

Who 'owns' teaching cultures? The teaching portfolio as a transformative tool for re-appropriating institutional and personal teaching agendas. (0235)

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Overview

This paper offers a conceptual outline of the challenges of institutional implementation and development of teaching portfolios (TPs). It draws on experiences of introducing TPs as a staff development requirement for adjuncts participating in the Adjunct Education Programme¹ (AEP) at Roskilde University (RUC), Denmark. The implementation of TPs however has not been without challenges. The notion of espoused theory and theory in use (Argyris and Schoen 1974) voiced in evaluations of adjuncts' experiences suggests that while on the one hand practitioners and institutions may hold a set of beliefs and values, although how these are enacted is not necessarily reflected in practice. The question is who 'owns' teaching cultures? The TP can be regarded as a possible transformative tool for both re-appropriating institutional and personal educational agendas.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the problems of attempting to reach two linked but separate goals within RUC by introducing TPs: 1. Using TPs as institutional tools to protect and revive institutional teaching culture and pedagogy relating to a fundamental university structure around problem oriented project based learning (POPBL). 2. Introducing TPs to support and engage teaching staff in reflection on personal teaching cultures, and achieving career goals by recognising and developing good academic practice.

The paper argues that implementing TPs in the AEP and in HEIs generally can be a complex endeavour. The implication is there is a need to carefully consider the ways in which TPs are implemented and used in order to enhance the potential of this as a tool. However, to understand the significance of some of the specific issues relating to the implementation of TPs at RUC it is important to present some key contextual influences.

The context

Roskilde University was founded on a specific pedagogical and didactic approach focusing on addressing the challenges of mass university provision and securing the needs of widening participation by recruiting a diverse student population. However, since 2003 Danish HE has undergone a period of sustained reform which has shifted priorities. A core question for the institution, therefore, if it is to realise its specific mission, is who owns and defines teaching cultures and how do the changing agendas and competition affect and develop teaching practices?

Evidence and findings

¹ Adjuncts in Denmark are the equivalent of Assistant Professors and their equivalent. The AEP is broadly comparable Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) at King's College

Adjuncts are a key group for the future of mass higher education. The emerging evidence from the institutional studies presented in this paper suggest that there are some fundamental challenges for how we think about pedagogy in such settings and, crucially, how those engaged in its theories and practices get to the point of 'qualification'. Specifically, there is evidence of some pragmatically driven limitations which are perfectly rational, but not necessarily helpful, responses to the combined effects of top-down reforms and institutional demands. In the specific case of RUC adjuncts these can be summarised as:

- The adjuncts show signs of stress and feel torn between research demands for career progression and teaching duties.
- The insecurity of career progression influences the adjuncts' choices in unsustainable ways and an adjunct position is rarely a secure career pathway.
- The TP demand has been ordered top down, which produces resistance. However, when the adjuncts buy into it and produce reflective and forward looking portfolios, it proves a very good personal and professional tool, as well as an institutional way of securing both excellence in teaching and a recognisable institutional culture.

These generic issues influence their specific approaches to Portfolios and more generally their career coping strategies. These are developed and shaped by their feeling alone and left to their own devices. Because for a number of years "the RUC way" has been practised without the necessary induction and knowledge sharing – newcomers from other HEIs have been left to their own devices thus both watering down the unique RUC brand and developing at times unhealthy coping strategies destabilising their sense of solid academic identity.

The introduction of TPs is part of dealing with these issues. It is the medium through which adjuncts argue and claim evidence of professional development and competence in relation to academic practice – specifically teaching and research dissemination.

Tps certainly engage them in the theoretical and methodological aspects of their teaching practice and plays part in their definition and development of academic identity, and they generally like the idea of value being attached to the teaching side of their profession. Whether these experiences are identifiable more broadly – within Denmark and beyond – is an intriguing question, but one beyond the scope of this particular paper. However, their overriding aim is to succeed to stay in academia – it is all they want. And as the research agenda is prevalent, they feel pressurized by the extra demand of pedagogical qualification requirements on top of everything else. A typical response is to tend to create different portfolios for different audiences.

Implications

At one level there is evidence of success in revising the culture associated with RUC. In a bid to revive and innovate – the institution is attempting to engage all staff in debates, discussion and practice. The goal is within the more pervasive culture of the HE sector. Government reforms, in effect, though possibly in unintended ways, bolster this culture. They 'speak' to the reactive instinct

not to overturn the 'private practitioner' teaching culture that lurks in the system as a whole. Our evidence is that whilst adjuncts are open for change, this can (too) easily be overturned by the necessary pursuit of a career. When this happens there is undoubtedly evidence of retrogressive communities of practice.

Challenging this retrogressive culture is difficult. Analysis of the adjuncts' own perspectives on these issues is beginning to reveal a fairly consistent picture. They are 'up' for transforming experience into culture and culture into experience.

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