Enabling academic practice through dialogic space (0172)

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Drawing on a series of research studies by the author, this paper outlines a model for dialogue use as an enabling tool to support the professional learning of HE academics. It operates at macro, meso, and micro levels within organisational systems providing space for empowerment, professional development, affirmation and reward. As a group the studies sit within an action research methodology and form an evidence base constructed around empirical work by academic developers into dialogic means for professional learning. The studies also stand independently as a series of mixed method and largely qualitatively analysed research studies. Building on this, the author has particularly explored dialogue use for the assessment and support of professional learning. The symposium brings together colleagues across three UK institutions who have undertaken independent research into dialogue contributing further evidence in support of the model.

Background

It is widely accepted that professional educators develop themselves and their identities through the practice of teaching and within the educational setting (Guile & Lucas, 1999; Barnett, 2008; Eraut, 1994; Evans, 2008). The impact of learning within social and community-based environments is also well established (Wenger, 1998; Kahn et al, 2008; Roxa & Martensson, 2006). Continuing professional development for academics has furthermore been re-profiled through the influence of national initiatives such as the HE white Paper (1997), UK PSF (2006, 2011), TEF (2016), and of course the increased marketisation (globally and nationally) of the HE sector. Recent small studies suggest that professional learning can also impact positively on the student experience (Zaitseva, 2016; Pilkington, 2016). Nevertheless, the prevailing discourse for academics emphasises the limiters on academic freedom and autonomy: these relate to the increased control exercised by institutions on systems and processes associated with teaching and student learning environments; the increased accountability for individual academics in their teaching; and the explicit reporting of success and teaching excellence. The rhetoric appears to highlight a disempowering of academics and teaching through pressure on careers, practice and performance (Sachs, 2001).

The need to respond to such pressures has generated considerable creativity by academic developers in order to support professional learning for academics. The author for example developed an organization-wide approach as a response emphasising dialogic approaches to encourage reflective, critical learning. The approach included the use of courses and formal professional learning opportunities spanning novice to mastery and leadership (PG certificate awards, masters and professional doctorate), and an accompanying pedagogic research forum and targeted communities of practice, alongside the introduction of mentored dialogue and an assessed professional conversation as a means of awarding professional status linked to UK PSF.

Four studies underpin the model in this paper:

- As part of a nationally-funded, practitioner-led literature review into reflective learning in PG Certificates for HE teaching, the author researched the social aspects of reflective learning in this context. The literature reviewed confirmed that dialogue was a factor in effective and best practice (Kahn et al, 2008).
- In exploring the application of dialogue for assessing and awarding professional status as part of an institutional CPD framework, the author examined transcripts of professional assessed conversations for 12 applicants. Findings reinforced the affirmative, positive and enabling nature of dialogic processes to support professional learning even in the context of assessment (Pilkington, 2012).
- Drawing on four case studies of sustained academic development using dialogic spaces to enable critical professional learning, the author concluded that spaces within work based structures and processes could enable and enhance professional learning (Pilkington, 2014; Appleby & Pilkington, 2014).
- Finally, from interviews with 15 academics from 4 institutions, the author (with M Asghar, paper 4) investigated the impact of dialogue for individuals completing an assessed professional conversation to achieve Fellowship (UK PSF). This research indicates that dialogue in this context is enabling, empowering and offers a space for professional reflection and development of practice that has consequences for practice beyond the boundaries of the 'dialogic space' (work-in-progress).

The dialogic model

The model for dialogic organisational space constructed around this evidence uses the acronym 'SCORED' to identify the mechanisms enabling HE professionals to learn. Underpinning the model are six assumptions about professional learning supported by both literature and research. These are that academics in education develop their practice through critical reflection informed by values, wider understandings, and scholarship, purposeful evaluation of practice and interrogation of their own assumptions and prior learning; that they need to become skilled in multiple discourses enabling learning across multiple communities of practice and organisations; that they need to recognise the complex nature of professional knowledge and its relationship with practice; and that in developing themselves, they should be able to identify and selectively exploit opportunities for learning to enhance self and practice; finally, that they need to apply agency in an organizational context to make judgments and initiate actions on their own and others' behalf around practice, position and career (Appleby & Pilkington, 2014).

The model suggests this only occurs where HE institutions and individuals recognise the value of such learning; and where employers are supportive of professional educational practice and CPD. Given the current trends around professionalism, TEF, and the visible emphasis on high value HE teaching and learning, this paper suggests the solution to creating an empowered liberated and critical workforce lies in embedding learning spaces within organisational structures that enable critical professional learning around practice backed by dialogic approaches (Freire, 1970). This paper opens a discussion on the use of dialogue to respond to the challenges and tensions that surround HE academics.

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