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Inter-professional collaborative learning: Key variations in meaning and understanding within the context of ITE at Liverpool Hope University

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Background

One of the critical aspects arising out of the New Professionalism project, and also from the Centre for the Child and Family, which is being developed at Liverpool Hope University, is the centrality of inter-professional collaborative learning in relation to improving teacher education and equipping students to be competent teachers in the future, within an inter-professional context. The promotion of inter-professional collaborative learning reflects our developing understanding on cognition and meta cognition (Claxton 2006). Indeed, there is much evidence that collaborative ways of learning, both formally structured and spontaneous, can enrich learning outcomes (Biggs, 1999). The philosophical underpinning of collaborative learning can be associated with sociocultural theories of the development of mind in society.

Previous research I have been involved with, exploring intra-organisational collaboration (Diamond and Rush, 2009) highlighted the centrality of key characteristics of individuals associated with good or promising collaborative practices. In this research these 'enlightened individuals' (as opposed to 'the pragmatic', 'the pedestrian' and 'the emerging enlightened') were: reflective, nurturing, informed, open, displayed enjoyment, dialogic, engaged, rigorous, confident, conceptually driven, professional, reciprocal and progressive. This research also showed that the nature of the individual and the quality of relationships between these individuals could be depicted in the following, hierarchically inclusive, degrees of collaboration:

- Co-existence - in which the interaction between individuals is almost non-existent. Activity is task related, monitored, resource driven and compliant.
- Co-operation - in which the individuals are focused. Each person has an assigned role, roles are hierarchical and, as such, dialogue is positional. Dualist thinking prevails and a predetermined script is worked to.
- Co-ordination - in which the relationship between individuals is dialogic. Within defined parameters, decision-making is shared, individuals are involved in joint problem solving and open to innovation.
- Collaboration/Co-ownership - in which individuals are not limited by rules or accepted ways of doing things, assume a shared responsibility, listen attentively and adopt non-dualist thinking.

Research Questions

Whilst acknowledging the importance of individual characteristics towards more sophisticated collaboration, research (Benneworth, 2007; Harris, 2008; Karlsson et al, 2008, Whitchurch, 2008) also shows that the degrees/quality of collaboration is contingent upon the institutional context and the dominant culture, which prevails. Whitchurch (2008), for example, argues that the success of an organization is dependent upon adopting a holistic approach to collaboration which would include some of the following elements: team working; project orientation; networking; accommodation to uncertainty/complexity; political astuteness; adaptiveness. This approach is set against prevailing practice within the context of ITE which tend towards rules/regulatory and hierarchical ways of working and is likely to be resisted by those 'bounded' individuals who tend to dominate institutional cultures and practice.

This research takes the view that inter-professional collaborative learning has the potential to support the development of confident, autonomous, and creative professionals. The aims of the project are to:

- identify key characteristics of more and less sophisticated inter-professional collaborative practice associated with the ITE provision at Hope; and
- to explore how evidence behind the more sophisticated practices can be creatively adapted and successfully implemented, mindful of the implications for curriculum development, including placement opportunities.

Indicative Key Questions:

1. What forms of inter-professional collaboration exist?
2. Is there a shared definition inter-professional collaboration?
3. Is there a shared understanding of what is successful inter-professional collaboration?
4. How is inter-professional collaboration initiated, encouraged and supported?
5. To what extent does role and status of the individual influence successful inter-professional collaboration?
6. In what form does inter-professional collaboration take place?
7. Are there shared characteristics of the nature of existing inter-professional collaboration?
8. What makes inter-professional collaboration more or less effective?

Methods

A qualitative, case study methodology, drawing on notions of phenomenography (Marton & Booth, 1997 in Åkerlind, 20035), will be taken towards gaining greater understanding of academics', professionals' and specialists', and student teachers' experiences of the inter-professional collaboration at Liverpool Hope University. The case studies form one dimension of the New Professionalism project and sit within the early stages of an integrative research methodology comprising multiple investigative techniques. Through exploring variations in experience, key and interrelated themes emerge revealing different perspectives and foci that can be explored in greater depth in the later stages of the project.

Methods

In keeping with a phenomenographic approach, a primary method for collecting data will be semi-structured interviews (taped and transcribed). Questions asked will be as open ended as possible in order to let the subjects choose the dimensions of the question they want to answer. The dimensions the participants choose will be treated as an important source of data, revealing, as they do, an aspect of the individual's relevance structure. Having arrived at categories of description of the qualitatively different ways in which participants' experience the phenomenon (see Analysis below), previous related research and relevant literature (including grey literature) will be drawn on, to inform the Faculty in its reconceptualising of practices.

Frame

The phenomenographic analysis of interview data will comprise three stages:

- Stage 1: interviews recorded and transcribed verbatim
- Stage 2: coding and categorising individual transcripts in an iterative manner, repeatedly reading through transcripts, searching for underlying foci and intentions expressed in them
- Stage 3: coding and categorising all scripts as a collective - comparing and contrasting for similarities and differences, and looking for key structural relationships which relates as well as distinguishes them from each other towards a set of categories of description (outcome

spaces), representing different conceptions of the ways in which subject knowledge is developed.

Research findings

Research findings from the project will give critical insight into the characteristics of good or promising inter-professional collaborative practices and to the ways in which these can be creatively adapted and successfully implemented. As part of the project, particular attention will be paid to those non-intellective capacities, believed to be central to collaborative practice and the relationship between these and the particular context in which the collaboration is taking place.