



Making sense of a teaching programme for university academics: Exploring the longer-term effects



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Long-term impact of a teaching course for universities is under-researched.
- Sense-making becomes triggered by career responsibilities.
- Emerging outcomes filtered by individual interpretive frames.
- Findings related to research into profession growth of school teachers.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 April 2013

Received in revised form

6 October 2013

Accepted 25 November 2013

Keywords:

Higher education

University teacher education programs

Teacher characteristics

Faculty development

Career development

Professional development

ABSTRACT

To professionalise teaching in universities, certificated teaching programmes for academics are increasingly widespread and often mandatory for new lecturers. Evaluations of impact have escalated in the past decade. Existing studies show mixed results but few consider the differential effects on individuals over the longer term. This study examines narratives of course participants a number of years following completion to understand how lecturers made sense of formal teaching development. Powerful outcomes materialise for some individuals, highly focused by personal reference frames and career experiences. Findings are related to wider studies of teacher growth and individual orientations to teaching professional development.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Evaluating impact of lecturer teaching courses

The need for universities to improve the quality of teaching and invest in teaching education for academic lecturers has been emphasised in recent years, for example following various organisational and government reviews, including the European Union (European Commission, 2011), European Science Foundation (Pleschová et al., 2012) and United Kingdom and Australian Governments (Department for Business, Education & Skills, 2011; Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2011). Strategic initiatives to professionalise tertiary-level teaching are becoming formalised, and include the UK Higher Education Academy's Professional Standards Framework, Australia's Promotion of Excellence in Learning & Teaching in Higher Education

Program, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 in Ireland, and the Centre for Integrated Research, Teaching and Learning network's DELTA programme in the United States. Current plans in the UK are for institutions to make public details of lecturers' teaching qualifications to help prospective students make informed decisions when choosing where to study.

The most common accredited model of teaching development for new lecturers is the part-time year long course, typically the Post-graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (referred to hereafter as the PGC). These are prevalent across northern Europe, in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Netherlands and the Scandinavian states, as well as in the United States, Canada and Australia. In the UK these courses are increasingly mandatory for new staff beginning their academic teaching career.

Despite these developments, teaching in universities continues to be viewed by many academics as an activity that requires no formal training. Cynicism and disgruntlement over the appropriateness and effectiveness of these courses (see Hardy & Smith,

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2006; Knight, 2006; Lipsett, 2005; Quinn, 2012) have been accompanied by an escalation in evaluations of their impacts.

Parsons, Hill, Holland, and Willis (2012) and Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, and Van Petegem (2010) provide thorough reviews of these evaluations, and each highlight the variability in methods used. These include interview studies on perceptions of impact (Norton, Aiyegbayo, Harrington, Elander, & Reddy, 2010; Smith, 2011), mixed survey-interview designs (Butcher & Stoncel, 2012; Hanbury, Prosser, & Rickman, 2008; Knight, 2006; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007), and pre-test/post-test and quasi-experimental measures of impact on staff (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Trigwell, Caballero Rodriguez, & Han, 2012) and student outcomes (Stes, De Maeyer, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2012, 2013).

Findings present a messy picture, with effects of varying magnitude ranging from changes in lecturers' confidence, attitudes, knowledge, conceptions and practices (Butcher & Stoncel, 2012; Knight, 2006; Rust, 2000), to impacts on the institution and on learners' study approaches and learning outcomes (Hanbury et al., 2008). A commonly reported effect for the lecturer is a shift towards student-centred conceptions of learning (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Knight, 2006; Stes et al., 2010). In current syntheses, however, the consensus is that the effects of lecturer development courses are positive but small, with unimpressive results reported from large-scale quantitative studies (Knight, 2006; Stes et al., 2012; Trigwell et al., 2012). As in wider teacher education research, the challenges of measuring impact of professional development activity are well known (Desimone, 2009) and recommendations are for more robust empirical measures, particularly for how impacts extend to improvements in students' learning outcomes or learning approaches (Stes et al., 2012, 2013).

The limited nature of impact has been linked to failures in transferring formal learning back to departmental teaching contexts. Trowler and Cooper (2002) attribute successful transfer to the extent that the teaching values, activities and understandings encountered on a course match those of the individual teacher or the departmental teaching context to which that teacher subsequently returns. Where significant alignment occurs, the perception of course impact is likely to be positive; where misalignment occurs, transfer of formal learning to practice would likely fail. Mathieson (2011) emphasises the importance of local contexts, explaining how academics' approaches to teaching can be prone to being shaped by the perceptions of the departmental cultures into which they are inserted. Multiple studies recognise the importance of informal, situated social learning in shaping thinking and practice (Gale, 2011; Kahn et al., 2008; Mathieson, 2011; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Stes, Clement, & Van Petegem, 2007; Warhurst, 2008).

1.2. Limitations of current research

An important contribution of the work of Trowler and Cooper (2002) is recognition of the individuals' orientation to valuing formal learning. With the goal of most evaluations seeking generalisable impacts, attention to personal diversity and how learning comes to be valued or meaningful at the level of the individual has otherwise been neglected (Hunt, 2007). This is despite academic identity being understood to be highly complex with personal values, virtues and beliefs shown to be powerful even for new academics (Fitzmaurice, 2013; Jones, 2011). In contrast, research in wider teacher education has long recognised the importance of individual beliefs in orientating thinking and behaviour (Kelchtermans, 2009; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Pedder & Opfer, 2013).

A further problem is that the majority of studies of lecturer teaching courses measure effects shortly after course completion

when reflections relate to outcomes in recent memory and opportunities to apply learning are limited. As Knight (2006) explains, demand for immediate success will be high and might explain some muted impressions. What is currently lacking is richer understanding of how formal teaching education for academics becomes located or not as part of their longer-term development. This is significant because numerous researchers have concluded that changes in teaching resulting from instructional development occur slowly (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff et al., 2007) and the benefits for individual lecturers may disclose themselves some time after completion (Hanbury et al., 2008; Knight, 2006; Rust, 2000). The rare studies that do consider a longer-term view recognise evidence for some conceptual and behavioural change several years after completion (Gale, 2011; Stes et al., 2007). Again, this is in contrast to considerable research in the wider field of teacher education where processes of teacher change over time, application of formal learning and complexities of individuals' professional growth are more fully understood (Clarke & Hollingworth, 2002; Fessler, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Maskit, 2011).

This study aims to step away from evaluating impact to gain a richer understanding of how lecturers as individuals make sense of a formal teaching course as part of the longer career journey. The objective is to identify factors that bring this learning into or out of focus in the years following completion. To achieve this, the study will draw on concepts of sense-making established in the wider teacher professional development literature.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Personal sense-making and professional learning journeys

In exploring longer-term sense-making it is necessary to adopt a person-centred approach. Sense-making is an active cognitive and emotional process in which the individual relates and assimilates new information into existing beliefs, verifying, modifying or establishing new linkages towards a new mental frame (Ketelaar, Beijaard, Boshuizen, & Den Brok, 2012; Van Veen & Lasky, 2005; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). At the heart of this is the complex issue of personal belief systems and teacher (or academic) identity. These become constructed from unique personal and socially contextualised positions with identities unfolding and changing over time (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Flint, Zisook, & Fisher, 2011). Personal epistemologies have been shown to determine how teachers come to understand their teaching and professional development, and how this thinking in turn defines practices (Barnes, 1992; Hofer, 2001; Kelchtermans, 2009).

Kelchtermans' (2009) model of the personal interpretive framework elaborates how teacher thinking comprises dimensions of self-understanding and subjective educational theory. He explains how this interpretive framework provides the lens through which teachers make sense of teaching and give meaning to their job, which in turn orientates actions. In his model, the 'self-understanding' dimension incorporates five components. 'Self-image' concerns how teachers see themselves as teachers, based not just on self-perception but the perceptions mirrored back by others. 'Self-esteem' refers to the teachers' assessment of their job performance, which can include a strong emotional dimension. 'Task perception' relates to the teacher's conception of what good teaching is, encompassing their beliefs and values around teaching. 'Job motivation' concerns the drive to become and remain a teacher. Finally 'future perspective' refers to the individual's future vision of their self as a teacher. The second key dimension in Kelchtermans' (2009) framework is the 'subjective educational theory'. This is the teacher's 'know-how', their personal knowledge and beliefs that inform decisions and actions. Kelchtermans' model has developed

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