

Reclaiming the back-stage: collegial approaches to professional development for personal tutors (0223)

Research, in the form of facilitated reflection on personal tutoring practice with ten academics in a range of British universities, discovered that personal tutoring practice is likely to be based on the tutor's individual approach. The data suggest that collegial forms of staff development and support may help develop a sense of shared pedagogical or professional ethos.

Goffman (1959) differentiated between front-stage activity where professional display rules prevail, and the back-stage where professionals can offload, where communication can take place as a form of collective or collegial support, and where genuine thoughts and feelings can be explored. This research confirms that personal tutoring occurs in a third space, *off-stage*, away from the view of others including colleagues. These findings concur with Smith (2007) who argues that the work of personal tutors has become extra-curricular activity, unacknowledged by institutions.

If personal tutoring is hidden from both collegial and institutional sight, it is likely to be an autonomous act on the part of the tutor. Professional autonomy has traditionally been accompanied by professional regulation based on ethical and moral codes of professional conduct (Johnson, 1972; Holroyd, 2000). The absence of collegial forms of professional regulation and support such as professionalism (Evans, 2008), or 'practice' (MacIntyre, 2007) means there is little if any negotiated consensus within programme delivery teams of an ethical and moral code, or ethos upon which to base personal tutoring practice.

It was clear that all ten research participants made autonomous decisions about tutoring role boundaries and the nature of interactions and interventions. This could be viewed as professional autonomy, but there was no clear sense of 'practice', thus revealing inconsistencies of boundaries and practice not only between different tutors, but also within

the practice of some tutors. Tutors with a stronger sense of role boundary tended to operate strategically in relation to management of their own workload rather than a sense of what was appropriate professionally or ethically. Lack of dialogue within programme teams was part of a wider phenomenon of diminishing collegiality, affecting the ability of team members to reach consensus on the ethos of personal tutoring practice. This was also instrumental in causing the isolation felt by some tutors, many of whom had little or no opportunity to offload or discuss the more difficult or emotional aspects of their individualized work with students.

Discursive forms of staff development and more collegial working practices could support personal tutors in developing practice knowledge and support mechanisms. Such knowledge would arise as tutors debate the situated and contextual nature of their practice through collective and collaborative forms of engagement with theories, context and characteristics of practice. The ability to compare and contrast practice ideas and ethos with colleagues is likely to facilitate the kind of reflection that can lead to new insights about personal tutoring and commitments to particular types of practice. These activities can be expressed as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) or academic citizenship (Macfarlane, 2007). Consensus would most likely be achieved at team or disciplinary level where epistemological connections can be made about the most appropriate forms of engagement with students. This would enable personal tutors to make ethically and pedagogically competent practice decisions based on collectively defined 'practice' (MacIntyre, 2007). It would also give personal tutors a collective voice with which to counter attempts by institutions to impose practice methods based purely on managerial or policy imperatives.

The manner by which academic staff are managed may prevent this from happening. Line management systems, configured according to bureaucratic target-setting and appraisal systems, focus on institutional rather than professional targets. Tutors described how they were reluctant to express concerns about issues such as burnout, or professional development needs for fear of appearing weak or inadequate. Consequently many participants were working with quite complex student problems in a manner that was both unsupported and unchecked.

Professional supervision, whether this occurs via line management or a collegial/ mentoring process, is a professional development mechanism designed to prevent or ameliorate burnout, and to support safe, ethical working. Its absence can be seen as indicative of institutions not exercising an appropriate duty of care towards personal tutors or towards the students who seek their help. It would appear that the main vehicles for dealing with a situation whereby academic staff begin to display symptoms of burnout are staff counselling services or occupational health referrals, both deficit models which resonate with notions of therapy culture (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009).

Professional supervision presents an opportunity to develop notions of safe and ethical practice, and to locate practice within a wider socio-political context. Five of the ten participants had experienced opportunities to discuss with colleagues practice issues including personal tutoring, and in only one case did a participant describe a socio-political dimension to those discussions. For four participants personal tutoring had become a locus of conflict or resentment because they felt their own practice ethos to be different from that of their colleagues. Where opportunities for team discussion about practice were limited or did not exist, participants had each developed a discursive relationship with one particular colleague, and this was their primary vehicle for offloading and exploring practice. There was clearly a basic need for personal tutors to offload, given that those who did not experience collegial back-stage activity tended to go off-stage and seek it elsewhere.

All research participants described the usefulness of taking part in reflective practice facilitated via their participation in the study – an opportunity not generally open to them in the workplace. All made discoveries which transformed their personal tutoring practice in relation to boundaries and pedagogical effectiveness. There was some evidence of heightened socio-political awareness. A potential solution could lie in a role for the professoriate or other senior peers to include modelling fellowship (nurturing colleagues) and guardianship (upholding disciplinary and professional standards whilst encouraging challenges to received wisdom) (Macfarlane, 2007). This might involve providing individual

professional supervision or convening and facilitating peer supervision, provided this remained separate from target-driven, performance-based managerial supervision.

References

- Ecclestone, K and Hayes, D (2009) *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* Abingdon: Routledge
- Evans, L (2008) 'Professionalism, Professionalism and the Development of Education Professionals' *British Journal of Educational Studies* 56 (1): 20-38
- Goffman, E (1959) *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life* New York: Anchor Books
- Holroyd, C (2000) 'Are Assessors Professional? Student assessment and the professionalism of academics' *Active Learning in Higher Education* 1 (28) : 39-42
- Johnson, T (1972) *Professions and Power* Basingstoke: Macmillan
- Macfarlane, B (2007) *The Academic Citizen: The virtue of service in university life* Abingdon: Routledge
- MacIntyre, A (2007) *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* 2nd edition London: Duckworth
- Smith, R (2007) 'An overview of research on student support: helping students to achieve or achieving institutional targets? Nurture or de-nature?' *Teaching in Higher Education* 12 (5): 683-695
- Wenger, E (1998) *Communities of Practice* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press