

Exploring ecologies of practice across the disciplines in the shifting economies of the research-teaching-practice nexus (0204)

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This paper contributes to research on disciplinary approaches to the research-teaching nexus from a sociocultural perspective. It draws on academic narratives of the research-teaching-practice nexus across different disciplines of a single UK university aiming to shift its identity from a primarily teaching and professional practice focus to enhance its research profile and ranking. This research is based on interviews with 8 academics across different disciplines exploring the ways they and their disciplinary workgroups have negotiated this transition, the strategies adopted, the challenges faced, and the impact of this on the approaches of individual academics and programme teams to the research-teaching-practice nexus and to embedding research informed learning in the curriculum.

The current research builds on earlier research in South Africa into academic cultures of teaching and learning from a sociocultural perspective (Mathieson 2012). The research was based on interviews with academics in a merger of a historically black and a historically white university and the impact on teaching and learning across disciplines. The research found that while disciplines were significant, it was the way academics navigated the relationship between the discipline and a range of contextual factors that shaped approaches to teaching and learning. The research identified a trajectory of workgroup teaching identities and cultures, which could be defined by the extent and ways in which academics mediated between knowledge and research generated in the discipline, and a range of contextual factors: the challenge of teaching a new primarily black and disadvantaged student cohort, the challenges of social reconstruction and development, and the demands of employability and the world of work; at the far end of the spectrum were workgroup cultures where the knowledge, research and teaching culture was denuded, either by the pressures of ethnic patronage, or from the effect of privileging bureaucratic and administrative demands over teaching and research in the discipline. It thus argued against the idea that epistemological differences between disciplines were the most important factor in defining differences in teaching cultures. Implicitly, this trajectory of differences in workgroup cultures could be defined as differences in the relationship to the research-teaching-practice nexus, and it is this implicit finding of the earlier research that is the explicit focus of the current research.

This current research thus develops on the South African research, focusing more explicitly on how workgroup cultures are defined in relation to the research-teaching-practice nexus. By focusing on a range of disciplines at a single university where there was an institutional shift in the research-teaching-practice nexus from a focus on teaching and preparing students for professional practice, to a more explicit focus on research, this research draws out the way academics mediate between the discipline and a range of contextual factors in renegotiating their relationship with

the research-teaching-practice nexus and with research informed teaching.

The analysis of the interviews explores the impact of this shift in policy on academic workgroups, how this shift was mediated differently in disciplinary workgroups, and the various dynamics influencing this process. The focus is thus on the relationship between academic agency, and the interplay of structural factors, including the discipline, the institution, and a range of more localized contextual factors impacting on disciplinary workgroups in mediating this change. It thus builds on understandings of disciplines from a sociocultural perspective (Trowler, Saunders and Bamber 2012), by focusing specifically on how academics across disciplines mediate between research, teaching and engagement with professional practice in developing their approaches to research informed teaching. It also contributes to understanding how academics exercise a sense of agency and how they mobilize narratives to help to establish coherent identities as academics in the fragmented and unstable environment of the current higher education system (Delanty 2008). It thus foregrounds the identity work involved in mediating these often opposing imperatives, which also involves creating new meanings for their disciplines and programmes. It draws on approaches to narrative analysis used in post-colonial literary theory (Bhabha 1994) in order to explore the work done at the seams of the research-teaching-practice nexus as academics seek to establish new cultural meanings for their practices as teachers, researchers and professionals.

The research findings identify how the discipline is manifested in the process of renegotiating the research-teaching practice nexus, for example the specific challenges for visual and creative disciplines, and professional subjects in redefining their practice as research, and the challenges of redefining visual and professional learning as research informed learning. It highlights the aspects of disciplinarity that were experienced as significant in this, thus foregrounding both agentic and structural aspects of disciplines. It identifies challenges experienced by academics with primarily teaching and professional practice identities in making the transition to developing a research identity and practices, as well as the challenges facing newly appointed research oriented academics in engaging with teaching and professional practice demands from their research orientation. It also highlights the diverse power relations shaping these transitions, and the varying outcomes for the research-teaching-practice nexus across different discipline groups in a single university, thus emphasizing the varied landscapes in which a single institutional policy play out, with varying outcomes. The paper also identifies aspects of similarity across disciplines, in particular in the way research attributes and research informed learning are articulated by academics. The research thus offers a more nuanced understanding of the nature of agency and structure in shaping the research-teaching-practice nexus, and to understandings of the nature of disciplines as social practices.

Bibliography

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