

Academic developers as change agents: Caught in the middle

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Abstract: *The current higher education environment is characterised by change as it adapts and responds to multiple agendas. With an increased focus on quality we are seeing greater emphasis on measures of accountability. Within this environment the professional practice of academic development is positioned as 'strategic' with one of the major roles of academic developers being 'change agents'. But what does this really mean in practice? This paper draws on focus group data from academic developers from one university to explore and analyse from a critical perspective the tensions and conflicts that such a positioning has on the practice of academic development. Through this discussion struggles within the field, that have largely been silent, are raised.*

Keywords: *academic developers, changing higher education environments, discourse analysis*

Introduction

The current higher education environment is characterised by constant change and accountability agendas as universities strive to improve the quality of their teaching and learning. Within this complex context the professional practice of academic development is being positioned as 'strategic' and academic developers are described as 'change agents'. But what does this really mean and what impact do such positionings have on academic developers? This paper will explore these questions and the assumptions that are made about the practice of academic development from an academic developer's perspective. While much is written about the work of academic development in a general sense and how this work is positioned at institutional and national levels, the actual work practices of people in these roles are still relatively silent and largely under-theorised. As a result, the professional standing of the work of academic developers is incomplete and it is through an exploration of these practices that a greater understanding of the field of academic development can be gained. To do this I will draw on focus group data from a group of academic developers in one university and I will focus on the discourses that are used to explore their perceptions of work practices and reveal the tensions and conflicts that they feel as they struggle to be 'strategic'. Through this exploration I will try and make sense of how academic developers work in a complex environment and discuss the implications that this might have for practice.

Academic development – a strategic orientation to change

While there is acknowledged variation in what individual academic development units do and the models that are adopted (Macdonald, 2003), academic development is now a recognisable professional area of work that is receiving increasing emphasis and growth as universities place greater importance on measuring quality in teaching and learning and governments link funding to teaching and learning outcomes (Gosling, 2001). In response to these directions academic development has been publicly

positioned as 'strategic' (Gibbs, 2004; Ramsden, 2003). Involvement in the processes of change in teaching and learning is also seen as a significant role and function of academic development (Gosling 2001). This positioning is also reinforced at the individual institutional level. At the University of South Australia professional (academic) development is summarised in the following way.

Supporting university teachers through professional development is directed towards both inducing change towards institutional strategic directions and working with teachers in areas of change that they initiate in their local contexts. (Nunan, George, & McCausland, 2000 p85).

Interestingly, being 'strategic' is rarely clarified and the complex power relations that prevail both within the field of academic development and more broadly are not made explicit. Gibbs begins to allude to some of the conflicts and tensions that arise with this kind of positioning in the statement below, however this is only done at the level of engagement with faculty staff.

Some of our change processes and goals are congruent with the values and interests of faculty – and some are not. (Gibbs, 2004 p11).

Faculty staff are not the only players in this field. University managers and administrators play a critical role in setting these agendas and as such need to be acknowledged in a broader exploration of the field.

Taking a 'strategic' approach to academic development is not as simplistic as it first may seem. Rarely when making statements about such a positioning of academic development do authors go into any detail about the process or practicalities of this work. With the exception of the studies by Fraser (2001) and Land (2001; 2003) little attention has been given to this from the perspective of academic developers nor has the field been problematised using critical methodologies (Rowland, 2003). Fraser interviewed academic developers across Australia and New Zealand about their conceptions of their profession. While some valuable insights were made about the work and the differences of practice, the tensions were not highlighted. Land from his interviews with academic developers in the United Kingdom, has identified twelve different orientations to the practice of academic development. Through his research we are beginning to develop a better understanding from a practitioner's point of view of the approaches and conceptions of academic development. Although Land has acknowledged the complexity of the work attention is only beginning to be given to the tensions and the complex power relations that result from this (Clegg, 2003; Peseta et al., 2005).

Rowland (2002) draws attention to the tensions that pervade these academic spaces and states that fragmentation is part of life in higher education. He argues that working in these areas – what he calls 'the fractures and fault lines of academia' - should be the primary focus of academic development. While he is clearly establishing a place and a position for academic development in this changing environment the gap between teachers and managers continues to develop with increased emphasis on accountability.

In this climate, managers and administrators are likely to be viewed as part of a culture of compliance – agents of external forces – whose values are sharply at odds with academic values and whose influence is increasingly viewed with suspicion by academic staff. Academic development – and the work of those in centralised staff and educational development units most closely concerned with academic development – is often led by such external agendas as teaching quality and transferable skills. In these cases, it can also become associated with the culture of compliance in the eyes of academic staff in disciplinary department (Rowland, 2002 p. 57 - 58).

While Rowland acknowledges the tensions that these situations create, he does not address the implications that this has from a practitioner's perspective. In fact such an approach is significantly complex and certainly offers the potential for conflict at a range of levels.

The study

As the coordinator of academic development within my university I am specifically interested in the perspectives of the staff with whom I work and the work of academic development more broadly. In particular I want to try and uncover the power relations that exist and the struggles that people experience as they undertake an academic development function. To help understand struggles between groups, domination and the different power relations that occur, I have drawn on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Passeron, & de Saint Martin, 1994; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Through his concepts of field, capital and habitus, Bourdieu provides a special insight into how social systems operate. A Bourdieuan approach allows a researcher to go beyond the surface of appearances and representations to try and uncover a deeper level of understanding of the social systems and the power relations that exist within a field.

To help understand struggles between groups, domination and the different power relations that occur, Bourdieu emphasises the importance of language and discourse and its relationship with knowledge. Here there are many similarities to critical discourse analysis where the emphasis is placed on the discourse used to understand how particular discourses define meaning, normalise practices, limit understandings and support power structures. An understanding of these situations can be gained by focusing on the language and discourse of particular social settings and the linguistic exchanges between participants.

He [Bourdieu] portrays everyday linguistic exchanges as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce (Thompson [editor's introduction] in Bourdieu, 1991, p. 2).

Bourdieu provides a theoretical and conceptual framework to understand the complex relationships within a field and this has been used to understand how academic development is positioned in an institutional setting. The texts that were generated from a series of focus groups with academic developers were analysed using this approach. In particular a focus was placed on the language used by the participants to describe tensions that they are experiencing in their roles as academic developers.

The data reported in this paper was collected as part of a larger study which is examining the field of academic development from a critical perspective and includes data from academic developers and academic staff who have participated in academic development activities. In the larger study how academic development is positioned from an institutional perspective has also been explored. As part of this study, academic developers from one university were invited to participate in a series of semi-structured focus groups about their work practices and an initial analysis of this data is the focus of this paper. As the coordinator of this group of staff, I was very aware of the power relations between my role as a researcher and the staff participating in the focus group. While this positioning could not be changed the study was designed to be as open as possible. Staff were invited to participate by a third party, and as part of the ethics process all staff were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Open ended questions were used to frame the discussion and each group continued for approximately ninety

minutes. Participants were able to read all the transcripts and make changes before any analysis was conducted. A series of focus groups were held over a period of time and participants were given the opportunity to comment on data from previous groups.

The academic development unit at this university is located centrally and has a strong service orientation. Each academic developer is closely aligned, both physically and structurally with one of the major academic divisions in the university. Seven staff with various degrees of experience as academic developers were part of the first two groups from which the data analysed in this paper is drawn. Questions which guided the focus group of academic developers included their understanding of the term academic development, how they describe their role, tensions that they may or may not feel in their role, and their experiences of working with academic staff. The data discussed in this paper reports on one aspect of the responses - the struggles and tensions that academic developers felt in their role as a result of being expected to perform as change agents. Although the data comes from a small group of academic developers from one university and as such can not be widely generalised, it does raise tensions that have otherwise been silent, tensions that others will be able to identify with, and it also provides a more critical approach to analysing the work practices of academic development. Ideally it could be extended into a broader study which examines the themes raised across a larger sample of institutions and differently structured academic development units.

Academic developers speak

Apart from identifying the institutional differences that people who work in this professional field feel, what was particularly striking from the conversations that took place were the tensions within the role, tensions that are either neglected in general discussions about the work of academic development or given little attention when they are mentioned. Participants acknowledged their role of 'change agent' and discussed openly the tensions that this raised. As a result academic developers take on a 'middling' position that dominates their roles. This is the positioning that is taken up between management and the academic staff with whom academic developers work. While this is an expected role within this professional area the tensions that this creates are silent both at an institutional level and more generally in any discussion of academic development work. However there are implications for practice and unless there is an understanding and acknowledgement of these tensions the work of academic development can be impeded.

Change agents and change initiators

The expectations that academic developers will play a key role as change agents are well documented. Studies that have examined the work of academic development have all concluded that effecting change is an important element of this work (Fraser, 2001; Gosling, 2001). While this role in change processes may mean different things in different institutional contexts, in most discussions relating to academic development it refers to the instigation of changed behaviours at the individual academic level. This role was highlighted by the participants in these focus groups and there was general agreement by the group.

...I suppose I wanted to talk about bringing about change in practice ... and we are sometimes called change agents and change initiators

.... I do think that there is no doubt that we are change agents for the institution. I have no doubt about that and I think that we will therefore inevitably always run up against resistance

What is clear, especially from the second statement, is the acceptance of this role as 'change agents' to work with staff to develop institutional aims. To reinforce this positioning the academic developer

repeats that there is 'no doubt' about this positioning. However while this positioning appears to be accepted at one level, there is a strong awareness of the inevitable 'resistance' that this creates in the workplace and what this triggers in other parts of the conversations are the tensions that are felt as a result of this positioning. The tentativeness within the first statement and the 'inevitability of resistance' in the second, are an early indication from an academic developer's perspective of the external pressures that they feel in this expected role as they start to get caught within a power struggle.

The ham in the sandwich – neither betwixt nor between

AD3: I think we are the ham in sandwich where you sort of have the institutional SMG [Senior Management Group] top down approach and then the discipline school approach and you are in the middle trying to make sense of what the mission and the goals of the university are and taking into account where the discipline, school and division is trying to come from

AD4: and where they see their needs

AD3: yeh and how you mesh those two and I see it

AD4: it is very difficult

Even though there is a level of acceptance of the role of change in the work of academic development what came through strongly from the developers were the tensions that this 'middling position' created. In this short exchange, one participant uses the metaphor of the 'ham in the sandwich' to describe the position that she feels she is placed in and identifies the two opposing positions as being that of senior management and the other at the school level – with the academic developer in between. The distinction between the two approaches is not as simplistic as it first might seem. The 'SMG top down approach' refers to a general orientation to academic development – a strategic one – and is aligned to the 'mission and goals of the university' where particular kinds of managerial capital are valued and certain outcomes are required. However the 'discipline school approach' is at a more practical level and hence the disjuncture is not just about differences between two approaches but a power struggle over different species of capitals that are valued in the field of academic development. The role that is identified by the academic developer is a proactive one, one to 'mesh' these two positions together and to be transformative – a role that is acknowledged repeatedly throughout the focus groups as being 'difficult'.

This 'in-between' positioning forces academic developers to take on different identities and there is heightened awareness amongst the academic developers of these changing identities.

"... you know I take on or put on different hats for different occasions for different needs

So I have to... I hang back and I have to come forwards

we are in a very liminal position we are neither betwixt or between we are neither one thing or the other and that causes problems."

What is reinforced in these statements that were made at different times throughout the focus groups is this awareness of identities and the 'middle' positions that the academic developer occupies and the ongoing conflict and difficulties that are felt. Many roles in the changing university are complex but for academic developers the hat changing analogy is particularly pertinent. But it isn't just a matter of simply changing hats to suit the particular situation. There is a specialised need to know when to 'hang back' and when to 'come forward'. While these multiple identities are acknowledged the third statement particularly reveals a positional and identity crisis. Here the academic developer is unable to identify the

position that he or she is in – describing it as ‘liminal’ and neither ‘betwixt or between’, ‘neither one thing or the other’.

Multiple allegiances

You do construct yourself differently in the different situations you identify yourself with different things in different contexts but basically I think we are in the middle there and we ... we are trying I guess to in some respects we are trying to do two things. We are trying to look at the policy in ways in which they can be incorporated into the teaching and learning process but I also think we are also trying to look from the other perspective as well, although not as successfully perhaps.

In this statement the academic developer reveals a more acute sense of what ‘changing hats’ and hanging back and coming forwards actually mean. Here the developer carefully acknowledges the different allegiances – that of embedding policy into teaching and learning processes and the ‘other perspective’. Interestingly the ‘other’ perspective – that of academic staff – is not elaborated. However it is acknowledged that this perspective is not dealt with ‘as successfully’. What is beginning to be revealed here are the power imbalances between the different positions and the sense from an academic developer’s point of view of the more dominating position of the policy aligned approach.

While the different positions of management and staff are acknowledged it might have been expected that through these discussions the positions of senior management or academic staff are challenged more directly. This was not done explicitly in these group discussions with the focus being placed instead on the difficult positions that the academic developers occupy (the likelihood of a direct challenge is limited due to the risk that this carries). However there is evidence that this is being done implicitly as the developers talk about ‘other perspectives’ and the struggles that they face in this ‘middle’ position.

Further observations that give insight into how the field is structured are made by the academic developers about the perceptions of other staff within the University to the organisational unit that the academic developers belong to. This ‘middle’ position that academic developers occupy and the need to represent different positions in different contexts is elaborated further in the next exchange. While the first speaker (AD3) is able to make the shift between the two, resistance and resentment emerge with the second academic developer (AD4) who aligns herself more with the academic staff position.

AD3: It is quite schizophrenic isn't it because when I am with them I am always trying to represent the university's perspective but I think gently not as if this is what you have to do but bear in mind this is where we are this is where we are meant [to be] going. But when I am here I represent the Division's interest so that people up there get an understanding of what it is that I am experiencing with

AD4: Yes the Divisional liaison thing is a very big issue because of the loyalties that we are expected to both represent but also to use. Yes I find myself getting very cross with the [names teaching and learning unit] and I find myself sometimes getting cross with the Division (agreement) but by the same token the more you get to know your Division the more you try and represent them, the more you try and do what it is they need then I think I become resistant like an academic because I become resistant to the top down forces that are asking me, requesting telling me that I must instigate certain policies and hang what they think about because there is this attitude of them and us which I get the feel of when I come to meetings oh well you have to tell them what they have to do and what they need yet I represent them

AD6: Like a politician with a constituency.

AD4: Yes and I think that for us

AD7: Solidarity

AD4: Those of them yes you have a question here about the tension here in your role and position and I think that is very strong and I find myself the more I get to know my division and what their needs are and see it from their point of view the more I resent some of the issues that I am expected to deliver and it is quite difficult for us. I also because I know people in a lot of other divisions I am quite saddened by the general attitude of staff across the university towards the [names teaching and learning unit] and [names student services section] not so much towards [names student services section] because it is centred around students.

The first academic developer articulates a pull between senior management (and the organisational unit to which she belongs – which she aligns with management) and the academic staff with whom she works. Interestingly she describes the need to represent the university's position 'gently'. But what is also identified is the need to represent the position of the staff with whom she works back to 'the' university. What begins to emerge are the complex roles that an academic developer needs to take on to interact with these different players.

The second academic developer (AD4) reinforces more strongly the identity split that she feels over this binary division and the divided loyalties. Even though she aligns herself with the school based staff, the power of management is felt strongly and resented and the language that is used to describe this becomes emotive as she describes feelings of being cross, saddened and resentful. In this extract there is a heightened sense of annoyance with both stakeholders as she describes her feelings towards them and she becomes 'resistant' like the academic staff with whom she works. What is of particular interest is a real escalation of strength in the way she describes the impact of 'top-down' forces on her as she moves from 'asking', to 'requesting' and then finally to 'telling' her that she must 'instigate certain policies'. Although the expected positions are understood, the tensions felt due to these divided loyalties are most strongly recognised in this extract.

The aim of this paper is to highlight those tensions that arose. While in the above exchanges there is evidence of tensions with the 'strategic' directions of the University, greater tensions are felt by the academic developers when discussing their work practices. Academic developers are in a unique role to register these tensions both in relation to their own practice and of the staff with whom they work. What was revealed from this data was an acknowledged 'middle or in-between' position that academic developers take. Highlighted in these discussions are the contradictions between the overall positioning of academic development at an institutional level and work processes, and the struggles over capital and power – something that is rarely articulated but is clearly evident from these focus groups. These struggles have a considerable impact on the identities of academic developers, both at an individual level and more broadly as a professional group. Rather than view these tensions as negative, if addressed they could be used as a way to strengthen the function of academic development. These tensions need to be more openly acknowledged and discussed so that improved outcomes are achieved for all stakeholder groups.

Conclusion

So what does this mean for future practice? As already mentioned these tensions felt by academic developers have not been highlighted in the writing on academic development nor are they acknowledged in the workplace. However as has been evidenced from this study, these tensions do have a significant impact on the way people work and the identities of people in these roles. Opportunities need to be provided to induct academic developers adequately into this role and then allow ongoing space to discuss such aspects of the role. These focus groups provided this group of academic developers with both the opportunity and space to openly reflect on their work practices and the tensions and struggles that

they face. What was revealed were some very challenging work practices and strong feelings about the positioning of academic development. While the traditional positionings of academic development were acknowledged by the participants, in practice these were seen as problematic. The challenge is to now deal with some of the issues that have been raised. Similarly management (at both an institutional level and academic development unit level) need to acknowledge these work tensions and position the work of academic development to accommodate these concerns. If universities are really to get the most out of their academic development function in times of change, then these tensions need to be recognised, understood and dealt with in a way that takes into account all perspectives – management, academic staff and academic developers.

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