

Situating academic development in professional work: using peer learning

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Abstract

Academic development should be conceptualised not only as a university-wide process, but also as a local practice and as a process of peer learning in the workplace. The paper suggests that formal approaches need to more fully situate academic development in sites of academic practice. Two examples from the author's own setting—teaching development projects and writing for publication groups—illustrate the argument. Challenges arising from such a shift in perspective are discussed.

Most academic development takes place in locations where academics spend most of their time: departments, professional settings and research sites. It takes the form of exchanges with colleagues, interacting with students, working on problems, writing and associated activities. It is informal and not normally viewed as development. Nonetheless, it often has a more profound influence on staff than activities explicitly labelled as such.

This paper argues that formalised approaches to academic development are also usefully conceptualised as being located primarily in sites of academic practice: the department, the laboratory or library, in supervisory relationships and in professional networks. The rationale for this is that it is in these sites that academic identity is formed and is most powerfully influenced. Organised development activities may productively occur elsewhere, but when they do, they must take careful account of these other influences, especially the influence of learning among peers. An illustration of what happens when this is not taken into account is given by Martin and Ramsden (1994) in their follow up of teaching and learning courses, the good effects of which were contradicted when staff return to their departments.

The paper explores some of the implications of such a shift of thinking about academic development and illustrates ways in which it can be positioned to utilise reciprocal peer learning—learning with and from each other—which builds on a collegial view of academic work. There are also substantial implications for the role of heads and chairs, but full discussion of this falls outside the present paper. The paper examines differences of perception about the value of academic development which arise from different locations within an organisation and the opportunities and constraints which are created when one is working with peers in one's own professional area or discipline. Examples are drawn from the practice of the author in the use of peer learning in development activities in his own Faculty. These are (a) the use of teaching development projects to provide a forum for discussing teaching and (b) programs on writing for publication.

In previous papers it has been argued that there are competing conceptions of academic development (Boud 1995) and that new frameworks for preparation and development are needed to match the changing circumstances of academia (Brew and Boud 1996). In the latter, new approaches, which emphasise negotiation, flexibility and the importance of grounding development in the workplace were explored to promote a holistic view which acknowledges the staff member in context. The present paper extends earlier discussion to consider a view of academic development focusing on the centrality of workplace learning: in the department or faculty that forms the context for most academic work.

Phases of academic development

Before discussing the role of localised approaches, it is useful to set discussion in the wider context of changes which have occurred in thinking about academic development.

The following are necessarily broad-brush portrayals of qualitatively distinct phases and key theoretical ideas associated with each phase. They are drawn from experience in the UK and Australia of educational development or academic staff development. Different sequences and key points in developments are likely to have occurred in other countries and contexts and different views formed about salient concerns.

Development as embedded and invisible in academic life

The earliest notion of academic development was one in which development is so embedded in academic work that it is impossible to give it a distinct identity (eg. keeping up with the literature, exchanges with colleagues at conferences, etc.). There is no extrinsic notion of academic staff development. Academic values of autonomy, integrity and personal responsibility were paramount and it was unthinkable for the most part to suggest that anything should be done with colleagues who were teaching very badly or doing no research, other than a quiet word from the senior professor. While there was no theorising of development in this era, the theory which most relates to this now is probably situated learning (eg. Lave and Wenger 1991). In a situated learning perspective participants do not conceptualise what they do as learning but as peripheral participation in the work in which they gain expertise.

Development as a moral imperative

The welfare of students faced with high failure rates and the desire to take teaching seriously gave rise in the 1970s to a flourishing of activity aimed at teaching improvement. This first attempt at the formalisation of academic development was promoted by a relatively small number of enthusiasts. As it became apparent that the previous absence of discussion about development was not helping staff cope with the changes of population, motivation and diversity of students, offices or centres of academic development began to be established and offer programs on a voluntary basis about improving teaching. These started modestly with seminars and short workshops, but in some places have since expanded into substantial courses and accredited programs at Masters level. While there has always been a concern for students, there has been a progressive shift over time from teacher-centred to learning-centred approaches in such programs. Again, although little theorising was evident then, the theory which implicitly underpinned much of this era was that of adult learning (eg. Knowles 1980). Adult learning respected the autonomy of learners and emphasised learning by consent.

Development as corporate policy

Partly arising from the success of these earlier activities in focusing attention on the importance of students, an increasingly managerialist tendency in universities from the late 1980s began to coopt academic staff development as part of a corporate agenda and link it to activist forms of university management and initiatives such as quality assurance and performance management. It has had recent expression in the UK in the policy that all university teachers undertake nationally sanctioned accreditation for their teaching role. The theory which implicitly informed this era was human capital theory (eg. Marginson 1993), though many developers might resist this characterisation. The idea is that staff are a resource (especially for teaching) which need to be trained and deployed for the strategic objectives of the employing institution.

Development as multi-dimensional and distributed

The certainties characterising earlier time have been severely challenged. As academic work has become more complex, demands on individuals have multiplied and academic work has become more differentiated and fragmented. The notion that development only follows from personal desire or the corporate plan is being seen as overly simplistic. There is recognition that these concerns, as well as many others, need to be taken into account and that development, if it is to be embedded into the regular practices of staff, needs to occur at or in close conjunction with their sites of practice. The notion of grand plans for development is replaced by a less monolithic and more distributed discourse. Central programs still exist, but become less dominant; local initiatives flourish and control is dispersed. Responsibilities for development are simultaneously held at the

corporate, faculty and individual levels and different views of development exist within the same institution.

None of the kinds of theorisation which underpinned earlier eras are, in themselves, adequate in the present period of late modernity or postmodernity. Indeed, all previous conceptualisations continue to coexist. We need to draw upon ideas from these and other traditions and to ground the practice of academic development in the nature of academic work. We should not expect to now find a single all-encompassing approach or one which does not respect the unique features of each context.

The aspect of academic work, which, ironically, has been insufficiently explored in discussions of development, is its collegial nature. While some features of this are currently under threat from management intervention, what is remarkable is the strength of the tradition and its pervasive character. Examples of the vigour of this tradition range from the centrality of peer review in publishing and the awarding of research grants, to selection and promotion, and the academic direction of institutions. The latter may be perceived as under particular threat, but nevertheless, there is far greater control of priorities by staff than is exerted by the workforce of most other institutions in society today. It is this that still characterises the workplace of academia.

However, if the collegial nature of academic work is to be central in notions of academic development, the unquestioned character of the first embedded phase of academic development discussed above should be avoided. We must acknowledge that the context of higher education has changed so much that we can never return to the closed and cosy outlook of that earlier era. Grounding academic development in academic work now means that the nature of such work and relationships between colleagues must also be questioned.

Development as a localised practice

In the literature there has been an overwhelming emphasis on development activities organised centrally within the institution, rather than on those which initiated at a departmental level. This emphasis is not surprising as those who have academic development as their major role write much of the literature. However, increasingly there are examples of hybrid approaches involving teams of central and local staff. The strengths and limitations of a centralised view are soon apparent in discussions with colleagues though.

Well-designed university-wide development programs are extremely valuable and are often highly regarded by those who participate in them, but nevertheless they are not sufficient for internalisation of new practice and implementation in another context to fully occur. There is often little opportunity to practice new skills or ways of working, the colleagues who can support or undermine initiatives are rarely involved in such programs and new practices are often insufficiently contextualised to work in what might appear to be an alien environment. It is not sufficient however, for university-wide activities to be simply replaced by local ones. Local development activities are often limited by a tendency to parochialism, a lack of awareness of research on higher education and the reinforcement of bad habits which occurs when existing cultural practices are taken for granted.

While there will always be tensions between an inside-out and an outside-in orientation, both are needed. Central programs can challenge the taken-for-grantedness of local ways of operating, and local work can ensure that new initiatives are embedded in changing work patterns of departments. Much has been learned about how educational development professionals can conduct high quality programs, but as yet there is no complementary well-articulated body of practice at the local level. How would the field of academic development be conceptualised if this imbalance was corrected? A key feature would be an emphasis on peer learning with colleagues in one's own field. This

involves returning to the earliest phase of academic development to reappraise the traditions to be found there and to link them with more sophisticated theory and practice which has evolved since then.

Academic development as reciprocal peer learning

Over the past two years I have been working with colleagues on the use of peer learning in university courses. Our emphasis has been on developing strategies for teacher-initiated peer learning to assist students take increasing responsibility for learning and provide means for collective support in circumstances where teaching staff have less time for student contact (Anderson and Boud, 1996). Much of our work has been with learners who were mature age professionals, and this has led us to reflect on the applicability of the ideas of peer learning to working with colleagues.

We used the term peer learning to suggest a *two-way*, reciprocal learning experience. Peer learning involves participants learning from and with each other in both formal and informal ways. It includes mutual benefits and a sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience among participants. The emphasis is on learning rather than teaching, and on the support and encouragement learners offer to each other, as much as the learning task. In peer learning the roles of teacher and learner may either not be defined, be blurred and may shift during the course of the learning experience, unlike other learning events in which roles are fixed. Peer learning takes place spontaneously and informally in many circumstances, but it can be desirable to prompt it when there is the possibility that some members of a group may be excluded or ignored, or when other circumstances may inhibit it. Not all work places are congenial to learning (Hughes, 1998) and in many cases prior initiatives have to be undertaken to create a suitable micro-context in which peer learning is possible (Boud and Walker, 1998).

Some features of reciprocal peer learning relevant to present considerations are:

1. Peer learning necessarily involves participants working together to develop skills of collaboration. This gives them practice in planning and teamwork and involves them as part of a learning community in which they have a stake.
2. There are increased possibilities for participants to engage in reflection and exploration of ideas when they are not in the presence of someone designated as a 'teacher'. Whether these possibilities are realised however depends on the ways in which peer learning is established and the context in which it operates.
3. Participants gain practice in communicating and applying their knowledge within their discipline or profession. They are able to articulate their understanding and have it critiqued by peers as well as learn from adopting the reciprocal role.
4. Peer learning involves a group of people taking collective responsibility for identifying their own learning needs and planning how these might be addressed. This is a vital learning-how-to-learn skill as well as providing practice for the kinds of interaction needed in academic workplaces.

While in the past academic work has been characterised by a highly individualised approach, times are rapidly changing and cooperation and collaboration are vital in the complex organisations of higher education, which are now emerging.

Peer learning can be useful framework for considering academic development for a number of reasons:

1. While there are differences of experience, and sometimes status, the common ethos of academic work is collegial. Colleagues are members of a participative culture in which they share decisions and obligations.
2. The traditions of peer review (in publications and grant proposals) are well established and members of the community are not normally exempt from such procedures, no matter what their position within it.
3. Developing as an academic necessarily involves considerable peer learning. However, an explicit focus on the notion of peer learning enables the activity to be

discussed and critiqued rather than the processes of enculturation being taken for granted.

What forms might peer learning take in academic development? While there is clearly substantial scope for peer learning in centrally organised courses, there are many other possibilities at a local level which have the advantage of strengthening collegiality and being able to be implemented more effectively. The most obvious areas in which it might be fruitfully applied are those connected with the basic academic functions of teaching, research and administration. Our experience has been that it is also necessary to relate peer learning to those activities in which there is likely to be some tangible outcomes for staff and the academic grouping concerned. Peer collaboration needs to be actively promoted if it is to meet these ends.

Two examples

The following examples of local development have a common foundation, as in most workplace learning, as responses to demands of the immediate context. They are intended to be illustrative only: examples of this type can probably be identified in any institution. They are included here to demonstrate the kinds of fundamentally important local development arising from local needs which must be considered in any discussion of academic development, but which are often rendered invisible or subordinate by centralising preoccupations. Although at one level they are about the development of individuals, they also meet collective needs. Without a focus on both, they would not have been able to take root and flourish.

The first example involves teaching and learning practices, the second the development of research and scholarly writing. The context, which they share, is that of the amalgamation in 1990 of three institutions to form a new university—the University of Technology, Sydney. This created a need for the smallest part of the three (which ended up as part of a new Faculty of Education) to forge an identity in a new university. It was necessary to build on previous achievements and to establish new ones.

(a) Teaching development projects

One of the features of Adult Education at UTS was the pride taken by teaching staff in the way their courses were responsive to students. Courses had been constructed to reflect what were regarded as good adult learning principles and the School was well regarded for this (Boud 1996). However, on a day-to-day basis the teaching approach was accepted as ‘normal’ and courses were conducted with little thought given to what visitors commented on as interesting. When the Australian Government first announced the availability of National Teaching Development Grants the opportunity was taken to seek funds to investigate and document some innovative features of the programs. The reasons for this were twofold. First, it was necessary for a School which believed itself committed to teaching to gain recognition for its activities in a way which would be widely acknowledged in the university system. Secondly, it was an opportunity to involve those inexperienced in publishing to work on projects which built upon their undoubted educational expertise. Thirdly, it provided an excuse to critically and systematically reflect on particular teaching practices which were becoming to be taken for granted and not used as effectively as their potential allowed.

In the first round, a team consisting of two staff members relatively inexperienced and one experienced in research and writing pursued a project on the effective use of learning contracts (Anderson, Boud and Sampson 1996). Subsequently a wider group obtained two other National Teaching Development Grants for projects on peer learning. All of these projects involved a review of existing material and practices, the seeking of good practice amongst colleagues and the development of materials which could be used by teachers and students to enhance the effectiveness of courses.

Work on the projects necessarily involved professional development for the grantees and the immediate group of colleagues who were involved in exploring their teaching practices. Development occurred through the close examination of each person's practice and the sharing of experience. Mutual exploration of why each person did what they did and how they could relate their practices with those of others was the focus of regular meetings. 'Good practice' identified during these sessions was documented and feedback on this from others colleagues was sought systematically.

There was no sense in which development was being conducted *on* participants. They were engaged together because they believed what they were doing was intrinsically worthwhile and gave personal satisfaction. It provided an opportunity to review practices in ways which allowed for direct impact on the quality of teaching—thus enhancing professional self-esteem—and it created a public product which, in the current context of accountability, demonstrated their achievements. It could thus be justified in multiple ways. It was rooted strongly in the local context and had an impact beyond it through the production of teaching and learning guides. The focus was on the teaching innovation, not on individuals' personal development. There was no implication in this of a deficit which needed to be fixed by development.

Without the impetus of a funded project, the expectations of a wider group of colleagues and the presence of some expertise in the facilitation of learning within the group, it is unlikely that the initiative would have been successful. The desire to improve teaching and learning in collaboration with colleagues alone would not have been sufficient in the current highly demanding context of university departments.

(b) Writing for publication group

The second example also illustrates development arising from a local context and embedded within it. Groups were established within the wider Faculty of Education to enhance writing for publication. Lately, these have been supplemented with groups to assist in writing grant proposals.

The aim was to provide support for staff who wished to write for publication. The emphasis was on fostering collaborative self-support activity and on generating concrete outcomes for each participant appropriate to their level of skill and experience and their own writing goals. Some groups comprised those who had little experience of writing others were for those who had already published, but who wished to extend their writing activities.

Groups were small (around eight participants) and met regularly. Participants made a commitment to participate in all the meetings and to develop a paper for publication during the life of the group. Meetings at first were held weekly, but then moved to a schedule that fitted the dynamics of the academic year. A limited amount of teaching release was initially made available.

The emphasis of the sessions was on meeting the specific needs of participants. The interests of those who took part controlled the agenda. Regular writing tasks related to the ongoing writing projects of participants were the core of the activity. Most sessions included an activity in which participants commented on each other's work through which reflection on the processes of writing and publishing was prompted. A colleague experienced in writing and publishing took a leadership role, and it was found that the value of the experience was enhanced for all parties when that person shared his or her own writing-in-progress with the group. An important element in establishing the 'peer-ness' of the group, which was emphasised by participants in an evaluation of the strategy, was that group leaders modelled being a peer through having their own writing critiqued and not using their power to distance themselves from this form of engagement. The characteristics of reciprocal peer learning listed earlier were manifest in the processes of the group.

The success of the initiative is illustrated by the increase in writing productivity of participants. Also by the fact that in the following year, members continued their participation and two additional writing groups were formed and led by other experienced colleagues. This approach is now embedded in the strategic plan of the faculty.

Discussion

There are a number of common features in these and similar examples. The most important is that they view development as an intrinsic part of academic work. It is not seen as an activity separate from normal business. They are not designed to be ‘scaled-up’ to become university-wide processes; different kinds of activity are needed in different local settings. There is close alignment between normal reward processes (which value teaching innovation, publication and getting grants), the strategic priorities of the faculty, and the aspirations of staff members. Immediate colleagues see the outcomes and achievements of those who participate and they can be readily identified as enhancing the position of the faculty within the university. This contrasts with many staff development programs which are invisible to colleagues, disengaged from the life of the department and produce rewards which may not have currency within the economy of the institution.

Peer learning and support for department-led activities are hardly new in academic development. However, they have mostly been discussed in the context of initiatives from outside the department or faculty and viewed from the perspective of a broader scheme of academic development in an institution. They are rarely reciprocal. When they are viewed from a local perspective, they take on a different character. They work only in so far as they become part of ‘what we do around here’, not as part of a broader policy framework. Prompting and sustaining academic development in this conception demands a different focus, and leads to quite different outcomes as required in different contexts. Success is judged in terms of situated criteria, which may relate to institutional priorities, significantly shaped by local conditions and cultures.

Challenges arising from locating development in academic work

While this paper has illustrated how academic development can be viewed as a local practice and as a process of peer learning in the workplace, there are many issues remaining which require exploration beyond the scope of this paper. Not all contexts are conducive to such approaches and careful analysis is required to discern what is appropriately dealt with at any given level.

- *development as enculturation*
Academics will always become encultured into the institution, discipline and department whatever formal steps are taken to initiate development. The unstated and implicit assumptions about academic practice exert a formidable influence. Until development becomes as familiar and common feature of everyday life in universities as teaching and writing and part of the everyday discourse of academics, then the existence of formal policies, projects and courses will have only marginal effect. We know relatively little about bringing about cultural change in universities: a great deal more is needed if both local and central staff development is to be successful. An important feature of the two examples presented is that they involved a public commitment to development, utilised senior staff as participant/leader and they were explicitly conceptualised as promoting learning.
- *what is it legitimate to do for and with one’s peers?*
There are limitations on learning in the workplace. An exclusive focus on working with peers can reinforce a parochial stance. It can avoid the challenges of research on

teaching and learning which exist beyond the bounds of the individual discipline and trap development within cultural practices which may not value the full range of academic work (eg. favour research at the expense of teaching). Dysfunctional local traditions may need confronting. Analyses of the appropriate roles of local and institution-wide development need to be undertaken to determine where an emphasis on each should be placed.

A particular restriction exists in the university context. The natural inhibition about revealing one's needs to a supervisor is compounded by the collegial relationships in university departments. When no one has a conventional line manager, changing positions of responsibility (through elected positions of authority) mean that potentially everyone is a supervisor. The management of one's image of personal competence becomes quite complex and the sensitivities involved in this need to be respected when peer learning activities are established.

- *linking development with strategic priorities*
While there are clear advantages in linking academic development with the priorities of the Faculty and University, not least being access to resources which flow to such priorities, there is the danger that strategic plans stress new initiatives rather than sustaining 'normal' work in teaching and research. The challenge is to ensure academic development is always a priority and to utilise energy released in innovation to be channelled into wider forms of personal and professional development.
- *development as part of leadership*
Local academic development cannot be successful unless leaders and managers are supportive of the concept and are willing to back it. Perhaps an ability to initiate and sustain activities of the sort described here is one of the key leadership skills to be sought in prospective heads and chairs. As there has been no tradition of thinking systematically about development in universities, it will require conspicuous acts of leadership to embed such thinking into daily practice.
- *using appropriate personnel in development*
One of the features of successful implementation in the examples given was the careful selection (and indeed, self-selection) of personnel to initiate and lead the activities described. A deep commitment to the development of one's less experienced colleagues and a robustness of ego which allows their successes to be celebrated are needed as well as expertise in promoting peer learning. A background in academic development of one member of the team in the first initiative described earlier was a bonus, which cannot always be replicated.
- *deploying specialist developers appropriately*
The argument of the paper does not suggest the demise of specialists who have developed particular expertise in academic development, far from it. However, this expertise needs to be spread widely and full time development personnel will need to continue the shift in their activities away from the direct provision of courses to supporting the development roles of deans, heads of departments and staff members who have vital local responsibilities. This has implications for the accountability of academic developers: they must be judged in terms of impact on practice, not on numbers of participants in programs.

Conclusion

Reconceptualisation of academic development is needed to move it further in the direction of locating it in the context of academic work. There is a danger though that this could be seen as a reversion to an earlier unsuccessful era and as a prop to the status quo. A misreading of the analysis in this paper might lead to a reduction in central

commitment to development. Such a commitment to resources is vital if the wrong signs are not to be given to the whole institution.

Academic development has been successful when it has drawn on a deep understanding of the ethos of higher education institutions, their cultural practices and the discourse of academia. High quality programs for new academics have been a success and have started to shift the culture. The major challenge now is to follow this through to the places where academics operate and are influenced by colleagues who have not had the opportunity to benefit from new thinking on development. It is not likely that this can be achieved by any single strategy.

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