

Title: Changing the Conversation: evaluating a whole-institutional initiative of annual teaching renewal

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Abstract

The paper reports on evaluation research into the impact of an institutional initiative of peer enhancement of teaching, assessment and learning. It invites the audience to consider the evaluation of complex, cultural change through discussion of an institution-wide initiative. The case presents specific challenges for educational developers of locating the development of practice within teaching teams, and involving students, in an attempt to invigorate an informed conversation around teaching quality.

Introduction

One of the strengths of educational development lies in its capacity to shape itself in response to the contemporary climate. Pressures on HE management, academic staff and learning support professionals to improve the quality of the student learning experience are high and closely observed on a number of fronts (Gibbs, 2012). For educational development, the current situation prompts a shift towards practice development, located within academic communities and mindful of institutional and disciplinary drivers, in line with the analysis by Boud and Brew (2013) who argue for ‘greater focus on peer learning in context’ and ‘fostering learning-conducive work’.

Conversations about teaching are widely acknowledged as a powerful mechanism for professional development (Pilkington, 2013; Thomson, 2012; Gibbs, 2010; Byrne, Brown and Challen, 2010, Haigh, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to discuss the merits and shortcomings of adopting just such an approach at an institutional level, and the implications this has for educational development practices and how we evaluate them.

Peer enhancement of teaching, assessment and learning (PETAL)

The case in question is the introduction of a scheme of peer enhancement of teaching, assessment and learning (PETAL) which seeks to change the conversation around teaching quality from audit to enhancement.

The PETAL initiative aims to “enhance student learning by creating a culture of consistent, sustained and richly informed attention to key aspects of learning and teaching, marked by collegial collaboration, and collaboration with our students.” (Marshall and Deepwell, 2012).

In essence, there are three elements to this new approach to teaching enhancement:

- Enhancement is set within the context of the programme team;
- Discussions are scholarly and evidence-based;
- Students are engaged in bringing about, and evaluating, changes.

The PETAL scheme replaces a system of peer observation of teaching, that had been expanded and enhanced over time so that it included dimensions of teaching beyond classroom observation, such as assessment practice, online learning activities, feedback and so forth. This previous scheme is similar to many in other institutions, where peer observations are carried out once a year and the reflective conversation between colleagues may bring about changes at the individual level of professional practice. In contrast to this, PETAL operates at a programme-based level and invites teams who work on the same academic programme to identify an area of practice they wish to investigate or improve and for them to initiate a range of enhancement activities over the course of a year to develop their collective practice and knowledge in that area. The types of activities vary widely from programme to programme, but it is notable that in the first two years the majority of programmes have focused on feedback and assessment. Activities chosen may indeed involve peer observations of teaching practice, but this is not required. The teams are encouraged to involve students in the process, and to engage in scholarly conversations and reflections on practice. PETAL thus has the potential for making a significant difference to the learning experience of students.

The nature of evaluating complexity in higher education

Evaluating a complex initiative, such as the implementation of a teaching enhancement process across a single higher education environment, is undoubtedly a challenge. The approach taken to evaluation needs to suit the demands of senior management as well as the available capacity of the research and development team. It also needs to serve the purposes of improving the initiative. Such initiatives take time to be understood, adopted, adapted and possibly embedded. Evaluating these cases, therefore, requires a longer term perspective on evaluation than is normally available. Longer term evaluation runs counter to the desire of institutional management for a speedy impact assessment to justify the initiative through the presentation of readily accessible positive changes in student learning, or the student experience. Consequently, the evaluators are required to produce relatively frequent reports for consideration by stakeholders, which rest on what Saunders, Bonamy and Charlier (2005) call 'provisional stabilities' but carry the danger that these stabilities become more fixed than intended, or desirable.

After considering a range of possible evaluation approaches, and bearing in mind our orientation towards development, we leaned towards adopting Patton's developmental evaluation (2010) with its emphasis on narrative approaches to evaluation and change. Developmental evaluation is useful to address the challenge of evaluating a complex system. A further dimension that has guided the development of the narratives in our approach is from Lewis, Passmore and Cantore (2008, 99) which sets storytelling, stories told and stories lived in a context of Unheard stories, Untold Stories and Unknown Stories.

Sources of data for the evaluation, in addition to the reflections of a cross-university evaluation team, include both naturally occurring data and elicited data. The research has analysed: minutes from staff and student joint committees; annual review reports; surveys of PETAL leaders, in-depth interviews with a cross-section of University staff and, separately, interviews with students. The theoretical approach to evaluation assists greatly in drawing together these disparate sources into more of a coherent picture of the merits and shortcomings, and the impact, of the initiative.

What findings are emerging?

The PETAL initiative complements other elements of the University's professional development framework (CPPD, 2010) that expects 'all those who teach, or who otherwise support student learning to undergo annual professional development in their teaching.' PETAL therefore impacts on a large proportion of staff in all Academic Departments. The scheme operates at a local level, with oversight from course or programme leaders, and in a few instances Heads of Department.

The developmental approach to evaluation 'guides action and adaptation in innovative initiatives facing high uncertainty' (Patton, 2010, p36), which in the present case has helped to shape the supports needed for the initiative, clarify stakeholders and their roles in the process, and identified further opportunities for using the evaluation findings to improve the initiative. Three examples of the impact of PETAL are shown in:

- **Actions:** as well as identifying a wealth of examples of local innovations in practice, the documentary analysis of cross-university minutes from course-level meetings has uncovered inconsistencies in the way that meetings are administered. This has led to immediate action as an unintended outcome of the evaluation, with improvements in administrator training and archiving.
- **Adaptations:** the scheme has enabled some teams to retain the strengths of their own local practices, and others to adapt PETAL to extend what they are doing already. In this regard, PETAL is proving fit as a flexible framework for ongoing professional development, in line with the way many academic colleagues enjoy working;
- **Attention:** the evaluation has shared some insights into attitudes, for instance, towards quality assurance, academic leadership, reward and recognition for teaching, and thereby provided a steer for the strategic developments in these areas.

There is evidence from the evaluation that PETAL has helped in general terms to raise the quality and nature of the debate around teaching, and that there are many benefits from this to the student experience. In some disciplinary areas PETAL can be seen to be the catalyst to academic colleagues to work together and effect changes to practice with and for their students, including changes to studio space usage, dissertation handbooks, involvement of alumni, consistent use of technology for providing feedback and so on.

Why might you be interested in this approach?

Peer enhancement of teaching for a programme team has been shown to re-ignite enthusiasm for talking about teaching amongst academic colleagues who have become over-burdened with individual administrative concerns. This has prompted more teaching development projects, more departmental awaydays where learning is on the agenda, and greater interest in promotion and awards based on teaching excellence.

By applying a theoretical approach to an evaluation that emphasises development, I would also argue that this particular initiative has been able to capture the complexity of the institutional changes as they are being played out. The interim findings at key stages have informed not only the future direction of the initiative itself, but also served as a strong driver for developments elsewhere in the organisation.

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