

Academic work-based learning: an analysis of three activities

People Involved

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Key Words

Academic practice; teaching; mentoring; service; activity theory.

Description

Academic work typically comprises three dimensions: research, teaching, and service. However, training for would-be academic staff undertaken during doctoral studies has been criticised for its emphasis on research and lack of preparation for other academic roles (Roberts 2002). Many doctoral graduates find employment in different kinds of HEI (eg. post-1992) where workplace cultures, roles and practices are quite different from the research-intensive universities where most doctoral degrees are earned. This study examines three different activities, grounded in academic workplaces, which have the potential to address some of these criticisms and tensions.

The framework described by Eraut (2007) will be used to inform the analysis. This defines different relationships between work-based activities or experiences and learning: work processes with learning as a by-

product, learning activities located within work processes, and learning processes at or near the workplace. The framework described by Eraut (2007) will be used to inform the analysis. This defines different relationships between work-based activities or experiences and learning: work processes with learning as a by-product, learning activities located within work processes, and learning processes at or near the workplace.

Finally, doctoral student involvement in journal editing constitutes an example of engagement in academic service – the third dimension of academic work. Here the experience can be characterised as primarily informal in nature, relating to work processes which involve learning as a by-product. An advantage of using Eraut's typology is that it has scope to incorporate formal and informal learning processes, and draws attention to differences between activities explicitly set up for the purposes of learning (mentoring) and those primarily oriented around achievement of a work-related objective (journal editing). Teaching development programmes could be seen to lie at the midpoint of this continuum, involving learning activities located directly within work processes.

The project will address the

following research questions:

1. What are the commonalities and variations between these activities with respect to:
 - a. What doctoral students learn about academic work?
 - b. How they contribute to doctoral students' development and identity as academics?
2. What are the implications of the response to question 1 for universities with large doctoral student populations?

Question 1 will be addressed directly through empirical investigation, while question 2 will form the focus of a collaborative workshop bringing together members of participating institutions.

In addition to drawing on Eraut's (2007) work, data collection and analysis will be informed by Activity Theory (AT) (eg. Engstrom 1999; see also Blackler 1993). AT has strengths in exploring interactions between individuals, the resources which support work-based learning and the contexts (structural, social, cultural) in which different activities are situated. In this way it is seen to address issues of relationships between agency



and structure (Roth and Lee 2007). This framework allows, within the context of the research questions above, exploration of individual or organisational purposes and objectives (in both the function of the three activities, and in considering implications for policy and practice).

Activity Theory can be used to explore commonalities and variations between different activities (incorporating individual subjects, their goals, collective or organisational objectives, resources, rules (formal, cultural), communities, and roles/division of labour (who does what). The application of AT to the context of doctoral education constitutes a novel contribution to the field (Hopwood & McAlpine 2007).

Methodology

This is a qualitative multiple case study of three different activities (teaching development, mentoring scheme, journal editing) as contexts for doctoral student learning in and about academic work.

Fieldwork will be conducted in six universities, incorporating five teaching development programmes for doctoral students, two cross-institutional career mentoring schemes, and two student-edited journals. More examples of teaching development are included as this is the more common form of activity, and disciplinary variation is particularly relevant in this case (discipline-based pedagogy).

Focus groups will explore the ways participants learn from each activity. Individual interviews will probe themes in greater detail. Relevant documentary evidence will be collected. The total number of doctoral student participants is

expected to be over 20.

Participants will be sampled from a range of disciplines, and attempts will be made to ensure approximate proportionality across the whole sample in terms of gender, age, and nationality (reflecting UK doctoral demographics according to HESA data).

Outcomes

- Improved understanding of ways in which three different activities can support doctoral student learning about and preparation for academic work;
- Contribution to theoretical literature through use of AT;
- Enhanced and extended interaction between Oxford and IoE CETLs and wider CETL networks;
- Increased research capacity (study offers developmental experience for Dr Hopwood).

In addition, the project will produce deliverables in the form of a workshop in which members of the participating institutions discuss emerging findings, consider implications and plan future collaboration; summary reports addressing relevant user groups; and academic conference presentations and journal publications.

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