

Academic development: compliant behaviours or conceptual change?

How can academic development foster 'real' change?

In a worldwide context of changing expectations of the role of the university, the purpose of academic development is multi-faceted and complex. A major aim is arguably to improve university lecturers' teaching. How then can academic development encourage university teachers to change their beliefs about learning and teaching in order to improve their teaching? This paper puts forward the view that unless the individual perceives the need to change, any behaviour required by academic development initiatives will be compliant and short-term, as it has not resulted from real conceptual change. The consequences of ignoring psychological processes means running the risk of imposing staff development sessions, workshops, or training programmes, which have little or no impact on academic staffs' actual teaching practices or on how they think about learning and teaching. Encouraging staff to engage in their own pedagogical action research may be one solution but it, in turn, raises more questions.

What are the barriers to academic development?

The English White Paper states *'that all providers should ensure that staff are trained to teach and continue to develop professionally'* (DfES, 2003, p.49). This will presumably cause few difficulties to new university teachers who begin their professional life in this changed culture. Continuing professional development could be more problematic, however, for experienced university teachers. Such staff may well be disillusioned, overworked and overburdened with administration duties, increasing numbers and facing the challenge of teaching a more diverse student population. A further barrier is the institutional culture of many universities, which favours excellence in research rather than in teaching (Fielden, 1998). It is small wonder that most academics who have a real passion and commitment to their own subject, are difficult to persuade that engaging with generic aspects of teaching and learning, will enhance their professional roles and identities.

Of course, not all academics are resistant to the influence of pedagogical development and pedagogical research. A considerable corpus is keen and committed to improving their teaching and their students' learning – the pedagogical enthusiasts. Such staff have an important role to play in influencing their colleagues, often through their own example, to actively engage with academic development initiatives. Examples of the enthusiasts' approach at the macro level include learning and teaching conferences, discussion mail bases; professional seminars and workshops run by various academic bodies, such as those run by the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD). At the micro level, examples include learning and teaching developments often funded by the institution or by the relevant discipline based Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), to which an individual or small group of lecturers can apply. The enthusiast, then, can be a powerful driver for change, but dissemination is hard. There is a tendency to reinvent the wheel as colleagues do not like using other peoples' teaching materials and the net effect can be excluding rather than inclusive. Their enthusiasms also risk remaining at the level of a 'hobby' unless transfer of learning is

supported in the individual's departmental culture and at the level of the institution (Knight, 2002; Reid, 2002).

Whether lecturers see themselves as pedagogical enthusiasts or discipline-committed specialists, they will still encounter a further barrier to academic development when they are asked to enter professional training. No matter how expert in their own subject, they inevitably take on the role of learner in this situation, which they may perceive as threatening, and questioning of their professional competence. Unless these issues are seriously considered the 'traditional' academic is likely to be an unwilling participator in staff development programmes focused on learning and teaching. The result will be a public compliance since the individual will remain resistant to their messages because her or his beliefs have not changed. A further problem with compliance is that it only persists while the behaviour is under scrutiny, so the individual is likely to revert to previous teaching behaviours when no longer observed. To avoid public compliance, academic development needs to change academics' beliefs about their role as university lecturers, but the question is how?

Do conceptions of learning and teaching need to be changed?

Despite many powerful treatises to encourage a student-centred conception of teaching as learning facilitation, there still appears to be a widespread belief that teaching should be teacher-centred and is about knowledge transmission (Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead & Mayes, paper under review). Such 'traditional' conceptions need to be challenged at the very least. Even where lecturers hold more student-centred conceptions, these are not always translated into how they go about teaching and assessing their students (Murray and Macdonald, 1997). Until we know why there is a disjunction between conceptions and actual teaching behaviours, it will not be helpful to keep introducing new methods of teaching. Such a course of action would be very similar to the student-learning scene of the 1960's where study skills were seen as the panacea for all ills regardless of students' conceptions or intentions about their learning. How, therefore, do we avoid past mistakes and not only widen university teachers' horizons but also ensure that their conceptions are consistent with their practice? Social psychologists would suggest real change is brought about through active participation and involvement rather than through external drivers which enforce compliance (Hogg & Vaughan, 1998). The underlying rationale is that by empowering people to come to their own decisions, their beliefs will change and so too will their behaviour.

Pedagogical Action Research– is the time right?

Encouraging university staff to carry out research on their own teaching/assessment practices and on their students' learning has been referred to variously as teacher research, action research, reflective practice, or what Norton (2001) characterises as 'pedagogical action research'. Action research is rapidly growing as is evidenced by thriving networks established in the UK and beyond, such as the University of Sydney (<http://www2.fhs.usyd.edu.au/arow/>). The power of pedagogical action research is that it starts from the 'inside' at the level of the individual lecturer who is stimulated to carry out an action research enquiry. Action research draws on principles of constructivism, personally meaningful learning, and active involvement by academic staff in their own

continuing professional development. By engaging with the practicalities of carrying out a small-scale research study, the lecturer will have a personal stake and investment in exploring the theoretical literature on the scholarship of teaching, in acquiring appropriate research skills, and in drawing conclusions and amending her/his practice based on the research findings. In other words, there will be a gradual shift at the lecturer's own pace in his or her beliefs about learning and teaching rather than a public compliance.

A further advantage is that action research addresses the need for autonomy and professionalism, which is so highly valued by academics and may be one of the reasons why they resist staff development programmes and resent heavy handed approaches to quality assurance. Pedagogical action research is cyclical and progressively collaborative so it deals with the criticism of the reflective practitioner as being immersed in his or her own private world, unaffected by peer review. Pedagogical action research has sometimes been criticised for being no more than evaluative curriculum development. Such comment is justified unless the pedagogical action researcher is prepared to put her or his work to the public scrutiny of the wider academic community and to peer review. Although the prime aim is for practitioners to carry out research on their own teaching and learning in order *to improve practice*, pedagogical action research cannot be called research unless it rigorously meets this criterion.

Questions still to be answered...

Pedagogical action research addresses many questions raised in this paper relating to 'real engagement' in academic development by the individual lecturer. It also raises many more that the reader might wish to consider:

1. Does pedagogical action research change university teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching?
2. Is pedagogical action research powerful enough to transcend the role of enthusiast's hobby?
3. Is pedagogical action research the best way of linking pedagogical development with disciplinary teaching?
4. Is pedagogical action research valued as much as subject research?
5. Does pedagogical action research translate into modifying practice?
6. Can pedagogical action research influence policy making in higher education?

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