Becoming a lecturer in nurse education: the workplace learning of clinical experts as newcomers

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Abstract

This project investigates the experiences of nurses who have been recently appointed as lecturers in higher education. Successful nurses, clinical experts, suddenly find themselves to be 'newcomers' in many aspects of their role when they are appointed to a lecturer post in higher education. The project uses a workplace learning theoretical framework and builds on previous work on becoming an academic. The continuing professional development and contribution of this group of staff have significant impact on the effectiveness of nursing education.

The key data source for this small-scale qualitative enquiry is semi-structured interviews with nine nurse lecturers within their first four years of appointment to a case study higher education institution. Additional data on the workplace context is provided by interviews with three line managers and analysis of institutional documents related to the appointment, induction and continuing professional development of academic staff.

The new nurse lecturers generally find their transition to higher education challenging and confusing because of the tensions in their subject, their department, and their original practitioner profession, over what a lecturer should be. Their workplace includes a complexity of overlapping communities of practice including subject groups, teaching teams, and clinical placement networks. The different communities require them to emphasise different elements of their identity. The experiences of the new nurse lecturers tend to encourage them to hold on to existing identities as clinical practitioners rather than embrace new identities as academics.

The study has implications for all of those concerned with enhancing the academic workplace as a learning environment for lecturers in professional education fields such as nursing. These include the need to recognise and respond to tensions within

the workplace and to nurture non-formal collaborative learning.

Introduction

The study reported here investigates the workplace learning of newly appointed lecturers in nursing within higher education who have moved from clinical practice roles within the last four years. The key question for the study is 'how do new lecturers experience their transition as they move from clinical practice roles as nurses to become lecturers in nursing in higher education?' Within this there are several sub-questions. These include: How do new lecturers in nursing maintain and develop their professional identities? How do they build professional networks and relationships? How do they experience professional development activities and the wider context of their higher education institution and professional subject field? The purpose of the study is to inform the academic induction of new lecturers in nursing, the professional development of this group is critical for the effective contribution of departments of nursing to the education of new student nurses.

Much previous work on becoming an academic has been generic in the sense that it investigated the experiences of lecturers across a range of subject disciplines. However we consider that it is the *situated* nature of workplace learning that is critical (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and this study therefore explores the experiences of new lecturers within one admittedly broad professional area, nursing, and does this within one department in one higher education institution in the UK.

The paper will briefly review the workplace learning literature that forms a theoretical framework for the study, before considering previous work on becoming an academic. An outline of methodology is presented and followed by a summary of the qualitative analysis of documentary and interview transcript data. A discussion section then presents our findings including that these new lecturers in nursing experience a very challenging and confusing transition into higher education roles because of tensions in the department, the subject discipline, and the profession of nursing.   Our analysis sees the experience of the new nurse lecturers as involving them in boundary-crossing activity. However, importantly, contradictions within the workplace context appear to encourage them to hold on to their identity as credible nurse practitioners rather than to seek new identities focused on scholarship and research activity.

The literature: workplace learning in academic contexts

Situated learning theory and activity systems theory have been presented as providing useful theoretical frameworks for analysing academic workplaces (Trowler & Knight, 2000; Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006). The situated learning literature signals the need to focus on professional learning that is rooted in the workplace context and on the learning of newcomers as they interact with experienced colleagues within a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It emphasises the importance of workplace learning in non-formal situations (Eraut, 2000) but the potential contribution of more formal support also needs to be considered (Fuller et al, 2005). Wenger (1998) presents a model of the professional learning of new entrants to a complex workplace as one requiring boundary crossing within an over-lapping constellation of communities of practice. He argues for a focus, in research, on the interactions between individuals and workplace communities of practice and this study is a small-scale response to that proposal.

Wenger argues convincingly that there is a 'profound connection between identity and practice' (1998: 149) and positions identity as a 'becoming'. He considers that we define who we are through negotiation and reconciliation as we steer our way along multiple trajectories related to our varying positions of membership of multiple communities. The temporal element of a trajectory is important although Wenger does not see it as a simple linear time scale. The newly appointed lecturers join their academic community 'with the prospect of becoming full participants in its practice. Their identities are invested in their future participation, even though their present participation may be peripheral' (154).

Influenced by Wenger's perspective on the link between identity and practice the interview schedule in the current study asks new lecturers about their workplace practice and learning. In contrast Clegg's study (2008) adopted the more direct approach and asked a small widely varying range of lecturers within one institution about their identity. From her reading of the lecturers' narratives Clegg found that the boundaries of higher education 'emerged as porous' so that some academics were not identifying with subject discipline in a simple and traditional way but were influenced by other claims 'beyond the confines of the university'. The current study investigates lecturers in nurse education who have significant histories and

investment in wider practitioner communities, who teach in well-established educational partnerships, and who work in an institution that is not driven by the Research Assessment Exercise. As Clegg points out, 'less traditional universities…might be important sites to investigate in relation to academic identity' (2008: 341).

In developing activity systems theory Engestrom (1987; 1994; 1996; 1999; 2001) signals the need to focus on academic workplaces as collective dynamic object-oriented activity systems in which rules, tools and division of labour shape behaviour but in which social action and contributions by participants are also able to shape the system.   Within an activity theoretical approach the importance of history and wider structures in influencing workplaces is emphasised and the workplace is considered to include tensions or contradictions that may drive further development of the activity system. Although contradictions are seen to create disturbances or troubles they are more than that, 'Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems' (Engestrom, 2001, 137). Where these contradictions provoke collaborative questioning and change effort, Engestrom proposes the possibility of expansive learning in which the object of activity is reconceptualized and the activity system itself is transformed.

In investigating the identities of academics, Henkel (2000) considers the response of lecturers in the humanities and sciences to the current UK higher education context. This context is considered to include developments of massification, a utilitarian curriculum, an increasingly influential accountability agenda, and a declining resource base. It might be argued that in some ways nurse education is very familiar with these contextual features. For new lecturers developing within this challenging context, previous work on academic identity and induction signals the importance of subject discipline, the department (Henkel, 2000; Trowler, 2001) and leadership at departmental or programme team level (Trowler & Knight, 2000; Knight et al., 2006).

There has only been a little work on the process of becoming a lecturer in nursing and what there is has tended to focus on the process as an individual transition rather than on the workplace social system as the unit of analysis.   From the North American context a biographical reflective paper by Neese (2003) emphasizes the impact that a formal programme played in supporting her transition into the role of nurse educator.   Also from the North American context, Diekelmann (2004) notes

the perception expressed by new lecturers of the 'busyness' of the academic workplace and the way that this appears to constrain non-formal support by experienced colleagues. A contemporary study in the UK by McArthur-Rouse (2008) used semi-structured interviews with 6 nurse educators who were within two years of appointment to higher education posts in one institution. This study found that 'lack of understanding about the functioning of the organization' was a considerable challenge for the new nurse educators and that they were unsure about their role. In a previous study (MacNeil, 1997), many of the interviewees had been lecturers in nursing for a 'considerable length of time' and the study identified 'lack of affirmation' as an element of the experience of the lecturers; they did not gain the same level of feedback from students as they had received in their practitioner roles from patients and their relatives. The study also identified a 'troublesome duality' which was seen to cause role ambiguity for the lecturers; they were trying to be a nursing practitioner as well as a lecturer. There has been some work on the experiences and role of lecturer practitioners who may be in position to make a significant contribution to creating cohesive educational partnerships between academic departments and clinical practice settings (Carson & Carnwell, 2007; Manias & Aitken, 2005).

To build on this previous research this study focuses on the experiences of new nurse lecturers in a complex academic environment and considers their professional identities in relation to the workplace communities to which they belong. These communities are seen as non-formal and socially defined rather than simply a formally defined departmental or teaching team.

Methods

The main body of data consisted of interview transcripts from semi-structured interviews with a sample of nine new lecturers in nursing within the department who had moved from clinical practice roles within the previous four years. The convenience sample was selected in a stratified way to include participants with a range of subject specialisms, to include two males (to reflect the gender balance within the department) and to include a spread of experience within higher education between 1 and 4 years of appointment. The participants were assured of anonymity and the right to member check their interview transcript and a draft of the analysis; all those approached agreed to participate. The research project gained ethical clearance through the institution's internal procedures.

The semi-structured interview schedule began with the main question 'how has the journey of becoming a nurse educator been for you? What is your personal story?'. The interviewer then encouraged narrative through the use of neutral prompts and checking understanding but also introduced prepared prompts where this was required to cover the research agenda. These prompts included open questions on areas of strength and key challenges, experience of formal and non-formal support, approaches to teaching, and the place of scholarship and research activity. The schedule was informed by our reading of the literature in that we prompted for non-formal workplace learning so that respondents were asked to reflect on this rather than simply list their formal induction and professional development activities.

Additional data included semi-structured interviews with three section leaders following a modified form of the schedule. In order to maintain anonymity this data is analysed and reported as a mixed sample of 6 section leaders including some from the teacher education department which had been completed as part of a parallel project (Boyd, Baker, Harris, Kynch & McVittie, 2006; Boyd, Harris & Murray, 2007). These section leaders are 'line managers' to the new lecturers, for example they are responsible for managing their workload, their development and their annual appraisal.

A sample of 10 institutional documents, relevant to recruitment and academic induction of new lecturers were analysed to provide contextual information. They included job descriptions and person specifications for lecturer posts, as well as policies on induction and probation.

Choosing a sample of new lecturers within one subject area within one institutional context was a response to our reading of the literature in the sense that workplace learning is 'situated'. It is seen as important to focus on a particular institutional context and a specific subject discipline as these are likely to be very significant influences on the workplace learning and emerging identity of newly appointed lecturers. Within this, the study adopts aspects of a case study approach by seeking to understand a 'contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' and uses 'multiple sources of evidence' by using interviews with line managers and contextual documentary evidence to complement the interviews with new lecturers (Yin, 2003: 13).

The qualitative content analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) involved the drafting of a coding framework based on the research questions, our reading of the research domain and the interview schedule. This approach was informed by a modified grounded theory approach in the sense that, following familiarisation with the transcripts and documents, open coding of data from each source was used to inform the further modification of the coding framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). The coding process continued to be iterative throughout in the sense that emerging themes were not forced into existing categories, the constant comparative method was used and the coding framework was modified as required. The data analysis was managed using ATLASti software for the coding and development of categories and to enable constant querying and checking of the emerging analysis.

Findings: the experiences of new lecturers in nursing

An important aspect of the institutional context is that this is not a 'research intensive' university. The nursing department concerned has around 70 academic staff and is led by the head of department. Three section leaders then have direct responsibility for the management and professional development of smaller groups of lecturers, they are the 'line managers' responsible for the new lecturers. The individual lecturers often work as part of larger teaching teams that cut across this formal structure of the department and they also work with clinical practice colleagues who support the students during work placements.

Analysis of the institutional documents suggests that within the institution's strategy there is an emphasis on professional development in relation to teaching but some ambivalence towards research activity. Overall a corporate approach appears to be dominant in the sense that there is clear strategic intent but a tension is apparent between corporate strategy and the needs and interests of the individual lecturer. The analysis of documents indicates that the emphasis within academic induction is mainly on formal systems with a key role for the line manager, but there are some signs of recognition of the importance of non-formal support. There is a tension apparent between the corporate desire to promote professional development but a perceived lack of institutional influence over the range and quality of non-formal support.

Line managers identify coming to know organisational and academic systems as key challenges for new lecturers. They consider practitioner knowledge to be an important strength of new lecturers including useful prior experience as clinical-practice educators. The line managers recognise that most new lecturers are expected to be teaching very soon after their appointment. The line managers experience a tension between the need to provide time for a measured induction and the pressure on the department in terms of covering the teaching. Line managers appear to view 'preparation for teaching' as scholarship. They view formal programmes, such as the postgraduate course for new lecturers and other Master's level subject courses, as useful and see them as supporting scholarship and research activity. They do not appear to have high expectations for research and publication activity and position it largely as an individual interest.

The new lecturers in nursing describe 'feeling new' and they experience considerable levels of stress. They are aware of a change to a lower status within their new institution. The new lecturers feel that they were thrown 'in at the deep end' especially in teaching and supporting students. They also feel 'in the dark' partly with regard to teaching content and strategies but even more so in terms of the specialist language, procedures, relationships, line management responsibilities, and level of autonomy within higher education.

So it was a matter of, I felt fairly new, which it's a long time since I felt very new.

(New lecturer in nursing 3)

The response of new nurse educators to 'feeling new' appears to be a seeking for 'credibility'. They suggest a struggle with their previous identity as a nurse and appear to be reconstructing their prior experience as a clinical practice based nurse educator. They describe their experience of supporting colleagues, educating patients and carers, as well as student nurses and of gaining their various formal qualifications in relation to nurse education. Nurses recognise that this experience is an asset but feel that it is discounted within the higher education institutional context:

So I always thought of myself as a nurse educator, its… a very integral part of nursing… the post graduate cert [certificate] …was so different to my experience of education, and to be truthful I didn't feel as though they valued my education experience in the past…but when I went through the whole process…because my job had changed so much, that I began to get a handle on it from that other point of view and maybe it was me facing the fact that I was moving away from nursing which

is what I considered my profession to be and moving more into education as my profession now. So perhaps it was a battle within myself as well.

<div align="right">(New nurse lecturer 8)</div>

Overall the new lecturers in nursing expressed a determination to develop and demonstrate competence in their new role by 'seeking credibility through knowing'. They focused mainly on the student audience and on the context of teaching in order to establish this credibility. Their aim, at least in the early stages of their new role, was on establishing credibility as a 'nurse'.

Interviewer (referring to new nurse lecturer respondent's claim to have 'up to date nursing knowledge' as a strength): …who cares about that?

Respondent: Students. It gives me respect in the students' eyes. And it's that feeling of inclusivity really, feeling that I belonged and actually feeling valued in some way because it's very hard when you don't have the skills as a lecturer… the students know that you're new and it's almost like they're testing the water…the fact that I was an experienced nurse holds a lot of power with them.

<div align="right">(New lecturer in nursing 3)</div>

The new lecturers generally expressed a view of the student audience as being focused on clinical practice and valuing credibility as a clinical nurse practitioner rather than for example credibility as a scholar or researcher. The new lecturers appear to have responded to the dilemma of being out of clinical practice by spending time in practice settings and on practice-focused professional development courses; these activities seem in some cases to have been given priority by new lecturers, rather than using the time for scholarship and research activity.

In addition the nurse lecturers described the desirability of being 'up to date' in terms of professional practice, and the interviewee source of the term 'credibility' is illustrated by the following quote:

That's in nursing, having some sort of street cred [credibility] in terms of being up to date with the practice, knowing what's going out there so when you're delivering things you can link it to what's going on in practice and having been here for over [x] years now I can see that gap's starting to widen. I can still draw on the quantity of practice but the updatedness of practice.

Interviewer: *How important do you think that is?*

I think it's important, I think the students respond to that if they feel that somebody does know what's going on out there…

<div align="right">(New lecturer in nursing 1)</div>

<div align="right">9</div>

However the new nurse educators somewhat paradoxically, whilst claiming nursing knowledge as a strength, go on to describe a huge effort put into preparation for teaching in terms of reading:

> *I found it very, very difficult to prep the sessions initially, very difficult because some of it was half of the pieces there to know what I was doing so therefore I was getting as much information out as I could and it's one thing to have the practice knowledge, I'm not always sure I've got the theoretical knowledge… Because… you know it's differentiating the role. I'm not teaching as a mentor in practice, I'm actually teaching from the university perspective… which is different… and it's learning the different rules…*
>
> (New lecturer in nursing 2)

The new nurse educators use the term 'nursing knowledge', and consider this to be a strength that they bring with them, based on their recent practitioner experience. They also describe perhaps more abstract theoretical nature of knowledge accessed as part of 'preparation' for teaching. In some cases their references to web-based resources and to being 'up to date' point towards this preparation being focused on strategic and good practice professional documents rather than more specific underpinning research papers or scholarly texts:

> *…my teaching is influenced by research in terms of content all the time. So, for instance, if I'm teaching on [subject topic] then I will have looked at the most recent [subject topic] from the department of health etc.*
>
> (New lecturer in nursing 7)

Other workplace experiences were identified as challenging. Time management in general and the ability to say 'no' to requests for their time was a key issue raised by the lecturers. Assessment was seen as a problematic area of professional learning. Marking student work was viewed as difficult and time-consuming, and understanding the assessment procedures was considered particularly challenging. Developing organisational knowledge, of administration and procedures, was often seen as more of a challenge than developing subject knowledge.

The new nurse educators' perspectives on the support provided for their development included a fairly balanced view of the benefits of both formal and non-formal support, and of centralised institutional and more local departmental support. They did generally find mentoring to be a useful form of support but used both formal and non-formal mentors and emphasised the importance of close physical location and of time and commitment by the mentor for the arrangement to be effective. Some new lecturers found themselves to be learning through being a member of a

well-defined, collaborative and supportive team. Others lecturers, who were not working in such a close-knit team, found their own non-formal mentors:

> *…and just informal relationships, a social support, that sort of thing has been very important … and that's also the 'nursing corridor' so I think also the informal support there just by the people in offices that are near together, but that's all very informal stuff.*

<div align="right">(New nurse lecturer 5)</div>

The new lecturers express reluctance to 'keep on asking' for advice, partly they explain this as awareness of the heavy workload of experienced colleagues but they seem to feel a tension between appearing as credible and requesting additional non-formal support. The new lecturers do not appear to be very proactive in terms of managing their own professional learning. For example although they value non-formal opportunities to shadow workplace visits and to observe experienced colleagues teaching they do not always feel able to make these arrangements themselves.

Discussion: tensions in the field and the workplace

The induction experience of the new lecturers in nursing appears to be a rapid immersion into teaching and a challenging and often stressful period not least because of tensions within their workplace environment (Engestrom, 2001). [sentence deleted] Institutional policy and professional body influence appear to emphasise teaching, student support, and accountability in terms of student satisfaction more than research activity by lecturers. The contradiction between institutional rhetoric for support of new staff and staffing resource pressures means that in practice new lecturers are immersed in work, especially teaching and supporting students, with little opportunity to develop a critical stance towards their new role and context. There are also tensions apparent around the role and value of more abstract theory within the subject discipline of nurse education and this creates a confusing learning environment for new lecturers.

The activity of the lecturers in their membership of different teams, preparing for teaching, teaching, assessment, and linking with clinical settings and practitioners, all involves them in boundary crossing as they build their revised identities within their new role (Wenger, 1998). This boundary crossing sometimes includes physical

space, for example visiting a clinical setting. However much of the boundary-crossing activity appears to be due to the tensions within the field of nursing; it is between abstract theory and an academic discourse and practice-based knowledge and a clinical practice discourse. Crossing boundaries requires the new lecturers to emphasise and build different elements of their identity. Within the case study workplace context the experiences of the new nurse lecturers encourages them to hold on to their existing identity as clinical practitioners.

This study finds, in accord with previous work (Trowler & Knight, 2000), that line managers, who are constrained by staffing pressures, have considerable responsibility and power to mediate the experience of new lecturers. The line managers recognise the significance of non-formal support but mostly leave this for the individual new lecturers to organise. The new lecturers may be reluctant to ask for support as it seems to conflict with their pursuit of credibility. Organisational learning, including specialist language and administrative systems, appears to be very significant within the experiences of new lecturers and current provision of support for this seems to be weak, this is line with the findings of McArthur-Rouse (2007). Within their complex workplace formal and non formal mentoring is experienced by the lecturers in nursing as a useful form of support, although its quality is varied. The institutional context and the seeking of credibility by the new lecturers conspire to emphasise formal support and the responsibilities of the institution and the line manager for induction and professional development rather than placing this responsibility with the new lecturer.

Conclusions

There has been an emphasis in previous investigations of academic induction on professional learning through non-formal activity and the importance of the quality of everyday social interaction amongst lecturers (Trowler & Knight, 2000). This study supports that view but suggests that if the wider context is not taken into account then such workplace learning may lead to reinforcement of conservative perspectives and an uncritical acceptance of taken for granted assumptions. In this case study the unintended impact of the workplace context is that it encourages new lecturers to hold on to their identity as clinical nurse rather than develop a new professional identity as an academic. The conclusion to be drawn is that departments of nursing need to critically consider the impact of their particular workplace environment on newly appointed lecturers.

The findings of this case study suggest that newly appointed nurse lecturers may need to be supported to adopt a more critical stance towards their emerging professional identity, their existing practitioner knowledge, the existing practices of their department, and the institutional, professional field and wider socio-political context of their role.   Perhaps it is the 'resistance identities' proposed by Castells (1997) that new lecturers in nursing need to be encouraged to develop. In adopting this critical stance the new lecturers would gain credibility as 'academics' and be able to contribute to the collective work that appears to be required to resolve the contradictions identified within their workplace activity system. The support for developing such resistance appears likely to be found through non-formal networks because, as Henkel (2000) argues, it may largely be expressed as resistance to institutional centralised policy or management of change and may be associated with research activity. Membership of strong subject discipline research networks both within and external to the institution are possible forms of support to encourage the development of critical perspectives.

There appears to be a potential role for a postgraduate course, or an alternative collaborative project, for new lecturers in helping them to build networks with colleagues in other subject disciplines in order to gain a more critical perspective on their own context. Such formal processes of support during induction may provoke professional learning but there appears to be a danger that they may also unwittingly encourage a passive approach among these new lecturers in terms of taking responsibility for their own induction and professional development. New lecturers in nursing need to be encouraged to shape their own development, to pro-actively plan for their scholarship and research activity and to see more clearly how that will link to their teaching.

The issue of time management is critical and this raises the key question of workload, which, from the perspective of the case study new lecturers in nursing, feels overwhelming. Higher education institutions need to back up the rhetoric of support and development with staffing resources that enable some protected time for new lecturers so that they are able to focus more systematically on their professional development including scholarship and research activity. As part of this work there is a need to clarify the professional body and wider requirements for 'currency' in clinical practice and then interpret and express them very clearly, for both new and existing experienced lecturers, within the department (Barrett, 2007).

Organizational structures, the formal learning architecture (Dill, 1999), and formal support for research-capacity building may be useful in supporting academic induction. However it is likely that less explicit support and pump-priming incentives will encourage more highly valued non-formal activity and non formal communities of practice.   Developing this fuzzy architecture is a difficult area of strategy in which the institution must not become too intrusive. It might include encouragement of collaborative research activity, perhaps through small-scale funding, and encourage non-formal support groups (such as writing groups or special interest groups) and non-formal mentoring. The current study shows the value of investigations within subject specific academic workplace environments [deleted].

Overall the study has illustrated [deleted] that there is a need to understand and address the induction and workplace learning of lecturers in particular professional subject fields and work contexts at more than one level. This concurs with the wider workplace learning literature (for example Evans et al., 2006) in calling for enquiry and action at the wider level including the institutional context, at the individual level, and perhaps most importantly, at the level of the workplace team.

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