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Collegiality as a foundation for a learning culture?

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Abstract

This study focuses on how academics interact in a disciplinary, education focused formal workgroup. The purpose is to longitudinally explore the every-day lived experience of collegiality and its role in shaping and sustaining an academic culture that learns.

Three workgroups of 7-12 members within a research-intensive department were studied over more than one year through participatory observation (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Each group dealt with issues of education in relation to their subjects in a context where their everyday practices and routines were disrupted (Vollmer, 2013), due to financial constraints and departmental educational re-structuring.

Traditionally, higher education is governed through collegiality, signified ideally by a high degree of expertise, specialisation, equality, and consensus-based decisions (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). This style of governance is commonly viewed as slow and conservative. What happens, then, with collegiality when the context demands change?

Previous research has established the importance of local workgroups in influencing academics' ways of thinking and practising teaching and learning (Hounsell & Anderson, 2009; Jawitz, 2009; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015; Trowler, 2009; Trowler & Cooper, 2002). This study adds to that literature by exploring how workgroups deal with disruptions in authentic situations. Thereby we can deepen our understanding of collegiality as a foundation for a learning culture, and ultimately as a basis for scholarship of teaching and learning.

The researchers over two semesters observed and made notes of regular work-group meetings around educational issues, always chaired by one member, with a formal agenda and minutes. Over time participants in each workgroup were invited to react on and help interpret the observed episodes. Results reveal an intricate interplay between change and stability as the workgroups deal both with the disruptive reform and with everyday educational matters. Collegiality unfolds as a lived experience in a dynamic dual gestalt with similarities and differences across the groups. We assume that this dynamic is recognisable in other disciplinary contexts as well. The results together illuminate potentially critical and easily overlooked aspects of collegiality, and therefore potential for SoTL-embedment. At the conference colleagues are invited to discuss these results and their generalisability.

Proposal details

This study will be presented as a paper, with substantial time for the audience to engage in comments and Q/A, as the researchers want to get feedback on the interpretation of results as well as on the methodology used (participatory observations). The contribution fits several of the conference themes: how does collegiality relate to a culture for learning, a culture of learners, and not least a culture that learns? The presentation aims to highlight the role of academics' social collegial context in any endeavour to enhance teaching and learning, including potential engagement with scholarship of teaching and learning. In fact, in at least one of the studied groups, one person was drawing on her participation in a SoTL-based program, in order to influence that particular collegial group in the solvation of their disruption. Quotes and descriptions of instances when the collegiality has come to the fore in various ways will be

presented at the conference, along with central themes that have come across in the observation of the different groups, such as physical presence, formal and informal power, and interaction dynamics.

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