

## Academic development identity and positionality

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### **The early modernist project**

A little bit of philosophical analysis of the 'concept' of academic development suggest that there are three elements to the concept – that which is being developed (the subject of the development) and the second, implicit in the concept of development, namely that it is a change towards a desired end (the goal of development). These three elements lead to two questions 1. who or what is being developed? 2. to what end are they being developed? 3. what are the process or the processes through which or by which the subjects are developed in order to achieve the desired end.

Interviews with those who were instrumental in creating the field of 'educational development' in the 1970's indicate that it was characterised by a clear idea that it was focused on people – teachers in higher education and a reasonably clear idea that the end was improved teaching. The processes were based on the idea of 'in-service training' with a curriculum that included 'teaching methods' 'student learning' 'educational technologies' and 'curriculum design'.

We put people through with the City and Guilds 730 for some time, not in that name because they didn't want to come to us for City and Guilds but it was the same sort of thing, same sort of programme. (Respondent 10)

The second feature was the *moral imperative* which motivated the creation of the field. The early academic developers were driven by a strong desire to improve teaching – to make things better – according to their view of what would make a better experience for students. This was the goal to be achieved.

Here is an academic developer talking what motivated him to become a ‘developer’. He described his own experience of university when his teacher would lecture by reading from his book, and ‘each week, like idiots, we wrote it all down’.

‘That fuse, being melodramatic, lit at that point..., and it’s still there. I still hate, get angry about, bad teaching, and bad course design, and lousy assessment. I’m afraid there’s a lot, and I’m glad there’s a lot, still to be angry about. It keeps me working.’ (Respondent 5)

Here there is no room for questioning, no existential reflexive doubt. There is bad teaching. There is bad course design. And there is ‘lousy assessment’. These are seen to possess ontological certainty. The job of the academic developer is to eliminate these behaviours from the university. It is also clear that the beneficiaries are intended to be ‘students’. There is an implicit assumption that if staff can be developed to teach better, then students will learn more effectively.

Academic development understood in this way is, as Ray Land has pointed out, a ‘modernist project’. It was driven by an optimism that through rational means (such as education) institutions (such as universities), can be ‘improved’. Change is seen as progress, and change processes can be understood through scientific principles or, to use a more modern phrase ‘evidence-based practice’. The new science of teaching and learning was intended to shine a light on ignorance and dogmatism that had characterised university teaching up to this point in time. Educational development would replace pedagogical superstition with modern ways of achieving ‘effective learning’. The early academic developers saw themselves as pioneering, revolutionary, overcoming the old forces of order that were based on class, privilege, and established hierarchies. They were largely anti-establishment ‘polytechnic lads’ ‘rolling their sleeves up’ and ‘making a difference’.

Academic developers were those who had the knowledge and expertise to reform what had been conceived as staff development up to that point in time. Staff development (before educational development redrew the conceptual map) was in the words of one of the pioneers:

an entirely different notion about what kind of beast it was or how you did it; it was kind of gentlemanly in those institutions, you had a kind of friendly, semi-retired professor running it whom people trusted, you know that kind of... total amateurs were running it (Respondent 7)

These ramshackle, ad hoc, pre-modern processes, run by semi-retired professors, largely based on tradition and authority, were swept away and replaced by new, shiny, modern, research-based processes.

I re-oriented the research group into a thing called a Study Methods Research Group, hired X as a researcher, and with Y, we started doing phenomenographic research into the experiences of Open University students and longitudinal research looking at changes and then what influenced those changes. And it was out of that, my work on study skills got spotted in several places, so that the thing that became, the work then became teaching students to learn which was very widely used, was already widely available in booklets of various kinds that were written for staff development purposes.

Thus academic development began to change the landscape of staff development.

### **Academic Development breaks out of the staff training mould**

It has been said that to a large extent 'Educational development, as practised, remains, on the whole, a modernist project.' (2004:192). Seductive though such a modernist model might be it doesn't take account of many things – the agency of the subject, the impact of context, the dynamic relationship between the subject and the process and between the process and the end, indeterminacies about the effectiveness of the process as a means of achieving the end, the influence of other agencies and countervailing factors, uncertainties about the desired end.

If we are persuaded that we live in a postmodern world of radical uncertainty, super complexity, the end meta narratives, and the dissolution of the subject then it is questionable that the early concept of academic development can survive. The current period is characterized by seemingly endless choice (Bauman 1991). New technologies (in communications, biotechnology, medicine and defence) are undermining the older forms of social integration and cultural identity (ethnicity and race, religion, class) which were based on older forms of social integration of (supposedly) autonomous individuals.

The project of modernity, as it has traditionally been conceived, is poorly equipped to unite these domains and re-establish a principle of unity and purpose, for knowledge has ceased to offer the prospect of emancipation. (Delanty 2001:152)

Quite early on, arguably as soon as it got started, academic development as a single-minded and straightforward modernist project began to break down.

they didn't want to be just teacher trainers or staff trainers they wanted to be educationalists who encouraged others to look at, examine, and enquire into Teaching and Learning issues (Respondent 4)

The first signs of a split between those who conceived themselves essentially as 'trainers' and those who had a wider interest in changing higher education

began to appear. Academic development expanded to encompass a wide range of topics or objectives

so '73 onwards for five or six years was In-Service Training and Curriculum Design, and then the Curriculum Design bit got phased into Development and Research, Programmes and Research Skills, and Research Bids and Projects (Respondent 10)

What is notable about this is (a) the way in which academic development was required to respond to institutional agenda and (2) as consequence academic development no longer focused exclusively on the academic qua teacher but began to take other subjects for development including the institution itself as a subject for development, (3) and it began to accept that were goals for development other than improved teaching and learning.

By the time that the heads of academic development group formed (in 1994) there was considerable variety in the remits of academic development departments particularly in the new universities – for example, equal opportunities, widening participation, providing community links, compacts, credit accumulation and transfer (CATS), accreditation of prior learning AP(E)L, English language support, study skills, production service for TV/video – these were scattered through new universities' remits. This may be partly due to the historical origins of Academic development departments, which brought with them functions from a predecessor section. Or it may reflect the fact that in a more corporately organised institution a central department can be given new functions if it is thought to be the appropriate by managers.

At UEL I had the only 'academic adviser for black students' a post in the UK created by an earlier Home Office initiative. Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) also created new posts and encouraged – if did not initiate – a whole new language of entrepreneurship, work-based learning, capability, learner-managed learning. Independent studies, student learning contracts, autonomous learning, experiential learning – these buzz words all indicated a fragmentation of purpose and the influence of diverse ideologies pulling Academic development departments in different directions.

Under the influence of HEFCE's requirement that Teaching and Learning strategies should address what they called strategic priorities, academic development began to chase unclear, rather poorly articulated, political goals being set by New Labour – goals such as employability, widening participation, fair access, and later the entrepreneurship, internationalisation and teaching/research nexus. Innovation was always treated as an intrinsic value, a good in itself. This was particularly reflected in the growth of perceived importance given to ICT and VLEs in the mind-set of academic

development. It began to appear that almost any aspect of HE life could be potentially a candidate for 'development' and which academic developers could turn their hand to if asked. Post-graduate skills development, research capacity, student learning development, organisational development, management development all suggest that academic development has long since lost sight of a singular conception of subject, process or goals.

Research into the perceptions of academic developers of their role also indicates wide variations in personal orientations to academic development. Whereas some see themselves as primarily functioning in support of the strategic objectives of the institution, others position themselves in a more neutral stance of supporting staff to cope with, or even subvert, some of the changes required by senior management (Badley 1996; Gosling 1997; Land 2000; Land 2001). Martensson and Roxa have gone so far as to say that in the Swedish context,

'individual practitioners seem to understand the practice of academic development in such a multifaceted way that they do not understand each other – there exists no community of practice' (Martensson and Roxa 2005:2)

As at least some academic development centres moved from the margins of their institutions to the centre, it became increasingly obvious that there was a willingness to use institutional systems to achieve goals. There was a strong push, for example, to change promotion criteria and embrace other rewards, such as National Teaching Fellowships, and Centres for Excellence. This has led to the accusation that academic development 'is dependent on and implicated in those very managerial practices from which some practitioners wish to distance themselves. Moreover, some developers enthusiastically embrace these powers' (Clegg 2008:5). Clegg has suggested that

the project of academic development, at least in the 'north', is now so embedded within the structures of audit and managerialism that it can no longer claim its progressive (modernist) role (Clegg 2009:413)

But as Clegg discusses, this creates ambivalence and unease among some developers about their institutional role. I well remember that despite my disapproval of Subject Review as a process, I and my academic development unit took full advantage of approaching Reviews to work with departments on what we saw as 'improving teaching and learning.' This kind of pragmatism or opportunism has served academic development well in gaining influence at both an institutional and national level, but the price to be paid in engaging in this Faustian pact may be high. The tolerance of directors of academic development was strained to the limit by the Centres for Excellence initiative with which many directors disapproved, but who felt

nevertheless that they could not afford to ignore the opportunity to apply for such generous funding.

Waste of money and rubbish [laughs]. My last year has been entirely ruined by something that I don't believe in. (N.B.S.16) (Gosling and Hannan 2007:638)

A familiar position adopted by successful bidders was to separate their personal views of the CETL strategy from the advantage they stood to gain from being successful. This might be called *Strategic compliance*.

Bid-writers put aside their personal view of CETLs, and became strongly motivated to achieve what became seen as both a personal project and something important to the institution. This phenomenon was particularly noticeable at stage two, when bidders perceived that their chance of success was so much greater. (Gosling and Hannan 2007:640)

### **Bernstein and Academic Development as a new 'Region'**

It is clear that Academic development departments make decisions about the scope of 'development' based on pragmatic considerations within a very context dependent framework, determined by what is possible within their particular circumstances, including key factors such as the size and culture/mission of the institution, the level of priority given to teaching, and the size and capacity of the EDU. In other words academic development is a field of activity which has no strong boundaries, is unstable and necessarily required to respond to the environment in which it operates.

Bernstein has argued that this is typical of the 'new regions' of knowledge. He suggests that even disciplines (what he calls 'singulars') have two faces. One

'legitimises their otherness and creates dedicated identities with no reference other than to their calling From this point of view singulars develop strong autonomous self-sealing and narcissistic identities' (Bernstein 2000:54-55).

But disciplines also face outwards, to their external linkages to the political and economic environment.

However in what he calls 'regions' which are 'recontextualisations of singulars which face inwards towards singulars and outwards towards external fields of practice.' (ibid: 55) it is this outward facing character that is critical to their identity.

Identities produced by the *new regions* are more likely to face outward to the fields of practice and thus their contexts are likely to be dependent on the requirements of these fields. Identities here are what they are, and what they will become, as a consequence of the *projection* of that knowledge as practice in some context. (2000, 55)

Bernstein's 'regions' resemble what Hirst (1965:131) called 'fields of study' which draw on forms of knowledge which contribute to the subject – for example engineering, education and medicine. They incorporate a range of disciplines or 'singulars' but uses them to achieve practical goals. The fact that 'regions' incorporate several discipline may go some way to explaining the phenomenon that

Rowland has pointed out, namely that there was no overlap in the discourse between two types of academic development literature represented by Entwistle and Barnett (Rowland 2003: 17).

Another way to illustrate this phenomenon (and here I have only South African and Australian data) is that if we ask directors of academic development centres which five texts have most influenced their practice, we find there is no consensus about which texts are most influential in the field of academic development.

In South Africa, The South African Journal of Higher Education was mentioned by four respondents and the International Journal of Academic Development by two. The only text mentioned by more than one person was Ramsden's *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. Otherwise all texts had only one mention. Among Australian Directors, there was slightly greater agreement. 29 texts or authors, 18 journals and 3 web-sites were nominated. Of these, 2 texts stood out as having most influence with 6 mentions each – Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University (Biggs 2003)*, and Ramsden's *Learning to Teach in Higher Education (Ramsden 2003)*. Ramsden's *Learning to Lead* (Ramsden 1998) was mentioned four times and Laurillard's *Rethinking University Teaching (Laurillard 2002)* and Prosser and Trigwell's *Understanding Learning and Teaching* (Prosser and Trigwell 1999) three times each. Other authors with two mentions were Bowden and Marton, Brookfield, Huber, and Kotter. Among the journals HERD was mentioned 8 times, IJAD and Studies in Higher Education three times.

This variability suggests a lack of clear boundaries within the literature of academic development – what Bernstein would call 'weak framing'. This is worth exploring further in relation to the question of the academic identity of academic developers.

There is a trend towards a larger proportion of directors with higher degree qualifications, suggesting an increasing academicisation of the profession and decreasing identity based on experience in staff training. In both South Africa and Australia, 74% of directors hold a PhD. This compares with 53% with a PhD in the UK sample, compared to 52% of Australian directors in 1997 (Hicks 1997)

Because there are no formal requirements in terms of specific areas of knowledge or qualifications to enter the academic development 'profession' there is wide variability in discipline background. There is no consistent pattern of disciplinary background. In Chism's international study the proportion of academic developers with an education background ranged from 39% to 70%. Education was named as the major area of study for respondents' most advanced degree (48.0%) while other disciplines were represented as shown in Table 8. Australian respondents reported the highest percentage of Education degrees (70%), followed by Canada (64%). The percentage in the United Kingdom and United States was virtually the same at 44%, while Europeans reported 39%. (Chism 2007).

It is arguable whether an education background is necessary given that in most cases 'education' relates to the schools sector. Indeed a substantial proportion of professionals in academic development have had experience in the school sector, 37% in the UK, 42% in South Africa and 50% in Australia. One explanation is that higher education institutions across the globe have found it necessary to recruit AD staff from the secondary sector because individuals with school experience are more likely to have had systematic training and staff development in areas such as curriculum design and student learning. Another possible explanation is that academic development professionals in higher education with a secondary school background are more likely to have an interest in teaching than academics who have entered HE through the research route. It will be interesting to see whether as more academics have had contact with AD - through PgCerts or similar programmes - it will become more common for universities to recruit heads of AD from within their own ranks.

Does academic development have an identity which is clear to itself and to others? Academic developers have always been rather ambivalent about where to draw the boundaries around the 'profession'. There is one school of thought which favours professionalization of academic development. Given that it is one of the proud boasts of academic development that all academics in the UK now must undertake some kind of initial development through an accredited postgraduate course, it may be regarded as surprising that no such requirement exists for those who are responsible for and teach on those courses.

But there is another view which argues that academic development is not exclusive to those with posts with academic development in their title and that the boundaries are permeable - anyone can be a developer.

if somebody's asking good questions about their teaching saying "What's working? How do I know what's working? What's research question have I

got? What literature might be able to help?" Then everybody, every teacher becomes a developer in a sense in John Cowan sense a developer of their practice and our role becomes not helping them to teach better, helping them to become better developers of their own practice. It's still a role, but it's different. (Respondent 5)

If 'every teacher becomes a developer' then what is it that distinguishes an academic developer from anyone else? There is a view that it is unnecessary to draw strict boundaries because academic development is an activity, not a professional role.

If you were a really good head of department and you made sure and supported your colleagues and inspired them, and you're doing academic development, then that's fine by me. X (name removed), she did a lot to inspire her staff to try new approaches to teaching and learning through her own commitments and passion. She wouldn't call herself an academic developer. She was a head of department. So I think it's the activity not the name. On the other hand I know as a feminist that you don't name things they become invisible and vulnerable. (Respondent 11)

This fear of vulnerability seems to borne out by studies in the UK (Gosling 2009), Australia (Palmer 2008; Gosling 2009) and USA which suggest that academic development units are particularly vulnerable to being restructured and disbanded, particularly at times of financial restrictions.

The precarious institutional position of academic development units seems largely to do with difficulties in articulating and communicating the role and purpose of academic development and its value to the institution. One ex-head of a unit that was closed considered that the reason for the closure was:

We hadn't made the case for ourselves as a necessary and valuable sustained function. We were an activity for the good times, not for the bad times.

Heads of academic development complain that others (principally the PVCs to whom they report) often misunderstand what academic development is *really* about.

'There are many misunderstandings about the remit of academic development and a tension between the need to carry out research in this area and the need to provide support' (pre-1992 university).

It has been suggested that this because their route to taking on the T & L responsibility may not have required them to engage in any of the literature on T & L or staff development.

Many of them will have come through because they have been Deans and Faculty managers – those sorts of things – they have all of those skills, they are not necessarily as up to speed as you would like them to be on what it is that might enhance learning and teaching (interview respondent 4, post-1992 university).

They may have come from another institution with a different, possibly more limited, view of academic development or they may have had a poor experience of academic development previously.

But it would be wrong to blame institutional managers and claim 'no-one understands us'. Let me suggest a few other issues which also create an environment in which academic development is vulnerable.

1. The formal expectations placed on Academic development departments exceeds their capacity to deliver. A not untypical responsibility of Academic development departments is 'maintaining and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching' (Oxford Brookes 1995). Academic development departments do not have the power to maintain and enhance teaching quality even if there was agreement about what this would mean (which there is not).
2. Resources allocated do not match the formal expectations and have no relationship to the size of the institution. In South Africa the ratio of academic development staff to students ranged from 1:1.7 thousand to 1:10 thousand. Similarly in the UK there is no consistency in ratios of Academic development departments staffing to institutional staff.
3. The relationship of academic development to academic teaching staff continues to be problematic. Whilst a few staff become enthusiastic supporters of academic development, attend its events, apply for funds and perhaps aspire to become academic development professional themselves within their departments or in a central unit, the majority remain indifferent and a smaller proportion are actively hostile. For one interview respondent this was to be expected, because academic development is a 'standing reproach' to many academics:

You know, it's really odd, it is expanding, it's fantastically more established than it was but still, it's not seen as essential, and I just, I understand reasons why, our very existence as a profession is a standing reproach to all those teachers and all those heads of departments and course leaders because if they were doing their job extremely well, they feel, they wouldn't need us. So somebody coming in and saying, crudely, "Had you thought about this, that or the other?" is often taken as a criticism. So our existence is a reproach, so you couldn't expect to be popular on that basis could you? (Respondent 5)

4. The evidence for the effectiveness of much of academic development activity is weak and indirect. Much of Ed work is mediated through the activity of others and it is difficult to pin-point which effects can be attributed to academic development interventions. The evaluation of the CETLs will be one of the largest evaluation exercises undertaken. It will be interesting to see what we can learn from the 74 self-

evaluations and the HEFCE commissioned summative valuation. However CETLs are not typical academic development organisations, for a number of reasons, not least for having far more funding than is ever likely to be repeated.

5. Academics suffer from initiative fatigue and academic development's association with every new 'drive' weakens its sense of itself and its ability to convince others that it has anything more at its core than to do the institution's bidding. There is nothing inherently wrong with taking opportunities as they come along, providing a sense of direction is not lost. For example the NSS does provide some opportunities to improve feedback to students for example, but the risk is that academic development is perceived not so much as improving teaching as being complicit in the university's desire to improve its marketing capability.

## **Positionality**

The key issue for the future of academic development is its institutional positioning or positionality. My thesis is that academic development has to communicate with many different audiences within the institution. To each audience it presents a slightly different face and its actions are interpreted differently by different audiences. What is therefore important is what I want to call its dominant positionality.

Although many models, approaches, orientations to academic development have been proposed, I believe some simplification is useful here to understand fundamental choices that academic development units have to make. Based on my research in the UK, Australia and South Africa, I suggest here are three basic alternatives in the way EDs position themselves. These are not alternatives in the sense of being exclusive. On the contrary my proposal is that all units position themselves in one of these ways at some time, depending on the issue and the audience. However the dominant position adopted will influence not only the options open within the two subordinate positions, but will affect how the EDU is perceived within all three positions.

The three positions are – as a service, as a management function, and as an academic department.

In the service position Academic development departments offer workshops, events, they carry out consultancy to individuals and to departments, they advise on using new technologies, and support academics who wish to research and publish on teaching and learning.

In the management position, Academic development departments work with senior managers to develop policies and guidelines, set targets, seek to influence institutional behaviour on matters such as the introduction and use of technologies, promotion and reward schemes, learning spaces. Academic development departments are called upon to support institutional initiatives and attend to institutional priorities. Typically this requires EDU members to spend time on committees and partaking in working groups.

In the academic position Academic development departments seek to carry out and commission research into learning and teaching and to teach on credit bearing courses, supervise PhDs, engage in debate in internal and external forums such as conferences, to publish in journals and on web-sites and to write books.

These are ways of describing the activities that characterise these three positions, but underpinning these activities are different ideologies and values. They imply different power positions in relation to the institution, also different ways in which the effectiveness of the work is evaluated.

My thesis is that, although most Academic development departments adopt each positions on different occasion it is the dominant position which most affects how the EDU is received and perceived. In some cases the dominant position will not have been chosen – it may seem like within a given institution to be the only choice open, or it may be the only one that the director of the EDU is willing to consider. But I suggest that Academic development departments do choose their dominant positions in the sense that their actions, their values and their public face will reflect their fundamental choices about their identity.

## **Conclusion**

I have traced academic development from a rather simple and single-minded modernist project to its creation as a 'region' of study, with its largely determined by the context in which it operates. This has created problems of identity for academic development which remain unresolved at the present time. I suggest that the critical factor which determines the identity of an academic development department is its choice of dominant positionality. I suggest that positionality within the institution needs to be chosen carefully to avoid unexpected responses to its presence and its activities.

**Table** summarising three alternative ‘positions’ for academic development

	<b>Service</b>	<b>Management</b>	<b>Academic</b>
<b>Orientation (Land 2004)</b>	consultant/ professional competence/	Managerial opportunist	Researcher interpretive/hermeneutic
<b>ideology</b>	consumerist	managerial	collegial
<b>goals</b>	enhancement	strategic	critical
<b>agency</b>	dependent	institutional	independent
<b>field of operation</b>	departments individuals	directorates committees	external
<b>Mode of operation or activities</b>	events – conferences, workshops	policies/targets, committees, working groups	Publications/courses/research supervision/ teaching
<b>Institutional power</b>	low	high	personal
<b>location</b>	HR/central	central	Education/central
<b>remit</b>	restricted	open	restricted
<b>Success criteria</b>	competency	performativity	Intellectual productivity
<b>evaluation</b>	feedback from users	performance management	peer review

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