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Exploring the leadership role in enabling academics to manage competing tasks

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Background

In an earlier study (MacLeod et al., 2009), funded by the British Academy, we reported on difficulties experienced by academics in managing competing tasks, particularly in relation to writing for publication. Analysis of our data, obtained from writer's retreat participants, indicated that facilitative leadership at retreat was central to managing task complexity and related anxiety. The question remained about how this leadership could be modelled in campus settings to continue to support academics in managing the complexity of their multiple roles, beyond purely technical-rational approaches.

Research Questions

In this study, we used Ruch's (2005) model of holistic containment because it offers a theoretical framework for understanding the interdependence between individuals and organisations in providing facilitative work environments. This has particular relevance for the complexity of academic work.

The research questions were:

1. Within the context of writer's retreat, what role and function did leadership have in removing barriers to writing for publication?
2. Is there evidence of significant differences between leadership within structured writer's retreat and leadership in campus settings, in relation to the production of writing for publication?

Methods

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of Strathclyde. Thirty-minute semi-structured interviews were carried out with 27 participants (15 females, 12 males). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed by three researchers working independently and crosschecking coding.

Frame

This study focused on a model of structured writer's retreat, which is facilitated and led (Murray, 2009). Having established the containing function of writer's retreat (MacLeod et al., 2009) – i.e. that retreat acts as a container of anxiety associated with writing for publication and as a means of managing multiple competing tasks – we now apply Ruch's (2005) model of containment to illuminate our understanding of the leadership function both within retreat and in the academy. Transcriptions were coded for the core constructs where there were specific references to leadership or facilitation and/or emotional, organisational and epistemological containment.

References

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Research findings

The facilitator provided holistic containment for the majority of participants. This involved helping participants to manage unmanageable emotions (emotional containment), providing a clear structure and expectations (organisational containment) and helping participants to work through competing tasks, to make sense of their own writing projects, to make sense of their writing more generally and the place of writing in their academic role (epistemological containment).

There was evidence of significant differences between leadership within structured writer's retreat and leadership in campus settings, in relation to the production of writing for publication. Participants' accounts reflect a lack of containing and modelling; within structured writer's retreat, the leader is able to maintain the focus on writing for publication as a primary task, whereas departmental leadership did not maintain or enable a focus on writing as a primary task.

Clearly, it would be impractical for departments to make writing the primary task at all times. Therefore, the challenge for management and leadership is to enable strategic engagement with competing primary tasks. Through our findings we propose the notion of strategic engagement, a new concept in the literature. Strategic engagement furthers thinking about the development of academic role and the managing of competing primary tasks. It brings us beyond a false teaching-writing for publication dichotomy, making room for an integrated academic identity that can hold both. This takes us beyond technical/rational models that simply focus on the improving writing skills, or managerialist models that focus on increasing published outputs. The ability effectively to identify, prioritise and engage with a given primary task at a given time, and to move effectively between primary tasks, is the essence of strategic engagement. In order for this to be possible, anxiety must be contained not only by the individual but also for the individual by the organisation to the degree that clear thinking is not compromised. Clearly, this is a function of effective academic leadership.

We suggest that this model of containment and the notion of strategic engagement have particular relevance for leaders in a higher education context characterised by 'dis-integration', supercomplexity and fragmentation (Åkerlind, 2005; Barnett, 1999; Clegg, 2008), and that this model can be applied in a range of disciplines. It may have particular relevance to disciplines where there is a driver to increase research outputs, such as Education.