Dublin Institute of Technology
ARROW@DIT

Articles

Learning,Teaching & Technology Centre

2003-01-01

Researching and Acting: Exploring and Improving the Provision of Academic Support for Newly Appointed Staff in a Higher Education Institution in Ireland

Roisin Donnelly
Dublin Institute of Technology, roisin.donnelly@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: http://arrow.dit.ie/ltcart

Part of the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Donnelly, R. (2003) Researching and Acting: Exploring and Improving the Provision of Academic Support for Newly Appointed Staff in a Higher Education Institution in Ireland. Networks: Online Journal for Teacher Research. http://education.ucsc.edu/faculty/gwells/networks/journal/Vol6(2).2003oct/Donnelly.html

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Learning,Teaching & Technology Centre at ARROW@DIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of ARROW@DIT. For more information, please contact yvonne.desmond@dit.ie, arrow.admin@dit.ie.

Researching and Acting: exploring and improving the provision of academic support for newly appointed staff in a higher education institution in Ireland

Roisin Donnelly

Dublin Institute of Technology.

Introduction

As an academic working for the past three years in a learning and teaching centre in a higher education institution in Ireland, I have only recently asked myself if I have been living in the direction of my educational values (Whitehead, 1989). These are my ideas about what constitutes an educationally worthwhile process of teaching and learning by defining the relationship between knowledge, teachers and learners.

My professional role involves the provision of academic support for newly appointed staff at the Institute. I felt there was a discrepancy between what I felt should be happening for these new staff members and the reality of the provision of academic support. I decided to conduct an action research study over a three month period to investigate this discrepancy. The focus of the study was myself, and what I was doing to support these new lecturers. My claim at the end of this study is that I now have a clearer picture of the problem areas in academic support levels encountered by newly appointed academic staff.

My evidence emerged from an analysis of a transcript of a focus group session held with six members of academic staff as the participants in my study, through asking them what their learning needs were as they began their new posts, and at the various stages thereafter. Due to the fact that I felt that the research should be manageable and be under the direct control of myself as the practitioner, it was small-scale. My two colleagues in the Centre and a member of high level management agreed to form a validation group who worked with me to analyse the evidence to substantiate my claim.

1 Background

Prior to this research study being initiated, a review of similar academic support centres revealed that an educational development issue common to all disciplines and countries is how to combine generic development of staff as teachers with appropriate engagement with the specificities of teaching individual subjects (Clark *et al*, 2002). Within the confines of a development programme for new academic staff, the issues were even broader: these new staff have a wish to be a good teacher, but quickly, and to have the breadth of vision as teachers to be able to cope with new types of students and different ways of teaching.

Prior to this time, there had been minimal support in place for new academic staff, and efforts were being made to address this, by situating an optimal programme in an already-busy schedule for these new staff.

2 Initiating the Process of Change

McNiff *et al.* (1992) believes that professional and personal development are closely bound and that both processes can be fostered by a dialogue of equals. I am in tune with the suggestion that people develop as reflective practitioners through critiquing their own work, and offering their personal accounts for public criticism. I have believed for some time that the idea of the teacher as researcher is of crucial importance for the future development of my professional practice. Since undertaking this study, my professional practice has since been transformed. I can now make another claim in that I know that I have improved in my role in academic support. I have developed a better pedagogic style, one that is open to further reflection and development, and inclusive of the rights of the academic staff with whom I work to voice their ideas. Reflecting on my practice, and engaging with the existing theories in the literature of academic support in higher education, led me to the realisation that there was divergence between my values and my practice. I set about planning an intervention in my practice and developing my professional knowledge so as to synthesise my values and my practice. I further refined my ideas for carrying out the research and writing this study.

3 Action Research in my Context

The main impetus behind this action research study is intrinsically linked to the aim of action research which is to solve the immediate and pressing day-to-day problems of practitioners. Taken further, and exploring the 'teacher as researcher' concept, teachers are enabled to develop their own understanding of their own practice and to turn their practice into a form of research. It is a whole reflective enquiry into one's practice, to be

constantly saying to myself, “What am I doing? Why am I doing it like that, and how can I improve it?”

My intention as an action researcher would be to bring about a situation that was congruent with my value position. I was interested in exploring new ways of representing research: using self-reflection, using dialogue and conversation; yet for the purposes of this study, using the action research methodology of change seemed most appropriate to enable me to live in the direction of my values. A concern with a form of critical professionalism, enacted in my own teaching practice, underpinned this study. I used action research as a method of change and a means for taking up my own particular concerns with doing critical professionalism in order to improve the academic support I was providing and novice academic staff were receiving.

As my remit in the learning and teaching centre is to support the professional development of academic staff in the Institute, this takes the form of providing workshops and short courses in different areas of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education. However, our core ‘business’ to date has been the design and the delivery of a Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma and Masters (MA) in Third Level Learning and Teaching for lecturers – currently the only programme of its kind currently in the Republic of Ireland. For the purposes of this paper, teaching at third level directly equates with higher education teaching.

4 What was my Concern?

"The life of the researcher is entwined with her research." This statement in the work of Conole (1999), was certainly true for me at the outset of this work. I have always felt that timeliness is key to change. It is at this time in the academic year that I find myself reviewing my current professional practice. As both course and marketing co-ordinator for the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching, just now, I am in the process of recruiting participants for the forthcoming cohort. When I asked myself what is particularly high in my mind at the moment in regard to my work, I immediately could draw upon my values base. From the outset of undertaking this dual role, I have harboured misgivings about the extent to which I was liasing with newly appointed academic staff to the institution; the participants whom I was aiming to support by providing this course. It was important to conduct this research at the present moment in time as I suddenly found myself questioning my own actions in the area, and what was happening around me.

How important was the issue to the newly appointed academic staff? Concern was mounting. We were receiving informal feedback from some academic staff members who were unhappy about the level of support provided, and due to the constraints of their course syllabus, the time they had to attend Learning and Teaching Centre courses. This perplexed me deeply.

To date, there has been no formal or systematic study undertaken about this issue within this institute. There has never been a consultation process with the new staff to establish

what they need and when they need it. Do the newly appointed academic staff actually want to start a new course when they have just started a new job? Is the appropriate level of academic support to be offering them at this stage in their careers?

To this end, this action research study enabled the germination of an idea to develop; to better support the newly appointed academic staff by asking them what their learning needs are as they begin their new posts as lecturers in higher education, and at the various stages thereafter. There was a need to become more proactive to their learning needs, and by doing so, I wished to investigate how my personal and professional conduct affects these learners.

5 Why I was Concerned?

I have always believed that the best teaching is done by those who want to learn – by undertaking a process of critically reflecting on my practice. Learning can involve the evolution of understanding, and professional development can involve considered reasons for action. This was the basis for this study.

In this instance my personal and professional values tend to merge. I believe that people are able to think and learn for themselves, and that they generally tend to appreciate being given the space and time to give their own opinions on matters. I have always felt more comfortable working with people in a facilitation role, setting up a climate for learning, supporting them in reaching their own goals and potential. As part of this, I am of the opinion that an openness to change and dynamism on my part is essential.

6 How could I present evidence to show the need to undertake the research?

My intention was not to validate a theory independently and then apply it to my practice; I intended to validate through my practice. The methods I used to gather evidence to substantiate my claims were a reflective journal and a focus group. The journal entries reflected on the situation in which I found myself, and my thoughts on the need to do something about this situation. I hoped that once I had acquired specialised and detailed information from the newly appointed academic staff members in the focus group session, this would provide a basis for analysis and elucidatory comment on my topic of enquiry.

I took some time to develop working criteria to help me make judgements about whether the situation might be improving. These took the form of a set of questions to be used in the focus group session.

Insert Table 1 here

Throughout, I attempted to formulate the questions from my values base. I also hoped through the validation group that I organised for this study to share my observations and reflections so as to fine-tune the work, and continue the process in the future. Keeping track of events is sometimes difficult, but essential if the study is to be systematic and legitimate when it comes ot public attention. The personnel I chose to include in monitoring this study were colleagues in what I termed a Validation group. These

colleagues were sympathetic to what I was trying to do, but were able to criticise supportively in order to move my ideas forward.

The issue of validity of evidence was important:

- Are the focus group questions clearly formulated so that the answers will provide data to illuminate the research question?
- Are the procedures clear so that all stages of the investigation can be evaluated in context?
- Have steps to reduce bias and help reliability been taken?
- Can the claims that are made be 'legitimately' derived from the questions, the action plan, and the evidence which was gathered?

7 What I could do about it?

To conduct such action research I undertook to develop a plan of action to improve what was already happening in my practice, to act to implement the plan, to observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurred, and to reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, along with any subsequent action. Although it can be said that this is what every practitioner does anyway, to do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one does in everyday teaching and generate valid evidence from the data in support of a claim to knowledge. It was important to carry out these four activities collaboratively, involving others affected by the action, the newly appointed academic staff members because this

kind of honest, collective collaboration - with the participants as partners in the process - would be so powerful.

Insert Figure 1 here

Ethical issues played an important part in this study. There would be a great deal of sensitivity around this issue. The different players needed to be taken into account. From my own perspective, I took some time to write an ethics statement. The newly appointed academic staff needed to be shown that their opinions were valued and that they had a say in their own professional development.

By working with academic staff who were at varying stages in their posts, I was hoping that this would give me the opportunity to liaise with staff who have been in their posts for six months and those who have been working in the institute for a few weeks. This proactive approach was important to ensure that the enquiry that I was undertaking was informed.

I kept three action gains in mind: the improvement of practice, the improvement of understanding (individually and collaboratively), and the improvement of the situation in which the action takes place. Hearing from the participants in the focus group let me know what matters to them. I had a number of goals for this session:

- to listen and learn from them by exploring the topics of interest to this study;
- obtain in-depth knowledge as they shared and compared their experiences, feelings and opinions;
- pursue any interpretive questions about “how and why”.

Specifically, the focus group revealed a number of issues:

- The new lecturers questioned whether their 'voice' had any credibility within the Institute; being the 'new kids on the block' left them wary of being noticed amongst their more experienced peers, yet they still felt that they had something positive to gain from starting to question their academic practice. Quotes from the focus group participants illustrates these issues.

  > "*You get some critical comments from your peers which sometimes is hard to deal with, but it is probably a better idea if people were more open to having dialogue about practice. This discussion today has freed me up to raise the question in my own mind, how am I teaching? For me, that has become very evident; I am now teaching but perhaps not as well as how I should be teaching*."

- As a result of this insecurity, they queried if any suggestions that they were requesting in terms of academic support were actually going to deliver some of the things that they wanted.

  > *"I like the whole process you are offering to us. If it is implemented, in terms of totality, it seems a valued set of workshops and support; it should help take the pressure of new lecturers starting teaching. I only wish it were in place now as this is when I need it."*

- The focus group helped me learn about the foremost way to communicate with the new staff around the Institute. We discussed how best to convey information to them about the academic workshops and short courses on offer in a timely fashion. Incorporated into the academic support programme, they requested opportunities to further input their opinions, so that they could feel included in their own professional development.

> *"I have not seen any of the posters you have described, but I do think email is very effective for keeping us informed of forthcoming courses and initiatives."*

- Bringing the members of new academic staff together in the focus group allowed them to share and compare their different ideas. They discussed what was likely to happen and what was not, what would affect one of them more than another, and what their highest priority issues were during this period of transition for them. A general concern that they all felt could affect them was in terms of student support:

> *"How far should you go in dealing with students? Some students want you to go further than others with helping them if they have problems. How much is appropriate for a lecturer to do?"*

Thereafter, it was necessary to decide which action steps outlined in the plan were to be implemented next, and how the process of implementation and its effects were going to be monitored. I wanted to monitor the effects of the action plan with an open-eyed, open-minded, responsive way to record the unexpected and the routine alike. Monitoring techniques were used to:

- provide evidence of how well the course of action was being implemented;
- provide evidence of unintended, as well as intended, effects; and
- look at what was going on from a variety of viewpoints; adopting a variety of techniques.

8 The Reflective Process of Change

This action research study involved me reflecting on my own practice. I began by examining my educational values and beliefs. It enabled me to reflect further on my own

practice and the beliefs underpinning that practice. I wished for this study to have an enduring impact as I value critical reflection on my practice as a scholarly activity and see it as providing a vehicle by which I can undergo a process that Mezirow (1981) refers to as perspective transformation. I need to reach a state of self-realisation that enables me to envisage the influence of any of my past assumptions and constraints so as to permit a movement towards actions more consistent with new understandings.

The reflective journal was used as a chief source of reflection in this study. I felt it very useful to put my current thoughts onto paper and take time from my daily routine to think about my professional practice and the critical incidents that have occurred therein. It provided a documentary record but also provoked and recorded self-reflection about the processes I was engaged in.

9 How did I validate my claim?

My main focus at this stage was how could I justify my claim to have increased my knowledge? Validating claims made as a result of the research involves the following steps: making claims, critically examining the claims against evidence, involving others in making judgements and making the action research public.

As part of this process, I set up a validation group, and general pointers that I bore in mind whilst doing this were:

- the task of the validation group is to help the researcher move her ideas forward;
- I intended the atmosphere to be supportive, but challenging, encouraging me to give responses to questions in the form of new questions for myself, protecting my emergent thinking, and giving me confidence to act in a new direction;
- the validation process was not the summative point in this study that has led me to closure; instead it became a formative engagement in an experience which contains emergent property for the realisation of new potentalities (McNiff, 2002).

The collection and interpretation of data required considerable sensitivity. But it also required honesty, a willingness on the part of all those who were involved to ask pertinent questions, admit mistakes and uncertainties and cope with the unpredictability and open-endedness of an enquiry in which the variables are acknowledged to be shifting (D'Arcy, 1994).

The validation group included myself, my two colleagues from the Learning and Teaching Centre, and the head of Academic Affairs, representing management. I invited them to look at the transcript from the focus group, and listen to my story, through exploring extracts from my reflective journal. Dialogue is an important context for developing, as well as validating, this type of educational theory.

The validation group provided me with three specific inputs regarding the effectiveness of the focus group. In effect, three distinct areas for development were highlighted.

1. Certain workshop titles appeared in the transcript e.g. class planning, lecture design, thesis supervision at different levels, assessment, exam correction, and plagiarism. A number of enduring academic issues that lecturers considered important also appeared in the transcript, e.g. support for students with disabilities, student support, staff mentoring, induction, and increasing opportunities for staff networking.
2. The validation group found useful the emphasis I placed on what was immediately useful to lecturers, but asked the question, if new academic staff have no experience of teaching, do they know what is useful to them? Or do they discover what they need as they go along? I intend to use this as a starting point in a follow up focus group with the same participants in the near future.
3. The validation group also indicated that it was a successful outcome of the focus group to have not only the academic services stated, but also how lecturers wanted events advertised, and where they wanted them to take place. They felt that these were practical 'customer concerns'.

It was the spiral process of action research that permitted both responsiveness and rigour at the same time. Each cycle gave yet another chance to challenge the data and interpretations of the previous cycles. More cycles inferred more challenge, and more assurance that the results would be valid. Repeated cycles allowed me to converge on an appropriate conclusion by focusing on the quality of the data collected and the interpretations drawn from it. In the later cycles, there is scope for challenging the information, and interpretation from earlier cycles. The data collected and the literature read was part of this. In effect, this whole study became a process of iteration. Within this process, a gradual refining of understanding of the situation being studied took place.

On examination of the evidence in the focus group transcript, I decided to draw up an action plan for my future practice within the Learning and Teaching Centre and other institutional departments and committees. This was vital in order for me to be able to action the issues raised in this research.

10 How did I Modify my Practice?

'Be ye therefore slightly improved…' (Murdoch, 1985) Previously I had happy with working at ground level with academic staff. I had been a committee member of a Staff Training and Development committee within the institute, focusing on what training was needed from year-to-year. To help change come to fruition, I now felt it was necessary to work at a strategic level within the institute. At this time, I asked to be placed on a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) Sub-Committee to develop a framework for TNA for the entire Institute. The aim of this is to implement a programme to establish levels of performance and need for all staff, and my specific role is to assist with academic support over the next three to five years.

Insert Figure 2 here

After exploring the transcription of the discussion with the academic staff in the institute and discussing the issues with members of my validation group, it was on the latter's suggestion that I attend a seminar at the First Joint SEDA/AISHE Conference (April 2002). This conference was taking place under the theme of supporting and evaluating

change in higher education. There, I had the opportunity to discuss with one of the presenters one of the important issues identified by a lecturer in the focus group: the importance of holding mentoring conversations for new academic teachers. During and after this conversation, I had the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which dialogue with a mentor can be a holistic approach to teaching development that can embrace both the personal and professional needs of new teachers and help them manage the change to an academic career (Spiller, 2002).

I have now started working with appropriate staff in assisting with the establishment of an academic mentoring support system within the institute. This is to enable conversations as a place of safety during a time of transition and change. The dialogue that could take place within this context could be a way to process expectations, preconceptions and the realities of the new job. It could also be used generally as support, challenge and vision, as well as a place of rehearsal for future performance.

In addition, I have taken the responsibility for the design and will be contributing to a team teaching approach on a learning and teaching programme for new academic staff coming to the Institution in September 2003. As established by the action research study, into the current levels of academic support for new staff, it found it to be completely lacking in terms of academic support; there was an induction already in place to initiate staff into the DIT working environment, but that was the extent of support. The newly appointed lecturers received little or no guidance and advice on third level learning and teaching; there has been limited training provision made for new lecturers starting teaching in the Institution. Therefore, the main aim of this short course is to give newly

appointed academic staff an opportunity to develop a practical toolkit of learning, teaching and assessment methods, so as to assist them in effective delivery of teaching and in enhancement of the student learning experience. It is designed to be of immediate practical use to them in their choice of teaching strategy and preparation of learning materials.

The Teaching and Learning menu provided on this course will be broad, and will go into as much depth as required by the participants at that time; clearly follow-up sessions will be implemented as required. There are three broad areas that provide a focus for the course. Firstly, 'aspects of teaching' which will include learning and teaching theories in the context of third level education, writing lesson plans, lecture design and delivery, and making teaching more interactive. Secondly, 'Facilitating Learning' will cover Information Skills, Managing Tutorials, Practicals and Project Groups, Supporting Student Learning beyond Lecturing, and Supporting Learning and Teaching with Technology. Thirdly, a focus on 'Assessment' will cover an introduction to forms and purposes of assessment, assessing group work, writing examination papers, dealing with plagiarism, and managing assessment feedback.

Conclusion

As the study moved to conclusion, I have found that I have learned a number of lessons about working with novice academics. I feel that the kind of honest collaboration detailed in this study - with newly appointed academic staff included in the process - is powerful and democratic. I have begun a transformation of my own practice to collaborate with

academic peers and together to form which direction we wish to move in learning and teaching.

I have also discovered a number of lessons about myself and my professional role. At the outset of this research, I had hoped that undertaking this study would lead to my own personal development, to better professional practice and to improvements in the institution in which I worked. This is the stage that I now find myself. I can now see more clearly - through this action research process of reflection, intervention, action and evaluation - that my values and my practice were at odds. They are now more synchronised and, as a result, I feel that my personal and professional lives are also more harmonised. Consequently, I feel more confidence in my role as educational developer in higher education.

As my practice evolves, I am continuously learning. The knowledge that I have generated is personal and true for this year's context. It is laden with my values and permeated with my personal sense of what is just. By continuing on this road, and including working with existing academic staff in the future, perhaps a new set of challenges will be presented. If so, I can build on the knowledge I have gained from this year. Thus, the transformation of my learning from year to year will generate new personal, professional knowledge. This study is part of an ongoing process that I will continue to explore for as long as I work in academic support.

References

CLARK, G., HEALEY, M., JENKINS, A., WAREHAM, T. and CHALKEY, B. (2002) Developing New Lecturers: The Case of a Discipline-based Workshop, Active Learning in Higher Education, 3(2), pp.128-142.

CONOLE, C. (1999) Why Narrative? Struggling with time and place in life and research, Curriculum Inquiry, 29(1), pp. 7-32.

D'ARCY, P. (1994) On Becoming an Action Researcher – who Qualifies? Action Researcher, No. 1, pp. 1-3.

MEZIROW, J. (1981) A Critical Theory of Adult Learning and Education, Adult Education, 32(1), pp. 3-24.

MURDOCH, I. (1985) The Good Apprentice (London, Chatto and Windus).

MCNIFF, J. (1992) Action Research Principles and Practice (London, Routledge).

MCNIFF, J. (2002) Action Research: Principles and Practice (London, Routledge).

SPILLER, D. (2002) Conversations for Change: Mentoring Conversations for Induction into an Academic Career, First Joint SEDA/AISHE Conference, Supporting and Evaluating Change, 11th-12th April 2002.

WHITEHEAD, J. (1989) How do we Improve Research-based Professionalism in Education? British Educational Research Journal, 15 (1), pp. 3-17.