Students' responses to theory: An FD case study (0118)

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Abstract

This paper will report on a small qualitative case study which explored the professional formation of students on a work-based learning course. These students were studying part-time to become professionally qualified youth workers and were already working or volunteering in the field. Drawing on interviews with students and their employers nine months after completion of the WBL course we will map some of the ways in which they consider participation has influenced their understanding of the field and their approach to their work. Contrary to expectations, our own and those in the professional literature, we found that students placed considerable value on the contribution of theory. In some cases this had led to significant changes in perspective, leading them to question their own practices and those of colleagues. While some had encountered resistance others had the autonomy to change their practices during and after the course.

Paper

This paper reports on a small qualitative case study examining the professional formation of part-time students studying on a Foundation Degree in Working with Young People. It explores the different ways in which students approached the theory and models of practice which they encountered within the two initial modules. Interviews with students, and some employers, suggested a more positive orientation towards theory than we had expected and that students engaged with it in a number of ways.

The role of theory

The traditional paradigm for relating theory to practice describes a linear process whereby a body of scientifically established knowledge - propositional knowledge - is applied to practice situations. The role of the practitioner is instrumental; applying existing theory appropriately but mechanistically to solve problems as they emerge in the field , what Donald Schon (1983) has characterised, and criticised, as the 'technical-rationality model'. That such a straightforward process of application of theory to practice is in fact deeply problematic has been well documented and the difficulties of 'transfer' debated (Eraut, 1994). Evans et al (2009) point instead to the ways in which different forms of knowledge, arising in different professional fields, are re-contextualised as people move between contexts. In the case of our distance learning programme students move between multiple contexts; including those of the written and audio/visual materials themselves, face to face or on-line seminars, and their workplace. The range of contexts, criteria and purposes suggest knowledge may be 're-contextualised' in a variety of ways. Our own account of the course pedagogy positions theory as a resource which students will use to reflect on their own experience or that of others, with the aim of widening their repertoire of

understandings of practice. While the programme lies within a seam of professional development which emphasises 'reflective practice' (Schon, 1983) it maintains a prominent role for theory in the materials of the work-related and work-based modules. In the former students are asked to compare their understandings and ideals of practice with positions from the literature, locating themselves in relation to current debates. In the second they are asked to compare examples of their own practice with these theoretical positions or models of practice, and to undertake and reflect on new practice.

The students' responses to theory

We interviewed eight students who had completed the first work-related course, and then followed this up with a further ten student and six employer interviews once students had completed the linked work-based course. Our analysis suggests that theory played a number of roles for students.

1. Theory as a resource for naming practice, locating oneself within the professional discourse and influencing others

    I was just subconsciously doing stuff it made me more conscious of what I am actually doing and the processes involved'. ... I could say 'Oh so that's what it's called' (Mark, part time worker in the statutory sector)

For many of our students theory provided a means of making sense of existing practices or articulating tacit understandings. Whilst they might already be established members of their setting, reading and discussing theory enabled them to rehearse a more professional discourse of 'youth work'. Learning activities which require students to position themselves with respect to arguments about the values and purposes of youth work are overtly doing identity work (Chappell et al, 2005). As a consequence some students suggested that they were now viewed differently in their workplace, and by themselves, as more confident, knowledgeable and professional. Such shifts in identity appeared particularly significant to those working in the voluntary sector as they sought to distinguish themselves from the 'enthusiastic amateur'.

2. Theory as a resource to question practice

    '..it wasn't until I actually sat down and analyzed it that I realized ... I thought I was empowering the other people but I was actually stifling them ... it made me think hold on, let them decide what they want to do, so it was good.' (Jackie, part-time volunteer, faith-based organisation)

The course introduces students to powerful discourses, those which characterise the profession they are engaged in, and those which allow them to analyse and critique these positions. Yet in our work-based course we are asking students to go beyond this to critically examine their own practice. Here theory is positioned as a lens which can introduce new external perspectives onto familiar territory (Brookfield, 1998). Whilst we found evidence that students were drawing on knowledge from the course to question fundamental aspects of their practice, and to some extent that of their

organisation, there was much less evidence of students using practice to question theory.

3. Theory as a resource to reshape practices

'I now think about the young people's participation and how it affects both the team and the community.' (Nigel, part time volunteer with a uniformed organisation)

For some students insights gained from theory have influenced their approach to practice and resulted in changes being introduced to both the nature of the work and who is involved in shaping it. Students responding to work-based assignments within a professional course such as this one have to balance critical reflection on their practice with demonstrating its eventual efficacy. Our assignment structures perhaps encourage these kinds of short term redemptive cycles. Yet in these interviews students suggested that more significant changes had been developed beyond the lifetime of the individual module, sometimes by influencing other colleagues. There is some evidence of students identifying changes as arising from the course, and hence as 'more professional'. Such strategies may be aimed at establishing the legitimacy of such changes and weakening resistance.

Conclusion

We need to cautious in drawing conclusions from our small scale research, where there may be a tendency for our students to tell us what we wanted to hear. There is evidence however that they are engaging with theory in a number of productive ways. These ways are shaped by the expectations and opportunities offered by the learning activities written into our materials, and by the opportunities and resistances experienced in their workplace context.

References

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