

Hello, this is Julian Beckton, and I'm here with my second podcast, this time summarising the seminar I gave in the Centre for Educational Research and Development's Thinking aloud series at the University of Lincoln, on 24th February 2009. I'm recording this on the 2nd March 2009 for those of you who like to record that kind of detail.

Before I start I'd like to thank those of you who were so positive about my previous podcast. If you want to comment on this podcast, I'd very much like to hear what you have to say. You can do so by visiting the link on my blog, which is simply <http://julian.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk> I will, and I really do mean this, try and incorporate any suggestions that you may have into future podcasts.

Anyway the topic of the podcast is educational development units and their role in the modern university. This is a topic I have been researching for my doctorate, and I thought it may be of interest to briefly set out why I thought there was a problem, the methodology I used to investigate it, and to outline my findings. Because it is a podcast, it is, of necessity, a rather shortened version. The full thesis, will, providing it satisfies the examiners, appear in the Lincoln University institutional repository, (which you can find at <http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk>) in due course, and I am currently working on a rather shorter paper intended for publication. If and when it appears a link to it will be provided from the entry in the blog that details this podcast.

I think that a useful start is to describing what an educational development unit actually is, a task that is not as easy as it sounds. Basically, it is a small organisational unit within a university which is tasked with enhancing the quality of university teaching. Sounds simple. But in fact, neither "enhancement" or even "university teaching" are easy to define. For the purposes of this discussion I'm going to concentrate on a very specific aspect of enhancement, that is "innovation", and even more specifically, technological innovation. I fully accept that there is much more to enhancement than that, but I don't have the space to discuss those aspects here. As far as university teaching is concerned, I just want to raise the idea with you that different disciplines have different understandings of what constitutes acceptable knowledge. Natural scientists will place great emphasis on the observation and recording of natural phenomena, whereas social scientists may give a much higher priority to the social context in which phenomena occur, or even to the reported beliefs of research participants. This is likely to lead to different ways of teaching in different disciplines, yet the educational development unit is charged with enhancing teaching across the board.

I am going to argue here that the concept of enhancement comes largely from outside the university. There are a significant number of initiatives that emanate from government and other stakeholders. Examples of this include the development of transferable skills, the introduction of personal development planning into undergraduate curricula, surveys of "student satisfaction" initiatives to widen participation, that is to get more students into university. There are other initiatives, but if there is a common theme in these initiatives it is the preparation of students for a highly corporatised form of working, indicative of a conceptualisation of the university as a sort of instrumental, training environment. This does not sit easily with historical conceptualisations of the university, as a place where students and teachers worked together to push back the boundaries of knowledge, as imagined by von

Humboldt in 1810, or as a place of pure learning and thought as envisaged by Newman in the 1850s. Certainly there was an element of preparation for the world of work in Newman's conceptualisation, but he saw the universities as being as much about the production of "gentlemen" as about formal training. (As he was writing in the 1850s I fear we will have to bear with his rather sexist language)

We have already noted that different disciplines may have different views on teaching, but there is one other point I wish to make about university teaching, and that is that it is very difficult to become a credentialed researcher in a discipline. And the way to do so is usually through research and publication rather than through teaching. Nevertheless many academics have considerable expertise in their fields, sometimes even world renown. This emphasis on research may have had some influence on the external initiatives I have just described, but it does mean that the educational development unit has not only to become familiar with the external initiatives, but also needs to work on the personal attitudes of those working in the department. I attended many conferences in the 1990s at which considerable frustration was expressed, a frustration I had felt in my own professional life.

So I decided to investigate what colleagues in other institutions were doing. Now, research is nothing if it is not a search for truth. But "truth" is an elusive concept. I wasn't sure that I could arrive at a generalisable set of propositions about enhancing university teaching. In fact, given that I have already said that neither enhancement, nor university teaching were single clear concepts, I was fairly certain that I could not. But Universities, educational development units, the technologies they are using, and the practices of teaching are sufficiently similar for one who is engaged with them to look at detailed evidence in one or more cases and say, "ah yes, that does ring true with my experience" or "that's a good idea". Alternatively they might say "we're not doing that here" or "that's a bad idea." What I was trying to do was to say that "this is what is happening in a small corner of the educational development world" and use that evidence to start to construct some form of theory about educational development world. There will need to be many similar studies before warrantable conclusions can be drawn about what is the right course of action.

I therefore conducted case studies of five educational development units in English Universities. Again, for a fuller description of the research methods and data analysis you will have to wait for the thesis, or a journal article. I see that time is pressing, and so I think it is time to move to the concluding discussion about what I found.

Perhaps the most significant finding was that the staff I talked to seemed to have given up the idea of trying to impose external models of quality on university teachers. Without exception all the respondents spoke of working with teaching staff, and responding to their needs. The interview transcripts are littered with phrases like "We don't tell people what to do, we have conversations" There seemed to be a shift from an instrumental agenda to something that was much closer to the spirit envisaged by von Humboldt of working together to push back knowledge. I have termed this the "collegial approach" because it is at heart what a college is about. I am not claiming here that the external initiatives are bad things. Many in universities would agree that they are necessary. But they need to be remoulded into forms that are acceptable to the college and educational development units appear to have taken a role that might be described as facilitating that.

Further evidence for this was found in the award schemes that the units all ran. These usually took the form of some form of award, in the shape of a small amount of funding, and more rarely an honorific title, such as teacher fellow. The funding was usually for a specific project and was awarded on the basis of a bid submitted by the recipient. There was however some criticism of these schemes on the basis that they were very small scale, and many of the respondents felt that too many of the recipients of the award had not delivered on their projects, and several recipients spoke of the need to ask for more evidence of effort from the recipients.

Perhaps not surprisingly there was a great deal of emphasis on technological innovation. Often the EDU is seen as the main site from which an institutional virtual learning environment (such as Blackboard or Moodle) is supported, and several participants described experimenting with quite exotic new applications, especially those that are sometimes described as social networking tools or “web 2.0”. There was less evidence of these being introduced into teaching practice, but the EDU seems to have a role as a place where these technologies can be safely explored. One site had set up a panel of academic staff to work with the EDU in exploring these technologies, but much of the work with technology did appear to be largely experimental. That is not to say it is not valuable, because it highlighted an unexpected area of an EDU’s work, which is the development of relationships with support services, in particular computing support services. As one respondent said “In the past, IT departments used to be seen as the bad guys, who prevented staff doing innovative work” That’s not surprising, because there is a huge technological infrastructure in a university that MUST work reliably. The EDU seems in many cases to be moving towards a “trusted experimenter” status, as IT departments realise that they are not going to do things that will bring down the network, and in a university that wishes to innovate, this seems to me to be a role that must exist.

Finally, I found that the respondents all felt that their most effective work was done through working with committees, which really does underline the argument that educational development is very much a two way process, or at least that those respondents I talked to in my case studies seemed to believe it was. If there is anything I have taken from my study, it is that those who wish to effect change in educational development must first be prepared for their change to take some time, and second, be prepared to have their changes considerably remoulded through internal collegial processes.

If you’re still with me, thank you very much for listening. Goodbye.