Looking for the Number 11 Bus: Rethinking a Traditional Orientation Event for Academic Staff at the University of Edinburgh

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ABSTRACT

Orientation, the process of easing the transition of university educators into their new roles and contexts, is a challenging aspect of academic development. In this paper, we share our experiences of redesigning an orientation event for academic colleagues teaching in a research-intensive university. Over a number of years, our well-established orientation had come to rely on a transmission model of learning and feedback from participants suggested dissatisfaction with this format. We aimed to bring it in line with some of the guiding principles in the literature on academic development, such as an emphasis on collaboration and facilitation, an acknowledgement of the value of informal learning with and from peers, and an understanding of the complexity of academic practice. We sought to move beyond the idea of professional development as an exercise in plugging gaps in skills or knowledge, focusing instead on colleagues as agents in the learning process. We were conscious of the need to allow participants to engage with the University's structures and strategic priorities in a manner that was open and enabling rather than top-down and dogmatic. We wanted to instil a culture of academic development as an ongoing process that neither begins nor ends with set events like the Orientation. Importantly, we hoped to make the experience more inspiring and enjoyable for everyone. We use this short piece to indicate the direction of our changes and to begin a dialogue about how universities can better support academic development during the important orientation stages. We look at what the literature tells us about academic development and we then discuss how these findings influenced the redesign of our Orientation. We conclude by acknowledging the difficulty of making changes in existing practice in the area of academic development.

Keywords: academic; staff development; orientation; change management.

Background

There's an old joke about two friends who go out drinking and miss the last bus home. Fred breaks into the station to 'borrow' a bus, while Harry waits outside. After a lengthy delay, Fred re-emerges. "It's not good," he says, "I can't find a number 11." So often, it seems, we find it difficult to break out of old habits; we impose limitations that no longer apply. This had been the case until recently in providing orientation for staff with responsibility for teaching at our university.

Orientation, the process of introducing university educators to their new roles and contexts, is a challenging aspect of academic development. Academic development itself is, of course, a highly contested field, characterised by debates about who is to be developed, how, and to what purpose. All of these tensions come into play when we think about induction and orientation for university lecturers.

In line with the importance placed upon orientation at the University of Edinburgh, all new members of teaching staff are encouraged to take part in a two-day event and this is compulsory for anyone who wants to progress to the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. The timetable of activities was originally intended to contribute to ongoing professional development by encouraging staff to engage in the process of reflecting on their academic practice. However, due to the increasing complexity of academic roles and the volume of information required by new colleagues, the format of the two days had increasingly come to rely on a series of inputs from 'talking heads'; teaching methods reflected primarily a transmission model of learning. This approach had persisted, despite being clearly out of step with models of academic development which stress that significant learning opportunities arise in and through dialogue with other practitioners, such that participants learn with and from one another in a variety of learning spaces.

Because orientation can be seen as a microcosm for the University's approach to academic development, it is important that it is informed by learning from both relevant theory and reflective practice. As such, we sought to redesign Orientation to bring it in line with some of the guiding principles in the literature on academic development. We also hoped to make the experience more inspiring and enjoyable for everyone. We use this short piece to indicate the direction of our changes and to begin a dialogue about how universities can better support academic development during the important orientation stages. In the next section, we look at what the literature tells us about academic development and we then discuss how these findings influenced the redesign of our Orientation. We conclude by acknowledging the difficulty of making changes in existing practice in the area of academic development.

What the literature tells us about academic development

Academic development is increasingly understood as negotiated, situated and complex. New academics need to find a way of

navigating a course that takes account of both alignment with the strategic goals of their institution and the value of academic freedom and disciplinary ties (Gosling, 2009). They have to find a place for themselves in complex learning and teaching regimes (Trowler & Cooper, 2002). Although professional development is commonly assumed to take place during events such as workshops, seminars and training courses, we also know that informal contact with colleagues and students during the working day provides an important source of learning for lecturers (Boud, 1999). This kind of development is located in real problems and opportunities, in the context of relationships; it is not dislocated and decontextualised as are many training and development events. Professional development for academics cannot be reduced to the plugging of gaps in their skills or knowledge base; it has to take into account tensions between the requirement for measurable outcomes and the benefits of open-ended exploration (Baume & Kahn, 2003) and between critique of and compliance with managerial imperatives (Macdonald, 2003). Academics have to find ways of balancing work and home life, research, teaching and administration in a fast-changing environment. And this development is an ongoing process which is highlighted in Gourlay's (2011) review of studies of academics in transition to new roles. She points to three salient factors about the nature of these transitions: they are complex, longitudinal and must be based on socially situated models of development and induction.

What our experience tells us about academic development

We know that facilitating teaching development activities for academic colleagues is not an easy task: they come to us with expectations that are sometimes unrealistically high and at other times dispiritingly low; they are often busy and tired; they may see teaching as a merely technical skill that does not warrant study or reflection; they may be passionate teachers who cannot find the time that they want to devote to their students' learning; they may feel that their teaching goes unacknowledged and unrewarded; they may even be discouraged from taking an interest in teaching in case this has a detrimental effect on their research career. It can be extremely difficult for someone who has reached a very high level of understanding and prestige in one discipline to become a novice in another. Furthermore, academics are an articulate, outspoken and highly critical group of individuals. We had plenty of evidence, in our feedback forms, that colleagues demanded something more and something different from their orientation experience than the traditional series of information-laden talks.

Redesigning the Orientation

We wanted to bring some of these perspectives to bear on the development of a new-style Orientation in December 2013. We sought to redesign Orientation so that it would better address the needs of incoming University staff for a more flexible and agile form of academic development. In particular, we wanted to foreground the use of collaborative and facilitative pedagogical models of learning, such that we actively used Boud's (1999) insight that valuable learning can occur in a range of informal relationships. Following Baume and Kahn (2003), we sought to move beyond the idea of professional development as an exercise in plugging a skills or knowledge gap by focusing on participants as agents in the learning process. We were conscious of the need to allow participants to engage with the University's structures and strategic priorities in a manner that was open and enabling rather than top-down and dogmatic. And, following Gourlay (2011), we wanted to instil a culture of academic development as an ongoing process that neither begins nor ends with set events like the Orientation. Below, we indicate the steps that we went through to redesign the Orientation and show how we arrived at an approach based on the use of hosted tables.

We approached the redesign as an exercise in constructive alignment: that is, we set learning outcomes for the event which were enacted in the chosen teaching and learning activities. Table 1 maps the learning outcomes and the ways in which we sought to meet them.

One innovation that allowed us to meet all four learning outcomes was the introduction of a series of *hosted tables*. Drawing on an approach piloted by a colleague (Lara Isbel piloted tables in her induction for new academic staff and we are grateful for her guidance in the redesign of this Orientation), hosts including senior managers, graduates of the PGCAP, colleagues who had received awards for their teaching and members of the Institute for Academic Development were seated around a table with participants, who had been asked to prepare ideas and experiences for sharing as well as questions and concerns. Table topics included:

- Making the most of the PGCAP
- Getting support for your students

Learning outcomes	Teaching and learning activities
To make contact with other people who are interested in teaching in their Schools and Colleges and across the University	Pre-event task on *Learn to share a quotation,* illustrating their approach to learning and to comment on others' chosen quotations *Hosted tables* sessions where participants could meet and talk informally to people from across the University in a range of teaching and learning roles Wine reception for further networking and discussion between participants, table hosts and staff from the PGCAP
To build on their previous teaching experience	Pre-event task to reflect on the UKPSF and to identify strengths and relevant experience Keynote Q&A session with the Vice Principal for Learning and Teaching Session on *Balancing roles* *Hosted tables* sessions
To develop their confidence in their academic practice	A half-day workshop on *Smarter Lectures* hosted by an external consultant *Hosted tables* sessions
To make plans for their continuing professional development	Workshop on professional development that was linked to the UKPSF Reflective session on their next steps in their professional development *Hosted tables* sessions

Table 1 Learning outcomes for Orientation and the ways in which we sought to meet them

- Assessment and feedback
- Getting involved in learning and teaching communities
- Leadership roles in learning, teaching and research.

Following brief introductions, the majority of the time was given over to a question and answer format. Here, participants had the opportunity to learn through informal conversations by asking questions that were pertinent to their own needs. As such, we hoped that they would take ownership of the learning process and would be more likely to be motivated by it. This dialogue also allowed the University's position on strategic policies to be discussed in a manner that was directed by the participants' needs rather than by a managerialist desire to transmit information. Importantly, this approach facilitated networking amongst all of the participants such that we would begin to build communities of interest around learning and teaching. Overall, we felt that hosted tables, rather than talking heads, helped to create an innovative and creative approach to academic development.

What we learnt from the redesign

As facilitators, our clear sense of the redesign is that it was a positive contribution to staff development. Although the tables were only one component of a wider set of initiatives (see Table 1), we want to highlight their particular significance in promoting academic development within universities. Our experience suggests that three factors were important. Firstly, we were persuaded by Boud's (1999) argument that academic development takes place in a range of settings, including in informal discussions. The tables provided an accessible way to tap into the potential of learning through dialogue. Each table dealt with a substantive topic and in this way we could ensure that important knowledge was gained by participants in a way that was meaningful and relevant to them. Secondly, following Gourlay (2011), we recognised that academic development is an ongoing and complex process. While it takes place in and through specific events, like Orientation, it is also carried on by individuals

as they reflect on their academic practice in new teaching and learning situations and within disciplinary and university contexts. The tables represented a moment in this ongoing process by allowing participants and hosts the opportunity to build relationships with one another which will be central to ongoing, and wider, conversations about academic development. And thirdly, we were actively trying to foster communities of those interested in learning and teaching with a view to creating a culture where reflection on academic practice is both recognised and rewarded. By bringing people together around the tables we hoped to take some steps in this direction.

These steps were relatively small. Nothing we have described represents a giant leap forward; nothing goes beyond what is well documented in the literature and supported by our own experience and observation. Nevertheless, these modest shifts provoked some resistance from colleagues who had previously contributed to Orientation. They required a lot of practical support and a level of boldness to see them through. The positive feedback from participants suggests that we are moving in the right direction and we're no longer trying to get on the same old bus! It would be interesting to hear how academic developers are helping staff to orient themselves to their teaching responsibilities in other institutions.

Biographies

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