Spiller Marjorie

Staffordshire University, UK

Making sense for the future:a focus on the in-role development of university managers (0058)

This study seeks to understand how university managers perceive their in-role learning and development. Within the HE literature, there is a strong focus on increased managerialism and constant change (Kolsaker, 2008 McFarlane, 2005 and McCaffery, 2010). In particular, the amorphous nature of academic management roles is highlighted (Henkel, 2005, Johnson, 2002 and Deem et al. 2007), the tendency for support staff to work in states of permanent transition (Whitchurch, 2006 and 2009), and need to redefine career pathways for all (McFarlane, 2011 and Strike, 2010). Despite this spotlight on endemic change, there is a paucity of research which specifically highlights the *process* by which university managers learn in order to work within these transitions. In an effort to elucidate this process of how managers learn, the literature from the wider fields of professional, workplace and management learning is also used to inform the study.

By interrogating managers' perceptions of how they learn, this study endeavours to provide evidence to help address this gap, and to uncover the enablers and inhibitors incumbent within this process. In doing so, it aims to reveal the extent to which this learning process involves sense-making, using Weick's (1995) seven properties as a deconstruction framework. Researching within a single university, an analysis of institutional plans over a 15-year period provided a contextual backcloth for subsequent interviews with twenty-four managers from a range of academic and professional support posts. These were then supplemented with follow-up interviews for newly-appointed managers and the completion of reflective journals by a purposive sample from within the original group of interviewees.

Analysis of the evidence revealed that formal learning was only a small part of the managers' process of understanding and deciphering how to approach their roles. This indicated the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the process of learning as the managers strove to 'make sense' of their roles and everyday experiences. This process varied between managers and was interwoven with a myriad of different factors relating to the managers' own and others' perceptions of their roles, opportunities to learn from others and a mixture of University-determined expectations and sector-led requirements. The evidence from the University managers within this research strongly indicated that their learning was not an atomistic or sequential process of knowledge or skill acquisition. Instead, for these managers, their learning was primarily informal and grounded in the workplace (Billet, 2004 and 2006, Kyndt et al. 2009, Marsick, 2009 and Sambrook, 2005), it

involved interpretation (Mezirow, 2000), and it often necessitated adopting a different perspective for change to occur (Brookfield, 2000 and Kegan, 2000).

The evidence from the managers indicated that sensemaking was, indeed, an integral part of their learning process, although, there was not necessarily an equal alignment to all aspects of Weick's (1995) seven properties. The findings suggested that the boundaries between learning and sensemaking were becoming less distinct amidst a range of situations. As a consequence, learning for these managers was not a solitary, cognitive pursuit of receiving information, but instead involved them 'making sense' of their emerging realities (Watson and Harris, 1999).These realities were socially constructed within the context of the University, dependent on a complex interplay of a number of factors which collectively enabled these managers to find meaning. Moreover, the evidence suggested that such meaning did not constitute an objective frame of reference but instead resulted in a subjective reality in which the managers interpreted their evolving experiences. For many managers within this study, learning within their roles was a gradual process of realisation, as opposed to the occurrence of sudden or isolated incidents or events, resulting in the "continuous interaction with information [which] allows meaning to emerge" (Schwandt, 2005, p.182). In essence, the learning which these managers undertook involved "making sense of life's experiences and giving meaning " (Mackerarcher, 2004, p.7), a process which was ongoing, context specific to organisational requirements and sector wide directives and dependent on a growing understanding of their own particular roles and emerging identities.

This researcher contends, therefore, that the boundaries between learning and sensemaking are blurred, with the former incorporating aspects of the latter in an integrated and symbiotic way. Extending this further, the researcher suggests a reconceptualisation, proffering the notion that there was a 'learning to make sense of' process which occurred as these managers strove to understand their in-role responsibilities. This incorporated a blend of learning, development and sensemaking amidst the complexity of role evolution and ongoing response to University-led requirements. Essentially, the managers within this study were learning to make sense of their identities, the prevailing managerial culture, their social interactions, and their ongoing, informal and everyday activities.

Through this study, a number of implications for institutional practice have already emerged. Specifically, management development programmes should be designed to include opportunities for managers to understand their changing identities. In addition, they should enable managers to recognise that the bulk of their learning will continue to take place within the workplace (Antonacopoulou, 2002), thereby reconceptualising them as "'learners' and their work as learning" (Schwandt, 2005, p.187), exposed to "learning affordances" (Billet,

2002, p.209) from which they can learn as an integral and implicit part of their roles. There should also be more encouragement to import learning from previous roles and experiences, irrespective of whether this is informal, formal or experientially based learning from a myriad of different contexts. Institutional policy makers also need to acknowledge this breadth of learning opportunities rather than focus solely on programme-based outcomes as the sole contributor to the development of managers. Indeed, a range of informal and formal activities needs to be acknowledged as viable learning opportunities if managers are to make sense of their roles into the future.

(Word-count 939)

References

Antonacopoulou, E. P. (2002) Revisiting the What, How and Why of Managerial Learning: Some New Evidence, *Manchester Business School Research Paper series,* No.442, University of Manchester.

Billett, S. (2002) Learning through Work: Workplace Affordances and Individual Engagement, *Journal of Workplace Learning,* vol.13, no.5, pp.209-214.

Billett, S. (2004) Workplace Participatory Practices, Conceptualising Workplaces as Learning Environments, *The Journal of Workplace Learning,* vol.16, no.6, pp.312-324.

Billet, S. (2006) Vocational Curriculum and Pedagogy: an Activity Theory Perspective, *European Educational Research Journal,* vol.2, no.1, pp.6-21.

Brookfield, S.D. (2000) Transformative Learning as Ideology Critique, in *Learning as Transformation*, J. Mezirow (Eds), pp.125-148.San Francisco, Jossey Bass,

Deem, R. Hillyard, S. and Reed, M. (2007) *Knowledge, Higher Education and the New Managerialism,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Henkel. M. (2005) Academic Identity and Policy in a Changing Policy Environment, *Higher Education,* vol.49, pp.155-176.

Johnson, R. (2002) Learning to Manage the University: Tales of Training and Experience, *Higher Education Quarterly* vol.56 no.1 pp.33-51.

Kegan, R. (2000) What Form Transforms? in *Learning as Transformation*, J. Mezirow (Eds), San Francisco, Jossey Bass, pp.35-70.

Kolsaker, A. (2008) Academic Professionalism in the Managerialist Era: a Study of English universities, *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 33, no.5, pp.513-525.

Kyndt, E., Dochy, F. and Nijs,H. (2009) Learning Conditions for Non-Formal and Informal Workplace Learning, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, vol.21, no.5, pp.369-383.

McFarlane, B. (2005) The Disengaged Academic: the Retreat from Citizenship, *Higher Education Quarterly*, vol.59, no.4 pp.296-312.

McFarlane, B. (2011) The Morphing of Academic Practice: Unbundling and the rise of the Para-academic, *Higher Education Quarterly*, vol. 65, no.1 pp.59-73

Robson, C. (2002) *Real World Research,* 2nd edition, Oxford, Blackwell.

Mackeracher, D. (2004) *Making Sense of Adult Learning*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

Marsick, V.J. (2009) Towards a Unifying Framework to Support Informal Learning Theory, Research and Practice, *Journal of Workplace Learning,* vol.21, no.4, pp.265-275.

McCaffery, P. (2010) 2nd edition, *The Higher Education Manager's Handbook,* Abingdon, Routledge Falmer.

Mezirow, J. (2000) Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory, in *Learning as Transformation*, J. Mezirow (Eds), San Francisco, Jossey Bass, pp.3-34.

Sambrook, S. (2005) Factors Influencing the Context and Process of Work-Related Learning: Synthesising Findings from Two Research Projects, *Human Resource Development International,* vol.8, no.1, pp.101-119.

Schwandt (2005) When Managers Become Philosophers: Integrating Learning with Sensemaking, *Academy of Management Learning and Education,* vol. 4, no.2, pp.176-192.

Strike, T. (2010) Evolving Academic Career Pathways in England, in Gordon, G and Whitchurch, C. (Eds), *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*, pp.77-97, Abingdon, Routledge.

Watson, T.J. and Harris, P. (1999) *The Emergent Manager,* London, Sage

Weick, K.E. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations,* London, Sage.

Whitchurch, C. (2006) Who Do They Think They Are? The Changing Identities of Professional Administrators and Managers in UK Higher Education, *Journal of HE Policy and Management,* vol. 28, no.2, pp.159-171.

Whitchurch, C. (2009) Progressing Professional Careers in UK Higher Education, vol.13, no. 1, *Perspectives,* pp.2-9.