

Building relationships and reputation through professional dialogue (0202)

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Background

Internationally the quality of teaching in higher education is becoming more important than ever driven by new teaching approaches required to manage increasing numbers of, and diversity in, the student body; the competitiveness of the global education market (Chalmers et al., 2014, Feigenbaum & Iquani, 2015); demands to enhance students' employability and changing technological demands (De Courcy, 2015; Henard & Rosevare, 2012). In the UK, the teaching quality discourse is becoming explicitly linked to value for money, and is reflected in government policy that will see a teaching excellence framework becoming key to the assessment of quality across the UK sector (BIS, 2016). This and other changes in the sector are promoting an increasing climate of accountability and some might say an erosion of personal autonomy.

The question of how academics demonstrate they have the skills to teach and to provide a quality experience for students challenges the sector but there continues to be no requirement in many international contexts, for statutory qualification. However, increasing numbers of UK higher education institutions are setting targets for their academics to achieve at least a recognition of their teaching expertise by meeting the criteria of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF) and becoming a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA). Professional development schemes provide the means for assessment of an individual's practice most frequently via submission of written evidence that shows how they meet the standards. Some schemes have promoted alternative professional routes premised on dialogue as an important component of professional learning (Pilkington, 2013; Ligorja & Cesar, 2013). The aim of this research was therefore to explore the value of dialogue for this purpose, and provide insight for its further development in the context of Higher Education.

Methodology

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to explore, through semi-structured interviews, the lived experience of eighteen academics from six institutions. All had achieved fellowship recognition through professional dialogue routes. Methodologically, we drew on the perspectives of Gadamer who considered culture and history as key to understanding human experience (Landridge, 2007). The data was analysed through a process of reflective inquiry, using

the universal themes of life as a heuristic (Van Manen, 2014). Significant statements were extracted and meanings formulated, followed by a clustering into three of the lifeworld themes (relationality, materiality and temporality) with final elaboration through written description (Saldana, 2013). To enhance trustworthiness of our analysis, we individually considered the data and adopted an on-going peer review approach as we established the findings.

Findings

This paper describes one particular lifeworld theme in the professional dialogic experience “relationality” through three main categories:

Establishing connections: This category surfaced the importance of the critical friendship established with the mentor, the collegiality of the process and the almost novel experience of being listened to. This sort of relational learning stimulated emotional responses from some, in ways they felt unlikely to have occurred if they had applied for fellowship through a written application. Connections with assessors were at times influenced by the power dynamics that were absent in the mentor relationship. For others it was merely a continuation of their interesting mentor conversations despite it taking place under more challenging circumstances.

Reflection on practice: Mentors were described as supporting participants to uncover their pedagogy practice, make sense of scholarship, and reconnect with the student experience. The dialogic relationship created space to stop and think, it prompted learning and/or rethinking about examples of teaching and supported participants in their personal understanding of the UK PSF

Being a good teacher explores how the self is experienced in relation to others. Trust appeared to be critical as professional dialogue was perceived as something that occurred in public both through mentoring and assessment. Success therefore through professional dialogue carried a high personal value and whilst perceived, in the main positively, for some a sense of professional vulnerability permeated through our conversations.

there was something about sharing, having a face to face validation of your work, that was going to feel very different from sending a piece of written work off into the blackness, there was something more real, there was something more possible, and there was a genuine interest, or a curiosity about how that might feel.(Chloe)

Discussion and Conclusion

Professional dialogue, as a social and organisational learning opportunity, can be influenced by relational variables including, knowing and valuing, access, and cost (Borgatti & Cross, 2003). All can impact on the willingness of an individual to seek information from others. Knowing and valuing is

concerned with a perceived level of expertise that another individual possesses. Access includes timeliness and whether or not that knowledge is easy to obtain. Cost is a weighing up of the risks to self-image that an individual is prepared to take in order to seek out that knowledge. In professional dialogue schemes the first two elements of this model (knowing and value, and access) are generally managed for participants. That is not to say that it always worked out, but in general participants accepted and appreciated that their mentors had a degree of understanding about the UK PSF that was going to help them succeed. Access was for our participants about establishing a relationship that permitted the exchange of ideas. It is intimately related to the final element of the model i.e. “cost” and the “trust” one individual has in another in terms of their willingness to show their professional vulnerability. This includes weighing up of the risks this might have to reputation and self-image, or an individual’s perceptions of psychological safety something of particular importance in the work situation (Edmondson, 2004). We propose that in the current climate of increased accountability that there are challenges in terms of creating safe spaces for academics to explore their pedagogic expertise. However, carefully managed professional dialogic routes to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy can do just that, create possibilities to enhance personal practice and at the same time build real self-esteem.

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