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Citation

Widdowson, Beth and Birch, Maxine (2010). Managing the human-technological interface in the delivery of good teaching in open and distance education: reflecting on some key concepts, problems and solutions. In: 12th Conference Distance Education Quality: concepts, problems, solutions (DEQ-2010), 01-03 Dec 2010, Moscow.

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MANAGING THE HUMAN-TECHNOLOGICAL INTERFACE IN THE DELIVERY OF GOOD TEACHING IN OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION: REFLECTING ON SOME KEY CONCEPTS, PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Drawing on concepts of dignity in and at work, this paper explores what constitutes good ODE pedagogy, how new forms of technology are implicated in the (un)making of this, and the challenges and lessons it suggests for managers in the sector.

1. Dignity, new technology and managing change: key concepts and challenges

Concepts like quality assurance and performance management are ubiquitous, contested and much debated. Efforts to deliver the former by organisational providers of open and distance education (ODE) often hinge on various forms of surveillance targeted at front-line teaching staff - with the aim of managing and improving performance. Such interventions can be viewed as having both positive and negative connotations from the perspective of its subjects – perhaps culminating in promotion at best or termination of employment at worst.

Whilst surveillance is far from new, the affordances of new technologies to expand its scope and impact – to further illuminate teaching behaviours or practices which may or may not be viewed as supporting organisational norms and ideals – represent significant and serious challenge for all key stakeholders in the sector. However in tandem with managing enhanced forms of surveillance afforded by electronic innovations, ODE managers are also confronted with the challenge of promoting the well-being and dignity of staff. Indeed it is a key contention of the paper here that the promotion of tutor/Associate Lecturer (AL) well-being and dignity is a key feature of managing performance to promote excellent teaching in ODE; and that new technologies represent significant challenges and opportunities in this regard for managers in the sector.

Taking the concept of dignity at work as her focus Bolton (2007) suggests it has 2 dimensions: *dignity in work* and *dignity at work*. Defining the former in ways which resonate with wider debates around well-being at work (Layard, 2005; Widdowson, 2008), she suggest *dignity in work* refers to issues of professional autonomy, the ability to control one's work and engage in meaningful activities. Thus we have *dignity in work* if we feel we are involved in good or meaningful work. *Dignity at work* – in contrast – relates more to extrinsic and contextual factors such as having workplace rights and entitlements, being respected and treated with full and due consideration. Based on case studies of various different workplaces, Doolin and McLoad (2007) argue the introduction of new technologies – far from being a neutral exercise – represents significant implications for dignity in and at work. Arguing it can enable or constrain our ability to do good work through job enrichment or deskilling, they further suggest it makes workplace performance more visible , 'manageable'

and subject to internalised and external controls. In making this point they particularly foreground managerial issues:

Often, it is management that defines the boundaries of user-participation. As a consequence, participation may fail to engage with users' personal and professional values, individual and collective identities, roles and practices...[Moreover while it] is likely to be the intentions and decisions of senior management that influence job content and work organisation surrounding the implementation of [new] technology in organisations...technological change is a negotiated outcome shaped by individual users' appropriation of the technology, collective action by the workforce or unions and *by the actions of middle managers...responsible for implementing the decisions [of senior management] (pp.157-158)(Our emphasis)*

The use of new technology to survey, monitor and support teaching in ODE therefore has positive and negative implications for dignity *in* and *at work*. Having the potential to promote good/meaningful work and feelings of recognition and empowerment amongst frontline teaching staff, it is also associated with processes of deskilling, control and disempowerment. Further the interplay and tension between these different features emerge through complex processes of negotiation and mediation – involving various key stakeholders – as underlined in the above quote. Taking this problematic as our focus – we now move on to consider the particular case of the Open University in the UK and the issues it raises.

2. New managerialism and the Open University: making teaching more or less dignified?

The role of the Staff Tutor at the Open University is different from other academic roles in higher education. Thus in addition to sharing conventional academic dimensions, the role incorporates significant management responsibilities regarding the recruitment, line-management and performance management of a largely part-time teaching staff. This key, part-time and home-based component of its teaching staff are tasked with delivering courses and teaching materials which are for the most part designed by the OU's predominantly full-time academic staff. Arising from the model of supported ODE, pioneered by the OU, small groups of 20-25 students have access to a course tutor/Associate Lecturer (AL). A key part of Staff Tutors' responsibilities turn on supporting and managing the OU's AL workforce. Indeed the origins of the name, Staff Tutor, reflect ideals of providing an 'expert tutor'. Further and key, the importance of the OU's supported learning model recognises that a tutor with subject knowledge deemed necessary to tutor a specific course is not necessarily familiar with teaching it in ODE, as distance education tuition requires a balance of relevant academic knowledge and skill in facilitating learning across a range of learning environments.

The Staff Tutor role therefore encompasses and bridges academic expertise and distance teaching skills – in order to promote and support the teaching practice of the OU's ALs. As such Staff Tutors not only function as part of the OU core academic staff but also provide key links between this, its senior management and its largely part-time home-based AL

workforce – who actually teach the vast majority of its students. In many ways reflecting the core/periphery structure much alluded to in longstanding and ongoing debates about labour flexibility – instigated by Pollert's (1987) seminal and much cited work - this model significantly contributed to the OU's growth and development from its creation in 1969 . Enabling labour costs associated with front-line teaching staff to be kept relatively low due to the relative lack of rights and entitlements afforded to part-time and homeworkers, this feature has only lately been challenged through a combination of employment legislation and union activity. Promising to generate a more equitable contract of employment for ALs and thus potentially enhance their sense of dignity *at* work, the same period has nonetheless witnessed the introduction of new and escalating forms of technological change and e-innovations in ODE generally, and OU particularly, which suggest significant implications for ALs' sense of dignity *in* work - for better and/or worse .

Along with quality assurance and professionalization, the escalating use of new technology has provided the basis for a new managerialism in higher education. In academia a feature of this new managerialism appears as the need to 'facilitate a culture of commitment' (Morley 2003:57). Staff Tutors, like many other academic managers, can find themselves affirming the performance of tutors that directly respond to efficiency and excellence in quality measures, professionalization and IT skills. The need to attend to the demands of efficiency and excellence plus the increased visibility of tutors' work through IT systems has led to feelings of increasing surveillance, as Staff Tutors have an ever increasing array of technological means to 'check' tutor performance. It is this last component, the increased visibility of performance measures through IT that potentially has greater impact to change the nature of the Staff Tutor- Associate Lecturer relationship and to more generally transform the AL role. Thus Staff Tutors may become increasingly concerned with the 'creation of a governable and flexible workforce' through overt surveillance and control, while ALs could use such technologies to engage in the more subtle exercise of 'disciplinary power', involving self-monitoring and self-control to embody and internalise controls associated with this new managerialism (Morley 2003:48; Foucault 1977). Moving on to consider our action research based explorations of these dimensions – we will now consider these.

3. Examining ourselves and others to illuminate good and contested pedagogic practice

The empirical discussions presented here are drawn from reflective inquiries commonly associated with an action research stance.

3.1 Action research

Original definitions of action research infer this '*as a close examination of one's professional performance*' (Stenhouse cited in Elliott 2009:20). Action research has long been applied to examine and develop educational practices and at the Open University Associate lecturers are encouraged to develop this inquiry as part of continuing professional development. The aim to become an inquiring practitioner identifies and confirms '*the daily practice of good teaching*' (Zeni cited in Coats and McKee 2007:2). As Sobiechowsk & Maisch state: '*an*

action research orientation ... offers systematic means of exploring and meeting challenges that confront us in supporting learners through their studies' (2006:284). The action research paradigm is also linked with organisational development (Somekh 2006). The participatory and collaborative qualities of action research enable change in the workplace (Reason 2001, Reason and Bradbury 2006, Shotter 2009). Organisational boundaries in distance education are complex and multifaceted and an action research permits the identification of a shared group of interests within this. In this case the particulars of the Staff Tutor and Associate Lecturer relationship are highlighted. Both authors are experienced higher education teachers and now turn this process of inquiry to the daily practices of academic management. In this first instance this inquiry adopts a first person approach to address the actions of managing the Associate Lecturer, particularly across the blended learning environments where judgements on teaching practices are applied online, on text and face to face. Action research processes consist of a dynamic spiral of 'plan, observation, reflection, action' where reflection is the pivotal component. In this way espoused theories of the values and views underpinning the management actions are questioned to show disjuncture between intentions and outcomes. The aim of action research is to resolve such contradictions.

3. 2 Reflecting on critical points in the human-technological interface: some examples

Associate lecturers now engage and work with many significant electronic systems to deliver distance education to their students. A core part of tuition is the provision of formative feedback and grades for each student on a series of assignments. At the Open University these have always been referred to as Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) and signify the importance of individualised, personalised tuition in this distance setting. The introduction of an electronic system to deal with the demands of submission, collection, recording and returning these assignments has now operated for over 4 years and is reasonably well embedded within the organisation - although students can still submit in paper form on occasion and thus circumvent the system.

At first the introduction of this new system presented many challenges for personal IT skills and access to the correct computer hardware. Upgrades of equipment and skills were the responsibility of the AL and the Staff Tutor checked that these new requirements were met. Many ALs welcomed this new system and early adopters often championed the way for others to follow. Some however found the system complex and frustrating, and increasingly became defined and dismissed by senior management and others as 'less able' or in some other way problematic – thus shifting the onus of responsibility for capacity/skills building away from the organisation and onto individual tutors, who were thus represented as somehow deficient or lacking in comparison with ALs who had successfully adopted the system.

Closer examination of the complex set of human and technological interactions at play here revealed how AL responses are in fact shaped through contested definitions and experiences of what – from the tutor perspective – constitutes good or meaningful teaching. Thus in the case of the switch to electronic forms of marking and correspondence tuition it became clear that many later adopters actively resisted using the system because they felt it

constituted a less personal and personalised way of engaging with students. In this way ALs therefore regarded such technological innovations - which senior management introduced ostensibly to enhance and simplify the teaching process – as in some sense deskilling/ rendering it less meaning . Rather than promoting dignity in work such features – which in this case involve challenging the embodied practice of marking and commenting on scripts by hand – can therefore be viewed as having the opposite effect by some ALs, and be met with various forms of resistance in consequence.

Similar tensions are evident in the introduction of the OU's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This met with significant scepticism and resistance from ALs (and indeed many others in the organisation) when introduced in 2007, as fears were expressed that it would supersede more traditional face-to-face forms of teaching. And here again it became clear that good teaching for many ALs represents an inherent and corporeally embodied practice - which some ALs perceived as being threatened and or at risk of degradation through the advent of the VLE.

Conclusions, lessons and recommendations

On the basis of our discussions here it is clear that the human-technological interface in OED involves a mutually transformative process in which ALs can both shape and be shaped by technological innovations. However, as also suggested the introduction of technological innovation is not a neutral exercise but is instead an inherently political one which is shaped by a complex array of different and often conflicting and contested meanings and standpoints. And indeed this is a key lesson of our investigations. Further and related it is apparent that in order to promote dignity in and at work, when managing the human-technological interface to promote good teaching in ODE, managers in the sector need to attend to what front-line teaching staff feel about the technologies; and to develop ways of more fully involving them in the design and implementation of such technologies if they are to engender feelings of empowerment and retain the perceived meaningfulness of teaching work.

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