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THE MEDIUM BECAME THE MESSAGE: THE *MEDAL* PROJECT AS LEARNING SPACE

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OVERVIEW

Our contribution offers a retrospective glimpse into some perspectives on the *MEDAL (Making a difference: educational development to enhance academic literacy)* project, a three-year initiative that created a pedagogic network for childhood studies (CS), a new, complex and rapidly evolving area of research and undergraduate study. It aims to capture the sense of community that evolved throughout the project, because this underpinned our sense of the conceptual change and professional development that *MEDAL* brought about for the individuals working within it.

Our narrative incorporates the core team's perspectives and explores the ways that this group worked with others in a community that came to encompass members with a range of experiences, disciplines and backgrounds. In particular we will focus on the ways that *MEDAL* co-collaborators included students and emerging pedagogic writers, and highlight some of the common issues and ideas that emerged across the various electronic, physical and metaphorical spaces that the project developed. We draw on our own reflections and on data gathered by an independent researcher in interviews with staff and students, illuminating the ways in which *MEDAL* offered us what Savin-Baden (2007) calls "learning space".

BACKGROUND

The original idea for the *MEDAL* project stemmed from a number of chance encounters at a range of generic teaching and learning events, such as National Teaching Fellowship meetings and Higher Education Academy conferences. Here

the project director met six individuals who eventually combined to lead the project consortium. While seemingly having little in common, other than an enthusiasm for and commitment to improving student learning, by happy coincidence we all taught courses on the theme of childhood. For some this had recently become a primary focus, through leading childhood or early childhood studies degrees (CS/ECS), which were, by then, beginning to burgeon. Most, however, taught childhood-related themes as individual modules, such as children's literature in English, others on history of childhood in education studies, others on childhood media in media and cultural studies.

We concluded that we had not met previously because CS/ECS had no 'natural' subject centre home and agreed that this could leave one feeling a little rootless, with few opportunities to discuss the plethora of pedagogic issues and challenges that emerge from teaching CS/ECS at university. Consequently, when the opportunity arose, we decided to bid to FDTL to enable us to create a network for people interested in pedagogic issues associated with the area, which could be hosted by ESCalate and linked to other relevant subject centres.

At the core of the bid were staff from Northumbria University, Durham University, the University of York, York St John University and Roehampton University. Local contexts were extremely diverse, as were courses and students. As individuals the core group had a range of roles, responsibilities, research and disciplinary backgrounds, and experience in their institutions. Three of us had met as 2002 National Teaching Fellows, but most did not know each other well.

A key agreement in the very early stages of the project after funding was granted was that, despite massive pressures on time, face-to-face core team meetings were important, both to get to know each other and to share ideas about project development. Regular symposia, residentials and seminars involving the core team, rather than only appearing in the start-up phase of the project, became an important and highly prized aspect of *MEDAL*. In fact, these meetings became a vital component of the project's success, because of the nature of the conversations we had during the time we spent working together.

THE CHALLENGE: CREATING A PROJECT IN THE 'SPIRIT' NOT THE 'LETTER' OF EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At our first meeting it soon became clear that we felt the team's main challenge was to create a project in the 'spirit' rather than the 'letter' of educational development. We did not want to produce a bank of 'stuff', of materials or guidelines that might prove difficult to transfer, nor to suggest a 'fixed' or 'correct' way of doing things in this complex area of work. What we aimed to do, if possible, was maintain the underlying spirit and ethos (Davies and Ecclestone 2008) of discussing, sharing and further improving the principles and approaches our own CS/ECS teaching sought

to embody, not work to the letter of educational improvement by simply publishing and transmitting knowledge and information about 'good practice.' We wanted to emphasise *MEDAL* as a vehicle for conceptual change and professional development. The challenge was to find ways of doing this in harmony with the principles we shared for developing the types of learning experiences we hoped to bring about for students.

THE PROJECT PROCESS AS A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Research interest in improving student learning in higher education has focused on the notion of trying to improve the quality of students' learning environments. Most interest has, predictably, focused on the development of student learning/formative assessment environments that value learner activity and collaboration (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, Hounsell 2003, Nicol and MacFarlane Dick 2004, McDowell *et al.* 2005). From this perspective, approaches to improving student learning typically promote dialogic, interactive methods (Bloxham 2007, p68) that aim to stimulate conversations, social learning, questioning, self-evaluation and group discussion about learning and assessment (Black 2003). Dialogue as a means of contextualised 'coming to know' is a key theme and students are believed to benefit from collaborative inquiry and from seeing others' approaches (Hounsell 2003). These key principles were shared by the team, underpinning our espoused approaches to fostering student learning. In our first meetings we discussed how, through our pedagogic practices, we wished to create for our students communities of practice where participation, as a way of learning, enables the course participant to understand and contribute to the culture of practice (Lave and Wenger 1996).

With hindsight, similar principles applied to our own involvement in the *MEDAL* project, to the extent that the project medium, rather than the more tangible published outputs, gradually emerged as the main message of the *MEDAL* project. Given that we were working in such a diverse and emergent subject area meant that we needed to spend time coming to know each others' preoccupations, challenges and concerns, as we gradually sought common ground in order to make collective decisions about the project's direction. The sense of community that evolved throughout the project became crucial to the sense of conceptual change and professional development that *MEDAL* brought about for the individuals working within it, so that in an important sense, for us as much as for our students, *MEDAL* itself became a learning space.

LEARNING SPACES AND LEARNING CULTURES

While a recent review of the built environment of the university emphasised physical space (Temple *et al.* 2007), the notion of learning space can also refer to mental and metaphorical environments in higher education. The concept of learning space

expresses the idea that there are diverse forms of space in an individual's life where opportunities to reflect and analyse one's own learning position occur. Savin-Baden (2007) argues that ideas about learning spaces are rapidly emerging as a means of changing pedagogical practice. She suggests there are different types of spaces, which include ones that are:

— physically or psychologically removed from 'normal' learning environments, involving the creation of special time for writing and reflection;
— social spaces for dialogue and debate, discussion and shared reflection.

Notions of learning space underpinned individuals' sense of the value of the core team meetings, which became places in which we collaboratively worked on *MEDAL*; important sites of reflection and learning bringing about our own professional development and conceptual change.

At the project's outset, for instance, we decided that it was important to gain an in-depth, systematic overview of the key issues and challenges of learning and teaching practice in the area of CS/ECS. The Northumbria team leading *MEDAL* visited every partner site, interviewing the lead members of staff, relevant teaching teams and selected students in order to gather a range of perspectives on learning and teaching in CS/ECS. The data, suitably anonymised, became the focus of a two-day core team symposium, in which we discussed our views of the issues and teased out their possible implications for practice development and project planning. Although there is no clearly agreed nor 'boundaried' body of knowledge in the area of CS/ECS, as definitions and views of what is important to study are locally negotiated, the team debated whether there are fairly universal "ways of thinking and practising" (Hounsell and McCune 2002) that "constitute a threshold function in leading to a transformed understanding" (Meyer and Land 2003) of childhood.

We consequently drew up a working paper that sought to establish threshold concepts, collectively identifying some features of ways of thinking and practicing in CS/ECS that could act as a starting point for the project and its subsequent development. The declared focus of the working paper was on the creation of effective learning and teaching environments for our students, following the *Enhancing teaching and learning environments in undergraduate courses* (ETL) project's model (www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk). The original aim was to draw together some agreed commonalities in what was a hugely diverse, amorphous and eclectic subject area. However, collaboratively producing the paper helped us recognise the value of forging our own new learning space to discuss the very heart of our philosophies, rather than just scratching the surface. Team meetings, then, were not routine points during which to touch base and update each other on progress, but the backbone of the project.

The idea of learning space stretches beyond the simple idea of having time to think and write: for Savin-Baden (2007) it is defined by a different way of thinking. It encompasses the possibility of locating oneself in spaces where creativity and ideas

can flourish and the "values of being are more central than the values of doing". These spaces are often places of transition and sometimes transformation, involving some sort of a shift or reorientation, perhaps a shift in role perception, so that issues and concerns can be seen in new and different ways. *MEDAL's* learning space became a type of situated social practice: what Davies and Ecclestone (2008) call a "learning culture". Learning cultures stand for the social practices through which learning takes place, and are characterised by the stances, dispositions and actions of participants. Questions of values, attitudes and assumptions are raised and the focus goes well beyond the instrumental.

The interviews we report below suggested how far and in what ways every member of the core group valued this sense of community and felt that, as one member said, "*MEDAL* has facilitated reflective thought".

VIEWS FROM THE *MEDAL* COMMUNITY: CORE TEAM MEMBERS' VIEWS

Despite the group being made up of some highly experienced and senior staff, including three National Teaching Fellows, a key feature to emerge, perhaps surprisingly, was the development of staff confidence. "It has been very effective in building staff confidence, because there's a community of people who are interested in what you are doing. Somebody else thinks it is worth reading about your ideas and practices." Such was the impact on confidence that core consortium members had all been awarded a National Teaching Fellowship by the end of the project.

This issue of confidence closely mirrors research into student learning, and underlines the need for experienced staff, as well as students, to have access to 'low-stakes' environments (Knight and Yorke 2003) in which they can rehearse ideas, learn from others' approaches and form a sense of belonging to a community. "The great thing about *MEDAL* is its openness … we can all have a go and share."

Interviews revealed that issues of validation and status were significant. These sometimes related to an individual's sense of belonging: "I now feel part of a wider academic community." In addition, these issues were sometimes related to the ways in which the subject itself, rather than the individual, was located and valued: "*MEDAL* has been about giving the subject of childhood a presence and importance it hasn't been allowed."

Creating a community offering space to think about one's location and stance in relation to the project and pedagogic issues was central. This dialogic space, an arena concerned with different ways of thinking or shifts in perception, allowed issues to be seen in new ways. "*MEDAL* has been characterised by opening things up and sharing and allowing free exchange". Such dialogic spaces, according to Savin-Baden (2008), are sometimes confused with 'idle chat' (p54), but are typically challenging and

thought-provoking: "Being exposed to other people's ways of thinking has challenged a lot of boundaries."

Creating non-judgmental, non-threatening, collaborative spaces empowered the core team. As *MEDAL* was in uncharted territory there could, it was agreed, be no single 'right' way of doing things and it needed to be genuinely divergent, not convergent. Given that the focus, CS/ECS, is fluid, open, flexible and contested, it was felt that *MEDAL* should also be fluid, embodying diverse possibilities and so allowing intellectual debate.

Involvement in *MEDAL's* learning space sometimes prompted a reconsideration of one's own position in relation to the academy. For some it offered, for example, a space to think about locating the subject: "Being involved in the project has given me a lot in terms of understanding the nature of children's studies and its place in the academy." For others, the space was most important because it opened up discussions regarding staff development and encouraging take-up, which opened up new approaches to leadership: "My involvement in *MEDAL* has taught me something about academic leadership."

CREATING SPACES FOR 'EMERGENT PEDAGOGIC WRITERS'

Dissemination came to be seen as a means of encouraging others to join the network and contribute to case studies and resources. Among the contributors were a number of 'emergent pedagogic writers': staff new to publishing and disseminating their ideas in relation to pedagogy. This aspect of the project was largely unanticipated.

While electronic resources are very useful, the experience of *MEDAL* suggests that it is community and personal contact that encourages real change and embedding to take place. For many the first step was a face-to-face discussion with core team members, not a more traditional call for papers. The low stakes environment this offered allowed contributors to rehearse ideas and learn from others' approaches. This validation of personal classroom practice could be empowering and confidence-building.

Moving from initial conversation to published case study often took a considerable period and contributors needed much encouragement and support. The project process was the learning environment, and face-to-face encounters in hands-on workshop sessions allowed resources to be developed according to specific need. As the body of material grew on the website, each element reflecting the voice, style and ideas of an individual, it also became a resource in supporting new writers in finding a pedagogic voice. This process of moving from practice to case study, as well as enriching the *MEDAL* community, allowed the contributor to benefit through developing their understanding of teaching and learning and through increased self-reflection generated by writing about an aspect of practice.

STUDENTS AS CO-COLLABORATORS

Like students, issues of confidence, identity, discipline and practice were flagged up interviews with staff, irrespective of levels of experience. The recognition of these shared issues in CS/ECS meant *MEDAL* could be a vehicle for conceptual change and professional development for both.

This took place in a number of different ways, ranging from transparency around practice when teaching by some lecturers, through to active student participation. The former was characterised by using the *MEDAL* website in lecturing and flagging it up as a resource for students as well as staff. This opportunity to look 'backstage', to see lecturers as part of a community of learners, and to get a sense of what lecturers might do when not working directly with students did have an impact upon student perceptions of the role of lecturers. Interviews suggested that students, like case study writers, were also drawn to increased reflection on the nature of teaching and learning: "It helps students to know that they are involved in a teaching and learning project; their stuff is up there on the site. It makes them more self aware."

However, this was not the only response, in that some students began to move into active participation. The desire to create a community characterised by openness, in effect, created a potential space for students to become active members. Students, for instance, attended conferences and become involved in data collection as co-collaborators. This engagement was extended by students becoming speakers at conferences, as well as attendees and organisers.

Lecturers involved in *MEDAL* became more confident in initiating staff-student partnership working and in engaging with students as change agents. The relationships built through this conceptual shift, combined with the case studies, meant that *MEDAL* participants were well-placed to bid for research-informed teaching initiatives with students as researchers; in particular, via adaptations of Pam Knights' Signs of Childhood approach (for details, please see the *MEDAL* website). Spin-off projects based on collaboration have also been successful in bidding for further funding.

Finally, student engagement also linked back to subject centres, with, for instance, staff and students co-presenting at the ESCalate 'Students as Researchers: From Novice to Expert' conference. There were also further links to, for example, an NTFS project promoting undergraduate research. Thus student and staff perceptions of teaching and learning beyond the classroom and even the overall structure of the sector became subjects for shared endeavours and understandings. Here's where the medium really became the message – students as part of *MEDAL's* community of practice.

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