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Evaluating Academic Workplaces: the hyper-expansive environment experienced by university lecturers in professional fields

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Evaluating Academic Workplaces: the hyper-expansive environment experienced by university lecturers in professional fields

Academic developers need to understand the situated workplaces of the academic tribes they are supporting. This study proposes the use of the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum as a tool for evaluation of academic workplaces. The tool is critically appraised through its application to the analysis of workplace experience questionnaire responses from higher education lecturers in nursing and midwifery in the UK. The analysis identified excessive professional learning expectations and opportunities for these lecturers that we describe as a hyper-expansive workplace environment. We conclude that these academics need support to identify priorities and to develop synergy between areas of their work by focusing on the links between research, teaching and knowledge exchange activity. Used within an ethical research framework the expansive-restrictive continuum provides a useful tool for academic developers to understand subject discipline specific academic workplaces and offer tailored support to lecturers.

Keywords: workplace, expansive, research teaching nexus, knowledge exchange

Introduction

Contemporary academics may have roles as teachers, researchers and leaders, as well as working as consultants involved in knowledge exchange with external organisations. Our purpose in this paper is to inform the work of academic managers and academic developers in supporting professional development of academic and academic-related staff in higher education. The paper applies and evaluates a particular tool, the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum, which may be of practical use in departmental, institutional or national evaluation of academic workplaces (Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird & Unwin, 2006).

To illustrate the application of the continuum tool our paper presents an analysis of empirical data gathered by a national UK online questionnaire of lecturers in nursing and midwifery. The focus on lecturers in health professional fields provides useful insight because such lecturers, in addition to teaching and research activity, are generally strongly involved in partnerships with employer organizations and in knowledge exchange activity with end-users of research. The partnership employer organisations support work-based learning for undergraduate students, often fund postgraduate programmes for experienced employees, and collaborate in knowledge exchange activity including using academics as consultants. In a study of academic identity Clegg found the ‘boundaries of higher education emerged as porous’ (2008, p. 341). She argues that research in less traditional universities and areas of study, including professional fields, might be important for the understanding of academic identity. In the UK many new lecturers in the health professions begin their role as academics with a wealth of clinical experience, but have not followed the traditional route of becoming a lecturer via doctoral research.

The higher education sector has made attempts to strengthen links and create synergy between different areas of academic work, in particular between teaching and research. This has been conceived as the ‘research-teaching nexus’, or RT nexus, (Jenkins & Healey, 2006). However, for contemporary academics, including those in professional fields, this may be better captured by the concept of a research teaching knowledge exchange nexus (RTKE nexus). By including knowledge exchange activity the RTKE nexus more clearly recognises the value of the practical wisdom held by practitioners and the production of knowledge outside of the university. Efforts by higher education to strengthen the links between research and teaching have mostly focused on making changes to teaching, but shifting the lens towards the RTKE nexus may help the sector to consider also how the nature of research may need to be changed.

Within a socio-cultural perspective, we will argue in this paper that academic developers need to systematically evaluate and understand the workplaces of different subject discipline teams within their

institution. This will enable them to help academics to identify and creatively manage the tensions between different areas of work. We propose that the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum provides an effective evaluation tool (Evans et al 2006).

Academic Workplaces

The expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum is an empirically based framework offering characteristics of workplaces along a dimension from expansive to restrictive (Evans et al., 2006). Within the framework, the term expansive is used to mean a series of empirically derived organisational and cultural characteristics that generally support learning within a workplace. In an integrated approach to evaluation of a workplace environment an analysis of the productive process and the whole workforce is helpful (Evans et al., 2006). However, in a more pragmatic approach, the current study relies on responses by individual lecturers to an online questionnaire. The expansive-restrictive workplace continuum has been developed over time through a range of different versions, including application and development in an educational workplace setting (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). In this study we use a version intended as a tool for workforce development, presented in figure 1 (Evans et al. 2006, p.61).

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

The characteristics in Table 1 may be considered to reflect two broad categories. Some are related to organisational context and culture including work organisation, job design, control, and distribution of knowledge and skills. Others are related to how individuals learn through engaging in different forms of participation (Evans et al 2006: 42). The use of the term ‘expansive workplace environment’ within the

continuum, to describe characteristics of a workplace, is in contrast with Engeström's use of the term 'expansive learning' (Engeström 1987, 2001). Engeström's use of the term describes work by individuals to resolve contradictions in the workplace leading to change across the activity system, this change is defined as 'expansive learning'. However, there is a link between the two concepts because a more expansive workplace learning environment (Fuller and Unwin, 2003; Evans et al 2006) might provide affordances for individuals to do the challenging work (or 'knotworking') required to resolve a contradiction and bring about expansive learning (Engeström 2004).

The characteristics set out in Table 1 arise from a focus on workplace learning but make a clear link across to the organizational literature. A potential weakness of much academic development work is its dependence on naïve understandings of the concept of a 'learning organization' (Fenwick, 2001). One issue raised by Fenwick is that 'empowerment' of workers appears from a superficial perspective to be a positive development, but for whose benefit are they empowered, the organization or the worker? Fenwick's second issue is that too much of the learning organizations literature rests on an assumption of continuous learning based on simplistic notions of innovation and outcome measurement. Thus the 'learning organization' concept may be adopted uncritically within quality assurance agendas, managerialist approaches and other 'pernicious' ideologies that currently appear to dominate the increasingly corporate style of higher education leadership and management (Barnett, 2003). There has been a considerable analysis of the impact of managerialism on academic roles within higher education and this body of work forms a contextual note of warning underpinning the current paper (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Winter 2009; Knight & Trowler, 2000; Land 2001).

This paper adopts a socio-cultural perspective in which the workplace learning of lecturers may be seen as 'co-participation' which is proposed as a duality between the affordances that the workplace offers to workers to support their professional development and the agency of the lecturers, individually and collectively, in

engaging with those affordances (Billet, 2004). These affordances offered by a workplace may include some deliberate structures or learning architecture (Dill, 1999) but from a socio-cultural perspective a fuzzy learning architecture, one that encourages multiple opportunities for informal collaborative working and networking, is more likely to be successful (Boyd, 2010: 163). In developing such a fuzzy learning architecture the interventions, by employers such as universities, to enhance the learning of workers such as lecturers, must not be too intrusive because otherwise they are likely to constrain potential innovators by imposing the 'canonical view' held within the organisation (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p.53). From a situated learning perspective 'communities of practice' involve voluntary membership and may not conform to the formal membership groups such as teaching teams or subject discipline departments within a university (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

In the UK small-scale qualitative studies have suggested that many newly appointed higher education lecturers in nursing are primarily motivated by their contribution to the development of new clinical practitioners (Boyd & Lawley, 2009; McArthur-Rouse, 2008). In more traditional subject disciplines this might be interpreted as a priority for teaching by these new academics but in the professional field of nursing 'teaching' includes at least an element of knowledge exchange activity because programmes run within an educational partnership with employers rather than within the boundaries of a university department. In the UK, lecturers in nursing and midwifery are often appointed on the basis of their clinical expertise and may begin their new academic career with no significant prior experience of research activity. This creates particular challenges for academic induction including the need to support research capacity building (Boyd & Lawley, 2009; Fisher, 2006, McArthur-Rouse, 2008). This approach to recruitment of lecturers in nursing has been found to create a conflict within departments and institutions in the value placed on knowledge and identity as a clinical expert and as a researcher (Barrett, 2006; Fisher, 2006; McNamara, 2010) and this conflict has been considered as a tension between 'rival knowledge regimes' (Findlow, 2012, p. 117). Studies

of lecturers in nursing (Boyd and Lawley, 2009; McArthur Rouse, 2009; Barlow and Antonio 2007) suggest that the clinicians moving into higher education roles report many positive aspects but also experience varying levels of disorientation, de-skilling, conflicting priorities and work-overload.

In this paper we report from a questionnaire based study of higher education lecturers in nursing, midwifery and allied health professions across the UK. Previous publications from the same project showed that newly appointed lecturers, within five years of appointment, tended to hold on to their credibility as clinical practitioners rather than more quickly investing fully in new identities as academics (Boyd, Smith, Lee & McDonald, 2009; Smith & Boyd, 2012). These academics appear to experience a contradiction between attempting to maintain clinical knowledge and credibility and engaging fully with theory and research based knowledge and skills. Some of these lecturers in health professional fields may 'subvert' research work and researcher identity (Boyd & Smith 2014).

Data Collection

This study uses qualitative data from a large scale online questionnaire that targeted all lecturers in Nursing and Midwifery across the UK (Boyd et al., 2009; Smith & Boyd 2012). All UK higher education departments providing programmes in nursing or midwifery were approached, seeking permission to contact their staff and to identify a colleague to distribute an e-mail link to the anonymous, on-line questionnaire. This involved more than 200 departments. Contacts were also asked to identify the number of nurses and midwives employed in their departments in order to establish the population size and allow the questionnaire response rate to be calculated. Only two of the institutions contacted declined to take part in the research.

Ethical approval was granted through the formal procedures of the University of Cumbria. The nature of the research was explained in the questionnaire's introduction, participation was voluntary and consent was assumed through submission of the questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to gather key quantitative

demographic data about the individual and then to capture more detailed qualitative responses through open ended questions. The first two prompt questions requiring a narrative response asked lecturers about their positive experiences and the challenges faced within their higher education workplaces and roles. A third prompt question asked lecturers about their professional development and ambitions. These open questions gathered rich qualitative narrative responses providing insight into workplace experiences.

An iterative inductive-deductive approach to analysis was used, allowing initial themes to emerge from the data before applying the expansive-restrictive continuum as an analytical framework. The findings are presented in the next section with each theme accompanied by illustrative quotes and linked to characteristics taken from the expansive-restrictive continuum. In our study we gathered narrative data using open ended prompts focused on the workplace experiences of the lecturers. The strength of this approach was that it did not impose our agenda too heavily on to the respondents. However this approach restricted us to a qualitative analysis and although we used an element of counting during analysis it was not appropriate to report these as simple frequencies because of the nuances of interpretation involved. On reflection, in developing the continuum for workplace as an evaluation tool, we feel that a more explicitly mixed methods approach may be useful to allow some reporting of quantitative findings as these may be persuasive in attempts to influence institutional policies.

Findings

A total of 254 lecturers, 201 in nursing and 53 in midwifery, submitted completed online questionnaire responses. The estimated response rate for the overall questionnaire distribution was 17%. Of the 254 respondents, 86% were female and 14% were male. The age of respondents ranged from 20 to 60+ years with the majority (86%) in the age group between 40 and 59 years. All of the lecturers had clinical experience prior to working within higher education. Their experience as a higher education lecturer ranged from less than one

year to more than twenty. In terms of experience as a lecturer in higher education 35% had less than five years' experience, 29% had between six and ten years' experience, and 36% had more than 10 years' experience. Themes arising from the qualitative analysis are now presented and related to relevant characteristics within the expansive-restrictive continuum.

Developing New Practitioners

None of the characteristics within the expansive-restrictive continuum relate directly to the strongest theme arising from the data. From the complete sample of 254 online questionnaire respondents a majority (59%) specifically identified 'working with students' and being part of the students' development as new clinical practitioners, as a positive element of their work:

Being able to make a difference in nursing by teaching new starters to the profession is hugely rewarding and responsible. *Nurse (female – 7yrs in HE)*

Working with students was mainly positioned as supporting their development as new professionals rather than as a love of teaching:

...having an impact on the education/knowledge/skills/competencies of my students...knowing that ultimately this will have an impact on the quality of care for the patients in their care. *Nurse (male – 5 yrs in HE)*

A much smaller number of respondents raised problematic issues about working with students, primarily focused on the problem of teaching and supporting large groups and when students did not have a positive attitude towards their studies. This included the related issue that in contemporary higher education the student seems increasingly to be positioned as a customer whose frequent complaints are taken very seriously by managers.

...increasing commercialisation of education leading to the 'customer' always being right... *Nurse (female – 16 yrs in HE)*

Responses refer to at least four areas of work: teaching, research, knowledge exchange with clinical colleagues and settings, and administration / leadership, highlighting the significance of knowledge exchange within their work. However it is teaching and supporting students which appears to be a key motivator and source of job satisfaction for a large proportion of the respondents. This shared purpose and motivation appears to be a positive feature of these professional lecturers, but it does also contain a contradiction in the sense that many of the lecturers may tend to prioritise this area of work at the expense of others. This kind of shared motivation or purpose does not appear within the characteristics of the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment; this may be seen as a surprising absence as it is a feature of the concept of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The significance of this finding led us to add an additional characteristic of 'shared purpose' to create an amended version of the expansive-restrictive workplace learning continuum shown in Table 2.

Learning at Work

The lecturers experience many opportunities for professional learning and development and this is a very positive element of their responses that links to characteristic number three in the continuum, concerning the focus on knowledge and skills development. Learning was derived through formal support such as completing a postgraduate course or a doctorate and lecturers also reported informal opportunities such as debate with colleagues at coffee time, time to read, and opportunities to pursue research activity:

.... I have felt more able to explore research and scholarly activities with substantial support. There is a well-developed in-service education programme and all scholarly activities, if relevant to my role, are supported. *Midwife (female – 15 yrs in HE)*

In a knowledge based industry such as higher education it is not surprising that workers such as academics are

offered opportunities to develop their knowledge and this generally appears to create characteristics of an expansive workplace environment.

Formal Qualifications

The lecturers generally report opportunities to complete formal qualifications such as postgraduate courses or a doctorate through part-time study. This appears to be expansive and links to characteristic seven in the continuum. However, workload pressures appear to undermine this opportunity for at least some of the lecturers who complained of the pressure to pursue a part-time study programme when carrying a heavy workload:

Coping with the many demands from the university, including constant changes. Having to undertake further study whilst working full-time and with limited time to take study leave. Lack of admin [administration] support. *Midwife (female - 7 yrs in HE)*

This issue of overall workload is important in evaluating the workplace environment of the lecturers. The lecturers refer to their ‘juggling’ of different areas of work and pressures upon them include the demands for professional learning and development. This metaphor of juggling is in contrast to the synergy required to make connections between areas of work, for example between research and teaching as proposed by the RTKE nexus concept.

Boundary-Crossing

Lecturers commented positively about opportunities for boundary-crossing such as working with colleagues from other health professional fields, from other subject disciplines across the university, and through wider external networks via attendance at conferences. This links to characteristic five in the continuum, focusing on cross-disciplinary communication within the workplace. Some lecturers also picked

out clinical colleagues as key contacts and highlighted the opportunities to cross into clinical workplace settings.

Facilitating student development, linking the needs of clinical practice to academic development, maintaining my links with clinical practice and senior managers - having the feeling of being joined up...

Nurse (female – 7 yrs in HE)

In addition to informal learning through collaborative planning and teaching some lecturers new to higher education mentioned boundary-crossing as a key part of the formal postgraduate programmes, focused on teaching in higher education, that are a common probationary requirement in the UK. Overall the lecturers have considerable opportunities for boundary-crossing and this appears to be an expansive characteristic of their workplace environment.

Teaching in Teams

A considerable number of the lecturer responses specifically mentioned strong support from colleagues in their team as a key form of support for their work and professional learning. This links to characteristic four in the continuum and suggests that many are working in expansive workplace environments in relation to this characteristic. The overwhelming majority of team-working and support from colleagues was reported as being related to teaching activity:

Support from existing team of experienced teachers who had a strong midwifery focus. *Midwife (female – 17 yrs in HE)*

Within this collaborative work, team teaching was highlighted as an informal opportunity for professional learning:

I work with some fantastic colleagues and we do a lot of team teaching in our practical lessons - so there is a lot of creativity and a lot of mutual support and encouragement. *Nurse (female – 4 yrs in HE)*

Characteristic four in the expansive-restrictive framework appears to be using 'team work' to mean collaborative approaches and there is a risk that the lecturers are describing friendly, supportive colleagues with reasonable levels of co-operation, rather than collaboration which implies shared work on the same problem:

Colleagues to work alongside for companionship and support.. *Nurse (female – 3 yrs in HE)*

In contrast to experience of collaborative working in teams a considerable number of lecturers described working in 'isolation':

Lack of teamwork. Poor communication between colleagues. No joined up thinking when it comes to providing an educational experience for some students. Teaching not given the apparent kudos that research seems to have... *Nurse (female – 2 yrs in HE)*

Other lecturers mentioned dysfunctional team relationships or difficult colleagues, and some referred to excessive competitiveness between academics, especially in the area of research activity, as restrictive aspects of their workplace:

Trying to undertake research as a part time research student. Also many senior colleagues are reluctant to bring less experienced researchers on board with funding bids...thereby making it difficult to get experience. *Midwife (female – 6 yrs in HE)*

On balance then, many lecturers appear to experience supportive team work, at least in the area of teaching, and this appears to be an expansive characteristic of their workplace environment.

Researching Alone

Research, in contrast to teaching, was more often positioned by the lecturers as an area of their role which involved lone-working and a competitive culture. This theme links to characteristic eight in the continuum, focusing on chances to learn new skills.

Trying to break into research - have encountered much professional snobbery and competition here.

Nurse (female - 3 yrs in HE)

References were made to a competitive workplace although in some cases relationships were seen as positive despite the environment:

Terrific colleagues, all willing to help each other out, even in the competitive University environment. *Nurse (female – 19 yrs in HE)*

Research work appears to be considered as an individual activity and this finding has implications for academic developers because it suggests that despite a generally expansive workplace, with collaboration and support as key characteristics, this may not apply to the research area of work.

The lecturers' perspective reveals that they most of them are not subject to 'rigid specialist roles' which may be considered to be 'restrictive' (characteristic four). However workload and unwritten priorities that are negotiated between individual academics and their line managers and teams do appear to be allocating specialist roles to them and for many this means a priority for teaching and student support. This informal allocation of roles is closely connected to characteristics eight, nine and twelve on learning new skills, role design and mobility within the institution. Overall there appears to be a contradiction in the workplace of these lecturers whereby the generally expansive nature of their workplace does not always apply to the research area of work.

Developing Skills

A wide range of opportunities to develop what might be described as 'technical' skills were included in the lecturers' responses. This links to characteristic two in the continuum and includes skills in teaching, research, leadership, knowledge exchange and even administration. Teaching and research skills dominated in the responses and many lecturers also reported that finding time for developing research skills was a challenge.

The data revealed a concern for an additional area of technical skills of particular relevance to these professional educators, this is 'clinical' skills of their original health practitioner role. Some lecturers reported that they had established ways by which they felt they were maintaining their clinical skills or at least keeping up to date with clinical practice through links to clinical workplace settings and colleagues:

Being able to develop a link with a small number of clinical bases from which my students (qualified nurses) came from. *Nurse (female – 14 yrs in HE)*

Other lecturers complained of being deskilled or struggling to maintain their clinical 'credibility':

...the very long hours and high expectations...moving away from practice and losing clinical skills /credibility *Nurse (female – 23 yrs in HE)*

The data reveals some tension for respondents around this issue of maintaining clinical skills and it appears to be an area of debate or confusion:

...the tension between academic and clinical credibility and being seen as having neither.. *Nurse (female – 18 yrs in HE)*

Overall, technical skills do appear to be valued within the workplace of these lecturers and so this is an expansive element. However there appears to be a contradiction around the value placed on different sets of skills. This tension appears to be central to the workplace experiences of these lecturers because it highlights

the contested value placed on different kinds of knowledge with the professional field.

Academic Roles

Lecturers valued the flexibility of their job in terms of being able to plan their diary and manage their workload with a reasonably degree of autonomy. This links to characteristic nine in the continuum, focusing on expanded or restricted job design. The autonomy of the lecturers was qualified by some respondents because of their perception of carrying a heavy overall workload:

The variety- no two days are the same. The flexibility of the job is appealing...but at times you are so busy..there is no flexibility and it could take over your life. *Midwife (female – 6 yrs inHE)*

Lecturers valued autonomy for example, being able to choose an area of research or tackle on a new project and claimed to enjoy the variety of the role.

The expanded job design experienced by many lecturers was balanced by some respondents who claimed that heavy workload prevented them from engaging fully in research activity. The workload was primarily reported as consisting of teaching and student support but often excessive administration or bureaucracy was also mentioned. In some cases lecturers reported that their role did not include research as a priority. In some UK university departments academics are appointed on formal contracts with differentiated roles that focus on teaching such as 'university teacher'. The data analysis reveals tensions around expectations for research in different workplaces:

...the pressure to carry out research. As a 'tutor' it is not in my remit but there is still quite a lot of pressure to do it. In order to be promoted it is a pre-requisite. *Nurse (female – 7 yrs in HE)*

Most of the academics appear to have an expanded job design in line with an expansive workplace environment, but the breadth of a full academic role, encompassing four areas of work, is in tension with the autonomy allowed to individuals to prioritise their workload and development.

...being expected to participate in research and publication when [the] senior lecturer dictating this is lacking in these areas. *Nurse (female – 3 yrs in HE)*

This is at the heart of the analysis which suggest that the level of opportunities and expectations with the academic workplace may be reaching a toxic level. We choose to refer to this situation as a ‘hyper-expansive’ workplace environment and it is linked to the problematic nature of the concept of a ‘learning organisation’.

Innovation in Teaching

In referring to opportunities for ‘bottom-up’ innovation within their work a number of the lecturers reported that in teaching they were able to show initiative and experiment and contribute to curriculum development. This links to characteristic ten in the continuum:

Playing a key role in the education of the midwives of the future. The opportunity to influence curriculum development. Enhancing the student experience. *Midwife (female – 16 yrs in HE)*

These kinds of claims to be able to influence the curriculum included shaping the content and teaching strategies for modules, building links to clinical practice and skills, using new technologies, introducing new forms of assessment and influencing the design of whole programmes. Overall influencing teaching and programme design appears to be an area of work in which many lecturers experience some degree of creative influence and this contributes to an expansive workplace environment.

Career Progression

The data contained only limited direct reference by lecturers to career development although it did report an emphasis on progression, especially in relation to research. This links to characteristic twelve in the continuum. A small number of respondents signalled that they experienced constrained opportunities in terms of promotion and gaining their doctorate was seen as a critical step.

Other Characteristics

The questionnaire did not provide sufficient data to fully consider characteristics one, six and eleven. There were some relevant comments by lecturers around support from line managers and mentors and managerialist quality assurance regimes. In relation to skills across the workforce (characteristic eleven) it was clear that distribution of research skills within the academic workforce was seen as an important issue because of the pressure to publish research.

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Hyper-Expansive Workplaces

The workplace of these lecturers, based on their own self-reported experiences, appears to be expansive in terms of the opportunities for professional learning and development. However workload becomes a controlling factor and unwritten rules around priorities mean that in many cases it is research activity that is neglected. The close partnership with employers and the perceived need to keep up to date in relation to clinical skills creates an additional dimension to the workplace learning opportunities. In this sense the workplace may be characterised as 'hyper-expansive' with an excess of opportunities and pressures for professional development to the point that individuals or teams of lecturers are required to 'select' priorities. This analysis aligns broadly with the findings of previous research on the experiences of lecturers in nursing that identified a struggle for these academics to prioritise apparently conflicting areas of work especially research activity in a workplace characterised by excessive workload (Boyd & Lawley, 2009; Fisher, 2006; McArthur-Rouse, 2008). To some extent the excessive workload perceived by lecturers in professional fields may be attributed to the strong partnership with employers and with knowledge exchange and in the case of

teacher educators a key aspect of this time-consuming work that has been termed 'relationship maintenance' (Ellis et al., 2014). Some of the pressures on this particular group of academic staff may be related to their lack of research experience and doctoral qualifications on appointment. However pressures for building employer partnerships and knowledge exchange, and certainly for research outputs, are widely felt across the higher education sector and in an increasing range of subject disciplines. In professional fields such as Nursing and Midwifery there are considerable tensions around the value placed on different kinds of knowledge and skills and these are often expressed using the metaphor of a 'gap' between theory and practice. It may be helpful for lecturers, students and academic developers to consider alternative metaphors for professional learning that more explicitly recognise the value of practical wisdom of clinical practitioners (Boyd & Bloxham, 2013). Development work to resolve this tension between clinical and research skills and knowledge could lead to change in the workplace through expansive learning as defined by Engeström (2001).

A term used by several lecturers is 'juggling' whereby they attempt to maintain progress in all areas of their work, but others appear to have committed to a specific pathway, frequently teaching, at the expense of other areas, particularly research. The kind of synergy between areas of work that is signalled by the research–teaching nexus might be widened to conceptions of the research teaching knowledge exchange nexus (RTKE nexus). This widened version of the RTKE nexus certainly appears to be appropriate to these lecturers in nursing and midwifery and seems likely to be applicable to other professional fields and even to more traditional subject disciplines.

The Workplace Learning Environment Continuum

Overall the continuum provides a useful framework for workplace evaluation within the constraints of the data set available. Four limitations of the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum

have been revealed when applied to academic workplaces. Firstly to some extent the continuum may be seen as relying on a naïve understanding of the concept of the learning organisation as identified by Fenwick (2001). On one level presentation of the characteristics within the continuum as dichotomous is perhaps too simplistic. For example, in the continuum characteristic four focuses on ‘team work’ as expansive, but whilst collaborative working may often support professional learning but independent working may also encourage autonomy and creativity. A second limitation is that the continuum does not seem to highlight possible variation in responses to workplace context through individual and collective agency. For example in the case of the lecturers the value placed on ‘pursuit of formal qualifications’ in the shape of a Doctorate may be strongly influenced by their individual choice of research focus. Thirdly the continuum focuses on generalised characteristics of a workplace whereas in the case of professional educators it is important to consider how it plays out across the four different areas of their work. Finally the continuum did not include a characteristic related to the strongest theme arising from our analysis, that the lecturers had a strong shared motivation and commitment to the development of new clinical practitioners. Based on our analysis we have added ‘shared purpose’ as an additional characteristic on Table 2. Overall the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum offers a useful tool for workplace evaluation, but we would argue that the interpretation of qualitative data from academic staff is complex and requires a research-based, ethical and reflexive approach from academic developers who choose to use it.

Conclusion

We have identified the usefulness of the expansive-restrictive workplace learning environment continuum as a tool for evaluation of academic workplaces. We have proposed the concept of a ‘hyper-expansive’ academic workplace environment where lecturers may be exposed to multiple and overwhelming opportunities and pressures for professional learning. This hyper-expansive workplace environment may be particularly experienced by academics in professional fields such as nursing and midwifery where strong engagement with

employers adds complexity to their role. One implication for academic managers and developers is that they should critically analyse the workplace context experienced by academic staff within specific subject disciplines. This is especially true in professional fields where there may be a tension between clinical and research knowledge that requires resolution. Such leaders and developers need to control unrealistic expectations in relation to workload and allow academic staff to choose pathways for professional learning that are explicitly valued and recognised by formal as well as informal workplace rules and rewards. This should allow academic staff to negotiate a potentially confusing hyper-expansive workplace context to build a realistic career development pathway. Further research and development of the expansive-restrictive continuum in subject specific domains and in case study institutions should focus on individual and collective agency as well as workplace context in order to understand the responses of academic and academic-related staff to their higher education workplaces. Such research will help to underpin and inform the work of academic developers.

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