



2003

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Recommended Citation

Donnelly, R. (2003) Creating Spaces for Voices: The Portfolio as a Framework to Support Enquiry into Third Level Teaching and Learning, *European Educational Research Association Conference. Hamburg, September 17-20, 2003.*

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Creating Spaces for Voices: The Portfolio as a Framework to Support Enquiry into Third Level Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Background

This paper will discuss qualitative research that was conducted in our professional practice in supporting academic staff in third level learning and teaching. Our goal was to understand more fully the process of compiling a teaching portfolio through supporting the academic staff in their development of an authentic voice.

The scholarship of teaching has been of growing interest to the institution from which this Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching Course is delivered. This reflects a worldwide focus. Badley's research on HEFCE (2002) "*what is required is for all teaching to be animated by scholarship and for scholarship in turn to be informed by research.*" Boyer (1990) in the USA has completed significant work on developing a broader conception of scholarship. His work has identified four scholarships: the scholarship of discovery (or basic research), the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application and the scholarship of teaching. This has also found favour in Australia, where Andresen (2000) notes that an "*increasing number of institutions in Australia are today comfortably embracing the Boyerian stance and attempting to implement it in their policies.*"

Objectives

At the beginning of this process, there were a number of objectives. The portfolio was to be a vehicle for documenting and reflecting on the academic staff's teaching and learning to inform or improve their practice. The process they underwent was to chronicle their growth as learners and add to their understanding about their practice. Providing opportunities to form a learning community and collaborate with peers was considered important by all involved. Included in this was the setting up of supportive relationships and encouraging dialogue, so that learning took place from and with peers to create a culture of collaboration, connectedness and commitment to community.

One of the primary roles of academic development is to expand teachers awareness of their learning and teaching situations. Specific principles that underpin this are:

- Teachers need to become aware of the way they conceive of learning and teaching within the subjects they are teaching;
- Teachers need to examine carefully the context in which they are teaching and to become aware of how that context relates to or affects they way they teach;
- Teachers need to be aware of and seek to understand the way their students perceive the learning and teaching situation;
- Teachers need to be continually revising, adjusting and developing their teaching in the light of this developing awareness (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999).

Methods

To reflect the qualitative enquiry of the Portfolio, a Focus Group and a series of structured interviews were held with 28 participants. Throughout, it was aimed to give a measure of validity:

- Are the focus group questions clearly formulated so that the answers will provide data to illuminate the research question(s)?
- 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?

As the core of this study involved working with other people, it was important to concentrate on developing interpersonal skills, listening skills, management skills, and collaborative skills. As a general rule, focus groups are an appropriate research vehicle when the goal of the investigation is to gain an understanding of the “why” behind an attitude or behaviour (Greenbaum, 2000). They are a form of evaluation in which groups of people are assembled to discuss potential changes or shared impressions (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). After reading around this form of data collection, there appeared to be a number of key elements integral to the technique: the authority of the moderator, the ability to use both verbal and nonverbal inputs as part of the learning process, the group dynamics in the room, the concentrated attention of the participants, the ability of the participants to be directly involved in the research process, controls over security and the dynamic nature of the process.

Three action gains were kept 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. As advocated by Morgan and Krueger (1998), the give-and-take of the group discussion produced some very useful insights into what matters most to the participants for support for the portfolio. A number of goals were set for this session:

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

Framework

Studies and research on teaching and learning have been strongly influenced by the constructivist approach to cognition. One of the facets of this approach which held true

for this study is that individuals actively construe their knowledge on the basis of their existing conceptions, which in turn can be modified during the construction process.

Teachers are people who actively construe (and re-construe) new ways of thinking, planning and conducting instructional interventions on the basis of practical knowledge and beliefs elaborated in their professional experience. Therefore, teachers should be considered as professionals and supported in their attempts to reflect critically on their educational practice, as well as encouraged to adopt new and more effective conceptions of teaching and learning.

This perspective does not imply an individualistic approach to teaching. Instead, the process by which a teacher gives a meaning to his/her own professional experience always occurs in a social and cultural context. Thus, it is important to favour communication between these members of the community of practice; by so communicating, they have the possibility to re-construe the language, knowledge and beliefs which emerge in their interactions, and to share the meaning of the most frequently experienced situations and practices. It is also important to create opportunities for conversation between members of different communities, for example science and arts teachers, postgraduate and apprenticeship teachers, teachers from different institutions. These conversations allow the members to analyse and interpret instructional practices in the perspectives of the different communities, and thus to enrich them through reciprocal comparison.

The teacher education programme is also situated in real activities and practical contexts. Through analysis of classroom situations, episodes and experiences in a microteaching group, where the teachers can discuss their own and other participants' educational practices; by collaboratively experimenting with instructional strategies and materials aimed at collecting information on different aspects of classroom activity, and fruitfully interpreting this information from a professional point of view.

Shulman's Table of Learning (Shulman, 2002) provides a very interesting model for the portfolio process: engagement, understanding, practice, judgment and commitment.

Reflection

Cowan (1998) asserts that for reflection to have an impact, the process is continuous; actions should follow discussions and reflections, not solitary reflection but 'reflection-for-action'. Analytical reflection concentrates on particular experiences and also to the generalisations which can be drawn from similar experiences, much of the written reflections in reflective journals start from the analytical reflective position. For reflection to be described as critical as an activity the analysis needs to be complemented by a further stage of evaluation. The evaluative part of the cycle of reflection is often best carried out in collaboration with others (Biggs, 1999) and it is this process which contributes to the development of metacognition. Critical reflection helps the learner to describe experiences, to analyse what they have learnt from those experiences and to offer a process of judgement by which they might frame current or future experiences.

The Portfolio and its Evidence

Menu of possible portfolio entries (Marian)

Assessment Issues (Marian)

Results and Implications

What are the benefits in generating and compiling a portfolio? Arguably the two most significant contributions the Learning and Teaching Centre can make to educational reform are by maintaining high visibility, high credibility, campuswide and inter-institutional conversation focused on forward-looking learning and teaching and by providing quality support for all teachers from beginning instructors to experienced, highly regarded academic staff.

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