



## CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

### Facilitating the development of a shared purpose in a university department: the first stage towards developing a culture of shared governance

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#### Abstract

*Background and context:* The structure of higher education departments tends to be hierarchical or, at the other extreme, characterised as ‘a galaxy of individual stars’ (Handy, 1993 p 190). Ours was no exception. However, changes in the way nursing education was provided, internal growth and development followed by a period of austerity, presented our school with an unprecedented opportunity. We found ourselves in a position where we had the possibility to change.

*Aims:* The aim of the paper is to share our reflections on the process and outcomes to date of a culture change project in a university department. The purpose of this opening part of the project was to enable creative and collegial opportunities to work together.

*Conclusions:* An inclusive culture can make a difference to peoples’ lives and reflect the underpinning principles of person-centred practice. This project has enabled us to define our shared purpose, clarify our values, make commitments and set standards. Overall, though it has allowed us to see each other as people who have emerged from behind a faceless organisational structure.

*Implications for practice:*

- The values of inclusiveness, integrity and professionalism are important for a shared understanding and effective collaborative functioning within university departments internationally, especially those that espouse person-centredness
- Staff teams can be structured around professional and personal development needs but these also provide a direct link to both departmental and organisational purposes aligned to education
- Managerial support, staff participation and an experienced facilitator are vital for successful cultural change. Our project has been UK based but we believe these experiences to be transferable and of interest to university departments elsewhere that aspire to create cultures that enable staff, and therefore students and the wider community, to flourish

**Keywords:** Culture change, nursing, higher education, shared decision making, values, shared governance

#### Introduction

In this paper, we share our experience of the process and outcomes to date of a culture change programme in a university department. The paper uses a modified version of the model of reflection proposed by Rolfe et al. (2010). We have framed our experiences in terms of ‘what’, ‘so what’ and

'now what', in relation to a journey that aimed to redesign our practice architecture (Kemmis, 2009), from a traditional hierarchical school, towards one based on shared values and driven by shared governance, similar to that outlined by Bamford-Wade and Spence (2012). We were drawn to this shared-governance approach because it empowers individuals by devolving decision making and accountability to constituent members, as opposed to maintaining a command and control structure (Marquis and Huston, 2015).

## **What?**

### ***Organisational context***

With a history of providing graduate nursing programmes since the 1970s, nursing at the University of Ulster is characterised by pioneering, academic excellence, practice development and research, with a strong focus on person-centredness (McCormack and McCance, 2006; 2010) and creativity (McCormack et al., 2014). The department has approximately 70 staff and four research centres, and provides undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in adult and mental health nursing.

In 2000, the Department of Health contract for the provision of undergraduate/preregistration nursing in Northern Ireland was renegotiated and 50% of the provision was awarded to the University of Ulster school of nursing. This triggered a series of fundamental changes in the school, such as a recruitment drive that dramatically expanded the number of staff and provided 'new' courses on two campuses. Following this rapid expansion and growth, the university entered a period of austerity that profoundly affected how the school delivered its programmes. Thus, at the start of the culture change programme the organisational context was one of flux, with a new curriculum and associated developments in research and teaching.

The overt organisational structure at this point was bureaucratic, hierarchical and centralised in keeping with the description provided by Giddens (2006) – but it was designed to be flexible and to accommodate the post-2000 changes. However, the hierarchical structure was at odds with the notion of flexibility and created a dissonance that undermined effectiveness and led to a feeling among staff that it was no longer fit for purpose. Evidence of this came from feedback from exercises conducted at an away day, and from the school's executive committee, which used the claims, concerns and issues tool (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). As a result of the data generated, we decided that our organisational structure had to be addressed but also recognised that this was an opportunity to embrace culture change.

### ***The process***

The decision to proceed was endorsed by school management, which was important because, according to McCormack et al. (1999), organisational change is next to impossible to achieve without support from the top. With that support in place, and in keeping with Titchen and Binnie (1993), we resolved to adopt a bottom-up approach to facilitate change. Our goal was to re-imagine school structures while maintaining and improving the standards already enjoyed. A shared governance model was proposed as a viable way to achieve our goals and live our values, informed by the idea that 'form follows function' (Manley et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of the project was to establish an effective workplace culture by enabling and nurturing the creative and collegial aspects of working together (Manley et al., 2011). We decided to involve an external facilitator with experience in the culture change process.

In order for the externally facilitated process to move forward, volunteers from all departments established a coordinating group. Membership of this group was varied, with administrative, academic and research staff, as well as the external facilitator. This was built on an insider-outsider approach and, as Adelman (1993, p 9) pointed out, the strengths and perspectives of the members complemented each other, thereby distilling a 'new common sense'.

The first priority was to draft the vision, purpose and values from the data that staff had generated collaboratively. It is widely recognised that defining purpose is the first stage of a culture change programme, (Manley et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2014). The data, (both positive and negative), were captured in wordles, and processes to facilitate the project continued with a series of interactive meetings guided by the external facilitator. As many staff as possible were involved to ensure that colleagues were confident that the programme's output was theirs. This was helped by feedback and verification by peers to clarify ownership. In addition, we wanted to maintain dialogue to avoid contributing to resistance to change as identified by Klonek et al. (2014), who found that such resistance increased if recipients believed that change was being imposed. After many meetings and discussions with colleagues, a vision for the school was agreed. This is presented in Box 1.

#### Box 1: The school vision and purpose

*The school of nursing will have a positive influence on the lives of students, staff and all those we engage with and will be recognised nationally and internationally as progressive*

Having a clear vision to build on enabled us to clarify our purposes. These emerged as:

- Developing a flourishing person-centred culture
- Flourishing students and staff
- Have a positive impact on Ulster University and the wider society

Continuing our dialogue with peers through workshops allowed us to work out our values. The core values agreed were **integrity, inclusiveness and professionalism**.

Reflecting on how we would live our values led us to consider the commitments we were making to each other and to ourselves. The process was again facilitated externally and the commitments are illustrated in Figure 1. The hand-drawn illustrations are artefacts arising from the staff workshops.

**Figure 1: The commitments**



In order to clarify what the commitments would mean in real terms, we drew up a series of standards. These benchmarked our behaviour and attitudes, and allowed us to see what the values and commitments would 'look like'. Each of the standards arose from the group work, which enabled ownership and reflexivity (Table 1).

Table 1: The standards	
Core value	Standards
<b>Inclusiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respect people and their dignity</li> <li>• Be person-centred, positive and caring</li> <li>• Appreciate and celebrate each other</li> <li>• Listen and clearly communicate</li> <li>• Consistently work to nurture and develop the potential of each other</li> </ul>
<b>Integrity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistently work together towards the common purpose</li> <li>• Consistently support each other to reflect, learn and develop</li> <li>• Courage to give and receive feedback</li> <li>• Work with personal and professional commitment and passion</li> <li>• Work as a team with individual and team role clarity</li> <li>• Take responsibility and be accountable for own actions and decisions</li> <li>• Walk the walk</li> </ul>
<b>Professionalism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver the best outcomes for students, the school, university and society within resources available</li> <li>• Draw on the different gifts and talents of all</li> <li>• Always improving</li> <li>• Always using and developing evidence to underpin actions, decisions and professional practice</li> <li>• Maintain equity in worklife balance for self and others</li> </ul>

### So what?

This element of the reflective framework described by Rolfe et al. (2010) enabled us to make sense of the events described above and consider their impact. Even though this paper is written in an academic, critical and somewhat dispassionate manner, we did not want to lose our voice in convention (Murray, 2013). Therefore, it should be noted that the culture change project has been an emotionally charged undertaking with a significant amount of emotional labour for all involved. With hindsight this is perhaps not surprising, as Smollan and Sayers (2009) point out that culture change does provoke intense emotional reactions. Also, there were times when we did want to 'fix' as opposed to facilitate, as highlighted by Scott (2013). However, expert support through facilitation ameliorated the worst of the negative effects and prepared us for 'demechanisation', a process described by Boal (2002) as an opportunity to unlearn old habits in order to relearn.

From the outset, it was apparent that the project represented opportunities for collaboration, participation and shared decision making. As a part of this process, any scepticism needed to be addressed and dealt with. From time to time those facilitating the groups felt vulnerable; resilience, however, was nurtured through high mutual support, high challenge and living the values. It could be that we were illuminating Waddington's (2016, p 1) 'compassion gap' in the university, insofar as we were highlighting a disconnect between our values as caring professionals and the neoliberal agenda that drives commodification of students in higher education. Emotional venting notwithstanding, a variety of ideas and opinions were shared, recorded and discussed, and this allowed people to feel listened to and come to understand that their input was important. Examples of this include the development of an online dashboard that provides evidence of staff 'flourishing' through pre-existing indices of achievement, such as CPD activity, academic awards and publications. The school's board was kept abreast of progress and provided ratification of the proposals for a new decision-making structure to run in shadow form for one year.

We are at a place where we have shared purposes, values, commitments and standards. However, enabling the values to become 'lived' has been more testing. We need to consider how the values could be translated into the foundations of an embryonic structure that would enable us to embed

them in our everyday work. Following this, we need to consider what the new value-driven practice would look like as opposed to our previous 'regular' practice. As noted by Van Manen (1990, p 30), perhaps the form of this new practice will emerge in our idiomatic phrasing. Waddington (2016, p 3) suggests that a change in conversational patterns could 'illustrate difficult realities'; equally, such a change could indicate a shift in values.

From a practical perspective though, we needed to think about how everyone could contribute to a shared governance model. This drew us closer to understanding the expectations and burden of responsibility that comes with shared governance processes (Gill, 2011). Shared governance is described by Porter-O'Grady and Malloch (2016, p 16) as,

*'A structure and process that embodies the principles of equity, partnership, accountability and ownership, which are necessary for autonomy to flourish.'*

While colleagues supported the direction being taken with the project, the proposed shared governance structure produced some doubt. This is in keeping with Shaw's (2012) assertion that practice development is not that straightforward. Perhaps the doubt indicated uncertainty because shared governance would remove the perceived security offered by anonymity, while making responsibility explicit.

So, a number of possible structures were identified to reflect collaborative ways of working and decision making. Because of this, we established staff teams on the basis that supporting individuals first would facilitate consequent development. The teams were designed to mix business support, research and academic staff at varying career stages. Membership was through self-nomination, which took place at an away day in December 2014. The coordinating group nominated a facilitator and co-facilitator to start with and their role was to lead the staff team meetings regarding areas of personal/professional development. In this respect, the agenda has been left very much as an open forum. The staff teams are not campus specific and are intended to be supportive, developmental and participative.

A number of factors from our perspectives enabled development and, without ranking them, we felt that expert facilitation, managerial support, motivation and enthusiasm for changing 'the way we do things around here' all played a key role (Drennan, 1992, p 9). Barriers were encountered along the way, but this is to be expected in organisations undertaking change (Buchanan and Huczinski, 2010). It was when objections were being voiced and threatened to dominate the agenda that the value of experienced facilitation became most apparent.

Because of our new structures and processes, we looked forward to a changed workplace culture. This was imagined as being different ways of doing things. We felt that having worked towards changing our context and the mechanisms by which we did things, outcome change would follow, as suggested by Pawson and Tilley (1997). Perhaps most importantly, the project would enable shared responsibility by adopting the principles of shared governance that would be manifest in working together to realise a bottom-up decision-making approach. On occasion though, (and paradoxically if not ironically), this idea also posed a problem for some when realisation dawned that shared governance implied active participation as opposed to passive observation. There would be an enhanced focus on individuals' interests, skills and career development and thus enhanced teamworking – harnessing knowledge, skills and talents more effectively, supporting one another to exemplify the agreed values, and so on. We forecast that this would result in improved satisfaction, outputs and recognition, at local, national and international levels. We also recognised that increased scrutiny in the university would occur because of the new approach.

Operationally, the members of the coordinating group experienced dissonance between expectations of group membership and the priorities of the school. This was apparent when relief from workload, promised so that individuals could take part in the project, did not materialise. The pace, scale and

volume of work and the time demands created by practice learning support make carving out time to change difficult. We continue to be reminded of the professional implications of our course and the fact that changes cannot be made if there is risk of compromise.

### Now what?

Continuing along the framework provided by Rolfe et al. (2010) brings us to a decisive point in the development of the project where we suggest how things may be improved. To facilitate this, ongoing leadership of the project has passed to colleagues with a significant record of accomplishment in facilitating large-scale practice developments. New decision-making bodies were proposed but in the first instance, the decision was taken to concentrate on the development of new ways of collegial working through the development of staff teams.

On reflection, we find ourselves asking the question, 'what have we learned from this exercise?' Overall, the journey (so far) has been challenging from a variety of perspectives. It has even been distressing at times but this has been balanced by learning, a sense of moving forward and moments of excitement as we began to realise what was possible and became aware of the empowering effect this would have on our working lives. Having the opportunity to reflect on our experiences in the project thus far has enabled us to consider what Burman (2006, p 327) referred to as the 'political economy of production', in terms of the need to be aware of the wider context that our change processes sit in. We have been empowered to challenge the bureaucratic, controlling organisational structure with a view to improving outcomes for our students and our own working lives. However, we have also gained insight into the value that such a structure offers and that perhaps shared governance may not be the short-term panacea we hoped it would be at the outset of the project.

We have seen the impact that effective, experienced leadership has on a project such as this (Manley et al., 2014). Opportunities have arisen for us to refocus and refine our approach. Our collective experience has shown us that, above all else, resilience is needed. However, the shared purpose provided us with a touchstone that we could revisit to help us refocus and draw breath. There is still more work to do, but with the frameworks established we feel we can move forward together.

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