Mind the Gap

Postgraduate study and post-study work: drawing on experiences for radical pedagogy design

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Applied Systems Thinking in Practice (ASTiP) Group
Overview

- Project outline: Building a community of practice and employer engagement to enhance pedagogic development
- Phase 1: Barriers and enablers with PG study experiences
- Phase 2: Barriers and enablers with post-study work
- Phase 3: Design learning system for better pedagogy
- Challenges
Design a (learning) system for postgraduate recruitment and retention based on systemic inquiry

• Case study focus on PG programme of Systems Thinking in Practice (STiP)
• With employer engagement

Who is involved?

Martin Reynolds
Chris Blackmore
Ray Ison
Rupesh Shah
Elaine Wedlock

Members of Applied systems thinking in practice (ASTiP) Group
Need for an alternative pathway of partnership for postgraduate curriculum development

- Reduce dependence on ‘externalised’ (and often costly) marketing and draw on demand-pull
- Draw on largely ‘untapped’ resource of alumni experiences and enthusiasms coupled with employers needs (unique to OU)
- Develop more relevant and quality-enhanced curriculum content/structure and support

Who benefits?

- University PG support
- Learners and employers
4 phases of systemic inquiry (c.18 months)

- Phase 1: Understanding existing PG situation of students (x10 interviews and x1 group follow-up video-conference meeting)

- Phase 2: Engaging with STiP alumni group and employers (c.x20 interviews)

- Phase 3: Developing systemic model of retention and recruitment (workshops)

- Phase 4: Dissemination
  - Working paper
  - Refereed journal paper
  - Platform bid for wider systemic inquiry (HEFC/ESRC/EPSRC…)

Who does it?

- Two ALs (c.24 days in total)
- ASTiP team (c. 80 days)
Barriers and Enablers in PG part-time study

- core STiP modules - TU811 and TU812

Procedural issues
- Limited sample (x10) …no statistical significance
- self-selecting: students willing to give up 30-40 minutes + possible further workshop engagement
- OU Live session to jointly explore outcomes
- Feedback given to all phase 1 students regarding consolidated findings + invitation

Key ‘barriers’ (in addition to usual study-work balance)
- Changes in work circumstances whilst studying
- Forum discussions can be intimidating
- PG language: abstract nature of subject matter
- Case study: specific to students reinforcing solitude

Key ‘enablers’
- Chance to experiment in workplace situation
- Richness of voices and sharing experiences
- Resonance of (systems) ideas with work experiences
- Legitimacy of own views being expressed

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X2 Core modules on STiP (Systems Thinking in Practice) qualifications:

Thinking strategically: systems tools for managing change
TU811 – 30 credits

- views managing as about taking action on the basis of your understanding of a complex interconnected situation, where others involved may have different understanding, motivation and interests.
- develops your understanding of complex situations using robust tools from the traditions of systems practice to think strategically about change and uncertainty.

Managing systemic change: inquiry, action and interaction
TU812 – 30 credits

- views change as inescapable in everyday managing in situations.
- equips you with skills to shape the nature and direction of change
- enables you to use systems thinking and practice to help you engage with change and recognise the interconnected nature of organisations and environments.
x5 archetypes from STiP cohorts

- ‘Teach me tell me’ - limited authority in workplace
- ‘MBA-ready’ - newish to systems thinking but having responsibilities
- ‘Geoffrey Vickers lite’ – senior business with views on systems thinking
- ‘Get diploma and make hay’ – worldly experienced though new to systems thinking
- ‘Naked systems thinkers’ – already appreciating inter-relationships and multiple perspectives

Interviews with ALs on student retention

- Ray Ison interviewed all STiP ALs (x7)
- Little understanding of timelines and money issues and TMA banking
- No tagging of students returning and doing well
- AL contracts start 2 weeks after students have initial access to course materials
- Initial starting conditions for students new to systems thinking: limited opportunity for conversation

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Applying PG learning in the workplace

- Knowledge constitutive interests (Habermas, 1971)
- Some PG courses have fewer problems applying PG learning to workplace – e.g. technical-based subjects like computing and environmental technologies…technical interests
- Some PG courses engage with complexity i.e. interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary elements e.g. systems thinking in practice, development management, technology management, environmental management…‘practical’ (communicative) and ‘emancipatory’ (political) interests

Identifying the gap

- Espoused theory and theory in practice (Argyris and Schön, 1974)
- STiP…ers (alumni) experiences and Employ…ers needs
- Semi-structured interview schedules designed to flush out contrasting expectations and experiences

Special data-sets

- STiP-er partnered with employer
- STiP-er first followed by employer-partner separately
- X8 partner groups (pharmaceutical, NHS, HE, IT, EU funding, UN FAO, Disability support, Volunteer support)
Phase 2

Themes arising: dealing with the workplace
• Pre-defined job specifications
• Power dynamics …covert systems thinking
• BAU (business as usual) pressures on resources (time etc.)
• Organisational silos
• …

Themes arising: dealing with the study experience
• Confronting misplaced expectations – technical fixing of ‘systems’ or extravagant ‘leadership’ roles
• Shifting from individual understandings (aha! moments) to co-worker practical engagement with work colleagues on issues
• Dealing with sense of ‘hypocrisy’ – not being able or confident to ‘walk the talk’
• Practising autonomy in workplace
• …

Possible relational archetypes
• ‘mother-child’
• ‘autonomy supporting’
• ‘mutual empowering’
• ‘co-learning’
• …
Phase 3

**Workshop purpose**
- Discuss tentative findings
- Co-design new learning system based on systemic inquiry:
  - exploring inter-relationships between employment and study
  - engaging with perspectives (alumni, employers, ALs, academics, marketing etc.)
  - reframing boundaries of design parameters

**Workshop logistics**
- May 8th Camden Regional Office 10.30am to 3pm
- All participants from phase 1 and phase 2 (90% positive response)
- Special guests active in alumni group (Helen Wilding) and with HR in OU (Phil Wason)
- Some limited expenses support for those in need (including travel from Dublin and Rome)

**Ongoing work to Phase 4**
- Working paper and seminar at OU
- At least one peer-reviewed article (probably two)
- Bid for wider research grant
• Retaining high quality of existing provision (avoid technology fixes…VLE)

• Reconfiguring PG course production and provision (changing role of educators as gatekeepers to facilitators and co-learners)

• Changing marketing ethos from supply-driven to demand-pull

• Drawing on expertise and experiences of ALs

• Securing involvement of OU alumni (as mentors)

• Securing involvement of employer-partners