Leading Strategic Academic Development: Challenges and Milestones

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ABSTRACT: Given that a fundamental goal of engaging in SoTL is improvement of the processes and outcomes of learning (Trigwell, 2013), it can be transformative in leading to changes in the way teaching and learning are approached. Academic development, likewise, is "all about change" (Popovic & Plank, 2016). However, to be effective it needs to take a context-sensitive, integrated approach: previous scholarship has demonstrated that a reactive, ad-hoc, deficit approach focusing on development of individuals does not produce sustained change (Pleschová et al. 2013). Instead of such a more traditional approach, SoTL as a means of academic development has the potential, especially within research-intensive universities that value rigorous scholarly work, of enhancing teaching and learning through developing a quality culture, thereby helping to effect institutional change (Mårtensson et al., 2011).

However, SoTL can be a "hard sell" (Boshier, 2009): using it strategically for academic development is beset by traps and dangers. For example, if SoTL is conflated with educational research, it can threaten academics' identity as experts in their disciplines (Mårtensson et al., 2011). And if a university were to require academics to engage in SoTL for the purpose of professional advancement, this may instead result in a further division between teaching and research (Roxå et. al., 2008). This would run the risk of limiting the reach of developmental efforts by not paying sufficient attention to institutional improvement, and can undermine the task of going public with good practices.

Such dangers necessitate a careful strategy that fosters collegiality and engages with local leadership at the level of the discipline (Mårtensson and Roxå, 2016) so as to foster a culture of collegial sharing through significant conversations (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) that can benefit the institution as a whole (Olsson & Roxå 2013). This paper concerns a study that, focusing on the case of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning at the National University of Singapore, will consider the challenges of strategically leading change through evidence-informed academic development, and will identify milestones for doing so. It will approach the task at two levels: local leadership and leading the Centre.

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