PTAS Project Report

Project Title: Engagement with the discourse of professional development

Project type:
A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

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Schools/department: Centre for Open Learning, English Language Education

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What did you do?

The aim of this small-scale exploratory qualitative study was to find out how academic colleagues from different disciplinary areas across the university interpret and react to the professional development discourse of teaching and learning. We used Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), facilitated by our research assistant, Michaela Hubmann, for this purpose using the following prompts:

- The language of teaching and learning is significantly different from that used in my own discipline
- Teaching and learning development activities are difficult to engage with if educational jargon is used
- Reading articles about teaching and learning inspires me to read more widely in this area.
- Teaching and learning initiatives are designed and run by people who don't understand my discipline
- Teaching and learning initiative's over intellectualised teaching

The initial aim was to conduct six FGDs, across six different schools, with a maximum of six participants in each group. Due to the low participation rates, after two weeks we sent out a follow-up email to those who had already agreed to participate and asked if they would be willing to recruit some of their colleagues for the set date. Recruiting academics was always to be a challenge and at the closure of a doodle poll, we had two groups with two participants and one group with three participants.

Research Procedure and Data

Analysis

The voice recordings of the FGDs were sent to a transcribing company and were transcribed. The Research Assistant spot checked the transcripts before the team started with the thematic data

analysis, which was done first individually by copying and pasting relevant quotes from the transcripts into a word document and by grouping them according to broad themes.

What did you find out?

We have grouped our findings under four main headings which are presented below with illustrative data excerpts:

Language is a barrier to engagement

Finding 1: for some, the language used in academic development workshops was definitely off-putting and was considered a barrier to their engagement with the concepts and ideas of workshops.

'However, I think there were times when language might be a little bit of a barrier in some ways. That if you didn't speak the language you maybe, couldn't contribute.'

'I think language is a barrier to any learning […] So, if you want to learn about what I'm trying to teach you about, I'm going to use all these big fancy words and you're going to have to know them because they mean certain things. I want to be able to say them rather than having to use the two-line explanation each time.'

'I think some terms are very vague and a bit of a catch-all.'

'There are words around teaching and learning that are alien.'

'There are a couple of new terms and terminologies that have been circulated recently in the field, but I needed to do that personal effort to get to know them themselves. If I detach myself from the research aspect of the teaching, when I come back, I would find out that I missed quite a lot because I am no longer aware of particular terms that came to the discipline when I was not following up on that.'

Language is a barrier to engagement but barriers can be overcome

Finding 2: other participants acknowledged that the language used could be an obstacle but not one which was insurmountable, reporting that with support and time, there were benefits to be gained.

'You go through the pain of dealing with the terminology, and as a result of that, you have gained.'

*'But some people found it a lot easier than others and mainly because they were from **an arts background** so they were used to this kind of reflective style of writing. This kind of a little bit less black and white type of language.'*

*'I think from **a scientific perspective** we're very used to writing and explaining things clear cut. There's no descriptive, there's no discourse, it is literally how it is and you know you can't get used to that. Whereas when you try and read an article like that it's sometimes difficult to interpret if you're not that way inclined which can put barriers up and make it a challenge. At the same time, it's like learning a new skill, and if you have the support, I think particularly through like the*

certificate that I've been talking about, that does help you approach it and forces you to read articles and engage with it.'

Language is not a barrier

Finding 3: For other participants, the specific language of academic development served a clear purpose in providing a language to articulate teaching practice.

'[…] it helps people to engage because it makes it clear.'

'I always thought it was quite clear and straightforward. Because I see the materials that you engage with and teach are separate from your experience of being taught or learning about teaching and learning. It is a specific vocabulary to that and I have personally just never encountered any difficulty with that.'

Language as a proxy for non-engagement

Finding 4: In addition to these views, there was also a sense that academic language could be viewed as a proxy for non-engagement and that it illustrated their reaction to strategies and polices which did not align with some views of the purpose of education.

'[…] a sort of corporate aspect to the language that gets used around teaching and learning.'

'People rebel against, that they don't like because it doesn't sit well with how a lot of people picture what academia is supposed to be about.'

*'Words like **policy** and **consistency** and **framework.**'*

How did you disseminate your findings?

The team jointly prepared a report and we gave a presentation '**Is learning and teaching terminology a barrier to engagement?'** at the UoE Learning and Teaching conference which was held on 19th June 2019.

What have been the benefits to student learning?

One significant way in which the University aims to achieve its goal of leadership and excellence in learning is to support academic staff in pursuing professional development opportunities to develop the skills required to provide a rich learning experience for students. However, lack of engagement by university staff is an obstacle to the achievement of this goal. This better understanding of barriers to engagement is a step to improving ways in which development opportunities are presented to staff.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

In order to engage staff more widely across the university, learning and teaching development:

- needs to be discipline embedded (this is increasingly the case)
- should engage discipline specific expertise where it is centrally provided
- requires those leading development activity to be aware of their own use of terminology in order not to create unnecessary barriers to engagement

Financial statement

This project has remaining funds unused and we require details of how to return the balance. The Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

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