

Strangers in a lost land: new lecturers experiences of the first year of teaching in a UK university.

Internationally moves toward the professionalization of the practice of higher education teaching have resulted in the growth of courses that seek to prepare new lecturers for the teaching aspect of their role (Davidson, 2004). Within the UK this training is nationally accredited, informed by the principals and values of the Higher Education Academy. Although it has been recognised that new lecturers are drawn from a range of different backgrounds (e.g. research, industry and also from beyond the UK) and universities entail a diversity of practices, procedures and values, these courses are designed to provide a generic overview of the practice of being a university lecturer (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

Interestingly, in relation to the rate at which courses for new lecturers have grown, comparatively the research into this provision has been limited (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). Extant studies represent largely retrospective analyses that do not support robust examinations of the experiences and knowledge that inform new lecturers' emergent practices (Eley, 2006; Norton *et al.*, 2010). Nor do they consider the adjustments new lecturers may make to adapt to the values and behaviours of the community they are entering (Kane *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, the aim of this research was to investigate the knowledge new lecturers draw upon in their first year of teaching and the contribution this makes to their practice.

In this paper were draw on longitudinal data collected over 13 new lecturers first year of teaching to examine the factors and experiences that shape the development of their lecturing practices.

Methodology

Previous research has tended to focus on specific groups such as international or professional staff (e.g. Boyd, 2010; Green & Myatt, 2011). In this research participants were selected to represent a range of backgrounds (e.g. non-UK origin, professional backgrounds or research-focused) to allow a comprehensive and comparative analysis across these three groups to be made.

Eraut's (2004) framework of workplace learning enabled us to understand the sites, spaces and nature of the learning that occurs in relation to the role new lecturers have taken on. In addition, Alexander's (1992) competing imperatives framework was used to explore how the knowledge that

underpins their role informs the actions taken in teaching practice.

Data were collected using the following methods over the 2011-12 academic year:

- 1) October - November 2011 - A practice-based observation on a teaching session chosen by the participant was conducted, followed by a semi-structured interview framed around the stimulated recall methodology (Calderhead, 1981). This was designed to encourage participants to reflect on actions taken in practice, considering these in the light of their own educational, cultural and professional histories.
- 2) February 2012 - To gain an insight into the teaching practices of the new lecturers' Schools and support provided to new lecturers, their teaching mentors were also interviewed.
- 3) May 2012 – Using a critical incident methodology (Brookefield, 1990) participants were invited to reflect on their first year of teaching considering in particular changes or development in their practice. They were also provided with the opportunity to respond to findings emerged from the initial stages of the research.

The constant-comparative approach was used to identify aspects of their developing practice and knowledge of teaching (Silverman, 2005). These data collection instruments allowed examination of the knowledge and behaviours participants have relied on and the ways they have reconciled their expectations and experiences within a new teaching environment.

Entertain vs. educate? (Bridges, 2001)

Unsurprisingly, participants brought varying knowledge and expectations of teaching to their new context, which shaped their early practice. Although several participants were confident and cognisant of pedagogical theories, as observed by Kahn *et al.* (2008), most demonstrated limited knowledge of teaching. Therefore the application of different teaching techniques was often intuitive, accompanied with reflections on practice referring to the need to 'edutain' students (Bridges, 2001) in their classes and a lack of uncertainty regarding the quality of student learning taking place in their sessions.

Learning to teach from scratch?

All participants identified their role as intellectually challenging, as they struggled to identify appropriate techniques and accommodate the variety of student backgrounds present in their classrooms. Regardless of their previous educational or professional backgrounds, they all referred to

universities as “*strange and novel places*”. Consequently considerable time therefore was spent reconciling complex management structures, cultures, and working relationships, which had implications for their emerging practice.

Supporting structures

Formal and informal learning were both referred to as assisting in the conceptualisation of their role. Formal training provided an overview of institutional perspectives and integrated new lecturers into a wider network of colleagues (Bamber, 2008; Smith, 2010). However, it also represented a site of contestation, as they sought to reconcile the institution’s good practices with those associated with their disciplines / home departments. This was related to a number of factors including the level of autonomy they experienced in relation to developing their own practice and the receptiveness of students to alternative forms of teaching.

Looking ahead

Their final reflections indicated that the chaos associated with the initial practice had passed, and they were now beginning to coherently plan for the next academic year. This planning involved them articulating their views on teaching to more established colleagues, and actively reconciling their practice styles with those of their discipline and school.

Provisional conclusions

There is no doubt the first year of teaching has been challenging. However, comparison across these three groups is that whilst expected difficulties may have emerged, e.g. lack of confidence in language skills for international staff (Green & Myatt, 2011) or questioning of connections between the academic study and industry for professional staff, (Boyd, 2010) there were surprising levels of congruence in their experiences. Therefore centrally provided teaching courses, as others have questioned (Davidson, 2004), a robust mechanism of supporting new lecturers in developing their teaching. Whilst this is a reassuring outcome for academic developers, it needs to be considered alongside the other competing pressures they face which can threaten to compromise their emerging confidence as lecturers.

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