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Advocates for teaching: reconceptualising the practice of teaching development in a university

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Abstract: Teaching development units have been provided at most Australasian and British universities over the last thirty years. Typically, units have provided workshops, courses and individual consultations in a variety of formats. These units have always attracted enthusiasts, but have often struggled to bring about a fundamental shift in organisational thinking about teaching. At the same time, external pressures such as Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) draw academics away from teaching concerns and create additional challenges for staff developers.

The Teaching Development Unit (TDU) at the University of Waikato (UoW) is reconceptualising its approach with a view to building a culture in which advocates for teaching can help to build capability and capacity in teaching across the organisation. The goal is to promote and develop "solidarity networks" of people who value teaching across the academic community and to reinforce this with teaching advocacy at the strategic and policy levels so that institutional norms, processes and policies indicate a high regard for teaching and require accountability from academics in relation to teaching matters.

The TDU has been building a culture of advocacy in a number of ways and in different forums. These include involvement in the design of key teaching-related policies and participation on the Teaching Quality Committee.¹ Other initiatives include a cross campus teaching network, a postgraduate supervisors' conversation network, and the setting up of faculty advocates to co-ordinate teaching-related initiatives.

The TDU is using an action research model to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives and to inform modifications and refinements. In this oral presentation, we present our findings to date and reflect on the successes and limitations of our model of "solidarity networks" in strengthening organisational culture and capability around teaching.

Introduction: The University of Waikato is a relatively new university, established in 1964. It is a university that prides itself on the quality of its research, with several departments being rated top in New Zealand in the Performance-Based Research Fund exercise (PBRF). There have been many comments made by authors (see, for instance, Middleton, 2009; Roa, Beggs, Williams and Moller, 2009) about the merits and disadvantages of the PBRF for university staff. One relatively common criticism, both in the literature and heard anecdotally, is that the PBRF's emphasis on the production and measurement of research has led to a situation in which teaching is becoming undervalued.

¹ The Teaching Quality Committee (TQC) is a Committee with cross-university representation that exists to develop and promote teaching and learning-related policies and practices

Our university has striven to counter that perception in a number of ways. It has recently approved a substantial Teaching and Learning Plan, closely linked to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that require Faculties and departments to encourage sound teaching and assessment practices. This work has just been the subject of very favourable comment by an external audit group. The institution has trialled and is now implementing across the university a 40/40/20 workload policy, with teaching and research being 40% each and 'service' or administrative responsibilities the remaining 20%. It operates a Teaching Excellence Awards scheme that allows excellence in teaching to be recognised by students, staff and the wider university (two of the University's staff also received National Teaching Excellence Awards in 2010, of eleven successful nominees across the country). It is currently investigating a more balanced approach to promotions to counter suggestions that it is research, rather than teaching, which counts overall for promotion. It also funds our Teaching Development Unit, which has been operating since 1990 and acts to promote and support quality teaching practice across the university.

In an effort to ensure that students are receiving the best teaching that the University can provide, part of our Unit comprises the Appraisals staff, who operate the UoW appraisal of teaching system via a combination of online and paper-based appraisal forms. Appraisals cover both the content and delivery of papers, and the quality of the teaching provided. We, as a unit, have had some concerns around appraisals which we have expressed in high-level forums such as the Teaching Quality Committee and in preparation for the external Quality Audit held in 2010. These concerns include the issue that aspects of the appraisals results are not open to wider scrutiny than that of the staff member, who receives these comments back. The quantitative results of the *paper* appraisals (not the *teaching* appraisal results) are available to line managers and Deans, but the students' written comments are currently restricted to the staff member concerned. *Teaching* appraisals are currently confidential to the staff member. "Closing the loop" to ensure that student appraisals inform teaching improvement, then, is also part of what we have investigated in this project.

Relevant literature review: what work supports our attempts to build teaching networks and to support staff in Faculties?

"Practice without theory is blind. Theory without practice is sterile" (Marx, 1844:182). Our unit is charged with helping staff at our University to teach effectively and to meet more effectively the learning needs of their students. We have this in common with staff development units in other Universities. To do this, we need to be vigilant about evaluating the effectiveness or otherwise of our own practice and theories. We draw on the injunction of people such as McNiff and Whitehead, who encourage educators to engage enthusiastically with 'the new form of scholarship that Boyer (1990) and Schön (1995) say will enable us to rethink theory as a practical discipline oriented towards social renewal, rather than regard it as a static conceptual 'thing'' (McNiff with Whitehead, 2005, p. 1). It is this kind of work that has encouraged us to engage not only with the *practice* of teaching improvement, but with the *process* of how this occurs in times of change in tertiary institutions such as ours, particularly in times of organizational change. This is why we have engaged in intensive ways with processes such as policy reform and institution-wide audits.

Our reflection on current and past practice, and our analysis of who participates (and who does not) in teaching-related professional development activities at our university, has therefore been the prompt for our current action research, as we seek to develop a culture in

which teaching is valued equally with research. Our interest is replicated by staff engaged in similar activities elsewhere. Professional development staff from five different Australian universities, presenting at the 2010 HERDSA Conference, stated that in a 2009 OECD study, ‘One of the main findings was that teaching *matters* in HE institutions and “initiatives (actions, strategies, policies) aimed at improving the quality of teaching are spreading”’ (2009, p.4) (Brown, Bower, Skalicky, Wood, Donovan, Loch, Bloom & Joshni, 2010, p. 134, italics theirs). Later in the paper, the authors stressed that professional developers are being challenged to contextualize generic teaching and learning frameworks into forms that make sense and are applicable to staff in diverse disciplines, recognizing the different cultures that pertain in disciplines. Citing the Australian Science Teachers’ Association, for instance, they reported that

“What accomplished teachers of science know and do is different from what accomplished teachers in other fields know and do. If standards are valid – if they capture what good teachers know and can do – they must reflect these differences (ASTA, 2002, p.7)”, cited in Brown et al, op cit, p. 135.

Our reflections on our work in Faculties and departments highlight these differences and seek to meet them in ways that we outline later in the paper.

Not only are we attempting in this project to consider how we might contextualize our teaching, learning and appraisal frameworks so that they are more applicable and relevant to staff in Faculties and departments, but we are also seeking to build what Wenger (1998) calls ‘communities of practice’ by encouraging this work to occur in close consultation, and via delivery with and by, staff in the Faculties. We are striving, with staff in Faculties, to share power/knowledge by establishing networks and communities based around shared practice in teaching. Foucault, when speaking of power, described it as something which

...must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation...In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault, 1980:98).

In an institution that, like many other universities in New Zealand and elsewhere, is being affected by economic pressures to restructure and to lay off staff, it is easy for staff to feel devalued and disempowered. It is tempting for them to concentrate on the ‘high-status’ aspects of their work, which since the implementation of New Zealand’s Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) has been research. We understand, from substantial anecdotal feedback, that research has also been valued in the promotions round above teaching. Our project is attempting to combat this unequal focus on research. We are encouraging staff to see themselves as ‘vehicles of power, not its points of application’ through wholehearted involvement in good teaching practice. We are promoting teaching excellence as an aspect of practice that can and should receive the same energy and value that research does. But for this to happen most effectively, it needs to be promoted within discipline areas by those who best understand their contexts, working alongside people such as ourselves who are *au fait* with recent literature on teaching practice and innovation, and who can provide both expertise and an ‘outsider’ perspective to balance and strengthen the discipline-based viewpoint.

The work of Smith (2009) on solidarity networks is pertinent to the ways that we are attempting to develop such networks/communities in our context. Smith, in analysing the literature on solidarity networks, describes them as ‘social relationships [that] conceive of individuals as social actors, but importantly, also emphasize the social-justice, socio-political and socio-economic dimensions of such relationships’ (Smith, 2009, p. 2). She claims that ‘diversity can foster mutual rather than narrow self-interest that also benefits the public good’ (ibid.) In our context, the establishment of a teaching network – one of our project’s ‘strands’ – is an attempt to set up such a solidarity network. It is already enabling cross-disciplinary discussion and sound practice examples to be shared. These will be elaborated on later in the paper.

As we have already indicated, we have sought to work through committees and review processes to help to bring about ‘socio-political’ changes that promote improvements in teaching practice and its valuing. This work, operating in a shifting terrain in which staff attempt to research their *teaching practice* alongside (or sometimes in place of) *discipline content*, has frequently met with resistance, if not derision. An unintended side-effect of the PBRF has been that for staff in some disciplines, to publish in their content area results in a higher payoff to them and the institution, than publishing in education-related areas (Tawhai, Pihera & Bruce Ferguson, 2004). Our work aims to counteract this resistance by encouraging staff in diverse disciplines not only to improve their practice, but to publicise their work in discipline-related and/or educational journals.

Our Post-Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching (PGCertTT) is one way of supporting staff in this kind of work. As Smith stated, in the solidarity network model, ‘strength is found in diversity; “diversity is not only accepted but valued, encouraged and celebrated, including diversity of culture, of conceptual frameworks, of ways of structuring economic institutions, or priorities, and of ways of movement building” (US Social Forum, 2007, p.3)’ (cited in Smith, op. cit, p. 3). Our Teaching Advocate initiative, part of this project, is one way of valuing, encouraging and celebrating teaching diversity. A solidarity network operates through a belief in ‘an overarching set of principles that includes mutual support and the achievement of goals through collaboration rather than competition’ (op. cit, p. 4). In our pressured environment, where staff are being laid off and competition for promotion is fierce, the establishment of a solidarity network of teachers can be a way for staff to collaborate for the common good of enhanced student achievement rather than engage in dog-eat-dog competitive practices. It can also provide support at an affective level, for those who may otherwise feel isolated.

Methodology

Having considered some relevant literature that underpins our practice, we will now explain how the idea for this project came about, and the methods that we are using to carry out the research. The Unit has five staff – a Director who has been in the institution for many years and knows how its culture operates; a Teaching Developer who runs the appraisals function and works strategically to improve teaching practice through sound evaluation and appraisal processes; a 0.5 Appraisals Administrator who assists with this work, alongside a number of short-term contracted people at peak times; a Unit Administrator who prepares the monthly TDU Talk, organises all our programmes and meetings, maintains and balances our budget and liaises with staff and senior management; and a part-time Teaching Developer who supports the educational and research-related functions of the Unit. This part-time person has a background in action research, a well-known collaborative research approach that aims to

improve practice based on reflection and action by the practitioners themselves. As all of our Unit members are valued and experienced staff in their own specialist areas, we decided to carry out a systematic 'scrutiny and improvement of practice' aimed at helping us to work more effectively with staff in departments and Faculties, recognising that we get wider uptake from some Faculties and departments than others (historical data show this trend).

Gaining ethical approval took us until mid-year, owing to the complex multi-stranded nature of the project. Effectively, we wanted to gather data on eight different TDU (Teaching Development Unit) initiatives. These included (1) 'business as usual' activities such as our regular workshops for staff, usually held in February and June; (2) one-off workshops for staff in Faculties in areas such as broadening teaching methods or strengthening assessment; (3) involvement in our Post-Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, a largely individualised programme which also incorporates some compulsory workshops from our February and June menu; (4) mentoring organised by our Unit between staff with expertise in specific areas and those hoping to broaden or develop such expertise; (5) one-to-one consultations that occur from time to time; and (6) evaluating the impact (if any) of our regular monthly teaching-related magazine, TDU Talk (www.tdu.waikato.ac.nz/tdu/tdutalk.shtml). In addition, we included two new initiatives – (7) the Teaching Network, which commenced in late 2009, and (8) our Teaching Advocates scheme, an initiative whereby we channeled a small amount of money into each Faculty to support a person who would undertake to organise (and, if necessary, offer food to support) lunchtime or other scheduled teaching-related activities. The production of a teaching-related conference paper could also be supported by this funding. TDU staff might be invited to attend and sometimes contribute to these events. However, it has taken most of 2010 for Teaching Advocates to be established in most Faculties, with the Faculty of Education choosing not to participate. In only one Faculty have more than two sessions been held during 2010.

Some of these activities are evaluated as a matter of course using standard appraisal questionnaires. Others needed to have a short questionnaire designed for them; for the more 'variable' responses such as for one-to-one consultations and PGCert Tert. Tchg involvement, we proposed to use an independent administrator from outside our unit to ensure that respondents could give honest feedback without concern for identity. We also offer Post-Graduate Supervisory Conversations that run along similar lines to the Teaching Network conversations, but after some deliberation decided to exclude this initiative from our project data because we offer it in conjunction with the Pro Vice Chancellor Post-Graduate Studies, and her practice is separate from ours. We wanted to adhere to the initiatives that are strictly TDU's provision.

Because of the delay in gaining ethics approval, we changed the action research model that we had proposed to use initially (a McNiff and Whitehead approach that would have let us complete at least one full action research intervention cycle during 2010). Instead, we are drawing on work by Piggot-Irvine (2000) and Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1994) and using a three-phase model. The first cycle, which is largely data-gathering, is termed *reconnaissance* (examination of the existing situation, in Piggot-Irvine's diagram below). In a reconnaissance cycle, the action researchers seek reliable data on how their *current* practice is impacting on recipients of that practice. This phase is what we will have achieved by the end of 2010. Having gathered and reflected on that data, the action research team then investigates whether and how their practice needs to change to improve their situation. We will now not be able to

implement the outcomes of that reflection until 2011, and may well need to seek further ethics approval if suggestions for improvement go beyond the grounds of our initial approval.

In the Piggot-Irvine and Cardno model, *intervention* cycles, of which there may be more than one, continue until the action researchers decide that it is time to *evaluate* the entire process. As can be seen in the diagram below, there are often ‘spinoff’ cycles as the interventions are being clarified. These are issues that might need further investigation, and correspond to the ‘side spirals’ suggested by some researchers (e.g. McNiff, 1988;) and discussed in Bruce Ferguson, 1999. Piggot-Irvine described her model as ‘problem resolving’, a terminology that we do not subscribe to because of our belief that action research may equally be about improving *good* practice rather than focusing on ‘problems’. However, the flexibility of Piggot-Irvine’s model has worked well for us so far, as we faced a delay in our proposed project work for 2010. With the model and methodology now described, we use the rest of the paper to reflect on results to date and to raise possible issues that may affect the ongoing progress of our work.

THE PROBLEM RESOLVING ACTION RESEARCH (PRAR) MODEL

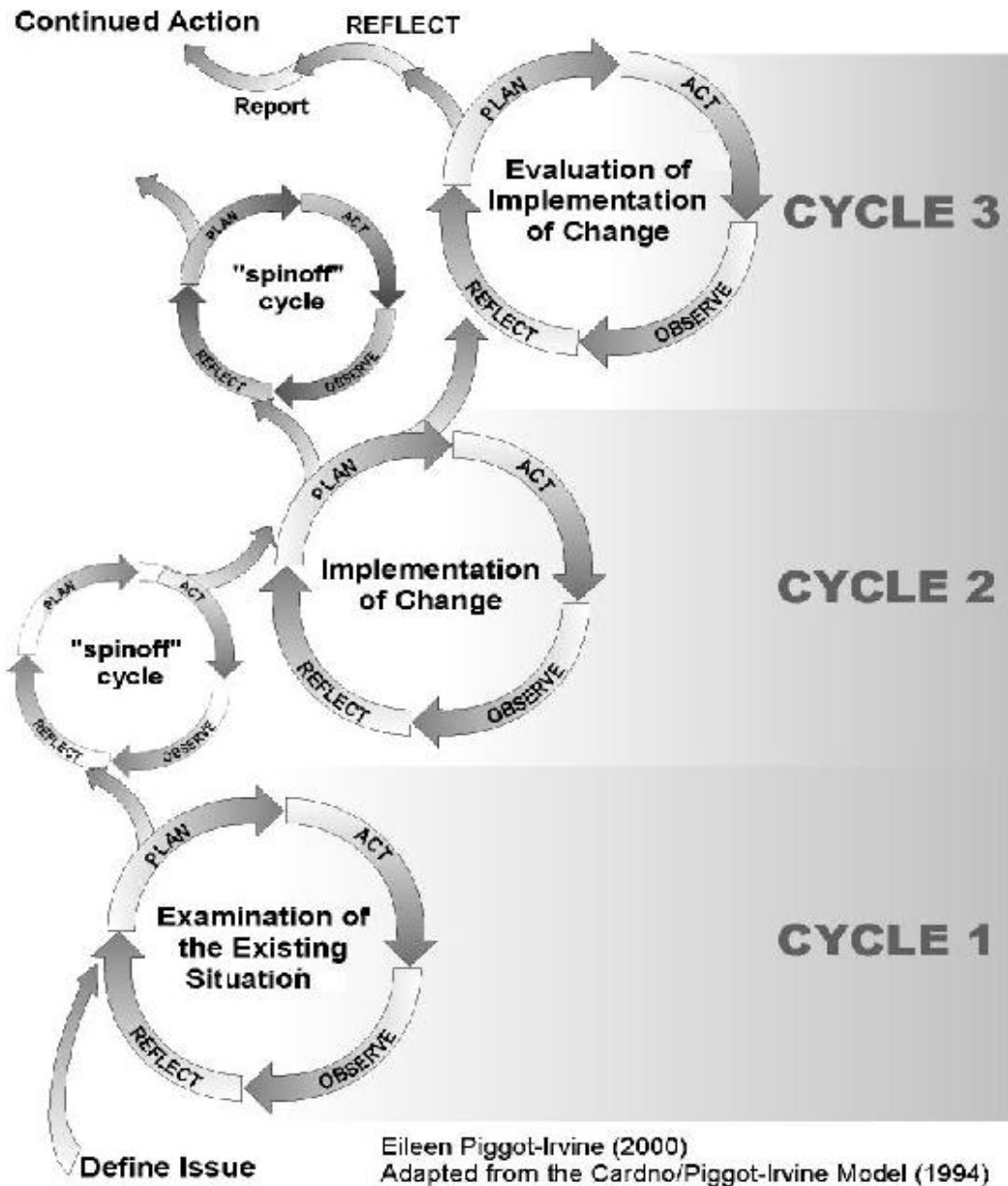


Diagram 1: Piggot-Irvine's Problem-Resolving Action Research model

Results

In this section, we present some results of data gathering that has occurred to date. As earlier mentioned, ethics approval delays meant that we could not start gathering data until early July. Results available to date are presented in the order in which the initiatives were introduced earlier in the paper.

1. University-wide workshops. In our June workshops, of the 12 respondents to the appraisal process, two were from the Faculty of Social Sciences; two from Education; two from Waikato Management School; three from the School of Māori and Pacific Development; two from the Faculty of Science and Engineering, and one ‘other’ (our workshops are open to staff from outside the University also, and it is unclear whether this person was from outside, or a part of the University, such as the Library, that doesn’t fit in a Faculty).

The results of the appraisals showed that these 12 people had attended up to nine workshops, with a total of 43 ‘attendances’ noted. 58.3% of them said they were always satisfied with the quality of the workshops offered; 25% ‘usually satisfied’; and 16.7% ‘sometimes satisfied’. Comments on how teaching practice had changed as a consequence of attending, included:

They always give me ideas that I can take back and apply to my teaching practice;

I wouldn’t say my actual practice has changed but I understand it better;

I’ve started using learning outcomes and seeking feedback more regularly from students;

I’ve become a lot more focused on being a reflective practitioner and have begun devoting more time to developing classroom materials which cater for a wider range of learning styles.

There was a wide range of comments about which workshops were of most use to staff in their professional development. Assessment, Becoming a Reflective Practitioner, Starter Strategies, Maximising Learning in Large Groups, and Evaluating My Teaching were all specifically mentioned, but several comments said ‘all of them’.

Suggestions for workshops that need to be changed/improved drew few comments, but one person felt they had not learned anything new from the Maximising Learning in Large Groups beyond what they already knew, while one wanted a clearer definition of what a Reflective Practitioner actually was, at the outset.

Suggestions for new workshops included one on designing lab classes for interactive learning; including in the workshops a ‘one-off’ session on giving peer feedback that the TDU offered in Semester B, and something on Moodle (‘but I know there is training somewhere though’ – this is offered through the Waikato Centre for e-Learning).

When asked for suggestions about how the TDU and Faculties can work together to increase teaching capacity and capability in the University, one person noted that the workshops seem to cater for inexperienced lecturers and that there needs to be a forum for discussion about teaching amongst experienced lecturers. (This is, in fact, what the role of the Teaching Advocates and the Teaching Network can achieve).²

² Further comments pertaining to the workshops appear under the feedback from PGCert Tert. Tchg, as these workshops are a required part of the Certificate.

2. No specific **one-off workshops** have been evaluated during the July – November period so no data are available on these initiatives at this point.

3. One to one interviews were carried out by an independent researcher to investigate to what extent staff find **the PGCertTert. Tchg** helpful in their teaching development practice, and as lecturers in their own specific Faculties. Some chose to keep their names and Faculty confidential, so tracing how well this programme works across Faculties is somewhat patchy.

The table attached as Appendix A summarises these responses. Overwhelmingly, the fourteen people who were interviewed were very positive about the PGCert Tert. Tchg and its ability to strengthen, support and often to change their practice. Comments included:

It has been a huge difference, like night and day for myself

When I started with the TDU workshops I was quite clueless about teaching so I think I've learnt a lot of valuable things from coming to the workshops and talking to Dorothy

This experience has been one of the most positive experiences in my university career, realizing what I didn't know and thinking of ways of developing oneself.

Typical among the comments was the recognition that teaching can operate in a much more integrated fashion than respondents had previously realized. The connection between learning outcomes and assessment was particularly strongly emphasized. Seven respondents mentioned their care now in linking learning outcomes and assessment (“It made me see a course as a package where all the parts are important”). Participants in the programme had also recognized that assessment can be used far more effectively when it provides feedback and feed forward to students (four respondents specifically mentioned this). “I am more conscious about basing learning through courses much more around a piece of assessment..to encourage students to start learning by themselves”.

Changes in pedagogy from a transmission to a facilitation mode were mentioned by eight respondents. “I initially thought that I need to prepare really good lectures and I need to cover this much content...so I have shifted in that sense from lecture-focused and assignment-focused into much broader activities”. While nine of the respondents mentioned gaining confidence, seven felt that the programme had validated what they were already doing, and ten believed that they now draw on literature relating to teaching with which they had been unfamiliar before.

As far as the way PGCert Tert. Tchg is structured (a mix of workshops, then one-to-one supervision sessions combined with twice semester-group meetings) this combination worked well for respondents. Six stated that the joint meetings were much valued, although there were two suggestions that the sessions consider focusing on specific issues rather than ‘check-in’ feedback. One respondent mentioned implementing a change to her/his own teaching based on an initiative described by a student from another Faculty, in the group meeting. The ability to ‘talk teaching’ with cross-disciplinary colleagues was appreciated. “In our School we don't have the mechanism by which people get together and talk about

teaching; they meet and talk about research but not about teaching”. The one-to-one supervision sessions and the flexibility to schedule these at need were appreciated also. One respondent mentioned the appropriateness of this format for postgraduate study.

Four respondents commented that they had developed a new idea of how they might research, by focusing on teaching practice. “I’ve never thought of publishing about my teaching but now I’m more interested in doing that.” However, this was not always supported ‘back home’. One respondent said, “I was told that publishing about teaching is a waste of time.”

There was a worrying volume of comment about the failure of the university to value teaching, in the opinion of many of these respondents. Five mentioned resistance from colleagues, with one saying, “If I go to the faculty tea room and talk about what I’m doing I would just be mocked, sadly” while another mentioned “a little secret band of happy teachers” in his/her faculty. Six respondents stated that teaching was not valued here, and wanted high-level support for this, such as research receives.

There are Deans of research but there are no Deans of teaching

The message has to come from the top that teaching is important

There is not a lot I can do to change a rather insidious culture that seems to sit quite across the whole Faculty at the moment...the effort we invest in our teaching is time away from publishing

We are so focused on the PBRF and it is totally research based, there is no incentive to work on your teaching.

Several respondents (four) stated that everybody should do the PGCert Tert. Tchg, and that its profile needed raising. This could be done by using people within a Faculty who had already done, and benefited from, the PGCert Tert. Tchg. Two felt that the Faculties should take the initiative to promote the Certificate (by implication, rather than the central University management).

Conclusions from this initiative are that the PGCert Tert. Tchg is an effective way of introducing staff to the scholarship of teaching and learning in a way that they might not otherwise have encountered; that it is helpful to staff in both shifting their own practice and giving them confidence to share with others, even if ‘in little, safe ways’; that both they and students are benefiting from more engaged practice, and that the Certificate work is valued and should be extended across the University. The suggestions for improvement were small, and mainly related to ways of tightening up the group discussions by enrolled PGCert Tert. Tchg students. These suggestions will be considered for our 2011 iteration, as will suggestions about helping the University and Faculties to promote the Certificate better to their staff.

4. **Mentoring:** no specific feedback has been sought for this project on mentoring at this point.

5. **One-to-one consultations:** as these have tended to overlap largely with the PGCert Tert. Tchg interviews, separate interviews have not been conducted during 2010 with this cohort, numbers of which are fairly small.

6. **TDU Talk:** feedback on this initiative, a magazine produced by TDU to disseminate recent literature and examples of good practice from this University and elsewhere, has been gathered via questionnaires on the workshops, and also by the independent researcher gathering data on PGCert Tert. Tchg. Of the twelve workshop participants, eight reported reading TDU Talk. Responses to its impact included:

...articles that spark a particular train of thought or indicate that I'm on the right track

Seeing techniques/ideas that are cross-discipline

All articles I've read have been useful...some particularly useful have been examples of innovative teaching and assessment ideas, and strategies for both giving feedback to students and receiving it from them

Reading the 'case studies' – the problems people face, their thinking process/values etc. and how they implement their solutions...It also helps me in my role as a teacher developer with our current staff and with development courses for overseas teachers

A similar range of feedback was received through the one-to-one interviews with PGCert Tert. Tchg respondents. Comments included:

It is a very helpful publication

I find it more useful as a tool for my teaching and I really love it

A fantastic resource which covers a wide range of different topics...very relevant to our everyday concerns and practices

Three respondents tended to get the copy, give it a 'quick flick through' and then file for future reference. Four commented that they like getting the 'hard copy' (TDU Talk is also available online). Six of the fourteen respondents tended to read just articles that interested them; four felt that the magazine contained good reflective material. Two commented that they find specific issues relating to a topic really interesting. Two mentioned its specific help in directing them to relevant scholarly research. On the basis of this initial feedback, it would appear that TDU Talk is a valued cross-university initiative that should be maintained. There were no suggestions for change.

7. The Teaching Network: Five teaching network meetings were held during 2010. We were not able to invite participants to feed back on the effectiveness of these until after the June event, for ethical reasons. Sessions run in 2010 covered building links between research and teaching (12 attendees); student preparedness for tertiary study, and how staff can optimize this (26 attendees); improving the first year learning experience: progression, completion and retention (18 attendees); interdisciplinary teaching integration and developing our identities as teachers (15 attendees); and tertiary assessment, with Professor John Hattie from the University of Auckland, (19 attendees). Despite an explanation at the last three sessions about the action research initiative, and an invitation for staff to provide feedback, only three respondents completed an ethics consent form. As all of these people have been involved in other aspects of the action research, we did not want to overburden their goodwill by getting them to complete questionnaires as well. Accordingly, while the verbal feedback on the Network (some of which is gathered through the PGCertTT interviews) is positive, it does not appear that participants at these meetings are inclined to provide specific research-related feedback on this initiative. However, we will continue the Network in 2011 because of the feedback we *have* received (and as the ongoing numbers show) that indicates the Network is appreciated.

8. Teaching Advocates: This initiative was commenced during the year. However, the uptake was patchy initially. The Faculty of Science and Engineering was the first to appoint an advocate, who has run four very successful sessions focusing on ways of teaching science (12 registrations); transition between school and university for a NZ-educated science (15 registrations); examples of both successful and unsuccessful teaching initiatives in Faculty classrooms (8 registrations); and writing and using learning outcomes (being run this week; registrations not yet clear).

The School of Management Studies' teaching advocate was appointed next, and ran one session concurrently with a teaching-related conference that was offered by the School. The School of Māori and Pacific Development offered a session introducing teaching advocacy and inviting staff input (10 registrations); however restructuring in that School has affected the ongoing offering of advocacy sessions there. The Faculty of Computing and Mathematical Sciences' teaching advocate is also their Dean; he has so far offered a session on teaching advocacy (16 registrations) and a session on writing and use of learning outcomes (15 registrations). There has been extensive restructuring in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; accordingly a teaching advocate in that Faculty has yet to be appointed. The Faculty of Education chose not to participate in the process.

Feedback from the advocates suggests that, on a Likert scale of 1 – 5 where 1 is very effective and 5 is not at all effective, all Advocates rated themselves as 3. One said while some staff were very open to talking about teaching, others didn't want to be involved in the discussions. One noted that Teaching Excellence Awards had been met with some hostility in his/her Faculty and that reflected badly on the Advocate. It was clear from all Advocates that our relatively 'non-directive' approach with regard to how Advocates might operate, had been less than successful. In our attempt to ensure that Faculties could design sessions that would best suit their staff, we obviously did not give sufficient information/support to

Advocates about how sessions *could* be run, nor co-ordinate common meetings where they could discuss what worked well or otherwise, in other Faculties. Two rated TDU support positively (1 and 2 respectively) while a third rated it 4. This person found out later in the year what Advocates had been doing in other Faculties and felt s/he would have benefited from receiving this information earlier. One Advocate said time would make a more effective Advocate – “rather than having it as another extra thing to do”, and also “explicitly stated support from the Dean, e.g. emphasizing the role in Board of Studies.” These are good suggestions and have provided ideas to us for strengthening the role, and our support for it, in 2011.

Discussion

This action research project to date has revealed aspects of complexity in our work environment that we were not fully aware of at the time of its conception. Darwin recently advocated

the consideration of alternative ‘second generation’ evaluation models for higher education that better reflect contemporary understandings of the complex social nature of learning. These might focus on collective action research-based approaches to enhancing the understanding and evaluating the craft of the professional educator in higher education environments. (Darwin, 2010, p. 210)

So our decision to engage in such a process to evaluate our practice was timely – but it has been rather delayed, if not actually warped, by changes in our work environment during the year. Economic pressures that have affected universities across New Zealand, and including their professional development units, have left many staff apprehensive and reluctant to engage in anything other than ‘nuts and bolts’ work. While we have tried to restrict our evaluation methods to processes that will not take up too much staff time, we have noticed some instances of ‘self-protection’ where staff have queried who will have access to our data.

A number of reflections arise from this reconnaissance phase of the project. The first is that, in a University and given a culture in which research has been promoted above teaching for the past few years, encouraging a more equitable consideration of teaching compared with research is, as one respondent stated, ‘an uphill battle’. The TDU, as another noted, is required to work from a small staffing base to meet the needs of an extensive number of University staff, in an environment in which few Faculties actively promote engagement with TDU and its various initiatives. To the contrary, in some Faculties respondents felt that such engagement would make them objects of derision. Culture change, therefore, is not something that will occur rapidly, and will need to be worked at on an ongoing basis. One way forward, to avoid dispiriting effects on morale, is to work with the enthusiasts in each Faculty and to look at ways to build up their confidence and skills within their own Faculties, then to find ways to extend that practice within the Faculties (to develop in-house solidarity networks).

Second, it has been obvious that three of the initiatives – the workshops, the PostGraduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, and the publication of TDU Talk, are all valued activities that should be continued. There have been a couple of suggestions for extending the range of

workshops and for adapting the way in which PGCert Tert. Tchg 'group discussions' operate, which the team will consider for 2011. But in the main, these three initiatives fit into the 'don't fix what isn't broken' category.

Third, some good suggestions were received from respondents interviewed for PGCert Tert. Tchg on offering workshops *within Faculties* that might better meet the needs of staff in those areas, than the more general ones covered within existing University-wide workshops and Teaching Network. The TDU has always responded to requests from Faculties and Departments for workshops – one is to be held in late November for a department requesting input on new and effective ways of teaching, for instance. But we could also promote to Faculties and Departments the suggestions put forward by our respondents and see if there is uptake of these suggestions. This would be work for 2011's 'intervention' cycles.

Fourth, it appears that Teaching Network attendees, while valuing the sessions informally, are not keen participants in a more formalised research investigation into the effectiveness of these. This may be because the cohort shifts between sessions; some have been regular attendees, while others come and go depending on the topics being covered. Accordingly, this initiative will be continued during 2011 but will be dropped from formal inclusion in our action research.

Fifth, the Teaching Advocates initiative, having only just got started, will be continued during 2011, monitored and possibly extended as part of the project. Extensions could include the running of 'group discussions' by Advocates themselves, to share what has worked well and what has been less effective. The TDU could also consider what else we might do to support Advocates better, and to encourage a wider range of staff to attend, although we recognise the importance of these sessions being 'owned' by the Faculties.

Sixth, a combination of staff work pressures within and outside of the TDU has meant that time to evaluate the effectiveness of the mentoring process and of one-to-one conversations (outside of PGCert Tert. Tchg) has not occurred during 2010, and some staff involved in the initiatives are now working on research and not easily available. The mentoring aspect of the action research, should they continue during 2011 given our proposed move to the Faculty of Education, should be reconsidered for inclusion, or possibly deleted from the project. One-to-one conversations will continue, as they are an important part of our work.

Finally, reflecting on the entire project, we think that the design was too ambitious at the outset. While we wanted to gather data on *all* TDU-related initiatives that might conceivably help staff in Faculties, the combination of late ethics approval and operating in an increasingly pressured environment in terms of staff numbers and restructuring has meant that some data have been unable to be collected as anticipated. This has been a good learning experience however, and will enable us, as we reflect on the next phases of the project, to decide what should be included and what omitted from subsequent iterations. This reflection may well have to wait until our unit is repositioned, and its ongoing functioning is clearer than currently appears to be the case.

However this occurs, we are committed to supporting the work of staff in Faculties who want to improve their teaching. With them, we bear in mind the words of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, who wrote (in his poem, *To a Louse*):

Ah, wud some pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us
It wad frae mony a blunder free us
An' foolish notion!

Fortunately, this reconnaissance cycle of our action research project has not revealed too many 'blunders and foolish notions' but has provided us with some rich data both to value what we do, and to plan for improved work in 2011.

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