**Here be dragons: The challenges of balancing quality assurance and pedagogy: Gaby Tobin and Laura West-Burnham, Cardiff Metropolitan University**

**Introduction**

This invited guest post sprang into being when Sally and Kay were highly impressed by our contribution to the virtual Practical Pedagogy conference organised by Chris Headleand of Lincoln University on 13th September 2021.

In this session, we described bringing together Quality Assurance and Pedagogy in process and operational terms, which was born of a literal merger of departments at Cardiff Met: the Quality Assurance team joined the Learning & Teaching team with a literal breaking down of office walls, and a whole heap of metaphorical walls crashed down too. The bringing together of people and ideas undoubtedly brought challenges and opportunity, but it wasn’t until work started in earnest on a whole-scale review of QA processes that the blending became complete and we moved into Quality Enhancement mode.

We were mindful of an old trope of academic colleagues viewing the QA process as something that demanded lip-service paying or, as Newton (2000) says, needing to ‘feed the beast’. The traditional view of a QA office as ‘dragons’ to be negotiated is something we wanted to move away from: whilst as a Welsh University we are happy to identify as dragons, we aspired to build on and enhance collaborative relationships with academic and professional support colleagues. This has been particularly important during the pandemic when we have needed to 'Lay the tracks as the train is running', in that the usual function of the QE provision has to continue while we make change, requiring acknowledgment that overlaps of old and new processes can be confusing and problematic at times. Managing expectations has been crucial and is true of the whole programme of work: people can tend to assume that reviewing process will result overall in less process, and it often doesn’t.

**Context:**

Tasked with revisiting the entire process for quality assurance from validation to annual monitoring, we spent some time considering approach and ethos: we knew we wanted to bring consideration of pedagogy better into the process, have wider and more meaningful input, reduce bureaucracy and burden on staff, and ‘close the loop’ around data.

We also recognised that QA and Quality control processes are not guarantees of quality just by virtue of merely existing (Vettori et al, 2007), and that successful outcomes depended on a number of variables – what you asked/ asked for, of whom, when, and why. Success in this area came from a series of increasingly honest conversations with colleagues, particularly those ‘poacher turned gamekeeper’ academics who, like Laura, now worked in hybrid Quality Enhancement/teaching roles. These discussions led to a recognition of some key themes:

* We weren’t always asking for the right things at the right time, and sometimes we were asking more than once;
* We could not assume that what we were told was always representative;
* Neither the academic colleagues nor the QA team were always sure of what happened next – so gaps were highlighted in follow-up, targeted support, and development opportunities.

**Taking lessons from teaching into QA practice**



Bringing some key ideas from good teaching and design practice into our evaluation of QA process led us to a place we could more genuinely consider Quality *Enhancement*: a space in which we could be confident we were adding into as much as we asked of the process. Key to this were some simple changes:

**Timing**: we reviewed several annual monitoring processes and concluded they fed from the same data and served similar purposes – so they were merged into one point of a rolling annual process. We also sought to plan activity in time to work from recent data, and in time to make changes. Bringing academics into the discussions highlighted that prompting review after the deadline for modifications has passed is frustrating and pointless – and likened to the practice of giving students feedback too late for them to build on it in their next assignment.

**Support:** We approached this as we would approach explaining a new student assessment: with clear guidance, exemplars, training videos to be viewed asynchronously, and workshop sessions. Additionally, increased support for the pedagogical change itself has helped perception of the review process and buy-in.

**Co-creation and collaboration:** Key to our design vision has always been the targeted input from a wider range of colleagues and stakeholders and at a point where they can make a difference – timing again! To this end, we have approached a range of Professional Services colleagues to build their input into process at design stage, not as a sign off at the end and too late to make meaningful change. This includes student colleagues, in collaboration with our Student Union.

**Rethinking relationships**

Considering who gets to contribute to programme design and review has led to some fundamental rethinking of the relationship all stakeholders have with the curriculum. Part of our approach has been in fully integrating these relationships and finding these areas of common ground and purpose. Essentially we are viewing academics as ‘front line workers’ or at ‘street level’ – Lipsky (1980) – the real makers of policy by their influence on how it plays out on the ground. The move beyond a Quality Enhancement body and approach that is ***central but separate*** is key here – any policy or practice guidance is only as effective as its implementation at ‘street’ level. Academic and professional staff are not passive receivers of anything, let alone the imposition of central policy: collaboration and involvement is the only way to gain traction.

Part of the negotiation of relationship building has been asking the hard questions of ourselves as a QE office: what is in it for them? Do we make it easier for colleagues to ‘feed the beast’ and tick boxes, or to find workarounds despite us? Do we have adequate reward in place for engagement, in that there are intrinsic rewards in undertaking the enhancement exercises? We considered some key themes here:

* Re-examining principles across the University – what do we do? Teaching and learning is the common goal – do QA processes always work towards this: ‘education as an enterprise’ (Elken and Stensaker, 2018)?
* Allowing support to be focused WHERE is it most useful – recognise ‘academic good standing’;
* Allowing scrutiny to be focused WHEN it is most useful – carefully considered points in the year, and at a stage that can make a difference so that colleagues see the point and the outcome;
* Acknowledging expertise, difference, and of good intent. Talking openly about exceptions to the rules and acknowledging subject expertise;
* Acknowledging resourcing and support needs – review of whether the level of input is practical;
* Changing culture of discussion – letting people have a look behind the ‘emerald curtain’ – when they understand why they are asked for information, they are more inclined to give it honestly and willingly.

**Conclusions to date**

Our work is iterative and complex – we are expecting to have to tweak and review in line with our own reflections and conclusions, and the needs of the University.

However, talking openly about where we are, about common goals, and finding solutions has been the key to engagement and support. Every single person, and professional unit, that we have asked to be more involved has been delighted…and has said they have wanted to be for a long time.

The next steps for us are to continue to embed and reflect, and then to continue this approach to other processes as we work through the QE cycle. We dragons in this context have become powerful champions of positive and compassionate responses in tough times.

**References**

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