Why do we need to consider pedagogic frailty?

June 7, 2016 by SRHE News Blog | Leave a comment

By Ian Kinchin

For some colleagues, the idea of pedagogic frailty (see post on 20th January 2016) provides a challenging concept. Why focus on what's wrong (frailty) rather than what's right (e.g. excellence, resilience etc.)? A good question, and I certainly do not hold the copyright to the correct answer to this. However, I feel there are a number of good reasons to explain why a consideration of pedagogic frailty can be helpful:

- After talking with various colleagues across the disciplines, the idea of frailty appears to resonate. As I am not using the term to refer to an individual's characteristics, but with reference to the quality of connections across the wider 'teaching system', it has not been perceived by them to be a threatening term.

- The clinical analogy from which I have drawn heavily provides a starting point that colleagues can relate to. Everyone has either been ill, or knows someone who has, and recognises that the clinical professions are dedicated to promoting health rather than illness. Nonetheless, medicine knows more about disease than it does about health. This is the focus of medical studies. In order to promote health, you need to understand the indicators of illness and the consequences of inappropriate treatment.

- The promotion of a manageable level of discomfort may be seen as a way of developing new perspectives to move forward. Challenging cherished beliefs about teaching may encourage colleagues to re-evaluate their practice and consider new approaches to existing problems. That does not necessarily mean that change is inevitable. If a consideration of practice confirms that an existing approach is still the best within a given context, then we have an evidence base to argue for maintaining the status quo, and not just say 'we've always done it this way'.

- Teaching at universities is not homogenous. The diversity of disciplines and personal approaches to classroom practice is a strength of the system. Reason (2000: 770) comments that in high reliability organisations "it is recognised that human variability in the shape of compensations and adaptations to changing events represents one of the system's most important safeguards. Reliability is 'a dynamic non-event'. It is dynamic because safety is preserved by timely human adjustments; it is a non-event because successful outcomes rarely call attention to themselves'. Teachers are always adapting to changing events and good teaching often goes unnoticed. I would not advocate teaching all becoming the same, but it may be helpful to have a shared view that underpins teaching; seen as a shared 'mindfulness' by Wieck et al. (1999), and shared values by Barnes (2014). The visualisation of pedagogy within the frailty model helps in the sharing process and works towards the development of resilience.

- Reason et al. (2001) make an observation about organizations pursuing the ‘wrong kind of excellence’ when managers adopt a myopic focus on numbers and manipulating specific indicators without appreciating their limitations. According to these authors, the blinkered concentration of isolated elements of the overall system does not readily lead to detection of subtle interactions in the system that could end up as adverse events. The consideration of pedagogic frailty specifically focusses on the interactions between elements of the system and may be considered a tool to address the dominance of non-learning (Kinchin et al. 2008).

I have no doubt that the emergent model of pedagogic frailty will evolve as it is subject to critical review. I’d be interested in your thoughts.
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References


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