Transitions and tensions: getting a project off the ground

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This paper describes the steps which have been taken to initiate a project under the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) at the University of Northampton, concerning international collaborations in higher education. This particular project was launched three months ago so as yet has no findings to report; however, the project initiation processes described here might themselves be informative. This paper is mostly a reflective account concerning personal and professional development and therefore uses an interpretative approach. This is a narrative, albeit a narrative that is as yet incomplete, hence it cannot have the usual narrative structure of orientation, complication, resolution and evaluation, and instead will be structured by describing a series of completed transitions (complications that have been resolved) and a series of tensions (complications as yet unresolved). As is suitable for a reflective account, the remainder of this paper will be written in a subjective style.

In order to be eligible for NTFS project funding the research team needs to include a National Teaching Fellow (NTF), so the first part of this paper covers my transition from being a teacher to becoming an action researcher, then a National Teaching Fellow. My main area of teaching concerns preparing international students for degree courses; hence I have been involved in pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Study Skills courses, and with supplying ongoing language support for students. Over time, witnessing the frustrations of international students and their teachers, I began to suspect that the types of intervention we were using had little effect; what was being done was necessary but not sufficient. I suspected that something was missing: the students' needs were being misdiagnosed. This suspicion led me to find out more about processes of change related to international education, first by reading research reports, then by carrying out research myself, leading me to develop hypotheses and design experimental interventions. By accident rather than design I stumbled into being an action researcher, and this research in time became more structured as I used it as the subject matter of my doctoral research. The next step, when I was confident that I had findings that could inform not just my own practice but also that of others, was to begin to disseminate my ideas, and that started

the transition to becoming an NTF.

Possibly colleagues of any NTF could accuse them of taking their topic of interest to a level bordering on obsession. In my case the topic of interest was a strongly held belief that successful internationalisation of higher education can only come about by an open exploration of the underlying and often unstated assumptions concerning what is the nature of knowledge and hence the resulting practices of teachers, students, quality assurance staff, careers advisors, and indeed every other university stakeholder. A simple example can illustrate this: to teach an EAP course component about the language of discussion will not of itself bring students to participate in seminars if they have not had the opportunity to explore why, in these situations, discussion is seen as a route to learning, particularly so if their previous education journeys have taken them on radically different routes. Their previous experiences will have equipped them for other tasks; competences which are expected, accepted, and respected elsewhere but not in their new setting. Similarly if academic staff have development opportunities to explore cultures of learning, they can subsequently reflect on their own practices and be better able to explain and justify their expectations, and may be better able to see and value alternatives. I began therefore to develop training materials for staff and students to encourage them to link their practices to basic beliefs about learning, and then ran training courses in my own University and – via the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics, and Area Studies – across the sector, made presentations at conferences and published my findings. This increasing activity led to my becoming an NTF in 2007.

In order to bid for NTF funding I needed to begin another series of transitions, as instead of designing a discrete piece of research I needed to design a complete project. My previous research had largely been carried out individually or with only one colleague, looking at a specific activity over a limited period of time. To bid for this funding, however, required the design of something with multiple facets. In terms of time, the project would need to have a three-year span, hence needed to be conceived as a series of phases which themselves would each be more complex than anything I had done before. In terms of people, it would need to have a team with specified roles, the involvement of

institutional management, an external evaluator, and an advisory group. In terms of structures, it would need web-based resources, a system of financial reporting, and various networks for communication. Above all, remembering that this bidding was a competitive process, the intended project would need to demonstrate that it would have an impact across the sector while still being feasible: not something too hard, not too easy. The resulting scheme can be summarised as:

- Year 1: to read published reports concerning various forms of international collaboration
- Year 2: to undertake primary research on a selected sample of case studies
- Year 3: to adapt the findings to develop a linear research report and an electronic text of coded fields so that the details of planned activities can be matched to previous schemes to create customised reports.

The few months since hearing that the bid was successful have included the third transition, from being primarily a researcher to becoming primarily a project manager. This transition is incomplete and from this tensions have emerged. The best comparison is to liken this transition to the process of culture shock: an initial feeling of elation, a subsequent period of doubting my adequacy, a feeling now – three months in – that the project can be accomplished but that it will be a hard grind.

The first tension concerns the competing demands on my time of project management and research. Most of my time in the first three months has been taken up with project management activities: recruiting advisors; setting up the website; writing reports for meetings; attending meetings; dissemination of the project's aims. Little time has been left for reading, so I need to make the time I allocate to the project elastic.

The second tension concerns the demands on other people. Although each of the other team members has a portion of their time allocated to the project this is only a comparatively small amount of remission and they retain their other existing duties. Related to this, although they are willing participants and can recognise the potential value of the project, they have not spent the past ten years on a personal learning trajectory which has this project as the end point: this is my obsession, while they retain their own topics of interest. The project also requires a time commitment from others outside the team who receive no remission from other duties; these include managers within the university; the advisors who have been recruited from around the world; and the participants (staff and students) who we hope will agree to be interviewed and assist our primary research in other ways.

The third tension, or set of tensions, concerns competences. The transition from researcher to project manager involves taking on new roles such as risk analysis and developing new literacies such as those related to Web 2.0 applications. The most important competences of all are the range of soft skills linked to communication and team working, made more crucial as many participants are volunteering their input, and made more critical as the nature of the project will necessitate cross-cultural communication. As the project proceeds, new skills and competences will be demanded, so this is a tension that can never be resolved, and probably a project manager can always be thought of as constantly chasing the horizon.

In conclusion, taking on any new task or responsibility inevitably involves change, and this account illustrates this in two ways. First, it openly lists the changes related to this project that have already happened and those which remain underway. Second, and far more importantly in relation to the project aims, it is an illustration of a text that has surface linguistic features which reveal an underlying philosophy of learning. The style of text I have used is linked to ideas that learning is about reflecting on personal change rather than accumulation of facts, that learning is socially constructed rather than ploughing an individual furrow, and that those engaged in knowledge creation are subjective, participative, and self-evaluative. Much of what happens now in universities in the English-speaking world, for example the use of reflective portfolios, rests on similar understandings which may differ from the definitions of learning elsewhere. The project intends to explore these differences.

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