

Academic development: Adding to the mess? (0150)

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This paper explores the academic development landscape through the use of boundaries as a framework for conceptualizing both the work done by academic development and possible directions for the future. This is a conceptual paper but is grounded in work undertaken in a range of higher education institutions. While important work in mapping the terrain has been done (Land, 2004) this paper builds upon it by providing an alternative lens. The paper argues that academic development is a fluid and multi-dimensional entity that needs to be theorized in a way that captures the different levels at which it operates, whilst at the same time providing sufficient clarity on which to base future direction. Consideration of boundaries helps us to achieve this.

In the current climate of change and uncertainty fuelled by reduced funding, shifting priorities, new directions and unease about the roles of the university, academic development can add to destabilization (the mess) because its agenda is unclear, its allegiance sometimes open to question. One response (individual and disciplinary) is to reinforce boundaries as a refuge since they provide safety and security and can be used to establish the appearance of control. Barriers still exist in higher education, for example, between teaching and research, academic and administration even if these are perhaps becoming more porous. This paper explores how academic developers relate to and use boundaries within the university as a way of conceptualizing academic development. The concept of boundaries is taken here to mean a social or cultural distinction that shapes attitudes and actions towards others. It is these perceived social and cultural differences that give a boundary its significance. Boundaries are formed out of a combination of shared history, values, practices, belief and sometimes location, and are enforced by a process of othering, in which one group identifies the ways in which others are different and by implication separate. Three perspectives on academic development and boundaries are examined in this paper: boundary crossing, boundary spanning and boundary blurring. Each of these will be discussed separately.

Boundary crossing is an idea used extensively in Activity Systems Theory (Engeström et al 1999; Engeström 2001). It is the process of changing from one understanding to another and is expressed when a person or group encounters a problem or dilemma which then prompts the consideration of change (Kerosuo, 2003). *Boundary spanning* is an idea borrowed from organizational literature where it refers to positions that link multiple systems where goals and expectations can be in conflict (Aldrich & Herker 1977, Weets and Sandmann 2008). It is focused on the individual rather than on systems and refers to the idea of communicating between boundaries while retaining one's primary identity. Boundary spanning requires a person to be able to operate in settings other than their primary one and to understand their social landscapes. Spanners have a role in linking, interacting, negotiating and building relationships across boundaries. *Boundary blurring* is a more structural notion, comprising the changing, shifting or softening of social and cultural distinctions. This is a more fundamental change and is likely to be a long-term project. Boundary blurring requires

the identification or exploitation of ambiguous boundaries and the enhancement of interdisciplinary, intercultural or interhierarchical spaces.

In using these concepts to understand academic development, it is possible to see the varied terrain from a new angle and in so doing to consider some implications for university policy and for possible future directions.

Academic development as boundary spanning requires people to remain within their individual context and to retain their primary identity but to be able to traverse the boundaries. From this perspective, people from either side of a boundary are able to act as translators or interpreters. For example after interacting with academic developers, individual academics might use ideas from higher education research in a particular teaching context and may promote the ideas and the underpinning concepts to their colleagues. This is done without a fundamental change to their primary identity, be it disciplinary or professional. Current conceptions of academic development have tended to focus on boundary spanning (although not using this language) with most of the emphasis being on the individual and their capacity to change their own practices and in some cases to be change agents within a departmental or disciplinary context

From the perspective of boundary blurring, academic development is the collection of actions which are designed to promote structural change. One example of this is academic developers working strategically (Blackmore, 2009) to explore and trigger change at institution or department level. Examples of these sorts of projects include the introduction of problem based learning into a medical curriculum, the introduction of active/enquiry based learning across a department, or the introduction of interdisciplinary education. In these cases, change requires boundaries to shift in fundamental ways or it exploits gaps, ambiguities or opportunities in the boundaries. Recently there has been a move towards boundary blurring across the university, with growing interest in interdisciplinary practices and cross institutional change. However, this does not always involve an academic development perspective.

Finally, Engestrom's notion of boundary crossing involves what he refers to as 'expansive learning' or in other words the idea that through the identification of dissonance or inconsistencies a group comes to a changed understanding and associated set of practices. Of the three perspectives on academic development, this is the most fundamental as it requires new ways of thinking and doing.

Traditional conceptions of academic development have not focused on boundaries, nor seen them as a driving force. This paper argues that a perspective which is conceptualized through boundaries is a powerful tool in considering current and future options and allows academic development to be more outward looking in way that take account of the local. It is a way of being both within and without. This paper does not suggest that boundaries are immutable, but rather that acknowledging boundaries is enabling, not limiting. The implications of this are that there is a need to reconsider academic development – both its conceptualization and practice.

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