A narrative inquiry of identity construction in academic communities of practice: voices from a Chinese doctoral student in Hong Kong

(Mark) Feng Teng

To cite this article: (Mark) Feng Teng (2019): A narrative inquiry of identity construction in academic communities of practice: voices from a Chinese doctoral student in Hong Kong, Pedagogies: An International Journal

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2019.1673164

Published online: 30 Sep 2019.
A narrative inquiry of identity construction in academic communities of practice: voices from a Chinese doctoral student in Hong Kong

(Mark) Feng Teng

Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ABSTRACT
Viewed through the lens of narrative inquiry, this study explored the doctoral experiences of a language teacher educator and examined how he constructed and reconstructed his identities through learning and research experiences in the higher education environment of Hong Kong. Grounded in the notions of “communities of practice” while using “identity” as an analytic lens, the present study examined how a doctoral student negotiated his participation and membership in his situated academic community. The case study provides in-depth understanding of major challenges for a doctoral student to negotiate competence, identities, and power relations in the academic community. These dimensions were vital to gain recognition as a legitimate old-timer in an academic community. A sense of agency was necessary to cross boundaries and shape his own learning and participation in the academic community. However, identity construction is complex in nature, influenced not only by situated experiences within an institutional setting, but also a broader societal academic community. Pedagogical implications for doctoral education were discussed.

1. Introduction
Internationally, doctoral education is acknowledged as the process by which skilled researchers are trained. Attaining academic community membership evolves in tandem with the development of a researcher identity (Cotterall, 2011). Fueled by massification, doctoral education worldwide has witnessed substantial growth and significant changes during the last decade. These changes included the expansion and diversification of doctoral programs, innovation in doctoral pedagogy, the changing modes of knowledge creation, challenges in supervision, and policies at the institutional and governmental level (Boud & Lee, 2009). Students studying towards their doctoral degrees are under challenging conditions due to the incessant discontinuity brought about by faculties and departments, as well as novel policies, rules and practices for teaching and doing research (Austin, 2002). Doctoral students are forced to make choices in the constantly shifting academic communities, and they may encounter enormous pressure on discerning the central meaning of their identities (Henkel, 2000). This trend marks a need to look further...
into the nature of doctoral students’ identity development during narratives of experience.

Although previous studies have been explored on researcher identity (Lambie & Vaccaro, 2011) and development of professional identity during doctoral experiences (Murakami-Ramalho, Militello, & Pietr, 2013), studies unraveling the nature of identity construction involved in doctoral students’ academic communities of practice are scarce. Considering that setting, while utilizing the approach of narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014) and adopting identity as a critical lens (Sfard & Prusak, 2005), the present study documents and analyzes how a language teacher educator – Bay – constructed his identity in his storied experiences while pursuing a PhD degree in the higher education community of Hong Kong. This study was conducted following a recent trend of exploring identity construction from the perspective of communities of practice (Morita, 2004; Teng, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Through detailing a qualitative case study that was informed by communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), this study contributes to advancing insight on a doctoral student’s identity construction in the academic community, and how that student engages in academic practices, overcomes potential contextual challenges, and evolves as a researcher in this highly competitive environment of higher education. The central question that guided this study was: How does the participant (re) construct his identity while pursuing his doctoral degree in the academic community?

2. Literature review

2.1. Doctoral education

Students enrolled in doctoral education programs forge their identities in a quest to gain academic community membership (Cotterall, 2011). However, doctoral education programs offer few opportunities and limited occasions for peer interaction and self-reflection (Austin, 2002). On the one hand, the doctoral journey for some students may be filled with stress and anxiety due to a sense of isolation, lack of explicit doctoral goals or expectations, insufficient understanding of academic careers, and internal worries as to whether the values of pursuing a doctoral degree would be aligned with those of the academy (Skyrme, 2007). In some situations, a few students may lose interest, take a longer time than usual to complete their doctoral program, and even discontinue (Wright & Cochrane, 2000). On the other hand, a sense of positive identity may open up new opportunities for PhD students to take on new roles within the academic community as interest and needs arise, and gradually come to realize the value of becoming a researcher (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). Evidenced in the above studies, much is left to be understood about doctoral students’ experience, and how those experiences and relationships with members of one’s network fashion and refashion personal and professional identity development.

2.2. Identity, teacher identity, and researcher identity

Among the various theoretical camps in educational research, there are different conceptualizations about identity. For example, there is a dichotomy between a structurally oriented approach towards conceptualizing identity, which regards identity as stable
and fixed, and an action-oriented approach, which delineates identity as fluid and malleable (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). Despite the contrast, the view that identity is individualized, dynamic, multifaceted, negotiable, and changing within a socio-professional environment has been widely accepted (e.g. Norton, 2016; Preece, 2016; Teng, 2018; Teng & Bui, 2018; Teng & Yip, 2019). Identity refers to the sense that an individual has of the self, including his/her self-image and self-awareness that can be captured in the stories shared by that person about himself/herself and how these are projected to and perceived by others (Richards, 2015). Identity is a product of diverse relations of power, performed through social interaction, and shaped by broader social, political, cultural, and economic processes (Norton & Early, 2011). An individual may have multiple identities. In this perspective, an individual may have a repertoire of identities that are made salient through various roles and contexts (Burke & Stets, 2009), suggesting that multiple aspects of an individual’s identity may arise from personal characteristics and social categories.

Hence, for a new-comer who transforms into an old-timer, some aspects of identity are more subject to ongoing negotiation and change while other aspects are obstinately uncooperative and unlikely to change. Some aspects of identity may even be in incompatible, leading to a state of conflict (Kreiner et al., 2006). Individuals with a positive identity may consider opportunities as a force or motivation, while others with a negative identity may regard opportunities as constraints. In this sense, some individuals may need a sense of agency to assume self-responsibility and attain the capacity for emotional regulation for personal development (Duff, 2012). Therefore, identity changes in practice, and aspects involved in identity development also change when moving from one community to a new community. A state of conflict may occur in identity construction because some aspects are stable while others are subject to modification. A sense of agency allows an individual to develop a strong sense of identity.

The review of literature on identity provides insight into teacher/researcher identity. Teacher identity was explained by Sachs (2005) as “how to be” a teacher, “how to act” as a teacher and “how to understand” teachers’ work (p. 15). As argued by Korthagen and Vasalos (2005), teacher identity refers to what it means to be a teacher. Teacher identity is not fixed or stable, but waggles over time (Teng, 2017a). The development of teacher identity can also be described as largely a non-linear process (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). In this regard, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) called for a dialogical approach in exploring the complexity and dynamics of teacher identity, for example, through a micro-analysis in describing how a teacher responds to school managers, students, and colleagues, and through a macro-analysis that explores teachers’ institutional and social-cultural conditions. Related to this, Beijaard and Meijer (2017) suggested the development of teacher identity is a process of integrating the “personal” and “professional” dimensions in becoming and acting as a teacher in the communities of practice. Consistent with teacher identity, development of researcher identity is also malleable, dynamic and fluid (Teng, 2018). The historical, social, and institutional factors influence the ways in which researcher identities are constructed and the support from community are essential to resolve conflicts in establishing a researcher identity (Norton & Early, 2011). Hence, understanding teacher/researcher identity should originate from their teaching and research practice in situated communities.
2.3. Communities of practice (CoP)

The formation of identity is an important dimension of growing and maturing as a member in a community (Pennington & Richards, 2016). A community is described as “an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98), or the prerequisite for creating a social milieu for members to “negotiate competence through the experience of direct participation” (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). Identity refers to both a product and a process resulting from the influences of various contexts on an individual (Olsen, 2008). This relationship may be as elucidated in Wenger’s (1998) framework of communities of practice, wherein an inextricable link between identity and practice in negotiating the self as a member of the communities existed. The above studies hint that engagement in a community is a source of identity development and transformation (Teng, 2019a). Members develop through participation in or across communities of practice, which are defined as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). As members go through a succession of forms of participation, their identities form trajectories, both within and across communities of practice (Teng, 2019b). While forming trajectories, identities “incorporate the past and the future in the very process of negotiating the present” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 155). In this regard, a range of trajectories representing differing paths of identity formation have emerged, connecting past and present experiences with future possibilities.

Hence, the framework of a CoP can help understand how newcomers seek integration, the extent to which they aspire to emulate practices, and how their identities can be influenced by the social experiences and support provided by members in the same CoP (Teng, 2017b; Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). According to CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), sustained participation in communities of practice – particularly when apprenticed to the knowledge and skills of the group by more expert members – leads to better learning. Wenger (2010) recognized not only that boundaries exist between communities of practice, but also that “boundaries are interesting places” as a source of learning in that the “meetings of perspectives can be rich in new insights and radical innovations” (p. 183). Hence, it is at the boundaries between communities of practice that productive dynamics can be forged, as innovations and ideas produced in one domain are translated into others. It is here that “knowledge brokers” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 154), with membership in multiple communities, can act as “translators” while moving from this community to a new one.

CoP can be applied to learning communities. For example, when members in a CoP accomplish their commitment on an ongoing basis, they interact with one another to clarify their work and to define and even change how the work is done, for which they share in a “joint enterprise” or “mutual engagement” (Wenger, 1998, p. 23). In teacher knowledge communities, teachers also build and develop their identities relative to the community through mutual engagement. This also provides insight into the interpretation that the process for new-comers learning to participate competently and appropriately in the academic community is like a process of gaining competence and membership in the new community, and identity is (re) constructed during this process. A new-comer’s entering into an academic community may be far more complex than the
process of appropriating established knowledge and skills because the progression of academic community engagement is associated with struggles over access to resources, conflicts, and negotiations between varying viewpoints arising from differing degrees of experience and expertise (Alberto, 1995; Teng, 2018). In addition, during this process, identity is constructed and reconstructed, and a new comer needs to cross multiple boundaries in the process of negotiating and combining ideas or concepts from seemingly unrelated domains into the domain of focal inquiry, e.g. becoming a researcher.

Overall, in view of the power differentials among members, the complex nature of negotiations, and the different levels of access to the community, new-comers in a CoP may not receive sufficient support from old-timers towards membership and participation. This situation ultimately affects their status as potential experts and legitimate members in the academic community. This lack of support can explain the complex nature of academic enculturation, for which the constitutive aspects of “mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire” need to be considered (Wenger, 1998). Hence, gaining legitimacy in a new community is not a process of peaceful transmission and assimilation but a conflictual process of negotiation and transformation. The community/institutional, interpersonal, and personal dimensions need to be considered in a holistic way rather than viewed as separate or hierarchical, and more studies in this line are needed.

3. The present study

3.1. Narrative inquiry as a research method

Narrative inquiry is an effective means to elicit ideas about who people are, how they view themselves and how they act (Czarniawska-Joerges, 2004). Through a collection of narratives, “people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and they try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 3). This can help us determine how participants’ experiences or lives produce their personal and professional identities (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Narrative inquiry has been regarded as a powerful research tool that can provide insight into various identities emerging from individuals’ social practice (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). For example, in a previous study (Yuan, 2017), narrative inquiry was used as a research methodology to broaden, burrow, and explore a Hong Kong language teacher educator’s teaching and research practice. Although Elliott (2005) argued that narrators inevitably distort their experiences in an attempt to make sense of these events, this pitfall can be avoided by building a good rapport between the investigator and the participant, and by motivating the participant to share real experiences. Bay, the participant in the present study, commented that this research might, to some extent, help him build self-awareness and awareness of his professional work. This type of reciprocity between researchers and participants while conducting narrative inquiry studies is an effective means to ensure trustworthiness of collected data (Creswell, 2007).

The present study considered the three dimensions of the narrative inquiry space as proposed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). First, the dimension of “time” was focused on in an attempt to explore Bay’s previous experiences, present engagement, and future plans as a researcher. This dimension was assumed to correspond with the temporal and
fluid attributes of identity (Gee, 2001). Second, the dimension of personal factors was incorporated to discover how his identity as a researcher emerged and shifted in relation to his inward emotions and outward practice while doing research. Finally, the institutional and socio-cultural environment was reflected on with the purpose of exploring the dimension of “context” in the development of his identity as a researcher.

3.2. Research context and participant

At the outset of this study, research invitations were sent to five language teacher educators in Hong Kong. Research participants were needed for in-depth interviews and to provide the investigator with access to their field. Two participants agreed to take part in the study. As the study was focused on exploring identity construction during language teacher educators’ doctoral journey, Bay, who was actively engaged in academic research and writing during his doctoral pursuit, was selected from the two cases. The other participant, who was not engaged in publishing experiences, was not added in this study. This narrative case study explored how a novice PhD student enacted himself as an academic researcher in a specifically institutional and socio-political context. Although the results may not be generalized to other contexts, this study provides an in-depth analysis of doctoral experiences, including doctoral writing, doctoral supervision, personal and academic tensions, doctoral pedagogy, and the role of emotions in the doctoral experience. In addition, the richness of the data can help researchers obtain a clearer perception of the development pattern of identity emerging from doctoral experiences.

Bay stated that he was a researcher with six years of tertiary-level teaching experience. He was born and raised in mainland China and became a middle school English teacher after acquiring a BA degree in English from a university in mainland China. After teaching at a middle school in mainland China for four years, he left his job and pursued an MA degree at X University (pseudonym) in Hong Kong. After one year, he was accepted for an MPhil program, and following another year, he joined a PhD program. In total, he spent four years completing his MA and PhD degrees. After graduation, he joined the English department at Y University (pseudonym) in Hong Kong, where he was also appointed as an assistant professor on a contract basis. At present, with six years of experience, he has been promoted to Associate Professor. This study focused on his doctoral experiences. A voluntary informed consent was obtained from Bay who was informed that he was free to withdraw from the study at any time. The confidentiality of the data was assured, and pseudonym was used to maintain the participant’s anonymity.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through three rounds of interviews. Each interview round lasted around two-three hours. The first two rounds of interviews were conducted face to face, while the last round was conducted via telephone due to the participant’s lack of time. The first interview was conducted at the onset of the study, aimed at understanding Bay’s educational background and experience in relation to his perception of being a researcher. The second interview round focused on his doctoral experience, how he presumed an identity as a researcher, and how he dealt with the possible identity clashes during his PhD pursuit. The last interview round attempted to gather his overall reflection
on the complete academic journey of doing research and writing. The last round also involved a discussion about any changes in his identities and the possible personal, institutional, and socio-cultural factors motivating the changes. The languages used for the interviews were either Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese, which are native languages of both the investigator and the participant. Both felt comfortable using either of the two languages. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the investigator, and sent to the participant for further cross-verification and annotation. During the interviews, the investigator sought to engage with Bay in evocative conversation, for example, through explicitly asking for stories, actively posing questions, prompting for meaningful responses, and expressing personal understanding (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). When Bay shared critical events or stories, the investigator prompted him to provide more details about the specific issues pertaining to his identity as a researcher. This approach furnished insight into the story characters, plots, contexts, and his internal thoughts, feelings, reflections, and reactions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition to interviews, the investigator also shared informal communication with the participant through social media platforms (e.g. WeChat), through which he shared more personal feelings and critical events. This type of informal exchange also strengthened the rapport between the investigator and the participant, which helped validate the interview data. The investigator played a reflective role during the data collection. As a qualitative researcher, he engaged in chronic negotiation and construction of meaning with the participant by listening to his stories, sharing his personal ideas, and eliciting more reflections from the participant.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, all collected data were subject to rigorous analytical procedures. First, cyclical analysis was conducted throughout the study and the data were refined when required at each phase of the collection. Therefore, there was a very strong interplay between the data collection and analysis, which resonates with Richards’ (2003) proposal that there is neither a distinct stage nor a discrete process in qualitative analysis. Secondly, a summative evaluation was also conducted, for which the interview transcripts were carefully and chronologically coded then reviewed for recurrent themes related to Bay’s identity construction during the doctoral journey. Finally, the findings were shared with Bay for a cross-validation, then the themes were re-examined in depth by rechecking the original data and extracting mini-stories.

4. Research findings

4.1. Identity construction over time: from a novice doctoral student to a seasoned researcher

Prior to pursuing his MA degree, Bay had not thought about pursuing a PhD degree in the future. Perceiving that a master’s degree was sufficient for his future career development, the motivation to pursue a PhD degree was absent in his imagined self-realization. His use of “why” showed that his academic identity was not developed during the initial phase of his academic career. Bay expressed,

I had a very stable job. My job of teaching English at a middle school belonged to the employment system of public-sector organizations. With a master’s degree, I could return to
my previous school for promotion. Why I should sacrifice my stable job to earn an insecure future? (Interview 1)

Motivated and inspired by the positive outlook of his teachers, professionals, friends, and his personal achievement in studies, his academic identity emerged. There appeared to be a reciprocal relationship between “internal identities” (what we think ourselves to be), “expressed identities” (what we pretend to be), and “observed identities” (what others think of us to be) (Alberto, 1995). Peer networks with Bay’s classmates, teachers, and friends helped him to gain cognizance of his self-deﬁnitions and enabled him to find the meaning of pursuing a PhD. Bay stated,

I secured ‘A’ grades in most of my courses. My classmates, friends, and teachers also encouraged me to get a PhD. But my inner voices told me that I should go back to mainland China and be a middle school teacher. It was the encouragement from my teachers and friends that made me recognize the value of getting a PhD. (Interview 1)

However, he had to overcome a difficult situation with his family to pursue his dream. It was his internal belief that pushed him to continue towards a PhD. Bay expressed,

My parents were worried about my PhD study. They insisted on the disadvantage of losing a stable job for taking a PhD. They also stated worries about job-hunting after graduation with a PhD. I told them having a PhD degree was my dream. (Interview 1)

One year later after taking the PhD program, Bay still regarded himself as a novice doctoral student who had only recently put his feet into higher education. He encountered great challenges in establishing an identity as a researcher. One of the challenges was his lack of writing ability. For example, while he had received his Bachelor and Master of Education as an English major and had been teaching English for several years, he still found it difficult to write academically in English.

I started to write for publication. I was very scared and uncertain of expressing my ideas in a paper. Looking back, writing was never easy. I could not even use ‘a’, ‘an’, and ‘the’ appropriately in an academic paper after years of reading and writing. (Interview 2)

The third year was a critical period for Bay to position himself in the academic community. Along with the progress of his doctoral research, he developed his academic identity. In order to secure a central participation in the academic community, Bay pointed out the importance of research publication. Bay’s identity development was a learning trajectory that incorporated the past and the future in a process of negotiating the present. Bay expressed,

Based on my prior experiences and the standard of being a qualiﬁed researcher in the future, what I need to do at the current moment is to publish. I tell myself again and again that publication is the entry permit to the academic community. (Interview 2)

However, Bay encountered difficulties in data analysis and interpretation. This could have posed a risk to the successful completion of the proposed research. Bay’s sense of agency motivated him to meet the program’s research requirement. Bay expressed,

The most difficult part for me was to do statistics analysis, data interpretation and explanation. I spent a lot of time trying different methods of statistics analysis. I tried to avoid detours, but the fact was that I spent a lot of time in running in circles. Then I realized the most important thing for a PhD was to learn how to conduct self-directed learning. A supervisor is only a guide. (Interview 2)
After spending days and nights analyzing and organizing data, he developed some ideas and put them into his paper. His confidence soared after seeing it published after several rounds of revisions. He sensed his identity as a researcher. He reported,

I didn’t have any sense of being a researcher until I had my first article published in a renowned journal after several rounds of revision. (Interview 3)

In the final year, Bay began to participate in academic community activities, for example, presenting research findings at international conferences. This helped him to construct his identity as a member of the academic community. Bay commented,

It was a great pleasure for me to attend international conferences. During conferences, I interacted with several researchers with expertise and experience. These conversations widened my horizon. (Interview 2)

Bay’s endeavor to publish practical papers signifies his identity as a researcher. His publishing experiences brought him a sense of belonging as a member in the academic community. The evolution of identity strengthened his willingness and agency to conduct research independently. He stated,

Getting a paper published is like winning a war. This process reminded me that it was rewarding to be a researcher. Through those publications, I formed a sense that I should be more self-regulated in writing and publishing in the future. (Interview 3)

Attendance at conferences and articles publication can be defined as “expanded spaces” (Gutiérrez & Larson, 2007). The expanded spaces were Bay’s newly constructed activities in the PhD program, leading Bay to perceive a collectively shared motive, which drove him to exert more effort as a member of the academic community. Being a part of CoP gradually turned into driven structures that ensured his agentive behaviors in forming an identity as an academic researcher. Bay reported,

Attending international conferences and publishing in international journals brought me more recognition as a legitimate member of the academic community. I earned recognition. I told myself I need to be a researcher because everyone is watching me. (Interview 3)

4.2. Personal emotions and tensions in identity construction during doctoral experience

Bay described his doctoral study as a struggling process full of “mounting pressures on top of the thesis”. He was uncertain as to whether he could be a part of the community, in which established researchers work together in a social context. According to him, he felt lost because it was difficult for him to enter the academic group as an outsider. Bay stated,

The process of doctoral study is a period of mounting pressures on top of the thesis. Everybody is saying that a PhD without a published paper is a bareheaded doctor. I don’t want to be a bareheaded doctor. I worried about whether doing a PhD was the right path for me. It was difficult to enter any academic group as I was treated as an outsider. (Interview 2)

In addition, stress was unavoidable during doing research. Bay stated that although a PhD student should manage emotion and maintain patience while analyzing data, he lacked knowledge of effective ways to manage emotional highs and lows. He reported,
What troubled me most was the laborious coding process, which was time-consuming. Although I knew I had to control my emotional flux, I didn’t know how to find the hidden patterns that were not apparently visible in data analysis and interpretation. I set a target, but I could not see the way to the target. (Interview 2)

The implicit rules determined how Bay should function in the academic community. Bay expressed he had no choice but to accept the hidden rules. As a “novice researcher”, he felt vulnerable in dealing with the hidden rules. He stated,

There were certain embedded rules that made me feel vulnerable. On the one hand, you are expected to do original work independently. On the other hand, you need guidance from your supervisor. I had a difficult time finding my way to do research and get my findings published. It was really difficult to get a paper published for a novice researcher like me. (Interview 3)

In addition, the process of analyzing the data was also a process of struggling to construct identities within the academic community. This was particularly obvious for Bay, and the reason why he kept silent and felt lost for some time. He expressed,

I was the youngest PhD student in my department. I didn’t have much academic experience. I was suddenly assigned to a role in which I needed to assume responsibility for data analysis. I lost my direction for some time. I wanted to ask for help. But I kept silent because I didn’t know anybody who could offer help. It was difficult for me to make a friend in this competitive academic community. (Interview 2)

While overcoming personal tensions pursuing a PhD, Bay expressed the necessity for a high degree of learner control. According to Bay, learner-driven behaviors were necessary to guide the learning trajectory, and in this sense, emotional management and playing with the data played a decisive role. Bay stated,

While an in-depth review of literature helped locate a research gap, it was the data that helped develop and support the idea. However, to accomplish this, I needed to learn how to manage negative emotions and enjoyed the pleasure of playing with data. I had to tell myself again and again that newborn calves should not be afraid of tigers. (Interview 3)

Bay described his doctoral study as a journey of emotions, including happiness, pride, passion, sadness, and frustration. This became an intricate part of his identity, revealing how he perceived himself as a researcher with a sense of agency. In addition, the identity as a researcher was not constant or stable, but dynamic, multifaceted, and continuously negotiated over the course of developing professional knowledge (Edwards & Burns, 2016). Bay said,

The doctoral journey was happy but also frustrating and uncertain, for which I needed to be aware of the pursuance of an inquisitive quest during this process. Pursuing a PhD is like a process of learning to design, think, learn, practice, sharpen my research, and reflect on my changing identity as a researcher. My doctoral journal was like my son whom I am very proud of. My role was not just a breadwinner, but a caregiver who should be “strong-as-a-rock”. My role of researcher also changed from a peripheral member, to a vulnerable researcher, and then a strong-willed academic. (Interview 3)
4.3. Finding a way out despite contextual challenges

Bay’s description of “vulnerable slave labor” showed the constraints imposed by his institution. For example, the work as a teacher assistant (TA) and research assistant (RA) deprived him of his time. Bay found it difficult to stay motivated because he perceived his position belonged to one of the most vulnerable groups amongst teaching staff. Bay said,

I needed to work as a TA and RA as a prerequisite for my studentship. I think the department was exploiting me because I was used as ‘vulnerable slave labor’ to cut institutional costs. (Interview 2)

In addition, Bay experienced frustration due to the tension between his self-positioned identity as a doctoral student and his imposed identity as a helper. He felt like he lacked institutional support for conducting research and writing. The conflict between Bay’s self-positioning and the externally ascribed identity by the institution put him in a position of vulnerability. Bay stated,

All staff in the office seem to be very busy with their own thing. Not many people were available at that time for whatever reason to talk to me and make me feel welcome and comfortable or help me out. I was a student, but the department wanted me to be a helper. At the end, I was in a vulnerable position. (Interview 2)

While Bay continued his doctoral study and faced the situation of receiving very limited institutional support, he “had to learn by doing”. He said,

I told myself I had to do it on my own. But I had no experiences. I had to learn by doing through my own practice. (Interview 3)

In order to overcome the challenges, Bay attempted to look for help from his supervisor. However, he encountered difficulties in building a good relationship with him. He wanted to seek guidance because he did not want to be an outsider in the academic community. His use of “should I” showed his puzzlement in seeking guidance from supervisor. Bay said,

I was quite stressed every time when meeting my supervisor. I don’t know how to build a good relationship with him. I tried in many ways to communicate with him. At times, I asked myself Should I ask this question to my supervisor? because I didn’t want him to think I was stupid. (Interview 2)

Bay’s worries were dispelled after sensing his supervisor’s willingness to help and receiving his encouragement. The help received from his supervisor was the source of Bay’s continued motivation for his research, pursuing his goal, and understanding the discrepancies between what was produced and the ideal solution. Bay reported,

I did not have much experience before participating in a PhD program. However, my supervisor guided me through providing some valuable feedback. It was him who encouraged me to fight for my goal and find out the research gap. (Interview 2)

It was a long time before he could finally find things interesting, realistic and rewarding. Bay gradually understood the value of being a TA and RA, which included acquiring knowledge, sharpening research skills, expanding his network, and accumulating experience. Bay reported,
Working as a TA and RA helped me gain more knowledge, gain experience and research skills, and get to know more people in this area. Working as a TA and RA was not an extra load or burden. After years of experiences, I realized it can be a win-win situation. (Interview 3)

Bay also encountered challenges imposed by the socio-cultural environment. For example, he attempted to write research articles for publication. As proposed by Bay, it is important to publish in peer-reviewed journals. However, his expressions of “uncertainties” and “stress” showed the difficulties in publishing. Bay stated,

It was not easy to publish, particularly in top-tier journals. I set myself a target for how many papers I should be able to publish. The reality was that there were so many uncertainties and a lot of stress. (Interview 2)

Bay was struggling at publishing not only because of the uncertainties in publishing but also because of the lack of systematic training in research and publishing from the institution. In addition, strict demands were imposed by the academic environment. Bay commented,

I think the university or academic community only judges people by how many publications they produce and whether their publications are in a top-tier journal or not. However, systematic training in publishing seemed unrealistic. (Interview 2)

While Bay built up his confidence to participate in the publishing “game”, he encountered difficulties and challenges to pass the peer-review process. For example, Bay reported many times that his research manuscript was often rejected. Some of them were desk rejections while some of them received only general comments. During this process, Bay was confused as to whether he should continue his career. Bay reported,

The time for completing a PhD program is very short, but publishing takes a long time. I received so many desk rejections without explanations as to why my article was not accepted. Even when I was lucky enough to have a chance for review, sometimes the comments were very general. For example, I received a general comment of “poor quality” for one of my articles. Why is it poor? Please justify this. I waited for several months to receive a comment like this. I was really upset by this. Sometimes I was confused about whether I should continue this job. (Interview 3)

Despite the difficulties, similar to other scholars, Bay also acknowledged the role of publishing in having a sense of belonging to the academic community. Despite how frustrating publishing was, he had to invest his time and energy strategically to frame his research and writing for publishing. To realize this, Bay expressed he was a “reflective learner”. Bay said,

Publishing is just a game. We all need to be strong. Anyway, research publications are the means through which individual researchers are measured, securing academic prestige, ranking, and branding. We need to figure out how to play this game. I am a learner who needs to always reflect on this publishing process. (Interview 3)

The social-cultural settings also brought positive dimensions to Bay’s participation in the academic community. According to Bay, struggling to survive in a highly competitive academic community is not always a pressure. It can also provide opportunities for a newcomer to learn and observe the practices of experts, and subsequently form a sense of
agency to adopt these practices to become a legitimate member of the community. Bay reported,

Hong Kong has a very good atmosphere for conducting research. Many famous scholars are in Hong Kong. Being in such a setting pushed me to believe that data should be collected but not fabricated, and efforts should be made to gain academic prestige in this community. I am still finding my way out. But I will keep working towards this goal. (Interview 3)

5. Discussion

This narrative inquiry study showed that Bay constructed and reconstructed a range of identities during his entire doctoral journey. The stories Bay experienced served as a narrative site through which his identity as a doctoral researcher was shaped and reshaped in relation to his inward feelings, outward interactions, and institutional and social contexts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It appears that Bay’s identity construction was not only related to prior experiences but also subjected to a wide range of contextual obstacles across different sites during his doctoral journey. Bay’s identity construction during his doctoral journey can be interpreted in the following aspects.

First, a doctoral student’s professional learning in an academic community is a social process of moving from the periphery to the center through participation. Bay experienced a range of challenges and emotions in this learning process and in order to move from the periphery to the center of the academic community, he had to draw upon various resources at his disposal to enable effective participation in academic practices, such as attending conferences, giving presentations, and publishing research findings. This process of learning and the trajectory of movement in, through, and potentially out of the community was shaped and reshaped by his self-positioning and his relationship with others in multiple communities of practice (Pennington & Richards, 2016; Teng, 2019b). It appeared that, Bay needed to pay concerted attention to gaining competence and membership in his situated community. However, his effort in doing this was subject to various contextual constraints (Olsen, 2008), which made his movement to the center of the community an open, dynamic, and sometimes conflictual process (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Enlightened by Lave and Wenger (1991), as well as Bay’s struggles and emotional experiences while seeking his academic quest in the present study, Bay’s alignment with an academic community was far more complex than the appropriating of established knowledge and skills. Alignment to Bay was a process of resisting struggles and solving conflicts in accessing resources, transforming a given academic community’s practices, learning through reification of expertise in practice, and transcending the here and now by affiliating his work with the broader structurers and enterprises.

Second, a doctoral student’s ability to negotiate his/her roles or identities is an essential dimension of whether he or she is willing to be integrated into the academic community. As a new-comer to academic communities, Bay expressed that he experienced tensions when analyzing and coding data, which made him perceive himself as a less-competent member. He felt lost for some time. However, feeling lost does not necessarily represent his inaction or a lack of desire for participation. In Bay’s case, his identities (e.g. a student, a helper, a struggling researcher, a seasoned researcher) were under continuous construction through his negotiation for meaning in doing research and publishing. He developed a wide variety of subject positions even though he had the
previously formed identity or role of being the youngest member with less academic and life experience than others. As he struggled to find hidden patterns embedded in the data and develop new ideas from the data, he expressed that he had more active participation in the academic community, leading to an emerging sense of being a researcher. Although the negotiation of identity is situated in Bay’s social context, Bay’s identity as a doctoral student is also dynamic and fluid (Preece, 2016). For example, he had to negotiate different identities while participating in different contexts (e.g. doing research, publishing, presenting, and working as a teaching and research assistant). This suggests the complexity of the situated nature of participation in multiple contexts and that the identity development is a process of belonging to multiple communities of practice and gaining multi-memberships (Kreiner et al., 2006; Teng, 2017a, 2017b, 2018).

Third, a doctoral student’s identity development is influenced by previous events and is directed toward goals that have not yet been accomplished. Related to this, a dynamic, active, and mutual process occurred when being engaged in a process of collective learning in a shared domain, e.g. learning to survive in the academic community characterized by the “publish or perish” culture (Teng, 2019b). Bay changed in many ways through continued engagement with and reflections on academic activities (e.g. reading vast amounts of literature and seeking guidance from his supervisor). One of the challenges for Bay, and possibly other doctoral students, would be to manage emotional flux during doctoral experience. However, he transformed from “being puzzled about what to do” to “using internal and external resources to adopt agentive behaviors in doing research”. For example, having tried various ways to perform statistical analysis and having gained the skills and confidence to utilize resources to do research, Bay demonstrated a higher degree of self-regulation in his academic quest. In addition, by means of social learning spaces, e.g. through attending international conferences, Bay was able to have meaningful conversations with peers. This kind of outward interactions gave rise to the kinds of engagement where Bay felt like he was pushing the envelope of becoming a legitimate member of the academic community (Teng, 2019a). Bay subsequently constructed and reconstructed his understanding of what it meant to be a researcher as he reflected on his constraints, tensions, strategies, achievements, and communities of practice (Zappa-Hollman & Duff, 2015). This corroborates the findings of previous studies that document the changing nature of students’ position in an academic community (e.g. Morita, 2004). When interpreted from Rogoff’s (2003) notion of participatory appropriation, appropriation occurs in the process of participation, as the individual changes through involvement in the practice, and this participation contributes both to the direction of the evolving event and to the individual’s preparation for involvement in other similar events. In the case of Bay, this was a process of transformation, which involved his creative efforts to contribute to the community, make adjustments to stretch his understanding to other events, and bridge the gap between different ways of understanding research requirement. This resulted in Bay’s change in roles and identities, which resonated with his initial struggling identity of studying for a PhD degree and extended to his efforts and involvements in his “imagination” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 91) of future community. In pursuing his “dream” of earning a PhD degree, he conducted “mutual engagement”, established “joint enterprise”, and built up a “shared repertoire” (Wenger, 1998, pp. 72–73) for which he formed a sense of identity and belonging.

Fourth, the site of doctoral student identity development should not be confined to the realm of personal knowledge and practice in doing research but expanded to include
the wider communication network with the faculty advisor. In the present study, Bay constantly associated his ideas developed from data analysis with notions in the literature and drew on his learning and teaching experiences to illustrate his in-depth points in his papers. This indicates the “intertextual trajectories of participation” (Zappa-Hollman, 2007, p. 358). Through making intertextual connections, Bay not only appropriated the key concepts and theories in the literature but gradually socialized them into practices. In addition, Bay performed a series of agentic acts to shape his own participation in, learning from, and learning of the academic community. However, in Bay’s case, the construction of agency and positionality was not always a peaceful and collaborative process. He encountered struggles in overcoming his internal tensions related to his pursuit of a PhD and challenges from being involved in power relations. He also encountered difficulties in overcoming the ascribed role or identity as a marginalized member, which might have restricted his active participation. For example, Bay stated that he was once very conflicted as to whether he should continue with his research as a PhD student and he continuously sought help from his advisor. In Cotterall’s (2011) study, doctoral students encountered a tense relationship with their supervisor. Assistance from experts or peers may not always be readily available to all doctoral students. With guidance from his supervisor, Bay was able to take on a more empowered role than he had initially assumed, suggesting the powerful role that experts (e.g. supervisor) can play in helping doctoral students to make use of resources to position themselves favorably. Doctoral student identity can thus be conceptualized as an internal-external dialectic of identification (Alberto, 1995), for which a reciprocal relationship between self-esteem and affirmative feedback from faculty advisor fuel identity development.

Fifth, a doctoral student’s identity construction in an academic community can be conceptualized as not only a potentially antagonistic process, but also an agentic and creative process, during which a doctoral student needs to exercise agency to forge novel solutions to the contextual constraints. Bay’s crossing of “multiple boundaries” (Engestrom, Engestrom, & Karkkainen, 1995, p. 320) between the identities “less-competent member”, “vulnerable slave labor”, “novice researcher”, and “seasoned researcher” indicated that an individual may have multiple identities, and some aspects are made salient by personal factors and social contexts (Burke & Stets, 2009). For example, Bay experienced difficulties performing TA and RA work. In addition, being considered a “helper” by the department and his self-perceived identity as a doctoral student were incompatible, which caused a conflict within his identity recognition. Identity construction within the process of professional learning and doing research required Bay to negotiate past experiences, solutions, future ideals, competency, agency, and marginalization (Teng, 2018). Thus, the process of overcoming the identity conflict can be conceptualized as a process of boundary crossing (Wenger, 2010), for which a sense of agency plays a decisive role (Teng, 2018). For example, the “publishing game” reflected Bay’s vulnerability and powerlessness as an inexperienced researcher in the academic community. He was very upset about the desk rejections and negative comments, corroborating Yuan’s (2017) findings that academics were often put into a vulnerable position in creating balance between personal beliefs, values with the institutional norms, and rules in research and publishing. In confronting the culture of performativity and accountability (e.g. prescribing how many articles he needs to publish) and other challenges (e.g. the potential bias towards top-tier journal), Bay, through
a sense of agency, took on an identity as a “learner” by actively reflecting on his own publishing and reviewing experiences. In Bay’s case, boundary crossing required him to exercise agency, which might have permitted Bay’s past experiences, as well as future ideal identities, to shape his attitudes and perception toward doing research within the institutional setting, thus shaping his emerging identity as a researcher.

Finally, engagement in academic communities of practice implied a need to reexamine what was required of PhD students to become researchers; this is not only a phenomenon in Hong Kong but in educational settings throughout the world. Exploring the transition from doctoral students to teachers/researchers provides a finely grained understanding of the multi-layered elements of the teacher/researcher identity. The case study in the present study emphasized the value in accounting for the roles of time and space in identity construction within the academic communities of practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The temporal properties of transforming to a teacher/researcher from a doctoral student need to be revisited because identity development for doctoral students is a social, fragmented, discursive, and multi-step process (Gazzola, Stefanob, Audeta, & Theriault, 2011). Related to this, imagination, allowing Bay to transcend time and space and create a new image of himself, permitted him to surpass his own experiences, cross imagined boundaries, and create images of being or becoming “a researcher”. The identity development for Bay was thus a continuum of negotiation through his prior experiences, participation in practices and activities in the present, and understanding of the type of researcher he aspired to become (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). In Bay’s case, the transition from being a doctoral student to a researcher appeared to be shaped not only by situated experiences within an institutional setting, but also a broader societal academic discourse of doing research, attending conferences, and “publishing imperatives” (Rabbi & Canagarajah, 2017, p. 10). Bay’s identity-in-practice can also be conceptualized as a social matter operationalized through concrete practices and tasks. Through engagement, Bay established and maintained joint enterprises and negotiated meanings in the academic community (Teng, 2019a). In line with Wenger (1998), engagement allowed Bay to invest in relations with other people and gain a lived sense of who he should be. His transition from being a doctoral student to a researcher appeared to be shaped not only by situated experiences within an institutional setting, but also a broader societal academic discourse of doing research, attending conferences, and “publishing imperatives” (Rabbi & Canagarajah, 2017, p. 10). During this process, the engagement with academic community ensures Bay’s comprehension of real societal needs that inform research engagement and fortify his perceived meaningfulness of doing research, which feeds back into his identity development.

6. Conclusion and implications

Although results from one single case study may not be generalized to all PhD students’ professional development, this study provides directions for future studies that take a longitudinal approach to explore, e.g. the identity trajectories of an individual from a doctoral student to an established researcher across different educational settings over an extended period, which would supply an in-depth understanding of identity construction in academic communities of practice. Future research on triangulating other data sources, e.g. observation, reflective activities, should be conducted to explore how doctoral students in the
academic community construct identities through a trajectory of participation in and across social contexts, such as home, school, workplace and so forth.

Pedagogical implications for doctoral education can be concluded. First, expectations towards doctoral education are changing. Pressures for top-tier journal publications are becoming overwhelming. The pressures doctoral students face, and continue to face, in today’s doctoral programs, are immense. Doctoral students need institutional support, guidance, and nurturing to meet these challenges. For example, they need support to build an awareness of building a relationship with peers, within and outside of the academic community. The awareness is also a source of support to their personal and professional development while on the path to the professoriate. Support systems within the academic environment need to be encouraging rather than inhibiting persistence (Austin, 2002). Second, identifying the factors that influence doctoral students’ identity development is critical to doctoral education programs. Policy initiatives for doctoral education should begin at the program levels. Doctoral programs need to have policies in place that identify students’ needs throughout all phases of the doctoral student experience. Third, a supportive intellectual and social community is essential to doctoral students’ identity recognition. Given the communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), doctoral researchers need to be supported to construct a scholarly identity. The focus should be “mutual construction” of the individual and the community (p. 146). It is essential to explore the ways of enhancing the inclusion and engagement of doctoral researchers in academic communities. A related issue is the quality of the research environment and the sustainability of the departmental community into which doctoral researchers can be introduced. Finally, the relationship between doctoral students and supervisors is a concern to doctoral education. We may need to reconsider the doctoral students’ emotional flux and the supervisor’s dual role of pedagogue and gatekeeper.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

(Mark) Feng Teng is a language teacher educator with extensive teaching and research experience in China. He is a Ph.D. candidate at Hong Kong Baptist University. His main research interests include metacognition and writing, vocabulary, and identity research. His latest publications appeared in TESOL Quarterly, Language Teaching Research, Applied Linguistics Review, CALL, and other international flagship journals. His recent monographs appeared in Springer and Bloomsbury.

ORCID
(Mark) Feng Teng http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5134-8504

References


