A family of strangers: the fragmented nature of academic development

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This paper draws on the experiences of 20 academic developers as they examine the proposition that the organisation and work of academic development in higher education is fragmented. Academic development was seen to have neither the status of a field nor a profession, and there was recognised tension between an institutionally focused service model that could be everything to everyone and one that could be distinguished as more conventionally 'academic' with theoretical knowledge as the basis for practice. Against the proposition, there was evidence of shared values and acceptance of diversity of purpose. We conclude that academic development has been fragmented since its inception and it remains resistant to cohesive change. Data suggest that to develop a unified community, academic development could seek field-status by encouraging all staff to provide their services by way of research-led teaching with each developer using their research knowledge and experiences of academic life to underpin practice. Only then will it have the necessary credibility and foundation from which it can work out its broader purposes and provide a quality service.

Keywords: academic development; research; disciplinary status

Introduction

The authors of this paper are academic developers and we experience the higher education development community as 'fragmented' in the sense that it consists of many sub-groups that have little in common with each other. Even within the sub-groups, there is no guarantee that there are mutual ways of working or shared conceptions of the work done. We often discover that we do not share a colleague's interests and find it difficult to enter any sort of professional dialogue. Of course, all academic work can be seen as fragmented in some way (Rowland 2002) but we see the case of academic development as comparatively extreme and, if we are correct in this analysis, then there are implications for the quality, development and continuation of academic development work.

Academic development is organised in a myriad of ways that are institutionally determined with activities that are largely institutionally focused. If one examines Cryer's United Kingdom (UK) survey of those who provided training and development for teachers in higher education in 1979, the picture is one of ad hoc provision with a wide variety of practitioners and working practices (Cryer 1981). Nearly 30 years later the organisation and culture of academic development remains the same. There are many ideas about its purpose, the work that should be done and who should do this. As a consequence, the field does not have widely shared values or epistemological foundations (Harland and Staniforth 2003; Land 2004). Because this situation has remained stable over time, the

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community continues to be characterised by local service providers and practices that are constantly being adjusted to suit local situations.

In New Zealand (NZ) there are eight universities and because of this small number it is possible for all developers to get together for an annual two-day meeting through an association called 'Academic Staff Developers of the Universities of New Zealand' (ASDUNZ). At the 2005 meeting, it was noted that each of our centres had a unique name and when the idea was floated that we could collectively change to either 'Academic Staff Development Department' or 'Higher Education Studies' (following Andressen 1996), there was uproar. There may be several explanations for such a reaction but it seems that names and identity are closely intertwined and chosen internally to reflect an institution's service requirements rather than reflect a professional group or a field of study. It also emerged that name choice purposely promoted difference. One delegate remarked that when the last name change occurred in her centre (changes are quite regular throughout the sector), that she liked the name of a centre in another NZ university but it could not be used because it had already been 'taken'. A list from Canada shows the same trend. Out of 63 'instructional development centres', we found 61 different names and only one NZ university shares a name with a Canadian institution. One centre has recently adopted a name of 19 words, presumably to add precision to the type of work each staff member does and to help those who use its services understand their work. Although the naming of centres might be seen as superficial, we believe it is symbolic of deeper identity issues within academic development.

Even though we understand our practice as fragmented, we also feel that we are part of a community hence the intentionally incongruous title, 'A family of strangers'. In order to question these ideas and our experiences we set out to seek the thoughts of other practitioners. We suggest that if we have a clearer idea of how practice is currently understood, this should help inform the contemporary debate about academic development's purpose and future.

Method

This research was done with the help of 20 colleagues from Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, NZ, South Africa and the UK. All are experienced developers who are known to one or both of us. We sent each participant a position paper outlining our current thinking about academic development and then invited them to reply to us in writing as a starting point for an ongoing dialogue around the idea of fragmentation. Colleagues were sent the following proposition.

The field of academic development is fragmented in different ways:

1. structurally (e.g. units/centres organised as academic or administrative);
2. operationally (e.g. centres do different types of work);
3. ontologically (e.g. individuals hold different views about the field); and
4. epistemologically (e.g. our theories of what counts as knowledge differ).

Correspondence took place over five months to June 2007 and most communication took the form of asynchronous email discussion. However, we were also provided with other data sources that included unpublished research, a thesis chapter, reports, web sites, organisational charts and other relevant documents. As part of the ethical requirements for research, we set out to report the data anonymously and each respondent is given a code

(R1, R2, etc.). The first complete draft of this paper was sent to respondents for their comments.

Results and discussion

Data showed that the four dimensions of the position paper were seldom discrete and many responses were difficult to categorise in this way. Despite this, we have reported the data in two main sections of 'structural and operational' and 'ontological and epistemological' fragmentation. We recognise that this separation may not always adequately capture the subtleties of our colleagues' contributions.

On structural and operational fragmentation

We think that academic development primarily supports academic staff as they learn about their teaching and other aspects of academic work, although we recognise that its purposes are highly contested. Academic development can include a wide variety of occupational groups, some of which would not see themselves as 'academic developers'. Under the development umbrella, groups include, for example, administrators of evaluation programmes, technical staff working in educational media and higher education researchers. Academic development centres may or may not work across a university community, staff can be academic or administrative or, as the study showed, hold a position somewhere between the two.

What seems to be more unusual in a university context is that staff with very different background experiences, skills and qualifications can be employed on a variety of contract types to do essentially the same work. For example, a developer teaching on a postgraduate course for university lecturers can be an academic who researches in the field of higher education or perhaps an experienced teacher who is not required to research and is not employed as an academic (see Brew 2002). These differences in background and occupational status were seen by some to partially account for the complexity of academic development and in this sense there was general agreement about fragmentation. We were reminded that academic development was never whole from the start, rather 'arising in many places and taking many shapes'. An illustration of both structural and operational fragmentation came from the UK:

> Outside of the basic teacher ed., there's a knowledge transfer unit that arranges some activities, there's some staff development available to academic staff as well as others that happens through the Personnel department, ICT training through IT services, and we do have an eLearning development unit that runs lunch time seminars from time to time. Actually various activities pop up from time to time, run by people in other faculties who send out more general invitations. It does seem a bit random. (R1)

There were, however, two respondents who thought the term 'fragmented' was incorrect. One suggested that we had a 'diversity of approaches' while another said:

> I don't think that the field is 'fragmented' – rather, we have what I've termed a 'continuum of variation' and that the specific forms that AD (academic development) takes in a particular context is dependent on a complex set of relationships. (R2)

While we had two examples where centres almost exclusively specialised in teaching postgraduate courses and doing research in higher education, a more typical approach was to strategically fill various 'niches' to meet the changing needs of the academic workforce.

Such a needs-driven approach must also be related to the expertise and skills of the developers available at any one time. It was suggested that such a broad service model could be embraced defensively because developers do not always have stability of employment. Centres tend to experience frequent reorganisations and this situation was seen as 'symptomatic of the way the university [   ] views the role of AD (peripherally, marginally and easy to ignore!)'. An academic development unit at a South African university recently underwent a very 'unpleasant and challenging restructuring and integration exercise'. Another talked about having to 'justify their existence' and that as a 'marginal group', we seem to be understood by those who run our institutions as 'different' to other administrative or academic colleagues:

> I've been (for the past two years) struggling to get promotion criteria approved for staff [   ] they are classified as academic-cum-research professionals. (R3)

> We used to have a lot of angst about being at the 'lecturer' position but working with Professors, and then of course for promotion pathways it was immensely difficult because apples were being compared with pears. (R4)

Yet it is not just the institutions that are unsure about organisation and functions and within development itself these are contested ideas (see Fraser 2001):

> . . . we just spent the entire day yesterday at a departmental Planning Day in which the main question of the day kept circling back to: what is our purpose/mission? What would we tell someone? What would we tell ourselves? (R5)

There can be few developers who have not experienced such a conversation and these questions are not easy to agree on. For example, a respondent asked 'whose interests are we working for?' and it was suggested that our purpose has 'the ultimate goal of creating the most engaging and fulfilling experience for students'. An alternative conception is that as 'teacher-educators' we should work first and foremost in the interests of our colleagues and not their students. The idea of academic development as 'improving student learning' does not have an analogous position in conventional teacher–student relations, although Barnett (2000) argues that there should be the likelihood that students act purposely and beneficially in the world as a result of their education. Similarly, academic developers could be optimistic that their colleagues' actions would be positive for student learning, however, improving student learning per se seems too far removed from practice. Working for someone else's interests also has consequences in terms of the immediate relationship between the developer and their colleague. A goal for student learning rather than a colleague's learning must subtly alter this learning relationship and achieving outcomes for both parties is not automatic. The 'improving student learning' conception may have gained acceptance because institutions insist on it. However, developers may also see themselves in a form of partnership with an academic colleague or they find the idea of 'colleague as student' or 'colleague as learner' difficult, especially when they are working with someone experienced. This example provides an illustration of the 'conflicting ideologies' that exist within academic development (Rowland 2007).

Is academic development academic?

Developers, their centres and their universities have many different ideas about the type of activities that should be undertaken and who is eligible or capable of doing various aspects of the work (Land 2004). In an earlier paper, we argued that academic development should

be academic work with a foundation of research for teaching (Harland and Staniforth 2003). In NZ, legislation requires that university teachers are researchers and it seems inconsistent that an institution would either 'interpret' the law in such a way as to avoid appointing academic developers as academics, or accept the double standard of research-led teaching for a lecturer's teaching but not for their learning. Furthermore, we argue that a key role for academic development is to promote academic values. Yet the present study showed that many staff, including some in NZ, are not employed as academics:

> We are on academic related contracts. Research is certainly not frowned upon, but it's not really a core activity as such. My manager certainly approves and is very helpful and supportive as far as he's able to be. He can't really provide a lot of guidance, as he's not a researcher himself. If anything, I have a stronger research background, although I can't really claim anything all that marvellous against my name. What I really need is to be less lazy and more motivated, but as you can probably imagine it's not always easy to push yourself hard when no one else really cares all that much. (R1)

It was suggested that how others see us can affect both the outcomes of what we do and recruitment into this line of work. How our colleagues view us can impact on our interactions and self-esteem (Peseta 2007) and a 'non-academic' reality for many developers is also important because the use of non-traditional contracts and the casualisation of university work tends to result in marginalisation:

> I recognize that this unique function and identity within the university has led me to explicitly state my qualifications and experiences – PhD, recipient of external research funds, published in peer review journals, presenter at conferences (all the things any academic is expected to do). (R5)

Yet units often employ a range of staff for their expertise and they may not be conventional academics, researchers or teachers. For example, ICT specialists have their own professional knowledge. Should they be researchers or teachers or technicians?

> I personally think you can't be in this job unless you have taught. However there are a lot of people around here who have never taught. They tend to be the techies, but also include some of the educational advisers. I think we have harmed our own image by employing some of these people. (R1)

A difficulty with development work is that theoretical knowledge about academic practice is insufficient on its own and experience of academic practice is also needed. Both provide specialised knowledge and skills and developers tend to draw upon experiences in an academic setting, often the experience of being a university teacher or researcher (see Moses 1987):

> Sometimes educational developers speak of 'academics' as if they are someone else (apart from ourselves). This worries me as I come from the 'camp' that believes that educational developers should themselves be 'meta-academics' [ ] I would never employ/use anyone who has not had experience as a university academic as I see this identity as crucial to credibility and knowledge about the nature of academic practice. (R6)

> (in Holland) all research universities had their own Center for Research of Higher Education, as they were called. So from the beginning, the units were positioned as academic entities. However, many did not succeed in surviving at that level. With the benefit of hindsight, you can also see the shortcomings: it was a naive Research-Development-Diffusion model, expecting teachers to improve their teaching by simply consulting the results of educational research. (R7)

If the idea of research-led academic development gains wider acceptance, then one of the challenges for the field is to establish an active research culture of sufficient quality that allows centres to compete in compliance exercises such as the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and NZ's Performance-based Research Fund (PBRF). It was suggested that any move in this direction would come from individuals rather than institutions, however, at the University of Otago, developers and management decided that the centre's researchers should be nationally accountable in the PBRF exercise in the same way as any other academic field. Yet despite this example, we agree with the respondent who suggested that even those employed as academics pursue 'a slightly tortuous academic career path'. For example, we work in academic development 'centres' and not 'departments' and we have even heard the argument that this is because we don't want to be mistaken for an academic department.

Is academic development a profession?

So if we are not organised as an academic field, could we become a profession? Several respondents raised this question and it is an idea that has been explored on other occasions (e.g. Andressen 1996; Knapper 1998). We suggest that it is difficult to think of development moving in this direction especially as established professions are becoming increasingly fragmented with less clear boundaries. As academic development work did not begin as a profession, we think it unlikely to achieve professional status because of the immense complexity of such an exercise and also because many developers would resist complying with professional standards and organising their work administratively. Most of our respondents appeared to construct their identity in more conventional academic terms:

> I'm not sure if this is (or should be) another profession. Isn't it just someone who teaches and researches about HE? And if we include within the term 'research' the methodology 'action research', then doing 'action research' on/in HE by definition aims at the improvement of HE. Is AD anything in addition to that? (R12)

Finally, could structural or operational fragmentation be positive? From a service point of view, more jobs can be done across a university and functional diversity must be good in the sense that if we are open to contestation of ideas we can develop new critical understandings at the boundaries of our various roles. Yet, Weimer suggests that few who enter the field in the USA finish their careers in academic development because of burnout (Weimer 2007). Such an outcome is more likely for those who have a service orientation to development because this attracts constant demands from others in addition to being under-valued.

On ontological and epistemological fragmentation

The academic development family

It was suggested that the academic staff development community shares certain values and that it is at the ontological level that we have most in common:

> I really have not detected differences of the deep views of ADUs held by people within those units. Yes, perhaps their practices vary and there are perhaps different models of implementation, but everyone I have come across is aiming to engage academics and the university in things about learning and teaching and making moves to ensure the best possible outcomes for teachers and for students. (R8)

A responsibility – to respond, is something that I regard as a constant in the attitude or orientation that academic developers have to their role, their work. [   ] It is this imperative that helps account for the sense of community that I can always discern when academic developers come together. (R9)

However, it was questioned whether or not such values were enough for 'establishing whether there is sufficient foundation for an enduring interpersonal (interprofessional?) relationship' between developers.

The contested nature of academic developers' knowledge

If academic development aspires to being 'academic', then one is forced to ask what our subject is and where our knowledge comes from. It has been argued that our subject is 'higher education' (Bath and Smith 2004) and most of those we corresponded with were researchers. However, not all were so clear on 'what counts' as knowledge and we were reminded that not all developers wished to be academics or researchers. The higher education field is also shared by academics that are not academic developers and to complicate matters further, developers are sometimes researchers in other disciplinary fields:

...we do not have a shared and agreed set of foundational knowledge; like teaching, but much less dwelt upon, we are an interdisciplinary field of practice and there isn't even a large body of accounts of that practice, let alone theorising or historicising or sociologising of that practice. (R10)

I don't think that educational/academic development is a field in its own right in a cognitive sense yet. Part of the trouble I feel is that we have gone hook line and sinker for [   ] the 'psychologised' version of t&l. In other words, we get people to learn about deep and surface learning, learning styles, etc. but largely ignore the history, sociology, politics and philosophy of education. Why? Because we follow a very narrow agenda about student learning rather than addressing questions of broader practice and professionalism (which we should). Therefore, we have a knowledge base that is too restrictive representing (arguably) a dummed down version of the psychology of education. Maybe that's a bit of a harsh statement but when you look at the knowledge base of most PG Certs it's not far off the truth, is it? (R6)

It seems that all developers must come from 'somewhere else' because there is no traditional academic route into this work. This 'somewhere else' can be the discipline of education (which seems quite close) but it is often from another discipline. Those who move tend to have strong values for teaching and learning and may already be doing research into the pedagogy of their discipline. Yet they may still experience a complicated transition:

I did not know what to do – and because – though I did not realise it with any great clarity at the time a field which was uncertain, experimenting, contested within its own members – and very questioned and contested outside – and it's revealing that I have used the phrase 'outside'. (R11)

If we recognised that the broader interests of the field of higher education could serve academic development's purposes, then we could potentially bring the various occupational groups together through a common interest in research and a more expansive conceptualisation of teaching:

Some people have special interests in international education or equity or special educational needs. But that's true for any bunch of academics in a discipline. Some of our geographers

would have done a lot of poking about in river banks, others are all about environmental policy, and others compare use of space in different countries. I can't see why we'd be any different really. (R1)

A UK university has recently made such a transformation and general staff positions in areas such as ICT have been changed to lecturing positions. It was suggested that this strategy forced incumbents to question their subject expertise and what they teach and research. However, there may always be some subtle differences between being a 'regular' academic and a developer:

> I do see/and certainly experienced as a geographer a clearer and less contested nature of my role as seen by myself and others than I did when I moved into educational development. (R11)

The question was asked if academic development centres should 'be about subjects rather than about functions?' If we accept a functional approach as a foundational principle, then we could re-conceptualise academic development in terms of 'scholarship' (Andressen 1996). Yet the idea of scholarship is not well understood in the wider academic community which tends to value research in the narrow sense of the term. However, there was an alternative suggestion about academic development knowledge that lends support to both scholarship and a functional approach:

> I believe that knowledge is a co-constructed experience that is shaped and owned by all people and artefacts that are immediately present. (R5)

With a traditional research approach there are additional problems for developers because their own institutions and colleagues become the subjects of their inquiries which potentially creates a difficult environment for that research to take place:

> That is simply because the study of the practice of academics is resisted by academics – particularly by academics who don't share their own discipline – since it raises critical questions about their practice. The attribution of low status is a means by which the institution can limit its legitimacy. (R12)

If this analysis is correct, then the irony is that even if academic development became united through any form of research, the rest of the university community might still not value it.

Concluding thoughts

The views expressed by our colleagues suggest an underlying concern that developers simply lack sufficient power and influence over the structure and operations of their work. There was clear recognition of complex and continuing problems and an acceptance that there are no easy solutions. Despite the fragmented character of the field, developers tended to share particular values, such as a commitment to helping others, and this may provide some commonality across community groups. Certain dimensions of fragmentation were seen in a positive light, especially with regard to our institutional service and process functions and being responsive to identified needs. Yet the quality of this work must vary and it is questionable if in the long term institutions are best served by such an ad hoc approach. As local service providers many major decisions will be made by others on behalf of academic developers, most likely by senior academics and administrators who may have less than ideal knowledge or insight into the possibilities for development, but a

great deal of control over its destiny. Web (2004, 174) argues that development 'from the perspective of senior managers, is a tiny and non-critical part of the enterprise'.

However, as institutions continue to invest in academic development they are likely to want to know what impact it has. Weimer makes the remarkable claim that after 30 years of faculty development in the USA the impact 'has been nil' (Weimer 2007, 6, see also Moses 1987) and one correspondent said that we do not have the data to evidence our utility:

> What we are poor at is evaluating the added value of our practice to our institutions specifically and to higher education in general – and in my opinion ... until we crack that nut, we won't really get the overall credibility we deserve and gain our status as a 'discipline'. (R4)

Although our instinct is to reject Weimer's claim outright and question the link between 'added value' and 'disciplinary status', these comments prompted us to consider the evolution of fields of study. All academic disciplines are based on a foundation of knowledge with advancement coming through sustained and systematic inquiry. The majority of our colleagues held the view that academic development should be research-led and if those who managed our institutions of higher education 30 years ago had provided some leadership and vision for academic development, perhaps as the 'study of higher education', then we would be in a different position today. Yet this vision could be enacted now if institutions and their academic development staff (all occupational groups) chose the direction of research-led practice. Research then becomes one of the indicators of quality or 'added value'. At Otago the case was made in the 1970s for academic leadership of the University's development centre. It was initially rejected but argued for repeatedly until the idea gained favour with the University's management. Since the 1980s, successive management groups have continued to value the idea that academic development should be underpinned by research and, just as important, they also recognise the tensions faced by a research centre that provides a service for its own institution and also researches into institutional practices (see Knapper 2000). In the present study, it was suggested that there was more hope for contemporary change because the new generation of developers are starting to have more influence in their institutions.

If we can't develop a coherent field founded on the broad study of higher education, it is difficult to see what will bring the parts together. True professional status seems unlikely, but if it were possible, it would almost certainly result in a collective of sub-groups with their own interests and identities. If the field remains fragmented and continues to function to meet the needs of individual institutions, while relying on others, perhaps 'real' academics, for a key part of the knowledge required for practice, then academic development will carry on operating principally as a service with its 'continuum of variation'. There was a suggestion that the future of our work might not be in 'conventional' centres:

> I think we also have to look beyond conventional (!) units and centres to find the new academic development – into development projects, CETLs (*Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning*) again. (R7)

However, such a prospect is likely to result in a different type of fragmentation and it still does not address the argument that the community as a whole would provide a better quality service through research-led teaching. 'Developer as researcher' provides coherence because such a strategy looks towards the internal life of the academic profession which is protected by its traditions and is resistant to change, despite recent and radical transformations in the academy (Marginson 2000).

Stability through academic practice will give academic development a sound base from which to continue to work out its purposes, provide a more equal footing for practitioners to engage with academic colleagues and allow all functional groups to contribute to knowledge and to the same international community. Furthermore, this would result in a more obvious and attractive career path and may encourage some of the very best academics to switch to this line of work. Not just the best teachers but the best researchers too. A starting point might be to stop thinking of our centre names as internal marketing tools and take the audacious step of adopting a common name that crosses international boundaries to signal a drive towards academic disciplinary status.

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