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Revelation or Irrelevance: engagement with 'theory' of new teachers in higher education (0054)

'...you're not thinking "how do I engage with theories of student-centred learning", you're thinking "how do I teach in such a way as they won't laugh at me".' (R1, female, arts).

The quotation above perfectly illustrates a tension that exists in development programmes for teaching in higher education. That is the tension between theory and practice; between the need perceived by new tutors or lecturers for immediate survival skills and their efforts to come to terms with current public propositional theories of learning and teaching with which they are expected to engage in educational development programmes. This paper seeks to explore this tension by looking at the variety of ways in which participants in a development programme for early career researchers (doctoral students and junior researchers) in a British, research-intensive university spoke of theory in interviews that asked them to reflect on their experiences of the programme.

The term public, propositional theory used here refers to propositions in the literature of higher education that offer ways of understanding how students learn, how lecturers teach, how programmes are developed and evaluated and so on. Examples would be ideas of deep and surface learning (Marton & Säljö 1976), Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984) and Biggs notions of constructive alignment (Biggs 1996). Thus in the responses to interview questions cited below terms such as 'theory', 'the literature' and 'reading' are taken as synonyms for public propositional theory.   The concept of public propositional theory is used here to distinguish it from personal or 'folk' theories that new teachers will have developed through their own experiences of being a student or teacher or through common room chat.

Theoretical Stance

This tension is not newly discovered and it has been subjected to theoretical analysis. Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984) is well known but is often represented in an incomplete and simplified form. Certainly the cycle from experience through reflection, theory formation, experimentation, and back to experience forms a central part of Kolb's model. Kolb also, however, identified two tensions in his model. One was represented in his diagram horizontally and is a tension between reflection and experimentation. The other tension, which is explored in this paper, is between experience and theory. More recently, the neo-Vygotskian, Yrjö Engeström has suggested that tensions and paradoxes are an essential element in expansive learning (Engeström 2001). It is this framing of the tension as essential to progress in learning to teach that underpins the stance taken in this paper.

The Research Process

An online survey of the development programme was undertaken in early 2011. There were 81 potential participants – a participant was defined by having completed the programme from its inception in 2005 to the end of academic year 2009-2010. Nine participants were uncontactable (it was not possible to get a current email address) thus the sample size was 72. Of this 72, there were 39 respondents to the survey. Thirteen of these agreed to be interviewed and it was possible to follow up ten of these with in-depth interviews. Thus the interview sample was voluntary. The findings below are based on these interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Of the ten participants who were interviewed six referred specifically to theory. There was considerable variety in these references. The two most extreme positions were offered by scientists who, although this was an introductory programme, had both had significant experience of teaching in universities

before engaging with the programme. The first position might be called instrumentalist or strategic. R2 simply wanted to complete the portfolio that would provide accreditation. He accessed several article online and used these in his portfolio.

It would be easy to conclude that R2 takes a rather superficial approach to his teaching but in fact he is a thoughtful, reflective teacher who has taken on responsibility for the development of other teachers and does this very effectively. In contrast to R2's strategic approach to using theory, R3 found that engaging with the literature transformed her understanding of teaching. She described the experience of engaging with the literature as revelatory or '*like... a religious conversion'.* She later described how this transformational experience had not been immediate. Initially she had found reading educational literature like *'reading Chinese'* with which she was not familiar. However, after grappling with it for a few weeks *'the penny dropped'.*

R4 (male, mathematics) had two years of teaching experience before engaging with the development programme. He was looking for discipline specific literature to help him to move forward as a teacher having been *'thrown in to teaching'* and *'figuring out how to teach tutorials'.* He found this in a reading group that was very orientated towards his subject.

R1 was in a very different position from R2, R3 and R4. She had little experience of teaching when she was first introduced to learning theory. As a result she found *'it very difficult to make those links between theory and practice.'* For her *'the theory kind of became much more relevant a bit later on'* when her early lack of confidence in doing the actual teaching had been dealt with. The responses of R1, R2, R3 and R4 suggest that theory does not always make immediate sense to new teachers or even to more experienced teachers. The tension experienced and described particularly by R1and R3 needed to be worked through; in R1's case being addressed through more experience of teaching and in R3's case by reading, reflection and relating the theory back to her experience of practice.

Conclusions

In summary then it is proposed that the tension between practice and theory ought not to be seen as either an irritant or as something to be ignored or minimised in the development of new HE teachers. Rather grappling with the tension and attempting to resolve dilemmas created by this tension can lead to transformative or expansive learning.   New teachers need to have some experience of practice on which they can 'hang' the concepts contained in public propositional education theory but they also need these concepts to help them to understand their practice and to move beyond their private or folk theories. Creating relevant activities which provide spaces for new teachers to work through both their ideas and practices is a key challenge for educational developers as is the need to let new teachers know that their concerns are not only normal but necessary.

References

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