Change agents or partners in conversation: Academic developers appropriating institutional quality agendas to foster critical curriculum debate

Jude Smith
Queensland University of Technology, Australia
je.smith@qut.edu.au

Karen Whelan
Queensland University of Technology, Australia
k.whelan@qut.edu.au

Abstract: Curriculum regeneration framed by graduate capabilities has been a teaching and learning priority in universities for a number of years (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell and Watts, n.d.). But there are two levels of curriculum: that which is sought and that which is taught. This paper investigates the experiences of an academic developer and an academic embarking on a journey of curriculum regeneration and staff development with discipline teams in the Creative Industries. It explores the tensions and challenges for developers who position themselves in contradiction to the “parallels between Third World development and the development of professional academic workers” (McWilliam, 2002) but who nonetheless comfortably engage with the performative institutional language of curriculum audits for graduate capabilities, evidencing teaching and course quality assurance. How do developers reconcile these contradictory drivers?

Keywords: curriculum development, disciplinary cultures, academic development

Introduction
Queensland University of Technology has approached changing the learning and teaching context through policy development. Most of these policies focus not on teachers and learners, but on curriculum artefacts such as graduate capabilities statements, course documentation and unit outlines. Implicit in this approach to organisational change is that the curriculum is at the core of the learning and teaching work of the university. But in the world of tertiary undergraduate teaching, there are two levels of curriculum. There is the curriculum sought and that which is taught. By sought we are referring to the aspirational course approval documents that are designed and developed by department heads and course coordinators and reviewed by teaching and learning committees. The curriculum taught by academics and experienced by learners, while framed by the curriculum documents is often something quite different from what the curriculum designers intended. While the aspirational documents have considered the whole of course design in its implementation, this becomes atomised through the focus on units. For the academics and learners on the ground a sense of a learning journey is often lost.
Opportunity for academics to have a sense of ownership and commitment to the curriculum design requires that they are involved in developing curriculum from the ground up.

This paper explores the experiences of an academic developer and an academic who came together as part of a team to frame and implement a curriculum regeneration project. It presents our views of the staff development issues and tensions that arose from a collaborative curriculum design regeneration, developed and trialled in 2003 and implemented more broadly across the Creative Industries Faculty (CIF) in 2004 in partnership with Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS). Our positioning in relation to the perceived outcomes and “acceptable” approaches to achieve these outcomes is juxtaposed with the university’s published notions of academic work in creating and implementing curriculum. We examine here the ways in which we, as developers “against professional development” (McWilliam, 2002) reconciled our positions with the organisational perspective of teacher development, to engage the discipline teams in unpacking and making sense of graduates capabilities and assessment for their context.

The context for curriculum regeneration

Top down drivers: university policies and imperatives

At QUT, like many other universities there has been ongoing efforts to articulate from the top down teaching and learning policies that enhance the quality of its graduates. In late 1990s QUT was involved with other Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities in a project that supported the articulation of QUT graduate capabilities. Much work has been done since to integrate these capabilities in the curriculum. At QUT there is a strong management imperative to transform and translate the Graduate Capabilities into meaningful frames for discipline learning and teaching practice. The institutional messages about graduate capabilities, however, seem to assume an academic conception of these as “enabling abilities and aptitudes that lie at the heart of scholarly learning and knowledge, with the potential to transform the knowledge they are part of and to support the creation of new knowledge and transform the individual” (Barrie, n.d.). While there have been attempts made to provide staff development and support for making graduate capabilities a meaningful reality in curriculum, they have not engaged with the current conceptions of academics nor addressed the particularities and uniqueness of knowledge fields. While course and unit design across the Creative Industries Faculty, for the most part, paid lip service to these graduate capabilities there was little ownership from academics at the coalface. Early approaches to implementing QUT graduate capabilities focused at the unit level and involved listing relevant QUT graduate capabilities separately from other more unit specific objectives. More recently a more integrated approach to embedded graduate capabilities has been tried.

Another significant driver for curriculum regeneration has been a new QUT Assessment Policy which mandates criteria and standards referenced assessment across all units by 2007. At the outset of this project most academics in the Faculty had limited knowledge of criteria referenced assessment or the skills to design criteria and standards that support learning and the quality of assessment.

On the ground: one faculty, many disciplines

The QUT Creative Industries faculty was formed in 2001 out of a recognition by State government and QUT of the significance of Creative Industries to the knowledge economy. The Creative Industries is at the heart of the leisure, cultural, entertainment and creative sectors of the economy. The UK Creative Task Force in 1997 defined them as “those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, no date).
Incorporating the eleven disciplines of acting and technical production, communication design, creative writing, dance, fashion, film and television, journalism, media and communication, music and sound, performance studies and visual arts, the Faculty is well placed to provide a breadth of opportunities for Creative Industries students. In its undergraduate course offerings, learners are introduced to the creative industries through a series of core units that enhance their skills and understandings for the emerging creative industries. While most students focus their studies within one or two of the disciplines a significant number of students enrol in the Creative Industries Interdisciplinary course.

The existence of a Creative Industries Faculty reflects a shift towards the “performative society” described by Barnett, Parry and Coate (2001). A focus on creative production and application reflects a revaluing of knowledge fields. “Those knowledge fields that were once intrinsically valued for their own sake must now demonstrate their relevance to the wider world.” (Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2001). This shift is not unexpected in a “University for the Real World” but it may not sit easily with academics, whose strongly discipline based knowledge fields are “not only … a source of academic identities, but … a means of structuring curricula” (Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2001).

**On the ground: teaching and learning support services**

Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) is a central department in the Division of Technology, Information and Learning Support at QUT. Its work spans a wide spectrum of activities associated with learning and teaching including:

- Contributing to the strategic development of learning and teaching at QUT
- Supporting the development of learning and teaching resources in online and other contexts
- Maintaining and developing learning and teaching environments both physical and virtual
- Developing the capabilities of learners and teachers.
- Three key areas of work in capabilities development, with academics are:
- The provision of formal professional development programs in learning and teaching
- The oversight and administration of the Teaching Fellowship Scheme by which academic staff are seconded to TALSS to work on a learning and teaching enhancement project which will have sustained impacts on the learning and teaching priorities of QUT
- The provision of consultancy services to faculties, discipline areas, individuals and course teams in the implementation of learning and teaching policy initiatives

**The process**

**The collaborators in curriculum regeneration**

The collaborators in this curriculum regeneration project included academics from the Creative Industries, and learning and teaching support staff from TALSS and the Library.

A learning and teaching support team was drawn together to collaborate with the creative industries academic teams from the disciplines of journalism, film and television and the core units of the creative industries courses, to consider curriculum, assessment and pedagogical approaches. The academic teams were initially reluctant to be involved in the collaborative process. There was a degree of cynicism and distrust of the TALSS support team and the process. Having experienced external reviews of their curriculum which had provided for limited input by academics, there seemed to be quite strong resistance to engaging in the project in initial meetings. A fear that top down agendas would drive the process was of some concern to academic staff. Using terms like curriculum review in early workshops only served to flame this thinking. It was recognised early that we needed to establish shared space for dialogue that encouraged academics to voice their concerns and express their ideas. What also ignited a commitment
to the process was recognition that this process would provide the discipline team the opportunity to articulate clearly their uniqueness as a discipline, to define what they believed their industry considered was important capabilities for their graduates.

The learning and teaching support team included an academic from the creative industries, an academic developer, a learner support advisor, an instructional designer and a faculty liaison librarian. To frame and inform the faculty perspective on the project and outcomes, one author, an academic from the creative industries worked with the TALSS team members to plan for and implement a range of project activities from developing position papers, engaging in meetings with discipline leaders and in seminars and workshops with discipline teams. The other author is a professional staff member with TALSS, an academic developer whose responsibility on the original project documents was described as “staff development”.

Intensive support process

The CIF-TALSS Learning and Teaching Intensive Support project sought to achieve curriculum regeneration to enhance student learning in the context of Faculty and University priorities. Amongst other priority areas the project addressed Graduate Capabilities and Assessment. Through the project the TALSS team established and consolidated an intensive and collaborative working partnership with CIF staff. The combined CIF-TALSS teams engaged in dialogue around current practice and future innovations aimed at meeting the learning needs of students to support their development as Creative Industries professionals. The discipline based approach to support took advantage of the “disciplinary loyalty and discipline based working relationships” (Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2001) that had already been established in these discipline teams.

In the early meetings a good deal of time was used establishing the collaborative relationship between the teams. Initial activities focussed on all curriculum team members contributing to dialogue about the project. Discussions around the roles of the team members were necessary to clarify the relationships were ones of mutual support, collaborative knowledge production and curriculum redesign. Establishing the roles of the TALSS support team as supporters and co-facilitators of conversations rather than drivers and delivers of staff development was important in building a sense of trust of the process. Another important aspect of building trust was recognising and valuing the significant discipline knowledge and experience of curriculum development that resided with the curriculum team members.

Articulating discipline-specific graduate outcomes for Discipline teams and foundational-level outcomes for the core units was the initial focus of activity in the project. These draft discipline-level capabilities were then mapped across the units of the curriculum. With this whole-of-course perspective, areas of overlap and gaps in the curriculum were identified and plans for curriculum redesign were established. A number of templates were designed to support the dialogues about curriculum regeneration. For example, the following unit template supported discussions with academics about how the draft discipline level capabilities articulated into a specific unit. Academics were asked to consider if the capability was taught (T), practiced (P) and/or assessed (A) and at what level of complexity (I – Introductory, D - Developing, G – Graduate).
In response to this mapping work, curriculum redesign and resource development was planned and in some cases undertaken. For example unit outlines and detailed unit outlines were reviewed and criteria and standards tables were developed. The draft discipline level capabilities were continually reviewed and refined in light of work in the project.
Experiences of developers “against professional development” (McWilliam, 2002)
Through the project we came to share a common position on key principles for the project operation and a strong conviction that has continued to inform our approach to professional development. At the start of the project, we did not have a language for the commitment that we felt to engaging in a partnership and therefore fell into the trap of picking up the organisational language of “staff development” and “curriculum review”. This language was immediately disempowering for the academics we worked with so that in the early phases we struggled to create a meaningful discourse that would reflect our position. Through this process and experience we have found ways to articulate that position.

We reject the idea that we should present ourselves as “developers” engaging with “developees” – a notion so eloquently challenged by McWilliam (2002), in which she compares current practices in professional academic development to third world development practices. We believe that to do so would only serve to privilege a “generic” approach to curriculum and pedagogy development over a valuing of disciplinary pedagogies. This devaluing of the disciplinary context may alienate academics from engaging with us.

Secondly, we see our orientations to academic development fitting firmly in the domain of “Interpretive-Hermeneutic” as described by Land (2003). While the framing documents suggested a neat linear approach to the project, we saw a shifting landscape of project engagement between ourselves and discipline academics. We hoped to open new spaces for conversation and debate. While the language of outcomes and objectives may have been our starting point, we aimed to open ourselves to the experiences that emerged as a result of our project journey. Thus we strive toward the goal of communicative action and discourse that frees us from the influences of unequal power relations in our academic development practice (Gosling, 2003).

We want to engage in conversation with the discipline teams about their “particular conceptions of knowledge and concerns with particular areas of ‘content’ and epistemology” (Healey and Jenkins, 2003). In this sense we want to move beyond a conversation about learning and teaching and into a discourse on the nature of practice, research and learning in the disciplines.

While we aligned with these notions and positions for our academic development work, the project required of us that we engaged with the performative institutional language of curriculum audits of graduate capabilities, evidencing teaching and course quality assurance for the purposes of reporting and evidencing achievement of outcomes. But we tried to deliberately hijack and challenge this language with the discipline teams. For example, while there is a policy position at QUT about what capabilities our graduates would possess, our conversations with the discipline teams did not start from these documents but rather from the directions emerging from the teams themselves. In the case of Journalism this included contested discussions about what it looked like to be a journalist. The discipline team then framed the discussions around the language of ‘Knowing’, ‘Doing’ and ‘Being’ journalism.

Having been engaged to achieve a Faculty and University priority outcome, we grappled with aligning this with our own principles for this approach – we had to work through and work out what this implied for the project. We got off on the wrong foot with a number of the discipline teams – the language of curriculum “review” preceded us and hostility was the first reaction of the teams to meeting us and the project. While reflecting on and reviewing the project goals as identified by the faculty executive and discipline heads was an important part of initial conversations, we focused our early efforts on moving to a place with the disciplines where they felt empowered, shifting from Faculty and University priorities to a conversation, led by the discipline team about the contested territory of their discipline. This helped to build a trusting partnership between us.
Our focus was on making the tacit explicit by ‘getting down and dirty’ with the teams about what we do, what we hope we do, discipline particularities, epistemologies and ‘knowledge fields’ (Barnett, Parry and Coate, 2001). We challenged the discipline teams to articulate all of these and found a passion and enthusiasm bubbled to the surface very quickly. Disciplines began to use this process to carve out their niche in the faculty perspective, to define the uniqueness of their discipline. They valued the time and space that the project provided to nurture their community of practice, to have conversations across the practice-theory divide and to ensure that discipline and discipline pedagogy was not lost in the creative industries performative.

Approaching this at a discipline and course level gave ownership to the discipline team but while this shared language evolved across the project, the pragmatic realities in units and classrooms was another matter. Discipline team members while coming to agreements about the language and framing of their discipline level capabilities were sometimes challenged to adapt this language within their own pedagogical worlds (Healy and Jenkins, 2003) of their units and classrooms. The translation of discipline level graduate capabilities through course level capabilities and into individual unit assessment criteria and standards was not a one-way process but rather created opportunity to revisit and refine curriculum statements at all these levels.

Dialogues in meetings often lead to in depth discussions by academics around the discipline knowledge fields and associated epistemologies. With different discipline backgrounds to those being discussed our innocence about the intricacies of the discipline based concepts and language, allowed us to prompt people to clarify their positions and to draw in examples from related disciplines. Even among the discipline team members there was often a need to clarify language and ideas. Developing a sense of when and how to enter into the conversations to encourage the flow of ideas among discipline team members was important.

**Outputs and outcomes: what did we achieve?**

The framing of this engagement as a project implies a beginning and an end, a checklist of project outcomes that must be ticked off and evidenced. What emerged for us, however, was that there was no beginning, in the sense that we were entering into the ongoing flow of discipline definition under the guise of a project. And similarly there was no end. While we tried to achieve a list of graduate capabilities for each discipline team, we somehow never shifted beyond “draft” or “Version 9”. Our partnership became increasingly more comfortable with this lack of “conclusion” because it seemed to make sense for us when talking about a curriculum that was being shaped for learners “learning for an unknown future” (Barnett, 2004). For the academics involved there was also no chance to stop the ongoing practice of teaching, to step back and reflect but instead they were trying to define a learning and teaching approach and curriculum while being immersed in it and with it.

As academic and academic developer, we chose to problematise the accepted model of curriculum reform that might have overtaken this project – a model of expert developers imparting knowledge about generic curriculum approaches to academics. Instead we looked toward “the hope of an emancipatory discourse which is free from the systematically distorting influences of unequal power relations, (concealed) strategic orientation, structural restrictions, closed thinking, fixed assumptions, one-way communication and domination by one party to the communicative interaction” (Gosling, 2000).
References


Acknowledgements

This project was originally initiated by Stephen Towers, Head of Academic Programs at QUT. The staff participating including a teaching and learning support team: Aliisa Mylonas, Peter Duffy, Karen Whelan, Jude Smith and Alice Steiner with the Creative Industries academic staff from across the areas of Journalism, Film and Television and the Creative Industries Core Units.

Copyright © 2005 Jude Smith & Karen Whelan: The authors assign to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a nonexclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD-ROM and in printed form within the HERDSA 2005 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.