Encouraging learning innovation: recognising and rewarding good practice

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Abstract

Global, societal changes require individuals to be able to learn a wider range of
concepts, faster throughout their lives. To achieve this goal, universities should re-
examine the ways people can access and participate within education. The need to
constantly innovate requires new approaches to transformational change in learning
and teaching. This article outlines such an approach, focusing on strategic change
across a single institution. The paper outlines a short study analysing tensions within
current approaches to strategic change then proposes a model to overcome these
current problems. A case study outlining how this model has been applied highlights the
importance of distributive leadership and the importance of recognising and rewarding
good practice in learning and teaching.

Keywords: transformational change, strategic change, distributive leadership,
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Recognition and reward for transformational change

Changing individuals' work behaviours and practices can be difficult and costly (Brown, and Dugiud, 1991; Twigg, 2002). The processes and environments that support change must ensure that change is transformational; in other words, the change remains in place even when the interventions bringing about the change are removed. Transformation involves altering the culture of the organisation by reframing attitudinal change, and challenging underlying assumptions and overt behaviours, processes and structures. It is deep and pervasive; revolutionary rather than evolutionary (Eckel, Hill, & Green 2001; Chapman, 2002;). A key element in bringing about transformational change is reward and recognition of new attitudes, values and ways of working.

In universities transformational change could be sustained by rewarding practitioners' involvement in inquiry processes and knowledge sharing. However, there are a number of barriers to achieving change in this way. Firstly, universities, as organisations, are not culturally attuned to change processes and do not necessarily demonstrate a 'readiness for change' (Twigg, 2002; Chapman 2002). Secondly, scholarship requires an integration of research and practice. This requirement can be difficult to meet if researchers and practitioners often have divergent epistemic beliefs (Markauskaite & Riemann, 2008). If approaches to transformational change are to be effective, they should address factors inhibiting change and reward actions that seek to reduce these tensions.

Tensions affecting transformational change in Higher Education

A variety of approaches to transformational change have been implemented and tested in Higher Education contexts over the past decade. These methods can be implemented at different levels within education systems: at national or international, inter-institutional, intra-institutional, departmental levels, or even at the level of the individual.

National and international initiatives are characterised by high level objectives, focused around the advancement of new approaches to learning through the development of expertise and the creation of networks of experts. Examples of such initiatives include:

- The Higher Education Funding Council Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (HEFCE, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/Tinits/cetl/final/)
- The Scottish Funding Council eLearning Transformation Programme (http://www.jisc.ac.uk/elearning_sfc.html)
- The Pew Learning and Technology Program (Twigg, 2002)

These large-scale initiatives have focused on the costs and benefits associated with learning innovation, using impact parameters that can be set and measured. The approaches tend to provide 'drip funding' targeted towards needs.

Intra-institutional initiatives, such as the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England)Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), tend to focus on institutional needs. Much of this funding was used by institutions to support the development of institutional Learning and Teaching strategies alongside central support essential to bring about change (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2005). Evaluation studies have evidenced change in institutions, though a longitudinal study is required to assess the long term impact. In addition the expertise developed through strategic activities is likely to have a significant impact on the institution and/or the sector. However, the development of such expertise is difficult to assess.

Change processes at faculty/school, departmental and individual levels can be implemented through strategic Action Plans as well as Appraisal and Review processes. Change can be facilitated through professional development support that is targeted towards individual's needs. This sort of change often lacks strategic focus and may not draw upon relevant educational expertise. Furthermore it does not view the teacher as a self regulated learner in charge of his or her own development needs. Consequently, solutions are often implemented without clear problem definition and subsequently change may be linked to individual, rather than institutional, needs.

Each of these approaches can lead to potential change at a particular level, depending on the issue to be addressed. For example, improvements in progression rates may require transformational change at a departmental or programme level (eg improvements in programme design) alongside change at institutional level (eg improved learner communities). To achieve this goal, any transformational change

model should link local requirements and educational development activities with evidence generated through education research.

Analysis of the approaches outlined above identified a number of tensions that may inhibit the effectiveness of transformational change approaches:

Local versus external funding.

Transformational change is often driven through a mixture of initiatives using internal, institutional and external funds.

'Craft-based' versus 'evidence-based' approaches to change.

Conventional approaches to developing new teaching methods are frequently based around individuals, or small groups of academics, adopting an experimental approach to change based on local concerns. This approach can be less effective because it is not grounded in evidence based research (Twigg, 2002). Consequently, many Higher Education institutions have moved towards more evidence based, or evidence informed approaches to enhancement, linking research, scholarship and practice. One solution is to integrate two strands of activity: 'professional and educational development' with research through 'action research'. Using this approach a range of externally funded and internationally focussed, applied research initiatives can produce outputs that may be embedded through professional and educational development. Through strategic change initiatives education experts can form partnerships with staff in academic schools or faculties and with colleagues in support services. This approach allows institutions to capitalise on expertise in learning research and enables the of new learning methodologies to be embedded within and across programmes. In this way leading-edge research may impact upon day-to-day practice. However, research ideas are likely to be difficult to implement within current teaching practices without close collaboration of researchers and practitioners, through models such as distributive leadership.

Localised initiatives versus focus on strategic themes.

Balancing the requirement for learning innovation in Higher Education with the need to encourage ownership and autonomy of initiatives within academic schools is a critical

issue. To date professional development in learning and teaching has largely focused on localised initiatives based in academic schools or departments. While this tactic enables academics to feel 'ownership' of initiatives, it does not integrate developments across the institution and is often not cost-effective or sustainable. A more strategic approach is to identify broad themes around which a number of activities can be clustered.

Lone innovator versus transformation through collaborative networks.

Innovations in learning and teaching are frequently driven by a 'lone innovator'. Contemporary writers in the area of organisational change in Higher Education are pointing towards the creation of communities or networks focused on key strategic themes identified by the institution (Nicol & Draper, n d). These activity-based networks are generally short-term (around 2 years) but some remain in existence as topics evolve and develop. Networks comprising academic co-ordinators working in partnership with educational specialists on a set of core activities are a vehicle for change. Activities are developed to bring together ideas from applied research and advanced scholarship with learning and teaching practice using modest seedcore funding from a variety of sources. While seedcore funding can bring about local change, this sort of funding tends to be too small to have a major impact across institutions. Larger amounts of external funding, secured through proposals led by education experts are likely to have greater strategic impact.

Dissemination of best practice versus diffusion of innovation

Dissemination of best practice is frequently used to change teaching practice within Higher Education. However, dissemination is frequently interpreted as communication of ideas, rather than as an action taken to embed and upscale an innovation within a new context (Australian Learning and Teaching Council [ALTC], 2005). An alternative approach to transformational change is through 'innovation diffusion' in which adoption of new processes and technologies are managed by 'innovation leaders' (those who spearhead the development and adoption of new processes, but who work outside 'cultural norms') in collaboration with 'opinion leaders' (those who can influence general opinion on 'cultural norms') (Rodgers, 1983).

Workshops versus collaborative development activities.

Professional development in learning and teaching is shifting towards a model based upon collaborative strategic initiatives (Littlejohn and Peacock, 2003; Creanor and Littlejohn, 2000). The reasons for this change focus around the balance of individual needs versus the needs of the organisation. While 'just in time' workshops interventions may satisfy the needs of individual academics, these interventions are usually not supported over a period of time sufficient to bring about sustained change. A different approach, based around clusters of activities sustained over a period of time, are likely to be more effective than workshop-based programmes. These clusters could include 'professional development activities' such as formalised courses leading to membership of professional bodies. For example, accredited courses run by many universities in the UK leading to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy provide a national focus for enhancing teaching, learning and students' experiences in higher education.

Support for unstructured proposals versus action plans.

Conventional models of change in universities focus around supporting proposals that may not be well structured. A number of international initiatives have focussed on models of change based around dynamic development of action plans. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) eLearning Transformation Programme is based on the Pew Learning and Technology Program in Course Redesign. The main aim of this programme was to reduce the cost of course delivery without lowering learning quality, or alternatively to enhance learning quality without increasing costs. A major success factor within the Pew programme was its emphasis on the development of action plans that focus on 'readiness for change'. Potential participants in the Pew programme had to undergo a reflective process based on 'readiness criteria'. In contrast the SFC programme did not apply these criteria, which, in retrospect, may have reduced the overall potential impact of the programme (Nicol & Draper, n d).
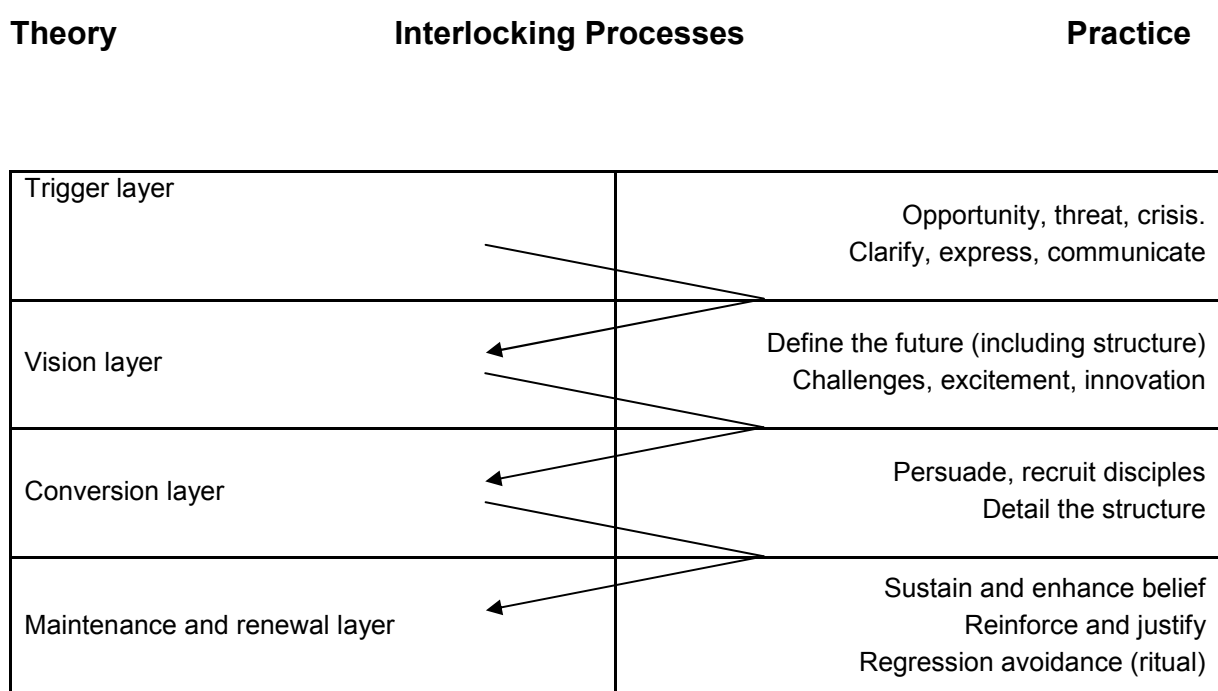
These tensions may provide triggers for change within educational contexts. Such triggers provide opportunities for proactive creation of strategic change management initiatives. The challenge is to create a context for academic staff to take ownership of leadership opportunities created through this new transformational change model, and

to create conditions that produce changes in people rather than promoting specific instructional practices (Hallinger, 2003).

Triggers affecting transformational change

Change is driven not only by identifying the triggers for change, but by collaborative planning and implementation of change action across an institution. Paton and McCalman's (2000) model of Perpetual Transition Management supports this form of analysis and planning for change.

Figure 1.   Model for perpetual change (Paton & McCalman, 2000)

Theory   **Interlocking Processes**   **Practice**

Trigger layer	Opportunity, threat, crisis. Clarify, express, communicate
Vision layer	Define the future (including structure) Challenges, excitement, innovation
Conversion layer	Persuade, recruit disciples Detail the structure
Maintenance and renewal layer	Sustain and enhance belief Reinforce and justify Regression avoidance (ritual)

This model comprises four interlocking processes, beginning with identification and sharing of triggers for change, that are needed to implement and sustain major organisation change

At the **trigger layer,** the tension of localised initiatives versus focus on strategic themes can play a strong role, particularly when external factors (such as Quality Enhancement) may strongly influence universities. Resolving this issue is complex. While localised initiatives encourage ownership, they are not strategic. On the other hand 'meta level',

strategic projects focused on research are often not meaningful to practitioners. A potential solution is to focus on strategically targeted change initiatives around themed 'clusters' linking local and 'meta' level initiatives. Clusters are typically themed around broad area, for example 'learner progression' or 'employability'. Each cluster may include a scoping study consultation with staff and students to identify problem areas in learning and teaching. These scoping studies can be used to benchmark local practice against international standards and assess 'readiness for change'. Expertise within the themed cluster is developed and diffused through linked projects. For example, expertise developed through leading-edge research projects can inform scholarship initiatives within the academic schools. These scholarship initiatives may be supported using small amounts of core funding monies to ensure local impact, as outlined later.

At the **Vision Layer** future directions are defined. The tensions between communication of best practice solutions versus diffusion of innovation may be partially resolved through partnerships of 'opinion leaders', and 'innovation leaders' (scholars) with education research and development staff (Rodgers , 1995). Project staff engaged in course redesign are often aware of the problems that they wish to address but often lack the necessary expertise in learning and pedagogy that would allow them to generate potential ideas to address these. This points to the need for the involvement of networks of staff with a range of different types of expertise working together. These networks should look outside the institution to ensure leading-edge approaches are adopted from the wider environment (Nicol and Draper, n d).

The **Conversion Layer** focuses around persuading others of the value of change. Cortrvriend (2005) proposes a model based on effective change management phases and actions (adapted Paton & McCalman, 2000). This paper highlights that within the conversion layer there is a need to develop political support and to actively manage the transition. Securing active and visible support at senior level forms part of the readiness criteria. Conversion at a practice level is characterised by the tension between awareness-raising workshops versus strategic, collaborative change activities, such as action research.

The **maintenance and renewal layer** focuses around the processes of reflection, evaluation and dissemination. Paton and McCalman (2000) advocate that the process of maintenance and renewal is typically neglected after the initial enthusiasm for the

change wanes.   According to Nicol and Draper (n d):"…dissemination of learning and teaching knowledge, as opposed to research, is an important but neglected issue." Currently dissemination occurs through education journals aimed at researchers, or discipline specific literature aimed at practitioners through, for example, national (Higher Education Academy) subject specialist centres. They suggest that the question for those seeking transformational change is to provide not just information repositories, but ensure that "practical know-how is shared". Individuals implementing new approaches to learning and teaching require knowledge from a variety of disciplines. This approach requires individuals to work in teams, rather than as lone innovators, since individuals may not have the required knowledge base for innovation. A potential solution is to implement communities of practitioners, education experts and support staff working within a strategic change initiative.

Collectively these approaches can be applied within institutions through a distributive leadership model. The following case study illustrates an approach to transformational change through synthesis of Distributive Leadership and Perpetual Transition Management in order to overcome tensions inhibiting transformation and importantly to reward and recognise change.

Distributive leadership: a mechanism for reward and recognition

Traditional leadership theories are based on exclusive, hierarchical models of organisations (West-Burnham, 2004), limiting the overall capability of the organisation to actively build leadership capacity. By contrast, distributive leadership is a shared, collaborative activity extending across the organisation and contributing to the creation of a strong organisational culture (Schein, 1997). Distributive leadership views leadership as a shared, collaborate activity which resembles less a technique and more an "intellectual label" (Oduro, 2004), or a "value or ethic residing in the organisational culture" (MacBeath, n.d). Distributive leadership does not espouse traditional heroic leadership but, according to Bennett (in Oduro, 2004) results from shared and not delegated experiences. It supports individuals in *thinking* differently, supporting reflection, challenging current activities and   assumptions thereby developing of shared values within the organisation (Eckel, Hill & Green, 2001).
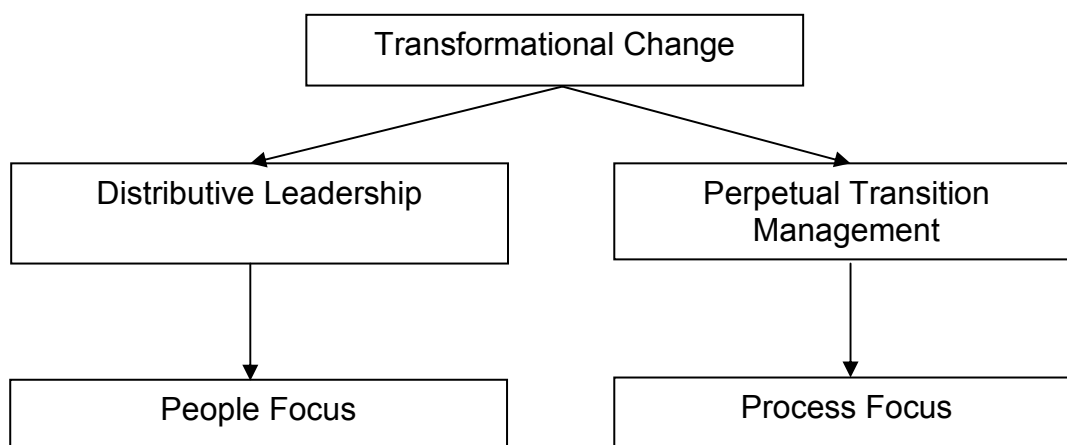
One way of effecting distributive leadership in learning and teaching is through action research. This form of scholarship enables individuals to develop ideas, discussing and debating these with peers and with education research and development experts. The scholars may work within action based research initiatives within specific activity clusters focused around specific themes. New knowledge generated from these ideas are fed across the clusters through multiple channels ranging from the distributing of information through websites, wikis and blogs to the application of new knowledge through individuals working across multiple projects within the activity clusters.

Synthesis of Distributive leadership and Perpetual Transition Management: the Learning Action Model

Strategic change management can be implemented through a synthesis of Distributive Leadership and Perpetual Transition Management. At Glasgow Caledonian University, a 'Learning Action Model' has been used to integrate top down and bottom up processes providing a multi-perspective transformational change approach which, through increased participation, embodies the key features of distributive leadership. The model (see Figure 2) emphasises both the role of people in **achieving** transformational change, and the role of processes in **supporting** transformational change (Paton & McCalman, 2000).

Innovation is emergent rather than planned with open-ended change being driven from the grassroots. Thus innovation can be viewed as a process of learning, rather than solely a method of changing organisational structures and practices. (Burnes 1996).

Figure 2.   Learning Action Model

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                    │    Transformational Change   │
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        ┌──────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────┐
        │ Distributive Leadership │      │  Perpetual Transition    │
        │                       │      │       Management         │
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        │     People Focus      │      │      Process Focus       │
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Scholarship is an important element of contemporary professional development and is a key element of the Learning Action Model. A distribution of individuals promoting the scholarship of learning and teaching across all four transition layers maximises the opportunity for diffusion of innovation throughout the organisation (see Figure 1).

Within the Learning Action Model groups of scholars engage in action based research that focuses around the production of new knowledge, insights and practices. Action based research is designed by the scholars to address challenges aligned with identified university needs.   This means that factors picked up from strategic scoping (Trigger Layer) act as the "key stimulus" for change. However the primary motivator for change remains at grassroots level.

The Scholars Programme at Glasgow Caledonian University is an example of this Learning Action Model in practice. The programme offers distributive leadership opportunities to both teaching and support staff to develop project proposals designed to bring about change in their own area. Staff submit a scholarship proposal focused around a current work related challenge or problem. Proposals must be explicitly aligned with the University's Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy to ensure that clusters of activity and not lone innovator approaches are developed. Proposals are peer reviewed by international colleagues who are noted leaders in learning innovation. If successful, a Scholar will be rewarded through a £2k scholarship award and will be given time to carry out the scholarship. The international reviewers continue links with

the scholars, providing feedback throughout the programme. Scholars work in partnership with pedagogy experts, based within the Caledonian Academy (a centre for expertise in learning innovation http://www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/) creating a dynamic, distributed scholarship community.

Scholarship projects are situated within Communities of Practice focussed around key strategic themes in learning and teaching.   One example is a cross institutional initiative, Moving Forward, designed to enhance student progression and retention. Community members are involved from all the university's academic schools and central learning support services in a range of learning innovation projects arranged within 'activity clusters'. Project boundaries are blurred through individuals being active across projects within these clusters. In this way 'ownership' issues and problems with diffusing ideas across boundaries are reduced.

The Scholars Programme is one of a range of opportunities that form the university's Continuing Professional Development Framework. This framework identifies the distribution of accredited and non-accredited CPD opportunities in learning and teaching available across the institution. The University's accredited programmes in learning and teaching similarly adopt an action research methodology. Each participant demonstrates leadership capability by designing and implementing their own negotiated action research project to achieve work related outcomes aligned to one or more of their School/Department's strategic priorities in learning and teaching. The University's promotion criteria for teaching and learning have been linked to these CPD opportunities to offer further recognition and reward for staff engaging in these leadership activities.

The Learning Action Model thus integrates transition management with distributive leadership, thereby synthesising strategic change planning with emergent change.

Conclusions

Learning Action Models can be used to provide intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for good practice in learning and teaching. An example of an intrinsic reward is where a Scholarship award is viewed as evidence of esteem. There are also potential extrinsic

rewards. For example Scholars Programmes can be linked to the university's promotions criteria. A Scholarship award may not guarantee promotion but can be used as evidence of esteem in learning and teaching.

Practitioners' involvement in action based research and knowledge sharing is essential to transformational change in learning and teaching. However, a number of issues around the culture of change remain major barriers to strategic change. A planned evaluation of the impact of implementation of the Learning Action Model will focus around measurement of key performance indicators. This evaluation will contribute to knowledge of how to overcome tensions inhibiting change and the merging of epistemic beliefs through distributive leadership, contributing to a greater understanding of strategic change in learning and teaching in Higher Education.

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