Similarities not differences: an exploration of the impact of change upon a group of nursing lecturers within a university setting

Alison McLennan, Debbie Banks, John Gass, Barry Gault and Andrew McKie

The concepts of collaboration and partnership currently have extensive impact upon health care providers and higher education institutions. One of the challenges is to develop networks which will foster partnerships able to react, and contribute, to an ever-evolving educational culture. These themes are illustrated by using the example of one school of nursing and midwifery, and the collective experience of a number of its academic staff.

By focusing on distinct features of collaboration (strategic planning, origins of change, group dynamics and building a community), the authors seek to explore the impact of an educational culture in an attempt to provide meaning to their recent experiences. In so doing, group identity is explored and the prospect for creating partnerships across disciplines (‘similarities rather than differences’) is considered. © 2001 Harcourt Publishers Ltd

Introduction

As one means of addressing the challenges presented by rapid change within education, the concept of collaboration has particularly extensive impact (Hargreaves 1994, Keiny 1996). Underlying the plethora of terms used (e.g. collegiality, community, group dynamics and partnership) is an attempt to more fully understand the influence played by educational culture upon the work of teachers within their particular contexts of learning and teaching. This paper seeks to explore the impact of an educational culture, in its response to change, upon a group of nursing lecturers within a university setting.

Keiny (1996), in discussing collaboration, compares and contrasts its influence at two different levels. The first is at a macro level where professions and organizations seek to network and communicate with each other. This finds significant expression in, for example, Fitness for Practice (UKCC 1999) with its call for nurse education within higher educational institutes to enter into partnerships with health care providers to ensure benefits to students, education and service alike. In addition, from the perspective of health care providers there is recognition, in respect of nurse education, of valid partnerships with higher education (DOS 1999, Watson & Harris 1999).

The second perspective outlined by Keiny (1996) is the micro level of individual teachers’ reflection upon their own practice. It is against such a background that this paper has been written. One of its aims has been to explore aspects of educational culture from the
perspective of a group of lecturers’ experiences of responding to rapid change. Given the voluntarist nature of collaboration (Hargreaves 1994), its completion is significant in cathartic terms for its authors. By focusing on distinct features of collaboration (strategic planning, origins of change, group dynamics and building a community), the authors seek to highlight key aspects of educational culture and its ability to operate within an ever-changing context of health care.

Background

The majority of nursing education, formerly under the auspices of the National Health Service, was transferred into the Higher Education (HE) sector in 1996. Through a contracting process, the Scottish Office considered bids from HE institutions for the contract to provide pre-registration nurse education. Since this, our school has undergone a series of changes.

Coming together coincided with both a change in location, as well as a reorganization of the school. This change was driven by processes within the university rather than external pressure. Experiencing ambivalence and uncertainty is a feature of most educational change (Stew 1996). Our experience as members of a cognate group has been one of both adjustment to, and a shaping of, the new institutional agenda arising from this. Tangible adjustments in that locational change include: moving offices, sharing with new people and the cessation of long-term working ‘partnerships’. The Childrens, Learning Disabilities and Mental Health Cognate Group was one of two new organizational groups which heralded the creation of a School of Nursing and Midwifery and its relocation to a university campus.

Framework for strategic planning

Given such change, Sessions’ (1998) option of several essentials that organizations must have in order to function effectively is enlightening. These essentials should be present not only in central planning but also within defined groups. These essentials are:

- A clear, well-understood vision
- Senior management who are champions of the process
- A culture that supports trust, truth and accountability
- Good benchmarking skills
- Good strategic skills
- Well-informed, cross-functional, cross-group networks
- A good external view of success
- Exceptional communication.

This seemed to be a suitable framework to develop our cognate group as well as providing a template for the wider organization. It echoes aspects of Hargreaves’ (1994) model of a collaborative teacher culture which emphasizes trust, support, joint-working and continuous improvement.

Accordingly, our primary aim was to be instrumental in defining the agenda that resulted from the introduction of new structures and relocation. In contrast to the experience of colleagues (Gordon & Wimpenny 1996), we also sought to develop a framework to enable the individual and their professional development, in terms of area of interest and expertise, to be valued. As a consequence, we recognized that trusting each other’s judgement and professional competence was important. Empowering each other through building upon our relationships to become the new cognate group, and in our work with other colleagues was, for us, a key feature in creating our identity.

Schaefer (1998) states that all businesses, irrespective of purpose, need to make strategic decisions that lead to certain courses of action. How do organizations monitor their success in strategic planning? Noting this early stage of defining our cognate group, we see writing our philosophy and presenting our vision as reflecting our strategy for future actions. We need to be aware of limitations upon its effectiveness. Schaefer (1998) highlights some important cognitive factors which may lessen any group’s effectiveness:

- Lack of understanding of causal relationships – we acknowledge here that not all members of the cognate group feel comfortable as yet in the new arrangements
- The wrong information serving the informational basis – we recognize that

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‘information flow’ comes in a variety of ways and that misconceptions about our cognate group’s identity and role are not only feasible, but certain.

- Inability to connect strategic objectives to everyday operating activities – we recognize that our new cognate group works within a new organizational framework that is not universally adhered to within the school.

As we move forward, addressing such factors will contribute to our effectiveness. Creating our vision also established a context for our relationships within the cognate group. In addition, it created a context for relations with the other parts of our school, faculty and beyond. Thus we have been able to focus our attention upon establishing a common understanding of our experience. This seems to strengthen group relationships and also allows us to make meaningful links between concepts and themes identified as strategically useful within our experience of change.

**Origins of change**

The findings from Stew’s (1996) research on change in nursing education and the experience subjects had of a ‘process of being in relationship to an aspect of change’ provides a useful framework for examining our approach. Three states of being were identified by Stew: belonging, knowing and controlling. Each is reflective of subjective experience. This encompasses, firstly, identification with the organization and others; secondly, an awareness of what is happening in this process; and, thirdly, having control or influence on events. These three states reflect the group culture we have sought to create.

‘Belonging’ will mean we have established our identity. One recognizes that the differences between us with respect to our various professional backgrounds will simultaneously allow us to draw upon a strength which derives from the collectiveness of the group. From this, we can develop our networks within the school and university, and beyond to the wider academic and practitioner community. At this early point we recognized that this is not a simple process and we must overcome a range of personal and professional issues if it is to be truly achieved.

‘Knowing’, for us, denotes a sense of being aware of what is happening to us, being clear of what we want and being in a position to provide direction. Our focus here adopts a person-centred pattern of behaviour that demonstrates how we value each other. This extends to acknowledging, and celebrating, the personal successes of group members leading to an openness in expressing our views and in sharing information.

Finally, ‘controlling’ suggests a sharpened focus which comes from identifying a clear definition of the purpose of the group. It is being able to recognize and deal effectively with both internal and external structures that challenge our purpose and our ability to work in our area of scholarship and practice.

Illes (1999) considers the impact of professional loyalty, the sense of allegiance that comes from the specialization inherent in separate disciplines. In the context of higher education, such processes, for Illes, can fragment disciplinary groups, creating an atmosphere where communication and organizational affiliation is weakened.

It has been apparent to us that we do, as three separate groups, have primary loyalties and that we need to find ways to lessen the impact of this.

The dilemma of higher education for Illes (1999) centres upon the relationships between external forces, e.g. budget constraints and internal forces, thus creating a competing pressure for autonomy. This struggle, alongside the competing forces that shape the organizational phenomena, lend even more difficulty to our aim to define our common meaning within our cognate group. The consequence is potentially one of strengthening professional boundaries, thereby leading to division and an exacerbation of separateness. This lack of cohesion may lead us to a fragmentation of our effort and resources, the further construction of boundaries rather than creating a learning community, and a looking at differences rather than similarities between us.

Illes (1999) distinguishes between planned or managed change and the more dramatic and discontinuous transformation associated with demands for energy, vision and social cohesion. Illes’ (1999) description may be far removed from...
the micro-perspective we offer, but it does resonate with the experience we have. For us, working through the process of change draws heavily upon both our sense of purpose and our need for collegial support. The metaphor of the university as a village or neighbourhood (Illes 1999) seems better suited to the notion of comradeship and communal behaviour than the trite community. It does reflect the ideals we identified in our own cognate group vision statement as:

To promote and develop the activity of the group within the School of Nursing and Midwifery, the Faculty of Health and Social Care and our relationships with both clinical staff and other academic institutions. Work effectively with reference to other cognate groups to achieve the objectives of the University and the School of Nursing and Midwifery. Provide innovation and seek excellence in teaching activity, place students and the achievement of their aspirations in their courses at the centre of our work. Support and encourage scholarship within the group in the context of curriculum development, teaching activity, publication and collaboration with others. Increase awareness of our activities among others in the wider professional and other health care settings.

In connection with the village as described by Illes (1999), this social connection is valued and is seen as a force against alienation both within our group and with respect to our neighbourhood. A consequence of such connectedness is our developing sense of trust and value for each other. This can be seen in the support offered to members for a variety of needs: developmental (PhD studies, tertiary-level teaching, project leadership) and emotional (sickness leave). Emerging from this is our capacity for collaboration and our efforts to support and participate in the educational activities of others within our cognate group and beyond. A key strength of this is in the potential for curriculum innovation and scope for scholarly activity. Ultimately, this is a perception that change is a key aspect of collaboration that impacts upon us all, as illustrated by the tripartite states of Stew (1996).

**Group dynamics**

A successful marriage has recently been defined as the process of growing ‘closer and closer apart’ (Bayley 1998). Accepting that a work group is more than the sum of its constituent individuals, how do we both account for, and define, the nature of the developing ‘atmosphere’ of that group? In addition, what other strategies do we employ in order to ensure that the growth and development of our newly formed cognate group is a satisfactory process for all participants?

Johnson and Johnson (1994) distinguish two basic approaches which describe and explain the development of groups over time. The first identifies sequential stage theories which seek to posit a ‘typical’ order of the phases of group development. A widely utilized theory of this nature is outlined by Tuckman (1965), where after reviewing a wide literature, the view is expressed that groups go through five predictable developmental stages (forming, norming, storming, performing and adjourning). The efficacy of this, and other ‘stage’ theories, depends on whether, in seeking to use them to account for the nature of the group, they are applied retrospectively as a useful hermeneutic device, or alternatively the stages are seen as the necessary sequence of all group development. Another deficiency would appear to be the triumph of form over content; little importance is attached to the content of the group purpose, or to the politics which surrounded the emergence of the group in question.

The second basic approach identified by Johnson and Johnson (1994) shifts attention away from issues of group biography/development towards recurring phase theories, which examine issues displaying a tendency to recur repeatedly. An influential example of this approach is found in the work of Bion (1961). A first type is ‘work group activity’, where mental activity is designed to further the work in hand. The second category of activity revolves around the emotional states or basic assumptions pervading the group at any given moment. For us, these two types of activity have been obvious, but we have given priority to the emotional state in the development of our relationships.

The three recurring phases are identified as: Preserving the Group/Fight or Flight; Optimism and Helpful Anticipation/Pairing; Dependency
and Awe/Challenging the Leader. A number of comments can be made under these headings. With regards to the former, it is clear that we witness some evidence of behaviour reverting to old patterns. When such action is viewed as futile, the question then becomes one of the extent of our emotional attachment to the newly formed cognate group.

In the area of ‘Optimism and Helpful Pairing’, commitment to making the group work has resulted in strategic alliances between members taking place. The third category is perhaps the most challenging of all: does our evolving group culture inadvertently create dependency on its leader or do we have a group culture that diffuses leadership throughout the group itself?

If one of these basic assumptions is active at a given moment, the other two will be latent, and the group tends to move from one to the other. The problem with this approach, though it may ring true when one thinks about one’s own ‘experiences in groups’, is that it rests upon the identification of emotional drives of obscure origin.

What lessons do these alternative approaches provide in considering strategies to promote positive development within our group? The first approach encourages group members to focus upon developmental factors, i.e. it forces them to take into account the history of the group, and the point it has reached on a journey. However, if the group is going to be empowering in its operation we may have to recognize that individual group members may view group processes differentially according to the stage that they have reached in their own journey, i.e. that it is acceptable to have differences.

The efficacy of the second, recurring phase approach to group development is to help us go beyond issues of structure and organization. By attuning the perceptions of group participants to the fact that, as well as having a ‘rational’ purpose, workgroups occupy a central role in our emotional lives. If our newly formed cognate group is to be empowering, both group leaders and peers need to acknowledge this emotional content, and to be reflective, not censorious, when it breaks the surface. The cognate group will also need to be proactive in the process of encouraging the development of open and emotionally supportive relationships. This suggests group members getting to know one another at a more than superficial level. Perhaps, the metaphor of the university as a village or neighbourhood (Illes 1999) could act as a source of such support.

Building a community

A further aspect of the overall group culture of which we are a part refers to Stew’s (1996) initial notion of belonging. This raises, amongst others, the idea of community as a distinct social unit wherein people find a sense of identity. Although the usefulness of the concept of community as a ‘transformative metaphor’ (Illes 1999) has been questioned, it is, nevertheless, important to consider its claims in respect of further education.

One aim of this paper has been to explore the identity of our particular cognate group. Responding to the question ‘who are we?’ echoes Schwehn’s (1993) observation that, in the area of the philosophy of science, questions of communal identity have now replaced epistemological (knowledge) issues in terms of primary importance. This resonates with our experience within an overtly vocational university setting (Trowler 1998). It also suggests that education is much more than a narrow cognitive process of collecting and assimilating facts, but needs to incorporate instead a much wider range of human experiences and perspectives (Palmer 1983).

It might be considered a simple task to locate our own experience of nurse education within such a social, or communal, model of health care education (Glen 1999). Our particular professional backgrounds within this cognate group reflect experience of teaching students in relatively small branch groups where shared learning might be expected to be the norm. In addition, the influence of our professional backgrounds as nurses, and the practice and caring dimensions of nursing, would appear to give relative priority to context over theory. However, given the combined influences of nursing’s continued analysis of itself as art or science (Conway 1996, Marks-Maran & Rose 1997) and the wider social, economic and organizational contexts of our educational practice, our sense of communal identity would appear to be far from straightforward.

The idea of community derives from the notion that personhood is predicated upon our
relations with one another (MacMurray 1991). McFadyen’s (1991) description of ‘our communicative identity’ suggests that we come to know ourselves only as we relate to, and speak with, others. Identity then, to highlight Sessions’ (1998) framework, needs to incorporate an internal dimension, as well as an external perspective, i.e. ‘how others see us’. It also suggests, as Zwart (1999) indicates, a recognition at different levels of what a group of people share in common.

How do we translate the notion of community into the world of our activities of teaching and learning within nurse education? A communal understanding of learning suggests approaches which move beyond rational dimensions (‘learning facts’) to incorporate wider perspectives of emotions, beliefs, relationships, contexts and social behaviours. In addition, by emphasizing processes of education, a community approach gives relative prominence to the contexts of learning (classroom, care milieu, communicative) over issues of content. This can be further illustrated by consideration of one model of the academic community presented by Schwehn (1993), as shown in Table 1.

A number of observations can be made about this model. A combination of elements 1 (teaching) and 2 (research) tend to characterize the Cartesian approach of many ‘traditional’ academic settings (Trowler 1998). One feature of this has been the conflict created for some of us in terms of prioritizing between teaching and research activity. A consequence of such tension has been deficits within the third element: the care, nurture and development of students (element 3). DeGroot (1999) articulates this clearly with respect to the potential isolation which many students experience within higher education settings.

Although members of our cognate group may prioritize such elements differently, our understanding of the learning community seeks to integrate all three elements. It suggests an exploration, in Glen’s (1999) key phrase, of ‘education for dialogue and dialogue relationships’. If we accept the concept of the ‘learning community’, what might be the key features of ‘dialogue relationships’? Two major elements shall be considered. One is the relationship between teacher and student. ‘Dialogue relationships’ involve shared learning characterized by mutuality, respect and commitment. One example within our cognate group takes the form of a weekly Literature Review session where nursing students and teachers jointly discuss an article of topical interest.

Other reflective sessions encourage students and teachers to develop an explorative model of learning (Blomberg 1999). Underpinning such approaches is the notion of teacher as guide. This can be seen in the development of the personal tutor role within our programmes which seeks to promote a genuine sense of student welfare contra certain tendencies viewing it as a ‘waste of time’ (Schwehn 1993).

The second theme is the collegiality of the learning community. This suggests fostering, and maintaining, relationships amongst fellow teachers characterized by mutual respect, support and help. Within our cognate group, our commitment to writing a mission statement at an early stage illustrates such collegiality. Another focuses around our weekly meeting in which attention upon timetables and other organizational issues is eschewed in favour of quality time for discussion of scholarly interests, informal supervision and mutual support.

We recognize potential weaknesses in the concept of the learning community. Not least are we aware of tendencies towards exclusiveness, stagnation, isolation and individualism (Zwart 1999, Hargreaves 1994). In addition, we acknowledge the possible negating features of the wider organizational culture of which we are a part. In particular, we need to pinpoint the influence of the wider educational agenda (e.g. modularization) potentially undermining the benefits of a learning community. Notwithstanding these, however, we suggest that the ‘learning community’ is a useful way of interpreting our shared experience within this particular cognate group.

In particular, by suggesting that one purpose of education is ‘for thoughtfulness’ (Schwehn

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**Table 1**: Schwehn 1993

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<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teaching</td>
<td>Teaching and transmission of knowledge/skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Research</td>
<td>Research (‘knowledge creation’: Wissenschaft)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Helping</td>
<td>Helping students (character formation)</td>
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1993), the ‘learning community’ can subvert the notion that ‘knowledge is power’ by renewing our common vision, asserting the provisionality of our knowledge and translating new insights into further practice.

Conclusion

The desire for a sense of belonging, knowing, controlling and identity remain potential forces for division. Three distinct, professional groups, coming together in collaborative working form a powerful lobby for discipline advancement. By focusing on distinct features of collaboration (strategic planning, origins of change, group dynamics and building a community), one of the key aims of our cognate group has been to foster relevant partnerships across disciplines, that is looking for ‘similarities rather than differences’.

However, in the context of the ever-changing climate within which our school operates, an ever-present danger is a tendency towards segregation and isolation. Our challenge now is to develop networks which foster partnership and build a growing sense of identity within the group to enable contributions to the wider community of nurse education to be made.

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