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What light can a sociocultural analysis shed on the changing nature of academic workgroup cultures: findings from a merging South African university (0245)

Abstract

This presents findings from sociocultural research into the nature of academic workgroup cultures in the context of merger, focusing on teaching and learning. Differences between workgroup cultures were found to be based on differences in ways academics mediated between the discipline and a range of contextual factors impacting on their practices. Six typologies of workgroup culture are identified, from traditional academic workgroups, to workgroups where academics mediated between the discipline and a range of contextual factors: including a changing student body, reconstruction and development of the new society; and the needs of industry. In addition were two types of workgroup where the academic endeavour was subordinated to other priorities: an emergent bureaucratic managerialist culture, and one where academic issues were subordinated to patronage based on race. Differences in workgroup cultures impacted on approaches to merger and change, thus highlighting the importance of localised workgroup cultures in mediating change initiatives.

Outline

This presentation focuses on findings from research using a sociocultural perspective into the nature of academic workgroup cultures in the context of a merger, focusing on teaching and learning cultures. Differences between workgroup cultures were found to be based on differences in the ways that academics mediated between the discipline and a range of contextual factors impacting on their practices. Six typologies of workgroup culture were identified. These ranged from traditional academic workgroups, where commitment to the discipline was seen as paramount and experienced as being under siege from a range of contextual pressures. In other workgroups academics sought to mediate between the discipline and a range of contextual factors, and three distinct orientations to context were identified: a progressive orientation to respond to the needs of a changing student body, in particular first generation black students; a focus on changing the nature of disciplinary knowledge and learning to become responsive to the social reconstruction and development needs of the new society; and a focus on responding to the needs of industry and the world of work. However, the research also identified two types of workgroup culture where, rather than mediating between disciplines and contextual factors, the academic endeavour was subordinated to other priorities: this included an emergent bureaucratic managerialist workgroup culture that was experienced by academics as undermining their own agency to respond to change, and as prioritising administrative and financial over academic objectives; and a residual and newly emergent ethnic patronage culture, where academic issues were subordinated to patronage based on race and ethnicity.

These findings are based on research into academic workgroup cultures across 12 different workgroups brought together in a merger of three campuses, in four disciplinary areas of a South African university. Workgroup cultures were analysed using a modified 'communities of practice' framework (Wenger 1998). 30 academics were interviewed across these workgroups to identify their understandings of the 'joint enterprise' of teaching and learning in their workgroup, the 'shared repertoire' of approaches to teaching and learning, and forms of 'mutual engagement' within workgroups (borrowing from Wenger 1998). However, the interviews and analysis also took on board

the critique of 'communities of practice' theory (Contu and Wilmott 2003) by focusing on issues of power, difference and the impact of broader contextual factors on localised workgroup cultures and practices.

When interviews were analysed, clusters of characteristics were identified that were associated with the six different workgroup typologies identified above. These clusters of characteristics involved differences in ways of engaging between academics, different values and priorities in teaching, learning and research, and different repertoires of practices in relation to teaching and learning. These localised cultures had an impact on the ways workgroups responded to the merger and their experience of the change process. For example, traditionalist disciplinary workgroup cultures that were characterised by individualist and competitive relations faced particular difficulties in engaging collaboratively in change with the merger of workgroups, and were often the sites of unresolved tensions about the nature of the merged curriculum and teaching practices. On the other hand, workgroups characterised by mediation between the discipline and a range of contextual factors tended to manage the merger of workgroups better. These workgroups, whether oriented primarily to the student experience, to engaging with the social reconstruction and development agenda, or responding to industry, were characterised by collegial, collaborative forms of engagement between academics, with an emphasis on collective discussion of the curriculum and team teaching. This provided a basis for collaborative approaches to the development of new curricula, with mediation between a range of perspectives in developing new practices. Bureaucratic and managerialist workgroup cultures were experienced by academics as most destructive of teaching quality in the merger, since changes tended to be imposed from above regardless of existing practices, and placed administrative efficiencies above concerns in teaching and learning.

This diversity with which workgroups engaged with the merger highlights the need for caution in assuming that all workgroups will respond to institutional change initiatives in the same way. This research found that the cultural characteristics of workgroups were developed over time, and were often based on deeply held understandings of workgroup practices and the values underpinning these practices. The success of change depended on the capacity of workgroups to mediate between their existing workgroup cultures, and the demands placed on them by the merger, in particular the compatibility between workgroup cultures brought together in the merger that had developed in response to different contextual contingencies. Differences between workgroup cultures often led to fierce contestation, for example whether curriculum coherence, or research-led teaching should be a guiding principle in the merged curriculum; and the extent to which knowledge was open to construction by students, or was viewed as a fixed body of knowledge that students needed to learn.

While the different workgroup cultures were distributed across the universities and campuses involved in the merger, trends were identified in workgroup cultures, both historically in response to changing national contexts, as well as spatially by institution and campus. Within workgroups, individual academics also varied in their positioning along the continuum between commitment to the discipline and engagement with a range of contextual factors. This research thus sheds light on the agency/structure debate in making sense of academic workgroup cultures. It offers a critique of structuralist approaches to academic cultures by focusing on the important role of academic agency in mediating between the discipline and a range of contextual factors in making sense of their immediate tasks of teaching particular groups of students in a particular environment. It also raises questions for 'communities of practice' approaches that focus on meso level workgroup cultures while under-emphasising the importance of both individual agency and difference, and the structural effects of power and historical factors on local practices. This research thus highlights the important role of academic agency in mediating institutional and national level change processes, and the importance of

taking account of the interpretive space that lies between 'economies of performance' and the 'ecologies of practice' (Stronach 2002).

Bibliography

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