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Developing new academics' self-perception as agents of change: a cross-disciplinary case study

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Abstract

This paper reviews a project run within a university Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE). The project, implementing changes in content and delivery of a PGCHE module, Innovation in Learning and Teaching, had three purposes. These were to promote peer learning among new lecturers and teachers (PGCHE participants) engaged in curriculum change; to increase institutional dissemination of the projects they had undertaken and the resources they had developed; and develop a framework for interdisciplinary exchange of expertise and interest. The aim was also to explore the effect of peer learning on participants' own perception of their role as agents of change. The focus is on evaluating the impact of changes made to one module in response to specific concerns.

Prior to the revision of the module, Innovation in Learning and Teaching, very few participants enrolled; those who did worked largely in isolation. The changes made to the module included the use of interdisciplinary learning sets; greater involvement of mentors; accessing literature on evaluation; a greater use of technology. These changes resulted in a number of outcomes. Participants developed strong and lasting peer networks beyond their academic departments, with a consequent impact on their developing professional identity. The teaching team felt it was useful to have a forum encouraging participants to explore and engage in curriculum innovation, and essential to have more robust processes to engage participants' colleagues and students in evaluating the impact of each project. Many projects continued to be developed and become more widely disseminated.

Keywords: curriculum change; innovation; peer learning; academic identity

Introduction

This paper explores three areas. Firstly, it reviews the impact of curriculum change on a PGCHE, and how this affected one module, especially through an attempt to encourage peer learning among PGCHE participants (early career academics) engaged in learning and teaching related initiatives. Secondly, it evaluates strategies designed to improve dissemination of such initiatives. Finally, it considers the effect of these changes on academics' self-perception as potential agents of change.

The paper considers these in the light of the significance of disciplinary variation; and the role of university teacher education programmes on teacher development and behaviour. Data was drawn from participants' feedback from module and exit questionnaires and interviews with a sample of former participants. This feedback, and the teaching team's own reflections, provided insights into the strengths and limitations of the programme, resulting in a major curriculum review in 2006.

Institutional background

Kent is a pre-'92 university, originally with a single (Canterbury) campus offering a traditional curriculum - Humanities, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences - but now on several sites including Medway, a relatively deprived area of mid-Kent, a campus with a particular remit to attract students who are the first in their family to enter Higher Education. Although the University does not hold data on the proportion of such students, anecdotal evidence suggests that they feature more in undergraduate cohorts than five years ago, particularly on vocational courses such as Pharmacy and Social Work. Overall between 2001 and 2007 fulltime student numbers have more than doubled. The traditional curriculum has also changed: there is now Journalism and Creative Writing in the English degree; Science Communication in Sciences degrees; and Forensic Science has emerged as a new discipline. Even though most new staff at Kent begin their academic careers having completed a PhD and have held one or more

postdoctoral appointments, the numbers who enter academic life with a professional profile are increasing.

Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE): background

Since 2002, PGCHE completion has been a probationary requirement for all new lecturing staff at Kent. Like most programmes of its kind, the PGCHE is a 60 credit Masters level qualification with a curriculum mainly geared to the traditional academic areas of activity: teaching and research. Until 2005, this comprised a 30-credit compulsory module covering, largely generically, learning, teaching and assessment. A 15-credit module, Effective Research in Higher Education, was compulsory for participants with teaching and research contracts in practice all but a handful of participants were on such contracts. The latter module was more akin to induction, aiming to develop participants' understanding of the University's research culture and infrastructure and the need to build a research profile through publications, conferences and public engagement, and strategies for writing successful research grant applications.

The remaining 15 credits were gained by taking one of four optional modules in preparation for particular roles, such as postgraduate research supervision, or engage in teaching projects, of which Innovation in Learning and Teaching is an example. This structure offered participants, whether fulltime probationary lecturers or the increasing numbers of teaching staff taking the PGCHE voluntarily (postgraduate students, Graduate Teaching Assistants and sessional tutors) limited flexibility. Successive PGCHE cohorts brought diversity: of experience, of disciplinary and educational background, of their university roles, of professional interests. Those making the mid-career transition into a lecturing post from other professions, recruited to develop and teach more explicitly vocational courses, were generally experienced professionals in their field. These individuals often had 'split appointments' between the NHS or other professional practice body and the University. For this group, the transition from being an experienced practitioner in their original workplace to a newcomer in the university workplace, with unfamiliar expectations and behaviours, was unsettling. Participants reported a sense of isolation as they set about developing new curricula, liaising with

professional bodies, navigating unfamiliar institutional administrative processes and recruiting students. They were, additionally, expected to begin establishing themselves as researchers. Those remaining active in their original fields, such as health professionals, were coping with constant readjustments. As Knight (2001) suggests "subject departments are prime sites of non-predictable professional learning" (p229), individuals in nascent departments were potentially disadvantaged. Former participants also raised concerns about PGCHE content. The theoretical base of education is broad, including for example, sociology, anthropology, psychology. Participants whose discipline fell into this group felt that the application of, for example, psychological theories to learning and teaching on the PGCHE was superficial, and resented non-specialists' appropriation of it; those to whom educational theory was new found it difficult or irrelevant. Di Napoli (2007), surveying perceptions of teacher education programmes such as PGCHE, warns that generic programmes which do not "take into account the fuzziness and complexities that accompany shifts in the cultural practices of an institution" (p.5) are unlikely to engage the staff they are intended to support. For all these reasons, it was clear that a one-size-fits-all, restricted programme with no policy for the Accreditation of Prior/ Experiential Learning (APEL) was ripe for overhaul.

Rationale for review

The main aim of the PGCHE review was to provide appropriate and academically robust support for all new university teachers with greater flexibility and variety, and balancing the generic and the subject -specific. Staffing was a critical factor. Until 2004, the Academic Practice Team, whose responsibilities include the PGCHE, comprised staff on fractional short-term secondments from academic departments, equivalent to 2.4 staff for 70 part-time participants. From 2005 the team grew: 4 full time academics, education specialists with teaching and research experience in that discipline, working with over 200 participants in liaison with seconded colleagues.

The underpinning philosophy was to combine the development of practical skills with scope for participants to explore and articulate their perceptions of the nature of academic practice, grounded in their discipline and the working context; in other words to provide "…a range of social and discursive pedagogic practices to construct their sense of what it means to be a teacher." (Zukas,2005, p.467). It was important to

address the range of academic activity - teacher, researcher, member of a disciplinary community. Subject-specific input needed a proper place in the programme, while maintaining a forum for cross-disciplinary engagement. We wanted to implement a more varied repertoire of approaches in our PGCHE teaching, Such variety included opportunities for collaborative work - mitigating the sense of isolation- and peer support networks of subject area, common interests, shared experiences and values. We initiated changes to content and delivery to combine whole-group teaching, subject - specific seminar discussions and individual investigations. Finally, we wanted to ensure that PGCHE participants could connect with the broader academy without disconnecting from their disciplinary community, and had a safe environment to investigate ideas and take risks.

The Innovation in Learning and Teaching module, which I convene, is an example of this shift in practice. Subsequent sections of this paper offer some reflections on participants' self-perception, the rationale for the use of peer learning, the changes introduced and an evaluation of their impact, based on my own perspective and interim participant feedback. Table 1 summarizes the changes made at programme level.

Table 1. PGCHE Structure 2008

New structure (APEL available up to 30 credits)
Introduction to Learning, Teaching and the Academic Environment (15 credits; compulsory for staff new to teaching)
Critical Perspectives on Academic Practice (15 credits; compulsory for staff with less than 3 years teaching experience)
Developing as a Researcher in HE (15 credits, optional)
Developing as a Research Supervisor (15 credits, optional)
Technology in the Academic Environment (15 credits, optional)
The Inclusive Curriculum (15 credits, optional)
Innovation in Learning and Teaching (15 credits, optional)
Teaching Languages in HE (15 credits, optional)

The Innovation in Learning and Teaching module: development 2004- 07

The learning outcomes for this module state that participants should

1. Critically evaluate the principles and theory of your chosen innovation in learning and teaching
2. Synthesise this knowledge and understanding in the (re-)design of learning environments, learning materials and teaching processes, as appropriate for the innovation you have selected
3. Present a critical analysis of the innovation in HE practice

In 2004/05 and 2005/06, three participants (academics on teaching-only contracts) worked on Innovation projects. They received one-to-one guidance from a member of staff; in due course their work was marked, one copy returned and one copy retained. The outcomes of these projects were, presumably, shared within their home department

but there is no evidence of wider dissemination. In 2006/07 the module was more widely publicised as 'open to anyone engaged in curriculum change' and attracted 15 students, including postgraduates who teach. The module was restructured to include three taught sessions, combining tutor input with task-based activity undertaken in discipline-specific groups. These tasks depended on the nature of participants' chosen project e.g. designing new programmes, incorporating technology, or working with a specific group such as first years or mature students. Each group received a bibliography of relevant readings. Participant exit feedback was that they had found the group work useful and rated the module highly. A number of their projects were put forward for University teaching prizes, and the winners presented their work at an award ceremony. However, I remained concerned about several aspects - listed below - and decided to implement a number of changes to try to address these with the next cohort: 27 participants, nearly a quarter of the first year PGCHE intake.

Limited dissemination

The award ceremony, the only dissemination event, was poorly attended, perhaps due to unfortunate timing rather than lack of interest. To address this, all projects are now published in a handbook sent to all departments, and a version posted on the University intranet. We encourage participants to enter their projects for University teaching prizes. Those shortlisted, and the winners, present their work in a variety of fora: in departments, at Academic Practice Forum events open to all University staff, and to subsequent PGCHE participants.

Managing subject - specific discussions

One part of the taught sessions included participants explaining subject-specific elements to a non-subject specialist. The intention was to provide participants with practice in communicating their ideas to a wider audience. However I noticed that such discussions occasionally became mired in generalities or went off at tangents. Sometimes the explanation of the innovation required a level of understanding which only a subject specialist could reasonably be expected to possess. Time spent on explanations tended to detract from the pace of the session.

To address this, the first class began with brief tutor input and a discussion in Faculty groups, based on a short piece of pre-reading on the theme of curriculum innovation, with a few key questions to focus participants' attention. Participants then worked in pairs with someone from their own, or a cognate, discipline to outline their proposed innovation. This resulted in a more focused discussion and a brisker pace throughout the first half of the session.

Participants being tutor-directed rather than self-directed

Participants on many PGCHE modules have commented that they welcome a forum outside their departments in which they can express themselves, develop their ideas and draw on each other's experiences, a view which I shared. However the way the module had been taught in 06/07 still assumed that individuals would work on their own outside the taught sessions; it provided limited scope for collaborative learning. It was important to offer both, and I felt that peer learning sets, based on Boud, Cohen and Sampson's model of reciprocal peer learning "the use of teaching and learning strategies in which students learn with and from each other without the immediate intervention of a teacher." (1999, pp. 413-414) could assist. The purpose was emphatically formative: mutual feedback on work in progress, questioning, being questioned, offering support and encouragement. As tutor, my role was to create opportunities, treating participants as resourceful and active members of a group, and encouraging – not forcing – interaction. Interactions happened firstly in the taught sessions through pair- and group-work. In the second half of the session each participant wrote their project idea on a giant poster for all to read, before grouping the posters thematically: for example, using technology; working with first years; assessment practice. This created groups of 6-8 people. The grouped posters were transcribed and circulated to the whole group. Participants were encouraged to engage in learning set discussions, although they could elect to work in a departmental or Faculty subset too. At the time of writing 15 of the 30 participants who began the module in 07/08 have had electronic or face-to-face contact with each other, chiefly in threes on Departmental lines. One set of 5 (from Humanities and Social Sciences) has met several times, and reports that they are refining their ideas as a result. This is a very encouraging development, which may be due to the fact that at the initial taught session they were immediately enthusiastic about learning sets, and have since gained practical value from working in this way.

The role of feedback

Individual engagement in group activity varies, and I did not want to attach marks to participation in each learning set. Nevertheless, the assessed work for the module requires participants to show that they have sought feedback from others (a departmental colleague, their students and a non-departmental peer) in the course of developing and implementing their innovation. The learning sets help identify a non-departmental peer, so even if someone is not an active participant in the whole group, they can engage with one other person at least.

Participant feedback

It is too early to have a complete picture of the overall impact of this approach; projects and follow-up work are still in progress. However, initial participant feedback gathered informally (through tutorial meetings) and formally (using evaluation questionnaires) identifies a number of positive aspects of the re-designed module, including the clear structure within which participants could be creative, engage in self-directed learning but access support as needed and the benefits of the blend of the subject-specific and interdisciplinary: "Opportunities to gain insights from a variety of disciplines" (Module evaluation form, 2008). Several described their pride in their students' progress as a result of their own efforts: "They exceeded my wildest expectations'" and "My students clearly benefited from the work I have done, and I feel so proud of this." (Module evaluation forms, 2008)

The effect of peer learning on participants' self-perception

At the start of the 2007/2008 session, participants were invited to provide a brief explanation of the potential of this module for their professional development. Of 20 respondents, 10 felt it provided an impetus to take an initiative; 5 were responding to specific teaching challenges; 2 respondents with responsibility for developing new curricula wanted the support of a larger group than was possible in their own subject area. Several postgraduates observed that they felt "more like a real teacher" (Personal communications, 2008) through developing an educational initiative. In the course of the academic year,15 participants reported that the impact of their innovation within and

beyond their home departments had resulted in a rise in their self-confidence, pleasure in the positive impact their innovation had had on their students and, for one more experienced participant, the rekindling of his enthusiasm for teaching by "taking me out of my comfort zone." (Personal communication 2008). Most felt that the peer support climate engendered during the module had been very important, although departmental encouragement and a sense of achievement were equally significant. Although the numbers involved are small, this is consistent with one finding of Gibbs and Coffey's (2004) investigation of the impact of university teacher education programmes in 22 universities in 8 countries. They concluded that participation in initial training tended to foster positive attitudes and a stronger student-focused approach. However they warn against assuming that training in itself results in positive changes; these could be ascribed to a generally supportive institutional culture and multiple developmental opportunities (such as mentoring schemes, seminars and conferences) rather than solely a result of training.

Further developments 2007/2008

The success of the Innovation module is evident through practices being adopted in different disciplines and departments. For example, one lecturer in Actuarial Science initiated supplemental instruction on one module. There was clear evidence of improvement in first and second year students' exam performance, and the development of communication skills in the third and fourth year student instructors. This was one of several aspects singled out for praise by the Institute and Faculty of Actuaries, the professional body which accredits the BSc programme. Supplemental Instruction has now been extended across the first and second year and piloted in two other departments as a direct result of the interdisciplinary networking fostered by the Innovation module. Other projects have focussed on skills development. For example, a skills sessions run by a drama teacher was introduced for Business School students, and a participant who had developed a Science Communication project gave peer support to a colleague initiating a Communications strand for Actuarial Scientists. Other Innovation projects have burgeoned to involve whole departments. A part-time lecturer in the School of English investigated the motivation of the surprisingly high proportion of dyslexic students, what attracted them to English, and the effectiveness of the support provided. What began as a small-scale project is developing across and

beyond its original School, leading to a lecturers' guide and resource pack for Humanities staff.

Many participants remain in contact with each other, formally and informally. They have created a network offering mutual support, advice and friendship during the early years of an academic career. It is central to the role of the educational developer to foster creative, challenging and practical ways to encourage early career academics become independent and confident participants in the academic community. Evidence to date suggests that the approach taken in the project is an appropriate way to realise these aspirations. Participants' final piece of work, submitted in 2009, will include a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of learning sets and the strategies adopted within their departments to get feedback on implementing the innovation. This will enable the PGCHE team to evaluate the impact of the change of approach, and its potential elsewhere on the programme. PGCHE participants will be encouraged to present their work more widely, thus contributing to the academic community.

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