

The Academic Experience of Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education: living between policy and practice (0232)

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Context and background

Professional development frameworks and policy in Higher Education continue to be focused on engagement at national and institutional level. This paper aims to illuminate and interpret experiences of CPD at the individual (micro) level which may be much more important in the matter of achieving a meaningful culture of CPD in H.E.

Academic Developers, often described as 'New Professionals' (Gornall, 1999), widely espouse socio-cultural standpoints which situate 'professionalism' as a 'socially constructed contextually variable and contested concept' (Troman, 1996). However, a pervading culture of naïve realism (Scott 2000:11, cited in Dunne, Pryor and Yates, 2005) still requires Academic Developers to discover what is 'out there' and import something 'in there' by superficially quantifiable means, supporting largely monolithic strategies which struggle to survive in the complex social world of academic 'tribes and territories' (Becher & Trowler, 2001). In this cultural environment, notions of professional development can be narrowly understood, and produces many tensions between the different agendas of institutional policy making and individual notions of professional development.

Dominances and absences in the discourses of CPD in H.E. can be seen to be rooted in power relations produced by institutional responses to neo-liberal reform agendas. However, in spite of the adoption and dominance of strategic planning in institutional discourses, the rational alignment of individual, departmental and institutional missions is by no means straightforward or assured. Organizations do not necessarily behave rationally (Mintzberg, 2004), and can be conceptualized in many ways, in particular as social or political systems with their own cultures and values.

The notion of evidence-based transferable practice is therefore brought into question.

What is clear so far is that a technocratic approach cannot fully achieve the shift in the level of engagement required of academics to continually review their academic practices (Clayton, 2008). Moreover, what constitutes meaningful individual engagement in CPD in H.E. is often obscured by the technocratic approaches of institutional policy making. These events impact upon personal and professional lives and complex academic identities, and it is important to know more about the affects of this.

There is a burgeoning literature around change, identity, professional knowledge and development in Higher Education, and an emerging literature around what might be described as the psycho- sociology of Higher Education. Relatively little is known or written about how affective dimensions interplay with professional development, and the impact of these factors.

Studies in the schools sectors (Dainton, 2005; Day et al, 2006, 2007; Goodson, 1992, 1996, 2003) demonstrate that changes in practice are difficult to achieve and can often lead to confusion and tension with deeply held beliefs.

This study has regard for the ontology of individuals and aims to illuminate the experience of being and becoming developed (after Barnett, 2007). It is interested in how the policy discourse of professional development intersects with the lived experience of individuals.

Methodological approach

Many educational researchers, Carey and Biesta (1994, 1995, 2004c) and others, have effectively shown that cultures are both structured and structuring. However, the rationale for this paper is that it is through 'stories' at the micro level where these relationships might best be seen and understood.

This study attempts to find a way of looking beyond the structure-agency issue by exploring story and narrative research methodology and methods. The aim was to use a theoretical framework which both troubles common sense understanding (Clough, 2002) and the positivist paradigm of institutional policy and practice of academic development.

In any study of culture it can be seen that 'story telling' is a powerful tradition. The stories that are told, and that we tell ourselves in our professional lives, the stories indeed that institutions tell themselves, are a relatively little heard aspect of research into the sociology of H.E. and in particular investigations into notions of professional identity and development.

the philosophic concern with life as narrative involves an emphasis on dialogue, conversation, story and the processes of inquiry and reflection on experience that allow the individual to identify what has personal significance and meaning for him or her personally.

(Charles Taylor, 1989:52)

By focusing on personal significance, narrative approaches have the potential to unfold depth and complexity by foregrounding voices excluded in dominant politics.

There are considerable differences in the ways in which narratives are used in research. For 'narrative thinkers' such as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) experience is situated in an 'experience continuum' of past present and future.

Therefore, a key concept in the approach used is their idea of the 'three dimensional narrative inquiry space'. Temporality in relationship to experience is discussed not just as that which happens in the moment (and therefore has to be captured and analyzed as such) but as an expression of something happening over time. Stories therefore have a simultaneous past, present and implied future.

As such, thinking narratively creates a space where stories are always changing direction and therefore multi-layered, creating a rich picture.

The objective of the inquiry is to illuminate, through six stories, how academics have responded to an intense period of continuous educational reform in Higher Education. The aim is to understand how academics perceive and implement change and policy imperatives, and how CPD activity fits in to academic working lives.

Emerging findings and issues

This paper will present two 'case stories' from my research to date, focusing on the following aspects:

- The analytical framework for the interpretation of narrative data in this context.
- The construction, during one interview, of a pictorial representation of a 'career river' as a device to plot significant events over time.
- The emotional investment involved in academic identity, how that is linked to 'back-story' as much as 'future-story'.
- The implications for the practice researcher position in narrative 'insider' enquiry.
- Findings which signify the importance of the emotional dimension in academic identities and development and how this adds to emerging literature on the affective domains in theorizing Higher Education.
- Implications for institutional policies and Academic Development practices in the new age of austerity.

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