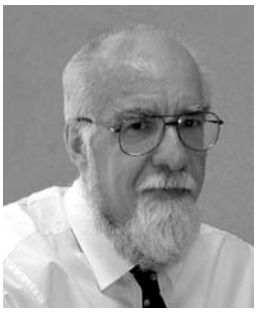
Reflections on Academic Leadership



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Summary
This article introduces some reflections on the aspect of teaching and learning that is often called 'academic leadership'. Programme tutors, curriculum developers and those with special responsibility for academic quality, for example, often have to deal with teaching and learning issues which transcend individual groups of students, and cannot be located within the classroom. We argue that reflection on practices in these areas is very important, but presents specific challenges that are relatively unexplored.

Introduction

During a typical academic year, many of us spend a considerable amount of time engaged in activities such as monitoring quality, curriculum design, programme or module leadership, and contributing to the development of university policies and regulations. Our view is that we should reflect on this as an integral part of our teaching and learning, and not relegate it to a different level of activity such as administration or management. Indeed, there is a risk that the mere act of highlighting this activity will immediately isolate it from, and put it in competition with, other things, and we rely on the good sense of the reader to guard against this. We would not wish to contribute to the division of educational activities into 'legs' or 'streams' such as 'research', 'teaching' or 'commercial activity', by adding 'academic leadership' to the set.

How can we distil from these reflections something that could be of value to others? We could simply identify a particular task and focus attention on strategies we have adopted for improving our performance: for example, chairing a scheme development committee. Such an approach might help others faced with a similar task. Another possibility is to identify a particular area of theory (or literature) and to draw from this an analysis of our problems and their possible solutions. This might alert colleagues to possible sources of information which we have found of practical benefit.

We prefer to attempt something rather more ambitious, a narrative that arises from our need for deep reflection on what we mean by the term 'academic leadership', prior to consideration of techniques and localised theories. Such an approach immediately presents a problem: how do we carry out and present well-founded reflective study in such a vague and woolly way? Our starting point was a text by Brown and Jones (2001, p.7) which explores the reconciliation of action research and postmodernism:

> It would seem that what we are proposing is an unlikely match. On the one hand there is the notion of the subject who besides being stable and coherent can use powers of reasoning and rationality in order to understand the complexities of the world, including those which are embedded in teaching. This conception of the researcher finds favour within various examples of practitioner research paradigms. On the other hand, there is the fragmented subject, with its multiple selves, implied by poststructuralist theories.

This seems to encapsulate many of the issues and suggests that reflection on the implications of postmodernism may provide some valuable insights. Note that our willingness to read about postmodernism in no way suggests we are 'embracing' it. Indeed, we are minded to agree with Latour (1993): 'We have never been modern'. For our purposes, a working identification of 'postmodern' is that of Lather (1991, p.4): 'the larger cultural shifts of a post-industrial, post-colonial era'.

We present some of the ideas that we have encountered in our exploration of postmodernism and indicate how they impact on our perception of academic leadership, starting in the next section with an exploration of the key concepts of the status of theories, narratives and bureaucracies. Arising from this is the concept of 'performativity', and in the following section we move on to discuss current trends in academic leadership in the light of this. One danger of looking at something new (to us) is that we might start to see the whole world in these terms, so we have included a section in which we force a reconciliation of some of these ideas with a familiar approach that we

have found helpful in the past, namely considering education as a design-based activity. In the penultimate section, we make some of these ideas more concrete by discussing one specific aspect of academic leadership, namely curriculum design, in the context of the issues raised. Finally, in the conclusions, we pull these ideas together and offer a personal reflection on some implications of this approach.

From grand narratives to bureaucracies

There is little doubt that the past two decades have seen an acceleration in the drive towards 'reflective practice' in education in the belief that this will enhance the quality of provision for pupils and students. One of the problems of reflection, however, is that we need to be able to recognise and interpret what we can see in an image, which may be complex in many dimensions. For example, if we are reflecting on any activity that itself involves aspects of reflection, we may see an infinite pit of images like those observed when we point a television camera at a screen displaying the image from the camera. If we glance sideways whilst reflecting, we see 'new' bits of the image that we might not have noticed before. If we have the ability to zoom in and out, we can view our reflections at different levels, and so we need to be able to re-focus. None of these problems is unique to education, of course, and they are reminiscent of many of the issues that we discuss regularly with research students via the Generic Training programme at the University of Hertfordshire. In general, however, our students are able to manage many of these problems by recourse to one notion of 'discipline': using specific tools, techniques, theories and methods that have come to be widely used in the context of a particular subject area, and hence form a Discipline. It is interesting to note, however, that the drive towards reflective practice has happened during a period when, according to Blake et al (1998, p.3):

> The authority of the 'foundation disciplines' … of the history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology of education has faded and their institutional standing has been eroded. Nor have they been replaced by any other *discipline* of study; instead the personal (but largely atheoretical) reflection of the 'reflective practitioner' is supposed to do whatever job here needs doing, with the help of a few *Introductions to Management* nostrums and Learning Method techniques.

One of the reasons for this decline is often cited as the move to a position where 'theory' is seen within a relativist (or subjectivist) context. Very loosely, we can caricature this as a position where theories are no longer seen as objectively true, but rather as somewhat arbitrary entities accepted in some transient way within particular communities through a process of narrative and discussion. Once we move to this position, an obvious reaction is to claim that we cannot ground education on the shifting sand of ephemeral theories (which, as a result of this reaction, now acquire labels such as 'the loony left', 'the progressives', 'the new mathematics'…), but must work with the 'facts'. As Blake et al (1998, p.8) have noted, it is often claimed that:

> …facts are facts – they are aspects of the Real World in which we cannot but live and which we cannot but recognize on pain of stupidity. Facts are not theory-relative. It follows that educational research, if it relates at all to the Real World, can only be a limited process of the discovery of additional and hitherto unrecognized facts.

There is, however, a major danger inherent in this view, noted more than 70 years ago by García

Morente when commenting on the importance of retaining a philosophical perspective in education. If we sever the ties between teaching and philosophy, pedagogy may become 'seduced by pragmatism and vital efficiency [and] may very well fall in the error of granting more virtue to teaching methods than to thought, and imagine it possible to teach and learn without thinking' (1931, p.192).

One side effect of any move away from modernist theorising to postmodernist theories-through-discourse is the change of emphasis in the types of narrative we value. In a traditional 'discipline' we expect a 'grand narrative': the story of the discipline. This will not be universally accepted, and need not be explicit, but will be part of a shared culture. What is valued, the status and types of knowledge that are used, the aims of the discipline, and what makes a good 'theory' might all be considered part of this grand narrative. There may be changes over time, of course, but these will usually be achieved by reference to, and refinement of, the grand narrative itself, pointing out inconsistencies or potential improvements. There could even be several competing narratives (like chapters in a book) that themselves go to make up the grand narrative. If we move to a postmodern view, however, we shift the emphasis from the grand narrative to discussion of localised narratives, with no agenda for mutual engagement. The power of a story is no longer its ability to explain the facts within the grand narrative, but how widespread it is: if enough people tell the story it gains stature. If we all say that 'increasing student motivation is central to good teaching' often enough it simply 'becomes' – it 'is'. As Lyotard has noted (1984, p.23):

> Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.

This move away from 'foundation disciplines' in education and the relegation of the role of theories has been accompanied by the emergence of structures that constrain what, how and when we teach. The National Curriculum, QAA benchmarks and the Framework for Higher Education, for example, all serve to remove any reliance on theory. They provide instead an operational bureaucracy within which professionals must work. Donald Schon, regarded by many as one of the founding fathers of reflective practice, noted the tensions between a bureaucracy and the reflective practitioner (Schon, 1995, p.328):

> When a member of a bureaucracy embarks on a course of reflective practice, allowing himself to experience confusion and uncertainty, subjecting his frames and theories to conscious criticism and change, he may increase his capacity to contribute to significant organizational learning, but he also becomes, by the same token, a danger to the stable system of rules and procedures within which he is expected to deliver his technical expertise.

The present era, where institutions are promoting an agenda of reflective practice whilst strengthening the bureaucratic structures within which this takes place, is proving challenging for both institutions and individuals, with academic managers often in the uncomfortable position of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable.

We stress that we are not claiming that education (as a discipline) no longer has foundation disciplines – indeed, as one of the referees pointed out when commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, these continue to

form the backbone of RAE submissions in the education unit of assessment. Our point is the more sinister one, that the link between such theories and the practice of teachers in implementing and delivering a curriculum in the classroom has been broken, to the point where most classroom teachers are no longer formally versed in a range of such theories, nor (self-)consciously aware of this lack. Nature abhors a vacuum, and operational bureaucracies are not 'theory independent'. So practitioners with no prior 'inoculation' of received theory are in danger of developing their own 'inappropriate' instrumental theories in an unselfconscious way. We may be developing a 'folk pedagogy', akin to the 'folk psychology' often cited as governing the behaviours of everyday actions, but elevating it to the status of underpinning professional practice. As Bruner has noted (1996, p.46), such 'folk pedagogy' reflects:

> …wired-in human tendencies and some deeply ingrained beliefs…in theorizing about the practice of education in the classroom, [teacher educators] had better take into account the folk theories that those engaged in teaching and learning already have.

We would argue that in HE, although folk theories are typically derided within their own disciplines, academic leaders have to operate in a domain where folk pedagogy is rife but rarely acknowledged.

The desire to move away from 'wasting time on theory' to a position where we deal with 'factual information' or 'statistics' misses the point that all observations of 'the real world' are theory-laden. Whether those observations are grounded in the terminology of the National Curriculum, HEFCE funding formulae or the current quality guidelines, actions based on them are only well-founded with respect to a particular theory-laden contextual interpretation.

From grand educational values to performativity

One result of the changing status of theory-laden knowledge and the emergence of bureaucracies to replace grand narratives is the acceptance of performativity. An activity becomes evaluated in terms of its contribution to the performance of the system that embraces it. Lyotard (1984, p.48) argues that precisely the same ideas impact education, and that in attempting to answer questions relating to educational provision:

> If the performativity of the supposed social system is taken as the criterion of relevance…higher education becomes a subsystem of the social system, and the same performativity criterion is applied to each of these problems.

If we ask, for example, what should we teach our students, the answers are judged against the criteria of performativity in society prevalent at the time, typically wealth creation. This process in action can be seen quite clearly in many events. For example, the EU white paper on 'Teaching and Learning' (EU, 1995, p.27) boldly stated that we have reached:

> …the end of the debate on educational principles. Heated debates concerning the organization of education and training systems…now appear to have come to an end…Moving towards the learning society is a twofold challenge. The first challenge is economic. [The second challenge is] to avert a rift in society.

Thus economic wellbeing and security are transmitted from particular aspirations of

society to the metrics by which we should judge education.

It is important to stress that this move towards performativity is not merely a simple change in the underlying values of education. The ethos is such that every individual aspect of education must be capable of being judged in isolation against these criteria. Each lesson should have 'learning outcomes' which clearly demonstrate that something of 'value' has been achieved, each curriculum should explicitly assist students with their career planning, all research students should be taught entrepreneurial skills, so they can exploit their research results effectively, and so on.

It is often taken for granted that if we all do 'well' at the little things against clearly identified metrics, the system as a whole will perform 'well' against these same metrics. This assumption is fundamentally flawed. Heylighen (1992) provides an excellent example of where such reasoning lets us down. Wolves hunt in a pack collectively and then all members of the pack share in the 'kill'. It is not unreasonable to assume that a good metric for pack performance might be to optimise the return of food against the expenditure of energy in hunting. Consider the impact of allowing every individual wolf to be driven by the same metric: the optimal performance for each individual is to avoid spending any energy on the hunt, but to share in the rewards anyway. This exposes the basic rule that in many systems of this type 'local optimisation does not always lead to global optimisation'. We invite the reader to consider whether a system that measures the performance of teachers and institutions at every level by the examination success of students leads to an educational system where an optimal number of students are successful in these terms.

We can contrast this performative view with one that considers education from the perspective of *praxis,* where rather than thinking purely instrumentally (we are educating students to fill their roles in society), we accept that education is one of the purposes for which civilised society exists. In a very informative discussion of the role of philosophy in Spanish education, Jover (2001, p.375) notes that:

> the second [of two] consequence[s] of understanding education as a kind of *praxis* is that it implies thinking of the educator as someone who is not purely neutral regarding the values being encouraged. Educators are not merely executors of pre-designed steps; they are committed to the welfare of the person in their charge.

This resonates with an interesting discussion (Blake et al, 1998, pp.81-89) on the subtle differences between 'giving' a lesson (or lecture) and 'delivering' a lesson.

From shared experience to loss of innocence

The move from teachers working largely as individuals to working as part of a performativity-based bureaucracy reminds us of a similar discussion in the context of design. Alexander (1964), writing from the perspective of architecture and town planning, makes the point that many design activities start out as *unselfconscious* and take place in primitive societies where people work within their own communities and practice is handed down as 'rules of thumb' or perhaps encoded into dogma. These rules are not static, but change slowly. The designer can adapt immediately to particular problems but there is a damping effect of tradition, as Alexander states (1964, p.52):

> Rigid tradition and immediate action may seem contradictory. But it is the very

> contrast between these two which makes the process self-adjusting.

The designer does not reflect on the *process* of design, but acts on the basis of immediately available facts.

It seems to us that Higher Education has been through this phase. Many of us learnt to 'lecture' by a process of doing unto others what our lecturers did to us. There was change, of course, but this was slow and localised within our disciplines. Most new lecturers in a discipline had studied within that discipline, and so had the shared rules to fall back on. Cyert, as recently as 1980, noted that (Cyert, 1980, p.7):

> Perhaps the most difficult organization to change in society is the university. Scratch a professor from any discipline and you will receive a lecture on how business organizations, churches, governments etc. should reform. Yet universities ignore the problems of education in their own institutions.

With the move to self-conscious design, however, the designer is asked to take explicit action on behalf of some other person or community. Responsibility for the design clearly resides with the designer, the problems are likely to be complex and hence require analysis and abstraction processes and, significantly, the designer may be working at some distance from the problem and so not obtain immediate feedback. We would argue that current education in universities in the UK has moved to this position. We no longer move seamlessly up the ladder of a discipline, we create new disciplines (Computer Science, Sports Science, Media Studies…) and new abstractions (generic skills, personal development planning, blended learning…), and have to deploy these within a framework passed on to us by those outside our traditional cultures (such as the QAA or the HEA).

The rewards for our actions are now often seen as located in the subsequent employment of the student, from which we receive no direct feedback. This transition causes significant problems for the designer, who can no longer transfer responsibility for failure to the rules (or the Gods), but must accept a 'loss of innocence'. Alexander (1964) notes two responses that frightened designers may use to try and escape this loss of innocence: refuge in genius and refuge in style.

Educational refuge in genius can be summarised by statements such as 'good teachers are born not made'. Our ability to act as professionals is 'given' to us, so if we are inadequate it is not our fault. If the Muse of Education fails us one day, so be it. What is more, reflective practice is dangerous as the mere act of thinking about our actions may destroy the gifts that make them possible.

Refuge in style is perhaps more widespread in Higher Education and manifests itself in various subtle ways. For example, once we have claimed to embrace 'student-centred learning', 'action learning' or 'back to basics', we have a ready-made refuge for escaping the implications of our actions. It may well be that the movement we adopted was ill-founded, but that was clearly not our fault, and no one can criticise us for using something so respectable, can they? This, of course, was often cited as the reason for IBM's sustained world domination of the computing market during the 1980s: 'you can't be blamed for buying an IBM' – the unspoken implication being that anything else is a risk you are taking personally.

Grounding the discussion in curriculum design

Let us now briefly attempt to give a more concrete account of how such reflections impact the academic leadership task of curriculum leadership in Computer Science, with the aim of promoting discussion.

First, let us ask 'who should carry out curriculum design?' This question is fundamental to the process, and yet we are not aware of any real discussion that has ever taken place on the topic (presumably because it is not directly observable and hence does not figure in a performative approach). We have encountered a wide range of approaches to forming a design team, ranging from the small team of subject experts, through a medium-size team with a deliberately chosen range of backgrounds and skills, to a large group consisting of anyone that is interested. We have seen team members nominated by interested groups, or recruited by a general call sent out for anyone who is interested, or identified by managers. Selecting the right team is, of course, wrapped up in issues such as your view of knowledge (if you believe the primary role of the curriculum is to deliver that which is inherent in the discipline, you may choose subject experts) and democracy (if you believe the curriculum needs to be owned by the staff teaching it, you may want wide representation). If you are driven by performativity conditions, you may view team selection as the task of selecting the best performers in those terms. We have encountered one curriculum design project where the result was far from ideal, no single person on the team accepted responsibility for the design, and the general view was that the problems all arose out of the need to 'compromise'. There was, of course, no need at all to reach a compromise, but the fact that the team was perceived by its members as representing various factions meant that the need for compromise had erroneously been assumed. This can be viewed as an example of seeking to optimise *local* satisfaction but failing to achieve *global* satisfaction.

What do we mean by 'curriculum design' at the University of Hertfordshire, or indeed is it important that we have a common understanding of the term? If we believe we are really designing the *delivery* of a curriculum, we need to identify the source of that curriculum (professional bodies, other institutions, benchmark statements, the literature, student demand, employer requirements). If we believe the curriculum is not 'given' but constructed, what principles and values underpin this construction? This may seem like idle navel-gazing, with no real benefit for practice. We would disagree. Philosophy of education:

> cannot be taken as a tasteful ornament for a few select minds. Rather it constitutes the very *first* moment – looking at the ends to be achieved – of any educational task, since it lets us determine the structure of the educational process, the criteria for action, and the essential goals that must be sought and met. (García Morente, 1931, p.371)

The outcomes of our deliberations here are crucial to our choice of design approach. If we believe that our curriculum is rooted in our discipline, then we might expect a grand narrative to guide our design, with components that *must* be in every curriculum, and we should expect marked similarity with curricula at other institutions. If we sign up to the performativity agenda, we may wish to identify the observable metrics against which we wish to be judged, and play the game of maximising our performance against these.

We should be careful, however, for in a subject like Computer Science it is far from

obvious what society really requires from us. In the 1980s, for example, when there was an imperative to produce a skilled workforce *ab initio* for the rapidly developing computer industry, there was a tendency towards short-term goals. In the words of Harlan Mills (1980, p.1161), one of the leading authorities on educating an industrial workforce for computing in the USA:

> There are any number of courses which will comfort rather than educate. They are 'practical', 'easy to understand', 'the latest techniques'. On attendance programmers discover various new names for common sense, superficial ideas, and thereby conclude, with much comfort and relief, that they have been up to date all the time. But unfortunately for the country, these programmers have not only learned very little, but they have been reinforced in the very attitude that they have little to learn.

Of course, such courses are likely to 'perform' well: the students are motivated and will assert that the learning outcomes have all been met. Once again local optimisation leads to suboptimal global performance.

What of our curriculum structures? Many of these will be given through the constraints of the institution, so should we question these, or simply accept them and be grateful for the refuges they imply? For example, it is far from obvious that an undergraduate curriculum maps automatically on to three 'levels', or that we can structure affairs so that students 'progress' through these in a sensible way. Is it not possible that some important aspect of the curriculum could be introduced in the first year, but only be properly understood after some related topics have been developed in later years? In which case, how do we write learning outcomes to reflect this? If we include the topic in the learning outcomes for level one, it must be assessed. If we omit it, it may not be covered (or students may opt out as it will not impact on their performance). Perhaps learning outcomes are not an ideal tool for describing a curriculum.

This leads on naturally to a consideration of 'assessment'. Why do we do it? There are numerous sources of information that tell us 'how to do it well', but what do we do it *for*? Is it even possible to do something 'well' without a clear understanding of why we are doing it? Perhaps this is another example of the assumption that if we all work well locally, the system will be well globally. Note that the importance of assessment is so clearly stressed in so many narratives, that it clearly 'is', but why it is important, and to whom, is somewhat less clear. Sometimes we use the term 'formative assessment' to indicate feedback to students, but how does this differ from any other form of interaction with students? Perhaps we take refuge in this term: many of us can appreciate the value and purpose of interacting with students in ways that help them to evaluate their performance and hence learn from their experiences. By labelling such interaction 'assessment' perhaps we seek to make other activities more acceptable by association. We have certainly been in situations where, upon criticising the foundations of a particular curriculum's assessment strategy, for example, the counter-argument has been constructed by reference to feedback alone.

Finally, let us consider the issue of student motivation and engagement. Informal discussions with colleagues both nationally and internationally suggest that this is one of the areas of greatest concern at present. Teachers are trained to 'deliver effective lessons' (TTA, 2004) where 'effective' is explained in terms not only of achievement of learning objectives, but also ability to 'interest and motivate learners'. It is no longer the curriculum that needs to

motivate and interest, but the deliverer. The simple fact is that 'discipline' is not always pleasant, and many students have been led to expect to enjoy their studies at every moment. We would hypothesise that one reason the problem seems to be getting worse is that schools and colleges are now driven by the performativity agenda. When we taught in schools, we were able to allow students to learn some important lessons through failure, in a protective environment. In these days of performance indicators, targets and league tables, schools develop efficient support mechanisms which ensure that students can often jump the hurdles without learning the real skills of training and running a race. This is not in any way critical of the schools, of course, they are simply performing well – unfortunately the criteria used in the judgement are not necessarily very supportive of Higher Education. How should we react? The obvious solution is to play the game, and ensure that students 'perform' well, so that we perform well, and hope that they can find employment conditions where the employer is prepared to continue the game.

Conclusions

In this paper we have provided a very superficial treatment of some very deep issues. Our hope is that such reflections will lead into discussions with colleagues from which we may all learn. We make no apology for the fact that this paper is not presented in the style of a particular discipline, for one of the basic problems of reflective practice is that one is not always free to determine what issues will arise, and as Magee notes (1973, p.68):

> A consequence of always proceeding from problems which really are problems – problems which one actually *has*, and has grappled with – is, for oneself, that one will be committed to one's work; and for the work itself, that it will have what Existentialists call 'authenticity'. It will not only be an intellectual interest but an emotional involvement, the meeting of a felt human need. Another consequence will be an unconcern for conventional distinctions between subjects: all that matters is that one should have an interesting problem and be trying to solve it.

In part, we are reacting against the division of educational activities into 'legs', or 'streams', such as 'research', 'teaching' or 'commercial activity' on the grounds that drawing fine distinctions between different processes which might lead to learning, such as teaching, research or scholarship, is likely to distract us from what is important, and render 'academic leadership' into process and resource control, with little direct impact on the important issues. Indeed, the negative consequences of making such distinctions may take a more sinister turn, as Alexander has noted (1964, pp.69-70):

> Caught in a net of language of our own invention, we overestimate the language's impartiality. Each concept, at the time of its invention no more than a concise way of grasping many issues, quickly becomes a precept. We take the step from description to criterion too easily, so that what is at first a useful tool becomes a bigoted preoccupation.

Performativity occupies a crucial position here, for once a term has been introduced, and widely disseminated, a reification process takes place which renders it 'real'. Thus 'retention', or 'widening participation', move from being issues that need discussion, to names for performance metrics. Thus in the frame we use for our reflections, we take it for granted that we should argue against any notion that 'teaching and learning' should take on a restricted interpretation that excludes, and competes with, activities such as helping

'research' students to develop their understanding, helping colleagues at a conference (or through a journal) to see things in a particular way, or working with industry towards organisational learning. We take the view that a university above all else is, and should be, a centre of learning and we cannot with integrity accept, as managers, a position that imposes performative targets in any one 'leg' without careful consideration of the impact on learning per se.

Our position should not be misinterpreted as requiring every action to be thought through to 'first principles'. As Poincaré (1913, p.37) noted:

> To doubt everything and to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; each saves us from thinking.

There are undoubtedly times when immediate action based on partially assimilated facts outperforms delayed action based on reflection, but we always retain responsibility for the consequences of our actions, regardless of whether or not these consequences were intended. We cannot think of a more appropriate way to conclude than to repeat, and assert our support for, García Morente's comment that we should not 'fall in the error of granting more virtue to teaching methods than to thought, and imagine it possible to teach and learn without thinking' (1931, p.192).

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