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Perceptions of Leadership and Management in the Teaching of Large First Year University Courses

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Introduction

The quality of teaching and learning in university courses has received considerable attention over the past few years and there has been significant research into the experiences of teachers and learners in those courses. The leadership and management of the teaching in those courses, however, remains a neglected area. In this paper we report on the ways in which teachers of large first year university courses experience the leadership and management of these courses. We describe the qualitative variation in terms of categories of description and show how individual members of academic staff work within the framework of these categories.

Issues about the quality of student learning have been the focus of substantial research in higher education for over 20 years. It began with the pioneering work of Marton (Marton and Säljö, 1976), Entwistle (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983) and Biggs (1987) showing that students adopt qualitatively different approaches to their studies in higher education (surface and deep), and consequently have qualitatively (not just quantitatively) different learning outcomes. The research has progressed by studying the relationship between these approaches to study and students' perceptions of the learning environment (eg perceptions of goals, workload and assessment), and has identified recurring relationships between these perceptions and approaches (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991). More recently, qualitatively different ways of conceiving of, and approaching, teaching in higher education have been identified, and relations are beginning to be established between teachers' perceptions of the teaching environment and their approaches to teaching (Martin and Balla 1991; Ramsden, 1992; Trigwell, Prosser and Taylor, 1994). There is also ongoing work on the relationship between teachers'

approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning.

In this study, the aim is to further extend the boundaries of this research by identifying the qualitatively different perceptions academic staff have of the leadership and management of the courses they are teaching and how these perceptions relate to their approaches to teaching, and so, ultimately to the quality of student learning. It is part of a wider study which looks at issues of leadership and management at the departmental and course level on the one hand, and on the other, at the relationship between the qualitative variation in leadership and management of teaching and the quality of teaching and learning.

Method

An essentially phenomenographic perspective has been adopted for the study reported in this paper (Marton, 1988). The analysis is being conducted in two stages. The aim of the first stage is to identify the qualitative variation in perceptions of leadership and management of the course from the perspective of the teachers themselves, and to describe this variation in terms of categories of description. The categories of description are not pre-determined, but are constituted in relation to the data. The categories are identified from the data set as a whole, without regard to individual variation. The categories are decontextualised and describe the essential features of the variation. In the second stage of the analysis, a case study approach is adopted, in order to recontextualise the categories of description and to show how the categories are related to individual teachers' perceptions of leadership and management, and to the overall teaching and learning climate existing within the department.

The data was collected by in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 32 staff from 8 first year university courses, across 4 disciplines. The disciplines were: Medicine, Engineering, Psychology and Biology. As the courses were all large first year courses, they were taught by several teachers (including tutors) constituting a teaching team (a teaching team being, for the purposes of this paper, the collection of individual teachers teaching in the course). The interviews aimed at probing the teachers' perceptions of the leadership and management within the first year course they were teaching. The interviews were based around the following questions:

Who teaches in the subject?

How does the group work together?

Who decides what is taught?

How is it decided what is taught?

Who decides how it is taught?

What do you want the students to learn?

What is the responsibility of the subject co-ordinator?

Who do you look to champion a new idea?

The results reported in this paper are preliminary in nature, with further data continuing to be collected and categories and case studies continuing to be developed and/or refined.

The results of the study are being reported in terms of (a) a decontextualised set of categories of description, and (b) several contextualised cases studies.

Categories of Description of Perceptions of Leadership and Management

Our preliminary analysis of the interview data have identified seven categories which describes the essential features of the variation in perceptions of leadership and management. The focus of the analysis was on how leadership and management of the course was perceived in relation to the development of the course being taught. The categories are briefly described below.

Category A: There is little experience of leadership and management as there is seen to be little need for change or development in the course.

In the remaining categories, leadership and management is experienced by teachers in terms of decisions for change and development to the course being:

Category B: imposed upon the teaching team by bodies or individuals external to the team, but internal to the department (for example, the Head of Department).

Category C: imposed by one of the members of the team (usually the team leader) on the other members of the team.

Category D: negotiated between the team and bodies or individuals external to the team, but internal to the department.

Category E: negotiated between members of the teaching team and the team leader.

Category F: arrived at collaboratively by the teaching team acting as a peer group.

Category G: taken by individual members of the teaching team without discussion with other members of the team, but within a previously collaboratively agreed framework.

It needs to be re-emphasised that these categories do not describe how any individual teacher experiences the leadership and management in the course they are teaching, but the qualitative variation in the range of perceptions in the data set taken as a whole. Any one individual teacher may have one of these perceptions for one aspects of his/her course and another for another aspect.

The structural relationship between these categories is shown in Table 1. It shows an analysis in terms of who makes the decisions and how the decisions are made.

Table 1: Structural Relationship between Categories of Description of Leadership and Management

How decisions are made	Who makes decision
No-one (external to Teaching team, internal to dept)	Others Teaching team, constituted as peer group
Teaching team	Teaching team teachers
Individual	Individual

Given	A
Imposed	BC
Negotiated	DE
Collaborative	FG

Category A differs from all other categories in that the perception is that there is little need for change or development in the course, and

it is taught in the way it has been taught for several years. Categories B and C are similar in that decisions are seen to be imposed upon the members of the teaching team, but in the case of category B the decisions are imposed by bodies or individuals external to the teaching team (though usually but internal to the department), and in the case of Category C they are imposed by the team leader. Categories D and E differ from Categories B and C in that decisions are experienced as being arrived at by negotiation and not by imposition.

Categories D and E differ from each in that in Category D the negotiations are between the team and bodies or individuals external to the team but internal to the department, and in category E it is between the team leader and other members of the team. Category F differs from the previous categories in terms of both who makes the decisions and how those decisions are made. In Category F, the teaching team is constituted as a peer group, in which decisions are taken collaboratively by members of the group. This does not mean that there is no team leader, but that the team leader works through collaborative decision making by all members of the team. Finally, Category G is similar to Category F in that the decisions are made within the peer group, but individual teachers are empowered or championed to develop their own ideas within the collaboratively arrived at framework.

Having described the variation in the way the teachers experience leadership and management of their courses, we will now describe a number of examples of how these categories are constituted in a number of the teaching situations.

Case Studies

In the previous section, the qualitative variation in perceptions of leadership and management in the interview data as a whole was described. The variation was described in terms of the key features which differed between the categories. We will now briefly describe four examples of leadership and management based upon the data collected. The four examples exemplify perceptions A, B, D, F and G. The descriptions focus on how leadership is practiced, organised and experienced in the course. They foreshadow how the perceptions of leadership and management of the course relate to the quality of teaching and learning within the courses being studied.

Example 1: Category A

How is leadership practised?

The course team has no formal meetings. The head of the department, who is external to the course team, decides who will teach in the first year of the course. The topics taught have been established over a number of years and have not changed. Individual teachers decide what will be taught within the topic area though there is some discussion within the team as to how many lectures will be allocated to a particular topic. A teacher in the course describes it this way:

Well basically the head of a department organises people to teach first year, right, and we know what subjects we want to teach and then we say we'll incorporate a bit of this and a bit of that and you will teach this and you will teach that, right.

Members of the team have worked, together, on the course for ten or so years. Familiarity with content and with each other means there is seen to be little need for either formal or informal meetings of the

team. Occasionally it is necessary to remind the person responsible for the next topic that their teaching begins the following week:

We have a common timetable all worked out. We have these notes, we can see what other people are giving them and just before it's our turn we ask them what the first years are like and we tend to prompt the next person say, "you're on next week, it's your turn", just things like that.

A second teacher describes this process:

You're on next week, they're a bloody awful lot this year, do you want any slides?

The course co-ordinator indicated it would be extremely difficult to change the course or aspects of it.

It will never happen, okay? You've got a group of people who, you must know academics, no one can tell any academic how to do anything. So in fact what we've got is a system of laissez faire really. People pretty much do what they want. As a co-ordinator I think what you're trying to do is make sure the subject holds together as an integrated unit.

...academics are funny people and if you have half a dozen lecturers, which we do in first year, it is difficult to get them to all agree to one thing so that would probably be another reason why change is so hard to come by.

How is leadership experienced?

The teachers believe that their familiarity with the content and with each other means that almost no leadership is necessary for the course to function effectively:

Because many of us have been teaching this course for a number of years, we have confidence in each other's ability and knowledge. However casually, we have talked around the subject sufficiently to know that we are basically all on the same level. We have a fairly comfortable arrangement at the moment.

The comments of the teachers indicate the subject is seen as a cumulative array of topics necessary to understand the discipline.

The aim of the course is to introduce students to animals ... so we go

from single celled animals up to cordate, vertebrates like us We go through the groups of animals we find that it's, it's pretty descriptive and involves a bit of rote learning, it's a bit like learning a language. Now our approach is probably a bit old fashioned and we believe that you've got to know the repertoire or the vocabulary of a science before you can really start understanding the principle, the methodology and more esoteric aspects.

The teaching focuses on getting the facts across. One teacher explains that he will typically:

Stand up in front of the lecture I will tell them to shut up, I will tell them what I'm going to talk about, I will talk using the overhead projector I use the overhead projector as a constant prompt and tool for my lecture.

Summary

The leadership of the subject, like the teaching of it, involves ensuring that the teachers know the basic facts - what content to teach and when to teach it. The team are very familiar with each other and with the content. The course functions through trust and reliance on accepted practice and on the perceived expertise, reliability and competence of its members. The process and the content are maintained because they are 'given'. If something has been done for ten years it is clearly working

Example 2: Category B

How is leadership practised?

The co-ordinator operates as a functional administrator, someone who is concerned with schedules for marking assignments, coordinating exam questions, arranging meeting times. There are formal meetings to address these issues, particularly at the beginning of the year. In the teaching arena the co-ordinator operates as one amongst equals and takes no responsibility for how teaching is practised, though there is some informal discussion about teaching between members of the teaching team:

I'm coordinating two other lecturers who are very much on a par with me so really I'm just a co-ordinator in the sense of an administrative co-ordinator. So I don't have a great deal of input into what they do in any way.

We would talk jointly about how we should teach the subject, how we should structure it ,that sort of thing. The other people who are teaching in this course this semester are all about as senior as I am and so I don't have a lot to contribute to them .

How is leadership experienced?

The co-ordinator's view of his position is that the major decisions are taken by senior people in the department and that decisions about teaching are taken by individual teachers and this leaves a very slim slice of responsibility for the co-ordinator.

We've got people teaching (the course) who are responsible in their own right and could easily be team leaders or co-ordinators and they pretty well handle it. Any problems we do have tend to be more of a general type of a problem that are possibly more at the chairman level than co-ordinator level.

This view of leadership, as being imposed from outside, is shared by a teacher when discussing the way changes to the subject might be achieved. The teacher by-passes the co-ordinator when he talks about leadership and refers to the Chairman.

If I want to make a change I would seek the backing of the other lecturers because if I didn't have the backing of those then I probably wouldn't get the backing of the Chairman.

In describing the teaching of the subject, members of the team emphasise the responsibility of individual students to learn. The task of the teacher is to provide the theory base for students to learn.

Well the way in which we expect them to work is ideally to take responsibility and attend lectures. So we'd expect them to attend the lectures and also to attend the weekly tutorials. I would expect them, at some point during the week, to actually sit down with their notes

and attempt to understand what was said.

Summary

In this team, teachers believe that they operate autonomously, that the individual teacher takes responsibility for his, or her, own teaching, that there may be informal discussion with peers, but that any real decisions are dependent on a senior authority outside of the teaching team.

The practice of teaching is reflected in the practice of leading. Students have an imposed content, just as teachers have an imposed syllabus. Students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning just as teachers are expected to take responsibility for their own teaching.

Case-study 3 - Category D

How is leadership practised?

In this case study, the general direction and emphasis is established by the teaching committee of the school (department) but it is up to individual staff members to choose content and approach to teaching within that. A teacher on the course explains:

We want to maintain overall coherence so the teaching committee ensures this rather than it being a big smorgasbord of electives.

and the course co-ordinator adds:

The teaching committee takes the big decisions but the individual teachers are pretty much in control of how they do what they do and what material they work with.

The course leader ensures that the directions of the teaching committee are attended to, that less experienced academic staff are supported and that the course is effectively administered. He explains:

There's a lot of administration involved, checking that things are happening as they should when they should ... There's also a function of supporting the tutors and ensuring that students are happy with the way things are going.

A teacher on the course reinforces this:

The course co-ordinator's task is to make sure things run smoothly, to make sure everything is covered and that nothing's left out ... and to see there's complementarity with other subjects.

Formal meetings of the teaching team occur at the beginning and end of each semester, but there is a lot of emphasis on team members keeping in touch informally. The course co-ordinator explains:

The main business for the meeting is the student feedback but we talk about general progress of students and aspects that have gone well or not so well ... There's enough informal discussion along the way to know how things have gone before the formalities begin.

How is the leadership experienced?

It is seen to be important that individual teachers maintain ownership and control over their teaching. A teacher on the course explains:

I think it's important that individual teachers are able to run with good ideas they have and this way that happens.

The course co-ordinator adds :

There are some very experienced and senior people teaching on this course. I do not feel I'm in a position to advise them about teaching.

But I do support through administration.

The course co-ordinator goes on to explain how the senior and experienced teachers help students to learn:

They model in a way. They model the way experts think about and talk about and work with the subject matter.

Discussion and debate about the progress of students and the course is seen to happen in informal ways, through meetings in the corridor and in the staff room.

We probably recognise we should (have formal discussion). There tend to be occasional informal discussions rather than anything formal or extensive. (teacher on the course)

We don't have a real need to meet on a formal basis more regularly. There is enough informal contact. (course co-ordinator)

Summary

In this case-study, teachers work within the framework negotiated through the teaching committee, which is external to the teaching team, but there is considerable freedom for the individual teacher. University teaching is seen to be a professional activity and experienced teachers must be encouraged to practice as professionals, as professionals in their subject and as professional academics. When experienced teachers teach, they model the way the subject is talked about, argued about and investigated. The way experienced teachers do this must be respected and not interfered with. The task of course coordination is essentially an administrative task.

Case study 4: Category F and Category D

How is leadership practised?

The quality of student learning outcomes and the appropriateness of course content is overseen by the department's curriculum review committee. The teaching team itself operates out of a particular philosophy of how students learn. Individual team members are encouraged to explore what works for them and their students when they teach. The course co-ordinator explains it this way:

There's the formal course committee meetings each year ... and this is where the overall quality of the course is checked It doesn't effect what we teach or how we teach so much as ensure that overall the course is making sense and that individual subjects are satisfactory.

A teacher in the course adds that from his perspective:

The syllabus was worked out originally by (the course co-ordinator) and that basically decides the topics but that's altered every year ... by discussion between staff members and with discussion from students. The course committee doesn't really effect what we do because we do a good job and that's their concern.

The educational philosophy, which informs the teaching on this course, is explored and developed each year through a workshop program which operates over several days at the beginning of the academic year. The program is for all team members, new tutors as well as more established team members. The course leader explains about this in-service course in the following way:

Four weeks before the start with students we have an intensive in-service training. I bring us all up to date with what is going on in student learning research, so as to understand what, in fact, the elements of good teaching are. We very clearly define the content, but the process is up to us. We know what the end point has to be but we have to work out for ourselves how to achieve that, rather than giving particular teaching techniques.

The course co-ordinator explains that university teaching in this subject involves:

Helping students to come to think anatomically This happens because teachers enter into a dialogue with students. Teachers change the way students think about what they have to know ... they also work with different ways of making the content accessible. The course co-ordinator emphasises that this is only the beginning, however, the real task of helping teachers to teach happens through working with them on practice and problems:

We are all working together in the labs for hours every week that's where we explore and discuss the judgements they make about how to help students to learn.

For this course co-ordinator the task of leading the group includes:

Creating an environment where the voice of good teaching resonates through the faculty and curriculum review committee meetings.

Helping teachers reconcile the demands of the university ... as well as the demands of good teaching.

Ensuring that the freshness, the enthusiasm and the insights of new tutors informs the teaching of the subject.

Preparing very carefully and making sure that content, the learning outcomes, are very clear.

How is the leadership experienced?

A teacher on the course, endorsed the fact that most of the decisions about how to teach are developed through on-going discussion and negotiation during teaching sessions:

We're always relating to each other and to the students and we get student feedback on what we're doing throughout the day ... and we've got discussions going on all the time informally between and amongst ourselves, amongst the demonstrators, senior tutors and lecturers and so there is no formal coming together but there's continuous mixing and talking, discussing of ideas and approaches, and sharing information and knowledge, but also discussion of ideas and the roles of ourselves in teaching.

A teacher emphasises, however, that whilst the way of working is informal, ideas are documented and discussed in a more formal way within the group.

(The course co-ordinator) and I will go for a run, discuss what we want to do, go back to the computer and we'll change the syllabus and work out if that's going to be feasible, discuss it with the other staff members, discuss it with the students and if it appears to be OK we'll go ahead ... and if it doesn't work then we'll leave it ... so we're very flexible like that. It's on-going change. We'll change things in the middle of a semester if it's going to be an advantage.

The teachers on the course recognise that the course leader has helped to create a special environment in which to work and feel most fortunate to be part of the team.

We are very lucky we have what I would call a cultivating environment for the students and for the tutors and for the teachers It personally makes the difference between being angry with your position and what you're doing and being happy. I've got the support of my peers and instead of having hurdles thrown in front of me I've got the hurdles cleared for me I am valued and have emotional support in abundance (The course co-ordinator) is inspirational ... he put my aspirations on the agenda.

The teachers themselves are able to articulate a link between what they are trying to achieve with their teaching and what is being achieved in the way the group is being led.

There's a dialogue going on with us, just as there's a dialogue going

on with the students and the purpose of the dialogue is learning. Learning anatomy for the students - learning to teach anatomy and to know anatomy even better for us.

In summary, in this case study the teaching team are a peer group who feel that their opinions have weight and can influence what the group does, but also, who feel encouraged to pursue their own ideas and aspirations. The formal curriculum committee is known to be an overseeing committee but its presence in no way oppresses the activities of the group. There is a clear understanding of what students have to learn and the relationship between the way teachers help students to learn and the way the course co-ordinator helps the teachers to teach and this is made explicit by members of the group. The notion of dialogue is strong in the learning, the teaching and in the leading. Students, teachers and the course co-ordinator are clearly excited by the course.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study we have identified seven qualitatively different ways in which teachers of first year university courses experience leadership and management within their teaching teams. The categories can be grouped in a number of ways, based upon ideas presented by Middlehurst (1993) in *Leading Academics*. For example, collegiality has traditionally been thought to be one of the principles underlying leadership and management in universities. Categories D, E, F and G represent more collegial experiences of leadership and management, in that they are based upon consultation, persuasion and discussion within a group context to arrive at shared aspirations and understandings. Categories B and C clearly represent non-collegial experiences as they are based upon decisions being imposed on the team. Category A, at first sight, may appear to be collegial as decisions are not imposed upon the team. But there is little or no debate, consultation and persuasion informing their practice of teaching.

The categories representing collegial experiences can be further subdivided into examples of transactional (Categories D and E) and transformational (Categories F and G) experiences of leadership and management. In this context, transactional forms of leadership focus on compliance and compromise through systems of negotiated responsibilities and benefits. Transformational forms focus on the development of shared visions, with individuals being empowered to pursue their own aspirations within the shared vision.

Of prime importance for the present study is whether, and if so how, these experiences of leadership and management in teaching in higher education are systematically related to the quality of teaching and

learning. Do the traditional collegial forms of leadership and management result in higher quality student learning, and is there a difference in outcomes between transactional and transformational forms of leadership and management? Our case-studies suggest that the collegial forms of leadership and management, and in particular, the transformational forms, are more likely to result in successful and satisfying teaching and learning. This issue is one which we continue to pursue.

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