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The hidden curriculum of researcher development

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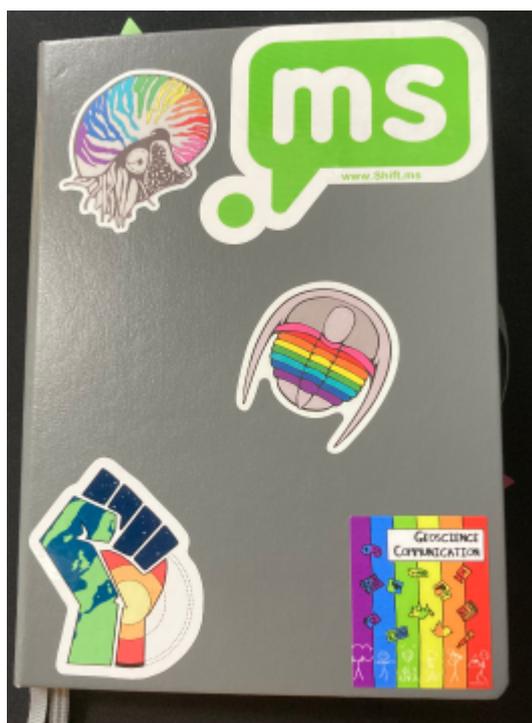
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THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION

30TH JUN 2021

The Hidden Curriculum of Researcher Development

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Stephanie's notebook

In this post I want to reflect on my experience and explore if a Hidden Curriculum also exists for people designing and delivering learning and development opportunities. The Hidden Curriculum “*refers to the unintended and often unacknowledged learning that occurs during a programme of study*” as defined by Advance HE, which links closely to [concepts in Elliot et al, 2020](#). This definition is accompanied by the explanation that “*this includes the absorption of attitudes values and perspectives that are experienced during the daily routine and the interplay of social relationships in the learning environment...*” and, importantly, it does not separate learners from teachers. Looking at the learning environment and the relationships experienced within it, I think that this implies that the Hidden Curriculum also impacts educators, like myself.

As do a lot of researcher developers, I have a background in research and followed the academic research path from PhD to postdoc via a short period working as a research scientist for the British Geological Survey. A few things happened during my postdoc period that I always say inspired my career change but with a bit more distance and reflection, there's more to the story.

When I arrived at Heriot-Watt in 2015 as a postdoc, I was quite surprised by the lack of research(er) community and it was super difficult to meet other postdocs outwith my office space. The training courses offered were great, but I missed the peer-support and community. So, together with a postdoc from my office I founded the Postdoc Forum in 2016. Mainly to meet other postdocs but also to discuss common issues and get support. The forum did very well, and it was expanded from school level to university-wide with support from senior management. It even became an [HR Excellence in Research Award](#) case study. The forum also changed a policy or two. I really enjoyed doing this volunteer work, and I could see not everyone saw this as a good use of my time. It was a perfect use of my time, I learned so much about the University management and got involved in some initiatives that later helped make the career move.

On the other side I had some personal challenges, mainly my MS diagnosis in 2016, at a time where I thought I had finally figured out what I wanted to do. You can read more about [my academic life with MS on the Voices of Academia blog](#). This life altering diagnosis was a big shock and an added uncertainty. Until then I had been quite ok with the uncertainty of employment and the challenges of finding another postdoc contract would bring, but at that time was my *only* uncertainty. Having flimsy health added into the mix led to some reflection on what I really wanted, and more importantly what I liked about my job.

The Hidden Curriculum of Career Transitions

By complete coincidence I had registered for a Career Thinking course, aimed at Professional Services staff but open to academics. As part of this course, we were able to do the [Strength Finder test](#). This was the first time someone told me that being 'a developer of people' was a thing, and a valuable skill with some real career prospects. It hadn't really clicked that the people I saw at training or during events were 'Developers'. This key moment of learning from the Hidden Curriculum was pivotal to my career.

This new knowledge, together with some other exercises from the course showed me that maybe there was something else out there. Getting a diagnosis like MS forces you to take stock and re-evaluate a lot of things. Through this whole experience of the postdoc forum, the joy I got from supporting others plus the possibility of this being a more desk based (and in my head MS future proof job) all lead to me deciding to change career.

Through the postdoc forum and a range of workshops I attended I got to know some of the Researcher and Academic Developers at Heriot-Watt very well. And once I realised that's what they were, I talked to them about their paths and what opportunities might be available. I also told them that I was going to look to change career. And it was actually one of the

developers at Heriot-Watt who pointed out the position at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS). Dr Rob Daley and Dr Vicky Ingram were big influences on me and helped me make this career move and have been a big support ever since.

In 2018, it happened, I joined UWS as a Lecturer, something I didn't quite realise was possible as a Researcher Developer. In my role as Lecturer in Researcher Development I design, develop, deliver and evaluate training and development opportunities for all researcher at UWS from postgraduate researchers (PGRs) to professors. My work is guided by the [Vitae Researcher Development Framework](#) (RDF) and my own experience as Civil & Environmental Engineering PhD and working as a geoscientist, researcher and postdoc. Importantly though, as I am settling more into my role, I can now see how my work is also shaped by the researchers I help develop.

Continuous professional learning from the Hidden Curriculum

Even though my work is guided by frameworks, literature reviews, my own research and input from colleagues as well institutional strategies; it is also informed by my own experiences. The experience of a cis, white, women in STEM, at particular institutions.

In my role at UWS I work with a whole range of researchers at different stages of their careers, as well as breadth of research areas and of course their own lived experiences. So how does the Hidden Curriculum support my professional learning? The biggest impact comes during or after delivery of workshops while interacting with the PGRs and then reflecting on those interactions. Every time I get asked a question or a learner shares their experience or insight it makes me re-think my approach. I don't always end up changing the workshop or class, but I definitely take these encounters into the design process, as well as into meetings with colleagues. Allowing this blurring of lines between learner and teacher and interacting from an understanding of mutuality can really transform the learning environment.

More recently I have noticed this approach working very well when it comes to more informal support. Since remote working started, over a year ago, I offer regular coffee chats for PGRs and the [Power Hour of Writing for staff and PGRs](#). Holding these informal and community building sessions allows me to gain great insight into aspects beyond the research, mode of study or other work-related challenges. It opens up the conversation about lived experiences and PGRs and staff share things they wouldn't share in a workshop necessarily. But these informal conversations can really inform me and the way I deliver my workshops or hold these community activities. Looking back at the meaning of the Hidden

Curriculum – this makes perfect sense to me know. Routine conversational engagement opens up the Hidden Curriculum.

We are now looking ahead to hybrid models of delivery, whatever that might be. In designing online learning environments I think it will be crucial to explore our attitudes to the Hidden Curriculum and what it means to us as educators, as we learn from interactions with students. And we should not shy away from using informal activities to learn more about the lived experiences of the people we help develop and engage with.

Follow me on Twitter [@StephZihms](#) or [find out more on my blog and writing courses here](#).

 CAREERS, NETWORKS & COMMUNITIES, WORKSHOPS

One Reply to “The Hidden Curriculum of Researcher Development”

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