

Local Projects and Cross-Institution Development of Learning and Teaching

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Summary

This article focuses on the potential for local projects or initiatives to have cross-institution impact. With an increasing emphasis on sharing good practice across institutions and across the sector, there is often an expectation that local projects will make a contribution outside the local context. I explore some of the issues in using local projects for this purpose, including: the nature of project outcomes; the effect of local context on the development of a project; and how we view dissemination and impact. My intention is to raise questions concerning how we think about cross-institution impact, and offer some suggestions on ways forward.

Introduction

There are many ways of bringing about change and development in learning and teaching in higher education. This article focuses on the potential for local projects or initiatives to have cross-institution impact. Of course, developments in learning and teaching by individual lecturers and course teams or at programme level happen all the time, in many cases probably without a great deal of thought being given to the possibility of others learning from them. However, with an increasing emphasis on sharing good practice across institutions and across the sector, local projects are increasingly being given support by an institution or through external funding. There is often an expectation that they will make a contribution outside the local context in addition to the immediate benefits for lecturers and students in that location. Arguably, both the lecturers involved in local projects and those who have responsibility for academic leadership at programme, department, faculty or institutional level need to consider how best to draw on such local projects for cross-institution impact.

In this article I explore some of the issues in using local projects for this purpose. My intention is to raise questions concerning how we think about cross-institution impact, and offer some suggestions on ways forward. Important issues for consideration include the nature of project outcomes; the effect of local context on the development of a project; and how we view dissemination and impact.

I shall distinguish between two kinds of outcome. Both kinds of outcome may be present in any given project, but it is worth highlighting their distinctiveness as this may well affect how they are seen as contributing to development across the institution. Project

outcomes may be in the form of learning, teaching or assessment strategies that, although developed in one subject discipline or one area of an institution's work, are seen as relatively context-independent. It is then appropriate to ask questions about how these strategies may be disseminated so that lecturers in other areas can consider whether they will incorporate them in their practice. Such questions concern what is to be disseminated and by which means. This is probably the more readily recognised kind of outcome from a local project.

However, other outcomes centre on the growth of understanding of key issues in learning and teaching by the staff involved in a project, and their ability to work differently in a wide range of teaching and learning contexts as a result. In this case it is not so much a strategy that is to be disseminated, but rather a case of individuals making informed contributions to developments outside their local context, perhaps outside their subject/discipline. Dissemination of a strategy may, therefore, be too narrow a concept to reflect the full range of ways in which others may learn from the work of a project team. We need to consider the purposes and modes of dissemination, and other ways in which local projects may have cross-institution impact.

The nature of project outcomes is not the only matter for consideration. Such projects take place in a local context, which will inevitably influence their development. Understanding the way the local context shapes the project is important because it helps us see how best to describe the more cross-discipline outcomes to a wider audience. A key person in making this link between a local project and its relevance in other settings is the project leader.

The importance of context

Local projects are inevitably influenced by key features of the local context: departmental culture and organisational structure; discipline- or subject-based assumptions about the nature of learning and teaching; requirements of external agencies such as professional bodies; resources available for development and implementation.

Departmental cultures are significant in considering the impact of local projects. Knight & Trowler (2000) discuss the role of departmental cultures in the improvement of learning and teaching, commenting that:

'Learning in practice' is always contextualised: any particular action is socially constituted...the 'same' behaviour in different locales can take on very different significance (Lave, 1993, p. 18) and the notion of 'transferable skill', including teaching skills, becomes a problematic one. (p.72)

In considering how a learning and teaching strategy is to be disseminated outside the context in which it has been developed, it is important to understand how its meaning has been shaped from within the local context. Why was this strategy developed? What resources were made available for its development and implementation? How did the strategy relate to the aims of programmes or modules within that local context? Responses to such questions serve to clarify for people outside that context how and why the strategy has been developed.

Some years ago I facilitated a project concerned with developing a framework for assessment of clinical practice in radiography, a local project situated within a nationally funded project to develop a curriculum for radiography education (Price et al, 1997). This role presented me with a number of dilemmas (see Burchell,

1999), one of which concerned the responsibility for establishing how the outcomes of such a local project might have relevance for other institutions. To do this the project team and I needed to consider how to identify the generic elements of the assessment strategy developed, and also to be able to show how the strategy had been shaped within a local context.

An interesting perspective on the significance of context for academic learning within higher education institutions is provided by Hodkinson (2004) who sees any educational research project as taking place within a community of practice. Although the argument he sets out relates to how he wishes educational research in general to develop, it also has value in understanding how projects of the kind discussed in this article may enhance learning and teaching. The main thrust of his argument is that we should view 'researchers and research communities as learners: people who learn about doing and being researchers, as well as about the topics/issues/subjects that they are researching' (p.12).

There are two aspects of Hodkinson's analysis that are pertinent to the ideas explored in this article. The first concerns the concept of a community of practice. Hodkinson draws on the work of Wenger (1998) to provide a suitable working definition for this concept:

He [Wenger] identifies communities of practice as having three dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire of actions, discourses, tools etc. (Hodkinson, 2004, p.13)

This concept highlights how the norms and traditions of such a community will influence how a project is conceived, developed and integrated with other work within that community. In one community, a subject group or programme team for example, the development

of student understanding of a specific knowledge base or a specific set of skills may be very important; the project may therefore be expected to focus on learning and teaching strategies that will enhance knowledge or skill. In another community it may be the development of professional values relevant to a student's future career that is to the fore and a project's emphasis will consequently be quite different.

Communities may also differ in terms of the strength of external influences on their programmes, perhaps particularly so in areas of work where there are standards set by government or professional bodies. Such standards may define quite closely what students are expected to achieve. Yet again, resource availability at departmental level may affect what is possible, in terms of development and implementation of approaches to teaching and learning. These factors shape the development of local projects, and their effects need to be considered when presenting the outcomes to a wider community. The ways in which they have affected the project may need to be made explicit, so that the more generic aspects of wider relevance can also be identified.

The second implication of Hodgkinson's analysis concerns the significance placed on learning: members of project teams and the staff of departments or subject groups in which they are located can be seen as people who 'learn about doing and being' developers of learning and teaching. Viewing a community of practice in this way places emphasis on the ways in which the project affects team members' views of themselves and their actions beyond the context of the specific project. This idea is reflected in a paper discussing quality in educational research commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (Furlong & Oancea, 2005), which I turn to in the next section.

The nature of project outcomes

In their examination of what counts as quality in applied and practice-based educational research, Furlong & Oancea (2005) identify four dimensions of quality, two of which have particular relevance for the argument developed in this article. These are 'value for use, the technological dimension' and 'capacity building, value for people'. One way of looking at these two dimensions of quality is to see that they direct our attention to two kinds of outcomes. Both, of course, may be present in any project, but understanding the implications of each may help us be more sensitive to the particular features of each project and consequently how we value its outcomes.

The 'value for use' dimension places emphasis on research that is to be judged by how it impacts on practice, whose purpose lies in the solving of 'concrete and current' problems, and is designed to 'respond to the needs of users and to their specification, as well as to the (foreseeable) specific contexts of use' (p.14). There is a link here with the search for research-based or evidence-based learning and teaching strategies. If seen in these terms the outcomes of a project might be expected to be a specific approach or strategy for teaching, facilitating learning or assessing students' progress and achievement. Such an approach or strategy can then be evaluated in use, and thereby be developed into what might be called an example of good practice.

Perhaps this is what we most commonly have in mind when we think of project outcomes. However, the second dimension of quality – 'capacity building, value for people' – points to the importance of another aspect of educational research, and by extension another aspect of project value and outcome. The central feature of the conception of practice that underpins this aspect of research is seeing it as a space for the development of practical

wisdom, 'recognising that it can be just as important as explicit knowledge' (p.14). Essentially, Furlong and Oancea see practical wisdom as concerned with developing the qualities of deliberation, choice and self-reflection that are 'crucial for the better understanding of educational practice' (p.14). Seen in this light, what is important is how involvement in a project enables us to reflect on practice and come to see it differently.

This view has implications for how we see both project outcomes and their contribution to the wider academic community. Such an outcome may perhaps be communicated more appropriately in the form of a discussion paper for circulation across the institution. A paper might highlight: how the project had provided opportunities for the participants to think through issues; how this influenced their ways of seeing teaching and learning; and how the way they acted in various situations had been affected as a result. This is perhaps a less familiar way of looking at project outcomes, and in some ways is closer to forms of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that emphasise the importance of developing educational perspectives and values as the basis from which to develop more explicit learning and teaching strategies.

Looking at different kinds of project outcomes leads to consideration of different ways of communicating them across an institution, and of the different kinds of learning that may result.

Learning from the project: dissemination and impact

To consider how a local project may contribute to the learning of others across the institution requires clarification of the purposes and strategies for dissemination, and the kinds of impact that might be looked for.

In their analysis of the dissemination of development initiatives arising from the Effective Teaching and Assessment Project, funded by the Higher Education Funding Councils, Sharp & McLaughlin (1997) identify different meanings of the term 'dissemination'. These range from awareness that a project or development is taking place, through attendance at an event designed to present its outcomes, to making use of the materials and distributing them to colleagues (p.317).

These purposes for dissemination can be seen to relate to a framework for understanding the impact of CPD for schoolteachers developed by Harland & Kinder (1997). This framework identified levels of impact ranging from acquisition of new information and raising awareness, through enhanced motivation and a positive affective response, to the deepening of professional knowledge and skills. They emphasised also the criticality of the value dimension of the framework: impact was weakened if the underpinning values of CPD provider and learners were significantly different. This is not perhaps a surprising view, but it does lead us to question how individual lecturers' educational values interact with what they understand to be the purpose and outcomes of local projects whose outcomes they may be asked to incorporate in their practice in some way.

The purposes of any dissemination strategy are therefore very important. As Sharp & McLaughlin (1997) argue, different views of dissemination require quite different approaches to engaging lecturers beyond the project setting. For example, in-house conferences may be expected to be effective in raising awareness and providing information about learning and teaching strategies, and may also serve to enhance motivation. However, this method of dissemination may be less appropriate for deepening professional

knowledge and skills; a more sustained engagement with new ideas may be necessary for this to happen, perhaps through some form of study group.

In addition, the position and role of the project leader influences the potential for impact. In exploring the impact of projects carried out by teachers as part of an MA programme, colleagues and I have argued (Burchell et al, 2002) that we need to be aware of the way different roles within an institution, and different networks of influence, affect how dissemination takes place. Someone who has a role that involves leadership of an area of the institution's work, and where the organisational structure provides clear opportunities for dissemination, will be able to work differently from someone whose effect on others is more through personal influence and local networks within the organisation.

However, as argued earlier, the concept of dissemination may focus our attention too narrowly on those project outcomes that are readily identifiable as learning and teaching strategies. Where we place emphasis on outcomes in the form of enhanced practical wisdom then we need to consider appropriate ways in which this may make a cross-institution contribution to the development of learning and teaching. We may need to find ways in which lecturers involved in a project can share their understandings of the issues and the ways in which their own practice has been affected. This might be through involvement in curriculum or programme developments, perhaps in the role of critical friend, or by acting as facilitator to a group of colleagues interested in moving their own practice forward.

Considering the cross-institution impact of local projects is of course predicated on a model of development of learning and teaching that centres on local initiatives as the starting point. Not all developments are of this kind:

cross-institution working parties or development groups start from the premise that bringing together the expertise of lecturers from different discipline/subject areas will enhance the outcomes. However, such an approach may not always allow for much local development work. A way of structurally connecting local projects and a broader cross-institution perspective is offered by the model of staff and professional learning communities developed by Cox & Richlin (2004) in the USA. Such communities involve a transdisciplinary group of eight to ten staff, each of whom will develop their own project connected to the broad goals of the group. This is one model of cross-institutional development, and may serve as a useful framework for the sharing of both 'value for use' and 'value for people' outcomes of local projects.

Ways forward

In thinking through how cross-institutional development of learning and teaching may be informed by local projects, it is important to consider: the significance of the local context in which the project is located; the nature of the project outcomes; and the forms of dissemination and impact that may be appropriate. From the discussion of these areas in this article a number of points for consideration can be identified:

1. The need to be clear about different purposes for dissemination, ranging from awareness-raising to using project materials or guidelines.
2. The need to identify aspects of project outcomes which have cross-discipline relevance.
3. The role of critical friends from outside the project and cross-institution consultative groups.

4. The place of a discussion paper in communicating outcomes that are not solely in the form of specific learning and teaching strategies.
5. The value of cross-institution study groups or professional learning communities as a context within which local projects can take place.

If attention is paid to these aspects, at all stages from initial conception to final outcomes, the potential for local projects to make an important difference to the work of lecturers across an institution should be enhanced.

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Biographical notes

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