

Serial number 0080
r
Title Researcher-led academic development
Submitter Dr. Marion Heron, Dr. Anesa Hosein, Prof. Ian Kinchin, Dr. Emma Medland, Dr. Naomi Winstone

Researcher-led academic development.

Introduction

This work considers the influence of the highly diverse research background / focus of each of the research-active members of a single department and the way in which it underpins perceptions of their role as academic developers. We make the assumption that in the context of a research-led institution, if the influence of research does not come to the fore in our 'development role' in the manner that complements research-teaching links with the academic faculties, then academic development as an activity is in danger of creating the conditions to promote pedagogic frailty across the institution (see Hosein, 2017). Historically much academic development has been research-informed – drawing from key theories that have informed higher education, such as 'reflective practice', 'deep-surface learning' and 'constructive alignment' (see Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009). However, within a department that is actively researching teaching practice and student learning, there is likely to be a shift from research-informed (bringing externally generated research into discussions) towards a more research-integrated situation in which academic developers are more likely to embody their own research tradition within their practice – in the form of *researcher-led* teaching (*sensu* Hay et al, 2015). In this paper, we explore the potential of our research activity to frame our academic development activity, consider the increased richness in diversity of perspective this may offer and conclude that despite this diversity the department achieves coherence through a vertical discourse of values and beliefs (as described by Bernstein, 1999).

Context

This paper takes as its starting point that in order to understand how academic developers work together as a group and view their roles it is important to explore the research lens through which they base their practice with others - in particular how they explore teaching with staff/students. Such an exploration inevitably involves an examination of our identities as academic developers. Academic developers have many different roles and identities depending often on the institution and the tasks they are involved in. The fragmentary nature of academic practice is something that has been problematized by Gough (2014).

The use of reflexive accounts is one way of exploring roles and identities. Gravett (2017) explored her roles, her influence on others, and her own learning through a self-study analysis. She highlights the fact that our own beliefs and values about teaching and learning are demonstrated in our practices with others. We argue that in fact it is the embodiment of our own beliefs and values about teaching

and learning and our research focus that informs and forms our practice. Kinash & Wood (2013) apply a similar self-study analysis by starting with their identity as academic developers and look inwards to their self-concepts. In this paper we take the opposite stance by starting with the self and looking outwards to how our research lens influences our practices with academic staff. Ultimately, the knowledge of academic developers is “*produced by practitioners, about themselves, their theories-in-use, organizational structures and values*” (Clegg, 2009, p. 409). This paper explores further what Liebowitz (2014, p. 359) calls the “*nexus of ‘academic development’*” – the learning from teaching, research, and vice versa, which informs and enhances our work with others.

Methods

In order to frame narrative reflections on their work, the participants in this research were each asked to engage in a single map-mediated interview (*sensu* Kandiko & Kinchin 2012). The interview question was simple: to ‘describe the dominant research frame that guides your practice as an academic developer’. This process produced a concept map for each of the seven participants to summarise their research frame in a format that was succinct and emphasised the dynamic links between the elements. Each of the interviewees was guided/interviewed by an ‘expert mapper’ so that they could concentrate on the answer to the question whilst the mapper could guide the interrogation of their evolving map and help to ensure the map was succinct whilst exhibiting the maximum explanatory power. During the interviews, maps were physically constructed using Post-It notes and A3 paper. Completed maps were drawn electronically by the interviewer and returned to the interviewee for editing/refinement before inviting them to offer a reflective narrative to highlight key points from the map. Maps and associated narratives were then shared and discussed among the team.

Outcomes and implications

Whilst the research foci of the participants exhibits variability in scope and methodological preference, the work of each of the researchers is underpinned by a number of core values that are shared across the group:

- i. the relationship between ‘students’ and ‘teachers’ and how they are informed by both.
- ii. personal beliefs such as our approaches to personal development.
- iii. the ‘socio-cultural context’, the higher education ‘environment’ and ‘community’ in which we work.
- iv. pathways towards ‘learning’ that might incorporate ‘responsibility sharing’, ‘negotiated meaning’ and ‘feedback’ .

In Bernsteinian terms (Bernstein, 1999), these observations suggest that even if the horizontal discourse exhibits variation across the team (i.e. different research practices), the underpinning vertical discourse (considering values and beliefs) exhibits a greater degree of similarity and

uniformity across the team. Stability in the tacit, vertical, regulative discourse would appear to be the more important component in developing departmental cohesion.

The 'target' for academic development seems to be 'teaching excellence', though this is a term that is considered by some to lack any real meaning as there is no agreed definition (e.g. see Charles, 2017) and implies competition rather than enhancement (Ashwin, 2017). The target of academic development is therefore not fixed, and resides in numerous different disciplinary contexts. The whole enterprise is quite fluid and therefore each of the participants has to exhibit a degree of flexibility in their approach. Flexibility in the horizontal may be separate from a well-established vertical discourse, and yet reflection upon and engagement with the espoused vertical discourse of a team may contribute to the development of the concept of research-intensive teaching through approaching the pedagogy of the field through a process of enquiry similar to the research process (Elen et al., 2007).

[992 words]

References

- Ashwin, P. (2017) Building an agenda for academic development on the peculiarity of university teaching. In: E. Medland, R. Watermeyer, A. Hosein, I. Kinchin & S. Lygo-Baker (eds.) *Pedagogical Peculiarities: Conversations at the edge of university teaching*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. In Press
- Bernstein, B. (1999). Vertical and horizontal discourse: An essay. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(2), 157-173.
- Charles, M. (2017) Teaching in spite of Excellence: Recovering a practice of teaching-led research. *Studies in Philosophy of Education*, DOI: 10.1007/s11217-017-9568-1
- Clegg, S. (2009). Forms of knowing and academic development practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(4), 403-416.
- Gough, M. (2014). The problem of identity for academic practice in terms of definition. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(4), 590-607.
- Elen, J., Lindblom-Ylänne, S., & Clement, M. (2007) Faculty development in research-intensive universities: The role of academics' conceptions on the relationship between research and teaching. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 12(2), 123-139.
- Gravett, E. O. (2017). Tracing a developer's development: a self-study in teaching. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 1-12.
- Hay, D., Weller, S. & Ashton, K. (2015) Researcher-led teaching: embodiment of academic practice. *Higher Education Review*, 48(1), 25 – 39.
- Hosein, A. (2017) The research-teaching nexus. In: Kinchin, I.M. & Winstone, N.E. (Eds.) *Pedagogic Frailty and Resilience in the University*. (pp. 135 – 149) Rotterdam, Sense Publishers.
- Kinash, S., & Wood, K. (2013). Academic developer identity: How we know who we are. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18(2), 178-189.
- Kandiko, C.B. & Kinchin, I.M. (2012) What is a doctorate? A concept-mapping analysis of process versus product in the supervision of lab-based PhDs. *Educational Research*, 54(1), 3-16.
- Kandlbinder, P. & Peseta, T. (2009) Key concepts in postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching and learning in Australasia and the United Kingdom. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 14(1), 19-31.

Leibowitz, B. (2014). Reflections on academic development: what is in a name?. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(4), 357-360.