2002

An Action Research Project to Explore Providing Improved Academic Support for Newly Appointed Staff in a Higher Education Institution in Ireland

Roisin Donnelly
Technological University Dublin, roisin.donnelly@tudublin.ie

An action research project to explore providing improved academic support for newly appointed staff in a higher education institution in Ireland

Roisin Donnelly

(Learning Development Officer)
Learning and Teaching Centre
Dublin Institute of Technology
Dublin 2
Ireland

Abstract

In my current professional role as an academic in a higher education institution in Ireland, I have only recently asked myself if I have been living in the direction of my educational values (Whitehead, 1989a). Educational values are ideas about what constitutes an educationally worthwhile process of teaching and learning: they define the relationship between knowledge, teachers and learners (Elliott, 1995).

Action research begins with values (McNiff, 1995). In my attempts to become a more developed self-reflective practitioner, there are times when it helps me to take a time-out from my daily practice in work and instead put some time and energy into clarifying for myself the kinds of values and commitments I hold as a professional in my practice. This action research project is one such time-out.

Abstract

⊟ The project was conducted over a three month period in a Learning and Teaching Centre in the aforementioned institution. The focus of the study was myself, in my professional role as academic support for newly appointed staff at the Institute. My claim through this project is that I now have a clearer picture of the problem areas in academic support levels encountered by newly appointed academic staff. My evidence emerged from an analysis of a transcript of a mini focus group session held with three members of academic staff as the participants in my study through asking them what their learning needs are as they begin their new posts, and at the various stages thereafter.

⊟ Due to the time constraints on the project, it was small-scale and involved these three academic staff members. My two colleagues and the director of academic affairs were members of a validation group who worked with me to analyse the evidence to substantiate my claim.

Abstract

McNiff et al (1992) believes that professional and personal development are closely bound and that both processes can be fostered by a dialogue of equals. I am in tune with the suggestion that people develop as reflective practitioners through critiquing their own work, and offering their personal accounts for public criticism. It has been argued by McKernan (1996) that the idea of the teacher as researcher is of crucial importance for the future development of the profession. Since undertaking this project, my professional practice has since been transformed. I can now make another claim in that I know that I have improved in my role in academic support. I have developed a better pedagogic style, one that is open to further reflection and development, and inclusive of the rights of the academic staff with whom I work to voice their ideas.

Abstract

◢ Reflecting on my practice, and engaging with the existing theories in the literature of academic support in higher education, led me to the realisation that there was divergence between my values and my practice. I set about planning an intervention in my practice and developing my professional knowledge so as to synthesise my values and my practice. I further refined my ideas for carrying out the research and writing this report.

◢ As my practice evolves, I am continuously learning. The knowledge that I have generated is personal and true for this year's context. It is laden with my values and permeated with my personal sense of what is just. By continuing on this road, and including working with existing academic staff, perhaps a new set of challenges will be presented. If so, I can build on the knowledge I have gained from this year. Thus, the transformation of my learning from year to year will generate new personal, professional knowledge.

Abstract

This report is the story of how I decided to take a close, critical look at my own practice and to develop and refine insights as to the nature of that practice. By consciously engaging in my own educational development, I wanted to gain both professionally and personally. An aspect of Hammersey's work (1993) explored that the teacher is (or ought to be) a skilled practitioner, continually reflecting on her/his practice in terms of ideals and knowledge of local situations, and modifying practice in light of these reflections. This project is part of an ongoing process that I will continue to explore for as long as I work in academic support.

An action research project to explore providing improved academic support for newly appointed staff in a higher education institution in Ireland

Roisin Donnelly

9th November 2002

Context to Research

- Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC) established in 1999 with 4 academic tutors
- The LTC supports the learning, teaching and assessment activities, including integrating learning technologies, of all academic staff Institution.
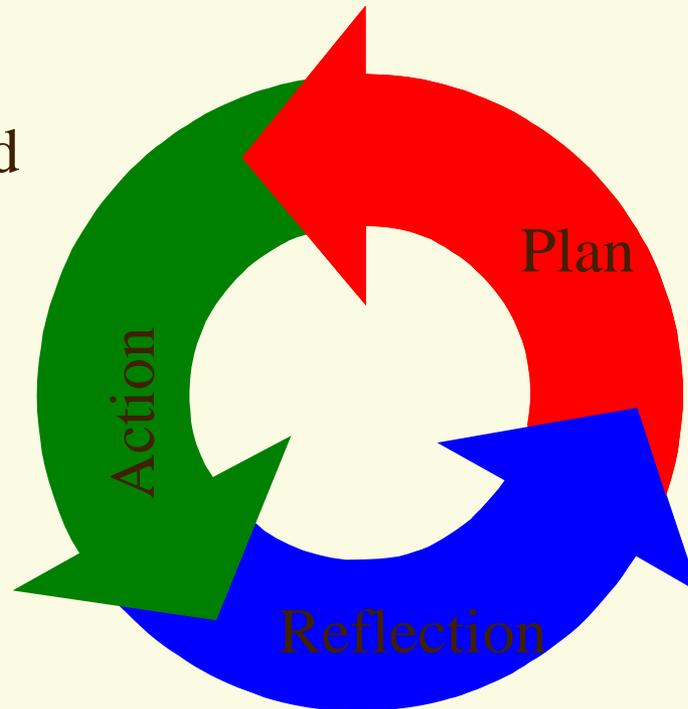
Context to Research

- No formal training needs analysis conducted with academic staff; a full programme of workshops were set up in areas of interest by LTC tutors

- Prior to this, the lecturers were never included in any consultation about their support needs

Action Research Cycle 1

Outcomes of this phase

- Calendar of focused workshops

- Learning and teaching quality is a high priority at this institution. The LTC shares that priority and regards it participation on key institutional Committees as essential. I joined the Staff Development committee and have already provided input on key issues related to learning and teaching

- Have been co-opted onto TNA sub group

Action Research Cycle 2

Series of semi structured focus groups with Management: Faculty Directors, H of Schools and Depts

Plan

Action

Reflection
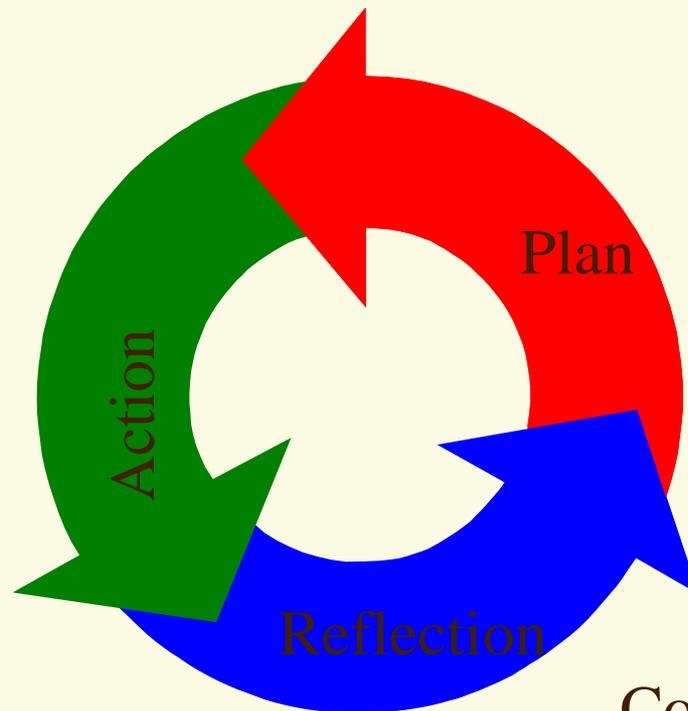
Larger scale intervention

Comparision with Institute's Strategic Plan

Outcomes of this phase

- Training Needs Analysis conducted for all staff, but my focus is on what can be provided for academic staff
- Develop framework for ongoing support

Conclusions

- Since undertaking this project, my professional practice has since been transformed:

- I can now make another claim in that I know that I have improved in my role in academic support.

- I have developed a better pedagogic style, one that is open to further reflection and development, and inclusive of the rights of the academic staff with whom I work to voice their ideas.

Conclusions

◩ Reflecting on my practice, and engaging with the existing theories in the literature of academic support in higher education, led me to the realisation that there was divergence between my values and my practice.

◩ I set about planning an intervention in my practice and developing my professional knowledge so as to synthesise my values and my practice.

◩ I further refined my ideas for carrying out the research and writing this report.