Title

Exploring the use of narratives to enable co-design and sense-making in organisational change through whole course design

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how to develop narratives that engage teaching teams to co-create whole course design for higher education programs. Course design, wherein learning outcomes, learning activities and assessments are aligned across a program of study, has emerged as a key means of achieving both positive educational outcomes and effective quality management in higher education. However, encouraging, engaging and enabling academic staff to undertake this can be an effort fraught with issues of power, identity and instability. This presentation explores how narratives can be used effectively to energise and engage teaching teams in whole course design.

Proposal

This presentation uses an action-learning case study to explore the early phases of student centred course design, an organisational change approach being launched at Swinburne University of Technology in Australia, which seeks to enable the active engagement of teaching teams in co-creating quality re-designs of their courses.

Rationale: Educational design has recently become widely used in higher education, at least partly due to the rapid rise in online and flexible delivery modes in response to the globalization and massification of education. Currently educational designers are employed in almost all Australian universities to encourage and support teaching staff to re-think their learning and teaching (Bird et al 2007; Kehoe et al , in press; Ling & Ling 2017). This case study has been developed by Swinburne University’s central academic development unit (educational designers), the Learning Transformations Unit, to share learnings about the potential and challenges of such approaches.

Principles from three theoretical sources inform the design of the study: action learning, project-based learning and peer-group learning. Action learning (Kember 2000; Revans 1980) is based on an iterative process of learning by designing and implement solutions to problems on a plan-act-observe-reflect cycle. Project-based learning is similar in that it uses a realistic problem or challenge as a stimulus and gathers progressive, cyclical input on what is needed for successful implementation. Peer-group learning is when people are positioned in relation to each other as both colleagues and learning resources (Kehoe at al, in press). While this approach is based on a well-proven theoretical base, what we are most interested in is how this can form the basis from which to develop effective, practice focused narratives that allow us to translate these theories into effective leaning and teaching practice; the ‘praxis’ of educational design.

The methodology we have established to achieve this end is a qualitative, action learning case study that critically examines stories or ‘narratives’ authored by higher education academics involved in the organisational change process. These narratives are analyzed to interrogate whether, and how,
educational design approaches offer opportunities to foster engaged and productive experiences of course quality improvement for teaching teams. A mix of technological, pedagogical and management issues are explored. Enthusiasm, collaboration and a sense of ownership are identified as major factors driving an effective change process. Major barriers identified include difficulties in apportioning time between varied responsibilities, the importance of timeliness of training components and the need to develop clear policy and guidelines.

The results are significant for addressing key elements of rapidly accelerating change in higher education. For academics to successfully transition to teaching that meets these challenges requires new pedagogical approaches that challenge previous practices with regards to assessment, group interaction and student/teacher dialogues. Furthermore, it necessitates attention to issues concerning academic work practices. Such change challenges traditional notions of academic work and bring together teams of people each with unique skills, into a course design and development team. To make such significant change coherent, empowering and enabling, engaging and positive narratives of change must be developed.

References


Revans, R. (2010), The ABC of Action Learning, Surrey, Gower Publishing Ltd.