

## The Generic meets the Discipline

Supporting New Academic Staff (SNAS) project meetings provided a lively forum for discussing appropriate ways for blending generic and disciplinary approaches to supporting new staff. The following ideas and information were put together by Alan Jenkins and Sue Burkill on behalf of the group. Please get in touch with one of them if you would like to contribute to the thinking on 'generic meets discipline'.

### Discussion points

#### What is meant by a 'disciplinary approach'?

PGCert courses have emerged in the UK to support and accredit new staff in their roles as teachers and in managing learning. Over the last 10-15 years, course providers have shared and refined their approaches; adapting them to fit the needs of their own institutions. In most cases the courses are provided 'generically' by a central team. The people who have participated in the SNAS project value the largely generic approach of most CertEd (HE) courses. Many, even most, of the teaching and learning issues that confront new staff are generic in nature; staff on such courses gain from working with colleagues across a wide range of disciplines. However, there has been a tendency to assume that participants can make the links to their own disciplinary practice and can find meaning in the generic references that are provided on these courses.

So, what do we mean by a discipline-based approach to courses?

One view:

"By a discipline-based approach we mean one that **explicitly** values and supports staff in exploring how generic teaching and learning issues relate to the particular concerns and values of their discipline or subject".

An alternative view:

"A discipline-based approach means that a course is effectively centred on the **particular** pedagogic concerns of a discipline or subject".

You will have your own perspective on the nature of a discipline-based approach and the extent to which a PGCert course should 'deliver' such a perspective. You may like to complete the questionnaire on page 7 and use the outcomes to provide a basis for discussion on your course

The SNAS resources do not presuppose a particular approach; they are effectively 'neutral' and can be used in a wide variety of ways. The case studies describe some of the discipline-based approaches that course providers are planning to adopt. You may wish to add a case study to the list. Please E-mail your case study to [Helen.brand@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:Helen.brand@heacademy.ac.uk)

## **Why adopt a disciplinary approach?**

Support for discipline-based approaches has been emerging in the pedagogic literature over a number of years. The SNAS project team discussed the advantages of a discipline-based approach, the main arguments are summarised below.

## **For course providers.....**

### **Issues of identity and ‘politics’**

- For many academic staff their primary allegiance is to their subject or profession; their sense of themselves as staff at a given institution or as a teacher is secondary or may simply be one of their professional identities. Courses that seek to bring them into the ‘new discipline’ of teaching and learning, have to value where these staff are coming from, or else they may resist what we have to offer.
- Such university wide courses are often attacked or questioned by Heads of Department etc for not being discipline-based; including a clear disciplinary focus helps to head off that criticism.

### **Issues of pedagogy and knowledge**

- Many disciplines are characterised by distinctive forms of teaching, such as; laboratory practicals in the sciences; studio critiques in art; work-based learning in teaching, social work and nursing....staff teaching in those disciplines need support in developing this discipline based practice, and access to the scholarship and research to inform that practice.
- Most forms of teaching need to be 'translated' into the culture and concerns of different disciplines. For example group work takes on different forms in practice based disciplines such as health care, field based disciplines such as geology and text based disciplines such as history. We know from research on (student) learning, that ‘transferring’ knowledge from context X to context Y is not automatic and indeed is problematic .Thus in our courses we need to support staff in ‘translating’ the generic literature and research into their particular disciplinary context.
- All disciplines, by definition have particular conceptions of knowledge and concerns with particular areas of ‘content’ and epistemology, which are ever changing through research in the disciplines. Thus all academics confront what are for them the challenge of designing curricula that attempt to ‘explore’ the complexity of current discipline-based research and scholarship. While the generic literature (e.g. that on aligning curricula and assessment) is of some help here, it does not do justice to the complex issues of course design that are central to the concerns of disciplinary communities.

## Issues of long term development

- For some/many staff, initial professional development courses will be the one time they focus on pedagogy in higher education. We think (or hope!) that by including a discipline based approach, and ensuring staff are familiar with national and international support for teaching in their discipline, they are more likely to continue to seek to improve their teaching. For some, introducing this discipline-based approach will orientate their future careers to working nationally and internationally in this area.

## National requirements and local support

- The Academy requires its members to know about “the *subject material* they are teaching ...appropriate methods for teaching and learning in their *subject area*...models of how students learn both generically and in their *subject*” (emphasis added)
- Accreditation requires a discipline-based approach although we know that at present this is ‘lightly’ considered, if at all, at accreditation. However through the development of the work between Subject Centres and the HE Academy this means that such requirements will be strengthened in wording and /or practice.
- Clearly those teaching on these generic professional development courses cannot ‘cover’ /support all the disciplines on their courses; nor can they be certain of strong scholarly and discipline based local mentoring in the departments.

## For course participants

### To help you find your way into a new discipline by relating it ‘back’ to ‘your’ discipline

- “The feeling aroused was something close to panic, a ferocious sense of uncertainty, and it held me, and I believe most of my classmates, often during that first week and for a long time after”. This is Scot Turow’s (1977) description after being an English literature postgraduate and creative writing tutor, of his first few weeks as a student on the first year law course at Harvard University. Perhaps that quotation echoes your experience on a course on teaching in higher education. For, in many ways, you are effectively entering into a new discipline: learning in higher education that may be very different from your ‘parent’ discipline. Certainly tutors on these courses, in the first weeks or months often hear participants saying things like; ‘this is all jargon’, or ‘how does it relate to me teaching X’.
- These resources will help those of you who think such thoughts to see how a generic course on teaching connects to your concerns about teaching your discipline, and to help you find your way into this new discipline. If you are feeling slightly adrift in these first few weeks or even months, think that many of your students may have similar experiences in coming into your discipline! Also, be reassured that we are certain that

(most of) you will soon find your way into this new discipline. Scot Turow, soon after that diary entry, found himself enjoying the course and graduated with honours to become an attorney and a crime writer!

### **To help you 'translate' generic issues to your discipline**

- Most courses consider issues like lecturing, group work, assessment etc. These issues, we think, are largely generic. A lecture is a lecture etc and the literature and underpinning research is largely generic. But even such generic forms of pedagogy may be slightly different in different disciplines; thus lectures in art history are often concerned with analysing visual images; an issue that is not relevant to law lecturing for example. So these resources help you to see how these largely generic issues translate into your discipline.

### **To recognise that all / most disciplines have particular concerns re teaching and course design**

- Thus, those of you in health care have to consider how to help students learn to be practitioners; in the sciences to teach labs and practicals; in mathematics to explore concepts of number, symmetry and structure, in the humanities to read and interpret 'texts' etc. Because there are so many different disciplines in these institutional courses, tutors cannot be expected to directly support you in these particular, but so important, concerns. The SNAS database should direct you to appropriate resources.

### **To support you in working with department /subject based mentor**

- Many of you will have a department based mentor to support you, including on this course. These materials can help you discuss more discipline-based concerns and can provide resources for your mentor to refer to as well.

### **To ensure you pass the course.**

- Many of you are on courses that are required to demonstrate a discipline based approach: "The Academy requires its associated to know about "the *subject material* they are teaching ...appropriate methods for teaching and learning in their *subject area*...models of how students learn both generically and in their *subject*" (emphasis added))

### **To support your long term development**

- It is hoped that some of you may find these discipline pedagogic issues so fascinating that you will see your career centred on such issues. That has been our experience in producing these resources. We hope some of you come and join us and that you all see these materials and resources as something that will shape your careers and will keep you interested in the pedagogy of your subject long after you have completed the course.

## Findings

### The participants' views

As background research to support the development of the SNAS database some basic investigations took place. There is a considerable body of (largely) anecdotal evidence that suggests that new lecturers on PGCert courses feel that there too little emphasis is placed on the particular characteristics of teaching and learning in their disciplines.

At one University this is backed up by some research data that is generated from analysing course evaluation forms. The participants typically express one of three opinions.

- those who primarily seek and respect the advice and guidance given by colleagues in their own discipline and are somewhat dismissive of any generic approach to training;
- those who are broadly tolerant of a generic approach but need to be provided with 'stepping stones' to link this with the disciplinary context;
- those who are supportive of (and even enthusiastic about) the generic approach; they see it as an opportunity of sharing approaches and relish the opportunity to transfer ideas.

As the course progresses participants may change their views; some become more 'tolerant' of generic approaches and seek out research findings from generic sources but others show a declining interest as they become more 'drawn into' and embedded in the (typically) isolationist pedagogic culture of their own departments. There is scope for further research in this area.

### The course providers' views

The SNAS project team were involved in discussions with colleagues who design and deliver PGCert courses. They wanted to determine whether there was a 'typical' approach to incorporating a disciplinary dimension and whether course tutors were happy with the approaches they currently adopt. Using a pilot version of the questionnaire, eighteen course providers supplied us with information. From this six typical course profiles were identified:

- Course is largely generic and tutors feel that is the way it should remain;
- Course is largely generic but tutors are looking for ways to make it more discipline based;
- Course is balanced between discipline and generic approaches but tutors are frustrated by a lack of staff resources to support the disciplinary approach;
- Course is largely discipline based but relies on using generic references/resources largely because there is a shortage of discipline-based references/resources;
- Course is largely discipline based and mostly draws on discipline based staff resources;

- Course has a split profile with some strongly generic features and some discipline based aspects.

## **Implications of these findings for SNAS**

We suggest that there is a need for more research in this area. The SNAS resource lists are, in themselves, welcomed by most; however, it cannot be implied that they will be used to shift the focus of PGCert courses towards a more discipline-based approach.

Up to a point, this vindicates the decision taken by the SNAS project team to provide 'neutral' resources and to involve the community of users (providers and participants) in exploring appropriate ways to use the resource lists.

If you are interested in getting involved in some further research in this area please contact [sue.burkill@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:sue.burkill@plymouth.ac.uk) or [Helen.Brand@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:Helen.Brand@heacademy.ac.uk)

## The Generic meets the Discipline

### Readings

These articles develop a range of arguments about adopting a discipline-based approach to initial and continuous professional development; they also provide useful bibliographies.

- Gibbs, G. (2000) Are the pedagogies of the discipline really different? in C. Rust (ed.) *Proceedings of the 1999 7th International Symposium on Improving Student Learning: Improving Student Learning Through the Disciplines* (pp.41-51). Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, Oxford Brookes University.

*This article by Gibbs usefully questions a discipline based approach or rather shows it needs complementing by a largely generic approach.*

- Healey, M. (2000) Developing the scholarship of teaching in higher education: A discipline-based approach, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 19(2): 169-187.

*Mick Healey and geography colleagues make a convincing case for a stronger emphasis on supporting new lecturers through discipline based educational development. Approaches that have worked in Geography are described.*

- Healey, M. and Jenkins, A. (2003 ) Educational Development through the Disciplines in Eggins H and Macdonald R and (eds) *The Scholarship of Academic Development* Open University Press and the Society for Research into Higher Education, pp 47-57

*Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins argue that one of the reasons for the isolation of teaching in Universities is that it has become disconnected from disciplines. If we want the scholarship of teaching and learning to flourish then we must work with and within disciplinary communities*

- Huber, M. (2002) *Disciplines and the Development of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the United States of America*

*Mary Taylor Huber argues that initial training courses should start with the disciplines first, as this is where most lecturers come from when they think about teaching and learning. However, she goes on to argue that there is much to be gained by encouraging participants to work beyond the borders of their disciplines in the 'interdisciplinary trading zone'.*

- Jenkins A, (1996) "Discipline-based Educational Development",
- Alan Jenkins' article was one of the first to be written addressing the need to redress the balance between generic and discipline based professional development.