Universities rely upon the collaborative work of academic staff and students, yet the nature of this work has been undergoing profound and rapid change. Neoliberal ways of operating have come to dominate the political landscape of higher education and in an era of supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000), universities are scrambling to ‘manage’ and control the work academics perform. Barcan (2013, p. 69) describes universities as a “fractured and palimpsestic work world” where three different types of institutions simultaneously coexist: “a scholarly community, a bureaucracy and a corporation”. Each of these types of institution has its own demands, values, rhythms, sense of time, and purpose. These competing demands and pressures within the higher education sector have led to a fracturing of traditional academic roles and notions of collegiality, leading to growing feelings of disconnection and emotional insecurity.

Through a series of emergent events that have encouraged sensual ways of knowing, academic colleagues from several institutions have been able to reflect not only on the intellectual, cognitive domain of the work they do, but also on the affective, emotional aspects, thereby making these aspects of their work visible. In this interactive presentation, we consider the competing discourses that frame academics' work and offer ways to enact a collegiality that buffers the current era of emotional insecurity, and which also ‘speaks back’ to the powerful impersonal university machine. We will discuss the ways we have engaged with colleagues using arts-informed methodologies (Butler-Kisber 2010; Leavy 2015), which harness the power of learning and inquiry through the arts to consider the diverse and emotive journeys of being an academic.

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