

Living Educational Theory research - Practice Case Study

In recent years there has been increasing consideration of teaching relationships within Higher Education (HE), with a move towards student-centred curriculum design and flexible pedagogical approaches in an attempt to address issues with power, agency and autonomy in student learning (Gordon, 2014; Kember et al, 2010). Whilst it is very important to support student outcomes by recognising and respecting the needs of different learners and learning communities, the role of the tutor within this relational dynamic receives little consideration. For example, Biggs and Tang (2007) encourage tutors to consider 'what the student is' as a factor influencing student learning, however the tutors' own identities do not receive the same attention. Hobson and Morrison-Saunders (2013) address this to some extent by proposing an educational philosophy where by it is acknowledged that it is the tutor's 'way of being with the subject' (pp212) which influences student learning. However, the emphasis still remains with the student, despite a more subject-centred approach being taken. Haim Ginott's (1972) description of his influence upon his own practice, for me, sums up the necessity for inquiry into how the tutor can influence their own practice and their students' learning;

'I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess a tremendous power...I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration'.

For some time now I have been an active member of an international Living Educational Theory research community. Living Educational Theory research encourages the individual to adopt the role of a reflective practitioner. To move away from traditional research methods which often seem to observe practice, and instead undertake research from within practice. It seeks to answer the age-old question 'how can I improve my practice?', by giving power to the 'I' within this statement (Whitehead, 2008). This is an original approach in comparison to the more objectivising stance taken by other education-based theories and research methods. Involvement with this community of educational practice researchers, has allowed me to develop work and create knowledge which I hope will contribute to informing contemporary Physiotherapy educational practice. In particular, the professional development of early career Physiotherapy lecturers, an area which lacks robust consideration within existing research. *Please follow hyper-link below for details of this activity.* www.spanglefish.com/TheAcademicPhysiotherapist.

Recently I acted as mentor to departmental colleagues undertaking a PgCert in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. In this role I was able to develop my Living Educational Theory research, whilst supporting the professional development of my colleagues. Within my developing Living Educational Theory research, I had recognised that when transitioning from a clinical to academic setting, lecturers enter into a process of identity evolution as they move between communities of practice (clinical to academic). During this time of identity reconstruction, lecturers in Physiotherapy have been reported to 'hold on strongly to their identity as a clinical practitioner rather than quickly embracing new identities of scholar and researcher' and this can cause frustration and stress (Smith & Boyd, 2012, pp 63). This makes professional development challenging as they are then asked to reconcile two professional practice roles (Chartered Physiotherapist and Academic in Higher Education) and fulfil the responsibilities of both.

When completing the PgCert in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, lecturers are introduced to a new framework of professional knowledge and standards as novice academics. In recognition of the above transition process possibly creating barriers to my colleagues' progression through the

PgCert, I asked them to complete an online survey prior to starting their course. The survey asked them to answer questions such as *'How do you describe yourself/ job role when introducing yourself to strangers?'* and *'How do you define your current practice?'*

Following completion of the survey, I hosted group meetings, where I facilitated my colleagues to discuss the survey responses, and then consider their professional development needs. Initially I focused the discussion on professional identity as they all responded in a different way to that question, and as issues with double professional identity and quasi-professionalism have been suggested as key limiters to successful career transition and ongoing professional development (Hurst, 2010). It was also important to acknowledge that in this context an andragogical approach was needed, and so a peer learning style seemed most appropriate as it recognises the experiences of those involved and that all play an equal role in contributing to the group's ability to learn with and from each other (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2014).

Quality assurance and quality enhancement implications for academic and professional practice were discussed in one of the group meetings, when I encouraged my colleagues to consider their responses to questions 5 (*What skills, values and behaviours did you bring from clinical practice into your academic role?*), 6 (*How do you define professional practice?*) and 7 (*Is professional practice different in clinical practice compared to academia?*) of the survey. By engaging with these questions my colleagues were able to start to reflect upon their changing professional practice, and develop a greater understanding of how this needed to be supported by continuing professional development in their new role as a novice academic i.e. completion of the PgCert. The following quote captures the ethos of ongoing professional development I have been evolving within my Living Educational Theory research. A philosophy that I shared with my colleagues by encouraging them to adopt a mind-set of gain [professional development], and not one of loss. An outlook that promoted an acceptance of their new practice context as a career progression and not a complete change. Something previously not examined in detail within the current evidence base;

'Academics must [now] recognise that they have stepped over the career divide into education, and that their loyalty to Physiotherapy should reinforce their change to a role which produces physiotherapists of quality' (Sparkes, 2002, pp482).

All of my colleagues completed and passed their PgCert and two requested I act as one of their practice references when submitting their applications. I was very pleased at the success of my colleagues, and felt a sense of pride that I had been able to play a part in their achievements and professional development. I saw this as a sign of the effectiveness of my approach with them as their mentor, and a good indicator that consideration of those early professional development issues re. identity and practice were valid inclusions in that process.

As part of a sustained engagement with supporting novice academic staff's professional development within Physiotherapy educational practice, I have continued to develop my Living Educational Theory research. Most recently I presented an original paper at the International Professional Development (IPDA) Conference 2020 titled *'Professional Identity and Professionalism: Living Educational Theory research as a vehicle to support Professional Development in Physiotherapy Educational Practice'*. I was also invited to collaborate on a research symposium at the same conference, where in I promoted the role of Living Educational Theory research as I answered the following question; *'How am I supporting Professional Development in Physiotherapy Educational practice through Living Educational Theory research?'*

In summary within Physiotherapy educational practice, issues with dual-professionalism and mismatched practices have been recognised as obstructive to professional development. Causing it to become ineffective and inefficient, and resulting in lecturers being unable to fulfil their responsibilities in regards to development of their practice and profession (Gourlay, 2011; Morris, 2002). This has possibly profound implications on quality assurance within programmes, and may directly influence core matrixes by which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are evaluated. For example, the National Student Survey (NSS) which includes consideration of pedagogical practice within twenty-two of the twenty-seven survey questions. By championing more vigorous examination and consideration of these influences upon the developing educational practice of novice academics, I hope to offer greater understanding, create knowledge and make an original contribution to my practice and the wider HE community. In practice I will seek to inform local department and institution level staff induction, and increase my scope of research to other professions and fields of practice e.g. non-health related. I will also look to have a paper published in the peer reviewed Educational Journal of Living Theory, and continue to be an active member of the Living Educational Theory research community.

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