Eloise Tan
Dublin City University, Iraq

Towards a conceptual model of the 'teaching-engaged academic': An interplay between institutional frameworks, academic development provision and epistemological beliefs (0190)

Programme number: F4

Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

Introduction

The National Strategy for Higher Education states, "It is not sufficient for academics to be experts in their disciplinary area; they also need to know how best to teach that discipline" (DES, 2011, p.59). Teaching at third level aspires to be "research-led… research-oriented… research-based… research-informed" (DES, 2011, p.58). In this way academics are expected to weave together their research and teaching to create a higher education pedagogy that is research-informed. Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2002) remark on the distinction between research and teaching preparedness: "For academics trained as researchers, this means that they are often well prepared for the research role. In contrast, many academics have had little or no formal teacher education to prepare them for the teaching role" (p.181). In some ways the establishment of academic development in higher education attempts to address the lack of 'teacher training' for academics who train primarily as researchers in their postgraduate careers. Academic development seeks to support and supplement academics with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills related specifically to teaching in higher education. As such academic development is not mutually exclusive from academics learning about teaching from their own practice, instead effective academic development is embedded and socially situated within academics' teaching practice.

This paper seeks to explore the phenomenon of those who choose to become actively engaged with their teaching through academic development. From analysis of 169 responses to an open-ended question in a regional online survey of academics in the Dublin region I work towards a model to describe the phenomenon of the 'teaching-engaged academic' and by contrast the 'teaching-disengaged academic'.

The 'Voices of academics in Ireland survey'

The survey was distributed over a 2 month (December 2010 - January 2011) period by email to Dublin City University, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dun Laoghaire Institute of Design and Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology Tallaght, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Trinity College Dublin and, University College Dublin. Over 800 academics began the online survey, with 683 respondents completing all questions. At the time of the survey there were 3798 academics staffed in the eight Dublin region higher education institutions (HEA, 2013). This gives a response rate of 18%. A similar online study

into the academic development of Open University tutors also reported a response rate of approaching 20% (Knight, Tait, and Yorke, 2007). To date this survey represents the largest collection of data on academics in third level institutions in Ireland.

The survey was designed to be completed in 10 minutes and consisted of 20 questions including two open ended questions. The 20 questions were distributed across five parts: 1) demographic information related to their current position, length of employment, discipline and other background information, 2) views toward changing nature of teaching in higher education, 3) experience with academic development, 4) preference for type of academic development activities and, 5) perception of institutional support for academic development.This paper builds on the findings from a qualitative content analysis from one open-ended question 'How would you promote good teaching in higher education?'.While the findings from the mixed-methods survey are being analysed as a whole with cross-comparisons between questions, here I focus on the findings from one question as it was the sole opportunity within the survey for academics to share their attitudes towards teaching in higher education. However, where relevant I will discuss the findings in the context of the overall findings of the survey.

Methodological analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis (QTA) is well-suited to analyse open-ended survey responses as it allows for the recognition of patterns (themes) throughout large quantities of small pieces of data. As open-ended survey responses can range in length from one word to a paragraph or more, it was not seen as suitable to apply discourse analysis methods given that the data was moreso respondents' bounded statements around the topic of teaching in higher education rather than 'talk' about the subject. Qualitative thematic analysis differs from quantitative content analysis as it does not seek to enumerate the data through word frequency counts, co-occurrence of terms or comparative keyword analysis (Silverman, 2011). Rather QTA is a "search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon" (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p.82).

Within QTA codes can be generated by theory, prior data/prior research, or by the raw data (Boyatzis, 1998). Here I adopted a hybrid approach of theory-driven and data-driven coding similar to Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006). The codes "institutional frameworks" and "structures of academic development provision" were generated by existing theory that informed the survey design as we had hypothesized that institutional frameworks of promotion and the lack of academics' time were main reasons for non-engagement with activities to improve teaching practice (McInnis, 2000; Young, 2006). The code "the academic's epistemological beliefs towards teaching" emerged from the data inductively when applying the theory-driven codes to the data to check for reliability (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The coding manuals were developed and tested using QTA frameworks set out by Boyatzis (1998) and Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006).
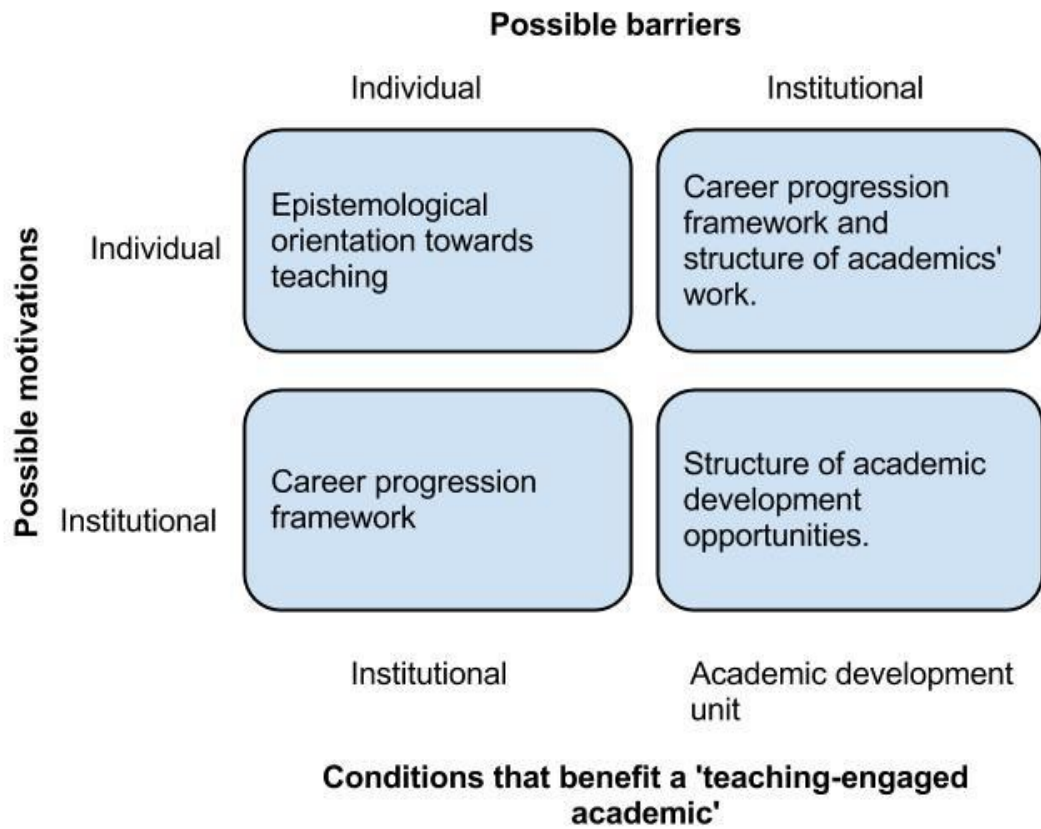
A limitation of this study was that member-checks could not be performed to validate the codes and their respective definitions as the survey was carried out anonymously. However I did test

the codes with teaching academics at the surveyed institutions by asking them if they felt they applied to their context.

Summary of findings and implications

Using qualitative thematic analysis I found three emerging themes through a combined process of theory and data driven codes: 1) the institution's incentivisation for academics to invest in improved teaching, 2) the academic's epistemological beliefs towards teaching and 3) the structure of academic development opportunities available to academics. I suggest that stakeholders in teaching quality in higher education must consider how these three factors (institutional frameworks, provision of academic development opportunities, and epistemological beliefs towards teaching) interrelate to foster a climate where investment in the improvement of teaching is seen as a worthwhile activity. Within the full paper I utilise excerpts from respondents to illustrate how individual respondents negotiate one, two, or three of these factors in their decision to engage/disengage with improving their teaching. It is beyond the scope of this research to ascertain if these three factors are equally important in an academic's decision to engage in improving their teaching.

Conceptual model of a 'teaching-engaged academic'.

Possible barriers

	Individual	Institutional
Individual	Epistemological orientation towards teaching	Career progression framework and structure of academics' work.
Institutional	Career progression framework	Structure of academic development opportunities.
	Institutional	Academic development unit

Possible motivations (vertical axis label)

Conditions that benefit a 'teaching-engaged academic'

References

Boyatzis, B. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development.* Sage: Thousand Oaks, California.

Department of Education and Skills (2011) *National strategy for higher education.* Dublin: Stationary Office.

Fereday, J. & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International journal of qualitative methods, 5(1),* 80-92.

Grbich, C. (2003). *Qualitative data analysis: an introduction.* Sage: London.

HEA (2013). *HEA Key facts and figures 2011-2012*. Dublin: HEA.

Kane, R., Sandretto, S., & Heath, C. (2002). Telling half the story: A critical review of research on the teaching beliefs and practices of university academics. *Review of educational research*, 72, 177-228

Knight, P., Tait, J. & Yorke, M. (2006): The professional learning of teachers in higher education, Studies in Higher Education, 31:03, 319-339.

Mcinnis, C. (2000) Changing academic work roles: The everyday realities challenging quality in teaching, *Quality in higher education*, 6:2,143-152

Silverman, D. (2011). *Interpreting qualitative data: A guide to the principles of qualitative research.* Sage, London.

Young, P. (2006). Out of balance: lecturers' perceptions of differential status and rewards in relation to teaching and research, *Teaching in higher education*, 11:2, 191-202