To Be or Not To Be a Professional
An Exploration of TESOL Professional Identity in Oman

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Abstract: To be or not to be a professional, that is the question being posed today by the TESOL practitioner. Teaching in general and English as a Foreign Language in particular has not been regarded as a profession until recently and the type of profession it is being regarded as is still very much the subject of scholarly debate. In this context there are a number of questions that need to be posed: who are TESOL practitioners, are they academics or simply instructors or are they both? Have TESOL practitioners been included in the exclusive circle of academia and if they have, under which conditions and with what limitations? What does this complexity entail in terms of their self-constructed professional identity? Do they perceive professionalism as external accountability or rather as an individual moral mission? This study presents the major debates in the literature reflecting the changing and fragmented nature of academic professional identity by exploring the views of seven TESOL practitioners teaching on the pre-university programme at a higher education institution in Oman.

1. Professionalism and TESOL practice

Professional identity in TESOL has long constituted a point of contention. Teaching in general and English as a Foreign Language in particular has not been regarded as a profession until recently and the type of profession it is being regarded as is still very much the subject of scholarly debate. Although we have come a long way from the 1969 definition of Amitai Enzioni (in Ornestein, 1985, p. 172) who viewed teaching as a semi profession considering that "the training [of teachers] is shorter, their status less legitimated [low or moderate], their right to privileged communication less established; theirs is less of a specialized knowledge, and they have less autonomy from supervision or societal control than the professions" we have not gone very far from what Robert Howsam said in 1976, namely that teaching is an emerging profession, "near the periphery of full professional status" (idem). In this context, how do we view teaching in higher education and specifically TESOL?

The higher education system in general has undergone a series of major changes due to the mass marketization of universities (Burgess, 2008; Taylor, 2008) which has led to a feeling of loss of a so called "golden age" amongst academics, an age in which there was "time to engage in academic work, whether that is scholarship or research" (Burgess, 2008, p.96). This loss has translated into a loss of freedom and autonomy where academics face a range of administrative tasks without any reduction in their workload, having to juggle their teaching duties as well as their increasing administrative obligations. This is all the more valid in the case of TESOL where practitioners are at times still on the side lines of professional status. In this context there are a number of questions that need to be posed: who are the TESOL practitioners, are they academics or simply instructors or are they both? Have TESOL practitioners been included in the exclusive circle of academia and if they have, under which conditions and with what limitations? What does this complexity entail in terms of their self-constructed professional identity? Do they perceive professionalism as external accountability or rather as an individual moral mission? These are some of the questions this paper will seek to address. In order to that this study will engage with one of the central debates in the literature reflecting the changing and fragmented nature of academic professional identity (Nixon et al, 2002; Burgess, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Stronach et al., 2002; Biesta, 2004) and will explore how this debate is reflected in the lives and practice of TESOL professionals working on the Foundation Programme at a private higher education

institution in Oman. This fragmented identity juggles several themes such as an outer pull towards accountability (Stronach et al, 2002) and an inner pull towards personal beliefs about teaching such as morality and ethics(Campbell, 2003)

My argument is built around the identity of a TESOL professional within the dynamic of a TESOL practitioner, both teacher and academic, in the particular context of the Omani higher education system. I define the TESOL practitioner as the person that works within the field of TESOL practice without consciously or unconsciously engaging in the theoretical debates in the field and whose main focus is engaging in best practices that would reach their target audience. The TESOL academic on the other hand is one that is able to actively engage with the theories that dominate the field and draw upon those to inform his or her practice. It is my belief that these two identities are experienced by most TESOL professionals and it is my intention to explore how these are conceptualised and most importantly whether they contribute or not to the further fragmentation of their professional identity or not.

All the above elements resonate from the recent debates in the ESL/EFL field (for example Johnson, 2006; Tsui, 2007)that have called for a focus on understanding the role that teachers' prior experiences and most importantly the contexts in which they work play in their conceptualisation of "how and why teachers do what they do". (Johnson, 2006, p. 236)

My intention is not to uncover how these identities are constructed but rather how the TESOL professionals that took part in the study view their professional identity and how the above mentioned debates reflect in their daily practice, whether they see their plural selves as contributing to the fragmentation of their identity or whether they perceive their identity as the harmonious sum of these pluralities.

2. Teacher's professional identities: between institutional accountability and moral mission

Accountability has become an integral part of the education system. As the education system has become more of a commercially viable enterprise, so has the need for measurable objectives and results grown. (Biesta, 2004; Stronach et al, 2002). Biesta (2004)argues that originally, accountability referred to financial documentation (p.235) which has rippled out in the current managerialist discourse that dominates the educational field.An accountable organisation is thus one that can fulfill the objectives set and presents measurable results as evidence for their attainment. "Transparent organisations are auditable, and auditable organisations are manageable-and vice-versa. Therefore organisations

must be made auditable at any price" (Charlton, 1999 in Biesta, 2004, p. 3).

Biesta talks about a shift in the meaning of accountability from the 1970s and 1980s when the discussions around it and about it focused more on its "professional" meaning where teachers were primarily accountable to themselves, to their professional community, to their students and society at large rather than accountable to external demands.This focus shift was caused by wider economic and social forces that involved the rise of a culture of quality assurance and hence an increased focus on systems and processes rather than outcomes. An increase in market offer and demand gave rise to an increase in individual choice and consumption. This very important paradigm shift has led to a hegemony of accountability within a quality assurance culture. So where does that leave the teaching professionals? Their identity has become more complex as they see themselves at times torn between their personal professional ethics and institutional expectations. Is professionalism then perceived as an individual construct or is it rather a sum of standards and codes of ethics agreed upon at institutional or societal level? Can it be both?

I talked about Biesta's disenchantment with increased regulation of the education system through a culture of accountability and the loss of a golden age of academia when the teaching professional was morally accountable mainly to himself or herself. However, I think that contrary to Biesta's view this type of intrinsic accountability still pervades the teaching profession. According to Campbell (2003) "the essence of professionalism is defined by the principles of ethics that govern not only the expected conduct of professionals but also the spirit of commitment and responsibility they embody as both individual practitioners and collective associates" (p. 103).

Campbell's definition evidences a more intrinsic view of professionalism which involves a higher penchant on to oneself in order to uphold commendable values such as commitment and responsibility. She does not view the extrinsic accountability and the intrinsic ethical pressure in a polarity as the expected conduct of professionals and their spirit of commitment hold equal rank in defining the "essence of professionalism". A similar view is expressed by Saks (1995 in Evetts, 2006, p 136) as "public interest and professional self-interest are not necessarily at opposite ends of the continuum "and the "pursuit of self-interests may be compatible with advancing the public interest."

Campbell also mentions that the ethical knowledge that is the essence of professionalism cannot be represented by merely engraving it into codes of practice, in other words by equating it with an extrinsic form of accountability.

"Only when code-specific behaviour and underlying ideals and values are connected –only when it is accepted that what teachers do and why they do it are connected-

will professional codes cease to be rules of professional etiquette and become moral powerful statements"(Campbell, 2003, p.111).

The TESOL professional operates in a variety of contexts which can imply a different approach to what is ethical or not and where very often local culture and societal values take precedence over performance standards. Thus the way professionalism is conceptualised hinges largely upon local values or "best practices"(Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994). Teachers have to often renegotiate their professional and personal identities when entering and operating in this new context.At times the codes of ethics take the form of unwritten rules and norms that the TESOL practitioners may have to discover on their own and more often than not through numerous so-called "cultural bumps". Their professional training provides them with a working knowledge of how to operate in any given context. According to Strom, working knowledge (in Campbell, 2003, p111) involves a moral grounding where universal values such as "justice, freedom, truth and moral dignity"prevail. However, these values need to translate into the local language of the context in which one operates as freedom and truth do not mean the same thing for a British white male for example as they do for an Arabian Gulf female. In this context, Holliday makes a point that professional and academic cultures can cross the boundaries of ethnic and national cultures by promoting a specialist discourse that is common to the TESOL profession. (Holliday, 2003; Holliday, 1994; Holliday, 1997;Troudi, 2005). This professional discourse is dominated by the non-native versus native speakerist polarity which is in fact ideologically constructed and works to divide the TESOL community through "us versus them" conceptualisations. This longstanding phenomenon is dominated by power relations that predominantly place more value or weight on native-speakers of English as professionals or the classroom pedgagogies and curriculums that come from what Holliday defines as BANA territory (Britain, America, New Zealand, Australia). Although I do not intend to explore in depth this very important division that exists in the field of TESOL, I find that it cannot be left out from the argument on a professional discourse in the TESOL field and serves to portray the complexity of the elements that construct the identity of a TESOL professional.

In this complex context, TESOL practitioners should not really "rely on others to define their professionalism or blame others for restricting their capacity to fulfill their moral duties" (Campbell, 2003, p.117) as it is up to them to constantly renegotiate theirprofessional relationship with their context and their audience. Although there are many external factors, for example curriculum or standardized texts, which are out of their control they can and should have an influence over the moral role they want to play or not in the educational framework. I agree with Campbell's argument which is the reason why I decided to explore TESOL practitioners' views on how moral grounding and external accountability fit into their professional identity, if and how these two elements are balanced as well as the challenges to this strive for equilibrium or the possible clashes between them.

3. English teacher or English lecturer- the question of academic identity in TESOL professionals in Oman

The Omani higher educational context is dominated by the EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) policy which brought about the need for employing English language educators from different backgrounds. Thus the great demand for ESL professionals has made it difficult to define a set of standards in terms of qualifications and experience necessary to teach ESL skills. Although the Ministry of Higher Education has disseminated a set of employment criteria for the private higher education institutions where the native versus non-native speaker polarity has been eliminated, in practice, the diversity of the staff employed especially on the Foundation Programme (a preparatory programme for study, IT and English skills) makes it difficult for practitioners to adhere to a common ethos and to have a shared professional identity. In this context, one can find highly qualified academics holding PhDs and MAs with extensive teaching experience and impressive scholarly records alongside native speakers whose degrees are not necessarily related to the language education field. This raises the need of continuing development for ESL professionals not only in terms of subject knowledge but knowledge of their learners' lives and culture as well as the distribution of ESL literacy within their respective communities and their motivation for undertaking higher education studies (Crandall, 2012;Troudi,2005). Thus we may have professionals working side by side but divided in terms of their identity. Some may see themselves as more academically oriented due to higher credentials and a higher scholarly orientation whereas some, especially the less experienced professionals, would see themselves as teachers. Thus TESOL practitioners form their own subcultures within an overarching institutional and ultimately TESOL culture (Ball & Goodson, 2005). These subcultures will of course entail different values and norms which can prove antagonistic at times. This will bring divisions within the professional community as their substantive and situated identities collide. (Ball, 1972 in Ball & Goodson, 2005). Fundamentally the practitioners' core values i.e. their substantive identity does not change as it is anchored in firm beliefs about the world and oneself whereas the situated identity is related to different forms of behaviour that are dependent on contextual factors. This can lead to an inner struggle or a clash of values among TESOL practitioners translating

into a perception of reality as conflicting and paradoxical. This is in part due to the fact that the TESOL context has like most educational settings become increasingly "bureaucratized and stratified". (ibidem, p.8) Thus we find practitioners having to become increasingly accountable to different stakeholders, namely education consumers, students or parents, accreditation bodies, market forces. In this ever changing context the teachers' identities vary from commitment to students' satisfaction and keeping abreast with the research developments in the field to a vocational commitment to providing a service that would contribute to societal development.

Secondly, their professional identity can be influenced by their reference groups which often decide the terms of reference by which they interpret their reality (Nias, 2005 in Ball & Goodson, 2005). The most important reference group can be the community in which they function and in which there are established hierarchies that can hold normative powers and most importantly can influence behaviour even by subversive means. So where do TESOL educators on the foundation programme place themselves as professionals? Are they teachers or are they academics? Is there a difference between the two? The Robbins report (Robbin, 1963 in Burgess, 2008) emphasizes the idea that there is no sharp division between research and teaching as "they are complementary and overlapping activities" (p. 100). However, this ethos is not always applicable in the TESOL field where a large number of educators see themselves as being first and foremost teachers. One of the contributing factors which leads to this view of research as being an indulgence for the lucky few that could afford it is the "loss of freedom and autonomy" (Burgess, 2008, p.96) along with an increased workload which leaves very little time for practitioners to engage in research. Another factor is a perceived replacement of collegiality with managerialism and corporatism. Reconciling these two aspects of their career brings professionals to a crossroads which can open new levels of reflection but can also generate conflict. Their allegiance lies particularly with their students as this is also highly emphasized by the accountability oriented academic culture hence we often hear statements like "we are first and foremost a teaching institution". In this context, it is very interesting to explore the way the TESOL professional's situated and substantive identity merge or separate, generate conflict or new emerging metamorphosis of their professional identity.

Furthermore, there is an added pressure on TESOL professionals in higher education to produce scholarly work in order for the institution to adhere to quality standards setup by accreditation bodies such as the Oman Accreditation Authority, which is the regulatory body for all the private higher education institutions in Oman that come under the patronage of the Ministry of Higher Education. Thus, being engaged in scholarly work does not only involve a question of prestige and status for the person and the institution he/she belongs to but rather an obligation that comes with employment in the higher education sector. The academic versus teacher/practitioner is very much a lived reality in the TESOL practitioners' lives. It is appropriate to claim that professionalism as a set of moral, ideal to-strive-for values has always beena part of the educators' substantive identity (Edge, 1996) which is constantly being negotiated depending on the "many different social settings" we all encounter (Nias, 2005 in Ball and Goodson, 2005, p.107) as well as on the different extrinsic pressures that come from reference groups.

Adding to the above argument, LePage (2001, p. 181) brings into the discussion professionalism as a moral framework which focuses on continuous self-improvement "and doing what's right, not doing it right" and "that focuses on interactions with students, colleagues and the community" but also as philosophical inquiry that goes against a culture of certainty and standardization and promotes a culture of diversity, cooperation and respect"where teachers investigate their practice in order to become more aware of themselves and more effective in their work" (Edge, p.12).

Edge further adds that the values mentioned above have their share of cross-cultural paradoxes. I believe that this reflects the reality of our profession and it has been my motivation in undertaking this inquiry into my fellow TESOL practitioners' beliefs. I have felt many times that my identity as a professional is compartmentalised in multiple selves, I as a teacher of post-secondary not necessarily higher education students, I as a researcher, I as a high-standard administrator, abiding by deadlines and keeping everything together, I as a doctoral student who is faced with all these professional dilemmas. Although I ultimately believe that teaching is a moral profession I also believe that the very different contextual factors require us to constantly re-negotiate morality and accountability and to reflect on our identities as teachers and/or academics.

4.   Context of the study

Foundation Programmes were implemented in the Gulf region in order to prepare students in tertiary education for the challenges of their degree programmes which are taught exclusively through the medium of English.

The Foundation Programmes experienced ,however, a cultural diversity, and in this case I am referring to Holliday's concept of smaller cultures (Holliday, 1994), and although there was a standardization in terms of the skills included in the curriculum, this was not implemented in terms of materials or learning methodologies. Thus, Foundation Programme curricula vary considerably from one institution to another. According to Oman Accreditation Authority, which is the

regulatory body of the higher education institutions in Oman, the respective programmes are intended to develop literacy, numeracy, computing and learning skills designed to prepare students for tertiary studies. Examples of subjects in the detailed fields include: general language skills, intermediate reading and writing, intermediate spelling and grammar, intermediate numeracy skills, intermediate computing skills, intermediate learning skills" (p106, Oman Standard Classification of Education, OAA documents).

The Foundation Programme of the institution in which the research was carried out includes a number of core English Skills modules for Semester I and Semester II students. The curriculum for the respective modules includes study skills, grammar skills, academic reading and writing as well as speaking and listening skills. The students joining this programme come from different parts of the country and different backgrounds. Some of them receive funding for their studies in the form of scholarships given by the Ministry of Higher Education; some of them are self-funded, as it is the case foremost part-time, mature students that attend evening classes.

5. Participants

The teachers on the Foundation Programme come from different backgrounds, either Omani graduates of different English majors, i.e. teacher education or literature as well as expatriate teachers, among whom are American native speakers and Indian non-native speakers. The majority of teachers are either BA or MA graduates of English or a related field. All the participants had different levels of experience in their native countries as well as Oman, ranging from 1 year to 10 years of experience. They also have very diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. In terms of gender, the sample included four males and three females. The sample thus chosen followed two criteria: purposiveness and accessibility (Silverman, 2001). I am a faculty member on the same Foundation Programme in the same institution, therefore accessibility of the respondents played a major role in choosing the sample. At the same time, it was my intention to represent the diversity of the faculty members in the respective department. All participants were ensured of full anonymity and confidentiality of the data they provided and were made aware of the right to withdraw from the study anytime they wished to do so. All the participants are referred to by pseudonyms: Anna, Andrea, Aymen, George, Isa, Taher and Dolores.

Method and procedure

As the focus of the paper is to explore the self-perceptions and beliefs of teachers on the Foundation Programme at a private higher institution in Oman it involves an "interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject-matter…attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2 in Anderson, 1998, p.127).

I decided on the data collection method of focus group interviews as I wanted to be able to give teachers a unified voice and at the same time present the diversity of the professional community existing in this particular context. It was my intention to create a "synergistic environment resulting in a deeper, more insightful discussion" (Anderson, 1998, p.213).

I also wanted the participants to feel that my main purpose was not to feed any existing stereotypes which tend to pervade the TESOL discourse but to explore several possibilities hence further highlight Nixon et al.'s (2001) idea of an emergent professionalism for higher education. Thus I wanted to provide an opportunity for new insights to emerge "where questions could be clarified or modified". This particular data collection method reflects the purpose of the study which is "to elicit a wide range of opinions, attitudes, feeling or perceptions from a group of individuals who share some common experience relative to the dimension under study"(Anderson, 1998, p212). One other reason for choosing this method was that it would generate further issues for exploration by means of open, unstructured discussion.In addition to the focus group data I decided to include a personal reflection of my experience as an expatriate, non-native speaker TESOL professional in Oman, a personal account on how I view my own professional identity. As mentioned before, this project represented a reflective journey into my own identity as a teacher-academic and teacher-researcher. It was also an opportunity to make my voice heard, to bring my inner world out through "co-narration and co-construction in the research process"(Freeman, 1994, p. 79).

6. Findings

The data was analysed by dividing it "into categories which capture the main elements of social action, and then noticing and documenting how these categories interconnect" (Dey, 1993, p161). The categories created were based on the research questions and the connections made during the analysis yielded three major themes which are closely connected, all representing elements of this broad picture of TESOL professional identity in Oman. The data from my diary pages was used to support the arguments made during the focus group interview as well as to make my voice apparent in this unique stance I found myself in, namely that of researcher-participant. Therefore, my intention here was not to keep an objective distance but to adopt "a critical self-reflective stance"(Johnson & Christensen, 2010, p. 265) and to allow myself to be one of the actors as well as the director of the show, a protagonist and a voice-over. This

involved seeing the data "in terms of construction rather than excavation" (Richards, 2003, p.91) driven by the belief that my "multiple selves feed into the writing and performance" of this report (Lincoln, 1997, p.38).

> A. The meaning of professionalism- between external accountability and moral values

Most of the participants considered professionalism to be a form of moral behaviour thus having an intrinsic nature where one is mainly accountable to oneself trying to abide by their own personal standards at the workplace. Thus, Anna states that:

> "For me it's the kind of behaviour that is required of a professional especially in a work place, a kind of behaviour in the sense that you are committed to your job, you are respectful since you're in your work, practice what you preach, that's how you gain respect and be punctual."

She adds that:

> "If you just say that you want to do it only for the institution, to meet the expectation of the institution, then I don't consider you a professional. Because I should also be satisfied with my work, if I'm not satisfied it might lead to lack of motivation in my teaching, it will affect everything around me, it will spoil the teaching and learning environment, I mean I also need to be satisfied with my job, it's not just meeting the expectations by hook or by crook but I also need to be satisfied with my job."

This is in tune with what Campbell (p.128) calls the "individual teacher's ethical reasoning and judgements". However, she further states that there could be teachers who conduct themselves in unethical ways in contexts that promote ethical accountability. This argument is put forward by Andrea who says:

> "I agree with that and I think also a teacher meets the general expectations, they show up on time, they go to their classes, their students get ok grades, all of that but professionalism to me means the way you act with other people so maybe you meet all of that expectations but your behaviour does not make you look professional or maybe you act in a way that a professional person would."

She further adds that professionalism:

> "To me it incorporates a lot of things, I think coming on time, meeting your responsibilities but in the other end how do you treat your colleagues. Are you going around gossiping causing problems for other people behind their backs at the expense of the whole team?"

This view is in line with the argument made by LePage cited in the first part of this report (section 3, p. 6) which is that a moral framework also hinges on the ability of a person to interact with their colleagues and their community in a meaningful, respectful way and ultimately the practitioner's ability to identify oneself with the community he/she works in. Her testimony iterates the need for "mutual engagement" not only as an "essential component of practice" (Wenger, 1998, p.74 in Rock, 2005) but also as an evidence for one's personal work ethics mentioned in the earlier testimonies.

Isa also makes a similar point emphasizing the professionals' ability to develop intercultural communication skills:

> "If a person is not able to deal with people from other countries or from other cultures this will cause a lot of problems and in this regard I don't see that he is a very professional person."

George puts forward an argument that looks at a different situation, namely that of a professional who can achieve work ethics in spite of an unsupportive environment, an argument also evidenced by Campbell (p.129) and which further anchors professionalism as a concept based on intrinsic moral values:

> "Professionalism I guess it's a work ethic that someone would have that reflects their professional training or their professional experience. It's an attitude often times and is something I think that is intrinsic that can be...that degrees of which it is used can be influenced by external factors but I think it's something that's intrinsic. For instance if we were in a situation where we don't necessarily have the ideal conditions there is perhaps a person who has a strong sense of professionalism. There needs to be something that reminds them that they are professional regardless of what they are asked to do, regardless of the limitations that prevent me of doing the job that I would like to do normally. That's kind of important."

Isa shares the same view of professionalism being first and foremost related to a set of personal moral values, adding that a professional person should show evidence not only of an ethical behaviour but also time-management skills:

> "A professional person is one who is organised in everything. He can deal with things in a much organised way so he has very good management skills and some good leadership skills as well so the professional person should also be... he can improve himself in different aspects."

Aymen makes an interesting point which defines the relationship between professionalism as an intrinsic set of values and professionalism as a set of institutional standards and extrinsic expectations. He argues that this relationship is dependent on the context in which the TESOL practitioner operates:

"I think the definition of a professional kind of depends on where we are, if we are talking about the situation here in our college, I think the definition here is to meet the expectations, to do what you are expected to do which is sometimes supernatural or has to be supernatural so you are doing what the expectations are so sometimes you can be regarded as unprofessional because sometimes you fail to do what you are thought to do be able to do."

The same opinion is shared by George although he views contextual differences as pertaining to specific elements such as meetings for example:

"In that regard the culture here is different because I noticed if went to every faculty's meetings that's all I would just go to meetings. When I got here I remember sitting thru several 3-4 hour meetings and I was thinking what have I gotten myself into, honestly and then of course the meeting times got shorter and then I was thinking ok do I really need to be at this meeting? Maybe not so much so you know. The concept of meetings is a shock."

I identify my own view of professionalism in line with the testimonies above as I often times believed that meeting institutional expectations was almost a superhuman exercise:

"I remember my having realised that professionalism means different things to different people. I remember that what in my view meant a critical reflection as a means to resolve a problem for some of my colleagues meant losing face and being negative. I had to learn to behave in a certain way, in my view to walk the line between what I believed to be professional behaviour and what other believed to be not only professional but appropriate behaviour. For me it meant that if the computer lab you were trying to use several days in a row was not working meant sending several emails about it was professional and not personal however I ended up being the one who was deemed to be unprofessional. I felt at the time that being professional and professionalism was being defined by what it wasn't rather than what it actually was." (Journal entry 13/10/2012).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Isa talks about external expectations not as source of pressure but as a source of motivation:

"I should say somehow external motivation can have a very good impact on the person. […]If a person works in a highly reputed institution he will feel that he needs to develop himself more."

Adding to the argument of institutional reputation, Andrea talks about professionalism being based on the qualifications and credentials that allows one to be part of a certain profession:

"[…] just acting in a way that upholds standards of your working institution but also professionalism means that we as professionals excel in a certain area, you have credentials and certifications that other people don't have, so that kind of separates you from kind of a different level."

Anna adds to it by saying that competence is an evidence of professionalism but she also points out that this does not automatically come with one's credentials:

"Competent as well in your knowledge but I don't mean to say that because somebody has a higher qualification he's a professional it doesn't come just with credentials or certificates."

Andrea clarifies the argument made earlier by saying that:

"I agree with that in a certain way, someone has a PhD and I don't have that, I only have a bachelors and a TEFL certificate so does that mean that that person is more professional than me, I don't think so but in a way no one can do this job just off the street unless they have a background and a certification in teaching English and I think in that way your certifications separate you from the rest, but within ourselves, I don't think that that should be a reason why one is professional and one is not."

The two testimonies above carry us into the next element that the participants including myself evidenced as essential to their professional identity which is whether we identify ourselves as academics or practitioners. Thus the next question is

B.   What are we-academics, teachers or both?

Most of the participants identified themselves with one or the other, affirming that they consider themselves first and foremost practitioners whereas three of the seven participants interviewed, saw themselves as both, acknowledging that the two elements are not mutually exclusive in their professional lives. Thus Andrea admits that:

"For me my idea of an academic has more weight, they're more into scholarly research and things, like a kindergarten teacher she's not an academic, she's just a teacher. Like an academic to my mind is more into higher education. For me I'm just a teacher even though I work in higher education. I have not done the research,

the in-depth looking at the things right now so for me I'm just a teacher."

On the other hand Taher says that:

> "People who are teaching at higher levels could be both, teachers and academics. Ideally, we are supposed to be academics because we work in higher education but at the same time if we are not very active in research we are just teachers. I feel that I'm both, because I have done research, I like to do research, I have papers published, I have presented a few papers. From that point of view I'm both."

Anna shares the same view relating her academic identity to engagement in scholarly activity or pursuing higher qualifications:

> "I'm also both, a teacher and an academic although I haven't published any papers but I've presented and I'm hopefully pursuing a PhD later so yes one thing I can say is that while you're in the class you will have to be a teacher because of the level of the students especially on foundation if we went as an academic nobody would understand us and that's not the skills that they would require."

Her statement reflects not a conflict but a contrast between the two elements of her professional identity which I believe is characteristic of working on the Foundation programme.

Aymen further evidences this gap by presenting the differences between skill-based and content-based teaching:

> "An academic is a person who lectures, who doesn't need to do activities in the lecture. An academic is one who walks in class who pours knowledge on students and leaves, students attended or not attend, care did not care this is not his problem. I mean essentially I'm not saying that lecturers should be just like ah…, boring but I mean it's not like teachers who I mean like skill-based versus content-based […]Even standards differ from skill-based to content based. I had 42 (students in a class) and even they could not split-up the class."

I personally have always felt a certain tension between my academic self and my teaching self ever since I started engaging in scholarly activity and all the more when pursuing my doctoral studies:

> "So what am I teacher or academic? People say both, I don't know yet, I have to say. I was recently asked during a discussion how does my scholarly work, which I enjoy doing and which comes with the package of doctoral work, underpin my teaching and I thought of a number of ideas that I put in practice in the classroom or in assessments which come from the literature in the field. That being said, I feel that my professional identity is very much compartmentalised, as I am a teacher in the class, and I enjoy being that, having this close rapport with my students, having that kind of closeness and satisfaction that comes from their active engagement in the activities I prepare for them. At the same time, after class when I have to write papers for publication or EdD assignments I feel that I'm in a totally different realm that is related sometimes to what I do in class and more often than not isn't, it being a totally different compartment of my professional existence. What also enhanced this feeling of separation is the question being asked of me by a person in authority in my college or it was more rather like a statement: "I hope your studies don't interfere with your work". I remember clarifying to her that they do in a very positive way in the sense that I mentioned earlier, that research guides my teaching. But I could see her point, being an academic is a 24 hr. job as more often than not, I also dream about my research. Now this is very demanding and strenuous, but is it a positive stress or a distress? Sometimes it can be both. Also she later clarified to me that people around me might perceive my mistakes which are normal through the lens of this distress that I'm facing. I would have to say, most of the times I'm juggling between this two compartments and sometimes the juggling turns into a natural flow, sometimes I wonder what does professionalism have to do with it all for example? What do the great theories of education have to do with it all? The classroom is an organic living dynamic space where theories have to be thrown out the window because the way I see it theories are about generalisations and the situations that you come across when you are teaching are anything but general." (Journal entry 18/10/2012).

Taher does not view his identity in the same compartmentalised way that I presented earlier but rather as a natural flow between both. His view is in line with the view evidenced by the Robbins report (section 3, page 5) mentioned in the first part of the paper.

> "Being an academic guides your teaching in the sense that you have to publish papers and you have to conduct empirical research studies if you keep yourself updated, you read about the research of other people in your field and you

know the research and theories in your field I feel you are still academic. […] you are in the field and you know what is happening in the field and you apply that in the classroom."

The same view is shared by George:

"I think are we a little bit sort of astray in our priorities because I think there is so much more that we need to do at the classroom level and that doesn't mean that you can't be an academic but I think in the field of EFL or ELT we need to be practitioners first then academics and I don't think they need to be mutually exclusive because you can do classroom research."

At the same time Anna brings forth the argument of an academic having a higher status and being considered more professional:

"It's like each one's perspective, maybe it's like the institution recognizes the one that, not the teacher, but the one who does researches, the one who presents papers. Maybe they would be more regarded if they had five or six doctorates in the department. It's a prestige issue."

In support of the same argument, Taher says that:

"Academics when they do research they have more critical thinking skills. They think about a topic, they get reliable data so it means they have a better edge so when they have information they have knowledge which is based on data so it means they're in a better position so then the people who are managers in higher education and they want to plan something, they get guidance from them based on their research so in this sense they can be regarded as such."

Andrea mentions an incident where her practitioner identity clashed with her higher education work environment:

"I think like the whole higher education environment is something about status and privilege and qualifications. For example when I started here or when I was going through the interview process here someone said to me basically know your place, you're a native speaker but there are people here who aren't native speakers who have PhDs and masters and ten years of experience so know your place, if they're talking don't try to argue with them, don't say I'm a native speaker and that thing goes this way or this way because that person has more experience or has more degrees."

This is an interesting example of how power relations between the individual and the reference group are formed and the possible conflicts they generate. The kind of conflict that she mentions requires a re-framing of her identity as a native speaker. Thus the professional native-speakerist discourse that Holliday was talking about earlier (see section 2, pg. 4) is no longer valid in this context, being replaced by a dominant professional discourse of academic vs. non-academic status.

On the other hand Isa puts forward a contrasting view:

"For example here in Oman we are giving more attention to those people who are coming from Europe. This is something to do with our culture. It's somehow like a stereotype oh this teacher is from UK. Even here I have students showing me their timetable and then asking me the teachers who are working here from which nationality are they, where are they from? Are they from UK? This is the first question. When you say no, they are for example Omanis, they are from India they are from Asia, and they will have somehow like a negative feeling towards them. This is like a stereotype in our culture so this will affect being a professional. So for example in a college if we have people from Europe or native speakers a lot of people will be attracted like they would like to be in that college."

When reconsidering all these views, the question remains however, where do we place ourselves in front of these complex issues? Do we give up our moral values in order to fulfil external expectations, do we try to achieve an academic status in order to be viewed as professionals or do we focus on improving our practice guided by an ethos of self-improvement and philosophical enquiry? I believe as my participants do that one should stay true to oneself and that often means renegotiating one's identity, re-constructing it from fragments in the face of complexity. Our substantive identity that I was talking about earlier in this paper is about our own core of values, "staying true to oneself" as Anna mentioned. That being said, much of what we know about our substantive identity comes through our situated identity, i.e. "our interactions with others as their verbal and non-verbal communication of appraisal influences our view of selves and our roles in relation to other members of the group". (Stets and Harrod, 2004 in McAlpine, p.114) The participants in this study evidenced this argument as Taher shows it:

"I think in order to keep balance you communicate with your managers who have different expectations but actually because you are the person who are in the field and you know that what you are doing benefits students better

than what the management is expecting so I feel that you have the moral duty to communicate with the mangers and convince them and you keep on doing the good things that you feel you should do."

Anna also adds that this interaction should be supplemented with a constant self-reflexion on one's professionalism:

"And to the best of your ability try not to leave gaps where you someone else pointing a finger at you…"

Thus the interplay between all these elements is an evidence of the diversity of identities in the context presented. Then, finally, I ask myself:

7. Whose professionalism is it anyway? (final thoughts)

The immediate answer would be it is everyone's professionalism (us as a community of practice) and at the same time it is our own (us as individuals). Taylor (in McAlpine at al., p.116) says that "there is no such thing as a standard academic career". I think this is the conclusion I have come to by undertaking this self-reflexive journey. I would add to that that there is no standard, unified professional identity as it is "shaped by the many relationships we encounter - our relationship to our research, our colleagues, supervisors, administrators, students all shape our experiences" (McAlpine et al, p116).The views presented above paint a complex picture of what professionalism means in this particular context, acknowledging a universality of moral, ethical ideals as one of the main components but also diversity in terms of institutional culture, background as well as personal beliefs. This means that some professionals view their identity as being more fragmented having to reconcile certain elements such as external accountability and their own moral grounding. Others view all these elements as part of a complex diverse picture of their professional identity and assert that viewing this complexity as the norm is in itself an evidence of professionalism.

This journey started by trying to understand what would prompt an experienced academic to say "professionalism doesn't exist", continued by exploring my own and my informants' professional identities and has ended by accepting that our identities are always under construction through constant reflection and self-discovery. I have found out that by accepting this, I could embrace this complexity and work with it and that what seemed to be at times a source of conflict between different elements, was actually a source of understanding of my work environment and my own professionalism. My views about professionalism and professional practice are still firmly grounded in my personal work ethics but they also embody a constant dialogue with my environment through the relationships that are formed and consolidated. As I carry on the identity construction process, the challenge in dealing with a sense of incompatibility between my identity as a doctoral student and my identity as a Foundation Programme teacher in Oman still remains. However, I realised that by constantly engaging in communication in this community of practice that I and my colleagues form, we could constantly renegotiate our professional identity hence better deal with conflicts arising from external pressure of institutional mandates and our own values, as well as inconsistencies and dilemmas that characterise the diversity of contexts we come from and we operate in.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Interview Questions:
1)   What does professionalism mean to you?
2)   How do you see/position yourself with regard to professionalism?
3)   Do you consider yourselves professionals or do you feel you should be in order to teach or to meet organisational expectations?
4)   What does it meant to be an academic and do you consider yourself to be one?
5)   Is professionalism a matter of status and self-regulation or a matter of values and practices?
6)   How do you balance your moral grounding as a teacher with external accountability? Do you envisage any challenges here?
7)   Do you see your personal ethics in opposition with external/institutional accountability?

Appendix B

Interview Coding Sample

What does professionalism mean to you?

Anita: For me it's the kind of behaviour that is required of a professional especially in a work place, a kind of behaviour in the sense that you are committed to your job, you are respectful since you're in your work, practice what you preach, that's how you gain respect and be punctual**. (Definition of professionalism as behaviour/intrinsic)**

Ashley: I agree with anita, just acting in a way that upholds standards of your working institution but also professionalism means that we as professionals excel in a certain area, you have credentials and certifications that other people don't have, so that kind of separates you from kind of a different level.**(Professionalism as external accountability as well as moral mission/Professionalism based on credentials/Intrinsic and extrinsic)**

Ayham: I think the definition of a professional kind of depends on where we are, if we are talking about the situation here in our college, i think the definition here is to meet the expectations, to do what you are expected to do which is sometimes supernatural or has to be supernatural so you are doing what the expectations are so sometimes you can be regarded as unprofessional because sometimes you fail to do what you are thought to do be able to do.**(Professionalism depends on context)**

Do you feel you are professional because the institution expects you to be professional or because you feel that you should be professional?

Anita: If you just say that you want to do it only for the institution, to meet the expectation of the institution, then I don't consider you a professional. Because I should also be satisfied with my work, if I'm not satisfied it might lead to lack of motivation in my teaching, it will affect everything around me, it will spoil the teaching and learning environment, I mean I also need to be satisfied with my job, it's not just meeting the expectations by hook or by crook but I also need to be satisfied with my job**. (Professionalism cannot be only based on external accountability/it has to be intrinsic)**

Ashley: I agree with that and I think also a teacher meets the general expectations, they show up on time, they go to their classes, their students get ok grades, all of that but professionalism to me means the way you act with other people so maybe you meet all of that expectations but your behaviour does not make you look professional or maybe you act in a way that a professional person would.**(Professionalism cannot be only based on external accountability/it has to be intrinsic)**

Tanveer: so based on this definition, people who are teaching at higher levels could be both, teachers and academics. Ideally, we are supposed to be academics because we work in higher education but at the same time if we are not very active in research we are just teachers.I feel that i'm both, because i have done research, i like to do research, i have papers published, i have presented a few papers. From that point of view i'm both.**(Identity as teacher and academic)**

Anita: I'm also both, a teacher and an academic although i haven't published any papers but i've presented and i'm hopefully pursuing a PhD later so yes one thing i can say is that while you're in the class you will have to be a teacher because of the lvel of the students especially on foundation if we went as an academic nobody would understtand us and that's not the skills that they would require**. (Identity as teacher and academic)**

Tanveer: Being an academic guides your teaching in the sense that you have to publish papers and you have to conduct empirical research studies if you keep yourself updated, you read bout the research of other people in your field and you know the research and theories in your field i feel you are still academic.**(Identity as teacher and academic)**