

Developing a scholarly forum at a teaching university in the UK: A case study

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Abstract The rapid move of nursing in the UK into the university sector in the early 1990s has not only opened up a set of new possibilities for nurse educators but also created a set of new challenges. One such challenge is to transform the teaching cultures of these new departments into a scholastic culture. This article, using Lewin's framework of change along with theories of cultural change, demonstrates the creation of a scholarly forum that would facilitate the creation of a scholarly culture. © 2007 National Organization for Associate Degree Nursing. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The concept of scholarly activity in nursing universities in the UK has been arguably a fairly new and, up to a point, an unwrought one. This is much a result of the fact that nursing in the UK as an all-graduate profession has taken shape fairly recently with the contemporary introduction of Project 2000 in the early 1990s and the establishment of the post-1992 universities, where most nursing departments are situated. This transition in the early 1990s has created for the newly founded university departments a set of challenges, not least of which is the need to be involved in scholarly activities. Crookes and Bradshaw (2002) consider that the move of nursing into the university sector among other issues signifies the intention of the nursing discipline to accept an inquiry culture that is pertinent to traditional

university disciplines and is illustratively expressed in the mantra "publish or perish."

Thus, the need to develop a scholarly culture within nursing education in the UK has become an imperative, which nursing education cannot afford to ignore. Nursing departments within Higher Education, like all other university departments in the UK, are subjected to regular reviews with regard to their scholarly output by independent assessors. One such assessor is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) that is carried out every 4 years and aims at outlining the profiles of scholarly activity in each university department. Consequently, based upon this assessment, it determines accordingly the annual distribution of public funding (RAE, 2004).

Despite the fact that new nursing departments had a very short period to adjust to these fundamental changes in the provision of university education, they were, nevertheless, required to compete and contest on equal grounds for funding with other traditional university departments. In the last three RAE assessments, nursing has been placed at the bottom of the league table. It is argued that this low ranking

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derives from the lack of a strong research infrastructure in nursing departments and from a permeating nursing culture, which places greater value in teaching the practice skills of how to act as a nurse rather than the ability to think and research as a nurse (Lindsay, Pfeil, & Bates, 2003). In fact, it is argued that the current culture dissuades lecturers from undertaking scholarly activities, and if they do undertake such activities, it is on a part-time basis on their own time and alongside heavy teaching, administrative responsibilities, and clinical duties (Crookes & Bradshaw, 2002).

Nevertheless, for nursing to climb up from the bottom of the RAE ranking and compete with other academic disciplines in terms of scholarly output, it is required that nurse educators change the way they practice. Hence, a variety of workable strategies that would permit nurse educators to combine teaching and scholarly roles in their working environments need to be identified (Crookes & Bradshaw, 2002). Robinson, Watson, and Webb (2002) suggest that this change does not need to take the form of a revolution but should be more in the form of an evolution of what nurse educators are already doing. Thus, it is suggested that if the relevant mechanisms are developed, then the existing roles of lecturers will evolve into becoming scholarly ones (Barton, 1998; Crookes & Bradshaw, 2002; Wilson-Barnett, 1997).

Therefore, the intent of this article is to demonstrate the process of developing a scholarly forum within a department of nursing in a UK university. The aims of this scholarly forum were to foster the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and experiences among lecturers within the department and to create a thriving environment for developing research ideas and for encouraging publication and conference presentation. The introduction of the scholarly forum was based on Lewin's trisected model of change supplemented with theories of cultural change.

2. Stage 1—Unfreezing the present situation

According to Lewin's (1951) force field model of change, the first step or phase for any change to occur is to unfreeze the present situation. This is achieved by highlighting to organizations that there is a need for change to occur. This need for change emanates either from a realized discrepancy between desirable goals and what actually is happening or from a crisis and/or shock situation triggered either internally or externally to the organization (King & Anderson, 2002; Senior, 2002). This phase, according to Senior (2002), entails a twofold process, which includes, on one hand, the diagnostic phase and, on the other hand, the development of a vision for the future.

The unfreezing process for the specific case study commenced by critically analyzing the current situation in relation to the role that the university has, both locally and nationally. Despite the fact that the university has had a long tradition of teaching in the local region, it was not until 1991

that it acquired polytechnic status following the merger of a series of colleges; it was eventually inaugurated as a university in 1992 (Thames Valley University, 2002a). At about the same time, radical reforms were taking place in the education of nurses in the UK with the wholesale move from the traditional task-focused and hospital-based nursing training to the academic- and research-based nurse education (Barton, 1998; UKCC, 1986; Wilson-Barnett, 1997).

These changes have imposed a set of new and challenging demands for all those who teach in the department. It is now required that staff will not only teach but also be research active at the same time. The literature concedes that for the nurse teachers to become fully accepted in the world of universities, it is imperative to complement their primarily clinical teaching experience and expertise with scholastic activities such as teaching abstract theories, conducting research, acquiring funding, and becoming active in publishing within referred journals (Alison & Green, 2000; Barton, 1998; English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting, 1995; Traynor & Rafferty, 1998). These characteristics are identified as the defining attributes of traditional academic disciplines (Anthony, 1997; Aron & Headrick, 2002; Farrington, 1996; Tierney, 1994).

These scholastic intentions are mirrored in the faculty's aims (Faculty of Health and Human Sciences, 2002), where it is explicitly stated that we should "achieve our aims by developing quality teaching, learning and research experiences" (p. 1). This can also be identified in the mission statement, where the objective is "to strive for the highest levels of achievement in scholarship and research in key areas of expertise, central to the University's academic and professional character" (Thames Valley University, 2002b, p. 2).

However, within the last decade, there has been an increased awareness within the faculty that, despite the high caliber of teaching, a mismatch remains between the rhetoric of developing a scholastic culture and the daily reality of the university. This discordance between aspiring aims and daily reality is being expressed not only informally among staff but also formally by the faculty's dean, noting that "now [lecturers] have competing demands of teaching and research, they teach all hours and they have no time to think. The luxury of academia does not exist anymore" (Parish, 2003, p. 5).

Moreover, this perceived discrepancy between desirable goals and the reality was further highlighted by the shock situation that was triggered by the independent assessment of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the UK that placed the university in one of the lowest positions in the last decade. The QAA assessments, while mentioning the praiseworthy teaching efforts taking place at the university, nonetheless pointed at the lack of research and scholarly activity and expressed the desirability of "supporting the growth of the research community" (QAA, 2003, p. 11).

Therefore, the need to change from a mere teaching culture into a scholastic one was triggered by both the discrepancy between rhetoric and daily reality and the shock created by the QAA's report. Hence, part of Lewin's unfreezing process had already materialized. However, the unfreezing phase does not finish unless a vision for change has been developed (Senior, 2002). This includes the creation of a new metaphor for the members of the department to which they could aspire to and be inspired by. In this case, this new metaphor included the creation of a scholarly forum that would facilitate lecturer meetings at regular intervals to exchange ideas on common interests, on current activities, and on issues requiring change and/or research. This scholarly forum intended to become a stage for providing positive feedback, for testing out ideas in a safe environment, for stimulating discussion, for identifying common research interests, and for sharing experiences of publishing.

3. Stage 2—Moving on to implement the change

The completion of the unfreezing stage led to the next phase of Lewin's (1951) force field theory, which is the moving phase. This included the effort of gaining commitment for the developed vision and the creation of an action plan for implementing that vision (Senior, 2002). This was the stage where information was disseminated to everyone and where the mechanisms for coping with potential constraints in implementing the change were set into motion (Carnall, 1992; Senior, 2002).

Hence, the necessity and inevitability for developing a research and publishing culture within the university were emphasized. This was achieved by providing all the formal documentation from QAA and RAE assessments and by reminding faculty members of the aims and mission of the university.

However, merely communicating the information and making the argument for change did not suffice. It is normal for people to react to changes by denying the proposed change and by defending the current situation. Such initial denial to the formation of the scholarly forum was viewed as a normal reaction to the new and different way of working and thinking and was expressed in the form of frustration and/or intense anxiety in dealing with the challenges that emerged from the changed situation (Carnall, 1992; Carney, 2000).

The necessity for a scholarly culture at the department was emphasized to overcome this reaction from the faculty members. Furthermore, it was explicitly illustrated that the proposed change of developing a scholarly forum would indeed achieve this culture shift. This is what Archer et al. (cited in Pearson, 1990) consider as the combined use of the rational-empirical strategy (provision of a logical argument with the accompanying evidence) with the normative-

educative strategy (reexamining of established values). The combination of these strategies provided the most effective means of overcoming resistance because it not only demonstrated the inevitability for change but also provided the assurance that the change will achieve the intended aims and, therefore, be worthwhile.

Furthermore, it was necessary at this stage to accentuate that the development of a scholarly culture does not materialize in the vacuum. On the contrary, as is contested by Jootun and McGhee (2003), "it requires a milieu that encourages this form of activity" (p. 39). French (2000) viewed this milieu as a networking environment where research groups meet regularly to disseminate information to each other. Similarly, Wilson-Barnett (1997) considers that teachers' group meetings are necessary in raising understanding and enthusiasm for research and in allowing discussion on published and proposed papers to emerge. Lastly, evidences of successful scholarly forums are described by Chester and Espelin (2003), Kohlenberg (1992), and Lewallen, Crane, Letvak, Jones, and Hu (2003). All these studies assert that participation in scholarly forums positively changed the way participants approached research projects and publications.

At this point, it was stressed that the development of a scholastic culture was not a challenge unique to this university. Most nursing departments in the UK were confronted with similar challenges. It was explained that the short period required for the transition of nursing schools into higher education and the didactic culture permeating nurse education have resulted in most nursing departments to be teaching focused rather than research focused (Alison & Green, 2000; Lindsay et al., 2003; Tierney, 1994).

All this information had a threefold effect. Initially, it provided a logical articulated argument as to why such a forum was required. Subsequently, it indicated that the development of a scholarly forum has been successfully implemented elsewhere. Lastly, it demonstrated that most UK nursing universities are confronted with a similar situation, and this is not a particular deficiency of this university but a logical consequence of the rapid changes that have affected the whole of nursing education in the UK.

Following this, an action plan was developed, which defines the behaviors of individuals involved in the group, the structure of the group, and the context of the group (Pugh, 1986). This process included assertive negotiations among all involved members based on a democratic dialogue (Carney, 2000). Pearson (1990) asserts that "changing norms of any occupational group must be the business of the whole team involved" (p. 167), and this is necessary because it prevents the change from being viewed as a power-coercive process imposed from above (Ford & Walsh, 1994). This collective decision making provided a sense of empowerment and ownership to all involved parties.

Despite the fact that a collaborative process in reaching decisions is beneficial among group members, consultation and assistance, at least in the initial stages, are also required

to provide the group with alternative possibilities and a sense direction. This role is normally reserved and undertaken by the person considered as the changing agent (Pearson, 1990; Senior, 2002). Hence, the change agent provided some possible suggestions for discussion and analysis to the lecturers of the group regarding the role, the structure, and the context of the planned scholarly forum.

Eventually, it was decided that everyone in the department will be involved regardless of research experience or knowledge. It was important to make everyone feel included and, at the same time, allow space for various types of knowledge and experience to be shared among the whole group. It was considered that variations of research experience among members of staff would be viewed as a positive mechanism of the process. Therefore, all staff members, whether they are teaching oriented or research oriented, can be influenced by each other and eventually increase scholarly productivity (Dundar & Lewis, 1998; Melland, 1995; Traynor & Rafferty, 1998; Wilson-Barnett, 1997).

4. Stage 3—Refreezing the changed situation

The refreezing phase is the third and last stage of Lewin's (1951) force field theory. This involves the actual implementation of the proposed plan, the assessment of the implemented change, and the stabilization of the change (Senior, 2002). This stage requires constant monitoring, assessment, and feedback to the members of the organization and other key stakeholders. It indicates the successes of the change and, at the same time, identifies issues that hamper targeted aims and destabilize the change.

The processes of implementing and evaluating a change are considered to be almost simultaneous. From the moment the action plan is implemented, this should be monitored and evaluated to assess if the desired outcomes are achieved. It is considered that complete failures or entirely successful cases of implementing change are very rare. Instead, change is a dynamic and malleable process that requires constant monitoring, evaluation, planning, and replanning to meet the needs of an ever-changing environment and the interests of individuals (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Limo-Basto, 1995).

A set of preplanned techniques was implemented to evaluate the dynamic progress of the scholarly forum. The evaluation of the implemented change would commence by the use of a questionnaire survey that would be disseminated to all members of the group after the first four meetings to assess progress and identify potential areas of improvement. The findings of the unstructured questionnaire will be qualitative content analyzed as to identify common patterns and deviant cases, and the results will be reported to the team. The sixth group meeting will take the form of a focus group activity to discuss the findings of the questionnaire. After the first

4 months, one of the managers or the dean of the department will be invited to participate in the meeting of the scholarly forum and provide feedback as to how the group is perceived from an external perspective. After the initial year, the questionnaire survey will be repeated to correlate findings with the first one. This will be complemented by statistical data that examine the rates of turnover or absentees and overall achievements, that is, the amount of published work, the number of projects undertaken, and the total conference presentations.

All information regarding the successes of the forum will be made available to the public. Also, this information will be included in a section within the department's electronic newspaper. Finally, problematic issues that the group will possibly need to deal with are timetabling of the meetings to avoid conflicting with other responsibilities, heavy teaching workloads that may distract efforts, and the admission of new members to the group.

5. Recommendations

The creation of a scholastic culture and the continuous development of nursing lecturers require systematic and methodical planning. The development of scholarly forums in nursing departments has been proven to be one mechanism of creating such a scholastic culture. Such mechanisms require a systematic design by utilizing models of change to shift the culture from being primarily a teaching one to becoming more research oriented.

This article explicitly outlined the development and implementation of a plan that intended to introduce one such scholarly forum. While this remains a case study in progress and has specific and individual characteristics, it allows for explicit or implicit comparisons to be made with other nursing departments. The intent of this article is not to identify the right way of developing scholarly qualities at nursing departments but to provide the reader with direct access to the trials, tribulations, and experiences of developing a scholastic culture at one nursing department. Therefore, this case study will benefit educationalists interested in developing a scholastic culture in their departments. It may resonate to varying degrees with their own experiences and, overall, add to their individual understandings.

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