

Transforming Academic Practices through Transnational Teaching Experiences (0020)

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Abstract

This paper describes a study into academics' experiences of transnational education through 'flying faculty' teaching experiences. Mezirow (1991) argues that critical reflection can lead to transformational learning and the enhancement of an individual's personal and professional practice. The aim of this study was to investigate whether 'flying faculty' experiences form the 'disorientating dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) required to trigger the reflective processes. Using the Biographic-Narrative-Interpretative Method (Wengraf, 2001), a small sample of academic staff were interviewed three times about their experiences of teaching outside of the country in which they ordinarily work. The individual case structures paint a rich picture of academics' motivations and experiences of teaching overseas. Cross case comparison drew out concerns relating to equivalence and equity; the impact of the visits on the physical body; and a revenue-generating approach to internationalization. The findings raise questions about how universities support and develop staff for such globalised roles.

Paper

In an increasingly globalised higher education environment, more and more academics are engaging in 'flying faculty' transnational teaching. 'Flying faculty' models combine intensive block teaching by 'home' country academics with support from 'host' country tutors. As the prevalence of flying faculty modes of transnational education has increased, so too has research into this area. Significant themes include: the quality assurance of transnational ventures (for example: McBurnie 2008; Stella 2006); the adaptations that flying faculty teachers make when teaching transnationally (for example: Prowse & Goddard 2010; Bodycott & Walker 2000; Crabtree & Sapp 2004); and institutional preparation and support for teaching transnationally (Gribble & Ziguas 2003; Dunn & Wallace 2008). While the challenges of flying faculty provision are undoubtedly great, the experience can be both professionally and personally fulfilling. This paper reports on a research project which sought to explore the value of transnational teaching experiences for professional development.

The social norms and cultural codes which shape life are taken for granted (Mezirow 1991, p.131); these accepted perspectives inform how we make sense of the world and our place within it. Confrontation with a challenge against an established perspective, what Mezirow (1991) calls a 'disorientating dilemma', can trigger critical reflection that can lead to perspective transformation. This project set out to investigate whether 'flying faculty' experiences form the 'disorientating dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991), through the requirement to work in environments, climates and classrooms, culturally different to their own, necessary to trigger the reflective processes that form the foundation of professional development.

The study used the Biographical-Narrative-Interpretive Method [BNIM] (Wengraf 2001) for both data collection and interpretation. BNIM is a useful methodology for capturing lived situations and experiences through narrative interviewing and 'creates a space in which the participant's voice can be privileged' (Snelling 2005, p.134). Five experienced male lecturers from Engineering and Business backgrounds were invited to take part in the study. They were selected through 'typical case sampling' (Wengraf 2001, p.102): chosen because they illustrate what a typical 'flying faculty' teacher experiences. While the sample appears small, it is comparative to other BNIM studies (see Wengraf 2001; Jones 2003); the intensity of both data collection and analysis results in rich qualitative data, which compensates for the small sample size. The focus of the data collection was on the participant's perspective of the situation through an initial open-ended interview, a second session exploring more deeply topics raised in session one, and a third interview that covered questions of interest to the interviewer that had not emerged in the previous sessions. The approach to data analysis was two-fold exploring the 'lived life' and the 'told story' and was facilitated through data analysis panels. The final stage of data analysis examines how the 'lived history' informed the 'told story' in order to identify case structure (see Wengraf, 2001; Jones 2003) and to compare these structures across the five interviews.

The case structures are presented as individual pen portraits of the five interviewees. The pen portraits paint rich, colourful accounts of working cross-culturally and the impact flying faculty teaching experiences have on career trajectories, personal lives, and interactions with students both inside and outside the UK. The resulting individual narratives provide useful case studies of the motivations, challenges and benefits of teaching transnationally. Dr Robertson, for example, sees transnational teaching experiences as just another part of the modern academic's role. He teaches 'the cohort', wherever they are situated. He is frustrated by what he sees as a lack of institutional support for the delivery of transnational teaching. Dr Stewart sees the benefit of overseas experiences as a means of staff development and set up collaborations to expose his staff to 'new ideas'. He bemoans the institution's inability to appreciate the value of such visits on academic's professional life. Dr Mackenzie sees his transnational teaching experiences as a means of connecting with new people and new places. His flying faculty teaching has given him the opportunity to experience being 'a fish out of water', which renders him a more empathetic teacher. For Dr Fergusson, transnational teaching is a means of exporting a UK education and he takes his UK practices overseas. He looks to provide equivalent learning experiences to students at home and abroad and ensures that the local tutors have the materials necessary to do this. Dr Campbell is a reluctant traveller, who admits that the teaching part 'hasn't been a big success'. The major benefit of the transnational experiences was career progression. The pen portraits show that the interviewees had quite different motivations for their involvement in flying faculty teaching visits, had different experiences when teaching overseas, and gained different benefits from those experiences. There are, however, commonalities across the cases. Three broad themes have been identified: the search for equivalence; the physical impact flying faculty visits; and internationalisation as income generation. The interviewees shared divergent understandings of equivalence, which ranged from direct export of UK courses overseas to attempts to add local colour. These understandings impacted on the ways these academics interacted with local staff. The interviewees spoke of the physical impact of intensive flying faculty visits carried out in parallel with

work at home. Finally, the commercial aspect of transnational education was discussed with concerns over recruitment, admissions and support for transnational teachers.

In terms of transformative learning, the interview data contained examples of these teachers reflecting on the content of what taught and the process of how they taught it. In addition, there were also examples where the premise of teaching transnationally was critically assessed. Undoubtedly, these interviewees felt that they had personally and professionally benefitted from their overseas experiences, but they also expressed frustration that the cumulative benefits of transnational teachers' experiences were not being exploited and that the institution was not learning from or building on that experience adequately. This raises questions for the educational development community in terms of supporting and developing flying faculty teachers, given that in most institutions formalized development is by no means the norm (Gribble & Ziguras, 2003).

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