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Applying a Practice Sensibility to Developing a Teacher Learning Innovation: A Meso-Level Perspective

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Abstract: The importance of change management for institutional leadership is well-attested to in discourses on higher education. However, the critical role of middle leaders in translating, interpreting and communicating higher educational imperatives for teachers on the ground has received less attention, due in part to the challenge of understanding the sensitivities that are at stake in mid-level change. This paper explores the question of how a practice sensibility may be applied to developing a teacher-learning innovation at the departmental level to promote scholarly teacher development. A practice sensibility, referring to a way of seeing the world through a framework of concepts to sensitize agents to what matters in change, is applied to conceptualize the innovation and apprehend the challenges presented. The analytical consequences and implications of the application will be discussed, with a view to showing the efficacy of a practice sensibility for empowering mid-level innovation by design.

Paper:

Change management is a key factor that influences the effectiveness of educational leadership. Less frequently acknowledged, however, is the importance of effective change management for the success of educational innovations. The ability to manage change effectively has not received adequate attention in discourses on middle leadership in higher education. Such a neglect seems a wasted opportunity to advance understanding on managing change at the meso-level, as middle leaders are the ones who translate, interpret and communicate higher level educational imperatives for teachers on the ground (Tan, Heng & Lim-Ratnam, 2017) and therefore actively bridge policy and practice. One possible reason for the neglect may be the difficulty of making sense of translation, interpretation and communication processes that take place at mid-level in a way that can feed change forward.

This paper explores the question of how a practice sensibility (Trowler, 2019) may be applied to developing a teacher-learning innovation at the departmental level to promote teacher engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). A practice sensibility is a way of seeing the world through a framework of concepts that sensitize change agents to what matters in a change situation. The mid-level change that is the focus of this paper is an academic development or professional

learning provision titled ‘Open Classrooms’ that aims to support a university-level imperative to develop scholarly teachers at a comprehensive and research-intensive university in Singapore.

Open Classrooms is a lesson study approach to inquiring student learning at the level of a focal lesson called the research lesson (Wahman, Peplow, Kumar, & Refaei, 2020). In this approach, teams of teachers collaborate to design, teach/observe, and reflect on a lesson to generate implications for the way forward. A lesson study approach was chosen to inform the design of the mid-level innovation because of the benefits that lesson study brings to encouraging faculty collaboration at a deeper level that is dedicated to the improvement of student learning – a shared commitment of SoTL. The site of change is a department of English language teachers committed to enhancing the academic and professional communication skills of local and international undergraduate and graduate students at the university. The innovation is termed Open Classrooms because it represents the first planned activity in the department where teachers deprivatized their practice for peer learning. The middle leaders or agents of change in Open Classrooms are a team of academic developers in the department led by the author.

Two sets of elements of a practice sensibility were applied in this study: one to conceptualize the innovation and accommodate it to the particularities of the target context to increase the chances of successful implementation; and another to apprehend the challenges faced in implementation to generate implications for the way forward. In conceptualizing the change, deliberations were made about (i) the context of change; (ii) the nature of the proposed innovation; and (iii) the relationship between context and innovation to adapt lesson study suitably to the workload of teachers in the department, their notions of what it means to ‘study’ a lesson, and the higher-level imperatives of SoTL engagement. This conceptualization process led to the adoption of a lesson study *approach* to SoTL that was characterised by reduced iterations of the lesson study cycle, and the creation of a cloud collaboration instrument to structure teachers’ lesson study and promote engagement with research.

Participant feedback on the inaugural implementation of Open Classrooms showed that teachers benefitted from productive learning conversations and pedagogical knowledge that was both broadened and deepened. However, they expressed resentment about the research instrument being an onerous exercise. Some also did not find their engagement worthwhile as they could not visualize “what’s next” and suggested reframing the activity as training for peer reviewers of teaching to help them in writing reports on lesson observations. A second set of elements of a practice sensibility was then applied to make sense of the ‘resistance’ presented by participants. This process led to an appreciation of where a lack of fit between agents’ and subjects’ perspectives of change may reside (Table 1). The implications of this analysis will be discussed, with a view to devising bridging resources to address the points of disjunction between context and innovation, and reflecting on the efficacy of a practice sensibility for empowering innovation by design.

References:

Table 1. Analysing points of disjunction between teachers’ and change agents’ perspectives using elements of a practice sensibility.

Elements of Teachers’ perspective a practice	Departmental/Institutional Implications perspective
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sensitivity			
Saliience	Deprivatization (teaching) practice	of Inquiry learning	on studentChange the deliverable to a grant proposal for a teaching enhancement project
Congruence	Peer review of teaching (classroom observation)	Collaborative research	lessonRevisions to enrolment, publicity and orientation materials and processes to highlight the differences
Profitability	Knowledge reception/exchange/change	Knowledge creation	E-resources on data-led reflection and deepening reflective quality

References

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