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The transforming practice of team teaching (0065)

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Outline

Team teaching is not a new phenomena in higher education; indeed, well established models already exist that typically describe a continuum of collaboration across the various approaches. Methods are often described as being weak or strong depending on the degree of collaboration and integration between the team members. (Yanamandram and Noble 2006). Fragmenting the delivery into discrete units delivered by different individuals could be considered to be at one of the continuum. A situation where all team members are equally involved in the planning, preparation and co-delivery could be considered a stronger form of team teaching at the other. (George and Davis-Wiley 2000). Prevalent in the literature is an assumption of a hierarchy in this continuum with fragmentation of the delivery being a lower form of team teaching than collaboration in the classroom. This is often accompanied by an assumption that teaching alone or dividing up of the syllabus leads to an isolation in teaching practice with the suggested implication that there is little collegial interaction guiding practice, resulting in pedagogic isolation (Lester and Evans 2009).

The discourse is perpetuated with an underlying assumption that team teaching is a pedagogic choice undertaken by like minded staff physically in the same location. However, an increasingly complex and pressurised environment in Higher Education challenges this assumption. The multi-disciplinary nature of many programmes arguably necessitates a team teaching approach. A widening participation context is resulting in academics team teaching with specialist support staff to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. (Perry and Stewart 2005). Furthermore, the increase of distance and transnational delivery has increased the use of team teaching with remote partners who may never meet face-to-face. (Williams et al 2010). These contexts are reshaping the understanding of team teaching, challenging the assumptions of best practice and transforming the concepts of teaching team membership and how they function effectively.

Whilst one form of team teaching may be pedagogically preferable to another, resources and institutional contexts may limit the extent to which ideals can be implemented. Organisational structures that utilise solo based work programme systems are typically not designed to recognise

team teaching, with unintentional impacts on how team teaching is implemented, thereby limiting the benefits for both staff and students.(Ford and Grey 2011).

This small scale project in a case study higher education institution critically explored team teaching practice with reference to established models to determine whether they are still appropriate in a modern, complex teaching context. In-depth interviews were completed with eight staff to explore their attitudes, personal experiences and opinions of team teaching to understand why it is used, how it is implemented and how it impacts on the individual's working reality. Grounded theory techniques were used to structure the research and analyse the data and move the qualitative enquiry beyond a descriptive study. (Charmaz 2006). The sample size was intentionally small to ensure a rich quality to the data that was detailed and focused on understanding participants feelings, intentions and reasons for their actions rather than just a description of what they do. The data was analysed by applying a rigorous and systematic coding process to the typed interview transcripts of the interviews, cross referenced with interview notes. The codes used arose from the reading of the data and not as a result of a pre-defined list which is a fundamental distinction in a grounded theory approach.

Results indicate that, for most of the participants, team-teaching is a necessity, thereby identifying a move from pedagogic choice to a coping mechanism to both facilitate efficient management of staff time and effectively support students in the learning process. Whilst the standard models of team teaching are still applicable, the contexts within which they are implemented are constantly evolving, challenging some of the discourse in the literature relating to strengths, weaknesses, levels of collaboration and assumed isolation perceived to exist in various models. A demanding context is perpetuating the emergence of difference forms of team construction implying that definitions of team membership are possibly more complex than definitions of team teaching. Such complex teams potentially require individuals to cross boundaries of communities of practice (Wenger 1998) impacting on their professional identities that are shaped not only by their perception of self but also their position in the community.

Furthermore, the research highlights the transforming nature of the module leader role to be more than an administrative role. Increasingly module leaders are providing academic leadership to a complex team of individuals. The topic of academic leadership is often restricted to the formal management structures of universities, such as Deans and Heads of Department, whilst the voice of those leading and managing teams at a module level is often overlooked. Ironically, these module leaders potentially face the most interesting leadership challenges of motivating individuals on a daily basis in a complex environment and accommodating different working practices.

University processes used to record staff activity unintentionally impose a hierarchy in the teaching teams, eroding equality and potentially hindering collegial debate. Whilst there is a common understanding of a shared responsibility in team teaching, the perception that ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the student experience resides with the module leader creates an inequality in the team. Power balance relationships between the module leader and others in the team have direct consequences on an individual's perceptions of limits being imposed on their academic freedom within a teaching context impacting on their professional teacher identity. Consequently the research begins to identify new knowledge relating to academic leadership, the changing academic role and professional teacher identity.

The findings have implications for how staff are prepared to teach in HE, how we support them in developing as excellent practitioners, and the processes whereby we record and reward individuals contributions. The results indicate that the structure and context of the team impacts on the model of team teaching, stimulating discussion of the potential limitations of existing models for the 21st century, and informing the ongoing debate relating to the pedagogy of team teaching.

(997 words)

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