Technology and change: conceptualising the struggles of 'new professionals' (0063)

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Introduction

In the late 1990s the term 'new professional' drew attention to the proliferation of job titles which were beginning to be applied to various forms of work associated with support for teaching and learning in higher education 1990s (Gornall 1999; Beck 1999). At the time many universities were occupied with addressing a 'change' agenda which included shifting emphasis towards learning and policies for widening participation with increased emphasis on the use of information and communication technology (NCIHE, 1997). The new professionals who emerged blurred the boundaries between academic and academic-related work to encompass a wide range of posts and roles.

Perceptions of the new professionals varied substantially; for example, as an 'emergent new group' having hybrid roles for the support of teaching and learning (Gornall, 1999, p. 45) or as a university instrument for servicing the needs of re-formed institutions which had become dominated by economic imperatives, market forces and new forms of management (Beck, 1999). While such posts might be seen as indicative of the existence of new forms of university groupings located possibly in subject departments and non-centralised units they are also present in units such as centres for educational development and learning technology or libraries and academic service departments (Gornall 1999; Beetham et al. 2001; Gosling 1996, 2001, 2008). Indeed as external pressures introduced what was seen as a particularly difficult set of challenges for universities to address (Barnett 2003, Daniel et al. 2006) and as technological innovation gathered pace there has also been an increased emphasis placed on 'efficient' management (Deem 2004) and, at the same time, a proliferation of educational development units in UK HE (Gosling 2008).

Theoretical approach and methodology

The research inevitably builds on earlier work of a range of researchers both in the UK and in international settings (see also Gornall 1999, 2004; Beetham et al. 2001; Eggins and Macdonald 2003; Oliver 2002; Oliver et al 2004; Land 2004; Taylor 2005; Price et al. 2005; Conole and Oliver 2007; Peseta 2006; Hicks 2005, 2007; Lee et al. 2008; Gosling 1996, 2001, 2008) but endeavours also to make an original contribution to understanding about technology and change and the emergence of new professionals in higher education. It has an empirical base which is used to illuminate both the experience of what it means to be a new professional, and underlying socio-cultural issues affecting practice. Thus what is under

investigation is the social structure, relationships, principles, characteristics and practices that govern the two groups of new professionals.

The notion of newness is central to associated discourse as in 'new professionals', 'new technologies' and 'new higher education'. Newness, primarily associated with discourses in the areas studied, is employed with caution and as a discursive term to signify its usage to denote the systematic improvement of products and processes and its cooption by the public management reform agenda. Thus the notion of new professionals is inextricably linked to the effects of reform and the diverse nature of activity in the changing university due, in part, to globalisation, technological innovation and the positioning of nations as global economic forces within the knowledge economy. Indeed Ball favours the broader concept 'post-professional' to argue that the new professional or the 'reformed teacher' is characterised by her/his compliance to adapt to institutional imperatives (Ball 2005, 20).

The emergence of new professionals in UK higher education in the 1990s may, therefore, be understood in terms of changes in new management regimes of universities, and in academic work at a time of massification, globalisation, reduced resources and technological advancement.

The methodologies and methods chosen were with the aim to make visible the practitioner whose practice and values lie at the heart of the system (Schutz 1964, 1967). Emphasis was thus placed on exploring practice and experience and the social and cultural conditions which shape that experience.

A three-fold approach was taken that involved a literature review which included an analysis of empirical studies of practice, a reflexive professional autobiographical narrative and in-depth interviews with selected practitioners who are perceived of as agents who actively contribute to the construction of the field.

An overarching Bourdieun framework was used (1990, 1992) to enable a more acute and targeted understanding of the social and cultural events and relations which have shaped both the broad field of academic practice and its new professional sub-fields of educational development and learning technology.

Summary of the findings

In summary the two sub-fields have overlapping aims. Professionals in both sub-fields have a strong sense of agency and share similar values. While there are differences between the two sub-fields in terms of practice, specialist skills and knowledge boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. Cultural capital in the form of practice, knowledge and formal certification is diverse and yet has congruence across both groupings. For both groups networks and relationships are crucial and strategic. External networks are self selected and complex and tend to be relatively stable, while, in contrast, internal structures (within

universities) tend to be unstable. Career routes, formal certification and professional development are emergent. Habitus and individual disposition are therefore influential in determining career route and in turn plays an important role in determining the position and nature of the work. Educational development and the use of new technologies are inextricable bound to institutional policy. Moreover both educational developers and learning technologists remain in an unstable and uncertain position with struggles for stability and academic recognition exacerbated by frequent changes in policy and leadership, erosion of agency and economic capital and division in and between the two sub-fields. (For more detailed findings see Hudson, 2009).

Concluding thoughts

The research highlights a disappointing level of collaboration between educational developers and learning technologists and indeed a sense of counter-culture, division and an acceptance of myths about each others' work. While the two groups seem to share some practices and professional values, each possess a distinctive set of social, cultural and economic capital with differential value associated with the forms of capital held by each. However it needs also to be recognised that academic practice in the university is dependent on a wide range of experience, specialist knowledges, skills and competencies and alternative lines of reasoning.

In exploring educational development and learning technology, it is clear that the application of 'new' to professionalism is not straight forward. It is, therefore, perhaps more appropriate to reconceptualise the label of new professional to include all those who engage with the various new technologies, innovative pedagogical practices and research, whilst being impelled by the policy technologies – of the entrepreneurial university. Indeed this 'take' on new professionalism could be applicable to almost all university teachers and staff. Nevertheless for the two specific groups of new professionals studied, which have been pulled more obviously towards government discourse, institutional strategy, quality indicators and change, it could be argued that their roles and practices are new, in the sense that they are interdisciplinary, positioned between faculty and management (and thus political), built on top-sliced and external funding (and thus entrepreneurial) and associated with quality indicators and notions of performance (and thus performative).

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