

6-6 Collegiality: “I’m sorry. I’m far too busy”

Introduction

“There is a powerful discourse of nostalgia, loss and golden ageism running through contemporary higher education literature. One lament is that current arrangements for quality assurance are in opposition to traditional collegiate practices for managing the academy.” (Morley, 2003, p.107)

The discourse of ‘*new managerialism*’ that is used to characterise, often negatively, the changes in higher education is framed here as a contrast to the view of higher education institutions as operating collegiately. Burnes *et al.* (2014) discuss collegiality in relation to universities at length whilst noting the difficulties in defining the term. They collate a variety of definitions ranging from “*collegiality merely as teachers conferring and collaborating with other teachers*” to “*professional equals governing their affairs through democratic procedures*” (ibid, pp.908-909).

In response to some prompts the five participants included in this section of the study made reference to the ways they work with others in their institution that give some insight into collegiate working within media studies. This shows that their practices are not wholly defined by either a dystopian ‘*new managerialism*’ or a utopian ‘*collegiality*’ discourse but show elements of both. This corresponds to Macfarlane’s (2014) view that:

“The collegiality-managerialism dichotomy is essentially a moral dualism. It evokes nostalgia for a lost era when academics, according to legend, were more in control of their own governance and where administrators (rather than managers) were benign figures who responded to the needs of academics rather than sought to exercise tight managerial authority over their day-to-day lives.”

Analysis

The responses of some participants show that their experiences of “*conferring and collaborating*” are not always positive. When asked about her experiences of the course design process as a newly-appointed member of academic staff, Participant 01 described both positive support from an individual but also disinterest from fellow academics:

There was a very nice person who sat down and went through the whole thing with me with words of one syllable, and at that point I began to just about cope. (Participant 01)

The academics were the ones who said, “I’m sorry. I’m far too busy. You’ll have to do it by yourself.” (Participant 01)

This leads to the consideration of a common but problematic term— ‘*course team*’:

Interviewer: What’s a course team then?

Participant 02: [...] I don’t know how to answer that.

This term is a common element of institutional process and procedure documentation and appears to be part of a ‘*collegiality*’ discourse and collective activity as envisioned within a ‘*new managerialism*’ institutional discourse (Drew and Vaughan, 2002). The following examples have been taken from university websites:

“The course team will be supportive of the needs of students...” (University of Central Lancashire website, 2012)

“The course team will attend the event in order to present...” (University of Sussex website, 2012)

“The course team will work with you to...” (Bishop Grosseteste University website, 2014)

The institutional course team quotes cited above suggests that ‘*course teams*’ have a tangible existence and are assigned specific roles to play in the practices of higher education. There is an implication that these activities are collegiate and there is a shared collective accountability for them. There is further reinforcement of this view from the recent discourses of ‘*student engagement*’ and ‘*students as partners*’ as student course representatives are increasingly seen as part of the ‘*course team*’ (Quality Assurance Agency, 2011b). However it is clear from the response of Participant 02 that his personal perception of ‘*course teams*’ does not match the institutional discourse presented above (“*I don’t know **how** to answer that*”). His response is carefully phrased to indicate, not that he does not know what a course team is or does not have an opinion on how they should operate. He appears to be reflecting on the difficulties of answering the question, given his position as a Director of Teaching and Learning with some accountability for the operation of course teams across the institution. This suggests that he is uncomfortable with the institutional discourse of ‘*course team*’ but recognises the significant presence of the term within the discourse.

Malcolm Tight (2010) has reviewed the literature covering UK academic workloads since the Second World War and concluded that although workloads have increased considerably over that time, most of that growth took place in the 1960s. However, Tight has identified the increase in administrative workload as the key factor in academics perceptions of workload:

“The growth in academic administration reflects the decreasing trust in academics on the part of their key funder, the state; yet, paradoxically, the increasing amount of time spent on it threatens the quality of the teaching and research it is meant to protect.” (ibid. p.214)

This may explain the mismatch in institutional and individual perceptions of the operation of course teams. Participant 02 does see the value of a 'course team' but only envisages it as a group of two or three people, the minimum possible size. His focus on "**actually** looking at and caring for" suggests that his perception is that course teams tend not to operate in this way and that they may just be Potemkin villages, designed to give the impression of collegiate activity and accountability for the purposes of institutional course approval, monitoring and review:

There really needs to be a core course team of two or three people who are actually looking at and caring for the educational experience of the students. (Participant 02)

Participant perceptions of collegiate working with academic colleagues varied and may be associated with the size and ethos of the institution they are working in.

Participant 04 is a part of a large department in a large post-92 university:

While having reasonable colleague-to-colleague relations, I didn't necessarily find it easy to (...) discuss, let alone come to agreements (Participant 04)

His views contrast with the views of Participant 08 in a small specialist arts-based institution and Participant 10 in a specialised distance learning university:

The buck would stop if you were a course leader or a subject leader a bit more. But it was still pretty much a team effort, I would say. (Participant 08)

It's the teams. So if you hit some triggers that you have below, we have you know, wherever we set our institutional averages at, if things fall below, two or three things fall below that it triggers this little process which we really hate. But actually it's had some quite good results. 'Cause it's quite a collegiate process. (Participant 08)

On the whole we were quite good at collaboration in terms of writing those courses and things normally went through one, two, three classes, between all of us, but also we sat down often beforehand and, and tried to get a sort of idea of what everybody thought was important and then try from there to see what, what needed, what was crucial to say and I think that's probably the, the first part is, looking at what was absolutely crucial, what had to be there, what were the key elements that we wanted students to, to know and learn. (Participant 10)

These participants give an overall positive account of working together with Participant 08 indicating a negative view of the administrative quality procedures (“*this little process which we really hate*”) but valuing the collegiate working that they engage in to overcome these.

With a public discourse that portrays staff and students working in partnership (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011), the discourse of ‘*collegiality*’ can now be expanded to embrace the contribution of students to academic practices as outlined by Participant 01:

I wish I had spoken more to current students. I think that they would have had, when I was doing development work, I think they would have been... To me, the team, I understood was academics and it should have been. To me, that's, and now looking at it with hindsight and recognising how these things should work, I think it should be students, alumni, employers and all sorts. (Participant 01)

This participant expands the concept of collegiate working to encompass a much broader range of potential ‘*partners*’, a distinct alternative to a ‘*managerial*’, customer relationship with these other groups of professionals.

Summary and Conclusions

This picture that emerges of academic ‘*ways of working*’ is a complex one with institutionally-initiated structures of group working (‘*course teams*’) not proving

to be such a tangible entity as the discourse of academic leadership and management would suggest. Informal collegiate working is valued by individual academics but is necessarily dependent on the vagaries of personal relationships. Bolden *et al.* (2014, p.759) have studied academic communities and have similarly identified academic life as “*conflicted and ambiguous*”. In terms of oppositional discourses of ‘*new managerialism*’ and ‘*collegiality*’, the participants show how they exist in tension, capable of managing power relations across both discourses.

Although academic staff may consider that the balance of power is balanced in favour of institutional managerialism, throughout this study the responses of the senior manager (Participant 02, Director of Teaching and Learning at a post-92 university) did not display discursive practices that convey an impression of Foucauldian power even though his status in the hierarchy would suggest that he ‘possesses’ power. He appears no more assured of ‘getting things done’ than the lecturer participants, a challenge to the dystopian view of higher education taken by Collini (2012), Whelan *et al.* (2013) and Williams (2012a).