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ARTICLE FOR THE SPECIAL ISSUE:
THE AGENCY GAME IN ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT: COMPLIANCE AND RESISTANCE

Avoiding compliance and resistance through collaboration? A Belgian teaching portfolio case

In this paper, the implementation process of a teaching portfolio at a Belgian university is described. The case is intriguing because it departs substantially from what is believed to be the mainstream antagonistic way in which academic developers interact with formal leaders. Rather than being caught in an edgy game of compliance and resistance, the actors present themselves partners in a collaborative process throughout three consecutive phases. To interpret this process, reference is made to the collaborative framework developed by Thomson, Perry and Miller (2007). Their theory offers a venue that could help to avoid compliance and resistance.

Keywords: academic development; academic developer; collaboration; compliance; resistance

Introduction

To discuss the issue of compliance and resistance we reflect in this article on the implementation of a teaching portfolio as an institutional tool to honour academics' commitment to teaching in X, a French-speaking university in Belgium. Clearly, honouring academics' commitment to teaching using a portfolio can be approached from various, possibly conflicting interests. Formal leaders may be attracted to using this tool because it helps them to evaluate teaching, while academic developers may favour its implementation because of its power to develop teaching (Buckridge, 2008; Burnap, Kohut & Yon, 2010; Edgerton, Hutchings & Quinlan, 2002; Seldin, 1997). As such, the implementation of a teaching portfolio presents itself as a process in which compliance and resistance may originate almost self-evidently.

However, the case presented here illustrates that compliance and resistance are not necessarily the 'default modes' in which academic developers are enforced while interacting with formal leaders. On the contrary, the analysis of this particular case revealed that these two sets of actors engaged in a process of collaboration.

For the purpose of this study, Thomson, Perry and Miller's definition (2007, p. 25) of collaboration was adopted. They conceptualize collaboration as "a process in which autonomous or semi-autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiation, jointly creating rules and structures governing their relationship and ways to act or decide on the issues that brought them together; it is a process involving shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions." Its strength lies in the fact that their theory deliberately focuses on the process of collaboration, on what is happening "inside the black box". By using this theory we contribute to the discussion about the relationship between academic developers and formal leaders from a social psychological perspective, rather than an educational philosophical one.

We intend to make clear that the analysis of what is happening in "the black box" is relevant because it illuminates how the stakeholders in this case did not interact according to the compliance and resistance modus, one might expect to originate. As such, this case can inspire others to avoid such antagonistic interactions.

We will develop our argument by first presenting the case of the implementation of a teaching portfolio at X. Then we discuss it using the collaboration theory. In the final section we reflect on how this case and our interpretation of it invite us to engage in further research that could help us to scrutinize more systematically the relationship between compliance and resistance on the one hand and collaboration on the other. This research could also help to inform the practice of academic developers.

The teaching portfolio at X

The case we present is not an historical account, nor is it based on a rigorous document analysis or systematic data collection. It rather is a reconstruction of what happened at X when the teaching portfolio was implemented, based on an iterative discussion among the authors of this paper. Since both the X -authors were involved in the implementation process, one as an academic developer and researcher, and the other as an academic; we could use their reflection on the process. Over the years, they both engaged in a series of talks with different stakeholders involved, i.e. the academics, the academic developers and the formal leaders (Vice-Presidents Teaching and Academic Affairs, as well as the chairman of the Education Committee). In addition, we also made use of the document analyses of policy notes, survey results and interview data that had been collected as part of the PhD- research on the implementation of the teaching portfolio at X (Y, 2011). Both the reflections and the PhD findings were jointly discussed by all authors. It was our aim to get a grip on the implementation process, by focusing on who was involved, what was at stake, how the stakeholders interacted and what the results were. This reflective exercise was highly iterative in nature and recognized that meaning, while being based on one's position of reference, is also socially mediated through interaction (Anderson, 2008).

Our analysis revealed that three major phases can be discerned throughout the implementation of the teaching portfolio: the initiation phase, between 2000 and 2003, the implementation phase that started in 2004 and ended in 2007, and finally a follow-up phase which is still going on. We will structure the presentation of the case accordingly.

Initiation phase (2000-2003)

In 2000 an open dialogue about ways to honour academics' commitment to teaching was launched. This was not surprising since X up to that point had been investing a lot already in promoting the importance of

teaching. Prove of this are: the creation of the unit for academic development in 1995, the establishment of a fund for educational innovation projects in 1997, the formulation of a university-wide vision of teaching and learning in 1999, and the launching of the UNESCO Chair for university teaching and learning in 2001 (Parmentier, 2006).

Within this climate it was only natural that time and energy were devoted to an open dialogue about ways to honour academics' commitment to teaching. This dialogue took place within the Faculties, when academic developers were working with academics on their teaching, at informal gatherings of academic developers and formal leaders and so on. As a consequence all relevant stakeholders could express their view on this matter. The X co-authors refer to academics asserting they were investing a lot of energy to improve their teaching at that time. Some of them also collaborated with academic developers to draw teaching action plans in which they reflected on their students' feedback and documented their efforts and evolution. The academics thought it was regretful that they could not make their teaching efforts and development visible to a fuller extent, when applying for promotion. Both the academics and academic developers believed that the teaching action plans could offer opportunities to do this.

The chairman of the Education Committee (an advisory board of the Academic Council consisting of academics of the different Faculties, academic developers and students) remarked that some other universities use a teaching portfolio to evaluate academics' teaching based on an account of their efforts and their evolution. He pointed out that these evaluations usually were based on criteria linked with the university-wide vision of teaching and learning. Consequently, he suggested that the committee would devote some time to find out whether a teaching portfolio could function as an adequate format to honour academics' commitment to teaching. These points of view were extensively discussed at the Education Committee.

In sum, the three important actors in this phase (the academics, the academic developers and the formal leaders) put forward the potential benefits of working with a teaching portfolio, both for the

development and the evaluation of teaching. Even more, they succeeded to integrate their particular views on the importance and position of teaching in the overarching idea that a teaching portfolio would be useful to honour academics' commitment to teaching in their university. Their advice to launch a teaching portfolio was endorsed by the Academic Council, although neither the implementation details nor who was supposed to take action were specified. Yet, the use of the teaching portfolio, to document teaching development and to apply for tenure and promotion, was recommended to the academics on the X website.

Implementation phase (2004-2007)

Following the recommendation of the Academic Council, the academic developers continued working with the academics on the students' feedback and their consecutive action plans with a renewed energy, since this work was now congruent with the recommended portfolio. However, as the X co-authors testify, some academics overtly questioned the use of the portfolio, as they were not convinced the committees for tenure and promotion would actually pay attention to it. Indeed, the teaching portfolios proved to be diverse in format. The content was personal and thus idiosyncratic. This also made the academic developers start wondering about the adequacy of their developmental work with the academics and the resulting documentation, in terms of the evaluation of the academics.

Within the existing open climate these issues almost self-evidently were put on the agenda, both at the level of the Education Committee and within informal interactions between all stakeholders involved. These discussions coincided with a change of the management team of the university, in which, for the first time, a vice-president for teaching was appointed. The vice-president took the needs and concerns expressed by the academics on board and integrated them in the work she launched towards a comprehensive teaching and learning policy for the university. She approached colleagues, both academics and academic developers, who had been working already on the teaching portfolio, to participate in one of the task forces she created to develop the policy, namely the one focusing on the further elaboration of the format and criteria of the

teaching portfolio. In their work this task force deliberately set out to develop criteria for its evaluation that took into account teaching development. Parallel to the alignment of the developmental work with the university's vision on teaching and learning, the ambition was to align the criteria for evaluation with this vision too.

As a result of this work the teaching portfolio became one of the obligatory elements of the academics' application for tenure or promotion. More specifically, it was stated that it needed to include both an overall self-assessment and an individual action plan. The vice-president academic affairs transmitted the criteria that were developed to the chairmen of the committees for tenure and promotion. Members of these committees were also asked to pay attention to the degree of relevance and validity of the evidence chosen by the academic, when considering the portfolios submitted.

Follow-up (2008 - …)

The stakeholders were interested to know how the portfolio was actually used. They agreed to make research time and money available for a PhD-study by an academic developer (Y, 2011). The study investigated institutional policies and procedures; as well as the perceptions and use of the portfolio of both academics and chairmen of the committees for tenure and promotion. The interviews with the committees for tenure and promotion revealed that the criteria were not yet as sharp as desired. The analysis proved they were too general, not adequately adapted to the signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) of the different disciplines represented in the committees for tenure and promotion.

As a consequence the chairmen were invited to work with academic developers to further elaborate the criteria. The ambition set was to make them discipline specific, without losing, in the process, their connection with the university-wide vision of teaching and learning. This current discussion is opening a perspective to an emerging new overall goal for continuing collaboration. Indeed, the stakeholders involved are wondering now about the position of the teaching portfolio within the global academic portfolio (Seldin,

Miller & Seldin, 2010). New questions are now being posed: how do we want to position teaching, research and service? How do we expect our academics to juggle these responsibilities? How can we honour academics' commitment to all three these areas in a fair and transparent way while doing justice to the development they inevitably have to go through? These questions – as it looks like now- give rise to new discussions and interactions between the stakeholders, involving also the Vice-President Academic Affairs.

Getting into the black box of collaboration in the portfolio case

In order to interpret the case we refer to the conceptualisation of collaboration developed by Thomson and her colleagues (Thomson et al. 2007). The authors distinguish five key dimensions of collaboration: norms, autonomy, mutual interdependence, governance and administration. Each of these dimensions covers several process-related activities we will exemplify by referring to the portfolio case. This exercise shows that the dimensions are a valuable, yet not a perfect, heuristic device for reading the case and for framing the activities and the partnership engagements therein.

Within their multidimensional model of collaboration, Thomson and her colleagues (2007, p. 28) refer to **norms** as the denominator that keeps together processes which contribute to the development of trust, to the installation of modes of reciprocity between interacting partners and to the gradual building up of an appreciation of each other's contribution and reputation. Obviously such norms are not a given right from the start: the underlying processes take time and commitment (Thomson and Perry, 2006). When the stakeholders have the sense that they are both contributing to the collaboration and do not take advantage of each other, even when opportunities to do so arise, the complexity and fragility of the collaborative relationship are gradually reduced. This in turn leads to long-term commitments and a sound foundation for collective action.

In the portfolio case, academic developers and formal leaders engaged in joint projects that allowed their interaction to become less fragile, contingent and ad hoc even before the initiation phase started in 2000. In this way a basis was created for trust and appreciation of each other's contribution and positions, which

were further developed throughout the portfolio case. The jointly made decision to entrust an academic developer with the analysis of the use of the portfolio in the follow-up phase Illustrates this.

In 2000, when the issue of the growing importance and position of teaching was raised, the different stakeholders, the formal leaders, academic developers and academics, expressed their 'self-interests' regarding this issue. In the initiation phase, it becomes clear that those interests differ from one another. Academic developers approach the portfolio as a tool to develop teaching, while the formal leaders stress its power to evaluate teaching. Throughout the implementation of the portfolio, these self-interests remain apparent and the partners find a constructive way to make visible the inherent tensions that come along with the fact that their self-interests do not coincide. In this way the different stakeholders engage in an interaction which allows them to experience **autonomy**, a dimension put forward by Thomson et al. (2007) in their collaboration theory. They respected each other's positions and were able to deal with the differences in a constructive, yet critical way.

Yet this autonomy did not seem to lead to conflict. On the contrary, the different stakeholders were capable of expressing their particular interests while exploring, gradually focusing and eventually defining in interaction a collective interest, i.e. the idea of implementing a teaching portfolio to make it possible to honour academics' commitment to teaching. What made this collective interest so powerful is the fact that it allowed each of the stakeholders to contribute to the realisation of their own particular interests. Even more, under the umbrella of the collective interest to honour academics' commitment to teaching, the implementation of the portfolio engendered several collective benefits throughout all three phases of the process. Firstly, communication about high-quality teaching became easier and richer because the stakeholders had developed a shared language. This was especially the case in the initiation phase. Secondly, the implementation of the teaching portfolio contributes to the perception of the importance that the institution attaches to high quality teaching. Put more bluntly, it became clear for everybody that academics are supposed

to develop their teaching. Thirdly, in the implementation phase when the format and criteria of the portfolio were set, the evaluation of academics' teaching became a more nuanced notion. It was based on the complexity of teaching and its progressive understanding and development over time. Finally, the portfolio made the evaluation of academics' teaching more systematic and transparent, especially in the follow-up phase when the stakeholders engaged in a revision of the criteria. As such the partners engaged in the collaboration experienced **mutual beneficial interdependence** (Thomson et al., 2007).

The implementation story illustrates that the **governance** dimension Thomson et al. (2007) put forward also was key for collaboration. This dimension refers to the creation of jointly made decisions about rules that will govern behaviour and relationships. It results in a set of working rules about how power will be shared, which actions are allowed or constrained, what information needs to be provided, and how costs and benefits are to be distributed so that the stakeholders can reach agreement on collaborative activities and goals through shared power arrangements (Thomson et al., 2007, p. 25-26). If governance is based on the primacy of the individual, collaboration becomes impossible. Direct and unilateral actions and unrestrained decision-making occur.

Clearly in the portfolio case governance was shaped in a positive way. The stakeholders jointly decided on the rules that governed their collaboration. Through a process of participative decision-making, task forces were created and relevant stakeholders (e. g. the chairmen of the promotion committees) were progressively asked to join in. At a certain point, the stakeholders acknowledged the need to collect data on the use of the portfolio to check and optimise its implementation. These acts of governance did not originate from an authoritative structure, nor did they lead to a hierarchical division of labour. On the contrary, there was a clear willingness on the part of the stakeholders to accept that all partners had legitimate interests. They shared information openly, showed respect for others' opinions and were prepared to submit to collectively made decisions (Thomson & Perry, 2006).

Having an adequate governance does not automatically imply that collaboration is also enacted. Thomson et al. (2007) argue that collaboration between semi-autonomous partners also requires an efficient **administration**. Administration refers to an operating system that supports adequate communication channels, clarity of roles and responsibilities, so that it is possible to do what it takes to achieve a goal. An adequate administration does not equal hierarchy, standardisation or routinisation. Indeed, when semi-autonomous partners collaborate administration also includes a 'social' aspect. It allows for particular issues to be put on the table.

In the portfolio case, administration was apparent when the coordinating vice-president transmitted the criteria to the promotion committees and asked them to take these criteria into account when judging the quality of the portfolios. By doing so the vice-president made sure that the decisions (i.e. the criteria) taken by the collaborative group were properly implemented. The existing communication channels also allowed the results of the research on the use of the portfolio to be discussed openly. As a result of this discussion, administrative action was taken to refine the criteria for the teaching portfolio so that they take into account the complexity of the academic reality. The academic developers consequently worked with these criteria in the counselling they provided for academics putting together their portfolio. In this way, the collaborative group acted according to the governance structure they had established. In doing so the issue of the positioning of research, teaching and service could be raised. It functions as an impetus for a new collaborative project.

Overall the five key dimensions of the collaborative lens made it possible to describe the portfolio case capturing the different process-related activities the partners engage in. This becomes apparent in table 1. This table makes clear how the key dimensions of collaboration play out in each of the consecutive phases. While all key dimensions are present throughout the process (light grey), some of them come to the fore more

prominently in particular phases (dark grey). For instance governance was not explicitly at stake in the initiation phase of the portfolio case.

Insert Table 1 here

Does this case fit with the theory of collaboration?

Even though the theory of Thomson et al. (2007) proved to be a helpful heuristic device to capture the process-oriented activities the collaborative partners engage in, the portfolio case also suggests some elaborations and adjustments to the theory.

Firstly, although Thomson & Perry (2006) recognize that collaboration is a process that occurs over time by referring explicitly to theories that describe the collaboration processes in terms of a continuum of stages (Gray, 1989; Himmelman, 1996; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994 in Thomson and Perry, 2006), a temporal dimension is not spelled out explicitly in their multidimensional model. The portfolio case however clearly shows that all five key-dimensions of collaboration are *not* equally prominent throughout the collaboration process. Autonomy and norms seem to be crucial in the initiation phase but not so in the implementation and the follow-up phase. The reverse is true for governance and administration while mutual interdependence is present throughout the whole process. Within the initiation phase, the collaborative partners thus engage in a common endeavour to elucidate and contrast their particular positions, ambitions and values. In doing so, all partners move toward a growing understanding of the significance and relevance of mutual commitment necessary to reach the common objective (i.e. honouring teaching).

Ultimately, therefore, the initiation phase is characterized by an increasing emphasis upon "doing the right thing". Or stated differently, during the initiation phase collaboration is imbued with a sense "effectiveness". During the subsequent implementation phase, however, collaboration centres around "efficiency", on "doing things right". In other words, in the portfolio case issues regarding effectiveness (norms, autonomy, mutual interdependence) precede issues of efficiency (governance, administration). We

hypothesize that –in general- a strong initial focus on effectiveness contributes to, and perhaps is essential for a continued collaborative engagement during the subsequent focus on efficiency.

Secondly, Thomson et al. do not discuss the role of formal leaders in relation to collaboration. However, in the portfolio case the formal leaders did play a significant role. Yet, they did not do this in an authoritative way. Neither the Vice-Presidents nor the chairman of the Education Committee unilaterally imposed working rules on the collaborative group. On the contrary, they respected the open nature of the relationship between the stakeholders. Their contribution to the development of governance came from their invitation to the stakeholders to keep focused on the higher goal of the group; namely honouring academics' commitment to teaching. As such they acted primarily on the mutual interdependence dimension and were capable to keep this dimension 'in the air' together with their colleagues throughout all of the phases of the implementation process.

Thirdly, autonomy clearly is a dimension that deserves further attention. Thomson et al., together with many of their colleagues, point out that the relationship between autonomy and collaboration is problematic. In their research Thomson et al. even found a consistent negative correlation between autonomy and collaboration. Thus, even though autonomy seems a crucial dimension of collaboration, a high degree of autonomy also hampers it. Yet in the portfolio case, the stakeholders were able to strike a positive balance between autonomy and collaboration. Obviously they engaged in fruitful collaboration. Yet at the same time they scored high on autonomy. They were capable to make the inherent tensions between their various self-interests visible and to discuss them critically though constructively, also in view of the collective interest they defined. We hypothesize that the positive correlation between autonomy and collaboration may be traced back to the role the formal leaders play.

Compliance and resistance?

Up to now we have used the framework of Thomson et al. to describe the interaction between the stakeholders engaged in the portfolio case, an interaction that is essentially characterized by collaboration. The framework helped us to understand the portfolio case. The five key dimensions of collaboration were present. However this exercise also made clear that collaboration is a complex phenomenon consisting of five interrelated dimensions which each describe a process and which take time to develop. This makes collaboration in our view a fragile process. Yet, the portfolio case enabled us to identify three elements Thomson et al. do not explicitly cover and which may help to reduce this fragility. Firstly, the stakeholders took their time to initially focus on questions regarding the effectiveness of the portfolio, before they started worrying about the efficiency of their plans. Secondly, the formal leaders did not immediately stress the importance of governance and administration, but rather invested their energy in sustaining the mutual interdependence dimension. Thirdly, based on the trust that could grow under these conditions and the awareness of the collective interest, the stakeholders could all come to terms with the tensions between their particular self-interests and the collective interest.

Obviously these observations need further investigation. A systematic validation of the findings of this case in other contexts, could serve two purposes. First, this kind of research would be helpful to define the exact relationship between the collaboration theory on the one hand and the notion of compliance and resistance on the other. One could assume that compliance and resistance can be avoided by paying attention to the five dimensions of collaboration and the additional elements we were able to pinpoint. However, collaboration remains a fragile process. Compliance and resistance lurk everywhere in relationships among university stakeholders. In this particular case, the collaborative partners managed to keep ‘power-games’ out of their interaction. Neither the fact that their views on the portfolio differed, nor the manner in which the formal leaders played their role, provoked antagonist interactions. The focus on effectiveness in the initiation

phase of the collaborative project may help to understand this, as it helped all partners to restrain from using power to enforce the others to comply with their particular interests or to determine the pace in which they moved from one phase in the implementation process to the other. Stated in terms of power, we are inclined to say that the formal leaders at X, contrary to those in the other cases of this issue, actively used the power coming along with their position to invite their colleagues over and over again to collaborate. Secondly, such empirical validation could also inform the practice of academic developers, so that they can indeed avoid compliance and resistance by facilitating collaboration while focusing on effectiveness, mutual interdependence and autonomy.

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Table 1. Cross-tabulation of key dimensions and phases of collaboration

			Norms	Autonomy	Mutual interdependence	Governance	Administration
Initiation (2000-2003)	Who	Academics, academic developers, Education Committee					
	What	How to develop and evaluate academics' teaching and to honour their commitment to teaching					
	How	(In)formal open dialogue					
	Result	Use of portfolio recommended					
Implementation (2004-2007)	Who	Academics, academic developers, task forces of Education Committee, chairmen of committees for tenure and promotion, VP Teaching					
	What	Format and criteria of portfolio					
	How	Task forces					
	Result	Portfolio obliged, criteria stipulated					
Follow-up (2008 –continued)	Who	Academics, academic developers, chairmen of committees for tenure and promotion, VP Teaching, VP Academic Affairs					
	What	Follow-up on implementation					
	How	Research project, Project group (criteria)					
	Result	Refinement of criteria (discipline-specific), new questions (academic portfolio)					