

The Academic Developer – Pillar or Prop? (0195)

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Outline

It has been argued that, across the Higher Education sector, the traditional role of the academic is changing alongside that of the professional academic, a label for learning support colleagues such as learning technologists and academic developers (Macfarlane, 2011, Whitchurch, 2008). The traditional, subject specialist, academic is no longer just expected to support student learning through subject-focused degree programmes. Curricula are changing to meet more varied demands and agendas including, employability, skills, global outlooks, sustainability, students as co-creators and graduate attributes. Likewise modes of delivery are also changing and hence having an impact, with a need for more flexible approaches to learning – work-based, online, blended, distance, part-time, personalised, etc. The spotlight is increasingly focussed on institutions in terms of multiple Key Performance Indicators (KPI's): National Student Survey, Progression, Employability, Good Awards, etc. and student evaluations which can be accessed and interrogated publicly.

Simultaneously, learning support colleagues now find they are moving into the realm of learning and teaching and curriculum design in a direct and focused way. For example, learning technologists have shifted from advising on how to apply technologies to learning situations to guiding the development of modules and programmes of study. More universities are opening up development opportunities such as post-graduate higher education teaching qualifications to include professional colleagues, where these licences to teach were previously the domain of academics. Set this context of changing identities against a background where the attention has shifted from delivering content and teaching students, to supporting students to learn (Barr and Tagg, 1995) and it seems timely to evaluate the effect of these changes on the relationship between, and perception of, the two roles.

The researcher joined the Higher Education sector in 2001 as an online learning technologist (now an Academic Developer) at a time when universities were starting to use learning technologies. They have supported the implementation of online learning platforms and online learning tools, the introduction of a blended learning strategy and a design approach for online distance education programmes in a Business School. More and more the academic developer role is one occupied by those who started out as learning technologists, tends to be a colleague who sits at a distance from core teaching teams, and is often called upon or engaged with issues relating to the use of digital learning tools. Today, with the range and variety of roles to support learning and teaching, there is an expectation that the professional academic and academics will easily and naturally work together to develop programmes, but the reality is often teams working in isolation.

From this perspective, the research will explore the dynamically changing relationship between academic developers and more traditional academics with a view to exposing the synergies and disconnects in their perceptions of how they work together and the contributions that they both make to developing innovative and relevant learning experiences. The researcher has experienced both extremes of the relationship, being called upon as the expert to implement a specific technological innovation and also as a core member of a teaching team developing the learning experience in partnership with academics and other support professionals: librarians, academic writing and language support, administrative support, etc. This relationship and collaboration leads to the best elements each has to offer being implemented in a planned, coordinated and transparent way.

Ultimately this study will seek to uncover if there are ways (or not) in which collaborative approaches can be encouraged, with the modern academic developer playing a central role in supporting

academics to navigate this fast-moving landscape. Indeed, are they essential for academics to be successful as 21st century academics (Tapscott & Williams, 2010)?

The research will take place in a large, post-92 institution and will only succeed if the viewpoints and meaning of a number of players are considered. The study can be viewed from a social constructivist standpoint where meaning is derived from social interactions (Creswell, 2003). There will be an autobiographical thread running through the research, acknowledging the lived experience of the researchers' changing identity and move into an academic developer role. This will be set within the auto-ethnographic methodological approach. The researcher will use their own experiences to better understand the changes in the sector whilst using the changes in the sector to better understand the identity and positionality of academic developers (Ballam, 2011). Qualitative data will be generated from a mixed method approach: focus groups, questionnaires and in-depth interviews to uncover the perceptions of both groups of professionals.

The work will benefit a range of groups: students (student-centred curricula, employing the best and most appropriate learning tools), academics (curricula developed collaboratively combining subject knowledge, pedagogical expertise and technology enhanced approaches), faculty managers (clear, consistent, fit-for-purpose curricula, promoting autonomy and providing flexibility), and central services (acknowledged professional expertise and voice, recognised identity, transparent language, clear communication).

This study is important to help clarify the roles and contributions of both academics and academic developers, in particular, to ensure universities make the most of their human resource in a resource constrained context to provide an excellent student learning experience. Furthermore, the findings will contribute to the discourse relating to team teaching in the 21st century in the sense that it will question whether traditional models of team teaching are still appropriate, particularly with reference to the individuals that make up teaching teams, how they function and how they deliver programmes of study. The benefit of this work will impact learning support and academic communities nationally and internationally.

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