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University teacher development program impact beyond graduation: More than changing the individual

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The common contexts, purposes and evaluation models of university teacher development (UTD) programs all reflect an expectation that the influence of the program will endure and spread once participants graduate. Such programs are expected to have impact beyond the individual participant and to affect the academic practices of participants' colleagues, departments and institution. Evaluation of these programs has focussed primarily on the endurance of program outcomes associated with individual participants' conceptions and approaches, rather than influence on practices in the context of the academic community and institution. Consequently, evidence of this kind of impact is limited. This paper evaluates the impact of UTD programs on both individuals and the organisations and communities in which they work through a close examination of one such program. We explore the experiences of nine participants from various countries working in their home institutions following completion of a discipline-specific Masters of Education program. The program's philosophy and structure closely mirrored centrally run UTD programs, offering modules in student learning, scholarship of teaching and learning, evaluation, assessment and curriculum design.

Impact studies of UTD programs traditionally report on changes in individual participants' conceptions. This study shows that those changed conceptions influence participants' work and, to varying extents, become shared public property amongst participants' colleagues and workgroups. Participants shared their ideas with colleagues, in their workgroups, in instances of strategic citizenship (such as committees) and instances of scholarship (such as conferences). The ideas shared are often participants' critical reinterpretation of existing teaching, assessment and curriculum practices. Generative, reflective dialogue, particularly the re-interpretation of the premises of existing practices, can engender a collective sense of valuing teaching and supporting innovation in organisations. In many cases, however, it may lead to contestation with participants reporting on their own contesting and resisting of existing routines and of having colleagues contest and resist their ideas and actions. To unravel this underexplored aspect of program impact this study uses a hermeneutic approach to analysing interviews as texts to examine how practice, as a collective entity, bridges individual actions and organisational culture. This approach to interpreting impact will inform curriculum transformation within professional development programs and better equip participants in such programs to foster innovation in the teaching and curriculum design practices located in their workgroups.

Keywords: practice, capacity building, professional learning

Introduction

This paper evaluates the impact of university teacher development (UTD) programs through an examination of one such program. It explores participants' experiences of working in their home institution following completion of a Master of Medical Education at the University of Sydney, Australia. The program's outcomes and structure closely mirrored centrally run UTD programs, with graduates completing subjects in student learning, the scholarship of teaching and learning, evaluation, assessment and curriculum design (Whelan et al., 2015). Learning activities encouraged critical analysis, reflective practices and negotiated project work. Program participants were medical practitioners and medical educators, including teachers of medical students in university teaching hospitals.

The program aimed to improve the quality of medical education by helping participants develop a deeper understanding of principles and practices underpinning teaching and learning in higher education and medicine, and improving their skills in developing curriculum, assessment and evaluation. Participants complete eight x 6 credit point subjects for a Masters qualification. Part time, on-campus study was the most common study pattern with participants typically undertaking two subjects per semester requiring a total commitment of 20 hours study time per week for two 13-week semesters each year. Each subject comprised one three-hour fortnightly evening class with further online participation and independent study required between classes. Subjects were also offered in fully online mode to assist interstate participants. The average cohort size was 15 participants in a given year.

The majority of evaluations of UTD programs have focussed on the endurance of program outcomes associated with participants' individual confidence, conceptions and approaches, rather than influence on practices within their academic community and institution (Prebble et al., 2005; Stes et al., 2010). While some recent studies have begun to consider changes in participants' networks of colleagues (van Waes et al., 2015) evidence of broader organisational impact is limited with many evaluations relying on snapshots of participants' attitudes and intentions captured through surveys and assessment processes at the completion of the program. These snapshots are valuable in creating a set of understandings of the immediate effect of the programs but leave other contexts unexplored.

This study aims to better understand the impact of UTD programs on teachers and the changes they make to improve the quality of education in their workplaces post-graduation.

Background

UTD programs anticipate that participants will continue learning and developing their academic practice beyond the end of the program. Two foundational concepts in Australian UTD programs are that participants learn through reflection on practice and through the scholarship of teaching and learning (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). The development of individual teaching and educational practice is seen to occur through participants' reflection on experience, education theory and research.

Reflection does not focus only on the individual teachers' awareness of what they know and how they go about their own teaching. They are also encouraged to reflect on why they go about their practice in the way they do (Kreber, 2013). Reflection on existing premises is also encouraged as a way of becoming aware of the departmental and institutional social order, control and authority and challenging the departmental norms and values that underpin

existing teaching and assessment methods and play out in course and curriculum review committees. Few studies of UTD programs have looked deeply at the interaction between program participants and the organisational culture, climate or teaching environment (Knight, 2006; Parsons et al., 2012; Pleschová & Simon, 2013). Most authors identify collegial or departmental attitudes that would provide a fertile environment in which participants could apply their learning from the UTD program (for example Chalmers & Gardiner, 2015). They do not explore how participants or the program would themselves create or promote such an environment or how they could or should interact with an organisational environment which is less supportive or conducive to change.

Social practice theorists have provided a means of re-evaluating learning practices in organisations (Schatzki, 2017; Nicolini, 2013). They have considered the elements of organisational culture, organisational learning, practices and reflection on practice through a social lens. They focus more on context as the learning cultures in which individuals participate, the cultures they and others call into being, shape and maintain through their participation, and in which they develop as individuals.

Understanding how the tensions between existing understandings and practices and new understandings and new practices are resolved is crucial to investigating how these programs might achieve their intended outcomes. Rather than concentrating on individual conceptions, attitudes, behaviours and choices, a practice-focused view of learning highlights participation in socially constituted practices. Meaning is seen to reside in collective practice rather than in individuals' heads. Practices are generally conceptualised as a nexus of activities, utterances and material artefacts held together by specific elements of shared understanding, rules and goal-oriented ends (Schatzki, 2001). If UTD program participants adopt the beliefs and attitudes encouraged within the programs, they may be seen as carriers of particular student-focused, critically reflective and scholarly academic practices. For these to become practices located in their workgroup culture, in the sense of practices as collective doings and sayings, there may need to be negotiation, lobbying, bargaining and possibly contestation.

Research approach

In this study we focused on longer-term program impact (1-3 years post-graduation) as a phenomenon experienced and understood by the participant, the researchers and to some extent the reader of this research. We adopted an approach rooted in hermeneutic phenomenology where the meaning of impact is not about uncovering a stable reality or true definition but about refreshing and clarifying the interpretation of impact as a lived phenomenon (Gadamer, 1975/1989; Lavery, 2003). One of the reasons for choosing this method was that previous studies in approaching impact as an object or series of items to be reported on, often at the end of the program, and via predetermined indicators, have minimised the idea of impact as an experience, interpreted and understood by people over time and in different contexts. The choice of the hermeneutic method fits well with an understanding of higher education as the domain of reflective and critical human beings (Barnett, 1997).

As the coordinator of a Master of Medical Education program, the lead author of this paper had encouraged program participants to analyse and critique the education activities they used in their work and to develop plans and projects for renewing those activities. Although the program received positive feedback in semester evaluations, she wanted to know whether the

participants had been able to implement their plans and change learning, teaching and assessment activities in their own work settings beyond graduation.

To gain some understanding of these issues the lead author interviewed 9 participants who had completed the program 1-3 years earlier. Formal approval to conduct the study was received from the university ethics committee. Emails invitations to participate in the study were sent to 40 graduates. The interviews were audiotaped with participants' permission and transcribed. Seven interviews were conducted in participants' workplaces, or a location of their choice, two were phone interviews. Participants were asked about the effects they believed the program had on them, what (if any) aspects of the program they had made use of in their work, and how (or whether) they had made changes in their work based on what they had learnt. Where appropriate, they were prompted to elaborate on specific instances related to their responses. The interviews were semi-structured and 60-90 minutes duration. Four steps were used in a hermeneutic analysis of the interview texts including a clustering of central concerns (loci) and the determination of thematic groupings related to these concerns. A complete interview guide and description of analytic stages is available in Pizzica (2016).

Findings

Participants' accounts constituted a pattern of three broad loci of interactions with students, interactions with colleagues, and interactions with the profession. Interactions with students concentrated on how participants had changed their classroom teaching to incorporate more student-centred activities. This is the locus most commonly reported on in other studies (Hood & Houston, 2016). This paper primarily focuses on the locus of participants' interactions with colleagues; the other loci are explored in depth in Pizzica (2016).

The locus in which participants interacted with colleagues either in their immediate work environment or in their broader professional activities seemed to centre around two interlinked experiences. One was participants' increased sense of confidence and involvement in aspects of education related to academic citizenship such as advising colleagues and sharing education ideas. The other was participants' management of their colleagues' reaction to those ideas. Reported reactions included acceptance, perpetuation and contestation.

Reactions of colleagues: Acceptance and perpetuation

Post-program, all participants reported feeling more confident about sharing their curriculum ideas and expressed an increased sense of legitimacy and authority in doing so because their ideas were informed by theory, research and new experiences from the program. To varying degrees they saw their environments as places where they could share ideas by advising colleague and engaging in education projects, committees and scholarship.

For Ruth (pseudonym), a hospital-based medical educator and general practitioner, the program had helped to alleviate her feelings of isolation in her part-time education role in the rural teaching hospital. Post-program, she felt that her conversations with colleagues had begun to change and she was "surprised" as clinical specialists in the hospital began to approach her for advice about their teaching. Ruth expressed a growing assurance in the value she placed on educational ideas and expertise, a change that was, to some extent, being communicated to and shared with her colleagues:

It's given me the authority to actually be able to talk to other clinicians. Particularly as a general practitioner, talking to a specialist or a consultant physician, having the

education degree has given me that authority to be able to say to them ‘think about doing it like this’, whereas I wouldn’t have done that [previously].

Ruth noted above that post-program her education expertise helped her to recognise and circumvent a communication division between medical specialties that had hampered collegial conversations about education in the hospital.

Naveen, a lecturer in a university medical education unit in a faculty of medicine, noted that as more of his colleagues in the unit completed UTD programs, they became “like sparring partners” for discussions about learning and teaching.

We have the theory about why we should to do this and then the theory to know what the outcomes will be like. So we’d say ‘Okay why don’t we give it a shot’.

Like Naveen, Nicole reflected on post-program changes to the quality of her interactions with an existing local community of colleagues interested in education. Working with a small team of medical educators in a medical education unit of a teaching hospital, she recalled projects and research that she had begun in the program had sparked further work with her colleagues.

We are lucky that we have an education group that we can be a part of. There is that constant professional collaboration around education. We had several presentations for the hospital at the last [conference]. It’s nice to be able to share that and nobody is dismissive of ideas about research around education. It’s a valued part of our work where I work.

Nicole noted that program had helped her to feel that she could provide more research-informed and trustworthy counsel to colleagues. She felt “more confident to talk about educational issues” and “more authoritative” in her role.

I don’t just feel I’m arguing for something on the basis of intuition. I am equipped now to go and do the research and talk to the appropriate people to support a change or support retaining something.

All participants spoke of sharing ideas about teaching and learning with colleagues in their workgroups. The three instances above are examples from participants where such ideas were welcomed, negotiated, and to varying degrees, the ideas became shared public property amongst their colleagues and workgroups. In those instances generative and reflective dialogue with colleagues engendered a collective sense of valuing teaching and supporting innovation in teaching and learning in organisations.

Reactions of colleagues: Resistance and contestation

Participants’ interactions with colleagues foregrounded elements of the group teaching and learning regime—the “constellation of rules, assumptions, practices and relationships related to teaching and learning” (Trowler & Cooper, 2002, p. 224). In particular, participants noted that sharing ideas was not always a benign activity. At times ideas were contested and resisted by colleagues, causing some frustration and, at times, disillusionment. This arose particularly in actions related to how assessment practices were perpetuated within their workgroups.

Omera, a general practitioner and lecturer in a university medical education unit, reported that her efforts to discuss and revise assessments were diminished as an established senior staff member (the unit secretary) with considerable influence within the organisation argued her

suggestions down in education meetings. Omera had suggested changing the unit's existing assessment practices which involved a heavy load of frequent testing through summative multiple choice examinations. She noted that her suggestions were contested more to maintain the established hierarchy than for educational reasons.

Before, the unit secretary was the place for people to ask something. But (then) people came to see me and discussed and believed me more.

Omera alluded to the secretary's habit of arguing down suggestions in the education meetings.

In our faculty I'm still young and so sometimes I feel not quite brave or not quite comfortable to argue with people who are far older than me, especially when they defend their argument not in the right way.

Post-program Omera had the changed tutorial activities and an assessment task in a subject she coordinated. She had led an assessment working group in her department and several of her colleagues had sought her advice on education matters. However, she was despondent that she had been unable to successfully lobby for further assessment changes through the unit's education committee. She noted that although she was the only person in her department to have a UTD qualification she felt she did not have the necessary authority. She said of herself "I just looked like a tiger without claws" and concluded that her faculty would not implement the changes she felt were necessary. She subsequently took a leave of absence to pursue higher qualifications in medical education:

I had planned to do a Ph.D, especially after I experienced not good acceptance in my faculty, especially from people that don't want me to change anything.

Ruth noted a similar incident where she felt that an inappropriate assessment practice was allowed to continue due to the lack of will to oppose the actions of a more influential and senior staff member, this time a hospital-based clinician. In an audit of assessment activities she noted that a specialty clinician administering a clinical exam was assessing a more complex skill set and higher level of knowledge than what was expected in curriculum's learning objectives. Furthermore the method the clinician was using during the simulated clinical examination was inauthentic to the clinical situation and would compromise student results. She approached the department for support for her suggestions.

I was told that was the way they've done it for 30 years and that was the way they would continue to do it ... So until the Professor retires, that's the way we're going to be doing it. I felt that was a) not aligning the learning objectives with the assessment, and b) the assessment was totally mad.

Next she notified the education committee whom she noted said they would "look into it" but did not address her suggestions and finally she wrote to the associate dean, without response. As Ruth tried different strategies for changing the assessment, it became clearer to her that the workgroup had allowed a poor practice to continue. It was not solely the work of a single staff member; rather, others in education leadership positions had allowed the practice to continue unopposed and seemed not to want to intervene to assist her efforts. She expressed frustration that the department refuted her suggestions not because people in the specialty had thoughtfully reviewed them or weighed up the relative merits of the different assessment techniques. Rather, the specialty had defended its right not to change by appealing to the established practices within the workgroup.

Participants had to navigate some negative emotional impacts, such as frustration and confusion, and potentially negative professional impacts where they experienced conflict with colleagues. As participants questioned and challenged the existing teaching and learning regimes in their local contexts, they frequently dealt with conflict by withdrawing and returning to working within whichever local context they felt accepted practice provided them the freedom or support to teach and assess in more student-centred ways.

Baden, a specialty clinician and medical educator in a teaching hospital, noted that his work on new approaches to assessment in the program helped to bring his ideas to the attention of his disciplinary colleagues in his specialty college. In the program, he had undertaken a research project on “hot new ideas coming from the UK” related to workplace-based assessment practices. The college invited him to present at the college education committee meeting. After the meeting, however, it seemed to him that his ideas, although welcomed by an interested committee, were not pursued any further. His suggestions were not immediately rejected or argued down as Ruth and Omera’s had been, but he felt that they were widely ignored and thus resisted. Feeling that he hadn’t made any headway with the college, Baden continued his assessment projects locally as the director of training in the hospital.

Three years later he was able to join the college’s assessment committee to review the specialty’s training curriculum. He noted that the earlier gap between his own and the college’s positions on assessment and curriculum had since lessened:

They’ve since used some of that information [in my proposal] to help them. The model they’re using now is not so dissimilar to something that we’d done as a project [in his hospital] earlier on.

He expressed some bemusement but no rancour over the length of time the college had taken to come around to his earlier recommendations. When he spoke of “feeling useful” to the college he portrayed a sense of their shared goal of effecting change in the assessment model in the rewriting of the national curriculum.

Post-program, the sharing of ideas did not happen in a vacuum. The reactions of colleagues were both supportive and oppositional. Working with these reactions constituted a major part of the participants’ narratives. When participants worked in environments where sharing ideas about teaching and learning were already a practice of their workgroups, the impact of the program was often to strengthen that practice through its perpetuation and variation. In many cases, however, the long-term impact was also manifested in participants’ accounts of contesting and resisting existing routines and of having colleagues contest and resist their ideas and actions.

Discussion

Academic citizenship and UTD impact on collective practice

A major finding from this study was that participants spoke of increasing their participation in academic service activities. They felt more confident to participate and their involvement and the type of counsel they provided tended to change post-participation. Categorising their work using Macfarlane’s (2007) service pyramid participants contributed to collegial service through sharing of educational ideas and solving of educational issues with colleagues. They represented research and theory informed perspectives in instance of institutional service

through education committees and workgroup meetings. They engaged in disciplinary and professional service by publishing results of education research and projects at conferences and through sharing of ideas in external curriculum committees.

Exploring the longer-term impact of the program as the experiences of participants showed that sharing ideas was not always a benign activity. To unravel it more thoroughly, we need to seek theoretical constructs that clarify our understanding of how practice, as a collective entity, bridges individual actions and organisational culture. In order to examine the processes through which UTD program impact occurs, we need to take account of how climate is brought into being through complex social interactions some years beyond graduation and that participants themselves are involved in the creation of the environment within which they must operate. Reported changes in interactions and participants' focus could be seen as individual changes in behaviour. However when the participant is seen as an actor within their departmental network (Roxå, Mårtensson, & Alveteg, 2011), these effects are also suggestive of changes in what is valued within the department as participants create new networks for dialogue.

Sometimes participants encountered receptive environments and the impact of the program was a simultaneous perpetuation and variation of workgroup practices which Price, Scheeres and Boud (2009) have articulated as part of the process of remaking existing practices in organisations. Some participants reported this happening as the innovations they were introducing in their own work attracted the attention of colleagues and initiated broader conversations about learning and teaching within their organisations.

The more challenging and less immediately enabling and positive elements of program impact discussed by participants were the kinds of interactions overlooked by more standard models of UTD program impact. In particular, in instances where colleagues contested participants' ideas, what dominated the participants' accounts were the more complex interactions between the program, the participants and the collective practices in their workgroups. Post-program, participants' actions challenged and sought to break, replace and remake practices. Contentious resistance occurred as the idea-sharing and collegial decision making practices (Macfarlane, 2007; Gosling, 2006) came into contact with the established practices of prestige, expertise and deferral to clinical expertise in medicine (Creed, Searle & Rogers, 2010).

Impact as a longer-term phenomenon

Commentary on the practices of workgroups, organisations and professions permeated participants' reports and emerged as an integral part of understanding their post program experiences. Impact of UTD programs, understood as a socially mediated longer-term phenomenon, is created in the contexts in which participants operate. One of the difficulties with studying the impact of UTD programs is that there have been very few evaluations that have drawn out participants' experiences over a longer term. A more comprehensive picture of the impact of such programs can be productively generated from interviews eliciting stories and commentary on the experiences of participants in their workplaces and professional lives over a period of years after completing the program.

Conclusion

Change in an individual is never a simple thing. Change in an organisation is more complex still. Evaluation of the impact of UTD programs needs to grapple with this issue of complexity. If an aim of UTD programs is to effect change in educational practices, it must be through a complex understanding of complex relationships. Longer-term UTD impact, as

interpreted in this study, is achieved through subtle and complex negotiation between members of an organisation subject to the equally complex interplay of things such as status, experience and reputation within the organisation. Practice theory provides a way to navigate between seeing the locus of change in the individual and seeing the individual as being shaped and shaping the groups and organisations to which she or he belongs.

The historical focus of UTD program impact evaluations on the individual as the unit of analysis has constrained the questions asked of such programs. A practice theory lens acknowledges that participants' work and the environments in which they operate are imbued with collectively agreed ways of understanding how learning and teaching get done. Applying this to UTD programs more broadly, the practice theory lens enables us to understand that participants in such programs are also participants in the education practices of their organisations and professions. They share their colleagues' practical know-how, observe or disregard rules. Changing practices and evaluating those changes should, therefore, no longer be seen as being about barriers or enablers to the transfer of ideas but about shifts and breaks in collectively agreed ends and ways of operating.

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