

332 Shared language, shared values? An exploration of the embedding of policy discourses on learning & teaching and the illusion of ‘best practice’.

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Research Domains

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Abstract

University research seeks to have an impact on policy but there are valid questions around the types of policy ideas that universities themselves choose to adopt and embed within their own policies and practices. In this paper, I refer specifically to policies around ‘learning & teaching’; that is, the field which addresses ‘good practice’ in teaching. To what extent do such policy ideas have a firm evidence base and are they really best practice? Or are they mainly responding to government agendas and a reflection of the socio-political context? Through analysis of policy texts and the way that ideas are ‘recontextualised’ into institutional guidelines and practices, I discuss discourses around ‘policy embedding’ and the notion of ‘shared language’ leading to ‘shared values’. I address the issue of who defines what good practice is and consider whether policy discourses around learning & teaching simply create an ‘illusion’ of best practice.

Full paper

University research seeks to have an impact on policy but there are valid questions around the types of policy ideas that universities themselves choose to adopt and embed within their own institutional policies and practices. In this paper, I refer specifically to policies around ‘learning & teaching’; that is, the field which addresses ‘good practice’ in teaching. This may be through national bodies disseminating policy ideas or, at institutional level, learning & teaching units supporting academics new to teaching or those who seek accreditation for their teaching in response to university performance indicators (Shaw, 2018). To what extent do such policy ideas have a firm evidence base and are they really best practice? Are they in fact mainly responding to government agendas and a reflection of the socio-political context? This paper addresses the issue of who defines what good practice is and considers whether policy discourses around learning and teaching simply create an ‘illusion’ of best practice (Horrod, 2023).

This presentation focuses on the ways that national policy ideas become embedded in institutional policies and practices. This includes the mechanisms, such as teacher accreditation schemes, that enable this embedding. It also involves an analysis of the discourses prevalent in learning & teaching policy. For example, the way that policy documents talk about the means of policy implementation itself in some kind of meta discussion; perhaps to enable ‘compliance’. One discourse strategy I focus on is the emphasis on ‘shared language’ and the notion that shared language can lead to shared values and thereby presumably ensure that everyone is engaged in ‘best practice’.

This paper is part of a wider study exploring how learning, teaching and assessment practices come into being; originating from a curiosity about the reasons for the adoption of highly diverse types of assignment (see e.g. McLean et al., 2017); for example, with external organisations’ involvement; mix of professional and academic genres amongst others. The research mobilises concepts and analytical tools from both the sociology of pedagogy (Bernstein, 1990; 2000) and critical discourse studies (Wodak & Meyer, Eds., 2016) to develop a framework suitable for outlining the object of study as well as analysing discourses in policy texts. For example, the former includes Bernstein’s ideas about the influence of the ‘recontextualising fields’ (including agencies related to government) on pedagogic practice. The latter in this case refers to a particular critical discourse studies’ approach (the discourse-historical approach – DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016) which provides the tools for different dimensions of

textual/contextual analysis. The focus for analysis of policy texts are the long discussion documents produced by the HEA (now Advance HE) on their six policy agendas: employability; partnership; internationalisation; assessment; flexibility; access and retention. I also compare these with their short frameworks, Advance HE frameworks and institutional guidelines to explore how ideas are 'recontextualised' and become embedded.

In terms of findings, I discuss how policy documents attempt to develop a 'shared language' around, and thereby shared values and assumptions about, 'best practice' through extensive use of definition, models and examples as well as particular discourse strategies, including forms of argumentation, which seem to be specific to this field of learning & teaching. I also discuss some of the findings around how ideas are recontextualised from national to institutional level; demonstrating that universities adopt these policy discourses around learning & teaching in an often uncritical way. I draw on some examples of how policy itself is discussed as well as examples relating to the construction of the 'purpose' of higher education.

I return to the pertinence of Bernstein's ideas around recontextualisation (see Donnelly & Abbas, 2019), the obscuring of the origin of, and influences on, such policy ideas and the notion that ideas around what to teach, and how, are never 'value-free' (Bernstein, 2000) in order to discuss the implications of accepting ideas presented as 'best practice' uncritically. What are the consequences of aligning with, even changing one's practices to demonstrate allegiance to, what some might see as 'neoliberal' policy discourses such as partnership, employability and flexibility which speak to notions around enhancing the 'student experience' and improving 'teaching quality'? I also reflect on the often negative portrayals of teachers and teaching in such policy. Finally, I argue for the benefits of detailed textual analysis of policy (Fairclough, 2013), a re-evaluation of the seemingly positive-sounding discourses of learning & teaching policy ideas and argue for more evidence-based practitioner accounts of the reality of teaching in universities.

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