

Chapter 18

Pedagogical Action Research: Enhancing Learning and Teaching through a Community of Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, the authors consider the dominance of the managerial discourse in higher education today related to staff development in learning and teaching, often perceived as a “top down” policy with which individuals are forced to comply (sometimes their successful completion of probation depends on it). Furthermore, there is an implication of a “deficit” approach to externally imposed staff development in learning and teaching where the assumption is that something in the teacher’s practice needs to be improved (Biggs, 1993). Such an approach does not take account of disciplinary and subject alliances; nor does it intrinsically motivate the individual academic, so it is unlikely to engender any real conceptual change. In light of these issues, the authors put forward a case for establishing strong communities of practice in teaching and learning where professional academics themselves can continue to influence policy and practice within their departments, their institutions,

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and ultimately, across the sector. In so doing, they draw on an example at one UK university of a community of practice in learning and teaching that evolved as a grass roots Pedagogical Action Research (PAR) group in 2001. Pedagogical action research has been proposed as an effective means of encouraging academics to engage with learning and teaching driven by their own need to know (Breslow, Drew, Healey, Matthew, & Norton, 2004; Norton, 2009). The authors conclude by analysing the effect of this initiative on the individual, the institution, and the wider learning and teaching community.

BACKGROUND OF THE HISTORY OF THE TEACHING/ INSTITUTIONAL SCENARIO

Liverpool Hope University is one of the oldest higher education institutions in the North West of England (its earliest founding colleges were established in 1844 and 1856). At the same time, it is one of the newest universities to be granted taught degree awarding powers (in 2005) and research degree awarding powers (in 2009). Liverpool Hope is a liberal arts inspired university and is the only fully ecumenical higher education institution in Europe. It has three faculties of Arts and Humanities, Science and Social Science and Education, and a student body of about 7,500 (undergraduate and postgraduate).

SETTING THE STAGE

The Status of Teaching

In two reports on reward and recognition in higher education by the Higher Education Academy and the Genetics Education Networking for Innovation and Excellence (GENIE) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (2009), there is a substantial literature review to indicate the dominance of research for job security and promotion in universities across the globe. In this context, such a situation means that university staff need to prioritise the demands on their time and decide where they will best place their energies. Staff development related to learning and teaching can sometimes be seen as an ‘extra’ activity rather than something which is at the heart of the academic role of being a university teacher. It is common for new recruits to turn to their subject disciplines and mentors within those disciplines for advice on teaching rather than going to centres for learning and teaching which can be perceived as generic and irrelevant.

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