

Developing Research in Learning and Teaching within Business and Management: a case study

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the importance of academic staff in institutions of higher education pursuing research into learning and teaching. A brief literature review considers why recent authors in this field consider it to be important. A case study is used to illustrate how research in learning and teaching has been encouraged and respected as a legitimate activity for academic members of staff. The context of the case study is a large Business School with 120 academic members of staff, organised in four academic departments within a matrix structure. The Heads of Department have responsibility for the quality of the curriculum, for modules and for staff, whilst Heads of Programmes (undergraduate and postgraduate) are responsible for the quality of the student learning experience associated with approved routes and programmes. All are accountable to the Dean.

Why it is important: a literature review

The reasons why in the past there has been limited interest in encouraging research into learning and teaching are explained by Nicol (1997) and are summarised here. Traditionally, Institutions of Higher Education have always rewarded disciplinary research only. In addition, many teachers in UK institutions of higher education have not been trained teachers. Nicol says that the main approach to encouraging changes in teaching practice were provided by central units which did not always meet the needs of teachers and were criticised because they took a focus on teaching techniques and not on "implicit conceptions that determine how teachers teach" (p 4). He concludes that in the past individual teachers were the ones who attempted to innovate rather than there being co-ordinated activity.

As Nicol acknowledges, this is no longer an accurate picture of the sector. One of the main influences of change has been the Dearing Report (1997). The report offers a vision that teaching and the management of learning be world class but that to achieve this would require a change in the values of the sector. This is the basis of recommendation 14, the establishment of a professional Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education:

"The Institute's functions would include accrediting professional achievement in the management of learning and teaching, commissioning research and development work into learning and teaching practices, and

stimulating innovation and co-ordinating the development of innovative learning materials" (Rec.14)

The influence that this recommendation is likely to have on the sector complements a view held by Elton (1998), who, when discussing appropriate criteria for individual excellence in teaching, suggests that one criterion may be research and scholarly works published in refereed journals and books (p 10).

There is increased recognition of the importance of research in learning and teaching as illustrated by Baty (1999). He reports on an open letter from the Editorial Board of the teaching research journal *Teaching in Higher Education* to the Higher Education Funding Council's research assessment exercise manager. They (the editorial board) want: "to conduct educational research on teaching and learning issues in their own disciplines, and to be acknowledged and rewarded for it through the Research Assessment Exercise", (p 3). They argue that the worst teachers within the institutions of higher education will fail to improve unless there are "significant changes in the research culture" (p3). The debate continues. Rowlands (1999) argues that including research into learning and teaching in the next RAE would:

"enhance the status of teaching more than all the efforts of the Institute for Learning and Teaching. It would help link teaching to disciplinary insight and view it as central to academia's intellectual life, rather than a second-order practical activity" (p 32-33)

After all the link between research into one's subject and teaching and learning are by no means world's apart. As Zuber-Skerrit (1992 (in Evans and Abbot 1999)) notes:

"...academics should try to learn about teaching in the same way as they learn about their discipline, or particular subject areas, that is, as personal scientists and problem solvers, through active involvement, practical experience and critical reflection about the experience. An important condition is that these developmental activities must be personally initiated, self directed, and consciously controlled by the university teachers themselves" (p 33)

Reflection on practice was discussed by Kolb (1984), whose research showed that active participation was not enough, but that it must be followed by reflection upon the activity, if learning was to take place. This initial work by Kolb has been developed by Pedlar (1991), Race (1993) and Handy (1994), who have all recog-

nised the need for reflection as essential for learning. Revans (1982) suggests that working within an organisational setting provides many opportunities for action learning but that organisational culture or "morale" is a determinant of success. Geherardi, Nicolini and Odella (1998) say "learning is always associated with some ongoing practice" (p 274). The view taken in this paper is that action learning where the teacher is encouraged to question and evaluate his/her own practice is an appropriate methodology for research into learning and teaching, particularly when it is supported by learning sets. Learning sets enable individuals:

"...who come to the set to learn from experience and to move on to more effective action. The set enables this process to take place through concentrated group effort focused on the issues of each individual". (McGill and Beaty 1995 p 21)

The view taken in this paper is, therefore, that research into learning and teaching is important for the following reasons:

- it encourages reflection of the actual teaching activity as well as the subject being taught; this reflection can enhance the pedagogic process
- in the future publications in learning and teaching which have a particular discipline context may become recognised as part of the Research Assessment Exercise
- application to the ILT by academic members of staff will be enhanced if they are able to demonstrate research and publications in learning and teaching
- for career and promotional aspects this would be one way of taking practice into the public domain for wider dissemination and evidence of excellence in teaching
- external quality review attaches importance to the evidence of reflection of the learning and teaching activity
- it supports the strategic plans of many Universities
- HEFCE in their Strategic Statement (1999) refer to funding opportunities for rewarding individuals who demonstrate excellence in teaching

A model of encouraging research and publication within learning and teaching in one institution is the focus of the next section of this pa-

per. The model takes forward the research methodology of action learning, briefly reviewed above, and the reasons that have been rehearsed here regarding the importance of this activity.

A model for encouraging a reflective practitioner approach

Within the Business School, that provides the context of the paper, there has been a faculty-wide Learning and Teaching Group since 1993. It is currently chaired by the author. The membership of the group has changed and evolved over time but consists of academic members of staff who are representative of the various aspects which make up the work of the School. In addition a Faculty-wide Internet and Learning Technologies Co-ordinator and the School's Principal Technician are also members. The work of this group is fully documented in Hodgkinson (1998). In terms of encouraging research in learning and teaching by academic and support members of staff, the following model has evolved.

A staff development forum

The first stage, once all the students have returned and new students are settled at the start of every academic year, is to offer a staff development event entitled "Getting Started: research and publications in learning and teaching". This event is open to all academic staff. The format of the session is an open forum and lasts about 1.5 hours. Both recent and established researchers reflect on the value and experience of developing this area. The event is supported by a variety of journals that are used to highlight different types of publications which contributors can target. The final element of this event is to explain that support is available in two ways for anyone wishing to "get started".

Seedcom funding

To enable and to encourage colleagues (including support staff) with this venture it is

possible for them to apply for seedcorn research funding. There are two opportunities for applications for this funding in any one academic year. Some appropriate areas we identified for guidance, included: issues on quality assurance, student feedback, modes of assessment, lifelong learning, teaching in Eastern Europe, innovative approaches to curriculum delivery, the use of technology and its impact on students and staff, and the application of different software in learning and teaching.

The aim of the funding is designed to enable assistance to be given for travel expenses associated with fieldwork, teaching relief and conference expenses to a maximum of £500. Requested proposals are short (two sides of A4) and must include a dissemination plan (conference papers and refereed journals to be targeted). The Learning and Teaching Group then consider the submitted bids. Initially there appeared a lack of interest by academic members of staff in taking up this initiative but for the current year six proposals have been received. It should be explained at this juncture that the Learning and Teaching Group receives an annual budget allocated from the faculty budget. This not a large sum and must meet various costs including those associated with the annual "Staff Development Programme of Activities" available across the School for all members of staff.

Peer support group

Support is also available to those academic members of staff who wish to commence research in learning and teaching through membership of a support group.

During the course of 1998/99 the group had a membership of twenty and met at monthly intervals. These meetings enable members to participate in learning sets and thus receive and provide critical support through peer review. The action sets aim to keep colleagues motivated as well as solve problems, to generate ideas and to help identify action plans for indi-

vidual members. There is no pressure for group members to attend all the meetings: rather the purpose of the meetings is to provide support as and when it is needed.

Annual conference

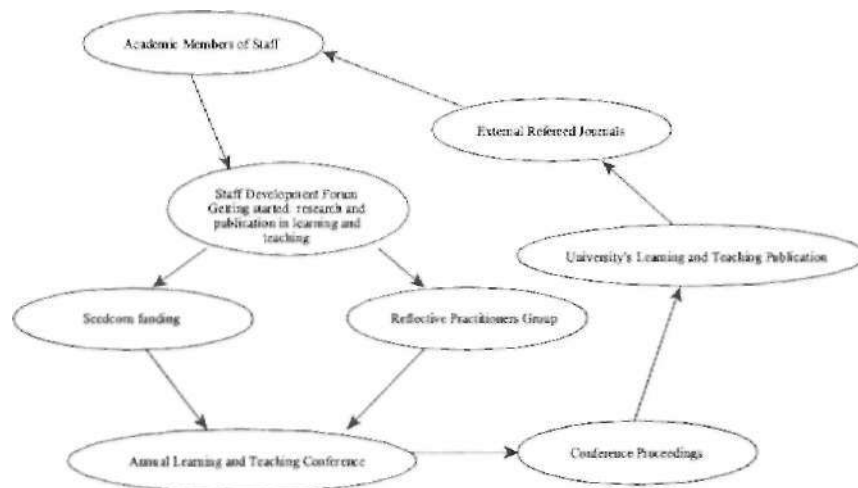
Since 1993, a one-day Learning and Teaching Conference has been held on an annual basis either in July or September. One of the conditions of the seedcorn funding opportunity is that successful applicants must present a conference paper at this conference. The conference is open to all faculty of the Business School. There is a call for papers usually in April of any year, with invitations to attend and booking forms circulated well in advance of the conference. The conference marks the end of one year of activities for the Learning and Teaching Group, but perhaps more importantly it provides a focus for colleagues who have received seedcorn funding. For some academic staff this may be the first time that they have presented a conference paper, therefore it is designed to be informal and non-threatening. The success of the conference is illustrated by comparing the one held in 1999 that had three streams, two for academic papers and one with a series of workshops and an attendance of fifty delegates. In 1993, the conference had one stream and eighteen delegates. Conference papers are circulated to all delegates with a copy going to the editor of the University's publication "Innovations in Learning and Teaching" (published annually) for review by members of the editorial board.

Measures of effectiveness

It is always difficult to be totally unbiased when discussing a model that has evolved over a period of seven years and view it objectively. A review of the annual conference indicates that more and more academic colleagues are participating as presenters at the conference. Not as many attend, however, as might be expected from the size of the School even allowing for those colleagues who are engaged in research within their discipline. Attendance at the peer support group decreased steadily over the last academic year. It was considered by the Chair of the Group that this level of support is no longer needed and instead an informal grouping has emerged that is less structured than the learning sets but adheres to similar principles. Since 1993, there have been twenty-four articles published in refereed journals concerned with aspects of learning and teaching, thirty papers presented at refereed conferences and innumerable non-refereed conference papers and presentations given. Requests for seedcorn funding are still low, but the numbers are increasing.

Qualitative measures tend to be anecdotal in terms of measuring the effectiveness of this initiative. However, those who successfully sought seedcorn funding have, to date, completed their projects. Colleagues have commented on their enjoyment and satisfaction in being involved. It would, therefore, appear that many staff are committed to learning more about their core activity of learning and teaching. Thus it can be assumed that they have en-

A model: developing research in learning and teaching within Business and Management



joyed the challenge of engaging in this type of research and for the first time producing a conference paper with the opportunity for wider dissemination of their work. By providing an opportunity to disseminate to colleagues it enables the promotion across the School of the importance attached to reflection in learning and teaching. In addition, implicitly through the reflective nature of the activity resultant improved practice which is shared with others.

Conclusion

The activity described here cannot succeed without the support of senior managers within the School's departments. They must be prepared to allocate resources to it in terms of funding and time. It is also important that they are visibly supporting it, for example in this model by attending the annual conference and even presenting a conference paper as the Dean of this particular School did at last year's conference.

It must also be acknowledged that within this Business School it was agreed in 1997 that this form of research fits within research of Human Resource Management and can therefore contribute to the Research Assessment Exercise. However, this factor alone cannot account for the success of the activity during the earlier years. In summary, this initiative has been successful in generating, across the School, interest in researching aspects of learning and teaching which is more significant than prior to 1993.

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