

# A narrative structure for teacher educator team analysis and development

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## ABSTRACT

United Kingdom (UK) teacher educators in the midst of professional practice changes have been reported to find benefit in being exposed to different theories with a view to resolving conflicting demands and developing new perspectives. This paper provides a synthesis of theories that can help teacher educator teams in universities to make sense of changes in practice together. The theoretical synthesis presented includes models of stages of team development, sense-making, experiential learning and complexity science principles. It is here argued that such a deftly applied synthesis can then facilitate higher education institution (HEI) education department teams to create individual narratives with a view to then sharing them with each other to develop a group narrative. The purpose and benefits of this would immediately be sought in improving team functioning and performance in order to create a more solid foundation from which individuals might even begin to engage in career development along the

fellowship trajectory assumed by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA). A key assumption this paper rests on therefore is that team functioning is a positive asset that is pivotal to individual career development and prerequisite impacts on teaching and learning, and leadership and management of coaching and mentoring with respect to these in a department or team. The contribution this paper makes therefore is a practical approach for analysing and further developing academic teams of teacher educators in a landscape of continual professional change, with a greater theoretical toolkit to draw from to achieve this.

## KEYWORDS

TEACHER  
EDUCATOR  
DEPARTMENT  
TEAM  
DEVELOPMENT  
IMPROVEMENT

## INTRODUCTION

Impacts have been reported in recent years of the expansion of school-based teacher training on the practice of universities, schools and trainees: ostensibly, for university tutors and managers, these impacts have included a changed sense of professional purpose in the midst of changing expectations (Brown et al. 2014). Unsettling of practice and accounts of it have arisen, and Brown et al. (2014) identified the need to provide resolutions to this to allow teacher educator identity to emerge from conflicting demands.

One example from Brown et al.'s (2014) study was where a teacher educator was required to do a PhD alongside the 'functional demands of being a teacher educator', which had 'been unsettling'. The teacher educator reported coming into contact with a range of theoretical lenses as a result, that had subsequently 'opened up everything' that she did, ie 'in departmental meetings, this had meant that whilst she operated at a functional level she was also able to pay attention to' who was saying what and why (ibid.).

Resolving this conflicting demand therefore brought to the fore a perceived benefit: learning new theory and being able to apply it to practice as a member of staff working with others. This paper develops this theme further, providing an integration of several theories specifically for application among teams of teacher educators.

What goes on behind the scenes of teacher education in university teacher educator departments and higher education institutions (HEIs) at the broad level is a shadow system that has impact on the front line too. In particular this paper explores the possibility of using a number of models and principles to facilitate the articulation of the narrative of such shadow systems in order to then suggest recommendations for university teacher educator department team enhancements. This would serve to contribute to improved chances for each team member to progress through the various levels of UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship. An underlying assumption of HEA fellowship recognition is that individuals act within well-functioning subject and department teams positively with others with a view to making high impact in areas of activity pertaining to teaching and learning, with core knowledge and professional values. While fellowship level recognition assumes effective participation at an operational level within such teams, senior fellowship level requires evidencing of leadership and management of the

same, and demonstration of coaching and mentoring skills in leading others towards shared teaching and learning goals. It would be pivotal then for any member of the team to work individually and collectively towards both understanding and improving team functioning for collaboration in this way.

This paper is structured according to an introduction to the theory, models and principles presented, a synthesis of these into a narrative structure, an elaboration and explanation of each stage of the narrative structure to facilitate application in practice, a brief overview of limitations, along with summary and conclusion.

The next section articulates a range of theories, models and principles that can be drawn together to help achieve this through the development of a narrative structure.

## THEORIES, MODELS AND PRINCIPLES FOR A NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The models and principles proposed at the heart of the narrative structure proposed include a combination and synthesis of Tuckman's (1965) four stages of group development, Weick's (1995) seven principles of sense-making, Kolb & Fry's (1975) experiential learning cycle, and six specific principles of complexity science (Webb et al. 2004, 2005, 2006). The first of these to be outlined is Tuckman (1965).



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## TUCKMAN'S (1965) FOUR STAGES OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Tuckman (1965) proposed a four-stage model of small group development, which later became specifically referred to as 'forming, storming, norming, performing' (Smith 1978). This described the tendencies of behaviour of those coming together in a group either socially or for task-based reasons. Smith (1978) outlined the phases as:

- 1) Forming: where group members demonstrate 'silence, anxiety, dependence on a leader, concern for structure, task requirements and methods'.
- 2) Storming: where group members typically become 'noisy, searching and comparing ideas, emotional resistance to demands of task, more self-oriented independent behaviours, possibly rebellious against initial leaders; ideas and information generation, opinion seeking with development of early pairings, sub groupings and relationships'.
- 3) Norming: where importance is recognised as being placed on 're-emergence of task demands and more open exchange of ideas and views. More listening and cooperation, with rules of conduct and identity of group (vis-à-vis other groups too) developing. Growth of "we" feelings, group cohesion, individual roles and agreement on work and decision making processes'.
- 4) Performing: where the group finally exhibits 'settled interdependence and problem solving – energy now directed at task requirements'.

As a practical starting point for, not just analysis, but intervention, Smith went on to use this model to propose relevant forms of training and group development. While Smith affirmed that all teams were different and may go through the above four phases in different sequences, another aspect to consider was raised by Tuckman himself (1965), who suggested

that further study should seek to elaborate on the independent variable of temporal change, ie change in group dynamics over time. In this paper, the position is taken that Weick's (1995) sensemaking principles, Kolb & Fry's (1975) experiential learning cycle and complexity science principles that highlight patterns of dynamic change can all be combined to provide the language to articulate a range of variables of temporal change from the perspective of those involved in the psychodynamics of group relationships themselves.

It is here proposed that university teacher educator department team members can use this and the other models and principles proposed to express their inter-subjective, humanist voices to engage in narrative sense-making (Weick 1995) and experiential learning (Kolb & Fry 1975) about their own group dynamics with each other, where the social and work-focused task orientation may also intersect. Each team member can reflect on their interactions with each other according to Tuckman's (1965) model, Weick's (1995) sense-making principles and Kolb & Fry's (1975) experiential learning cycle, in addition to using six principles of complexity science to articulate processes of relating and patterns of group dynamics based on work and social interactions retrospectively over a specific time period, which can then be used as a starting point for improvement and enhanced team functioning. Weick's (1995) sense-making principles are outlined next.

### **WEICK'S (1965) SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR SENSE-MAKING**

Weick's (1995) seven principles for sense-making can loosely be described as follows:

- 1) Analysis of aspects of identity and its continual construction
- 2) Retrospection during and after an event
- 3) Individuals recognising and co-creating roles in a specific environment
- 4) Understanding the process of

communication is in social interaction with others

- 5) The process is ongoing
- 6) The ongoing process is evidenced by brief snapshots rather than a holistic picture
- 7) The actors making sense of a process or event seek to understand the situation in order to rationalise and make it plausible – which overrides necessity of accuracy of interpretation.

Helpfully, these seven principles set the context for sense-making in the context of ongoing processes of communication and change, which is precisely the dilemma Brown et al. (2014) highlighted as being an issue for teacher educators due to the expansion of school-based teacher training and the impact on university tutors and managers: theories that can help shed light on this and new circumstances were welcomed. Kolb's (1973) theories are also relevant and this is presented next.

### **KOLB'S (1973) EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING CYCLE**

Kolb's (1973) experiential learning cycle is described as follows: 'Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a "theory" from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications, or hypotheses, then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences' (Kolb 1973: 2). This can therefore be summarised into four simple reflective steps:

- 1) Experience
- 2) Reflection
- 3) Theorising
- 4) Experimentation

Again, Brown et al. (2014) suggest that teacher educators operating in a landscape of professional change are advantaged by theory that allows them to look at what is going on around them with different theoretical lenses. Kolb's (1973) learning cycle is further enhanced by means of complexity science principles

adding more depth to theorising, considered next.

### **SIX PRINCIPLES OF COMPLEXITY SCIENCE**

In previous studies, six specific complexity science principles were found to be significant for the application to organisations and the people learning and sense-making interdependently in the context of them (Webb et al. 2004, 2005, 2006). These principles were:

1. Self-organisation and emergence: Organisations or groups were understood to show self-organising behaviour in terms of the system being able to organise itself, ie the single individuals within a system could find a structure bottom-up on their own, without having a master-plan or observational guidance instructing them how to organise. In this context the implication would be that not all team or group activity would be directed or managed autocratically, top down. Instead, social interactions between team members may well lead to unplanned work-focused outcomes.
2. Edge-of-chaos: The edge of chaos was interpreted as the balance between structure and flexibility that an organisation or group would need to become robust (where this meant being able to respond and adapt flexibly to uncertainty and the unpredicted). In complexity science, the edge of chaos, ie the zone between complete stability and complete chaos, was taken to represent a peak of creative productivity. Therefore, during times of change and unstructured, formal behaviour, new outcomes and future paths could also emerge.
3. Diversity: Organisations and groups were understood to need a diverse set of individual actors to be successful and to enable an effective structure to emerge. This was said to mean that the right mix of people would

be indispensable for innovation and creativity. Teams would not be as effective if all team members had the same strengths and weaknesses, as the combination of different abilities increases opportunities for creativity and adaptability. Diversity can also refer to developing a broad range of outputs and considering numerous strategies, etc.

4. History and time: Groups and the people interacting in them were understood to have a sense of historicity. This meant that, although the future behaviour of an organisation could not be extrapolated from the past, the past of this system would still be important for its present and future position. This would require therefore an aspect of retrospection prior to group formation, in addition to Weick's (1995) suggested retrospection during and after an event.
5. Unpredictability: The notion of unpredictability implied that the development of a group or team could not be foreseen, ie not extrapolated from past behaviour (see above) and not calculated on the basis of linear cause-effect relationships. For example, although a team may be confident that they are performing well together and have every reason

to believe that this will continue, external factors may interfere and disrupt the status quo (eg through unexpected redundancy, political, economic or social changes, etc).

6. Pattern recognition: Group behaviour is understood to show patterns. In the natural sciences these patterns can, for example, be observed in a flock of birds or the complex structures of beehives. People, however, have a natural urge to identify patterns in the evolution of complex systems, and, as suggested by Weick (1995), make sense by providing plausible explanations, rather than accurate ones, which then feed into Kolb & Fry's (1975) learning cycle through theorising and further experimentation, based on Weick's idea of 'brief snapshots' or a partial picture.

These six complexity science principles were found to be effective in interdependent learning situations between individuals in groups as a means by which to identify, articulate and understand problems, in terms of undergoing a change in perspective, philosophy and having consciously engaged in a learning process (Webb et al. 2005). These three areas of perspective, learning and philosophy, enhanced by sense-making enabled by

the six principles, were also found to make a substantial impact on the ability of individuals within the groups studied to solve problems (Webb 2006).

Having stated the value of the above models, theories and principles independently, this paper will now draw these together to provide a new, synthesised, theoretical lens.

### SYNTHESISING THE MODELS, THEORIES, AND PRINCIPLES

For the benefit of the method proposed in this paper, the principles and models outlined above pertaining to Tuckman (1965), Weick (1995) and Kolb & Fry (1975), and complexity science, were further synthesised and reconceptualised into a reflective-analytical model (Table 1) that provides a narrative structure (columns represent concurrent phases of sense-making).

This synthesis of theories, models and principles into a narrative structure provides the means for drawing together many useful lenses to shed light on communication and group dynamics over time in order for individuals to begin to analyse and articulate their own experiences.

This narrative structure can be used by each university teacher educator

**TABLE 1: CONCURRENT POSITIONING OF SYNTHESISED SENSE-MAKING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE (AUTHOR'S OWN, 2018).**

| Tuckman (1965) | Weick (1995)      | Weick (1995)               | Weick (1995)                     | Weick (1995)   | Weick (1995)  | Kolb (1973); Kolb & Fry 1975)                         | Complexity science principles  |
|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
|                |                   |                            |                                  |  |   |   | History and time   |
| Forming        | Identity analysis | Retrospection during       | Individual/ co-creation of roles | Ongoing process of communication in social interaction as brief snapshots/ partial picture | Individuals make plausible explanations to make sense | Experience – Reflection – Theorising- Experimentation | Diversity – Self-organisation – Unpredictability – Pattern recognition – Edge of chaos - Emergence |
| Storming       |                   | Retrospection during/after |                                  |  |   |   |  |
| Norming        |                   |                            |                                  |  |   |   |  |
| Performing     |                   |                            |                                  |  |   |   |  |
|                |                   | Retrospection after        |                                  |  |   |   | Pattern recognition Unpredictability   |

department team member to make sense of their team interactions from their own subjective point of view, the details of which can be summarised in the structure further developed and articulated below, where each narrative is related in the first person by each team member respectively and then shared and developed as the 'brief snapshots' provided by the partial picture obtained by the individual are brought together to provide a group sense-making picture, enhanced by views from many perspectives and a greater number of 'snapshots'. Each stage of the narrative structure is elaborated in more detail next.

### TEAM MEMBER SUBJECTIVE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

This narrative structure is here explained in more detail in order for individuals and teacher educator teams to use and apply together. Each stage shall be considered in turn, beginning with 'history and time' – which requires reflection prior to group formation.

#### 1) History and time (pre-point of group formation)

Individuals can begin to relate their individual narrative by referring to a point prior to their contribution to the forming of the current group. Here they should expand on prior experiences, aspirations they brought to their new group role and any other relevant frame-of-reference information that would be relevant as part of retrospective sense-making to help explain their role and identity in the current group. This might also serve to highlight the pre-existence of some group relationships prior to this time.

#### 2) Forming – from date of the newly formed group with current members (this might be when a new member joins)/identity analysis/retrospection/individual and co-creation of roles/brief snapshots of ongoing communication and social interaction/plausible explanations/

experience – reflection – theorising – experimentation/diversity/self-organisation/unpredictability – pattern recognition – edge of chaos – emergence

This stage of sense-making should allow individuals to reflect on their joining the group, initial impressions of others and how and to what extent they felt they were accepted or fitted in. Comment should be made on initial responses and contributions to individual roles in the social group and with respect to task functionality, any problems and any successes.

#### 3) Storming/identity analysis/retrospection/individual and co-creation of roles/brief snapshots of ongoing communication and social interaction/plausible explanations/experience – reflection – theorising – experimentation/diversity/self-organisation/unpredictability – pattern recognition – edge of chaos – emergence

In the storming stage an individual should provide a personal narrative on their own interpretation of any conflicts that arose, both socially within the group, and as relating to functional completion of job roles and tasks. What conclusions did this lead to and interpretations that led to their own changes in behaviour? What changes occurred at group level with respect to the social aspects of the team and functions and outputs related to tasks? What unexpected outcomes emerged or other unpredicted events?

#### 4) Norming/identity analysis/retrospection/individual and co-creation of roles/brief snapshots of ongoing communication and social interaction/plausible explanations/experience – reflection – theorising – experimentation/diversity/self-organisation/unpredictability – pattern recognition – edge of chaos – emergence

As part of the sense-making and reflection on the norming stage, individuals

should reflect on what routines started to become commonplace, and what roles became established in the group socially and functionally as pertaining to tasks. What did these newly recognised patterns lead to, if anything? What new structures of team performance seemed to be emerging?

#### 5) Performing/identity analysis/retrospection/individual and co-creation of roles/brief snapshots of ongoing communication and social interaction/plausible explanations/experience – reflection – theorising – experimentation/diversity/self-organisation/unpredictability – pattern recognition – edge of chaos – emergence

During the performing stage, individuals should narrate their perspective on how any conflicts or other social issues seem to have been submerged beneath the imperative to focus on task and reach success points as per agreed indicators. This may pertain to achieving the completion of work or a project by a deadline, or finishing the academic semester and teaching responsibilities together.

#### 6) Retrospection after – the group should decide on a milestone from which to evaluate group interactions and team performance as of a certain date retrospectively/identity analysis/individual and co-creation of roles/brief snapshots of ongoing communication and social interaction/plausible explanations/reflection – theorising/unpredictability – pattern recognition

This final stage of narrative construction requires an individual to piece together all their individual snapshots to make sense of a journey over a certain period of time to make sense of what happened in order to learn individually and then to contribute to group/team performance.

All team members can use the proposed structure to elaborate their own narrative to share with other team members.

## LIMITATIONS OF USE OF PROPOSED NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

It is obviously a prerequisite that trust is an underlying characteristic in the team. Where team members feel unable to share honestly in a narrative, this would serve as an indicator that greater levels of trust within the team need to be brought about, which in turn would come back to leadership, management, coaching and mentoring as well as resting on the team members themselves.

Other limitations of any outcomes of the use of this narrative structure proposed would obviously be its lack of generalisability, which would require further work to gather evidence from a larger sample size and population, should that be seen to be of benefit.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The benefits of the use of this reflective process are expected to be of shared understanding and group cohesion while acknowledging diversity and realising greater potential for synergy, even though the relationships involved may unravel in unpredicted directions. This can then be discussed as to how this shared understanding and deeper starting point can have a direct impact on delivery to students through more effective departmental functioning due to enhanced communication, transparency,

empathy and team relationship development. In addition, although the expected trajectory of a team member's role might not turn out as anticipated within the organisation in the long term, the foundations are still laid for highly effective future collaboration that could potentially carry on for much longer than the relationships as bound by the organisation that drew them together in the first place.

The process of using a combination of Tuckman (1965), Weick (1995) and Kolb & Fry (1975), and complexity science principles is therefore recommended as an effective suite of university teacher educator department teamwork enhancement tools, for both immediate effect of working together effectively within the same organisation as teacher educators, and with a view to maintaining and developing collaborative relationships beyond. This would also improve working relationships to more easily facilitate staff development according to levels of fellowship of the HEA for example, which have direct bearing on impact on student teaching and learning, core knowledge and professional values, in addition to an enhanced theoretical toolkit from which to draw to apply to working in teacher educator teams in a landscape of professional change (Brown et al. 2014)

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