

Pedagogic frailty: an initial consideration of aetiology and prognosis. (0026)

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Concepts from other disciplines can sometimes be helpful in making useful analogies in educational research. Within the clinical literature, "frailty" is considered to develop as a consequence of a decline in a range of factors which collectively results in an increased vulnerability to sudden adverse actions triggered by relatively minor events (Clegg and Young, 2011). Various indicators of frailty have been identified and include the inability to integrate responses to change in the face of stress (Rockwood, *et al.*, 1994); the loss of adaptive capacity due to a loss of complexity (Lipsitz, 2002); the wear and tear that results over time by repeated efforts to adapt to change (Seeman, *et al.*, 2002); the sense of fatigue when change is implemented without consultation (MacIntosh *et al.*, 2010). These issues would appear to offer considerable resonance with the pressures felt by academics teaching at university. In the context of higher education teaching, one might observe *pedagogic frailty* (Kinchin, 2016) when colleagues find the cumulative pressures of academia eventually inhibit their capacity to change practice in response to an evolving teaching environment, leading them to converge on what they might consider a 'safe', sustainable and traditional pedagogic approach (Canning, 2007). Pedagogic frailty may contribute to recently observed occurrences of the arrested professional development of university teachers, in which they have been described as *experienced non-experts* (Brody and Hadar, 2015; Van Waes *et al.*, 2015).

Conservatism in teaching approaches can lead to a convergence on traditional views of teaching in which the transmission of content is seen to dominate and teaching is structured as a procedural chain of practice (Kinchin, 2009). A linear chain is indicative of strategic success (i.e. "it works for me") in which the academic selects what is considered the essential information to convey his/her view of teaching and selectively ignores the rest. The competence that is indicated by such chains has been described as a 'monolayer of understanding' by Talbot (2004), in which dialogue plays no part in its development; i.e. it portrays an authoritarian certainty that has only a single possible route from beginning to end. So whilst universities may strive for distinctiveness, they may end up '*homogenizing their approaches to teaching excellence, pedagogic practices and the overall student experience*' (Stevenson *et al.*, 2014: 39). This makes the evolution of teaching practice more problematic (Kinchin, 2011), and hence increasingly frail. In addition, the adoption of innovative technologies into such a restrictive model means that any transformative potential is corrupted to perform utilitarian tasks, maintaining the *status quo* of non-learning (Kinchin, 2012). Within such an environment, it is not difficult to see why colleagues may find the idea of the 'scholarship of teaching' to feel like an unhelpful distraction from their daily tasks (e.g. Boshier, 2009).

One of the underlying causes of pedagogic frailty may be the way in which discourses surrounding the instructional mechanisms of teaching seem to take precedence over the discourse of the underpinning values. Bernstein (2000) refers to curriculum in terms of its Regulative Discourse (RD), and Instructional Discourse (ID). The RD refers to the values that underpin the curriculum. ID refers to content selection, sequencing, pacing and assessment. Bernstein argues that the ID is always embedded in the RD, whether the RD is explicit or implicit. Observations of programmes and their supporting literature suggest that departments typically focus on the ID without paying much attention to the RD (Kinchin *et al.*, 2015). Meetings are set up to discuss content to be taught and assessments to be created, but little time seems to be spent on discussing the underlying philosophy, values or pedagogy that supports the programme. These less tangible factors seem to be assumed to be a "given". Even if they have been acknowledged within the original validation documentation of the programme when it was established, how the RD is evaluated as it evolves or takes into account induction of new members of teaching staff or insertion of new technology into the teaching mix is rarely noted.

New academics who may have their horizons broadened through introduction to a variety of research into teaching and learning through HEA-accredited programmes (e.g. Kandlbinder and Peseta, 2009) may succumb to the conventional wisdom of the dominant group (often referred to as COWDUNG) so that their emerging dynamic and progressive teaching frameworks are eroded by the stresses of the job and the indifference (or active negativity) of jaded senior colleagues to the discourse of teaching and learning. This allows academics to settle into a comfortable cycle of non-learning (Kinchin, Lygo-Baker and Hay, 2008), with the aim of releasing more time to focus on research activities. This leaves the institution in a state of pedagogic frailty. This frailty results in institutions having a limited repertoire of responses to demands of the teaching and learning environment, illustrated by the impotence of universities to address students' on-going dissatisfaction with assessment feedback practices (e.g. Evans, 2013), exacerbated by a lack of agentic

engagement on the part of the students (e.g. Reeve, 2013), to which institutional responses are typically 'just do more and do it faster', as if increasing the dosage of an inappropriate medicine will eventually become a cure. This is an example of the loss of adaptive capacity due to a loss of complexity described by Lipsitz (2002).

Data presented here are drawn from preliminary interviews with academics and show indicators of stressors that can accumulate in such a way that relatively small events (changes in the academic environment) may become impossible to accommodate within the perceived strait jacket of traditional teaching models. These indicators include the tension between teaching and research that exists within an asymmetrical context in which rewards are not perceived as equal in status; the perceived separation of pedagogy and discipline; the centralization of administration that removes control of processes from the end-users; and the lack of a shared and explicit regulative discourse within teaching and learning strategies. The first step in combating pedagogic frailty is to identify relationships between the factors that contribute to the condition.

999 words

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