



## Breaking the Mould: an academic for all seasons

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## **Breaking the Mould: an academic for all seasons**

Much research (Biggs 1999, DfES 2003, Mandelson 2009, Kreber 2010) has focussed on the changing nature of higher education, but it is clear that we are now entering a new era of change, one which embraces the widening participation agenda, but which also demands that we take even greater account of “providing opportunities for different types of people to study in a wider range of ways than in the past” Mandelson (2009, p.9). He also argues that with the introduction of variable fees, as recommended in the forthcoming review of higher education, students’ expectations of higher education have changed and that these expectations from our most important clients should inform and enhance the service that universities provide.

By the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century widening participation was on the agenda within a HE context. Jones (2008) argues that unlike the Further Education (FE) sector which had expanded their numbers with a minimum degree of effort, widening participation for Higher Education (HE) was about increased participation through reaching out to lower socio-economic groups. Hockings *et al.* (2007) concluded from their research as part of a two-year funded project entitled ‘Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and difference’ that ‘University Lecturers today cope with more students, different students, as well as different courses with different purposes’. They go on to say that lecturers need to take a student-centred approach to teaching, curriculum design and assessment otherwise the learning environment will be ineffective or inappropriate, and this shift will doubtless have ramifications for perceptions of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Kreber (2007) succinctly outlines the impact of these changes as:

The change from elite to mass higher education (to universal access) in many countries has direct implications for SoTL. Widening participation agendas, though welcomed by many, bring with it multiple challenges with regards to pedagogy. Higher education ‘for all’ involves changing traditional approaches to teaching and assessment practices so that not only ‘all’ get admitted into our programs but ‘all’ also have a fair chance to succeed.

Kreber (2007, p.1)

What then does this mean for the role of the academic and the perceptions that he or she may have of their sense of professional self? Furthermore, what does this mean for academic developers charged with supporting academics in such a changing climate?

Taking as its background the experiences of the University of Ulster, this paper will consider how traditional views of the academic’s role are shifting and how this may be supported through academic development initiatives to foster an institutional and cultural change with regards to SoTL. It will examine how the University of Ulster restructured its processes to support new and experienced academics from initial professional development to continued professional development. The restructuring has, in turn, changed the ways in which the Programme Team operate and how this is influencing wider SoTL initiatives throughout the institution.

## The University of Ulster context

The University of Ulster, located at four campuses across Northern Ireland, is the largest university of the island of Ireland, having approximately 22,000 students and 3,500 staff of whom 1,300 are academics. The University has had in place a post-graduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PgCHEP) for over 20 years, and participation has been mandatory for new members of staff since 2004.

## Rationale for change

At Ulster, the PgCHEP was scheduled for revalidation in November 2009, which presented an opportunity to rethink the curriculum design and delivery and to place the PgCHEP within a wider structured process aimed at enhancing teaching and learning, and fostering a culture of engagement with scholarship. Whilst the internal revalidation processes provided the timescale for re-evaluation of the then programme, a number of drivers also served as an impetus for change.

A key internal driver was the implementation of the university's Teaching and Learning Strategy 2008/09 – 2012/13 (University of Ulster 2008a), the strategic aims of which are:

1. to enhance the quality of the student learning experience;
2. to target, recruit, support and retain a diverse range of students;
3. to promote and foster creativity in curriculum design and delivery;
4. to promote learning, professionalism and employability through the integration of academic theory and relevant professional and vocational practice.

Furthermore, in 2008, the University established a Centre for Higher Education Practice, designed to be the “facilitating and enabling arm” (University of Ulster 2008b) of the aforementioned strategy. Situated alongside the Staff Development Unit, the Centre aims to promote scholarship of teaching and learning by providing opportunities for engagement at a practitioner level, bringing together academics across the disciplines to engage in discussion and conversation about scholarship.

The Centre organises a monthly programme of open seminars and discussion *fora* on all four campuses, led by internal practitioners and/or external experts which seek to engage staff in different aspects of SoTL, the focus of which may be influenced not only by institutional priorities but by internal and external initiatives. The Centre also encompasses a number of sub-committees charged with promoting specific initiatives, such as creativity in the curriculum, pedagogic research, and peer-learning for students. Bursaries are also available to support teaching and learning projects, and dissemination of internal research and practice is encouraged through annual showcase events and through publication in its journal, *Perspectives on Pedagogy in Practice*. It can clearly be seen therefore that the university has a strong focus on teaching and learning, and seeks to encourage participation and engagement with SoTL through a number of institutional initiatives. Nevertheless, whilst laudable, a concentration on purely centrally instigated initiatives may engender a number of inherent dangers.

Where academic development is seen as being driven as a top-down management policy, there is a danger that “teaching becomes commodified” (Harvey & Knight 1996, p.163): the attendant measurement of compliance may stifle creativity and the

wider engagement with scholarship stagnates under the need for performance accountability. In order for engagement with scholarship of teaching and learning to flourish, a culture of social exchange is needed (Light & Cox 2001; Roxå *et al.* 2008; Mårtensson & Roxå 2009; Roxå & Mårtensson 2009; Roxå *et al.* 2010), but research indicates that for such “significant conversations” (Roxå & Mårtensson 2009) to occur in a meaningful way, the network of trusted interlocutors is very small and such conversations tend to take place away from an open arena. If this is true for academics who are already experienced, then this is even more the case for new academics struggling to come to terms with the practice of scholarship and the “new language” they are required to speak (MacKenzie *et al.* 2010). In addition, the notion of critical reflection may be alien to some and particularly challenging to those unaccustomed to examining their own practice in the light of a wider body of teaching and learning scholarship (Brew 2006, p.111). Centrally created initiatives therefore, whilst valuable in themselves, may sometimes inhibit the very dialogue and engagement they seek to nurture, particularly for the inexperienced. Indeed, the notion of “academic tribes and territories” (Becher & Trowler 2001) may be further reinforced by such central initiatives, creating an inner, elite, circle within the territory of academic scholarship.

It would seem therefore that a postgraduate certificate for new academics would serve to introduce the language and practice of scholarship of teaching and learning, and thereby provide access to wider experience both within and beyond the institution: a mechanism for widening the sphere of dialogue and encouraging the social activity engendered by scholarly practice. As previously mentioned, the University of Ulster has over 20 years experience of delivering such a programme to its newly-appointed academic staff, but it is fair to say that in many cases the qualification was simply a view to an end, and once successfully completed there was no expectation that continued engagement would ensue. Of course, this is not universally the case, but anecdotal evidence would indicate that the qualification was viewed by many as a necessary evil, a mechanistic exercise which, once completed, was rarely revisited.

### Types of initial teacher development

It apposite at this juncture therefore to consider the nature of postgraduate courses in order to understand why they were considered, in the main, as a fixed term intervention. As observed by Gibbs & Coffey (2004, p.88) “Initial training of university teachers is now established in every university in the UK”, having moved from small scale *ad hoc* development to more cohesive programmes of longer duration. However it is interesting to note that in their 2004 study, it is the impact of *training* on university teacher behaviour and student learning which is evaluated, and concentrates on three distinct goals: “the improvement of teachers’ skills”, “the development of teachers’ conceptions of teaching and learning” and “consequent changes in students’ learning” (Gibbs & Coffey 2004, p.88). Whilst this study is impressive in the range of its data and reinforces the role of the training programme as an “alternative culture” (Gibbs & Coffey 2004, p.98) offering a safe environment for dialogue about teaching, it is interesting to note that initial teacher development is referred to throughout as “training”, a term which implies a passive, finite experience by participants. Such a mechanistic training approach, reinforced by the acquisition of practical skills (Brown & Atkins 1978, Race 2001, Brown & Race 2004, Brown *et al.*

2004, Race & Pickford 2007) serves to underline initial teacher development at the transmissive, teacher-focused end of Trigwell & Prosser's scale (2004, p.413), which, although resulting in an improvement in student learning, does not yet embrace a student-focused approach which takes "teaching away from a direct focus on what happens in the classroom" to one which seeks to "actively engage students in the learning process" (Brew 2006, p.99). The movement towards a student-centred focus implies a stepping back from instrumental, formulaic classroom strategies and takes concrete steps towards a more facilitative approach where the curriculum aims to transform and reshape students' conceptions (Harvey & Knight 1996, Elton 2000, Light & Cox 200, Trigwell & Prosser 2004, Brew 2006,). To this end reflective practitioners need to engage with SoTL since it this wider understanding of, and discourse around pedagogic practice which prompts them "to re-evaluate the discipline of education in order to value it" (Brew 2006, p.105-106).

Over the years the University of Ulster's postgraduate certificate programme can clearly be seen to have mirrored this early insistence on the classroom management aspects of teaching and learning in higher education, where modules sought to provide participants with practical "tips and tricks" on a variety of teaching scenarios. Indeed the changes to the title of the programme is testament to this underlying ethos: over the years the programme has been called variously the postgraduate certificate in Teaching in Higher Education, University Teaching, Higher Education Teaching, before encompassing a more inclusive practice in 2005. Whilst wider reading on other aspects of pedagogy was encouraged, this initial engagement with the scholarship was limited to "instrumental" rather than "communicative" and "emancipatory" levels of reflection thereon (Kreber & Cranton 2000), thus reinforcing the finite nature of the programme.

### The academic sense of self

The role of the academic traditionally implies that of a discipline expert, having the dual emphasis of teaching and research albeit skewed towards the latter, operating within an autonomous institution, and whose immediate context of operation is the departmental and/or discipline community (Becher & Trowler 2001). Given the hitherto imbalance in the teaching-research nexus, the former was considered to be (and in some cases remains so) "a function performed by experts in their fields of research who seemed *de facto* qualified to pass on their knowledge to future generations" (Fanghanel 2007, p.4), without the benefit of any professional development and engagement in the theory or practicalities of pedagogic practice. However, given the changing face of the HE environment, it is clear that the current role of an academic "is characterised by increasingly complex relationships between teaching, research and administration" (Kreber 2010, p.173), and that the traditional sense of self needs to be re-evaluated. Indeed, from a teaching perspective, academics are now faced with an increasing emphasis on the 'student experience' and the quality of teaching, a diverse student background, increased accountability to external stakeholders and the mastery of new teaching modes and technologies.

For many academics the new order, and the inherent requirement to engage with SoTL will therefore require a re-evaluation of their role and practice (Brew 2006), and for many this "opens up new ways of thinking...which can challenge some peoples' notions of a verifiable, correspondence view of truth." (Brew 2006, p.114). In

addition, Brew suggests that these new ways of thinking, to encompass engagement with SoTL, require the academic to move from a practical consideration of their practice, which focuses on classroom technique, to a more considered and reflective mode in which teaching and learning is transformed. It also implies that academics need to be able to own their own interpretation of SoTL, a concept which may often be difficult to grasp and even more difficult to articulate (MacKenzie *et al* 2010), and which then needs to encompass a sense of self or identity that is unique and yet “linked, and committed, to *something significant* that lies beyond *my self*.” (Kreber 2010, p.172).

This shift towards self-reflection and identification of an emerging sense of self has obvious implications for the ways in which academics shape their own role and practice, but equally for the ways in which academic developers conceptualise programmes aimed at professional pedagogic development, since both social and occupational contexts (Becher & Trowler 2001) need to be tempered within a process of social and community learning (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger *et al* 2002). Engagement with SoTL under the aegis of academic development implies, therefore, the creation of a new community of learning, which goes beyond discipline boundaries and which fosters new conversations, new dynamics and a sense of empowerment (MacKenzie *et al* 2010). At the University of Ulster we found a useful framework to be that put forward by Trigwell *et al* (2000) which offers a multi-dimensional model on which engagement with SoTL may be identified.

[table 1 here]

The dimensions posited served not only as a useful benchmark for the development of the new postgraduate certificate in Higher Education Practice (PgCHEP), but also as a tool whereby the Programme Team could situate their own practice in terms of academic development.

#### Application of the model

Using the multi-dimensional model of scholarship of teaching (see table 1) we can map how the modules of the PgCHEP support and inculcate practitioners (who are likely to be at the top of the table (teacher-focused)) to develop into practitioners at the bottom of the table (student-focused). The PgCHEP comprises three modules; **Student-centred Learning**, **Supporting Research Practice** and **Enhancing Learning**. There is an alternative module to supporting research practice which is **Enhancing Professional Practice**; this is available for staff that do not have research as part of their contract.

[table 2 here]

The Programme Specification for the PgCHEP (University of Ulster, 2009) describes the modules thus:

#### ***Student-centred learning***

*The module provides an opportunity for staff who facilitate learning in the University to develop their understanding of, and practice in, effective learning, teaching, and assessment and/or feedback, through building up an in-depth knowledge of the needs of the cohorts of students they will encounter within the University. The*

*module provides a conceptual underpinning for individuals whose duties and responsibilities involve supporting and guiding the development and/ or delivery of learning opportunities for an increasingly diverse body of learners. It enables participants to enhance, apply and evaluate appropriate skills in the context of Higher Education. It provides opportunities for participants to reflect critically on their own experience, both as a learner and practitioner, and to identify aspects of their own practice that could be developed and/or improved.*

### **Supporting Research Practice**

*This module has been designed to support participants' understanding and development of research practices necessary to engage fully with their research remit in a Higher Education context. It recognises that academics are both teachers and researchers. The latter role involves developing original knowledge and disseminating it to a range of audiences including fellow academics, the general public, policy makers, and industry. The aim of this module is to provide professional training in acquiring research funding as, in general, this crucial skill is not developed through postgraduate research, and academics are facing increased pressure to write successful proposals.*

### **Enhancing Professional Practice**

*Building on Student-centred Learning, this module has been developed to provide an opportunity for participants to explore and critique the established and evolving scholarly and professional evidence base in Higher Education practice relevant to their area of work, and use this to inform and shape their evolving practice.*

### **Enhancing Learning**

*The final module builds on ideas and approaches developed in preceding modules, taking a synoptic approach to exploring how the various strands of participants' professional practice can coalesce to enhance the student experience. It recognises that the role of those involved in teaching and learning support has changed, and continues to evolve in response to institutional and/or external drivers, including emerging technologies, student profiles, and the need for a more creative outlook within a discipline-specific and cross-disciplinary context. It also provides participants with the opportunity to further engage with internal and external communities of practice to broaden their sphere of SoTL and hence inform leadership initiatives and the decision-making process.*

The programme team in designing the curriculum thus, wanted to enable new academics to make a seamless move from fulfilling their Initial Professional Development (IPD) obligations to Continued Professional Development (CPD) to avoid the programme being seen as a means to an end. The modules developed are intended to facilitate engagement in multiple cross-disciplinary communities of

practice which extend beyond the PgCHEP and actively promote engagement with the Centre for Higher Education Practice. [table 3 here]

Modules encourage participants to consider their practice from the students' perspective and to reflect on what this means for their future practice. Evidence of this can be seen in how the assessment for modules is structured. For example, in Student-centred Learning, participants are asked to write a report entitled 'My students'. This requires them to find out about the type of students they have on their programme, their pre-entry experiences and other factors that might impact on their learning. They also have to seek answers to questions such as, '*what do I have to change or enhance about my teaching*' as a result. Later in this module participants are asked to redesign the assessment of a particular module based on their growing awareness of the current literature on assessment, their knowledge of their students and their engagement with communities of practice. In 'Enhancing Learning' which runs over one academic year, participants are asked to attend a Centre for Higher Education lunchtime seminar and reflect on this in relation to their own practice hence encouraging engagement with new communities of practice. Participants are also encouraged at this stage to engage with the literature from their own discipline area. They also have the opportunity to engage in a cross disciplinary group to explore funding opportunities for a teaching and learning initiative and individually to carry out and reflect on an enhancement activity with their students. All of the modules require the participants to reflect on their evolving practice in relation to SoTL and to determine their own CPD in relation to how they might position themselves differently within the framework (see table 1).

#### Implications for the Programme Team

The aim of the new PgCHEP to embody a sense of community and initial and ongoing engagement with SoTL on behalf of the prospective participants in turn meant that the Programme Team had to embrace new ways of working in order to mirror the aspirations of the programme itself. Taking again as a point of reference the model provided by Trigwell *et al* (2000), individual engagement with SoTL could be situated at various points on the scale outlined in table 1 at the outset of programme planning, and the level and scope of engagement was largely dependent on the pedagogic focus of the module for which each team member was responsible. In the planning process of previous incarnations of the programme, individual module coordinators were largely autonomous in the scoping and development of their own modules. This, coupled with a residual focus on the instrumental nature of teaching practice, meant that the scholarly conversations within the Programme Team as a discrete community or network had hitherto taken place in only a fragmentary way with limited holistic impact. The desire to embed the new programme within the wider context of CPD, meant that the Programme Team had to adopt a more joined-up approach to programme design, in order to ensure that all elements were integrated within *and* across the programme and sought to position the PgCHEP, although finite in duration, as an initial stepping stone for engagement with SoTL beyond the programme itself.

The student-centred focus of the newly created modules with their emphasis on informed scholarly practice and a holistic approach encouraged the Programme Team to reflect not only on personal and individual practice but also on that of the team as a whole. A series of planning meetings, conducted off campus in a spirit of



honesty and collegiality, gave rise to candid dialogue about the programme, and allowed for the expression of “common concerns” within a “community” which in turn enabled “empowerment” both of the individual and the team (MacKenzie *et al* 2010). The move from the pursuit of an individual goal (module) to that of a common objective (programme) allowed the Programme Team to scrutinise the content and aims of each module with a degree of impartiality, and facilitated the decision-making process on a stop, start, continue (elements to be discontinued, initiated or maintained) basis. The safe environment recommended for such community dialogue (Roxå & Mårtensson 2009, MacKenzie *et al* 2010) fostered a sense of community self which was then able to devise an “intertwined” programme where clear linkage between and across module element could be seen, and where programme delivery could also occur as a community effort through team teaching and co-facilitation. The new programme having been launched for only a few weeks now, it is too early to gauge the nascent sense of community experienced by the participants, but it is clear that the Programme Team are operating within very different parameters than were previously the case. An additional sense of self has also been engendered through this development process: by being able to position the individual sense of self within a small community setting, this latter has been able to acquire a collective identity within the wider operational context of the institution and its other SoTL initiatives. The Programme Team is, as a result, better able to engage with and promote the furtherance of SoTL as part of the CPD agenda – academic development as an agent of change.

### Conclusion

Although prompted by institutional procedures the re-evaluation of the PgCHEP has allowed the Programme Team to consider the nature and role of SoTL within the university at a variety of levels. On the one hand it has made explicit the institutional initiatives and drivers surrounding teaching and learning, on the other it has encouraged consideration of the nature of academic identity in today’s higher education context. The experience of the Programme Team in this instance has provided evidence of how academic development programmes, informed by SoTL, can serve as a vehicle to promote and embed SoTL throughout an institution. In addition the adoption of a SoTL stance to the process of programme development has had a profound effect on the sense of collective identity for the Programme Team, and has reawakened their enthusiasm and capacity to act in ways commensurate with a scholarly and community of practice outlook.

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