

Teaching and Learning Champions: An Institutional Perspective from the UK

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Abstract

The perspective taken in this paper is primarily at an institutional level, relating to City University, London. It examines explicit initiatives to develop and sustain teaching and learning champions and draws on interviews with several of them. Overall much can be achieved through creating a network of colleagues actively committed to enhancement and promotion of teaching and learning, but sustaining such a network is by no means a straightforward exercise. A 'Change Academy' project enables an opportunity to explore this next phase, and may have potential for a more generic application – "communities of teaching scholar-champions".

Terms of Reference

- What support do institutions give to teaching and learning "champions"?
- How are they encouraged to share with colleagues their expertise and experience?
- What is the impact of this dialogue?
- Examine the relevant theme from any combination of personal, institutional and national contexts.
- Offer experience and advice to decision-makers who are in a position to shape policy and influence quality in the area of higher education.

Perspective Taken – Institutional Context

The perspective taken in this paper is primarily at an institutional level, relating to City University. It examines explicit initiatives to develop and sustain 'champions' and draws on interviews with several of those individuals. The perspective taken is also influenced, particularly in relation to the literature review, by the author's location in a business school. The perspective is not that of the institution officially, but ultimately of the author who takes responsibility for the judgements included.

City University and Educational Development

City University's profile is that of a typical UK city-centre university, and is overall in the middle of the national league tables. The particularly distinctive features of City University are its concentrated focus on business and the professions – the institution features schools of Arts, Business, Engineering, Informatics, Law, and Social Sciences. It has a student body that in most schools is extremely international in nature, as well as being ethnically diverse in relation to UK students.

As part of an initiative by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the creation of an Educational Development Centre (EDC) in 2001, headed until 2004 by Professor Vaneeta D'Andrea, turned out to be a very significant catalyst for the development of teaching and learning champions. The university was awarded one of the recent Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), as well as two national educational development projects from the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL).

The university has particularly taken initiatives in two areas which both create and sustain champions. The first is through the targeted use of institutional funds. Since 2001, City has awarded 11 Teaching Fellowships, 4 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Sabbaticals, 7 Teaching and

Learning Grants and many Teaching Awards. It has also obtained 3 National Teaching Fellowships (NTFs). This means that there now is a critical mass of lecturers and Professors engaged in the SoTL across the University. A Scholar's Dinner has been instituted to provide an annual formal focus for the champions community

Teaching Fellows are seconded to the Educational Development Centre (EDC) for one year, for a day per week, and their main responsibility is to pursue an area of research in higher education teaching/learning, to contribute to the work of the EDC through the organisation and delivery of programmes, and to develop relevant subject-specific and generic pedagogical expertise for dissemination within their Schools/Departments. It is believed that the SoTL sabbaticals are the only ones explicitly of this type in the UK, providing study leave opportunities with funding in the range of £15,000 to £30,000.

Secondly, the university has sought not to limit attention to prize winners, but has actively set out to promote a broad base of interest in SoTL. To this end it has sponsored for three years an international SoTL conference in London. There has, bottom up, been the creation of a centre for research in education (CRE), which has attracted a much broader group than simply prize winners. The CRE has organised in 2005 a university research day on SoTL for the professions.

What is a Champion?

The word champion has three broad meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary:

- *A combatant;*
- *Acknowledged defender of a person or cause; one who stoutly maintains any cause;*
- *Of the first class, excelling all.*

The "combatant" meaning is not directly relevant here, though could have some marginal symbolic significance. Although those interviewed were all prize winners for their teaching and learning skills, the "first class" meaning is at best tangentially relevant. That leaves the central meaning here as being the second one, referring essentially to those who "stoutly maintain" the cause of innovation in higher education teaching and learning.

The more specific definition evolved for the purpose of this study is:

Someone who both supports and personally implements pedagogic innovation AND who seeks to influence others to innovate, but not per se from a formal administrative or managerial position.

National Contextual Factors: England

Universities in England have become subject to increasing central government control over the last two decades, mediated through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). There are two main vehicles for control. The first is the regime for teaching quality, developed and enforced through the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency). The second is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), directly operated by HEFCE through a series of subject panels. The main body to promote educational development is the Higher Education Academy, formed through a merger of several former bodies in 2004, and in which HEFCE is a major but not exclusive stakeholder.

Impacts of National Factors on Champions

The QAA regime, subject to periodic change, has a heavy emphasis on formal quality processes. The RAE is intended to give a measure of research quality on a subject-by-subject basis, with a heavy emphasis on peer-reviewed articles in internationally and nationally-rated journals. Of greatest significance here are the typically undiscussed, and often undiscussable, tensions which arise between

the two exercises. Ultimately the main place where they are resolved, and then only out of sheer necessity, is at the level of the individual academic.

This poses a particular problem for teaching and learning champions, who almost certainly have tacitly accepted a greater, but often institutionally unrecognised, workload. The most particular dilemma relates to decisions on research publication. All other things being equal, one useful approach for a teaching and learning champion would be to focus research on teaching and learning issues, most likely within their subject discipline.

But all other things are not necessarily equal. The 2001 RAE exercise introduced the idea of recognition for disciplinary-based research into teaching and learning, but this was only fitfully recognised, if at all, in practice across the different subject panels. For the 2008 RAE, HEFCE's (2004) still somewhat grudging policy on research in HE pedagogy is worth enumerating in full:

15. We have discussed with a number of practitioners the challenges posed by the assessment of research in the pedagogy of HE, including in the pedagogy of specific disciplines. We would not wish to discourage institutions from submitting work in these fields that meets the standards of excellence applied across the exercise We realise that discipline sub-panels of the size we propose are unlikely to have members with specific research expertise in relation to pedagogy. We will therefore ask panel and sub-panel chairs to pay particular attention to this field in developing their proposals for additional specialist advice.

The patronising central assumption of paragraph 15 is that pedagogic research may well not reach "the standards of excellence applied across the exercise." There is then no guarantee that such work will necessarily be evaluated by an expert in pedagogy, unless the subject panel does actually take up the possibility of specialist advice. This apparently arcane area is cited as an example of how UK academics under parallel centralised regimes of measuring teaching quality and measuring research quality have to read the mystic runes or Delphic oracle of centralised advice in order to determine what research to carry out personally.

Literature on Champions

Jenssen and Jørgensen (2004) view "the champion process as a resource acquisition process". Howell and Higgins (1990) analyse in some depth the qualities of champions:

"Champions are the individuals who emerge to take creative ideas (which they may or may not have generated) and bring them to life. They make a decisive contribution to the innovation process by actively and enthusiastically promoting the innovation, building support, overcoming resistance, and ensuring that the innovation is implemented.

Although champions are celebrated as heroes of successful innovation, we still know very little about how they operate in organizations. What we do know is that each champion possesses unique individual qualities, uses different processes to introduce innovations in organizations, and operates best when management support is present.

Extremely high self-confidence, persistence, energy, and risk taking are the hallmark personality characteristics of champions. Champions show extraordinary confidence in themselves and their mission. They are motivated by a passionate belief in, and enthusiasm about, the nature of the technology and what it can do for the company.

Related to their self-confidence is the champions' capacity to cling tenaciously to their ideas and to persist in promoting them despite frequent obstacles and seemingly imminent failures. By actively promoting their ideas--often by repeating the same

arguments over and over--champions overcome (or wear down) the opposition. Inexhaustible energy or unflagging vitality is also a salient characteristic of champions."

One City interviewee outlined the factors they thought contributed to them becoming a champion:

Knowledgeable...Lot of energy and enthusiasm....Can persuade people and take them with you.. Conscious choice not to aim for Head of Department or Dean, fulfilled by front-line duties; administration kills innovation.

For another:

Recruited because of experience with new pedagogies. Recognised as part of a network outside the institution concerned with pedagogical issues. History of introducing innovations, and sufficient success with some (not all) of them to continue to be taken seriously.

And a third:

I had always regarded teaching as equal with research. With the growth of the RAE, there became an obsession with research at the expense of teaching. I slowly took an increasing interest in improving learning, including research and the uphill struggle of trying to persuade colleagues of moving forward.

Galbraith (1984) suggests three distinct roles for champions of innovation: Idea Generators, Sponsors and Orchestrators. Meyer (2000) adds a fourth role of devils advocate. The City University champions did not necessarily see themselves falling into a single role – for one project or purpose they might be an idea generator, then an orchestrator on another. One said:

I am seen as a positive agent within the school... both an ideas person and a finisher.

One interesting case that was highlighted in this study relates to the devil's advocate role. Unlike almost any other area of teaching and learning innovation, there has been a distinct feeling in relation to e-learning by many of its early adopters, that the take up by early and late majorities has been far from innovative. Indeed there is a concern by many early champions of e-learning that (in the UK at least) there has been an excessive emphasis on virtual learning environments (VLEs) which typically reinforce, rather than challenge, the transmissive model of learning. Morrison (2005) is only one example of such concern. The early adopters initially saw VLE technology as supporting such a challenge and are perhaps deeply disappointed that its roll out has too often been subverted to reinforce the transmissive status quo. In this context there is the unusual position of e-learning champions acting at least as devil's advocates, if not actually in one school actually opposing the introduction of a VLE what they saw as supporting an outdated and inappropriate pedagogic paradigm.

Nadler (1998) takes a stance on champions which is not unusual in books targeted at business managers, namely an assertively top-down approach:

"It's up to managers to seize the initiative and move aggressively to win support for change."

".. leaders become the psychological focal point for many of their employees; in an almost mystical way they become the personal embodiment of the institution, its values, its beliefs, and its future."

"Effective managers look for ways to fully engage their people in shaping their own environment within the framework of the overall change agenda."

Ginsberg and Abrahamson (1991) again focus on a top-down approach by analysing only new

members of the top management team and management consultants, and finding that “change advocates who participate in the process of strategy- making can play an important role in enabling organizational adaptation.”

In the environment of a typical British university, with a tradition of flat organisations, and collegiate approaches to decision-making, such quotations would historically have carried little meaning or significance. But there has been a steady growth in British universities of a more “managerialist” approach to structure and to change. Ironically, this is at the exact time when businesses have been reducing their dependence on command and control, and where even the military has been seeking to reduce such dependence. One of the few role models for business of successful “flat, less-hierarchical” organisations has actually been the university. The trajectories of the two sets of organisations potentially moving in opposite directions in governance is not without a certain amount of irony, especially to those in universities who see the substance of command and control being implemented without recognition of the underpinning cultural factors which, in business, offset its most negative features and actually make it work tolerably.

Caldwell (2003) argues in a business environment for very much the situation faced by teaching and learning champions in this study:

“The organization design/structure can facilitate change by being flexible. The concept is to design the organization for the purpose of evolution with the changing environment, to design for emergence by avoiding the rigidities of bureaucratic hierarchy. This means creating organizational arrangements that do not inhibit evolutionary change and that accept discontinuous change in the environment as entrepreneurial opportunity.”

City University Explicit Champion Initiatives

The main route selected by the Educational Development Centre for supporting Champions is the Prize and Award Scheme. Several schools have their own prize and award schemes. Additionally, within the E-Learning Unit, part of the University Information Services, there is also a scheme explicitly called the E-Learning Champions Scheme (ELU, 2004). This is seen as a network and is school based, each school being offered £2,000 for the academic year to nominate a champion and support the development of an e-learning related project or initiative in the School. The E-Learning Champion specification is:

“The nominated individual will work with the ELU on a regular basis to disseminate and promote e-learning within their school. Each e-learning champion is expected to:

- Produce an action plan with the ELU on the disbursement of the £2,000.
- Attend up to three meetings of the champions group.
- Present a seminar/workshop at University level on their work as a champion during the year.
- Promote e-learning within their School via formal and informal levels as outlined in their action plan – this may include running workshops, attending committees etc.”

Support to Teaching and Learning Champions

In City, the Educational Development Centre was most frequently identified as the source of support for EDC champions:

- “Helps us in developing proposals.”
- “Contribute to central workshops and the MA in Academic Practice.”
- “Value in personal meetings...visits to and from other departments.”

There is also a halo effect whereby EDC initiatives have stimulated school efforts:

- “The fact of the awards has prompted my own School to develop their own awards for excellence in teaching, student support, etc.”
- “We have amended our existing school teaching prize system to bring it into line with the university system.”

The wider university centre was sometimes viewed ambivalently:

- “Scholars Dinner was very useful...shows we have achieved critical mass...attendance and genuine interest of VC shows significant support to fellows.”
- “Institutional awards have reduced the antipathy that many in the School feel for what they perceive as a bureaucratic institution which interferes with existing good practice.”

Challenges

Those particularly identified by award winners were:

1. SoTL is not necessarily understood in the departments, including at Dean’s level.
2. Different departments have different views and ways of approaching teaching and learning, and varying interests in teaching and learning.
3. Competing with RAE which at the moment is for many staff the number one concern.
4. Teaching Fellows voice is not always heard either in departments or at institutional level, often more effective outside the institution.
5. Students may need to be convinced of the usefulness of the meta-cognitive dimension of learning about learning and about teaching.
6. Some reticence by champions to be able to go to other people outside own field.
7. Informal contact would be much easier if in one campus.

A Collective Project

The Change Academy (HE Academy, 2005) is a national initiative which represents:

“an exciting and powerful approach to helping institutional teams develop the knowledge, capacity and enthusiasm for achieving complex institutional change. It is based on the belief that the large scale, complex changes that institutions make can only be accomplished through people working together purposefully and creatively in teams.”

City has successfully bid for a place for a team in the 2005 academy, built around the kind of collective bottom-up culture relating to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning that has been evolved over the last four years. The team involves senior management of the university, Educational Development and representatives of the wider group of teaching and learning champions. It provides an opportunity for a group of teaching fellows/champions from City to reflect on how they could act as change agents within their department, using the group as support, as well as become more effective institutionally.

The role of champions has been explicitly recognised in the terms of reference of the Academy Team:

“The project is cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary in scope. This seemed a good point of entry to embed SoTL at local levels, both via students and colleagues

(focusing on those who already have an interest in teaching, ie using a 'champions' strategy), and using the Teaching Fellows and National Teaching Fellows involved to establish what practices are [employed] across the different disciplines/departments."

Conclusions

This is a useful time to review the situation against the original terms of reference, with a particular focus on "advice to decision-makers who are in a position to shape policy and influence quality in the area of higher education."

What support do institutions give to teaching and learning "champions"?

City University has an extensive system for both creating and supporting champions at the institutional level. More needs to be done both within schools and at institutional level to take full advantage of that system.

The underlying tension between teaching and research, a particular problem for champions, is typically not resolved at either the national, institutional or school level. It may be resolved departmentally, but the most typical case involves some element of overload on champions.

How are they encouraged to share with colleagues their expertise and experience?

The primary vehicles are formal ones – events of various types. There has been a growth in information bilateral visits and collaborations, though, surprisingly, it remains the case that often this take place with other institutions rather than within City, even among colleagues in disciplines which exist in City.

What is the impact of this dialogue?

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the Change Academy project is the explicit recognition that the aggregate of the teaching and learning champions has greater potential than acting as the isolated individuals that they often are. The aggregate is evolving into a community of practice, a social network. In the words of one fellow "It is one thing to create a network, it is quite another to sustain it". There lies the challenge for the future of champions.

Overall then, much can be achieved through creating a network of champions. A network offers the possibility of the "whole being greater than the sum of the parts". Champions provide both a counterweight to over-centralised top-down initiatives, and also a route to support implementation of benign top-down initiatives. But sustaining a network of champions is by no means a straightforward exercise. The Change Academy project enables an opportunity to explore this next phase, and may have potential for a more generic application – "communities of teaching scholar-champions".

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