

Freedom to learn: experiences of a formal course for academic developers (0236)

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This paper investigates participant experiences of a formal course for academic developers at a research-intensive South African university. Although significant strides have been made globally to establish academic development as a discipline in its own right, and to raise the credibility of those working in the field, it is commonly agreed that *we are not there yet* (Debowski 2007; Shay 2012). An overview of opportunities for newcomers and established academic developers alike to formally qualify themselves in the field reveals paucity in innovative and principled pathways for *developing the developers*.

Globally, there is concern around the profile, agency, power and status of academic developers working in higher education (Knapper 1998 & 2016; Debowski 2007; Peseta 2011; Shay 2012; Gibbs 2013; Quinn & Vorster 2014). The migrant identity of academic developers and fragmented ways of moving into and continuing to work in the academic development field in the absence of a strong knowledge base, is widely documented (Manathunga 2007; Harland & Staniforth 2008; Peseta 2011; Fraser & Ling 2013). Ironically, academic developers are tasked with an eclectic array of roles and responsibilities in an increasingly convoluted higher education domain. They are faced with an institutional relevance agenda that demands effective responses to deeply complex challenges. These range from the professional development of university teachers (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2015); decolonising knowledge and the university classroom (Mbembe 2015); enabling a decolonising intercultural education (Gorski 2008) and to critically engage with deep questions around access, opportunity, deficit and deficiency by disrupting compliance ideology in higher education (Gorski 2011).

In the absence of increased agency and credibility, one suspects that academic developers will retain an outsider status and nomadic identity. If ‘practising educational development is a little like combatting climate change’ (Knapper 2016:113), the urgency of constructing new opportunities for advancement and innovation for academic developers continues unabated. Without a strong knowledge base, finding ways of optimizing the potential agency of academic developers in the face of structures that position them as ‘human being[s] without agency’ (Haggis 2003:98), is critical. Academic developers might remain trapped in a cycle of invention and response to immediate day-to-day demands. One way to break this cycle is to construct a principled knowledge base in this emerging field and to create enabling conditions for academic developers to gain access to this knowledge in a structured and systematic way.

In 2011, the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning at Rhodes University (South Africa) implemented an accredited qualification for academic developers (PGDip (HE) for academic developers), the first of its kind (Vorster & Quinn 2015). This study considers the learning experiences of the first two cohorts of participants in the course by exploring routes into and expectations of the course, value attached to the knowledge base of the course by participants as well as impact on identity formation (coming to be) through an encounter with this knowledge (coming to know). ‘What we know affects who we are (or are perceived to be)’ (Moore 2007:3). In this context, learning is understood as requiring personal involvement through ‘being in the learning event’ and experiencing learning that is ‘pervasive’ and illuminating (Rogers 1969).

Methodologically, the study draws on Vorster and Quinn's (2015) framework of four domains of knowledge in the course and offers an overview of course participant experiences by way of identifying key insights following their introduction to new conceptual and theoretical notions. This investigation uses a qualitative research design and methodology. A questionnaire containing six open-ended questions was administered to each cohort at the end of the second and final year of completing the course. In total, 5 participants of the first cohort (2011-2012) and 6 participants of the second cohort (2013-2014) responded to the questionnaire. To date, 10 participants have formally completed the course and have graduated. A third cohort of 23 participants from 11 institutions will complete the course at the end of 2016.

This study adopts a sociological perspective, drawing on tenets of social philosophy (Barnett 2009) and social realism (Archer 1995) as a meta-framework. Barnett (2009) argues that 'there are numerous ways of coming into a valid relationship with the world, and so of knowing the world' (432). Such knowing is 'edifying' (432) through 'coming to know the world', implying that 'knowing has ethical properties' and is potentially 'emancipatory' (433). The process of becoming an academic developer is subsequently explored through investigating the interplay of knowing and being as experienced by participants in a formal course for academic developers.

The findings of the study are shaped in three main categories. First, the knowledge domains and ways of knowing identified by participants could potentially inform academic development practices as well as higher education teaching and learning in meaningful ways. Second, participants' becoming academic developers through an encounter with knowledge resulting in knowing and being differently, is shaped in multiple ways and impacts meaningfully on their sense of identity. Third, there is evidence that the structured knowledge base of the course enabled participants to gain new insights into the complexities of HE development and the role of academic developers in knowledge-based institutional responsiveness.

In conclusion, one cannot claim that there is a 'best way to develop the next generation of academic developers' (Kensington-Miller et al. 2011:11). However, a formal course raises possibilities for a knowledge-infused pathway. It offers structured, principled and theorised prospects that afford academic developers distributional justice by way of shared cumulative learning and knowledge-building opportunities. Participant experiences of the course indicate that their knowing endeavours have brought forth a process of 'epistemic becoming' (Barnett 2009:435). This process holds implications for how they see themselves as academic developers and their understandings of what such identity construction might mean for them personally and in their institutional pedagogic and epistemic functions. In essence, a formal course for academic developers affords participants the *freedom to learn*.

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