SEDA Development Grant 2008

Final Report

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What was done?

The original intention was to supplement my own professional development through formalised activities such as educational courses, during my tenure as a Teaching Fellow for Research Informed Learning and Teaching (RILT). However, one of the outputs from my first engagement on the Leading Educational Change (LEC) course was that there was much professional development to be gleaned from other activities, if a critical, scholarly approach was adopted. This critical insight also facilitated my own development through focused activities based upon others' development – a significant breakthrough for the improvement of my own effectiveness as an academic developer.

As a result, the funds were used as follows:

- £100 towards the SEDA LEC course.
- £100 towards attendance at the Re-invention Centre conference, University of Warwick, 2008.
- £50 towards attendance at the SEDA Conference 2008.
- £100 towards the SEDA Fellowship registration.
- £50 towards travel to present a RILT workshop at the annual Subject Centre Conference, 2008.
- £100 towards travel to co-present a RILT workshop at the first Institutional Research Conference, Southampton Solent University, 2008.

An assessment scheme for a Master's dissertation by portfolio was implemented. Additionally the interest generated by the RILT work led to the creation of an undergraduate student journal.

How was it done?

Key stakeholders were engaged at different levels, and individual academics were supported in furthering their own development. Subject Heads were supported in the development of curricula that embedded the practices of research. Quality and Learning Teaching and Assessment (LTA) committees, together with University Academic Board were utilised to develop and promote institutional policies. Changes to the University's LTA Strategy resulted in a noticeable increase in interest and engagement in adopting curriculum delivery methods that emphasised 'enquiry'. A key element was engagement in 'conversation' with individuals, not in a trivial way, but informed by the approach advocated by Haigh (2005). Similarly it was necessary to demonstrate some faith that improvements would emerge if the correct conditions were created. In particular Seel's 'watchful anticipation' (Seel, 2010) has proved reassuring.

Evaluation of the activities was continuous by way of frequent critical reflection. Private reflections and reviews supplemented public sessions, such as focused group discussions and a small number of structured conversations with key stakeholders. External validation was sought through peer-reviewed article submissions, but the most effective approach was to create participative workshops

that could be utilised to review practices and explore new ideas. Such feedback was instrumental in informing my strategies for development.

Why was it done?

The concept of Research-Informed Learning and Teaching is problematic for many academics. Many believe that it is 'just' pedagogy, others believe that they can achieve it by disseminating discipline research data in lectures. Indeed a more sophisticated understanding of the topic is challenging for a significant proportion of the academic community, and much of the work that was supported by the development grant was spent in trying to understand RILT itself. Reflecting upon this situation, the very complexity of the topic meant that there was a focus upon process, and a need to co-learn alongside the audience.

What effect did it have?

There was a variety of reactions to the initiative, and it was the MSc Dissertation by portfolio (DbP) that provided concrete evidence that real change had occurred. I have an interest in portfolios as a means of assessment and I had discussed this informally with several members of staff. Some time later this idea was presented by a colleague and I provided mentoring support as the idea was developed. After considerable resistance, other colleagues successfully lobbied the relevant quality committee and it was ratified by a collective that had originally opposed the idea. This outcome has been a powerful reminder that leadership can be very effective from within, and has also served to demonstrate that real results can be witnessed (and therefore demonstrated to) the very people that were involved first-hand in the process.

How are people hearing about it?

Internally within my own institution I have facilitated over a dozen workshops related to RILT, but also I have made extensive use of the internal fora such as quality, LTA and departmental committees to extol the virtues of curricula informed by research.

The development grant has been particularly useful for assisting the external dissemination of work. In most cases it was sufficient to report that I had a small travel contribution for an event, which was then supplemented by my institution. The interactions with others as a result of the conscious decision to disseminate externally has been fundamental in both my own, and others' development. Recognising that such activities are catalysts for conversation I have been extremely active within the institution, where of course there are no travel costs incurred. Aside from conference presentations (which I now relegate in favour of active, participative workshops), I have found an unexpected wealth of feedback from both the SEDA mailing list and both of the articles that I have submitted to Educational Developments (EdDev) magazine. I feel that EdDev gets to the academic development practitioners and is therefore a useful outlet, as well as a harvester of current practice.

The most notable public outlet has been the creation of an undergraduate research journal, inspired by the Warwick re-invention centre. This has created a whole new stream of interest in undergraduate research at my institution, with three other journals being produced since in education, law and computing. As for my current practice, all of my students are assessed in part by their engagement with the processes of publishing, leading towards a finished publication at the end

of the module. This has already proven motivating for students, and academic colleagues are expressing interest so that they might repeat the activity within their own assessment regimes.

What has been learnt?

I am now convinced (since I have evidence) that it is the creation (and subsequent development) of environmental conditions that directly impacts upon the behaviours of academic staff. Policies alone achieve mostly compliance, and practices without policy are difficult to maintain. Indeed the protagonists of the practices appear to be on some sort of crusade. But, policy development, informed by practice, which is honed by supportive mentoring and experimentation, and reflected upon critically, appears to set the scene for academic development to flourish. Haigh's work is useful, if only to serve as a reminder that conversation can be developmental if it is approached from a developmental perspective (Haigh 2005).

Where might it lead?

This work has illustrated that it is possible (and preferable) to create changes that remain within the fabric of the institution's operations. Even two years later, whilst the formal roles associated with Research Informed Learning and Teaching have disappeared, there are departmental practices that are clearly informed by this work. There are localised 'pockets' of obvious influence, where certain individuals have become acutely aware of their own practice and realised the benefits of supporting the development of their colleagues through, amongst other things, the SEDA Leading Educational Change Course and the Fellowship programme.

What is encouraging is that those staff who have embraced the SEDA values and are using them to steer and critique their own practice, have found something that cannot be 'un-done'. The deep reflection that is encouraged has become core to their practice, and this is now being inculcated into two new recruits who are at the start of their own respective careers. The fact that the new recruits are already noticing shortcomings in their formal teacher training indicates a need, and also some evidence, that informal mentoring by reflective colleagues is having a positive effect.

There is a spectrum of positive engagement with the SEDA values; some individuals have become converts, in some cases discovering an enthusiasm for academic development that had somehow been lacking previously. This is a marked positive effect, but it is unlikely that a whole department or institution would operate in this manner. I feel though that there is a significant effect from those who are less concerned about academic development, but who do react directly to the influences of their immediate environment. The development of an environment that promotes risk-taking, deep reflection and professional development appears to be much more powerful now that key 'agents of change' are in place.

In summary I feel that this might lead towards a more scholarly, tolerant and developmental environment for academics.

What next?

For me personally, I have two main challenges. Firstly I have had to shift my responsibilities for on-demand support to remote mentoring since I have moved institution. This has improved the quality of my interactions since they are more focused and I now have a much more external viewpoint.

Secondly, in my new institution I now face a different audience, whilst 'acting' out a different role. The challenges of academic leadership, which I found difficult without line management responsibilities, appear to be even greater now that I am a manager. This is a current theme for my own development at present. I feel that the challenges of academic development and leadership expressed in the literature has yet to mature, and that more accounts of academic staff faced with the myriad dilemmas would provide a stronger base upon which to develop research into this practice. I intend to keep contributing to this area, if only as a means of therapy!

References

Seel, R., (2010). Culture and Complexity: New Insights on Organisational Change. HEA. http://tinyurl.com/RichardSeel

Haigh, N., (2005). Everyday conversation as a context for professional learning and development. International Journal for Academic Development, Volume 10, Issue 1.