Mentoring the new academic: Conversations for individual and university development

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Abstract: There are many challenges confronting the new academic upon entering the University context (Barkhuizen, 2002; Cawyer, Simonds, and David, 2002). In addition in the broader context of tertiary teaching, there are ongoing discussions about critically reflective teaching practice (Brookfield, 1995), the importance of student centred teaching (Prosser and Trigwell, 2003; Ramsden, 2003), and relationships between university teaching and research (Brew, 2003; Robertson and Bond, 2001).

In our study, we were concerned with how the processes of socialisation conversations contributed to understandings about the teacher role within the broader organisational and environmental contexts. We support the view that if socialisation is left to the newcomer, the organisation risks the staff member not reaching their full potential as a scholar and teaching colleague (Cawyer and Friedrich, 1998). This paper looks at how a conversational framework can be used to socialise the new academic, assist with day-to-day teaching, and draw out tacit knowledge. We suggest that these processes can also be used to foster developments in the broader university context.

Keywords: socialisation, teaching, conversations

Introduction

There are many often overwhelming, challenges confronting the new academic upon entering the university context (Barkhuizen, 2002; Cawyer et al., 2002). In addition to the new academic acclimatising to organisational culture and learning the ‘ropes’, the institution assumes that the novice academic is ready to teach (Barkhuizen, 2002). Yet tertiary teaching qualifications are not yet obligatory in New Zealand or strongly promoted as in the UK, and new academics may be left to fend for themselves (Barkhuizen, 2002).
Many authors identify tools and techniques for socialising the new academic (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2002; Cawyer et al., 2002; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998). Additionally, within the broader context of teaching there are ongoing discussions about critically reflective teaching practice (Brookfield, 1995), the importance of student-centred teaching (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003), and relationships between university teaching and research (Brew, 2003; Robertson & Bond, 2001). Questions are being asked about how teachers and institutions can manage these issues and foster developments to benefit students, academics, and universities (McCollow and Lingard, 1996; Badley, 1999; Kimber, 2003).

This paper looks at how a conversational framework can be used to socialise the new academic, assist with day-to-day teaching, and engage the teacher in critically reflective practice. A ‘conversational’ framework centres on the ‘verbal interactions between two or more people in which the interactions can range from a single speech act (e.g., “Do it.”) to an extensive network of speech acts that constitute arguments… narratives… monologues or dialogues” (Ford and Ford, 1995, p. 546). In our case, the conversations were between a novice-teacher and a teaching developer in a university setting. We suggest that in addition to contributing to the socialisation of the new academic, a ‘conversational approach’ may have potential for enhancing other areas of university teaching.

**Institutional background**

Structural conditions of work establish role expectations of employees. The position description for a full-time lecturer at the University of Waikato includes a range of both teaching and research objectives. This dual focus is consistent with international practice. For example, advertisements for university lecturers in the United Kingdom and Australia identify research and teaching as components of the job (The Guardian Jobs, n.d.).

The University of Waikato offers a standard induction programme for new staff which covers areas such as the organisation’s strategic intent, employment policies, and staff code of conduct. New academics may select a colleague for support during their probationary period, but no standardised mechanisms exist for implementing or monitoring this and effectiveness varies across schools (faculties). The Teaching and Learning Development Unit (TLDU) provides support and guidance for teaching staff through formal university-wide programmes, departmental seminars, as well as consultations with individual teachers. However, at time of this study there were few formal supports for the day-to-day needs of the new academic, or opportunities to develop critically reflective practice.

The following section examines the literature on organisational socialisation in the academic environment. We also refer to mentoring.

**Organisational socialisation and mentoring**

Socialisation refers to the communication process involving a new staff member’s negotiation into the organisation (Albrecht and Bach, 1997). Socialisation concerns the new member learning organisational ways, as well as communication processes that mutually influence both the new staff member and the organisation (Bullis, 1993; Miller and Jablin, 1991).

Studies of new staff members (e.g., Bullis, 1993; Louis, 1980) and in particular new academic staff (Barkhuizen, 2002; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Cawyer et al., 2002) highlight that socialisation during organisational entry can be particularly challenging. In general three common issues arise for newcomers: negotiating differences between their expectations and the realities of organisational life (Albrecht & Bach, 1997; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Louis, 1980); a primary need to gain information about the role and the organisation (Albrecht & Bach, 1997; Barkhuizen, 2002; Bullis, 1993; Miller & Jablin, 1991),
and; the sense of isolation that new academics often experience (Barkhuizen, 2002; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Cawyer et al., 2002).

Improving the socialisation process not only addresses newcomer dissatisfaction but also enhances the quality of role performance (Barkhuizen, 2002; Cawyer et al., 2002; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998). If socialisation is left mainly to the newcomer, the organisation risks the staff member not fully reaching his or her potential as a scholar and contributing colleague (Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998). Departments and institutions need to find effective ways to share information and tacit knowledge with the new staff member (Albrecht & Bach, 1997), and allow the new academic to self-observe (Barkhuizen, 2002) and work through ‘expectations-realities’ differences. To address the socialisation of the new teacher, academic departments and universities generally, need to draw on their resources of research-based, specialised knowledge in the areas of organisational socialisation, interpersonal skills, and managing change as a communication process; in other words ‘practice what they teach’.

Social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2000) positions socialisation as a process of ‘constructing’ realities. That is, ‘what we know is interpreted, constructed, enacted, and maintained through discourse’ (Ford, 1999, p. 480, for example). Therefore socialisation is a mutually influencing process of ‘(co)construction’ as the new staff member interacts with other staff members and encounters new experiences in ‘the way things are done around here’ (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). Such (co-)construction takes place within and through communication; for example, in conversation.

Ford and Ford (1995) and Ford (1999) argue extensively about the role of conversations in effecting organisational change. Socialisation is a particular kind of organisational change experienced by both individuals and organisation. It may be viewed as a series of different conversations undertaken to meet different needs, or alternatively as one conversation involving different people over time (Wanous, 1992).

One genre of ‘socialisation conversations’ may be embodied in the processes of mentoring and professional supervision. Importantly, and like models of organisational change and employee socialisation, mentoring and professional supervision focus on both individual performance and role development within the broader organisational context (Hawkins and Shoet, 1994; Healy, Ehrich, Hansford, and Stewart, 2001).

Numerous writers have stressed the benefits of mentoring new teachers (e.g., Cawyer et al., 2002; Perma, Learer, and Yura, 1995). In context of the above discussion, the mentor and the ‘mentee’ are viewed as socialising agents, with mentoring conversations a communicative process through which the new academic co-constructs his or herself gradually in the new role. Thus, within the context of socialisation, mentoring is an information sharing, role development, and isolation reducing strategy.

A ‘conversational perspective’ to socialisation allows the experiences of the new academic to be ‘voiced’ within university culture and other socio-cultural contexts. These contexts may be viewed as ‘background conversations’ (Ford, 1999). The following section describes how we applied this method.

**Methodology**

Social constructionism advocates that there are no objective realities, but rather that realities are constituted in communication: that is language and interaction (Allen, 2005; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2000). This is not to say that there are no material realities, but rather that social constructionists tend to focus on how such realities are interpreted, engaged with, and responded to (Allen, 2005; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2000). Thus, social constructionists are concerned with the reality
of conversations (processes); and/or the realities of symbols, language, and meanings (products); and/or the lived realities of both: that is, how ‘material details influence and are influenced by socio-historical contexts’ (Allen, 2005, p. 39).

Social, cultural, political, and historical contexts and associated social phenomena help to inform, guide, and bind individuals and groups with socially and culturally ‘accepted’ interpretations and behaviours (Allen, 2005; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2000). In our study, we were concerned with how the processes of socialisation conversations contributed to the ‘products’ or understandings about the teacher role within the context of broader organisational and environmental ‘conversations’.

Such ‘background’ conversations (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Ford, 1999) influence and inform the socialisation process. For example, a conversation between a new academic and an experienced organisation veteran (Louis, 1980, 1990) takes place against a backdrop of broader, culturally and historically located conversations and discourses which may include lecturers as ‘experts’, teaching-research relationships, teaching-learning culture, university culture, and the marketisation of education. With the above issues in mind, we proposed ‘a conversational perspective’ to our study of new academic socialisation.

**Methods**

This study is based on critical, reflective discussions between a new academic (first author) and a teaching developer (third author). The second author was an established academic in the novice teacher’s department who had a research interest in teaching. The paper takes a broad case study approach (Stake, 1995) to analyse the conversations which were held weekly over the duration of the new academic’s first semester. The parties met at the teaching developer’s office and each conversation was approximately one hour. Nine out of 10 conversations were recorded (recording equipment failed once) and all the recordings were transcribed. No attempt was made to review or analyse the recordings during this period.

Textual analysis was used to highlight key themes and patterns in the conversations. Firstly, the transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). A theme was defined as an idea that recurred in similar or different words. We examined statements of both speakers, looking for recurring expressions of perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, and/or values related to the professional development, organisational goals, and the broader contexts of tertiary teaching.

**The story**

The new academic commenced her appointment two weeks before the start of the semester, and was handed sole responsibility for a third year management communication course. She had extensive practical experience and a solid academic record, but no teaching experience in a university. Furthermore, she had moved from management roles in the voluntary sector, to a direct-practice teaching position in tertiary education. As part of her management positions she had been responsible for staff induction and training, and occupational safety and health programmes. Prior to these, the new academic had been a social worker, with experience as both supervisor and supervisee in ‘professional supervision’ (Hawkins & Shoet, 1994).

It was not long before the new academic felt overwhelmed by the demands of the new role. She experienced differences between old and new settings, and between her expectations of the job and actual experiences with the new organisation. After two weeks on the job she requested weekly sessions with a teaching developer at the TLDU for feedback and reflection on the weekly classes. Louis (1990)
refers to this as locating a veteran in the organisation who not only possesses a good working knowledge of the job requirements and organisational culture, but who can also provide the newcomer with a sense of self (Albrecht & Bach, 1997).

**Results and discussion**

The results show how the new academic used a conversational framework to ‘survive’ and make sense of the day-to-day teaching issues, and how this approach benefited her and consequently the university. The results also highlighted the possibilities for broader application of the conversational approach to other areas of teaching development. The analysis revealed four interconnected themes that demonstrated benefits of the conversational approach for the new academic.

**Theme 1: ‘support and feedback’**

This theme was characterised by the new academic checking out her perceptions and responses to classroom events and course issues. The weekly conversations enabled the new academic to revisit the classroom experience once it was divested of its emotional immediacy. In this situation the teaching developer provided reassurance, encouragement, and feedback. These kinds of responses enabled the new academic to vent her emotional responses to ‘the way things are done around here’ (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). At the same time the conversations afforded the new academic the opportunity for clarification as the teaching developer offered new perspectives and reframed situations and issues.

**Theme 2: ‘conceptualising teaching’**

The second theme concerned the new academic’s exploration of her teaching role, the ‘self as teacher’, and ways to evaluate her teaching and the students' learning experience. The tendency of most university teacher induction programmes is to focus on skills, strategies, and innovations and neglect the need for the novice teacher to make sense of the self in a new role (Harper and Sawicka, 2001). The benefit of this conversational approach was that the teaching developer helped the new academic to articulate and make sense of the teaching role. For example, when the new academic expressed concerns about pressure to be ‘the expert lecturer’, the teaching developer provided alternative frames around the new academic’s professional practice, and linked the experience of teaching with the scholarship of teaching.

Thus, through the conversations the new academic developed a better understanding of students, the subject matter, contextual restraints, and herself as a teacher (Staton and Hunt, 1992). She was enabled to make sense of her situation through examining and reflecting on assumptions that underpinned her thinking and the implications of that thinking (Ford & Ford, 1995).

**Theme 3: ‘relationship between self and organisation’**

The third theme captured the emotional labour (Bloch, 2002) associated with the new academic’s desire to ‘belong’ and ‘fit’ with organisational culture and expectations of her in the new role. For example, the new academic referred to her past experiences and work roles and the relevance of these in her new job, and her struggles with interpreting the role of convenor for the course she now had sole responsibility for. Blenkinsopp and Stalker’s (2004) UK study of experienced managers transitioning into academia highlights the role of ‘discourses’ and the new management academic’s ‘own biographies’ in shaping role identity. Blenkinsopp and Stalker conclude that ‘how their identities “shape up” is of critical importance to universities’ (2004, p. 427), and ideally new management academics should be supported to draw on their experience in the new academic environment.

In our study, through the conversations with the teaching developer, the novice academic was encouraged to integrate the experiences of her ‘managerial past with [her] her academic present’ (Blenkinsopp and
Thus the conversations enabled the new academic to draw on her past experience in her present situation, and evaluate this inheritance from a range of perspectives (Bullis, 1993; Louis, 1990; Staton & Hunt, 1992). The dialogue enabled the dissonances and connections between her past and present life to sit side by side, before (co)constructing (Burr, 2000) ‘new’ ways of ‘belonging’.

Theme 4: ‘preparing for the future’

The final theme was characterised by references to practical possibilities for action, either in the semester in question, or in the next. This theme featured consistently across, but occasionally within the conversations, and with both participants. The tenth session was devoted almost entirely to the future. For example, in earlier sessions a future topic was discussed as ‘an idea for next week’, whereas the tenth session was devoted almost entirely to ‘where to from here’. In this final session preparation for the future was not so much a ‘recipe’ for action, as much as a ‘map’ to assist future navigation (Barkhuizen, 2002).

Implications for universities

At the end of the semester, the university had gained a new academic with some sense of self in the teacher role, including understanding of students, the course content, and ‘how things are done around here’. Without the conversations the new academic would have begun the next semester less prepared both emotionally and in pedagogical understandings, and consequently, at the university’s cost. Prosser and Trigwell (2003) point out that improved academic outcomes for students are associated with factors which make for good teaching. The remaining question is how could universities learn from this one-off, ‘self-help’ effort of an individual new academic?

Mentoring programme

One of the key features of this particular relationship was that it arose informally, and some studies have noted that the most effective mentoring relationships are those that evolve through informal networks (Cawyer et al, 2002; Galvez-Hjornevik, 1986; Louis, 1990). However, Cawer et al (2002) note one possible benefit of formal mentoring arrangements: that they encourages informal supportive relationships within a department. Universities need to recognise the nature of both formal and informal mentoring relationships.

The mentoring conversations of this study contributed to the implementation of a university wide mentoring programme. This programme uses a conversational framework to provide both structured and flexible support to meet the needs of academics university-wide. Facilitated through the TLDU, the programme relies on volunteer mentors, who are matched with academics requesting mentoring in nominated areas. Both groups receive some training (Harper & Sawicka, 2001) and once matched, meet regularly over a year for conversations. The mentoring programme addresses a range of needs including teaching development, getting published, and working towards promotion.

Broader applications

In our study, we aimed to illustrate how the process of socialisation conversations contributes to understandings about the teacher role within the context of broader organisational and environmental ‘conversations’. The results also raise possibilities for the application of a conversational approach within other contexts of university teaching. For example, as an application within course participants to focus on their particular teaching contexts and incorporate teaching scholarship.
Conclusion and ongoing conversations

In conclusion, our study demonstrates how teaching-focused, mentoring conversations engage the new academic in critical reflection and benefit the individual practitioner and the university. A central learning from the study is that it is possible to provide novice academics with the opportunity to develop in the role through a process of conversations.

This study of the socialisation of a new academic raises practical issues which could be addressed in different areas within universities, including at department and school levels. We believe a conversational model such as ours provides an ideal forum to enact university strategies aimed at ‘co-constructing’ new ways of ‘doing things around here’.

References


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