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Ways of working in uncertain times: a Teaching and Learning Framework development within a large-scale transformation programme on digital innovation in Higher Education

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Abstract:

Within debates about teaching and learning in Higher Education, increasing attention has been placed on transformation programmes that aim to promote 'innovation' within universities, often positioned as 'digital innovation'. These programmes, typically framed as a matter of 'strategic importance', tend to shift resource from 'business as usual' activity and arguably create challenging situations. These challenges pose problems for staff who need to adapt their practice as well as for the 'change agents' who are brought together in teams to lead on and operationalize change. This paper examines a 'change team's' engagement in the development of a new Teaching and Learning Framework for a HE Institution (HEI). The study examines this development of the Framework as a temporal process involving 'object construction'. The study followed a group of 'change agents' (n=13) over a period of four months using an ethnographic approach. Data from team meetings (n=8) and individual interviews (n=13) were analyzed to trace how the Framework was developed through a number of 'object realisations' as stepping points on the development journey. The analysis helps to situate our understandings of the impact of transformation programmes on professional practice and the tensions within processes of knowledge-making within interdisciplinary teams.

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global education market, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are exploring ways to improve educational provision in a financially sustainable way. These processes often are positioned as 'strategic change' or 'transformation' programmes, led by change teams that are mandated to lead organisational change. Understanding the context in which this work is performed, namely examining work practices and exploring challenges as well as opportunities these developments may bring, is important for future work practices in interdisciplinary teams. Furthermore, understanding how team members navigate the 'changing' organisational landscape, with multiple drivers and motivations, and how they make use of the resources provided or created as part of this process may offer insights into adapting and constructing knowledge and tools to support team work practices.

Context: Transformation programme in a Higher Education Institution

The paper draws on a study examining a large-scale transformation programme in a UK HEI. Departing from ethnographic and activity theory perspectives, the study places attention on a group of fourteen individuals who were brought together from various units across the institution and were tasked with leading a prominent strand of work: the development and implementation of a new Teaching and Learning Framework for the university.

We argue that this transformation programme provides an interesting context to examine such processes, because it represents an increasingly common scenario for HEIs in countries such as the UK, US and Australia, namely to task staff from within the organization with responsibility for change. At the same time, the work of this team was situated in a complex landscape of an organisation that was set to change, on-going business (locally, nationally and internationally), a financial deficit, powerful stakeholder groups (i.e. students, academics, non-academic staff), as well as expectations and expressed concerns from all these various stakeholders that at times were seen as generating conflicting discourses.

The change team was brought together in Summer 2017 and worked together over a period of 9 months. The team facilitated workshops and activities adapted to the emerging strategic directions, facilitated engagement across the institution and considered the implications the changes would have for the organisation itself and for their fellow workers. Most of this activity was centred on - and materialized through - the development of the Framework; an object that evolved throughout the lifetime of the team's engagement.

With these considerations in mind, and in line with the workshop's objectives, the paper presents an empirical case on the development and examination of interdisciplinary research. What challenges did the team members encounter when leading a large-scale organisational transformation programme? What tools did they use or what resources did they construct to tackle the various challenges they are faced with in this context? What were the implications of the team's interim activities in further work the team would develop? And

finally, how do we as researchers examine the practices of an interdisciplinary team? These are some of the questions the study was set to address.

Method

To investigate these issues, a researcher followed the team over time and engaged with the team's activities as a whole. The researcher participated in the change team's weekly 'action meetings' (either 30' or 60' in duration) as well as other more regular meetings/activities that supported the strategic objectives of the workstream. Data were gathered through participant observation in weekly meetings (n=8) over a period of four months (August and December 2017). Interviews (45 to 60 minutes) with individual members of the change team (n=13) were carried out. Each interview was guided by a semi-structured instrument previously used in studies of self-regulated, professional learning (Littlejohn et al, 2016). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed by drawing on the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Engeström 1987) to traces tensions as individual team members develop and adopt new work practices.

Considerations for developing and investigating interdisciplinary learning through objects-in-the-making

The Teaching & Learning framework was constructed through planned (and unplanned) activities that took place over time. The research highlights the essential material dimension of the Framework development, in the sense that it required on-going construction, review, consultation, adaptation, and redesign of elements of the framework (and eventually its dismissal). Practices of authoring and curating are highlighted alongside tensions related to 'ownership', i.e. who owned the Framework in this process but also 'purpose of the Framework'. For example, in early phases in this process the team needed to discuss, define and communicate the principles of the framework. This led the team to collaborate on the development of concrete materials to externalise their thoughts, approaches and discussions by setting abstract ideas on paper in the form of text and temporary diagrams. Intentions by the authors to keep these temporary materials confidential over a specific period were not possible, leading to a critical moment in the process when the change team had make specific version of the Framework public and enact a wider engagement in the organization through workshops and committee meetings on this topic. This unanticipated development meant that the change team had to navigate tensions of ownership vs making progress with the development, as staff 'on the ground' wanted to input based on their knowledge of the students. In practical terms, the team developed various 'Framework realisations' that were made tangible and accessible both at micro-level and macro-level, but increasingly the 'realisations' became the origin of mis-trust towards the change team and drew a visible division between the team and 'others' in the organisation.

The framework was an evolving knowledge object that its temporal constructions were influenced by expressed concerns and interests by various stakeholders and was essentially shaped by material and social configurations of the context. We call this a 'framework-in-the-making' to draw on previous work with teachers and curriculum development (e.g. Tronsmo & Nerland, 2018). The framework as an object-in-the-making revealed and shaped dynamics, work practices and interrelations between core team members but also had implications and influenced relationships with external stakeholders and greatly shaped other activity that was taking place at the university as part of the wider transformation programme. Similar to Baker-Doyle and Gustavson (2016), our study points to "the complexity and different concerns that are embedded in what they call the "small moments" of micro-level interactions during collaborative [framework] design".

In the workshop we will provide empirical examples from this work to illustrate our analytical approaches that were particularly challenged by a real and dynamically evolving environment and work that was taking place in complex networks of human and non-human actors. We draw on socio-material sensibility in that the material and the social are viewed as mutually implicated in bringing forth everyday action and knowledge. This offers a different configuration for rethinking a change programme and work in interdisciplinary teams by shifting the emphasis to important contributions to practice of material substances, settings, and devices (see e.g. Fenwick, Edwards, and Sawchuk 2011).

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