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Critical Conversations: Ethics, Professional Development and Organisational and Cultural Change

Alex Carson and Colette Bleakley

Abstract

The academic environment is rapidly changing in response to the combined pressures of policy, the diverse needs of stakeholders, community demands, technological advances, and globalisation. All of these drivers are common to all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) at the present time including the one featured in this paper. The aim was to develop an ethically engaged model of staff development and cultural change. The particular HEI featured in this paper, is applying for degree awarding powers. As part of this process, it has to begin transforming itself into an organisation that is and acts 'like a university'. This has involved more clearly defining a stronger relationship between research and scholarly activities and the quality of the student experience. This paper describes the way that the authors have developed the Appreciative Critical Conversation Process (ACCP) as a more ethically conscious approach to both staff development and cultural change.

Key Words: Narratives, critical conversations, ACCP, Higher Education Academy, ethics, staff and educational development, research and scholarship, pedagogy, constructive alignment, congruence.

Introduction

British Universities are part of a global academic context that sees education as a key resource in the development of national and international aspirations. Part of the strategic intent of the HEI featured in this paper, is to meet the needs of a variety of stakeholders in a changing national and international context. The Institute is required to widen local participation in higher education and at the same time to position itself globally. In addition, the HEI had also applied for taught degree awarding powers. To meet these aims, the HEI has developed a Strategic Plan which demands a clearer responsiveness to what the stakeholders require. Students are central stakeholders in Higher Education and so the strategic focus includes what they appreciate and addresses areas for enhancement. (National Student Survey, 2006, 2007).Thus the Strategic Plan envisaged cultural change, demanding a clearer articulation of the research and scholarly foundations for academic and academic related support practice. For this to take place it was imperative that opportunities for

critical conversations and support were established to ensure that colleagues were confident in articulating the relationship between research, scholarly activity, and learning and teaching. This included employing the curriculum vitae and annual monitoring reports as vehicles to capture the relationship. This process revealed that two main issues that needed to be addressed if the HEI could be and act as a 'university'. The first issue related to the fact that we had made assumptions about the level of 'a shared understanding of the language' required to analyse the value of their professional activities, research and scholarship in relation to the development and delivery of the curriculum. There were many examples of staff engaged in important, relevant and innovative activities that helped shaped professional practice who failed to acknowledge this. When asked, many said it was because they simply took it for granted that others would appreciate that their practice reflected the broader aspects of the academic role.

The second issue was that although there were a few pockets of serious research activity within the Institute and a few 'enthusiasts' in others, there was no overall coherent culture of engaging in research and scholarship throughout. Research and scholarly activity is part of the academic contract but there was not a consistent approach to ensuring this was supported, evaluated or disseminated. The new Strategic Plan then, became a major stakeholder in the conversation that emerged as part of professional and organisational development and cultural change. It emphasises the importance of research and scholarship informing the curriculum and demanded a more strategic approach to the development of 'the university culture'.

Current research into the role of staff development (SD) suggests that it is an exciting time for staff development. Blackwell and Blakemore (2003:p14-15) acknowledge the growing recognition of 'both the importance of Staff Development to particular agendas, such as the quality agenda, and to broader organisational needs for a flexible, learning culture'. They suggest that 'alignment with institutional goals and values especially and, more problematically, policy implementation is a precondition of strategic influence'. We would agree with this in principle but, in addition, we believe that the alignment of strategic goals at corporate, personal and national level can only be successfully achieved through the personal, professional and vocational development of the staff. Changes to human resource management and to institutional strategies including staff and educational development as well as learning and teaching, reflect the need to build capability in academic, commercial

and managerial resources and are shaped by the strategic aims at corporate, personal and national level.

Bill Rammell, in a speech to colleagues at a joint HEFCE and Leadership Foundation for Higher Education event in 2007, stated that the 'demographic reality is that 70% of what will be the UK's working age population in 2020 have already completed their compulsory education' and that 'by 2020, 30% of this working age population will be over 50, compared with 25% today'. Because half of them are already over 25 years old now, he argued that to address future needs universities need to work to:

> Widen participation beyond 18 year old students leaving college or school with good A-Level qualifications;
>
> Put learners and employers at heart of their provision; and
>
> Strengthen their leading position in international education through excellent teaching and innovative research. '

The challenges to the HE sector are reflected in the HEIs Strategic Plan approved by the Governors and Academic Board. It focuses on two principal objectives:

- the employability of graduating students
- the socio-economic development of our region

The success of the Strategic Plan relies on these two objectives being recognised through three areas of excellence: Business Excellence; People Excellence and Quality. These three areas of excellence provide the basis for professional (staff and educational) and organisational development discussions and activities.

Professional and organisational development therefore needs to be more strategic if it is to be perceived as having a primary function as an institutional change agent. But, by its very nature, it is hard to define. It must constantly evolve in response to changing imperatives, the needs and expectations of stakeholders, and the institutional, national and global challenges facing the higher education sector in the 21st Century.

During the past four years the HEI has sought to balance diverse, individual CPD needs and respond to the challenges and tensions precipitated by alignment of strategic foci. Rowland (2006) suggests that 'good management, like good teaching

and good research, works creatively within the tension between compliance and contestation as it struggles to create a shared identity amongst diverse individuals', (p126-127). We agree with this but would also include 'good staff development'. Staff development must respond creatively to the tension between *compliance* and *contestation*; address diverse needs and create a shared sense of identity and ownership. It must therefore embrace the multi-faceted development agenda if it is to have any impact on organisational and cultural change. This inevitably challenges traditional perceptions about the purpose and ownership of staff development. The HEI featured in this paper is seeking to balance diverse needs with a more collaborative, strategically focused approach to research informed development, policies and practice. This has precipitated a philosophical shift from course -bound development programme to one that is democratic and responsive but this in itself brings challenges. One has to achieve constructive synergies and align centrally focused strategic development needs with those of specific teams, schools and departments as well as the needs of individuals. In doing so, we need to make the design, implementation, decisions and impact of staff development more transparent to all concerned.

In many ways, this resonates with the challenges facing academic practice. Biggs (1996, 2003) grappled with the diverse aspects of learning and teaching. He advanced the notion of teaching and learning as an integrated, constructively aligned approach to curriculum design, implementation and assessment that optimizes the conditions for quality, high level learning. In Biggs' world, a poor system is one in which the components are not integrated. Constructive alignment (CA) was an attempt to provide a framework to enable academics and academic support staff to make learning and teaching processes and procedures more transparent to all concerned, especially students. Hounsell, Entwistle et al. (2005) explored the idea of constructive alignment as a way of working with departmental colleagues to strengthen the teaching-learning environments and enhance the experience of undergraduate students through engagement and high quality learning. Whilst the framework provided by constructive alignment was useful, the findings of the research team was that it needed to be reformulated it into 'a more inclusive concept – 'congruence' – for the purpose of reporting our findings'. (p2).

No one model can be expected to provide the answers. The drive to establish a 'university culture' and engage staff in strategic, yet diverse development cannot be achieved through a traditional model. Constructive alignment does have some merit

and is a model that has been considered but in accord with Hounsell, Entwistle et al. (2005), we recognised the need to address staff development through subject/department specific culture and contexts as well as the more corporate 'university culture'. Thus the approach to development emerging in the featured HEI seeks 'congruence' through the alignment of individual, team, institutional and professional intent and ethically framed appreciative critical conversations. Each School and Department have been charged with customising the Strategic Plan to address specific objectives relating to their own areas. This approach has influenced the development of a new Learning and Teaching Strategy.

Shaped by the institutional mission and vision, the new Learning and Teaching strategy emphasises professionalism, enhancement, research and scholarship underpinned by values and ethically framed conversations to advance collaboration between different stakeholders to secure the achievement of strategic goals. In order to address subject specific contexts, culture and requirements, colleagues have been invited to customise the Institutional Learning and Teaching strategy through their own plans. Central to the learning and teaching strategic agenda is challenge to make more transparent the relationship between research, scholarship and teaching and engagement with continuing professional development (CPD). Whilst accepting the pedagogical and cultural differences, there are generic similarities between subject areas that we can capitalise on in the development agenda.

In the first section of this paper we have identified some of the challenges facing the HEI in relation to the development agenda. The Strategic Plan; individual staff development review (ISDR); continuous professional development planning (CPDP); the development of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2007-2010 and the development of the Higher Education Academy accredited Continuous Professional Development Framework therefore formed a theoretical framework in which ethical conversations with staff were situated. The second part of the paper invites the reader to consider the theory and the practice of this.

Theory and Practice: A Dialogue

While it is one thing to set theoretical standards, it is often more difficult to meet them in practice. The theory asked hard questions of current staff practices. However it was also able to provide solutions to some of these questions by facilitating, through the new continuous development framework (CPD), opportunities for staff to engage

in research and scholarly activities. Research and Teaching Fellowships were also offered to staff to encourage their engagement in the process. What staff already had was their experience and this was something that the conversations had enabled staff to become more aware of. All staff were asked to write a new curriculum vitae and this process helped them to see their experiences in new and more positive ways. However, it also revealed gaps which the CPD framework was designed to help with. These early conversations between the Institute standards and staff experiences were the beginning of a more detailed conversation between theory and practice or, put another way, between standards and quality. The aim of this conversation, which both parties to the conversation shared, was to enhance the quality of the student experience. This aim was the benchmark and foundation for all future conversations. As such, it could be seen as an ethical principle that drove further conversations. Lawler (2001) suggests that we must 'renew the conversations and daily dialogue about the ethical dimensions of our CPE practice.' She progresses the argument by stating that ethics should be central to professional development. She suggests that:

> Ethics is not a "special topic" discussed only in times of professional crises or after the barn door has been closed behind the horse. Whether we are well read in our profession or are well versed in listening to our colleagues' issues and concerns, I believe we need to take stock of what is around us and understand the basis for ethical issues.

This resonates with the central tenet of this paper that an ethical perspective should inform strategic conversations and decision making strategies, as well as development processes and practice.

Too often challenges arise when different stakeholders end up talking at cross purposes. Real conversations require a common language and if all concerned agree on this as part of the ethical principles underpinning organisational conversations, we will minimise discordant behaviours. This was particularly important if there was to be a genuinely engaged conversation between the standards that the Institute articulated and staff experience. Care had to be taken that all parties were treated equally.

To accomplish this, we have been advocating the adoption of a narrative-based methodology (Carson, 2001). While there are many ways of using narratives,

narratives provide a more equitable way of developing conversations than other approaches. We are often given official documents, particularly in relation to academic and pedagogical development which are difficult to follow clearly. Policy is always a matter of interpretation. However, narratives are something that all parties in a conversation are familiar with. No one is too grown up to need a story. It was also our contention that narratives or stories provide the main vehicle for organisational activity. We are all familiar with the anecdote that we learn more in the tearoom than we learn in the classroom. It was felt that a narrative based approach would allow all to engage in a language that all were familiar with. Staff were encouraged to use stories in the conversations they had. As well as a narrative based methodology, we also adopted a common practice as our conversational method.

Charles Taylor points out that:

> When we see something surprising, or something that disconcerts us, or which we can't quite see, we normally react by setting ourselves to look more closely: we alter our stance, perhaps rub our eyes, concentrate, and the like. (Taylor 1992)

This practice of 're-searching' or looking again at what we see and what we do helps us to engage more directly with our activities. It is a reflective model of practice that gets us to see from different standpoints. As such it can be a critique of our initial perceptions. We developed our Appreciative Conversational Model (ACCP) from this important insight. It is something that we all do from time to time and does not rely on learning any new technique. As such, it was seen as a suitably reflective model in which to engage in critical conversations with staff and the HEI.

Critical Conversational Process

The Appreciative Inquiry model emerged in the1980s through conversations between two colleagues, Dr David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivasta at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, US who began challenging the accepted models of change management and problem-solving. Whilst it acknowledges the past, it is used to encourage a more positive visioning of the future, focusing on the best in people, the organization, and context it operates in the relevant world around them.

> In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms. AI involves in a central way, the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential.
>
> (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000, p. 5)

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is therefore an increasingly popular organisational change method but the lack of published research critically evaluating this has led to some reluctance to adopt this approach in HEIs. In this particular institutional context, we realised that the AI approach needed to be adapted if it was going to work for us. In 2001, Bushe argued that organisations are socially, co-constructed realities, leading to the notion that AI should attempt to engage as many members of the system as possible in the inquiry and focus on the desirable collective futures. To some extent this was addressed by Cooperrider and Srivasta (2001) in the revised appreciative inquiry principles, (Figure1) but we have taken it further to address specific needs.

By asking staff to expose academic practice to far more scrutiny than ever before, one has to accept that it can be interpreted as intrusive and a sign of managerial distrust in academic autonomy. Whilst some individuals and teams respond very positively to starting with an appreciation of what works, others need to have some time to ‘air concerns’. With careful facilitation and appreciative critical questions one can empathise with the difficulties and concerns but change the conversation from a problem-based focus to one that concentrates on what works to evolve a vision of how things actually are as opposed to how we think things ought to be as an individual, team or Institute as a whole. In doing so it was our intention to promote confidence in the strengths identified within our policy, process and practice and use this to inform the shared vision of the future. It has been used to initiate a conversation, at all levels of the Institute, between plan and practices. This led to the development of a customised model amalgamating Appreciative Inquiry with a Critical Conversational Process, developed by Bleakley and Carson (2006). This is illustrated in figure 1 next.

a) **AI Principles**	**b)** **AI Principles**	**c)** **Appreciative Critical**

Cooperrider (1987)	Cooperrider / Suresh Srivasta (2001)	Conversational Process (ACCP) Bleakley/Carson (2006)
1. the inquiry begins with appreciation 2. the inquiry is applicable 3. the inquiry is provocative 4. the inquiry is collaborative	1. the constructionist principle 2. the principle of simultaneity 3. the poetic principle 4. the anticipatory principle 5. the positive principle	1. the inquiry begins with appreciation/defining and articulating values 2. the inquiry is respectful of the individual, of the expression of ideas and the pursuit of knowledge 3. the inquiry is collaborative 4. the inquiry is principled and has integrity 5. the inquiry is provocative, saying/seeing something more about the practice 6. the inquiry is generative and positive

Figure 1

Many tend to focus on the positive aspect of AI but this is not the core. AI is about the *generative*, not the positive (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Bushe, (2007) suggests generativity occurs only when people collectively discover or create new things that they can use to positively alter the social construction of reality and their collective future. He argues that "negative" can, if sensitively handled, be generative too.

We agree with this but suggest that one has to agree the values and determine an ethical framework to shape the conversations. Thus our conversational process builds on these developments. The model begins with an articulation and appreciation of all narratives. The conversation is respectful of the individual, of the expression of ideas and the pursuit of knowledge. It begins by assuming or appreciating the best of the story, looking for the best value in the narrative or practice. For us, research in education should not be seen as a technical undertaking but a process in self-understanding. If we are going to understand ourselves then we need to begin to share a common language. It may be the case that research and teaching currently do not share a common language. Narratives engage all staff in

the Institute in a common language. The narrative of the strategic plan is part of the conversation as is the student experience. This is particularly important because it suggests that the language of inquiry has important outcomes in and of itself.

Engagement is a necessary condition if institute plans and academic practices are to be informed by each other. The appreciative, critical conversational process builds on the principles of appreciative inquiry by engaging all in a common language. All our stories reflect the values of all those who tell them and engage with the values of those who hear them. We do not assume that stories are *about* practice, they are the practice. This means that all staff must respect each others stories/practices and the people who tell them. We have found this narrative based approach helpful in fostering a closer engagement of all staff and the beginning of a cultural change. When staff engaged other staff with their curriculum vitae, through dialogue, many aspects of practice began to emerge. Staff could see that there was more to their practices than they had originally thought. The critical conversation allowed them to see themselves in a new light and increased staff confidence and their ability to engage with research and scholarship. This conversational model brings together other key features of AI including the anticipatory principle and the positive principle which states that momentum and sustainable change requires positive affect and social bonding.

By starting with the positive and focusing on the best of the system or practice it can change the conversations we have and create a flow of positive energy throughout the institution. This conversation is progressed by provocatively investigating what could be, the new knowledge, models and images and how this could influence the system, processes and procedures. Perhaps the most significant aspects of ACCP are its collaborative and inclusive values. It engages institutional structures with academic practices including research, learning and teaching. It allows organisational members to be part of the design and execution of the process.

Discussion

Paul Ramsden when he was Pro Vice Chancellor, (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Sydney said that:

> "I believe that the main hope for realising a genuinely student centred undergraduate education lies in re- engineering the teaching –research nexus."

Ramsden (2001, 4)

The ACCP places the ownership of this re-engineering in the hands of all staff in the organization. It encourages more explicit consideration of the relationship between research, scholarship, teaching and professional development and alignment between individual goals and institutional / school / department strategies and policies. The processes and procedures inherent in this model continue to reflect a 'light touch' to accommodate professional autonomy and diversity, where possible. It promotes a culture that embraces critical reflection and self-regulatory learning as part of the everyday quality enhancement agenda.

A critical component in advancing culture change and organisational development is the inclusion of continuing professional development plans (CPDP) into the individual development review process. The CPDP advances opportunities to engage in appreciative critical conversations with oneself and others. This helps to augment evidence of professional standing and engagement with research and scholarship in compliance with institutional, statutory and professional body requirements. It also enables staff to benchmark their practice and development against the Professional Standards Framework (UUK,2006) and supplement their curriculum vitae. At the heart of the Framework for Professional Standards is an acknowledgement that 'the scholarly nature and subject inquiry and knowledge creation, and a scholarly to pedagogy, are unique features of higher education in the UK.' The Higher Education Academy's six areas of professional activity and the Framework for Professional Standards are therefore employed to facilitate appreciative, critical curricular conversations; articulate values and core knowledge underpinning academic practice and evidence how professional standards are met by individuals within the institution.

In compliance with the institute's aspiration to ensure that the fullest recognition is awarded to individual staff ability, potential and achievement, there has been an increase in institutional funding to support Teaching Fellowships; Fellowships to support Research and Teaching Excellence and Excellence in Operational Practice awards.

As with all systems, in some areas it works very well but in others it is not as effectively implemented or as strategic as intended. However, this is all part of the conversations we continue to have. A greater proportion of staff are now engaged in more meaningful staff development.

The UK Framework for Professional Standards in Teaching and Supporting Learning (UK PSF) were launched on the 23 February 2006 by Universities UK (UUK), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP), the Higher Education Academy and the higher education funding bodies for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK PSF acknowledges the distinct nature of teaching in higher education; respects the autonomy of HEIs and the unique features of higher education including the scholarly nature of subject inquiry and knowledge creation. We have embraced these and have designed continuing professional development plans (CPDP) to be used, where appropriate, as part of the development review process. Thus the UK PSF can be employed to frame appreciative critical conversations and enable staff to evidence academic practice, leadership and where appropriate, academic management in compliance with national and institutional requirements. An additional feature is that the outcomes can be used as part of the application for HE Academy Associate Fellow or Fellow status.

The Inter-professional CPD Framework was accredited by the Higher Education Academy in December 2006. The HEI became the first in Wales and the second in the UK to achieve this recognition. Accredited status means that NEWI now has the right to determine who becomes an Associate or full Fellow of the Academy. Only the Academy can confer Senior Fellowship status.

The Institute recognises the importance of securing a broader understanding of the nature of research and scholarship which also includes advanced pedagogic research (innovative research on or in practice). It is committed to implementing a strategy for promoting research and scholarship that aligns with the learning and teaching strategy. These strategies endorse advancement of knowledge, a scholarly approach to practice; commitment to excellence, quality enhancement; continuous professional development and effective academic leadership and management. Progress has been made in aligning this strategy to the institutional learning and teaching strategy but there is more work to be done; work to win the hearts and minds of the research and teaching communities who often perceive themselves as very different. At the heart of this process are the appreciative, critical conversations that constitute the bringing together of theory and practice.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a model of staff development that brings research and scholarly activity closer to the 'chalk face' by providing the means for a critical engagement of both. These critical conversations are taking place in an institute that is going through taught degree awarding powers (tDaps) and Quality Assurance Agency Institutional Review processes. This has been only possible with the help of key stakeholders in the Institute and the HE Academy. It has already led to substantive gains in acknowledging the work, often unseen, that has been going on in the institute and has provided an appreciative but critical context for future staff development. We too are learning as we go along but a critical mass of staff members has joined us on this journey. We do not pretend that it is a perfect solution but it does provide an inclusive context and a critical framework for all members of staff to engage with the institute's strategic direction and their own. Do you?

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