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"Acts of stealth and troubled pleasure": investigating the connotations of familiar words from the academic development literature. (0022)

Background

As academic developers we are expected to communicate not only with each other, but also with academics from across the arts, humanities, sciences and social sciences. However, these colleagues often find our writings off-putting and incomprehensible (Wareing, 2004). Lecturers participating in the Postgraduate Certificate in University Teaching sometimes dismiss the readings that I recommend to them as jargon-filled, unconvincing, unrewarding and irrelevant to their needs. For them, the difficulties of engaging with an unfamiliar literature seem to be exacerbated by lack of time, the perceived low status of learning and teaching and their desire for straightforward solutions to pressing problems. Green (2010) asks whether we do enough to welcome colleagues from other disciplines into our community. He suggests that our writings may sometimes be deliberately opaque in order to exclude outsiders or even to avoid close scrutiny of our arguments. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that academics from other disciplines often fail to make connections between "our" literature and their practice.

It is possible (and many of us try) to make our writing more accessible to a wider audience by providing clear explanations of specialist terms, making disciplinary assumptions explicit and avoiding unnecessary ambiguity. This requires a careful focus on the denotations of the words we use – their strict literal definitions stripped of ambiguity and associations. However, denotation is only part of the story. A word bears the marks of how it has been used in the past, and is still used in other contexts: it has connotations. This is most obvious in poetry, but applies to all language, including disciplinary terminology. Some connotations are idiosyncratic, while others are more or less widely shared, at differing levels of awareness. Some connotations are congruent with what the current writer is trying to say, some are incongruent, some invite exploration. All have the potential to shed light on the concept in question, in ways that complement what can be communicated by definitions alone.

I have become interested in the connotations that cling to familiar words from the academic development literature. I am investigating the connotations of "trouble" for academic developers. I chose "trouble" because of a hunch that it had begun to appear in the academic development literature more frequently and with subtly shifting meanings in recent years.

My questions were:

Are there any discernible patterns of use of the word "trouble" in the academic development literature?

What connotations does the word "trouble" have for academic developers?

Approach

I undertook a survey of the occurrence of "trouble" and associated words ("troubled," "troubling," "troublesome") in papers published in three prominent journals over the past twenty years: *Studies in Higher Education*, *The International Journal for Academic Development* and *Teaching in Higher Education*. I have identified some of the connotations of "trouble" an discussed these with groups of academic developers.

Preliminary findings

I found that there has been an increase in the occurrence of "trouble" in all three journals over the past twenty years, with a striking "bulge" around 2006, and a falling-off in 2010.

I identified a range of connotations that clustered around the term "trouble" in relation to academic development. The most common use of the word was in references to troublesome knowledge (Land, 2003). "Troublesome" has an archaic feel to it– like "toothsome" or "loathsome" or "meddlesome," suggesting that learning troubles have been with us for a long time. The suffix "-some" seems to lighten the term , giving it connotations of connotations of annoyance and difficulty but also of value. It is implied that trouble is actually *a good thing,* characteristic of the

kind of unsettling that is required if important learning is to take place.

Peseta's(2007) use of the term ("Troubling our Desires for Research and Writing within the Academic Project") departs from the dictionary definition of trouble as pain or distress that must either be avoided or suffered. Here it has connotations of agency: it is the practitioner and researcher in academic development who is doing the troubling. What's more, it seems to be a worthwhile if risky activity – highlighting the role of academic developers and researchers as challenging the status quo. They are stirring up something that is at risk of becoming stagnant, and creating ripples of influence.

Rowland's(2000) Wordsworthian reference to learning as "acts of stealth and troubled pleasure" also suggests agency and the value of unsettling experiences, while inviting connotations of transgression, thrilling riskiness and the irrepressible:

"Take the following lines from Wordsworth's Prelude in which he describes his feelings when as a child, he took a rowing boat out at night and rowed across Lake Windermere towards the mountains on the opposite side of the lake:

It was an act of stealth
And troubled pleasure
                                        (Wordsworth 1975 edition: 135)

Viewing the young Wordsworth as a learner, this line captures the quality of his absorption in the learning experience – his own sense of agency in the face of uncertainty, and pleasure in the face of danger – which is beyond the scope of positivist language… To cast Wordsworth's 'act of stealth and troubled pleasure' as an educational objective simply makes no sense: it won't submit."

Implications for practice

There are three potential benefits to paying attention to the connotations of the terms we use. First we can reduce confusion by eliminating irrelevant associations; secondly we may enrich communication by acknowledging relevant associations; thirdly we

might create new meanings by exploring hitherto unacknowledged associations. There is also, of course, the risk of further alienating our audiences, but if this work is done carefully and well, it may be a risk worth taking.

I suggest that we should pay close attention to the connotations of the words we use as academic developers in order to engage the wider community of colleagues who are concerned with learning and teaching in higher education, and to help them to make creative connections with their practice.

<u>References</u>
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