

SRHE conference 2010

Proposal: Paper

Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

Theme: Academic and professional identities and roles

Title: Community building among early career teachers: opportunities and tensions (0083)

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Outline

Early career teachers (ECTs) are here defined as those in their first three years of university teaching, irrespective of their contractual status. They may be probationary lecturers, practitioners, or Graduate Teaching Assistants whose roles and responsibilities range from lecturing, seminar leading to demonstrating. Depending on the nature of their employment, they are likely to experience various parts of the university: their home department, centrally organised programmes, the Graduate School. They will consequently experience a variety of interactions, for example with their departmental peers, both those at a similar stage of their careers and those who are more experienced. These interactions may be academic (eg departmental seminars), social or more formalised, for example with their probationary or PhD supervisors, Head of Department, Director of Research. Broader social and academic interactions, such as conferences, offer further scope for engagement with the disciplinary community beyond the institution. Centralised provision such as teacher education programmes offer opportunities for cross-disciplinary interactions with fellow newcomers.

These overlapping communities contribute to the process by which new entrants are exposed to, and attempt to make sense of, the expectations and norms of the communities in which they find themselves: the discipline, the department, the university. These may make conflicting demands on the individual, while colouring the environment in which the individual develops and enacts their principles and practices. This paper focuses on two key elements. Firstly, how

do ECTs develop their sense of identities in these various communities? Where does their learning take place? Secondly, what is the affective impact of different interventions and experiences on ECTs' sense of confidence and agency in the academic community?

The findings of small-scale research, conducted over two years, unsurprisingly suggest that ECTs' sense of their own identity and confidence in taking the initiative in curriculum development is effected in a combination of ways. These include exposure within the department /discipline, and processes designed to raise individual awareness such as taught programmes, and peer learning in both spheres. This peer learning includes ECTs learning from each other and from more experienced staff acting as their mentors. Both experiences are crucial in academic socialization and in developing (or not) a sense of confidence and agency.

This paper builds on small-scale research undertaken in the context of a university teacher education programme. The first investigated the extent and impact of peer learning on new lecturers and teachers, engaged in teaching-related projects. The second explored the perceptions of ECTs and their mentors about the nature and boundaries of the relationship. The findings strongly suggest that informally brokered interactions, based on trust, empathy and mutual respect, are most effective in supporting ECTs and most fruitful for those working with them. Where the relationship becomes problematic it is frequently characterised by mismatched expectations or inequity within the relationship.

Finally, I will consider the implications for those working with early career teachers. Does participation in a number of different communities support them or set up conflicts of interest? If so, how could these be addressed and by whom?

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