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Supporting educational developers' change practices: Examining educator and student beliefs of and relationships in teaching practice

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Abstract

This paper brings together findings from two investigations that respectively examined educator and student beliefs and relationships within the learning environment, and goes on to examine how consideration of both might enable enhancement of teaching and learning practices. These results help to inform educational developers' practices, including facilitating change in the practices of educators and students in situ.

1   Introduction

The knowledge, skills and attributes needed by graduates to thrive in an environment marked by disruption require us to re-examine and change teaching practices to support student knowing in new contexts. As teaching practices are enacted through the interplay of educators and students, examining teaching practice from both perspectives can add richness to our understanding of how practices might change in different contexts.

In this paper, teaching is examined using social practice theory. This theory posits that human activity is not wholly rational and directed by thought, nor is it entirely dictated by the social structures in which individuals live and work. Social practice theory instead contends that individuals shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they live. In this way our collective behaviours and beliefs exist, not in the minds of individuals or the structures of our society, but instead in the intersection of the two as we interact with each other in the basic carrying out of daily life (Reckwitz, 2002).

In this theory, summarized in Figure 1, practice is defined as the **patterns** that come together to fulfil collective, though not always explicit, **intents**. At each site of practice (e.g., an academic department) exist **architectures of practice**; the things at a site that enable and limit practice (Kemmis et al., 2014). Through practice, these architectures are shaped and changed so neither practice nor its architectures are static, but instead, mutually constitute each other in a recurrent process. Practice at a site forms **traditions**, like well-worn paths created by repeated "travel" over the same ground. **Routines** of developing practice also exist (e.g., conversations with colleagues, committee meetings). Trowler's (2008) elements of teaching and learning

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regimes, shown in italics in Figure 1, align to provide **architectures specific to teaching and learning practice**. This figure is used to frame results from the two studies in this paper.
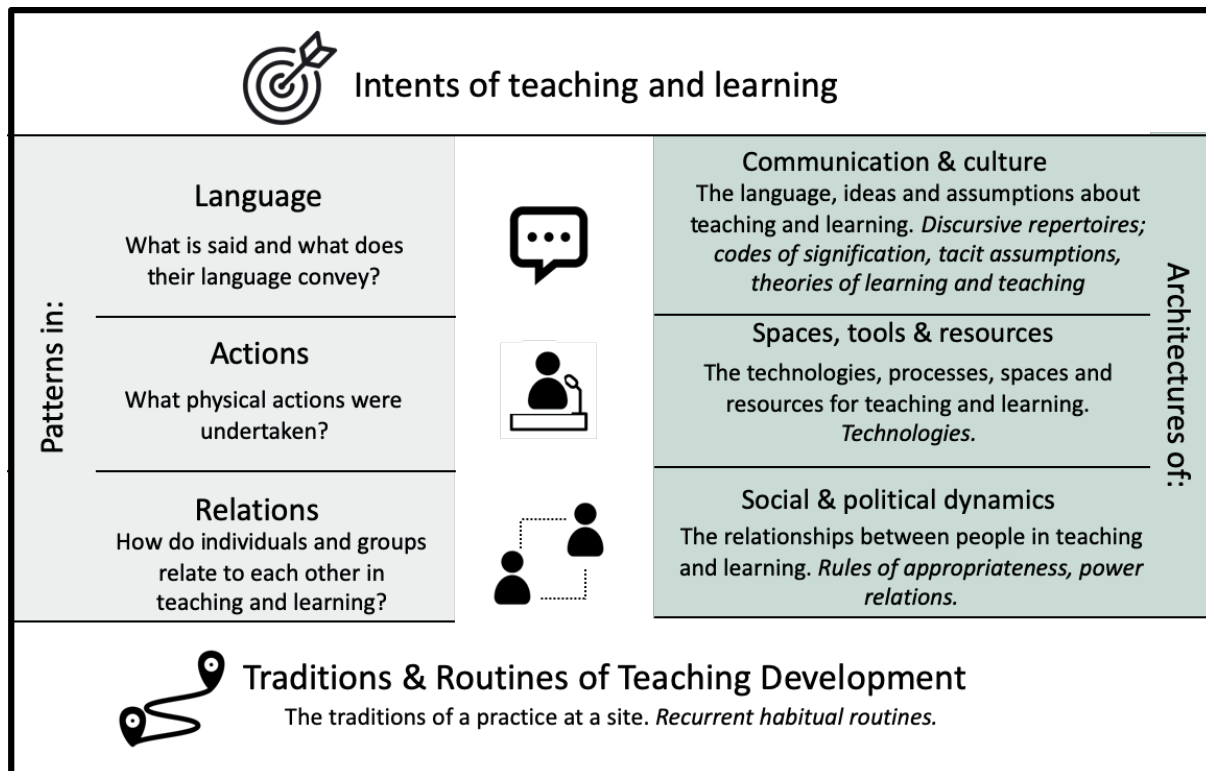

Figure 1: Teaching and learning practice and architectures of practice (adapted from Turner, 2018)

2   Study 1: Educator teaching practices and teaching practice architectures

An ethnographic investigation using social practice theory was undertaken to explore teaching and learning practices and the ways in which these practices developed in three departments at a research-intensive institution in Canada (Turner, 2018). While one step removed from directly assessing student learning practices, a key finding of the investigation was the central influence of faculty **assumptions about and relationships with students** on teaching practice and its development. For the purposes of this paper, the key findings in only this aspect of the investigation will be described.

Turner (2018) found that faculty assumptions about student motivations had a significant influence on departmental teaching practices and practice architectures. Findings saw these assumptions varying along a continuum of deriving motivation from grades, to gaining knowledge and/or skills, to growth as a member of a discipline/profession. Likewise, faculty relationships with students varied from faculty perceiving students as customers, to learners following expert faculty guides, to students being partners in learning with faculty.

Variance in these assumptions regarding student motivations and relationships with students influenced departmental language, ideas and beliefs about students and affected teaching practices. For example, in a department that believed students were customers who were motivated by grades, change in teaching practices sought to achieve student satisfaction. Conversely, a department that believed students were partners motivated by learning changed practices in ways that facilitated growth and identity development, with faculty and students learning from and with each other. In a simplified sense, the first department would see change driven <u>by</u> students and the second, change driven <u>with</u> students.

The practices and approaches to change noted here were fluid, not static characteristics of these departments. As such, assumptions about and relationships with students were key influencers of practice and practice architectures through ongoing teaching and learning encounters.

3   Study 2: Students' resistance to learning-centred teaching practices

Study 2 focused on students' perceptions when a faculty member in one course used teaching practices that the students did not expect to experience. In this case study research, Lewin's force field analysis model served as the theoretical change model, which posits that in a change situation, it is more effective to decrease opposing forces to a change than to increase the driving forces (1999). But to do so, the opposing forces – or barriers – must first be identified.

Ellis (2013, 2015) identified eight different barriers. Of interest in this paper is the one on instructional conceptions. In follow-up interviews, these conceptions were further investigated in relation to courses in the students' home department, tapping into the students' perceptions of departmental architectures and traditions, as explored in Study 1.

Trowler's (2008) teaching and learning regimes were applied as an explanatory framework for the results of the interview prompt: How well would the teaching practices used in this one course work in courses in your home department? Like the faculty, students had tacit assumptions (small class sizes are needed for interaction), implicit theories (nature of disciplinary knowledge), and beliefs about the conventions of appropriateness (students have to work independently) regarding teaching and learning that appeared to stem from their experiences with the recurrent teaching practices used in their home department and their beliefs about instructors (they are unwilling to learn new methods). The vast majority interviewed (n=14/17) believed that at least one of the methods used in the case study course would not work in their home departments.

In general, the experiences of students appeared to be critical in their conceptions of departmental teaching and learning regimes. Students' courses are not discrete experiences but rather a system of experiences, with each course adding to the students' collective set of perceptions about how teaching happens in a department. The more that students experience particular teaching practices at a site, the more they expect to experience those same practices. They are influenced by the teaching architectures and traditions within their home departments, but are not necessarily aware of their power to influence them.

4   Implications for educational developers

So why have we brought these studies together in considering educational developers' roles in enabling change? In general, when faculty want to adopt new instructional methods, it is helpful for them to do so with awareness that their practices and student responses to them are shaped by their workgroup. However, these practices and responses are challenging for faculty to see, which can provide an opening for educational developers to provide much-needed support and guidance.

Educational developers are outside of the architectures of academic departments, so can engage faculty with oblique questions or other activities that expose the tacit and often unconscious aspects of practices and practice architectures at a site (Trowler, 2014). For example, an educational developer might engage faculty in a card sorting technique (e.g., categorizing different assessment approaches), using projective techniques like imagining teaching in another scenario, or responding to a drawing of how things should/could work in teaching. Oblique questions might include asking faculty to compare the best student they could imagine, or the most effective teacher they have ever seen, to their current experiences.

These approaches, with follow-up questioning, can help make practices explicit, particularly when done with multiple members of a workgroup.

Similarly, educational developers can help departments create reflective activities to elicit and examine students' perceptions about teaching and learning regimes that may be opposing forces to engaging with new or unexpected teaching practices, and help them work with their students to develop broader, more expansive perceptions or transform them. Frameworks like those used in transformative learning may assist. For example, students could be asked how they think teaching should happen in courses in their home departments, how they decided that, and why they should question that thinking (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 2000). The ensuing discussions can identify barriers as well as enablers, and uncover students' assumptions for examination.

As seen in the descriptions above, these approaches are different from typical educational development practices, as the means of engaging to unearth and collaborate to change practice requires a different type of understanding of and engagement with the workgroup in which this change is occurring.

5   Conclusions

Practices are grounded in collective ideas, resources, and relationships at a site. While a faculty workgroup and a student's peer group are the primary sites of practice development for teaching and learning, the interaction of the two groups in the context of the department has a profound influence on them. If these two groups are considered independently, we miss the significant influence on teaching and learning practice that comes from the interaction. Educational developers are therefore encouraged to work at the level of the department and include students when making explicit – and changing – practices.

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