# A critical discussion of the role of action research in academic staff development

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# Our context

- **Lydia's role:**

  – Educational development

  – Lecturer (PgC Teaching and Supporting Learning)

  – Head of eLearning


- **Lin's role:**

  – Facilitator of AR workshops

  – Supervisor for doctoral AR studies

  – Contributor to PgCert programmes with AR component

# Action research in staff development

- PGCERT, MA and EdD programmes with typical assessment criteria can result in:
  - easy to design interventions
  - often one cycle
  - reflection that is 'performed' for assessment purposes

- Encouraging colleagues to do AR that might:
  - be seen as less prestigious than subject research
  - put inexperienced staff in uncomfortable positions of challenging subject/departmental mores

# Examples of action research in CPD

- Flipping the classroom
- Introducing problem based learning
- Expanding the use of Twitter for teaching
- Introducing play-based teaching approaches
- Using video for induction

Alternatives…

*Can students learn by listening? Are lecturers still experts? What is the opportunity cost of innovative pedagogies? Why do we need innovative pedagogies? What happened to independence? Locating the responsibilities of the student in learning …*

# The Higher Education sector

- Consumerism and accountability lead to change-based research

  – focus on micro-issues with limited reach.

- Sector wide narrative

  – celebrates relatively minor changes while remaining silent on significant, troubling issues.

# Different narratives

- **The public narrative of awesomeness**
  - Isn't our teaching wonderful! The language of service.
- **The CPD narrative of increments**
  - how can we drive up standards/satisfaction?
- **The data led narrative**
  - secret compliance? Whose agenda?
- **The Twittersphere**
  - with a tension between internal and espoused?
- **The coffee room narrative of frankness**
  - the honest space?

**WHERE IS THE CRITICAL SPACE FOR THE BOLD AND THE BRAVE?**

# The undercurrent narrative

Zombies are a useful way to explain the uncritical acceptance of managerial-led policies in higher education, believes @jonesdevitt, who presented the descent of fictional scholar @DrVendettas at @AdvanceHE #TLconf18 #ZombiesinHE

**Zombie academic on the march**
Undead professor deployed as critique of managerialism and teaching evaluation at a UK conference
timeshighereducation.com

3:17 AM - 7 Jul 2018

*The*
# Slow
Professor

*Challenging the Culture of Speed*
*in the Academy*

Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber
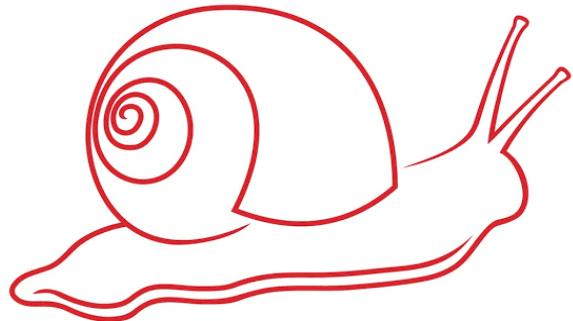
# Our past experiences

- Pedagogical action research can be uncomfortable
  - shift away from the familiarity of discipline traditions.


- New territory
  - challenge and change through action research can be daunting.

# Unintended consequences

- Stick to safer ground e.g.
  - implementing a change to get an immediate reaction from students
  - making incremental changes to personal practice without contesting the wider status quo.

# **Points to ponder...**

Is Pedagogic Action Research to:

1.  Change our practice?

2.  Change us as practitioners?

3.  Address the troubling issues?
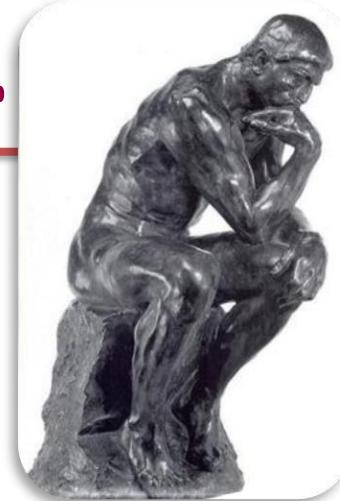
In CPD and formal teaching programmes:

1 & 2 are relatively easy to teach and assess.

3 is much more challenging (full of potential conflicts)

# Some potential responses

- Reconceptualising the assessment task to encourage:

  – Daring to be different methodologically

  – Daring to tell 'uncomfortable truths' through dissemination (and challenging the public institutional narrative)

# **Conclusions and provocations**

- CPD and formal teaching programmes have hi-jacked pedagogic action research and diluted it.

- Pedagogic action research has become a complicit part of a system that we should be challenging.

- How can we reclaim the territory?

# HEA Action Research:
# Sector case studies

- Collection of 15 case studies giving a snapshot of the types of action research being undertaken across the Higher Education sector.

- Gives a glimpse of current concerns of higher education practitioners

- Downloadable from the HEA website

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/hea-action-research-sector-case-studies