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Proof in the Pedagogic Pudding? The Challenges of Promoting Evidence-Based Teaching Practice in a Research-Focused Institution (0017)

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Drawing upon the findings of a mixed methodological study, this paper critically analyses the cultural, pedagogical, and organisational issues encountered by academics and support staff working within a newly established Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice tasked with facilitating a new teaching-focused policy in a previously research-led institution. The aim of this policy is to assure that, across the institution, teaching is given the same priority and kudos as research. Focusing specifically on staff perceptions of the impact of the new policy on various aspects of academic life including, pedagogic practice, student support, staff training, and organisational management, the paper critically addresses the cultural and attitudinal challenges of change management (Kotter, 1996) within a ‘grey-brick’ university. In doing so it makes a significant contribution to current academic theory and debate in the areas of pedagogic practice and organisational management.

Introduction & Background

The quality of teaching within Universities has received much public attention in recent years - most notably in the context of the National Student Survey (see HEFCE, 2009) which puts the UK Higher Education Sector under the spotlight on an annual basis. Such attention reflects academic debates concerning the quality of university teaching over the past two decades (Barnett, 2005; Biggs, 1996; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 1992). Much of this debate is grounded in the concept of Scholarship proposed by Boyer (1990), who argued that there are four separate, but overlapping areas of scholarship (discovery, integration, application and teaching), each of which is integral to academic work. Whilst from Boyer’s perspective, the relationship between the different areas of scholarship may be defined as conceptually and pedagogically interdependent, the debate regarding the relationship between research and teaching continues and has been described as ‘amongst the most intellectually tangled, managerially complex and politically contentious issues in mass higher education’ (Scott, 2005, p 53). Moreover, arguments that in order to achieve high quality scholarly outcomes, university teachers need to adopt an approach to teaching similar to that of research (i.e. founded upon academic rigour and evidence), continue to be the subject of much debate (Elton, 2005 & Healey, 2000).

Drawing upon the findings of a mixed methodological study, this paper critically analyses the cultural, pedagogical, and organisational issues encountered by academics and support staff working within a
newly established Centre for Learning Innovation and Professional Practice tasked with facilitating a new teaching-focused policy in a previously research-led institution. The aim of this policy is to assure that, across the institution, teaching is given the same priority and kudos as research. Focusing specifically staff perceptions of the impact of the new policy on various aspects of academic life including, pedagogic practice, student support, staff training, and organisational management, the paper critically addresses the cultural and attitudinal challenges of change management (Kotter, 1996) within a ‘grey-brick’ university. In doing so it makes a significant contribution to current academic theory and debate in the areas of pedagogic practice and organisational management.

**Methodology**

Adopting a research approach aimed at promoting a multi-phenomenographic pedagogy (Robertson & Bond, 2001 & Trigwell et al, 2005), and utilising grounded theory analytical techniques, the first stage of the research process captured the views of 20 early career academic staff who were asked to reflect upon their perceptions of the relationship between research and teaching in their particular department or research group and to draw a diagrammatic representation of this relationship. The value of using diagrams as a methodological tool was that they afforded the researchers the opportunity to work directly with visual concepts whilst allowing the participants to express themselves in a creative and imaginative manner. Each diagram was accompanied by a short descriptive passage of written discourse aimed at contextualising the individual’s perceptions.

The process of analysing the diagrams involved a critical, comparative investigation of conceptual images, conducted initially by two researchers working independently each of whom identified key concepts within the images. Following this, the researchers worked collaboratively; critically discussing their conceptual interpretations of the data and using theoretical sampling techniques to develop theory grounded in visual data. Reflection and reflexivity were integral to the process during which the use of open and then axial coding culminated in the identification and analysis of key categories and themes. Building on the visual data, and using theoretical sampling techniques, in-depth, focus groups were conducted with 20 academic and support staff aimed at further exploring the concepts identified in the diagrammatic analysis. The interviews were analysed following grounded methodology techniques during which the key concepts and sub-concepts were identified and the relationships between them analysed (Strauss & Corbin, 2001).

**Discussion & Conclusion**

The findings show that the process of facilitating organisational change has not been easy. Academic staff, whilst supporting the move towards teaching and learning excellence, identified several concerns regarding the implementation of the policy. Such concerns focused in three main areas: academic and practical concerns regarding the requirement to prioritise teaching whilst the expectation to be ‘REF returnable’ within one’s discipline continues: uneasiness regarding the requirement for less
experienced staff to undertake professional training in learning and teaching practice: and perceived
tensions within research groups and Schools between teaching-focused (mostly early-mid career)
academics and research-intensive (mostly mid-career/ senior) colleagues.

The discussion analyses the findings using Kotter's (2008) *Three Key Tasks* (managing multiple time
lines/ building coalitions/ creating a vision) to critique the success of the policy in terms of
organisational change. In respect of managing multiple time lines, the need for staff to balance short-
term individual aims with long-term institutional objectives is proving challenging for many. The
complexities of academic life mean that academics are struggling with the requirement to balance
expectations of quality in learning and teaching with increased teaching loads and continuously high
research demands. With regards to ‘coalition building’, there is little doubt that the strategic
management of the organization, incorporating focused recruitment strategies, strong leadership,
collaboration between management and staff and the building of strong teams supporting the
infrastructure, is beginning to impact the organizational culture. However, the research findings
suggest that whilst staff are committed to providing teaching content based upon discipline specific
research, there is still work to be done in terms of persuading staff of the value of evidence-based
teaching practice (in terms of pedagogic research and scholarship). Furthermore, whilst the
institutional vision of teaching, learning and research excellence, has been disseminated to all staff
and is widely supported, putting this vision into practice is not easy. The paper concludes by
suggesting that in order to make the vision a reality, the institution needs to move away from
conceptualising research and teaching separately and move towards an ethos of scholarship (Boyer,
1990) whereby the interdependence between research and teaching is not only acknowledged – but is
celebrated. [Word Count: 976].

References:


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