Exploring reflective journaling in academic development consultancy: Reflections, responses and challenges

Kogi Naidoo
Massey University, New Zealand
k.naidoo@massey.ac.nz

Abstract: Reflective journaling may be used to support staff to meet the demands of their personal and professional development in the light of the challenges and pressures they face, and may also be used by academic developers themselves to plan, develop, implement and evaluate new programmes or initiative. In this paper I explore some of the current challenges facing staff in higher education, in particular the challenges facing academic staff developers. The paper also provides my reflections as academic developer on a recent consultancy experience, using reflective journaling as the academic consultancy strategy. The benefits of using reflective journaling in consultancy are, for example, long term gains relating to change in practice, enhanced or new personal and professional relationships, and the provision of emotional/affective support that are sometimes missing in the usual consultancy support initiatives.

Keywords: Academic staff development, reflective journal, consultancy

Introduction
Evident in recent higher education literature (Van der Wende, 2001; Teichler, 2004; Deem, 2001; Middlehurst, 2001; Kwiek, 2003; Gordon, 1995; Wilmott, 2003; Ellis & Phelps, 2000; Howell, Williams & Lindsay, 2003; Bridges, 2000; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999) are various challenges that are being faced as a result of change that include, among others:

- Growth in higher education participation
- Internationalisation
- Globalisation
- Information technology and e-learning
- Higher education provision, flexible mode and delivery
- Quality movement which has demanded more transparency and financial accountability
- Changing student demography which includes background, age, gender, etc.

In the current performance based research funding environment, the pressure is on staff to increase research outputs and successfully obtain external funding. Academic development units in higher education are increasingly being required to be more accountable, to do more with fewer resources, while still being central to and supportive of achieving institutional goals and objectives.
The bind on academic developers is that they are expected to provide increasing personal and professional development (teaching and research related) support to staff with scarce and/ or dwindling resources. Academic developers need to maintain credibility and enhance their own practice by themselves evaluating, researching and updating their practice. A recent study commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (Prebble et al, 2004) highlights the dearth of impact studies of academic development initiatives on enhancing student learning. Some reasons for this as advocated by academic developers are lack of resources and time. Academic development practice is aimed at changing teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning, but whether this enhances student learning outcomes is not very evident. Another reason for this may be in the nature of the academic development interventions themselves. They are usually short-term, once-off consultancies, or the attendance of short, focused workshops and seminars which do not take up too much time of academic developers or staff.

An attempt is made in this paper to reflect on the impact of consultancy in academic development practice, thereby contributing to the scholarship of higher education academic development. Consultancy may be understood as academic support provided as part of institutional support service with no fee or charge levied. More specifically, a case example using the author’s own work is described, viz. using reflective journaling as a longer term, focused consultancy strategy for the duration of a twelve week teaching course. Also considered is reflective journaling as a consultation development strategy for use by academic developers themselves. From the conclusions one can extrapolate that investing more time and resources in consultancy in academic development will result in having greater impact and enhanced teaching and learning in higher education.

The purpose of this paper is to:

- Unpack academic development and the use of consultancy as a mode of academic development
- Share an experience of reflective journaling as a consultancy strategy
- Provide reflections on the experience and share lessons learned
- Consider ways in which reflective journaling can be used in academic consultancy.

In the roundtable discussion, delegates will have the opportunity to:

- Share their experiences of academic consultancy
- Explore the tensions/dilemmas of engaging in reflective journaling
- Discuss the feasibility of using consultancy although it is time intensive and can be personally, emotionally intrusive.

**Consultancy as a mode of academic development**

According to Jackson (2004), in an address to the Higher Education Academy, experienced academic developers conceptualise the developing of higher education teaching as:

- Improving their skills and artistry as teachers of higher education students
- Extending their interests and capacities
- Helping people become more knowledgeable, skilful and wiser
- Enabling teachers to think more clearly about what they are doing so that they are willing to make changes based on their analysis of what works for them
- Anything that helps them to examine/inform their practice
- Change at the level of an individual which leads to changed and enhanced practice
- Changing and growing as a person
- Leading people into different ways of thinking and behaviour.
From the teachers’ perspective, teaching development may be experienced as an increase in the teacher’s comfort with teaching, the teacher’s knowledge and skills, and the learning outcomes for students (Akerlind, 2003). Academic development and support of staff occurs in various modes. The Prebble et al (2004) research on the impact of academic development identifies consultancy, peer assessment and mentoring as one mode of academic development interventions, among others, such as short training courses, in situ training, student assessment of teaching and intensive staff development. Boud and McDonald (1981) differentiate among three types of consultancy: the professional service model where the consultant provides organisational or technical expertise; the counselling model where the consultant assists the teacher to articulate and find solutions to their own problems and challenges; and the collegial model where the guidance is provided by a peer or where the two peers serve as consultants for each other. The case example, in this paper using reflective journaling can be categorised as a collegial model according to the Boud and McDonald (1981) typology.

Weimer and Lenze (1997) found that although consultancy was common practice, there was only one institution that reported consultancy as an important component of their academic development interventions. The form that consultancies for teaching development most commonly takes, occurs as teaching development workshops, lecture observations, small group instructional diagnoses, and one-to-one consultancy which take place as informal conversations, questions by e-mail or telephone, networking and/or the sharing of good practice. Why reflective journaling is not commonly used as an academic development consultancy strategy may be because it is time and resource intensive, and/or that teachers and academic developers are not comfortable with such intense interaction. With regard to impact there is limited evidence to show that academic development relating to personal, professional and research skills development of staff has impact on the learning outcomes of students (Prebble et al, 2004).

The reflective journal consultancy

As academic developer I was approached by a lecturer who wanted to reflect on his teaching to demonstrate fulfilling the requirements for quality teaching for the HERDSA Fellowship. I accepted since it was part of my role as academic developer and a HERDSA Fellow, but also because I was keen to respond as critical friend/colleague and engage in the reflective dialogue on teaching for the twelve week course. My prior experience of consultancies included providing feedback on the observation of teaching and/or using the technique of small group instructional diagnoses, but not reflective journaling.

So what were my concerns in going into the consultancy? Rowland (1993) advocates that there be no boundaries to framing the inquiry, no ground rules which would hamper the constructive nature of the development of the relationship so as not to bias the way the relationship develops and influences the issues that arise. We decided on e-mail exchanges of written reflections (after each lecture) and critical friend/colleague responses (before the following lecture). I was concerned about the unstructured nature of the engagement. I was not used to working to an ad hoc agenda. I felt uneasy about working intimately with someone I had not worked with before. I was not sure how he would receive my responses although I was confident that they would be professional and constructively critical. My discomfort is evident in my initial response to his first journal entry: ‘If it makes you feel better, it is hard for me too! Guess it is a personal baring of our innermost thoughts and feelings…’. I end my response extremely cautiously: ‘Have I been too invasive, self-indulgent? How has the feedback differed from your expectations?’ A face-to-face conversation occurred when I dropped into his office one afternoon. The time offered us the opportunity to share our backgrounds and experiences, concerns and reflect on our first e-mail. This resulted in my feeling more comfortable with him as a colleague and our undertaking for the following weeks. Although I was apprehensive at the outset, upon reflection, adopting Rowland’s approach does work, and there are advantages to not setting boundaries.
This paper is also an attempt to analyse the meta-dialogue of the reflective journaling process. This can be analysed and viewed from the perspectives of the issues facing the lecturer and that of the issues facing me as academic developer. There were the twelve weekly written exchanges, a telephone call and an unscheduled face-to-face meeting. There were two levels of interaction in the reflective journaling process, what one thinks and there is what one says or writes down in the entries. Since this was my first long-term consultancy I felt that I needed to document the experience to evaluate my performance as academic developer. I kept a log of my ‘internal conversation’ separately. It was a summary – running log of the development of the relationship. It was my personal reflective journal to evaluate my performance as an academic developer – How was I performing my role? What did he expect? I felt that I needed to keep a record or I would lose my reflections of the moment. It also served to summarise the development of our dialogue. I could use my personal log as an avenue to vent or articulate my ‘real’ or ‘true’ reflections on the journal entry received. My entries focused on my feelings, confidence levels, and frustrations at times when I felt the lecturer was not responding to or reflecting on my responses.

Jackson (2004) differentiates between being directed, self-directed and collaborative - ‘doing things with teachers so that they grow/change and become better teachers’. Academics are expert at developing themselves for teaching and in helping students become reflective learners. The steps they follow are: thinking about how they teach; developing knowledge, resources/strategies to teach/help students learn; teach, evaluate effects; and plan to do it differently/better. Likewise, academic development consultancy using reflective journals can assist teachers to become more reflective about their teaching and learning. The lecturer in this case is adopting a reflection based model (Trigwell and Shale 2004: 525) citing Kreber and Brook (2002: 153): “academics who practice the scholarship of teaching engage in content, process and premise reflection on research-based and experience-based knowledge in the areas of instruction, pedagogy and curriculum, in ways that can be peer reviewed”.

Reflections on the consultancy

Mutual reflections of the analyses of our journal dialogue are provided in a joint paper presented at the conference in which we explore the issues in ‘framing the inquiry’, the ‘personal-professional nexus’, and the ‘teaching issues’ that arise as educational tensions (Ruth & Naidoo, 2005). This paper provides my perspective as academic developer of the reflective journaling consultancy.

The reflective journal provides the lecturer with a starting point to determine his “conceptions of teaching and conceptions of growing and developing as a teacher” (Akerlind 2003: 389). Jackson (1994) citing Levinson-Rose and Menge (1981) and Kreber and Brook (2002), identify staff self-reports as the most common, but weakest indicator of the effectiveness of academic development. Reflective journaling provides an alternative to self-evaluation reports and peer observation which has its own complexities (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). Therefore using a collaborative intervention like reflective journaling is likely to be more effective in that it is more objective than self-evaluation reports, by providing a peer’s perspective. The sustained ongoing communication over the twelve weeks provided several opportunities in the reflective cycle for immediate changes that could enhance the teaching, and consequently contribute to enhanced student learning outcomes.

The reflective journaling relationship may be compared to a relationship where two people meet, get to know each other, take the decision to progress the relationship or end the relationship and go their separate ways. There is ongoing evaluation at each stage of the relationship and feelings of self-consciousness and awareness of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in relation to thoughts, feelings, and needs. This occurs as an inner dialogue or in conversation intentionally or incidentally. Applying the partnership analogy to the consultancy strategy of reflective dialogue and journaling, there are the stages of getting to know each other, making the commitment, and interacting spontaneously, but cautiously until a
level of comfort is reached. This process can take several interactions and incidents. Upon analysis of the dialogue and reflecting on the stages in the relationship it is possible to know the precise moment of acceptance of each other. This occurred after my unscheduled face-to-face drop-in visit when we shared personal and professional experiences and future goals. Reflecting on the consultancy experience and professional exchange we were able to share a common focus and goals for the duration of the course. We met at the end to de-brief, analyse our journals and plan how we were going to share our experience. We decided to share our experience of our journal entries and reflections at a conference, write a joint refereed paper, and two other papers that would focus on our individual perspectives and reflections.

I kept a running log of reflections of my responses to the lecturer’s entries. The purpose of the parallel log was to engage in self-reflection of the reflective journaling consultancy and to contribute to the academic development research and practice literature, as advocated by MacKinnon (2001). I did not share the entries I kept in my personal journal with the lecturer until after his last reflection because I did not want to ‘control’ his entries or steer his actions, thoughts and behaviours relating to his teaching over the twelve weeks. As an academic developer, I was again faced with the dilemma of commitment. What does being committed really mean in academic development? Is it just a time commitment? To what extent are we emotionally, psychologically and intellectually engaged? How do we maintain our professional distance? What does it mean to academic staff? I have no answers, but these are issues worth considering.

What were some of the lessons I learned? From the meta-analysis and reflections on the reflective journaling experience, I would make the following changes to how I would use this strategy again:

- Establish trust in the relationship as a first step: meet to share backgrounds, fears and goals
- Set mutual initial goals with the understanding that they can be renegotiated at any time
- Monitor periodically the level of satisfaction with the journaling and responses
- Set some ground-rules (optional as it may not be necessary, cf. Rowland, 1993)
- De-briefing: to be set at the outset to engage in an in-depth analysis of issues, share feedback on the process and dialogue, discuss the way forward, e.g. development plan, commit to action changed behaviour, etc.

The guidelines for observational feedback as advocated by MacKinnon (2001) are equally relevant for academic developers’ use in reflective journaling:

- Distinguish between events and interpretations
- Balance positive and negative feedback
- Focus on impact
- Be selective with negative comments
- Be wary of the perils of prescriptions
- Be as neutral as possible with word usage

Reflective journaling offers an additional strategy to lecture observation feedback. The type of critique, range and depth of issues covered can extend beyond that covered in such feedback reports. More importantly, reflective journaling can also be used by academic developers to engage with and be reflective of their own practice.

**Conclusion**

The author acknowledges the limitation of the study in that it is based on only one case example. However, in sharing my experience at the conference as a “publication of research on teaching” (Trigwell
and Shale 2004: 534), it provides delegates with an alternative to reflect on their teaching and valid evidence should they intend obtaining the HERDSA Fellowship.

The outcomes of the reflective journaling reported in this paper confirms the studies of Stanley et al. (1997), Piccinin (1999) and that of the Weimer and Lenze (1997) study who reported similar findings. Engaging in reflective journaling as a consultation strategy does work, but whether or not consultancy makes a difference to enhancing teaching effectiveness is still not clear. However it would appear that consultation does help teachers to reflect and interpret feedback on their performance. At best there would be changes in their understanding, knowledge and behaviour.

The major difference in the use of this strategy is that the clinical element is removed from the development consultancy activity, e.g. curriculum reviews or small group diagnosis. The outcomes of such an endeavour provide pointers for academic development practice and may be applied to other areas in higher education support and development. There are implications for this strategy to be applied in other support programmes like supervision and collegial mentoring. What the lecturer gained was the evidence and insights into his teaching development. What I gained from this consultancy experience was the opportunity to try out a new strategy and achieving enhanced self-confidence in its use. What we both gained were new friends, who can be supportive to each other personally and professionally, and colleagues who can work collaboratively on other teaching scholarship research initiatives.

In the final analysis, I found that using reflective journaling is a mutually rewarding consultation strategy. The development of the relationship needs to be monitored closely and goals set at the initial inquiry stage may need to be re-negotiated should tensions or an imbalance in the personal-professional nexus arise. Other positives include a deep engagement with the person and the professional issues. There are the added benefits of the conversations and the ensuing contributions to the scholarship of teaching (sharing the experience at workshops, conferences and other publications), enhancing of the development of student learning, and the development of the academics and the academic developers.

Reflective journaling as a consultancy strategy is:
- A useful way of grounding the dialogue
- Still risky until the relationship develops a certain level of trust
- A mutual commitment for a set term
- A deep learning approach to consultancy and academic development
- A useful strategy for academic development: mutual benefits for support and outputs, e.g. sharing problems, sounding board, engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning issues
- A useful strategy for use as a reflective strategy for existing and new academic development programmes and initiatives
- An opportunity for research into consultancy as a mode of academic development.

What this collegial consultancy case illustrates concurs with the finding in the Prebble et al (2004: 71) report, that “working with individual members of staff in a consulting or mentoring role is an effective if not relatively expensive use of the development resource”. The following, however remain as challenges and issues that we as teachers and staff developers in higher education need to engage with: making the commitment in terms of resources and time. There is still the issue of who supports the academic developer? Reflective journaling could be used as a collaborative strategy among fellow developers, both as a support and evaluative tool for feedback on new initiatives. There are gains for seeking feedback and insights to inform further development, change or action, and other intrinsic benefits from the mutual sharing and networking.
References


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