

## **T3.2 Beaumaris 2 Friday 7 December 10.30 -11.00**

### ***Academic Development in the Neo-liberal University: Reflexivity as the key to authentic practice and informed agency (0319)***

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#### **Introduction**

Motivated by an earlier co-authorship (Stocks et al., 2018), we now seek to review our combined experiences as three academic/educational developers in two countries (the UK and Australia) in order to explicitly understand how the values, expectations and experiences that we bring to our work function in tension with the current context of academic work. That initial collaboration partially surfaced some of the challenges that we felt that we, and academic development as a profession (if it can be seen in this way), currently face. In that paper, we argued that the democratic process of action learning, which situates the developer as facilitator and co-learner rather than 'expert', might be a productive avenue for the future direction of academic development. We started to surface a number of barriers, often structured around a dichotomy between what we expect of ourselves, and what others (senior managers as well as the colleagues who we are tasked with 'developing') expect of us. We are now evolving this 'identity conversation' into a more thorough examination of what we believe academic development work in the current HE context could and, perhaps, should be about. This investigation involves reflection on *why* we hold certain values that may be at odds with some of the demands placed on us. Such awareness is essential if we are to avoid "the stress and flow of events [which] trick us into a tunnel-vision where contradictions and dissonant aspects disappear during a fast and fluent way of thinking" (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2017, 97).

Roxå and Mårtenssen (2017) argue that, contrary to much of the analysis of academic development work which situates it as liminal, homeless, misunderstood and therefore, we would argue, lacking informed agency (for instance, Manathunga, 2007), developers do have power; power which is exercised through, for instance, the academic courses that we run. If we are to exercise this power authentically and ethically, it is imperative that we are conscious and critically reflective of the basis of our actions and practices.

#### **Method**

In order to explore our experiences and values in a critical way, we have happened upon collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al, 2013). Autoethnography has been employed by both academic developers and academics more broadly (for example Grant, 2007; Manathunga, 2007; Kensington-Miller, et al., 2015; Bloomer, et al., 2004), but taking a collaborative approach appears less common. Over the last 10 months or so, we have systematically, if sporadically, used Skype, e-mail, and WhatsApp to explore and explicitly surface the experiences, readings and lines of argument in the literature that have helped to shape us as Higher Education professionals. We have reacted to, commented on and questioned each other's accounts and readings, and sought to identify and critique the values that underpin our work, and also those that we observe and infer from the interactions that we have with colleagues in our current and previous institutions. This has revealed some of the common challenges that we are experiencing or have experienced, as well as the shared

values that have both led us into academic development and which underpin our 'professional identities' and expectations of ourselves.

Collectively, we embody a diverse range of academic and academic development experience. We are early, mid- and late career, and that is reflected, to a degree, in our ages (two of us are around 40 years old, with young children, and the other is around 60, with grown-up children and young grandchildren). Two of us are British, and the other Australian, but two of us have lived and worked in Australia for much of our careers (and lives) so far. We all have experience of Research-Intensive Universities, but one of us currently works in a more teaching-focussed institution, which has aspirations for becoming more research-focussed. We all hold PhDs – two of us in the sciences, and one in the arts - and, therefore, are not unrepresentative in that we came to our development roles having established an initial expertise and professional identity in another discipline. One of us is currently an academic, one is 'professional support' and the third now holds an honorary appointment. This variety of experience and perspectives strengthens our collaborative autoethnographic approach, and provides a range of similarities and contrasts, that inform and helps validate our observations and conclusions.

### **Outcomes (so far)**

Our collaborative work so far has highlighted a number of shared values and experiences that, for us, provide challenges and barriers to the ways in which we three would aspire to practice if we are to do so authentically. We have come to recognise a desire to practice inclusively and collaboratively; to promote and facilitate on-going conversations about appropriate academic practices, the constraints and opportunities of the current performance-driven culture and the potential to engage with and modify it. This situates the developer as a facilitator and co-learner, rather than expert (see Grant, 2007; Roxå and Mårtenssen, 2013). A possible avenue of further interest concerns the value of taking a 'researching professionals' (Burnard et al. 2018; Taylor, 2007) perspective on academic developer identities and purposes. Of course, 'navigating the messy politics of the agency game', as Pesata (2014, 69) puts it, means that the desire for pursuing and exercising informed agency in our work is one thing; successfully navigating institutional and national political contexts in order to accomplish it (in a sustainable fashion) is another.

### **Conclusions/implications**

The strength of an effective autoethnography (and one key aspect of its validity, according to Ellis et al, 2011) is that it should prompt others who identify with the account to reflect on their own position. For us, the necessity for developers to practice reflexively, and to have the time and space to do so, is essential for authentic practice and 'being'. Further, in exploring where our own values deviate from those promoted by the current neo-liberal culture in HE we gain insight into the origins of some of the barriers, tensions and challenges that exist for academics as well as developers. Such insight ultimately enhances our capacity to exercise informed agency.

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