Whole of institution academic language and learning practice: systemic implications

Key Words

cognitive systems; embedding; identity; pedagogical practice

Abstract

According to Biggs (1993) higher education can be understood as a system of nested sub-systems; and good pedagogical practices need to be viable within and throughout this system. Increasingly, academic language and learning practitioners and units are expected to operate at multiple levels of the system, as well as in different ways, depending on the immediate context within the sub-system. In this way, practices have had to adapt to specific disciplines, different learning and teaching environments and a range of professional and institutional roles. Thus, academic language and learning practice is changing from solely focusing on the student and classroom levels, to encompass institutional and community level (Biggs, 1993) responsibilities and engagement across a diverse range of contexts throughout the system. In this paper, we map the practices of an academic language and learning unit across and within the sub-systems of a large metropolitan university. We identify, analyse and discuss areas where academic language and learning practices are successful and sustainable, and contrast these with areas where there are gaps and deficiencies, using the cline between embedded (or integrated) approaches and generic (or non-integrated) approaches as a key descriptive dimension. We propose factors and parameters that contribute to the success of academic language and learning practices and also discuss how these differ depending on the location of the practice within the system. We also identify and discuss the multiplicity of identities academic language and learning practitioners have to adopt and transition between in order to function successfully throughout the system. We examine the challenges practitioners face in adopting these identities and operating in these different locations. Finally, we draw conclusions in relation to the extent to which changes in academic language and learning practices have been a result of, or have driven, systemic change, or conversely, where they have simply been absorbed by the system, reverting to the status quo (Biggs, 1993).

References

Biggs, J., 1993, 'From theory to practice: a cognitive systems approach', Higher Education Research and Development, 12(1), pp. 73–85.