New trends in academic staff development : reflective journals, teaching portfolios, accreditation and professional development.

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Introduction

A renewed professionalism has taken seed in higher education in Ireland and elsewhere, with a long overdue acceptance of the need to provide teaching staff with frameworks for professional development in the area of teaching practice. The *professional scholar*, *but amateur teacher* model of the past is increasingly untenable in an era of widening diversity, greater public accountability and technological and institutional transformation. In this chapter, we will explore a range of relatively recent developments (in Irish terms) in the field of academic staff development, surveying the current landscape and reflecting on evolving international trends. We will explore the concept of the *reflective practitioner*, which is increasingly emerging as the dominant paradigm in many professional development programmes in higher education, through discussion of reflective writing and *teaching portofolios*. In addition, the new trend towards the provision of accredited, post-graduate level qualifications will be discussed through comparison between the UK and Ireland.

Teaching Portfolios

Boyer's concept of the "scholarships of higher education" (Boyer 1990), which sought a new approach to the traditional research *vs* teaching debate, has been strongly influential in the US and has made gradual progress elsewhere. Coupled with Schön's work on reflective practice (Schön 1983; 1987), it has helped fuel the acceptance of *teaching portfolios* as a means of documenting teaching practice and encouraging critical self-reflection. As Shulman states:

> My argument is that until we find ways of publicly displaying, examining, archiving, and referencing teaching as a form of scholarship and investigation, our pedagogical knowledge and know-how will never serve us as scholars in the ways our research does. The archival functions of research scaffold our frailties of memory, and we need something comparable for the scholarship of teaching

> (Shulman (1998) as quoted in Lyons et al. (2002))

Teaching portfolios have thus emerged as the dominant form of such "archiving" and are now very well established, with over 2,000 colleges and universities in the US currently supporting or developing teaching portfolio schemes, as discussed in Seldin (2004) review - which also provides large numbers of example portfolios from across a range of disciplines and institutions.

The use of Teaching Portfolios in Irish universities was pioneered at UCC (University College, Cork), driven at Vice-Presidential level and nurtured by links with US expertise, primarily by supporting a distinguished visiting scholar. In this particular model, teaching portfolios have been explicitly linked with the promotion of the "scholarship of teaching." A pilot portfolio scheme was structured around a seminar series, with participation by staff from a range of academic disciplines (Lyons et al. 2002). The emphasis, as can clearly be seen in this publication, has been strongly placed on the development of a statement of personal, individual teaching philosophy (e.g. McCarthy 2002). In many ways, it is this aspect of portfolio writing that poses the greatest challenge, highlighting the lack of tradition and familiarity both with reflective writing itself and in discussion of teaching-related issues from an academic perspective. The UCC model is commendable in establishing a local community of practice and a network for peer-support amongst at least the first cohort of portfolio writers. Now that portfolios are becoming required "artefacts" in evidence of teaching excellence for promotion applications, however, this model may face some challenges. One would suspect, that a new cohort of participants with this more explicit, more instrumental focus, may prove less tolerant of wide ranging, open discussion on philosophical matters and keener to relate to a more standardised portfolio format.

Indeed, if one compares the examples presented in Lyons *et al.*, with those included in Seldin's recent volume (and many other examples, which are increasingly available on the internet) a distinction becomes apparent between two groupings of portfolio types. The first is those which, as in the UCC experience, have emerged from a mutual, collaborative exploration of fundamental issues and principles in teaching and learning (e.g. McCarthy 2002). Such writing documents a process of conceptual change or a transformation of perspective. The second grouping, is rather more "pragmatic" in style and provides some minimal level of critical reflection, including a rather brief statement of teaching philosophy (e.g. Mues and Sorcinelli 2000). It is this second type, however, that appears dominant, driven, no doubt, by its primary use as evidence in support of a case for promotion (or tenure), but also by its relative ease of construction (3–7 Mues and Sorcinelli 2000).

Indeed, the acceptance of portfolios by university administration as a legitimate (and in some cases, compulsory) means of evidencing "excellence" in teaching, has arguably been the primary factor in boosting portfolio uptake (e.g. Hyland 2002). Within Ireland, this approach has also taken hold, and while to be welcomed by the advocates of "the scholarship of teaching", there should be no delusions about the instrumentalist rationale and the consequent limitations of such documents. The issue now, for academic staff developers, becomes one of taking existing portfolios, produced for promotion applications, and turning these into *living documents* that play a key role in informing and transforming day-to-day teaching practice.

It is not sufficient in such a context to simply require the inclusion of "evidence of reflection". The question of review, comparison and ultimately, of grading portfolios is of key importance. Promotions panels, awards committees and other potential recipients of portfolio submissions need to be adequately trained and experienced in recognising what makes an effective portfolio. If evidence of reflective practice is sought, then clear examples and explanations require to be offered in such training and this can prove difficult. But these are the same problems faced by academic staff that seek to encourage their students to be more reflective and demonstrate critical thinking. How is it possible to measure reflection? What are the hallmarks of reflective writing and how can one measure the "depth" of any discussion or critique?

Reflective Writing in Journals and Portfolios

A number of approaches to examining reflective writing are discussed in detail in Moon's work (1999; 2000). One such approach, which we have used in a major study on the continuing professional development of high school teachers (Susilowati et al. 2004; Mac Labhrainn et al. 2004) is to build on van Mannen's (1995) "levels of reflection." A simple scheme identifying 4 or 5 apparent levels of reflective analysis, or depth of critique, has been shown to have strong inter-grader relia-

bility and to provide a close relationship with levels of performance, particularly at postgraduate level. These levels and their characteristics are described in table 1.

Tab. 1: A coding scheme for reflective journals based on van Mannen's levels of reflection.

Level	Description	Indicators
0	Non reflective.	The entry in the learning journal/reflective portfolio is either irrelevant to the question or no entry is written for the question.
1	Everyday thinking and acting	The entry states common sense thinking and acting which was derived from habitual or routine action. It is intuitive and pre-reflective. No further reasoning or explanation is given to the entry.
2	Reflection on incidental and a limited way on practical experiences in everyday life.	Further reasoning or explanation is given to the entry. The reasoning or explanation given shows limited insight related to practical principles, "dos and don'ts" or rules of thumb.
3	More systematic reflection on own experience and that of others.	The reasoning or explanation given is more structured, based on existing theories or others' accepted perspectives and experiences. The entry shows indication of theoretical understanding or critical insight into the matter.
4	Reflect on the way we reflect on the form of our theorising.	The entry demonstrates a more self-reflective grasp of the nature of the knowledge, how knowledge functions in action and how it can be applied to the active understanding of the practical action. It could also show the transformation of the writer's thinking or belief.

Sources: Van Mannen (1995); Susilowati et al. (2004)

Indeed, in this and related work, the concept of a reflective learning journal structured around guiding questions and peer discussion, has proven highly effective. This reflective journal can be used as a means of developing an individual narrative through the content of a professional level course and tackling directly higher order intended learning outcomes. In essence, such journals form a mediated dialogue between writer and tutor/mentor.

Laurillard (2002) has argued that such a dialogue or "conversational framework" is a characteristic hallmark of academic learning. Although much of her writing has focussed on the potential roles of technology in contemporary higher education, this seminal volume takes a far wider brief and explores a number of possible theoretical groundings for higher education studies, raising interesting questions about the extent to which critical thinking and active learner engagement is taking place in mainstream higher education degree programmes, not just those supported by technology. The theoretical and ideological context in which portfolio assessment is situated is also something which has received only fairly limited attention to date. Moon (2000), of course, provides an excellent overview and a critique of many of the standpoints regarding the act of reflection itself. Johnston (2003), highlights the issue of developing approaches to assessment and

measuring outcomes and how these relate to a number of possible different theoretical/cultural positions.

One of the difficulties of simple self-reflection, is the danger that it becomes too introspective, unchallenged, ego-centric and self-limiting (Bleakley 2000; Land 2003; Moon 2000). In the case of the teaching philosophy statements found in all teaching portfolios, for example, there is the distinct possibility that such statements are essentially constructed as *post-hoc* justifications for the teaching methods used, which were most probably adopted through custom and tradition, rather than through a process of critical investigation or through a desire for "constructive alignment" (Biggs 2003). The role of a mentor, tutor or "critical friend" able to challenge statements and question assumptions therefore becomes central to any attempt to shift from the instrumental approach to a scholarship orientation.

Professional Qualifications in Teaching & Learning

Whilst Teaching Portfolios have served as the principal means of promoting the idea of the scholarship of teaching and laying the foundations for a more formalised basis for the continuing professional development of academic staff (or "faculty") in US universities, the situation elsewhere is somewhat different. In the UK, for example, the major focus of attention has been on the development and delivery of postgraduate level qualifications in teaching and learning. It is now compulsory in most UK institutions for new academic staff to complete at least a postgraduate certificate in this field. Opportunities also exist in many cases to pursue such studies to postgraduate diploma or masters' levels. However, certificate level programmes are the most "popular."

The timescale over which such programmes have moved from piloting to compulsory, probationary requirements has been remarkably short, driven strongly by government focus on quality issues in higher education, and triggered by the report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE 1997). This rapid development has not been without criticism and dispute, but should not be portrayed as simply a struggle between the forces of change and traditional vested interests. There have been serious, legitimate concerns about the nature of higher education and the appropriateness of the proposed frameworks. Indeed, the theoretical underpinnings of many such programmes have also been challenged. For example, Schön's reflective practice (Schön 1983) approach is particularly popular, but in truth, whilst there are many examples of small scale studies in specific academic subject areas, there are as of yet no major, robust studies indicating that reflective practitioners actually make "better teachers." Of course, how one interprets or measures good teaching is itself problematic. But, combined with internal contradictions in some of Schön's writings (see Moon 2000:46–53, for a detailed discussion) about specific aspects of the processes of reflection, the issue is worth further research.

Gibbs and Coffey (2004) have investigated the effectiveness of formal training programmes for university teachers in twenty-two institutions (in eight countries). This study is of particular value because it examined the impact of the training on the approaches to learning adopted by students in the classes of the participating teachers. They concluded that there was indeed some evidence that students were less likely to adopt surface learning approaches as a result of staff undertaking year long training programmes.

Haggis (2003) has drawn attention to the almost unchallenged assumptions upon which much of the 'standard texts' in this field are based, in particular the dominant "deep/surface" learning model. Through probing interviews with students she reveals some of the limitations and dangers of interpreting such research in over-simplistic terms and raises a number of interesting questions.

The current picture in the UK, then, is one where there are large numbers of postgraduate certificate programmes for academic staff (almost as many as there are institutions). Most, if not all, however, have been accredited by the *Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education* (ILTHE), now the *Higher Education Academy*. This accreditation process (Brown 2000), whilst conferring official recognition and approval, does not require the adoption of a standard, national curriculum, but rather, requires programmes to explore commonly identified key areas. There is,

consequently, a wide range of programmes available, from formal classroom based taught modules with a range of assessment instruments, to more flexible portfolio-oriented programmes.

However, the history of the ILTHE's growth and development has revealed tensions within the community, its relationship with other long standing organisations, such as SEDA (Staff and Educational Developer's Association) and the university unions (most notably, the AUT), its accelerated membership programme (based on a very abbreviated "portfolio of evidence") and the extent to which it has been accepted (or not) by management and academic communities in old and new universities have all helped generate a (healthy) debate over the past several years. Now in a merger with other, hitherto autonomous, organisations and projects (e.g. the LTSN – *Learning & Teaching Support Network*) it has been recast as the HEA (resulting in an interesting acronym conflict with Ireland's Higher Education Authority!) which has been viewed with suspicion by some as being far more an instrument of government control. Although this point is contested by virtue of its retention of "mass" membership and elements of democratic/representative governance, there is no doubt that it is an instrument through which government higher education priorities can be pursued. Interestingly, particularly given the devolution settlement of recent years, the new Academy is closely allied with the *Higher Education Funding Council for England* and there seems at least an incomplete appreciation, amongst some members at any rate, that higher education policy is now devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

The Irish Context

For Ireland, as a near (and conjoined) neighbour, these developments are important, given attempts to strengthen links between institutions in the North and the Republic (for example through AISHE – the *All Ireland Society for Higher Education*, and *Universities Ireland*). The ILTHE, as was, attempted to open its membership to academic staff in the Republic, with some limited success, but was still viewed very much as UK – centric. Accreditation of courses offered by universities in the Republic, however, has not been pursued since there is a view that, not only is there not a requirement for such accreditation nor any perception of conferred advantage, but that there is value in maintaining a distinctively Irish quality to the programmes on offer.

Outwith the UK, such programmes are not as developed or firmly embedded in preparation for higher education teaching careers (especially at university level in those countries where the "binary divide" has been maintained), although a number of European countries have long established schemes more akin to "apprenticeship", but also which include, increasingly, formalised certificated courses. There are significant cultural variations across Europe, but these issues are being explored through a variety of projects and organisations (for example the EUA). Given moves towards greater European harmonisation through, for example, the Bologna process (see, for example, Reichert and Tauch 2003), it is likely that the issue of staff training and development will become increasingly prominent in the next few years.

In Ireland, such courses are (at the time of writing) available to academic staff in DIT, UCC, NUI Galway and UCD, with indications that others are ready either to develop their own or to share those of partner institutions. Issues currently being debated are similar to those in the UK, and also focus on the value of Masters and Diploma courses as opposed to Certificate level. The latter, of course, are likely to receive a higher uptake, but the challenge is in encouraging longer term, *continuing professional development* and opportunities may exist through modular structures and incorporating wider areas of "academic practice", such as postgraduate student supervision, research strategy, etc.

Conclusions

These are exciting times in academic staff development. We are witnessing a renewed interest at the highest levels in issues relating to teaching practice, career progression and the role of the sector in the wider society. Teaching itself is beginning to develop a greater legitimacy within the academy (see for example Becher and Trowler (2001) for the definitive study of these cultural

aspects): acquiring the attributes of scholarly activity, building a research literature and growing international communities of practice. This is only, however, the beginning of the journey and a great number of challenges lie ahead, not least of which is the extent to which developments are driven by government policy or the academic community themselves.

The initiatives in Teaching Portfolios and formal postgraduate, professional certificate programmes are becoming increasingly important as a demonstration of the community's desire to professionalise the teaching role. An issue which still requires to be explored in some depth, however, is the cultural, political, ethical and institutional context in which such programmes are offered. Prosser and Trigwell (1997) have demonstrated that the context in which teachers teach shapes their approach to teaching, mirroring the contextual influences on students' approaches to learning. However, a similar argument could be made that the context in which these professional teaching programmes and portfolio initiatives are developed and delivered is likely to have a strong influence on their content, format, impact and value (Trowler and Cooper 2002; O'Neill and Mac Labhrainn 2004).

It is also, for example, no use denying that developing a strong research profile is still of central importance for a career plan in most universities and the positioning of teaching vis-à-vis research is still problematic, even given the widespread adoption of courses and, increasingly, portfolios. There is considerable opportunity for seeking synergy between these two roles, not just in following Boyer's scholarship approach, but also more overtly in directly linking aspects of the two as central, defining attributes of a modern academic.

Indeed, it is to be hoped that looking from this perspective there might also be a greater realisation of the need to widen our view of the role of higher education in society, breaking out of the somewhat sterile contemporary discussions around the "knowledge economy" and acknowledging the political, economic, cultural and sociological reality in which we are all daily immersed.

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