

Academic development: a multi-faceted endeavour

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ABSTRACT: Current research indicates that an integral part of a student-centred approach to teaching in higher education (HE) is the teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning. Consequently the focus of academic development is frequently placed upon the 'development' of individual academics, however the context in which academics work also has considerable influence upon how they conceive and approach teaching and learning. An increased knowledge of the contextual factors contributing to conceptual change is therefore necessary as it has practical implications for academic development strategies at individual and institutional level.

This presentation will describe a research study examining the working environments of HE teachers on an online programme to investigate contextual factors that contribute to conceptual development in a technology-rich environment. Interview data and contextual data concerning the educational setting are examined within a Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework to investigate contextual factors contributing to changes with reference to the individual experiences of the teachers, the structural contextual factors and the communities in which they participate. From this perspective, the actions of the individuals can be related to activity at departmental, programme and institutional level.

Distinct differences in the cultures and working practices of the teachers' contexts were identified which in turn influenced their possibilities to develop and change conceptions of teaching and learning. Departmental communities of practice were found to influence teaching cultures and practice both positively and negatively. Where support, community and channels for communication and reflection were present, opportunities for conceptual change could be created.

These findings have implications for the design of academic development activities. It is necessary to consider not only the individual academic but also the predominant culture of the communities of practice within which the individual acts. As academic developers we need to ask how we can support communities of practice at departmental level, creating better opportunities for communication and dialogue. Furthermore, we also need to consider the institutional culture of the university, as the institution itself is responsible for the structures it creates and the hence the context within which academics teach. Academic development at strategic level is therefore essential.