Learning to Manage or Managing to Learn: An exploratory case-study of how university managers learn and develop within their roles

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Introduction

• Own professional background

• Own ‘puzzle’

• Research questions:
  What is the process by which university managers learn how to manage?
  Where and how does this learning occur?
  What are the factors which assist or inhibit this learning?
  To what extent does this learning involve sensemaking?
Reviewing the literature

Different strands:

• The HE context - setting the scene
• Management in HE -
  a) academic and b) professional support
• Learning – experiential, formal/informal, social learning, workplace and situated learning, how managers are educated, developed and learn
• Sense-making
Reviewing the literature

Academics

• “The key to managing in the learning university is the paradox that it cannot be managed” (Duke 2002)

• Academics should “be reminded of their academic values, rather than reminding academics of their managerial responsibilities” (Rowland, 2002)

• Academics “learning to ‘do’ managerialism” (Deem, 2005)

• Reluctance because there was “still some resistance to being called managers” (Deem, 2006)
Reviewing the literature

Professional support managers

• “...university managers - more traditionally called administrators, must live with extraordinarily high levels of role ambiguity” (Duke, 2002)

• “competing identities” (Whitchurch, 2004)

• A “state of permanent transition” (Whitchurch, 2006)

• “Third space” and “Blended professionals” (Whitchurch, 2008)
Informal Learning

• “The bulk of managers’ learning takes place in the workplace, as a result of their work and in-role activities” (Antonacopoulou, 2002, p.3)

• “Non-formal learning is common, important and lifelong..non-formal learning is likely to be a more significant response than formal learning” (Knight et al., 2006, p. 322)
Sense-making

• “...starts with chaos” (Weick et al, 2005, p. 410)

• “...the meanings people attach to the situations they encounter.” (Allard-Poesi, 2005, p.176)

• “...reconceptualising managers as ‘learners’ and their work as learning” (Schwandt, 2005, p.187)
Reviewing the literature - finding the gaps

- Dominant focus on what university managers either do or are expected to do in their roles

- Very little on how they ‘make sense’ of their roles

- Very little on how they become managers, their ‘journey’ or development

- The ‘what’ of management rather than the ‘how’
Methodology

Case study using qualitative data using the following methods:

• Purposive sample of 24 senior managers
• Semi-structured interviews with these managers
  a) Initial interviews with all 24 managers
  b) follow-up for 4 newly appointed managers
• Interview with a member of the Executive
• Document analysis of strategic plans 1996-2012
• Reflective journals completed by 5 managers from the 24
Overview of the main outcomes

- Gradual process
- Almost imperceptible
- Getting used to their roles
- Informal learning
- Grounded in day-to-day activities
- Multi-faceted nature
- Complex process
- Not simply knowledge acquisition
- Involved interpretation and construction of meaning
- Learning to adopt a different perspective
- Not solitary process
- Gradual realisation
- Socially constructed
- Context specific
- Ongoing
Learning or sensemaking?

- Sensemaking is part of learning
- Boundaries of learning and sensemaking are blurring
- Reconceptualisation: Learning to make sense:
  1. How they had become managers
  2. Their identity amidst a lack of clarity in roles
  3. The managerial culture
  4. Through selected others
  5. On-going, informal and everyday experiences
Becoming managers
Changing identities
The managerial culture
Learning through others
On-going, informal and everyday experiences

Informal ‘learning to make sense of’

Formal learning
Implications for practice

Managers need to

• Use learning from other parts of their lives
• Learn about their changing identity
• Understand the complexity/ ‘messiness’ of reality
• Acknowledge the ongoing nature of learning
• Recognise the workplace as rich in informal learning
• Learn from others (similar and different roles)
• Understand the contextual nature of learning
Implications for practice

Staff developers should:

- Acknowledge the significance of informal learning for managers
- Support a multi-layered approach to the development of managers
- Use formal programmes to help managers to understand their:
  - Changing identities and roles
  - In-role opportunities to learn
  - University culture and expectations on them
  - Opportunities for networking
  - Opportunities for feedback


References


• Schwandt, (2005)

References


