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Elastic Practice in Academic Developers

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Abstract

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Keywords

educational development; reflective practice; collegiality; scholarship of teaching; tertiary teachers

Disciplines

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Elastic Practice in Academic Developers

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The academic developer's role is the focus of a growing body of literature. This paper builds the literature by arguing the importance to our current practice of making our theoretical underpinnings explicit. We excise and describe fragments of practice from the work of individual academic developers in order to discuss and consider the relationship between particular theories of academic development and particular approaches that these theories support. The three fragments of academic development practice we detail are related to reflective practice, collegiality and the scholarship of teaching. We also provide a fourth, more fulsome description of an approach to illustrate a highly responsive model of academic development: "Elastic Practice". Elastic Practice describes the process of tailoring a specific approach or instance of academic development from the full professional 'toolkit' (techniques, experiences, ideas, values, theories) that academic developers collect during their evolution as practitioners. The idea of Elastic Practice is that multiple theoretical bases are melded or successively employed to support an adaptive, responsive approach to practice. We suggest Elastic Practice is particularly appropriate for the complex, at times contested, environment within which academic developers work.

Introduction

The past decade has seen Academic Development emerge as a fledgling academic discipline from its practice-based past. The process of disciplinary emergence, as described by Becher and Trowler (2001) can be viewed as a progression through recognisable phases. These authors hold that a new discipline is initially characterised by confusion and diversity; next comes paradigmatic agreement where adherents to the field discuss shared foci, problems and practices to negotiate a loose but recognisable Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Finally the discipline emerges as a recognisable academic field with clarity of intentions, terminology, goals and practices. The growing body of literature on academic development and the role of its practitioners (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006; Brew, 2003; Calvin and Bath, 2004; Taylor, 2005) provides evidence that this is an emerging discipline.

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As an emerging discipline, academic development is in transition from its traditional emphasis on provision of service, toward a mixed-mode in which provision of service and theory both play important roles. Academic developers work in complex, and sometimes contested contexts and the range of potential roles and identities is highly varied given the diversity of organisational cultures, drivers and needs within contemporary tertiary institutions (Land, 2001; Taylor, 2005). The transition from service orientation to mixed-mode is evident in shifts in staffing patterns within academic development centres and in the related emergence of explicit statements of, and debate around, theoretical foundations for academic development in higher education. Early university academic development centres were most often service centres established with a mandate to support the quality of teaching in universities. These centres were often staffed and directed by staff who relied on qualifications and experience in school teaching (Hicks, 1996; Baillie, 2003; Fraser, 1999) and expatriates from diverse disciplinary fields (Mintz, 1997; Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006). Doctoral qualifications were not always required (Mintz, 1997; Hicks, 1996; Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006). This staffing pattern meant that the field was strong on practical action, but often lacked explicit agreed theoretical foundations. Discourse on what Peseta and others have called the “scholarship of academic development” (Peseta et al, 2005) is still nascent.

The staffing pattern and discourse observed in academic development centres is shifting (Baillie, 2003; Cowan, 2003), and the relationship between practice and theory is also shifting. Baillie (2003) observed the emergence of the “career academic developer” (p. 145). This new generation of practitioners tend to have “strong connections to theory...a theoretical stance...[and]...their academic subject is academic development” (Baillie, 2003, p. 145). A study that supported this contention was undertaken by Cowan (2003) who investigated specific instances of academic development practice and observed different approaches when comparing established academic development practitioners with those new to the field. Cowan (2003) observed that established practitioners tended to reflect on their real-life experiences of practice in order to generate theories, whereas new practitioners tended to draw on generalization or theoretical frames in order to decide experimental action to inform their approach. Recently, some researchers have begun asking “unruly questions” (Peseta et al, 2005: 60) in order to generate internal critique of the emerging traditions of practice in academic development. The point of such critique is to “simultaneously...interrupt and expand what research and evidence in academic development might look like” (Peseta et al, 2005; 60). This critical questioning offers substantial opportunity to examine and query accustomed approaches to practice which are common in this emerging field.

This is not to suggest that earlier academic development practice was a-critical or a-theoretical. There is limited evidence to support this proposition and the reality is likely to have been more complex. Trowler and Cooper (2002) have said “all practice is underpinned by theory, albeit often tacit” (p. 223). In other words, while the new career academic developer may have an explicit theoretical or critical stance, it is not possible to distinguish whether academic development practice has in the past been a-theoretical or whether the theory base of experienced practitioners was implicit and merged with practice. Ray Land’s (2001) research and synthesis demonstrate the multiple layers of context, structure and intention that may overlay, obscure or distort the theoretical foundation with which academic development practice aligns. Suffice to say, the explication of theory in academic development is significant for two reasons: it supports

the coming of age for academic development as a discipline and is necessary for maintaining, questioning and developing practice within the field.

The process of critiquing and theorising offers an opportunity for informed debate on the quality of thought supporting our accustomed approaches as academic developers. As suggested by Peseta and others (2005), there would be substantial value in such debates for contemporary academic development practice. For example, we could debate the value of various stances that are currently advocated for improving teaching in higher education (Trowler and Cooper, 2002). Stances advocated include; the scholarship of teaching (Hutchings and Shulman, 1999; Trigwell *et al.*, 2000; Trigwell & Shale, 2004); reflective practice (Schön, 1983); critical reflection (Brookfield, 1987); collegiality (Taylor, 2005) and congruence with academic self perception (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006). Land (2001) named a range of theoretical frames that aligned with different orientations in academic development, but stopped short of critiquing their effectiveness for the purposes with which they appeared to align. Openly debating the theoretical bases for each stance would allow academic development practitioners to make informed decisions and statements about what constitutes the best of our current collective practice, why we might employ or eschew a particular approach in a particular context, and how the field might continue to develop to ensure the health, rigour and quality of tertiary teaching.

In this paper, we contribute to the debate about theoretical underpinnings for academic development by describing and theorising our own practice. First, we excise and describe three fragments of specific academic development approaches, and explain the theory that supports each fragment. The purpose of excising these three fragments is to lay bare and consider the relationship between specific theoretical frames and specific actions in academic development. Following this act of fragmentation, we provide a fourth, more fulsome description of an ongoing academic development project. This fourth account details the evolution of an approach over time and the melding of supporting theoretical bases. We present the fourth approach to illustrate “Elastic Practice”. By Elastic Practice we mean an organic, responsive way of designing and evolving specific approaches to academic development. Elastic Practice is the process of selecting or tailoring a particular approach from the toolkit of practice in academic development. These tailored approaches respond to context, draw on the individual academic developer’s experiences, ideas, strengths, values and stances and meld multiple theoretical bases. We conclude the paper by discussing the potential utility of Elastic Practice for the professional learning of academic development practitioners, and as a means to describe a responsive, flexible approach to academic development particularly well suited to the complex context within which we ply our trade.

Method

In the early part of this paper, we argued the value and necessity of theorising academic development and making those theories explicit. Ironically, the genesis for this paper was in observations on practice. The authors are four academic developers who were working in a team at the University of Wollongong’s (UOW) Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR). UOW is a regional university in Australia. During a phase of restructure and reorientation at CEDIR, we noted substantial variation in the way that each team member constructed individual actions (approaches) as an academic developer and we wondered why.

This wondering catalysed a process of discussion, analysis and reflection on the similarities and differences in our theory, approaches and practice.

Our initial discussions of variation in academic development practice amongst the CEDIR team focused on the simple observation that we seemed to interact with our client base (academics, other academic development service units, policy and management) in a range of different ways. For example; one-to-one consultation, structured workshops, formal and informal meetings, and policy working groups. In discussing and beginning to catalogue specific examples of our practice, we noted that some academic developers in the team showed different degrees of elasticity in that they tended to use a greater range of approaches, sometimes melding an array of practices, and comfortably adapting accustomed approaches to suit a range of different contexts. We termed this Elastic Practice and decided that we might benefit as individuals and as a group from inquiring into what underpinned variation in our academic development approaches, and how and why some of us used Elastic Practice.

In our early discussions we speculated that variation in our practice as academic developers, and propensity for elasticity might be due to a range of factors. For example; our experience in the field or other life experiences, education and training background, the value bases informing and motivating our work, our intent, and various theoretical bases we employed to shape and make sense of our practice. Given that our theoretical bases were likely amenable to exploration, critique and even change, we opted to start by attempting to unpack theory. The remainder of this paper reports the results of this unpacking via structured activities and discussions undertaken by four members of the CEDIR Academic Development Team. The activities and discussions were aimed at identifying the theoretical foundations of our existing individual practices, and the processes we used were based on two of the theoretical bases that are subjects in this paper (collegiality and reflective practice). Processes included:

1. **Prompted reflective writing on the theoretical, philosophical and value bases of our accustomed approach to designing and delivering workshops.** These reflective pieces were generated via an email containing two simple prompt questions: What do you tend to do during a workshop? Why? The written responses to these questions were circulated amongst the group via a wider strategic planning process, and formed the basis of a paired discussion activity in which each partner explained their accustomed approach to designing workshops, and the reasons (eg. theories, values, experiences, assumptions) behind the accustomed approach. The initial reference to ‘workshops’ in the prompt questions was somewhat limiting, however, the respondents tended to focus on whichever activity best represented what they actually did as academic developers.
2. **Periodic and ongoing collegial discussion about the detail and bases of individual instances of practice.** These discussions occurred on a fortnightly basis over a period of three months and took a range of formats. Some discussions were focussed on the different institutional and faculty context within which we worked and how we responded and adapted our approaches to academic development in response to these contexts. Other discussions were explicitly about approach, for example, colleagues would opt to share examples of how and why they designed and executed particular academic development activities. These sharing sessions were most effective when one or more of

the authors had attended and observed the approach being shared. We also drew on, discussed and critiqued the approaches described in the written reflections (see 1. above).

3. Literature review and co-writing to explicate our individual and collective practice.

The process of co-writing this paper became an important part of our reflection and explication process. The initial intention was that each fragment would ‘explain’ the particular theoretical framework underpinning particular, specific approaches to practice. During this co-writing process, we co-read papers on a range of theoretical bases, read and commented on each others’ interpretations and descriptions of our own approaches, and were generally challenged to be clear about what we were doing and why. Several insights emerged during this co-writing process. For example, we recognised that our approaches tended to foreground a particular, primary theory but also draw from an array of less visible theoretical bases. It was during this process that the idea of Elastic Practice became apparent.

As a result of these activities and discussions we:

1. Developed a clear sense and statement of three theoretical underpinnings that strongly informed some of our different approaches to academic development;
2. Identified examples (fragments) from our own academic development work that explained how these theoretical underpinnings were manifest in specific instances of practice; and
3. Documented and explained in theoretical terms a specific academic development project to illustrate the idea of Elastic Practice.

Fragments of Academic Development Practice

In this section, we excise and describe fragments of our own practice to demonstrate that different theoretical bases can sponsor different approaches to academic development. The fragments we chose to describe were three we felt were effective and also neatly illustrated the foregrounding and practical implementation of three distinct theoretical bases. We describe academic development activity as supported by distinct theoretical bases current in academic development (reflective practice, collegiality and scholarship of teaching). We also show that there is practical and theoretical overlap between approaches. That is, the fragments described are most strongly shaped by a single distinct theoretical base (i.e. collegiality), but each fragment also draw on or overlaps with the other bases under discussion (i.e. reflective practice, scholarship of teaching). This overlapping foreshadows our discussion of the organising concept, Elastic Practice.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice (Schön, 1983) is concerned with consciously exploring and understanding both the “external technical” and the “internal reflective” dimensions of practice (Brookfield, 1987, p. 59). This theoretical frame is a foundation to much of the theory and practice of academic development in higher education (for example, Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Morss

& Donaghy, 1998; Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, 1996), and can be a powerful force for professional and personal change.

Proponents of reflective practice suggest that a degree of critical thinking is necessary if the exploration of practice is to engender professional learning. Theorists describe a range of levels that can be attained within the practice of reflection. Mezirow (1991) proposes a three dimensional framework comprising reflection at the level of content (exploring what we know); process (exploring how we came to know); and premise (exploring our assumptions). Hatton and Smith (1994) identify stages of reflection that trainee teachers move through as they become more experienced. These include (among others) technical reflection (related to teaching proficiency); descriptive reflection (which involves analysing performance as professionals); dialogic reflection (which involves exploring alternative actions) and critical reflection (taking account of social, political and cultural forces that shape the role). Bell (2001) analysed the reflective writings of academics participating in a peer observation program and identified three levels of reflection: technical reflection (related to improvement in techniques for presenting information); pedagogical (related to the development of a learner-centred conception of teaching); and critical (related to redefining one's educational role). While reflection at the various lower levels may lead to behaviour changes that improve teaching effectiveness, lower level reflection is unlikely to influence values development or effect paradigm shifts. It is only at the higher, critical levels of reflection that we expose and explore the values, beliefs and assumptions underlying our practice.

Moving beyond behaviour change requires an approach to reflective practice that liberates both the critical and the empathic faculties, and supports the educator in conceptualising teaching not as process work but as an ongoing journey of discovery. Thus, academic development activities based on reflective practice need to support academics in achieving both criticality and empathy when reflecting on their teaching practices. Building on the work of Lewin (1946); Vygotsky (1978); and Bruner (1996); that the social group is a powerful force for learning and that effective learning is contextual; a social-constructivist approach to reflective practice was developed within the University's Foundations of University Teaching course. The course involves a program of peer observation and collegial reflective practice that has been refined over the last ten years (Bell, 2001; Bell & Gillett, 1996). These "peer observation partnerships" (Bell, 2005) focus on meaningful, contextualised problem solving. The partnerships utilise feedback through Brookfield's (1995) four "lenses" - peer, self, theory and student - for critical reflection. Participants develop individual written reflections on the feedback they receive on their teaching. These reflections are shared for comment and discussion with at least one peer and an academic developer. These partnerships provide a collegial framework for reflective practice.

During the course, participants move through cycles of reflection on action as first described by Dewey (1910). The skills of giving and receiving feedback and writing reflections are modelled and practiced in a "safe" environment with the academic developer and peers within the course. Participants then develop peer observation partnerships (Bell, 2005) with faculty colleagues. These partnerships offer mutual support as the partners take the role of "critical friend" as described by Handal (1992) through: observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on

teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback; and trying out new ideas. Participants receive written feedback on their reflections from an academic developer who supports participants in moving from lower to higher levels of critical reflection by providing feedback that models the posing of critical questions.

Reflective practice and collegiality are the keys to this three-way partnership. The partnership process supports participants, their faculty colleagues and the academic developer in developing the habit of individual and collaborative critical reflection within the broader context of reflective practice. The significance of a collegial approach to reflective practice within professional development courses for higher education teachers is exemplified by a comment from an academic who participated in the course:

“This process created a sense of coherence and shared purpose/meaning that I have seldom seen [within the department].”

Collegiality

According to Taylor (2005) the role of the academic developer “requires a collegial posture in the way academic expertise is applied to help others solve problems on their own terms” (p. 37). Collegiality is a framework that offers shape to both the role and action of academic developers, and to the approach that may be taken in shaping how academic teachers work together to learn about teaching in higher education. Research on collegiality suggests that given certain structural, attitudinal, behavioural and cultural conditions, collegiality can intentionally be fostered to enable learners to support themselves and their peers to solve problems, and to reflectively develop their practice (Armour, 2005). Collegiality in this context is defined as “power shared equally between colleagues” (Bloomsbury, 1999) and requires what Fielding (1999) described as “a mutually positive attitude between fellow professionals; ... necessarily reciprocal and as such cannot be sustained by only one of the parties involved” (p. 14). The concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) lends further shape to an understanding of collegiality in the context of academic development. Communities of practice are groupings within which people share their understandings of work, responsibility, and knowledge within the workplace (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Three essential characteristics must be in place for this sharing to happen; mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998). *Mutual engagement* implies that each member of the community contributes to a shared activity; the evolving community negotiates meaning by developing a *shared repertoire*; and learning results from the full *joint enterprise* of contributing to activity, negotiating repertoire and working with common purpose.

In 2006, a collegial model for professional learning was used to structure a workshop for sessional tutors (teaching assistants) at UOW. As tutors are usually employed for their discipline and professional knowledge, and often on rolling casual contracts, the challenge for the academic developer is to ensure that provisions are made for ongoing development of their pedagogic knowledge and for evaluating the quality of their teaching. The workshop for sessional tutors was designed to address findings from a series of scoping interviews with prospective participants. The interviews suggested the sessional tutors were: isolated from their employing institution, lacked coherence as a community, and wanted to improve their teaching. These

needs differed from those identified in published studies of sessional tutors. These studies suggested that in-classroom issues like communicating with students, managing disruptive students and content knowledge are more common sources of anxiety for tutors (Goodlad, 1997; Luo *et al.*, 2001). The difference may be attributable to UOW tutors being spread across multiple locations and distant from the main campus; to the majority of UOW tutors having no other association with the University beyond teaching (i.e. are not engaged in postgraduate studies), or to the interpretive frame used to structure and analyse the interviews.

The intent of the workshop for sessional tutors was to support the ongoing development of participants' pedagogic knowledge and practice by initiating intentional collegiality amongst them to establish, develop and sustain the tutors as a community of learners (Senge, 1990; Barth, 1991). Wenger's (1998) three essential characteristics of mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise informed and were evident in the organisational negotiations, curriculum design, implementation and evaluation of the workshop. For example, participants were actively involved in the design of the curriculum content. This active involvement allowed them to nominate and frame a joint enterprise of the kind that Senge (1990) proposes would assist them to "deal productively with the critical issues they face, and develop their mastery in the learning disciplines" (p. 345).

Several communities of learners were established during the two-day workshop. In line with Palmer's (1998) process of learning in a community, the workshop set expectations for further learning by providing structures to facilitate ongoing reflection, discussion and action (follow-up assessment, optional accreditation, ongoing face-to-face and online collegial networks). Formal evaluation of the workshop confirmed that participants benefited from sharing experiences and ideas with other tutors; from reflecting on and solving relevant problems together; and from establishing groups with their colleagues. Some of the groups formed during the learning conference continue to operate and these have been sustained through interaction using email, internet discussion spaces and coffee gatherings. The preferred mode of interaction has been determined by each group, and has evolved in response to the changing needs and circumstances of the groups. The positive evaluations and continued operation of some groups supports the use of collegiality as a theoretical base for academic development activities.

The Scholarship of Teaching

In 1990, Ernest Boyer described a new way of understanding and valuing the teaching work of academics: the Scholarship of Teaching (SoT). Boyer's original conceptualisation of SoT was broad and subsequent research and debate has significantly developed the idea. The contemporary view is that SoT has three related dimensions (Trigwell *et al.*, 2000; Trigwell & Shale, 2004; Kreber & Cranton, 2000):

- an intent to improve teaching practice for example, critical reflection on and adaptation of the teaching approach;
- the use of scholarly habits of inquiry into teaching or learning for example, a research approach to evidence gathering, or strong grounding on educational theory; and
- critical peer input on the inquiry process and outcomes, and proposed improvements, for example transparency of process and response, with quality assurance through external review).

Hutchings and Shulman (1999) succinctly defined SoT as sustained inquiry into teaching practice and student learning that contributes to practice beyond the individual's classroom.

Institutional and disciplinary contexts strongly influence whether and how SoT is practiced in individual universities and faculties (Huber & Morreale, 2002). The fragment of academic development practice described in this section comes from UOW's Faculty of Engineering. Engineering is a discipline that has been described as difficult for the SoT (Wankat, 2002) and in most Australian engineering faculties teaching still has relatively low status compared with engineering research. A further constraint to SoT in engineering is the divide between the epistemologies and methods commonly used to research university teaching, and the objectivist tradition of engineering research. In light of these constraints, the approach to academic development used and described in this fragment was one of cross disciplinary co-operative research on teaching. The descriptor 'cross disciplinary co-operative research' means that the research was designed and undertaken via co-operation between academics in two disciplinary fields, in this case the fields of academic development and engineering. An avenue for co-operative research on teaching in universities is the undergraduate honours project. In engineering at UOW, the honours project is an independent research project undertaken by all fourth year students and usually comprises a quarter of the fourth year academic load. As such, the Faculty needs to offer and support a large number of honours projects and the research projects need to be of reasonably limited, manageable scope. Co-operative supervision of engineering honours projects offered the opportunity to work with engineering academics and honours students on engineering education research, as a means of supporting SoT in engineering.

During 2006, five engineering education honours projects were jointly supervised by a CEDIR academic developer and various UOW engineering academics. In each of these projects, the research focus was nominated by the engineering academic with the intention of generating research-based evidence on how teaching and learning might be improved in their particular subject areas or their teaching. The individual research projects delivered to different extents on the various elements of SoT. For example, one student researched the use of Minute Papers (Angelo & Cross, 2001) to inform changed teaching practices in an engineering computing subject. The information gathered using Minute Papers prompted the co-supervising academic to make substantial changes to the teaching approach. These changes contributed to a statistically significant improvement in student performance in final exams compared with the performance of academically equivalent students in the preceding year (Smith *et al.*, 2006). This is evidence of SoT through co-supervision contributing to a demonstrable improvement in an engineering academic's teaching practice.

The second element of SoT is scholarly inquiry using appropriate research methods and/or theoretical frames. Several students were supervised to design and execute qualitative and/or quantitative research including: interviews with academic staff and undergraduate students; paper-based surveying using open-ended and Likert scale questions; interpretation of short written text; and statistical analysis of assessment marks. One honours student's literature review was a thoroughly researched, succinct and coherent account of Constructivist theories of learning (Lam, 2006). The co-supervising academic who marked that literature review commented that reading and assessing the literature review was a strong learning experience.

Co-supervision allowed the participating academics to further develop skills in engineering education research methodology. Further the honours students searched, distilled and contextualised educational theory, thereby providing succinct means for the participating academics to access and critique theory relevant to their problems in the engineering classroom.

A third element of SoT is critical peer input. One of the projects resulted in a peer reviewed conference publication (Smith *et al.*, 2006) but perhaps more significantly, the act of assessing the students' theses was an important form of peer review and mutual learning for the academic developer and for the participating engineering academics. The act of assessing the honours theses required each academic to: thoroughly critique the research, evaluate what constituted a reasonable contribution, decide how and whether the resulting theses demonstrated a balance and blend between engineering and education, and consider whether the marking criteria set down for honours research in the Faculty were sufficiently flexible to appropriately reward each candidates' efforts. Each supervisor also viewed the comments and assessment provided by the co-supervising academic. This offered each the opportunity to learn from a critique grounded in a different disciplinary field (in this case academic development and engineering).

The activity of co-supervising engineering honours projects offered substantial opportunity for developing the SoT in the Faculty, and generated some very practical and useful outcomes. The academic developer came to a better understanding of the engineering education context. The participating engineering academics developed: a clearer sense of the patterns of research that are appropriate in research on university teaching, a grasp of the theoretical frameworks available to shape or reshape their own teaching, and some fresh ideas to break through some common stumbling blocks to learning in undergraduate engineering.

Overview of Academic Development Fragments

In the preceding three sections, we excised and described three fragments of practice that aligned with current theoretical stances in academic development. We described a peer observation partnership program that was predominantly shaped by a social constructivist perspective on reflective practice; we detailed a learning conference designed largely on the principles of collegiality to engender a community of pedagogic learning and sharing amongst sessional tutors at UOW; and we explained how co-supervision of honours student research was employed to develop the scholarship of teaching in engineering. Figure 1 represents how the predominant academic development activity in each of these cases differed by the main theoretical base that it aligned with. In the case of reflective practice, the predominant activity was *supported mutual introspection*. In the case of collegiality the academic development activity emphasised *structured relationship building*, and the scholarship of teaching underpinned academic development focused on *co-operative research*.

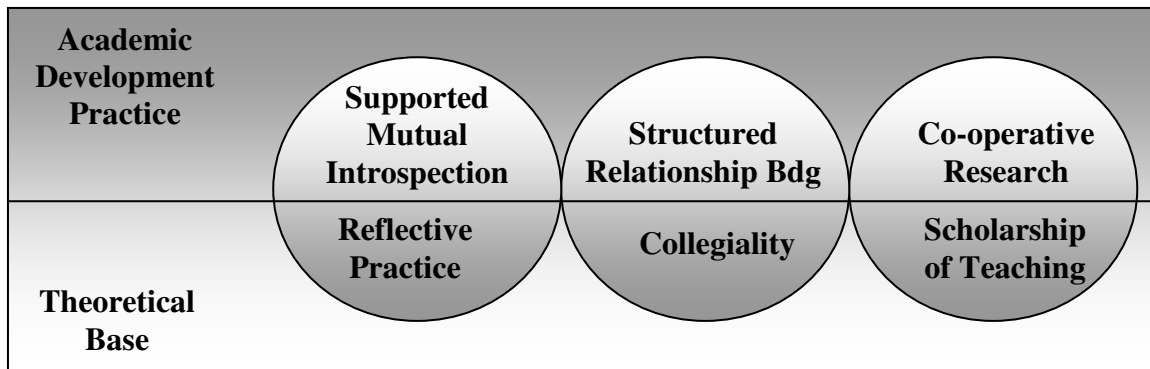


Figure 1. Fragments of academic development practice aligned with three theoretical bases

Interestingly, the activity of excising fragments of academic development activity demonstrated that there was significant practical and theoretical overlap between approaches. Each of the described academic development activities rested strongly on a particular theoretical base, but drew on or overlapped with the other bases under discussion. This blurring of theoretical bases offers a neat segue into the idea of Elastic Practice.

An Illustration of Elastic Practice

We have observed that some academic developers have a tendency to adapt their approach to academic development in response to the demands of context. We dubbed this approach Elastic Practice. Characteristic of Elastic Practice is the tailoring of an approach for a specific context, drawing on the toolkit of techniques, experiences, ideas, and theoretical stances that a particular academic developer has collected. This tailoring is observable as the use of a range of approaches to academic development. Sometimes approaches are complex, multi-layered and melded, sometimes practice is markedly different for different contexts, and sometimes the Elastic Practice results in approaches that organically or sequentially adapt over the life of an academic development activity. The preceding fragments of academic development provided three examples of practice in which a particular theoretical base was used as principle foundation to inform activity and in which additional theoretical bases melded into the foundation to provide and support each approach. In this section we describe a fourth academic development activity in full to explain and explore the idea of Elastic Practice.

The UOW's Faculty Teaching & Learning Scholars Program (Scholars Program) started in 2004 with the intent of creating strategic partnerships between faculty-based academics and academic developers to support change in learning and teaching. Such programs are not a new phenomenon in higher education. As early as the 1990s academic developers were identifying the need for partnerships between faculties and central units to support faculty-based leadership for improving learning and teaching. These types of program represent a devolution of academic development to the faculties. They have become reasonably ubiquitous despite limited evaluation of their impact on leadership, or on teaching and learning (Radloff, 2000; Southwell & Gilding, 2004). Similar schemes have been used to support implementation of new learning technologies (McNaught and Kennedy, 2000; Ingram and Thomson, 2001). The broad theoretical base supporting most teaching and learning leadership programs is collegiality.

Beyond this broad base, programs appear to rest on blended, tailored or emergent theoretical bases (Ingram & Gilding, 2002, 2003; Wenger, 1999; Lefoe, Hedberg & Gunn, 2002). For example, Ingram and Gilding (2002, 2003) describe a developmental leadership model that draws on the literature of communities of practice, whereby the supportive development of networks underpins the leadership development.

The Scholars Program partners a small collegial group of faculty-based academics with a mentor in the academic development team at CEDIR. Each faculty scholar nominates a key teaching and learning issue to research, and a member of the senior executive finances teaching relief for each faculty scholar for one academic year. Issues nominated for research must have demonstrable relevance to the faculty, and must align with the university's strategic plan for teaching and learning. Annually, approximately six faculty scholars are selected and are brought together to form a group of mixed discipline, teaching experience and research interest. The faculty scholars are supported in their research through fortnightly meetings of the full group. The meeting structure alternates a collegial meeting with a process meeting providing participants the opportunity to maintain momentum, remain accountable for progress, and reflect on the research process. In addition, key personnel with expertise in the area of each project may be invited by the scholars to attend these meetings. Some of the current scholars have also invited the previous years' faculty scholars to discuss their experiences and the challenges they have faced, and as a means to ensure that faculty innovation is ongoing after the initial year. On completion, faculty scholars disseminate the outcomes of their research through a university-wide forum, and many continue the process of dissemination through conference or journal publication.

The development of the Scholars Program has been an iterative process, shifting to accommodate the needs and insights of current participants, and adapting for each new cycle as faculty scholars and academic developers from the previous year reflected on their experiences. During its inception, the program was designed along the lines of similar programs described at other institutions (Southwell & Gilding 2004; McNaught & Kennedy, 2000; Taylor & Schönwetter, 2002). The program design was tempered by the lead academic developer's insights into the approach of academics at UOW who had succeeded in making change in their faculties (Lefoe & Albury, 2006). Initially, the principle base was collegiality (see A in Figure 2) and the intent was largely to structure networks of academics around purposeful activity to generate change in their own teaching, and the teaching of their immediate colleagues, as proposed by Senge (1990) and Wenger (1998). When the first intake of Faculty Scholars began to shape their research projects, the theoretical base of the program shifted to a blend that supported relationship building but also gave shape and structure for a more research-driven approach: collegiality and the scholarship of teaching (see B in Figure 2). After the first year of the Program, the benefits of and need for participants to undertake reflection became clear, and in 2006 the program began to incorporate prompts for reflective practice into the regular meeting structure. The next iteration of the Scholars Program will incorporate a more formal requirement for participants to employ reflective practice as part of an explicit extension of the Program into leadership development.

The current theoretical foundation of the Scholars Program illustrates the idea of Elastic Practice in that it has evolved into a coherent and rich approach that has evolved over time to

draw on three bases (reflective practice, collegiality and scholarship of teaching). The emergent theoretical base of the Scholars Program is represented at C in Figure 2. The development of a community of practice is fundamental to the model through mutual engagement, shared repertoire and joint enterprise. This structured relationship building, both within the network and across the university endeavours to ensure the longevity of not only the individual research projects, but also the cross-faculty relationships beyond the initial projects. The scholarship of teaching broadly supports and shapes each participant's research project, and reflective practice is employed to maximize participant's personal and interpersonal learning.

It is notable that the specific academic development activities undertaken in the Scholars Program differ from those described in the three fragments we discussed earlier. This strongly emphasises one of our reasons for explicating theory; it demonstrates the flexible interpretation of theory, and speaks of the impact of interpretation and context on how individual academic developers translate theory into particular instances of activity in academic development.

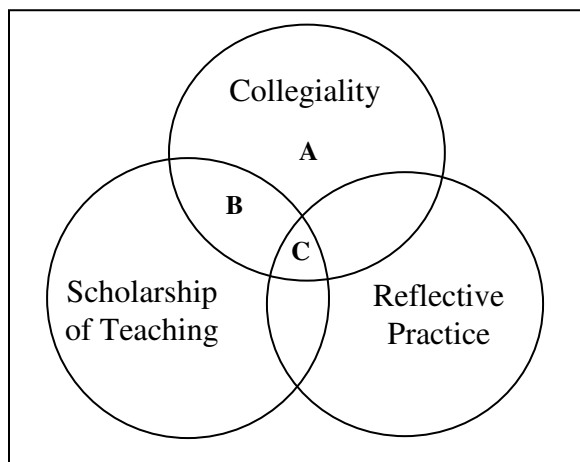


Figure 2. Evolving theoretical base for University of Wollongong Faculty Teaching and Learning Scholars Program

Conclusion

The work of academic development is a complex endeavour in a complex, and sometimes contested, context. Academic developers need to work effectively with many functional groups within their institutions, for example:

- discipline and faculty-based academics, managers and administrators;
- staff from other service divisions (eg. library, student support services); and
- university management (eg. those involved in strategic planning, and teaching and learning policy development).

The perspectives, priorities and cultures of teaching and learning for these functional groups show marked variation in intent and outcome. For example, an extensive review of the research on disciplinary approaches to teaching found that “different disciplines combine generic aspects

of teaching in ways quite specific to the discipline” (Neumann, 2001, p. 136). As such, discipline-based academics require academic development support that recognises and caters to the particular demands and cultures of teaching and learning that exist within their particular field of specialisation or faculty context.

Additionally, the objectives and drivers behind teaching and learning quality improvement for at least two of the functional groups listed above may be at odds. University management generally has a strong incentive to focus on reporting requirements and strategic-level objectives associated with how the institution’s teaching performance is viewed from outside the institution (eg. the Australian Universities Quality Assessment, Teaching Awards, Department of Education, Science and Training reporting requirements). This perspective may be somewhat different from the internal focus more commonly encountered amongst discipline-based academic teachers. The authors’ observations are that academic teachers tend to have more immediate and functional concerns associated with their teaching (eg. student pass rates; decent teaching evaluations for promotion; manageable assessment regimes; assuring the quality of graduates from professional programs). Academic development work needs to be diverse and responsive to support the range of agendas and objectives held by the three functional groups identified above. This can only happen when this work is valued and recognised and therein lies our dilemma. If we utilise, for example, a quality management framework for academic development, as proposed by Gray and Radloff (2006), we are able to provide evidence of our principles, standards, performance and impact within the managerial structures of the institution. However at risk is our relationship with discipline- and faculty-based academics and their managers and administrators, who may regard this with suspicion on two accounts. The first is that many academics still question the notion of the quality agenda in universities. The second is the concern that this probing may impact on the faculty by bringing into question some current practice. Exposing these practices places the academic developer in the potentially dual role of faculty ally, and advocate for action to address specific teaching and learning issues exposed (Gray & Radloff, 2006). The academic developer is constantly walking a fine line within the context of their own institution.

Taylor (2005) has referred to academic development work as a synergy among variable characteristics of the person, the academic role, development strategies and institutional context. She recognises this synergy as a complex dynamic (Taylor, 2005). Land (2001) has made a substantial contribution in documenting and depicting a range of contexts and intentions that exist within the academic environment and how academic developers might orient themselves within that environment. His model of academic development (Figure 2, Land, 2001) offers to shed light on some of the philosophical or values-based drivers that might inspire the different fragments described in this paper. For example, he positions the academic developer as educational researcher (SoT) being driven to promote critique amongst individual academic teachers.

In line with the view of academic development work as synergistic, active and personal, examining and diversifying our theoretical base, and its relationship with our practice and context, and with the approaches we devise offers the potential to improve our adaptiveness and our responsiveness. In this paper we excised and described three fragments of academic development, and made explicit the theoretical bases upon which each strongly rested. We also

documented the evolution of a substantial academic development activity (Scholars Program) to illustrate the idea of Elastic Practice. Elastic Practice is characterised as the tailoring of specific instances of academic development activity (approaches) from the wide array of possible actions (practice) in response to context. Elastic Practice encourages a practitioner to 'read' context in and to blend the techniques, experiences, ideas, values and theoretical bases within the professional toolkit in order to tailor an effective approach. Of particular significance for Elastic Practice is the value of explicating and reflecting on underpinning theoretical frames. Considering the interplay between theory and practice offers useful insights into how we at CEDIR, and the broader community of academic developers, might choose to evolve in terms of our individual and collective approaches. It offers the opportunity for us to be more elastically effective.

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