

Dialogue as an institutional change agent (0211)

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Ulster University has operated its HEA-accredited ENHANCE Professional Development and Recognition Scheme (PDRS) since 2012, providing professional recognition at all descriptors of the UKPSF. Within the PDRS, the assessment takes place through an Assessed Professional Conversation (APC). Professional conversations are seen as “one of the most powerful approaches...to promote teacher learning” (Danielson, 2009) allowing the individual to legitimately engage in “reflective critique” (Kreber, 2013) where personal and social constructs may be expressed in appropriate language, as part of a focused narrative which is evidence-based. This use of dialogue as a key component of the PDRS assessment approach has proven to be highly successful.

The use of the APC within the PDRS at the Ulster University marks a departure from the text-based accreditation process of the HEA, offering participants the opportunity to “speak for themselves” in a conversational manner which nonetheless requires familiarity with the lexis of SoTL for authenticity of expression. The research carried out sought to explore the role of the APC as an instrument of authentic engagement with learning and teaching and, by extension, the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Nevertheless, since it involved individuals and the articulation of a personal view of the reality in question, the focus of the research embodied a more ethnogenic stance “analysing social episodes in terms of the ‘actors’ themselves” (Cohen et al, 2011). This view of “knowledge as ... subjective and unique” (Cohen et al, 2010) aligns with the APC as an expression of personal beliefs whereby participants make meanings in and through their own activities, constructing and interpreting their own fluid worlds within specific social contexts (Blumer, 1969; Becker, 1970; Garfinkel, 1967). Reflection on this therefore needed to “understand the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen *et al*, 2010), and necessitates an exploration of the research approach.

The research carried out was underpinned by a phenomenological approach which allows multiple experiences or understandings of the same situation to be identified, and whereby participants may “construct meanings of phenomena from an array of social and personal influences...shaped by our experiences and our context” (Cousins, 2009). In terms of the usefulness of the APC as a tool within the PDRS, this approach has additional merit, since it gives voice to the less quantifiable perspectives of its worth. A purely quantitative approach to practicalities of the APC would undoubtedly focus on human resource and financial implications; whilst yielding important data, this would not take account of any intrinsic worth of the APC.

The focus of the research relates to participants' attitudes to the APC, and this facet of the research lends itself more readily to an approach inspired by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). Whilst literature on the use of professional conversations is largely positive (Spiller, 2002; Haigh, 2005; Clark, 2001), it should be noted that the assessed nature of these professional conversations adds another dimension worthy of examination, and one in which implicit and/or perceived power relationships may influence participants' responses. Inspired by Charmaz's interpretation of grounded theory, the research endeavoured to "follow leads that we define in the data" (Charmaz, 2006). The iterative data collection - comprising thematic analysis of questionnaires and semi-structured individual interviews of participants (Saldana, 2009) over the first three years of the scheme's operation - therefore enabled a formative refinement of the "the emerging theoretical framework" (Charmaz, 2006).

All APCs are predicated on a scholarly evidence base drawn from individual practice. Over the course of the scheme thus far the evaluation has noted that many participants had not previously actively engaged in SoTL, and consequently found it difficult or challenging to situate and/or articulate their practice within an appropriate scholarly and dialogic framework (Brew, 2007; MacKenzie et al, 2010) in order to generate the evidence of effective practice required.

The dialogic engagement provided by the APC, in addition to its focus on individual practice and the explicit criteria for assessment, also sought to capitalise on the value of broader collegial discourse on teaching (Spiller, 2002; Clark, 2001), to support applicants in identifying and engaging with scholarship to strengthen their evidence base for professional recognition. The sustained impact of engaging in discourse around learning and teaching has been evident with participants' feedback emphasising its individual value and its role in encouraging them to talk more confidently and freely with others about their practice. This has in turn, started to permeate through the institution where we have seen the emergence of a more evident culture of "it is ok to talk about teaching": this paper therefore examines our findings relating to the attitudinal shift towards scholarship within practice, and considers the transformational implications for individual and institutional scholarship going forward, where the brokering of new professional relationships is beginning to transcend the more usual "significant networks" (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) or trusted communities of practice.

This paper reflects on our experiences, and seeks to present our conclusions in terms of the following:

- the dialogic approach as a trigger for ongoing engagement with learning and teaching and the development of meaningful communities of practice (Wenger, 2000);
- the value of dialogue in brokering new professional relationships and expanding the usual "significant networks" (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009);

- recognising and gauging the role of dialogic approaches to foster cultural change in SoTL;
- the surfacing and further development of more hidden academic leaders;
- the inclusivity of such an assessment process to encompass for staff from a wide range of disciplines and roles;
- knowledge and sharing of the range of effective, and at times innovative, practice going on around the university;
- the opportunities for institutional expansion of the dialogic approach across other learning and teaching fora.

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