Teaching Philosophies: understanding culture through expressed values.

Introduction

This paper will outline the key findings from a documentary analysis of 44 teaching philosophies, written by participants studying for a Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGCLTHE). Requesting the submission of a written philosophy is common practice in such programmes and typically requires of the author to articulate "their beliefs about knowledge and learning and the implications of these for their role as teachers" (Pratt 2005, p1). This provides an opportunity for participants to consider the culture and purposes of higher education, and consider in what way those values underpin their approach to teaching and the methods they use to facilitate learning.

Notwithstanding the widespread use of written philosophies, an initial literature review revealed that few studies have sought to subject these potentially rich data sources to any detailed analysis. One extant study that does attempt to do this is that of Fitzmaurice (2008). Fitzmaurice (2008, p342) equates a teacher's philosophy with what they perceive as "…important in good teaching…". The contention, and commencing point, of this paper is that philosophies provide a much more complex and underused source of information concerning not only 'good teaching', but the changing cultures, attitudes and ideas amongst contemporary academics regarding both practice and careers.

Rationale and purpose

The purpose of this research was to undertake a documentary analysis of written philosophies to reveal underpinning beliefs, values and epistemologies affecting academics approaches to both practice and careers in Higher Education. In doing so, the study aimed to ascertain common themes within these accounts and provide more nuanced consideration of the inter-relationships between philosophies and practice than is available in current literature. The study was also premised on the assumption that analysing philosophies within the home institution would provide a valuable evidence base both to better understand both current teaching practices, and inform the development of the PGCLTHE programme. In summary, the research had two principal objectives: to ascertain and identify any common themes in the teaching philosophies of new academics enrolled in the PGCLTHE; and, to consider whether, and the ways in which, a greater understanding of such themes may be of use in informing the curricula of programmes aimed at developing the teaching practice of new academics.

Methodology

A qualitative, exploratory approach was used for this research. This approach was adopted as the most appropriate given the relatively limited nature of, and identified deficiencies within, the extant literature. Whilst a preliminary literature review had been undertaken, the nature of this study necessitated that the data was approached with no particular pre-conceptions of what constituted 'good teaching', 'appropriate values' or, indeed, *what* type of values and beliefs may be brought to academic careers by new academics. This contrasts with the approach adopted in extant work (e.g Fitzmaurice, 2008). The sole method of data collection was documentary research method. As is common with this method, the documents used, teaching philosophies, were produced for another purpose (participation in the PGCLTHE at the researchers home institution), but were available for assembling and systematic analysis (Bryman, 2004). The study population consists of all past participants who submitted a written philosophy over the past ten years, for whom we still had contact details from which to request participation. Out of a potential population of 166, 94 were still contactable. Of these 94, 44 accepted, 6 declined and 44 failed to respond. This paper is thus based on the analysis of these 44 philosophies. NVivo software was used during the analysis, for easier and more reliable searching and identification of key themes. Using CAQDAS also enabled more efficient generation of initial codes and testing of emergent themes and patterns.

Summary of Initial Findings

As anticipated at the commencement of this research, analysis of the written philosophies demonstrated that new academics brought a diverse range of attitudes and ideas to their practice and career development. A multi-faceted picture emerged, illustrating the complexity not only of academics subjective values and beliefs, but also the divergent ways in which these may impact on approaches. Notably, the vast majority of academics recounted that their current approaches to practice and development had been influenced by their previous individual experiences of education. In most cases, this was in the form of a positive or inspirational role model, whose practice they wished to follow; though some were driven 'away' from 'becoming' the negative experiences of the past.

Notwithstanding the complexity of individual accounts, initial findings suggested a number of common themes within the philosophies. Significantly, one overwhelming theme to emerge from the accounts was a tendency for new academics to view themselves as 'facilitators' or (less commonly) 'guides' to student learning experiences. Such conceptualisations were frequently accompanied by beliefs about the importance of inclusivity, equality, empowerment and, less often, 'transformation; of learners within teaching practice. Classical conceptions of teaching to inspire 'critical thinking' or independent thinking were also mentioned by a significant number, yet it was interesting to note that these more 'traditional' notions represented less strong themes than that of inclusivity and empowerment. It was

clear within accounts that a vast majority of the new academics participating in this research were designing teaching activity to directly reflect their beliefs regarding, and commitment to, learning as an 'active process'. Other significant, related themes included the desire to create environments of 'openness, respect and trust', and group support. Other themes of note included a desire to make learning activities enjoyable and challenging, in ways that promoted 'deep learning'. Notably, despite recent changes in the wider climate of H.E., desires to promote employability did not emerge as a significant theme – rather 'career' influences were often cited in a critical way by new academics as a factor that inspired them to promote independent and critical thinking amongst their students.

Analysis of the philosophies is still being undertaken, and the final results of the research will be the principal focus of the conference paper.

References

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