

Pedagogic Frailty: A lens to support professional development of senior academics

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Since the first discussion of ‘pedagogic frailty’ as a way of conceptualising unproductive tensions in the academy (Kinchin, 2015), the model has been vigorously examined. A number of case studies have been undertaken with individual academics in a range of disciplines (Kinchin et al, 2016; Kinchin & Francis, 2017; Kinchin & Wiley, 2017). These have shown how academics relate positively to the concept and engage with the suggested method – using concept map-mediated interviews to frame construction of a reflective narrative. Pedagogic frailty has also been subject to critique by a range of authors who were invited to interrogate the model from various theoretical perspectives provided by their own established areas of research (see Kinchin & Winstone, 2017).

This has stimulated further analysis and refinement of pedagogic frailty as a concept that may contribute to academic development (Kinchin, 2017a; 2017b). The value of the model as a framework has been explored by colleagues who recognise its potential to frame dialogue between peers, allowing them to take greater ownership of their own continuing professional development (Wiley & Franklin, 2017; Gkritzali et al, 2017). The model is already attracting interest from abroad by colleagues working in academic development in Russia (Kostromina et al 2017), Spain (de Benito et al, 2017) and Brazil (Correia et al, 2017), where similar pressures on the academic are evident.

In offering a bespoke, personalised and discipline-sensitive approach to enhancing reflective practice, the model has particular utility in supporting the development of experienced colleagues who have no wish to engage in formal programmes of academic development, but who none-the-less would benefit (and find value in) a method that allows them to reflect meaningfully on practice within a time-frame of their own choosing. As such it offers a possible framework for colleagues who are, for example, attempting to construct narratives to gain recognition as Senior Fellows of the HEA, or who simply want to refresh their engagement with the discourse of teaching and learning.

This paper considers the data collected from 12 case studies of experienced academics who were invited to reflect upon their teaching against the framework offered by pedagogic frailty. The academics represented a range of disciplines (Academic Development, Business studies, student learning support, Performing Arts, Politics, Chemistry, Engineering, Management, Nursing, Law, Languages and Psychology). The group included National Teaching Fellows, Senior Fellows of the HEA, Directors of Learning and Teaching; Associate Deans for Learning and Teaching, and Professors. Participants engaged in a single, in-depth, map-mediated interview (about two hours duration), during which they were supported in the construction of concept maps to represent their personal understanding of each of the four dimensions of the pedagogic frailty model (Figure 1). The model of pedagogic frailty refers to the network of connections which operates across Higher Education Institutions, and considers a number of factors which, if not connected productively, can collectively result in an increased vulnerability to sudden adverse actions that may be triggered by relatively minor and unpredictable events (Kinchin, 2015). The maps have been shown to have value in promoting reflection (e.g. Wilson et al., 2015) and

providing a frame for the subsequent development of a personal narrative (Kinchin & Cabot, 2016). The map-mediated interview allows the interviewee to concentrate on the content of the map (and the stories that lie beneath the ‘headlines’) whilst the interviewer, who is experienced in the application of concept maps, is able to provide prompts to support the interviewee’s interrogation of their own understanding, and relieves the interviewee of the additional cognitive demands of constructing a map. In this way, we can be sure of constructing ‘excellent’ concept maps – *i.e.* those that are succinct, focussed and have a high level of explanatory power (Aguiar & Correia, 2017). The maps provide the frame from which participants then construct their reflective narratives.

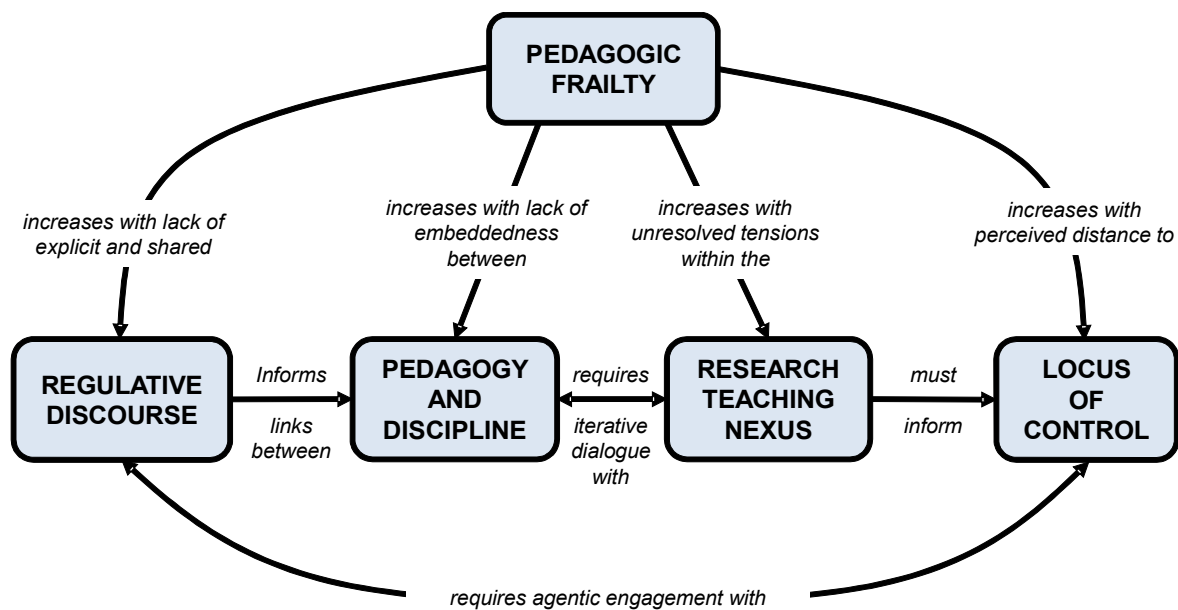


Figure 1: The model of pedagogic frailty (after Kinchin, 2015)

The data reveal a level of heterogeneity in the ways in which colleagues perceive concepts like ‘teaching excellence’ and ‘the research-teaching nexus’. Such contradictory understanding may be masked by uniform application of these terms. It also reveals contradictory ways in which colleagues perceive management and regulation – as either providing ‘constraints to practice’ or ‘freedom to act’. Such differences can generate tensions that tend to promote pedagogic frailty within the system, resulting in the adoption of ‘safe’ and ‘conservative’ teaching practices. A greater understanding of the variation in colleagues’ points of view is likely to promote a more open system in which ‘innovation’ and ‘adaptive expertise’ is valued more than ‘increased efficiency of routines through conservative approaches to teaching’. As such, the community (whether the department or the institution) is likely to achieve a greater level of resilience so that the system as a whole is able to respond productively to a changing environment (Winstone, 2017).

In each case, the interviewee was positive about the practical experience of engaging with the method and the model, and appreciated the value of sharing these perspectives in order to combat the negative influences of pedagogic frailty within their academic community. The process was seen to generate an enhanced ability to articulate personal views about teaching. The analysis of academic perspectives in this way provides physical access to data that are usually considered tacit and inaccessible, providing a method to support institutions that are actively seeking to enhance teaching. The process of engagement with the pedagogic frailty model is now an embedded component in our institutional CPD framework, and the case studies described here will be published as exemplar materials that colleagues may use for reference (Kinchin & Winstone, 2018).

The conference presentation will start with a short interactive experience in which the audience will be able to engage with the feelings generated by tensions that contribute to pedagogic frailty. This will sensitize the audience to possible resonance or dissonance between their own perspectives and those presented in the results from the case studies.

990 words

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