

Negotiating competing visions: Educational development in the strange middle ground

In many universities, educational developers occupy a 'strange middle ground' (Rushdie, 1981, p. 12) where they are neither upper administrators nor mainstream academics. Most have transferred to educational development from other fields, making them 'academic migrants' (Fraser 1999; Manathunga, 2006; Rowland, 2003) who may struggle to come to terms with their new position in an ill-defined in-between space in their institutions, as evidenced by numerous discussions of the field (including Bath & Smith, 2004; Holt, Palmer & Challis, 2011; Land, 2004; Lee & McWilliam, 2008; Rowland, 2002).

These spaces can be labelled 'marginal'. While in common parlance, 'marginal' may suggest being peripheral or *marginalized* (see, for instance, Harland & Staniforth, 2008; Schroeder, 2011), here we use the word in the sociological sense of being located *between* discrete groups, in situations where one group dominates (Dunne, 2005) and codifies standards for subordinated groups to follow. This marginal space – the strange middle ground that developers occupy – is therefore a location or state (marginality), not a process (marginalization); it can act as a bridge between other groups without belonging to any of them. We draw on Everett V. Stonequist's early sociological study of migrants to the USA, where he describes the 'marginal man' [sic] as one who 'combines the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider' and who is 'skillful in noting the contradictions and "hypocrisies" in the dominant culture' (Stonequist, 1937/1961, pp. 154–55). So, too, we argue, do educational developers

experience their home institutions, where competing visions and priorities (Brew, 2002; Healey, 2012; Manathunga, 2007) come into sharper focus when viewed from the margins.

In this higher education setting, the dominant party could be a managerialist upper administration that imposes values and strategies from business with an exaggerated emphasis on accountability and efficiency (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Kreber, 2010) at the expense of trust and collegiality. At the other extreme, mainstream academics could dominate, leading to a Balkanization of the university, where each discipline acts as its own fiefdom (Becher & Trowler, 2001), creating local policies and practices at the expense of institutional consistency and fairness.

How might developers respond to these competing visions? Stonequist aids us here. He identified three key 'roles' played by migrants, which we have adapted to the HE setting: the 'nationalist' role, where the individual supports or champions the underdog in a given situation; the 'intermediary' role, where the marginal person translates between dominant and subordinated cultures; and 'assimilation and passing', in which joining the dominant group – or at least appearing to do so – is the key behaviour of the migrant. 'Passing' is described as the more problematic role to perform, since it would necessitate secrecy and furtiveness so as not to be caught out as an imposter.

Having adapted Stonequist's study to higher education (Green & Little, 2011), we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 educational developers to explore whether the model was borne out in practice. Participants were organized in three clusters based on their prior disciplines: humanities, STEM, and 'intramural' disciplines (those whose research directly

informs HE practice). Each cluster included at least two countries and two types of institution (public/private, teaching-/research-focused), and all interviewees were senior enough to experience institutional tensions. Interviewees were working in Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA, with the majority in the US.

Interviewees firstly relayed tensions they experienced when operating within university hierarchies, after which they read an outline of the different roles from Stonequist and discussed the extent to which the model captured their responses in each situation. A detailed study of their comments is provided in Little & Green (2012), while a summary is presented here.

One key behaviour was absent from the model: ‘scoping and silence,’ in which developers assessed the situation before choosing how best to respond, or whether to respond at all. The other roles, however, resonated with our interviewees, though to varying degrees. Respondents were uneasy with the term ‘nationalist’, but once it was rephrased as ‘advocate’, they were more likely to ascribe the label to their behaviours in some situations. They added complexity to the model in that the ‘groups’ in the situations they explored were sometimes principles (e.g. ‘good teaching’) or hidden parties who did not directly participate in the discussion (e.g. students). The ‘intermediary’ role was most openly welcomed by interviewees, who saw it as a safe and preferable role, where they could act as ‘connective tissue’ in the institution and aid understanding from their position outside the fray. ‘Passing’ received a mixed response, though contrary to our expectations (and Stonequist’s study), a majority of respondents saw it as a natural way to ‘fit in’ in order to convey their message; they interpreted this role as a temporary performance that they could relinquish on completing the task at hand. Assimilation, in contrast,

was equated with 'selling out' and was generally not considered a viable option for most educational developers. Respondents did note, however, that they were sometimes *perceived* by others as having assimilated (in particular with the administration), even in situations where they were not personally involved in institutional initiatives or where their own views were decidedly against new policies.

Overall, respondents found the framework provided a useful heuristic to enable them to think through how best to navigate institutional tensions, including the kinds of ontological differences that can leave an institution feeling rudderless or passive. This positive response was reinforced during a workshop with 43 (mostly US) educational developers in a conference session on the topic (Little & Green, 2011). In addition, the study reveals some preliminary evidence for considering how the epistemological backgrounds of educational developers may influence the ways in which they respond to institutional tensions and conflicting value systems.

From these findings we argue that developers can actively *choose* to occupy the margins, that they can choose, in essence, to think, research, and work 'otherwise' in this strange middle ground between cultures.

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