Making our voices heard

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Background

• Teacher education

• Tutor - foundation programmes

• Academic advisor
I went over to the dark side ...
• Continued interest in academic literacies and foundation studies
• Helped found the Masters in Adult Literacy and Numeracy Education 2007
• Overall interested in how L2/ non-traditional students are positioned by the institutions at which they study and how this impacts on their learning.
“Who we take ourselves to be at any one point in time depends on the available storylines we have to make sense out of . . . being-in-the-world, along with the legitimacy and status accorded to those storylines by the others’ (Davies cited in Koehne, 2005).

• Is the same lack of understanding /respect shown to those who work most closely with these students?
“Condemned you shall be …”
Two studies

• One with Academic advisors at universities (PG level)

• The other –investigating programmes aimed at staircasing student into degree/diploma courses
Participants

• Foundation studies:
  • To date 42 participants teaching on programmes to staircase students to degree/diploma courses (on going)

• Academic advisors:
  • 23 drawn from the 8 NZ universities
Readiness?

• Cognitive strategies – how to formulate and solve problems and how to communicate effectively
• Academic behaviours such as study skills eg time management
• Contextual awareness – how to function and learn within an educational environment

• (Conley, 2008 cited in Lifting our game)
So who is best positioned to help?

• Those who work most closely with students and understand their needs.
And these are… (surely!)

• At pre undergraduate level those teaching on foundation programmes
• At undergraduate and postgraduate levels those working in Student Services
• “I am a firm believer that the people who are in the job know most about the students, know the most about what works from experience…
And yet this appears to be the case

and I think we’ve been sidelined.”
Why?

• Highly regarded by those that know what they do but on the whole a lack of understanding of /respect for their work

• Often hidden from view and /or not well publicised

  “half the staff don’t know who we are”
Is this the position?

Research indicates work marginalised, subject to whim of discipline lecturers; centres constantly reviewed.

- “in a servant/master relationship” (Pennycook, 1997, p.253)
- “seen as a remedial ‘service’, peripheral rather than central, to the mainstream operation of the university” (Turner, 2011, p.34).
- “operate at the margins of academic life” (Cadman, 2007, p.272)
- “lift your game” (Educational Attainment Working Group)
What were the common themes?

• Lack of respect and understanding for their work due to:
  – Money
  – Perception that it’s ‘not a real job’ (own and others)

• Leads to:
  – Vulnerability
  – Lack of consultation
  – Frustration
  – Poor resourcing
  – Limited career prospects
• I think we are taking up too much money.
• We don’t represent enough return on investment.
• We don’t bring in the bikkies.
• It’s very important that we at least break even or generate some funds
Not a real job

- I think there is something quite deeply ingrained in the role which because of its helping and facilitating role that somehow they (tutors) are not quite as good …I think it is quite subtle and the lack of being able to say here is my clearly defined role and the well recognised qualifications and experience that stand behind me because people came into this role through different avenues.

- We’re not a profession – we just happen to be tutors.
Vulnerability

• “We’re the fattest turkey at Christmas” (FS)
• “Only constantly – I’ve got a mortgage and two kids.” (FS)
• “I don’t think that there has been a moment in the last 5 years where I felt the beginning of one year that I would survive to the end of the next. And at the moment I look at it from a 6 month period to a 6 month period.” (AA)

Consequence – honest feedback?
Lack of respect/understanding/interest  AA

Told off (by management) for using the word ‘pedagogy’ because “we were just trying to mystify our work by using these sorts of words.”

A spreadsheet with contact numbers was the only important work that we do …

I have never seen the face of a management person in this place.
And more strongly

• Viewed as cleaners and low grade language teachers and proofreaders

• Ladies in the broom cupboard “we can help with writing [but] really if a student can’t write properly what are they doing at a university anyway”?

• People will ask what I do and then when I tell them they say, ‘Good heavens is there really somebody that does that?’
Foundation Studies

• We’re
  – the detritus
  – baby sitters
  – playing at education
  – bottom of the heap
  – a necessary evil
Frustration AA

• Talked about the ‘butler stance’ – we know everything in an informal way but don’t make any of the decisions.

• I would see more than 100 PG students a year – that’s way more than any single supervisor.
Frustration FS

• You can’t tell me that somebody who has been locked away or been damaging themselves who can come every single day for 6 months and attend class, working on assignments – you can’t say that is not a success.

• They objectify the students and see lack of retention or achievement as being a consequence of poor teaching … they don’t see the amount of pastoral work that we have to engage in to persuade them not to leave.
Limited career potential

• AA – (talking about limited career prospects)
  – Does that signal something? Does that mean student learning and researching the teaching and learning is actually not recognised? Do they want to keep it as remedial and assistance?

• FS
  – I had three good tutors apply for promotion and they all got turned down.
In both sectors

• To a certain extent an attitude that discipline staff can do it better themselves and save/make money.

• Few forums (within institutions) to pass on their insights and understandings.

• Voicing the need for and/or desire to become engaged in research –”we need an opportunity to reflect – to investigate issues”
Response

• The University of Canterbury plans to shut down its English language programme and make all 7 staff redundant. Navitas will take over – what can they do cheaper?

• “We do not conduct research as our focus is on preparing students for studies”

• Staff are not part of the university’s collective agreement.
Do you intend to expand to other tertiary institutions in NZ?

There are no plans at this stage.
No research needed?

- It is clear ... that this part of our tertiary system is not working as well as it might. Completion rates are low particularly among part-time students who make up the majority of priority learners. It is also unclear how well these programmes are benefitting learners...
  Underlying all this is a lack of robust information about the nature of these programmes, the learners who take part in them, and the effect of the programmes for learners over the long term.”

Lip service?

• University / polytechnics’ commitment to improving participation of minorities but marginalising those best positioned to advise.

• “What you do speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you are saying.” Henry Adams
The overall picture

• Certainly appreciated by parts of their institutions but overall:
  • Frustrated
  • Frightened
  • Not acknowledged/ work not understood and thus inferior
  • Feel excluded from any decision making
  • Limited career potential
The importance of this

• “We see through the students' eyes”

• Research indicates the importance of “the teacher – learner relationship in effective learning … Teachers are almost invisible in the policy rhetoric, or are presented as being in deficit” (Finlay et al., 2007, p. 149).
Identity

“...A teacher’s identity is shaped and reshaped by interaction with others in a professional context’ (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009,p.178).
From identity “comes a sense of agency, of empowerment to move ideas forward, to reach goals or even transform the context” (Beauchamp and Thomas, 2009, p.183).

Psychic capital is “the respect, appreciation and/or recognition as an agent within the broader social and political system” (Parkinson, 2008, p.56).
But …

• “Who we take ourselves to be at any point in time depends on the available storylines we have to make sense out of … being-in-the-world, along with the legitimacy and status accorded to those storylines by others” (Davies cited in Koehne, 2005)
• We need /want these students
• We know they need help
• Tutors acknowledged as key to student success
• So let’s devalue and belittle those who offer this help – no wonder James Toomey Mission Australia says “finding and keeping teachers is a struggle”. 
What can we do?

• Look for champions
  – Raise the profile of programmes
  – Make sure staff are recognised for their work
  – Get past middle management
• Get academics (with time allowances) in to lead research projects
• Discuss the playing fields – open and restricted entry?
• Celebrate success?
• Highlight the benefits to organisations
• Work together and support each other – a shared voice! (Keiko Yasukawa)
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Local practices, global contexts

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