Leading for learning in higher education – challenges and possibilities

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Few people would deny that universities are becoming increasingly complex educational environments due to significant changes in the nature of academic work and to changing societal expectations. University leaders face challenges and opportunities amidst this complexity, especially regarding responsibilities associated with student learning. The capacity of leaders and managers to respond is arguably affected by the arrangements and practices embedded within their own universities. Understanding these challenges and opportunities, and how current arrangements and practices contribute to or limit them, is central for finding sustainable ways of meeting educational responsibilities and supporting leading *for* student learning.

This paper explores one Swedish university's effort to enhance academic leading, and to understand the salient site-based arrangements and practices affecting leading for learning. These goals underpinned a series of four seminars on *'Academic leading – with a focus on student learning'* developed for all staff in management positions (including administration). The seminars were inquiry-focused, generating participant artefacts (e.g., diagrams, PowerPoint presentations) that were used to inform seminar discussions. This material was also analysed as part of an ongoing practitioner inquiry aimed at understanding and addressing site-based challenges for academic leading. Both the seminars and analysis were theoretically framed by the 'theory of practice architectures'[1].

Initial results show a need for explicitly focussing on the learning environment in everyday activities, and for clear articulation of goals and visions on both institutional and departmental levels. They also point to the importance of opportunities (i.e., *time*) for staff to reflect in organised ways on their practice and engage in professional learning activities and strategic development, as well as the need for further interrogation of activities that take up time that could otherwise be spent on developing good pedagogical work (e.g., administrative tasks). From a social-political perspective, the results emphasise the need for building

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[1] Kemmis, S., Wilkinson, J., Edwards-Groves, C., Hardy, I., Grootenboer, P., & Bristol, L. (2014). *Changing practices, changing education*. Singapore: Springer.

trusting, productive staff relations *within* and *between* departments, faculties, and administration teams.

The paper raises the question, on the basis of the analysis, of how we can more effectively and sustainably support leading for learning given the challenges and complexities of academic environments, by creating new practice architectures and/or by reorienting existing ones that constrain leading and professional learning in unhelpful ways.