thinking is a clear asset as it can enable an approach in which multiple or conflicting needs and voices can be connected.

Conclusion:

For the academic straddling the identities of teacher/researcher/artist and leader, our research suggests that a particular level of resilience is required. To a degree, resilience is required for any new journey of course. Career advancements by their nature will bring new experiences and bring any academic into personally uncharted territories. We support the idea that the new experience of leadership and the chance it offers to make an impact on systems and people can be exhilarating, including for artists in academic leadership. However, we also highlight how the head of department role is presented with multiple previously unencountered demands which require skills and dispositions across a very wide range of standalone careers in themselves - teacher, researcher, administrator and artist. We posit that the qualities we found in the trees which we used as the source of our mapping, tracking, and unpacking of our leadership journeys may be essential for any leader who navigates multiple identities: Adaptability, Creativity and Self-care. While it might not be the case for all academic leadership contexts, our findings suggest that one's artist identity can be particularly at odds with dimensions of

one's academic leadership role. The artist thrives on spontaneity and disruption (Biesta 2017) and the artist identity is curtailed in the leadership role, pointing to the importance of self care for the leader. For both of us, the need to care for our creative selves emerged as a concern, despite the importance and potential of creativity in how we approach our leadership positions. We believe that our visual reflection deepened our understanding of the experience of leadership, and that using arts-based inquiry as a form of documentation can serve as a kind of self-care. This process helps reconnect the leadership experience to the reflective thinking of the teacher/researcher/artist—a behaviour and aptitude that can often become neglected in leadership roles. The qualities found in the trees which we used as the source of analysis of our leadership journeys may be those which are essential for the leader who navigates multiple identities: At times we have needed to temporarily shed our artistic identities, but we continued to seek nourishment from our creativity, and to seek growth in what we do. The challenges of navigating multiple identities mean that rest and conservation of energy through self care is vital in order to sustain the leadership role. There is a paradoxical nature to the various roles occupied and so valuing one's own creativity is important, as well as a belief in the benefit of application of creativity to the challenges encountered in leadership. Our reflections have enabled us to see that growing toward the light doesn't necessarily mean that the growth period is not a valuable personal and professional journey, nor that the light represents the return of the artistic self. While artistic output and engagement may have to be somewhat placed on hold in the leadership role, the artistic way of thinking, knowing and being does not, and it is a diverse and valuable addition to the university landscape. We recommend that those in

leadership roles engage in self-study, drawing inspiration from their environment and using the arts, whether through poetry, drawing, music or other forms of creative inquiry. This approach helps to make sense of the many threads and patterns within the experience, ultimately tracing a journey of growth and emerging perspectives.

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