DRIVING LESSONS – SUPPORTING ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT IN A PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION SPACE

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Abstract

At Varsity College (VC) and throughout the divisions of The Independent Institute of Education, academic developers are known by the title of 'Academic Development Coordinators'. This paper reflects critically on the development of this role. Some of the critical insights gained in this role are examined, from the author's initial appointment as an academic development coordinator based at one of the regional campuses, and then subsequently as the national academic development coordinator in which academic leadership is provided for the regional campus academic development coordinators. Thereafter three pertinent issues are explored with which the newly evolved role still grapples. Firstly, the unconscious ignorance of the complexity embedded within this role. Secondly, there is the profound shift in awareness that occurs in academic identity, from that of subject expert to a teaching and learning professional managing an academic culture. Finally, there exists the issue of how to manage sensitively an academic developer within the context of the institution's performative education agenda.

Introduction

Academic development has a formalised professional history of some fifty years (Frazer, Gosling & Sorcinelli, 2010: 56), although there is a much longer informal history. The heartbeat of academic development rests in the tacit practices associated with teaching and learning. At The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) the primary focus of academic development is to improve the quality of teaching and learning. It is increasingly the case that students in higher education in South Africa as elsewhere in the world are wanting teachers, with the formative pedagogical practices they bring and not lecturers as purely 'information downloaders' (McMillan, 2007: 213). This call to focus on the quality of teaching and learning with its many permutations has subsequently been echoed by many voices within higher education in Africa and South Africa (Luckett, 2007).

Academic development coordinators have been in place for six years at VC, a division of The Independent Institute of Education (hereinafter referred to as 'VC'). The posts are located in a private higher education environment within a unique performative educational model. The term 'performative' when applied to the higher education context is ubiquitous. Its proponents tend to see it as a positive call for higher education to get down to the business of the delivery of quantifiable education provision. Its critics have a rather more jaundiced view. They see performative education as the spawn of the neo-capitalist enterprise (Ball, 2003). Academic development coordinators at VC have had to navigate their way through this ideological dialectic in private higher education, as have other academic developers globally.

This paper begins by providing a brief overview of the structure of VC. It then describes the research methodology used followed by a brief synoptic overview of some of the complexities of academic development that have been extensively documented in the scholarship of teaching and learning literature (SoTL). Thereafter, three pertinent issues are explored with which the newly evolved role at VC has had to grapple. These are: firstly, the unconscious ignorance of complexity involved in the role documented internationally in the

scholarship of teaching and learning literature; secondly, what it means to change one's academic identity from subject expert to a teaching and learning professional; and finally, the implications of sensitively managing an academic development coordinator within the context of the institution's performative education agenda.

AN OVERVIEW OF VARSITY COLLEGE'S ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURE

VC is one of the tertiary divisions of The IIE (http://www.iie.ac.za). The IIE is a wholly owned subsidiary of ADvTECH Limited, a listed company on the JSE. VC has a twenty year history. It has eight national campuses, namely, Pretoria, Midrand, Sandton, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Pietermaritzburg, Durban North and Westville (Durban). Each campus offers tuition for the upper LSM (living standards measure) groups for a selection of undergraduate degrees and diplomas as well as a Chartered Accounting qualification. Until 2012 the degree programmes offered were University of South Africa qualifications, The IIE has now launched two of its own degrees. The diplomas offered are in the main IIE qualifications.

The national campuses range in size, the larger campuses can accommodate between one and two thousand students, the smaller campuses around eight hundred students. Class sizes on each campus range between eight to fifty students. Two thirds of the student population are registered for undergraduate degrees, the other third for various diploma courses. Internal surveys conducted by VC, as well as subsequent academic support-based interviews with students and on occasion their parents, suggest that students enroll at VC, as opposed to one of the public universities, for diverse reasons, the dominant one being the emphasis the institution places on high quality supportive student engagement by lecturers and the student support teams. Each campus accommodates a student support team consisting of full-time lecturers, academic developers (usually two or more per campus), a Student Relationship Manager (SRM) who is either a counselling psychologist or a social worker, a librarian, a careers centre coordinator, programme champions (who track student success in the various academic programmes) and a vice principal:

student support tasked with coordinating the team. In addition, there are two national positions

- national academic development coordinator (ADC) and a national SRM whose task it is to ensure the strategic operational consistency of the respective positions across the eight national campuses as well as provide capacity building activities for staff occupying regional positions. The national post holders report to the national academic manager, and the vice principals for student support report to their campus principal. The ADCs on each campus in conjunction with the vice principal: student support are responsible for managing the teaching and learning environment and developing the teaching and learning culture.2

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1   It should be noted that over 90% of VC's lecturers are not full-time employed academics but independently contracted academics and professionals. This presents a unique set of developmental challenges.

Research methodology

This paper draws from part of an ongoing qualitative research project into the role of academic development at VC. It involves multiple sources of data (see Table 1). It would be naive to claim a high degree of objectivity in producing this limited small scale study (Ottewill, Shephard, & Fill, 2002: 57- 58). However, small scale highly specific qualitative studies do incrementally advance the evolution of the broader teaching and learning debate in higher education (Bamber, 2008: 114). This particular multifaceted action research methodology was selected in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the role's 'tacit knowledge' (Craig, 2009: 191).

Table 1: Data Sources

Data Sources	Methodologies used to collect data	Frequency
10 ADCs employed at the time	Unstructured individual interviews Regional workshops with each ADC team Monthly teleconferences with the 7 national ADC campus based teams	per ADC for each of the 3 regions (9 workshops in total) 12
34 independently contracted lecturers	Anonymous structured questionnaire selected by convenience sampling	Once
15 students	Unstructured interview of randomly selected students.	Once
2 vice principals: student support (formally ADCs)	Unstructured interviews selected by convenience sampling	Once
3 Heads of Department	Unstructured interviews selected by convenience sampling.	Once

The project, as with any research project faced certain contextual challenges and limitations. The first was how to define the pre-suppositional platform upon which academic development rests at VC. This study therefore adopts the framework of consultative service provision as a congruent starting place in the light of where VC is located on Goslings' platforms for academic development. These are: educational consultant, educational researcher, and educational

manager (Gosling, 2009: 13). Secondly, the interviews and focus groups with the ADCs were conducted by the author after he had been contracted in a developmental/ managerial position to oversee this portfolio nationally, reporting to the National Academic Manager. This naturally raised issues around power, transparency and confidentiality with the interviewees. It was agreed with all the participants at the outset of this research that all the individuals' viewpoints would be held in the strictest confidence. The author tried hard to negotiate the five 'research aporias'.3 The paper reflects only the views of the author.

Which road, which map? - academic development as a complex and contested space in the South African and international arena

Academic development is susceptible to being seen as the shallow harvesting and duplication of 'best practice' surface pedagogical techniques, which can lead to it being given short shrift by subject experts because of its lack of epistemological and theoretical gravitas (Rowland, 1998). However, human practices are vastly complex phenomena, not always superficially transferable from one person, organisation or culture to the next (Erlandson and Beach, 2008: 415). Despite a growing body of practitioners who are now applying rigorous empirical and theoretical frameworks to this emerging and rapidly professionalising field, there are still those who call it into question (Boshier, 2009: 2). Academic Developers are faced with a theoretical cacophony. What is the purpose of academic development? Is it to encourage lecturers to become reflective practitioners (Erlandson and Beach, 2008: 417); build communities of authentic educational practice (Viskovic, 2006: 332); facilitate the growth of the scholarship of teaching and learning amongst HE practitioners (Healey, 2000: 183); develop lecturers' critical thinking and teaching skills (Brookfield, 1995) or is it to assist educators to develop learning communities? (Palmer, 1998: 106- 113).

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2 The term 'aporias' in this context refers to complex ethical paradoxes that bedevilled, in this instance, research in a higher education institution within which the researcher is employed, and in particular where the researcher is researching other employees' behavioural patterns (Williams, 2009: 215-219).

Epistemologically if academic developers choose to locate themselves within modernism or even late modernism, the developing and emerging world can cry foul (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008), as this is seen as the spawn of the neo-liberal globalising performative educational agenda,4 or a lack of understanding of South African diversity issues (Thaver & Mählck, 2008). Critical modernism cannot ignore the strident voices of neo-marxism and feminism, which form part of the justice and redress debates surrounding the politics of recognition (Mighty, Mathew, Ouelett, & Stanely, 2010; Higgs & van Wyk, 2006). In the postmodern space epistemological relativism is celebrated (Steinnes, 2004: 271),5 but it is still a profoundly uncomfortable place for most educators (Min, 2005: 844-847) who are looking for secure ontological purchase points to inform their practice (Steinnes, 2004: 274). Postmodernism and critical educational theory have called into sharp focus the inescapable question of power and the values of who has the power (Gosling, 2010: 98-100).

There is a further complication for academic developers in the South African context with the post-liberation call to transform and contextually Africanise the university by recognising previously excluded forms of indigenous wisdom (Higgs and van Wyk, 2006: 85-89) as well as embracing the rich sense of communal humanitarianism found in the African philosophy of Ubuntu. On a more pragmatic level there is the need to address the levels of equity, justice, 'underpreparedness' (Bradbury, 2001), funding (Wangenge- Ouma, 2010) and educational inequality that the apartheid regime left as its acrimonious legacy. And there are very real concerns amongst many academics, voiced as early as 2001 that the present ANC government's commitment to the type of social transformation necessary is ineffectual and being hijacked by the global neo-liberal agenda (Waghid, 2001).

Internationally the field is starting to professionalise (McDonald & Stockley, 2008: 214) and could be said to be arriving at last at the end of its healthy 'identity crisis'. Rowland, for example, in 2007 observed that 22 of the 69 journal articles from 2001-2006 published in The International Journal for Academic Development focused on questions surrounding the identity of the academic

developer. He surprisingly, did not regard this as professionally narcissistic (2007: 9). Theoretically, academic development might be just beginning to find a home in the emerging philosophy and science of complexity theory. Here it can find the epistemological gravitas and breadth to give voice adequately to the polyvocality that the discipline demands (Reid & Marshall, 2009). Its malleable contexts and tacit practices could be characterised as 'elastic practice' (Carew, Lefoe, Bell & Armour, 2008: 60-62) who argue convincingly that academic development should be guided by a contextually bound pedagogical pragmatism.

Postmodernism is a complex philosophical and social phenomena encompassing a wide diversity of thinking. At its heart lies the notion of the radical contingency of the human experience coupled to the radical relativising of all metaphysical truths, epistemologies and value systems (Caputo, 1992:48).

Some lessons learned about academic development at VC
I now turn to three key issues which the ADCs and I identified as we set about implementing academic development in this privatised HE environment.

An ignorance of the pedagogical complexities of academic development

As the role of academic development matured at VC its practitioners became aware that they were initially blind to the complexities with which they were dealing. Part of this blindness was directly related to the lean VC operational environment which meant that ADCs carried large teaching loads leaving little time to engage with SoTL. This continued until 2009 partly because ADCs resisted management trying to reduce their lecturing loads - these were initially seen as their badges of authenticity amongst the lecturers.

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3 Woods (2005: 431-358)

In conjunction with this, entrepreneurial pioneering cultures, like VC, develop a fast-paced intuitive pragmatism that initially regards critical self-reflection, particularly of an academic theoretical nature, with a jaundiced eye. Research of any kind requires a certain degree of isolation from the daily cut and thrust of lecturer and student interaction, in terms of reading and writing at the very least.

In small to medium size organisations/campuses it is quite clear that academic developers remain in the primary role of developers, amongst lecturers as 'critical friends' (Shortland, 2010: 301-302) who can assist them to develop their practice. To this end, in these smaller institutions, academic developers cannot afford to be seen as office bound, to the extent that managers and researchers can, and still remain perceptibly credible with the lecturers and students. ADCs need to be in touch with what is happening in the corridors, lecture rooms, libraries, and e-learning spaces. This interpersonal connection, as emotionally taxing as it can be, is where the primary recognition of their organisational authenticity is found.

On the other side of this coin, there is the difficult but necessary need to develop the strategic organisational consciousness the role requires. Individuals and organisations learn because they are able to listen empathetically and respond to the demands of their environments. Listening implies not only meeting with individuals and groups but also accurately measuring, generating and analysing organisational data. In the early days of this position, ADCs were given additional tasks by their management if they were seen to be reading or analysing information. Unconsciously this was not perceived to be 'work' whereas face-to-face contact with students or a lecturer was. This is now changing. There is a shift towards a more reflective academic culture.

There is also the issue that academic developers are often required to acquire disciplinary knowledge of the faculties with which they work. They ultimately

have to learn the deeper disciplinary discourse around these faculties, with the basic epistemological premises, the communication expressions used, the disciplinary culture and the teaching and learning knowledge in the discipline (Taylor, 2010). Initially, this was not consciously engaged with, at best it was seen as a luxurious add-on; in the worst cases ADCs were completely ignorant of this debate.

The question then in these highly performative teaching, as opposed to research, environments, is how available can an academic developer be, to whom and at what cost? There is the short-term value that can be gained by always being available to see the next at-risk student or struggling lecturer, versus the longer term gain of academic developers being able to detach themselves temporarily from what is urgent, to attend to what is strategically important. Internationally, it is recognised that participation in the SoTL debate is a critical component in the development of academic developers, (Hoessler, Britnell & Stockley, 2010: 81). However, if one ranks the forces that have the greatest impact on the daily life of an academic developer and the goals of the programmes with which they are associated, the picture looks quite different, i.e. lecturers' needs, (students' needs), educational leaders' agendas, and lastly the reading required for engagement with SoTL (Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2010: 31-33). Teaching in these performative academic cultures, means making peace with this searing tension between reflection and action which constantly challenges both the individual's and organisation's integrity.

A change in academic identity

The second issue concerns academic identity. At VC the ADC role took high performing expert teachers, who were adept at dealing with the complexity of classroom management, and then exposed them to the much fuller complexity of having to develop a robust pedagogically accountable culture of teaching and learning within their respective branches. This jump was considerable. McDonald characterises it as '... finding a way to blend multiple identities into the concept of educational developer' (2010: 43). Initially academic developers regard themselves as subject experts, ironically though, because their

primary focus has always been teaching and learning, their publication output does often not support this claim. Colleagues, who have a stronger research agenda, have a publication record. This trend was reflected at VC, where of all the present ADCs interviewed only one self-identified as a teaching and learning expert first and then a subject practitioner, and there are no ADCs with large publication records. Some studies indicate a two to four year process of socialisation is needed to embrace fully this role and break with previous academic identities (ibid: 42). What has to be learned is that, 'you never lose your classroom it just changes.'6

Finally, there remains the divisive issue of where an academic developer's academic allegiance lies (Jawitz, 2009: 250). The majority of academic developers still originate from the ranks of subject teachers. They have deep affective and cognitive ties to their disciplines, which do not include formalised pedagogy. In many instances these academic disciplines have become deeply embedded in their own narrative identities. Furthermore, many of their peers and subordinates accept them on the bases of these identities, viewing pedagogy as an ancillary light weight 'add on'. Some authors are now beginning to talk about a career turning point that occurs, where academic developers have to make a hard choice about what will become their major focus (Gosling, 2010: 94). At VC we have discovered that like all major choices, this shift is a process that occurs within individuals as they operate in this role. The VC culture provides very strong recognition for the managerial and developmental aspects of the ADC role (promotion and compensation) and relatively weaker strains of recognition for scholarly research and development.

Managing pedagogical sensitivity and institutional demands

The third issue is to do with managing pedagogical sensitivity and institutional demands. It is acknowledged that academic development exposes its practitioners to a voyage of personal and collaborative discovery that is not always comfortable or predictable. In order to be effective the VC ADC has had to have a large degree of 'pedagogical sensitivity'. This can be defined as the advanced ability to detect proactively the potential disconnections between

students, lecturers and the educational system in which they participate.

The flip side of this sensitivity is that for conscientious ADCs it is very easy to feel overwhelmed by the host of issues that need attention. Human beings, unlike research papers, cannot be conveniently filed away for another day! As any systems practitioner is aware, she will see greater levels of depth and complexity, which call for more ownership; people have to be guided to learn how to manage this internal 'fire' that gaining insight ignites. Performative private HE environments continually attempt to improve throughput as well as pass rates. Student retention is directly linked to student support (Young, Glogowska, & Lockyer, 2007). It is very important that this issue is strategically managed so that recently recruited ADCs are not overwhelmed.

This pragmatic insight was given to me by the present Academic Manager of VC which greatly assisted me in my own identity transition.

In this regard the stress that ADCs experience at VC could be regarded as that of the associate professor status at other higher education institutions in South Africa, and as at least one recent South African study has demonstrated this could be the most stressful career period (Barkhuizen, & Rothmann, 2008: 332). Although an ADC might not carry the associated stresses of publication and postgraduate supervision, their lecturing loads, as well as the number of lecturer and student engagements more than compensate for this.

ADCs need their roles and identities nurtured by their management. The 'softer' issues of personal development such as attaining deeper levels of psycho-social integration, academic reading, and the sharpening of their strategic thinking skills, need as much attention as the 'harder' skills associated with academic administration. If this is not done career 'burn out' in this position is inevitable.

The road ahead - conclusion

If one looks at Gosling's analysis of the academic developer's role as that of educational consultant, educational researcher and educational manager (Gosling, 2009: 13), it would seem that the VC ADC should constitute a hybrid of consultant and researcher in terms of our organisation's needs and structure. The major chord that holds rich polyvocality remains the quality of teaching and learning (Gosling 2010: 92-94), which necessarily translates into the short-term pragmatics of job and career development, long- term into developing 'glocal' citizenship that will nurture the development of civil society.

In the small to medium private HE space over-utilisation, intensive multi-tasking, and a lack of reflective space can lead to academic developers burning out, coupled to them not utilising or participating in more critical and reflective practices, e.g. SoTL. Managerial support, alongside administrative support and well run IT systems can in these instances go a long way to mediating these systemic pressures. Globally, it has been noted by numerous practitioners researching this field that academic development is a very challenging educational space to inhabit (Bamber 2008: 107-108)]. For VC academic developers, the challenge is how to develop a sharp strategic focus on the teaching and learning environment at local campus level, while remaining in touch nationally and internationally with developments in this exciting field.

The multiplicity of career entry points, theoretical positions and interdisciplinary engagements, have led to the unfortunate perception that anyone can become an academic developer (Harland & Staniforth 2003: 28-31). The author's own experience and research in this field has led to another conclusion; namely, that academic development, as a form of organisational development, requires a special type of person and not just 'anybody'. Only individuals with a highly developed interpersonal skills' matrix coupled to a deeply integrated pedagogic coupled to andragogic sensitivity will have longevity within the field of academic development, especially when exposed to the full blast of organisational complexity. The competencies required to be an effective ADC at VC appear to be rooted in a radical form of pedagogic vocationalism, whose humble teleology is not located in a messianic sense of nation building, ideological liberation, nor

an aggressive marketing mentality. Rather the VC ADCs needs to be self-motivated to assume full responsibility for the 'excitement of the learning encounter' as Praeg (2006: 347) states:

… we can only bear responsibility when we do not defer to it. Part of the excitement of the learning encounter, then, is that it demands of us to take responsibility for an experience that is at once exhilarating, frightening, comforting, terrifying, and liberating.

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