

Academic Development and its Practitioners

A View from the Inside



Editor
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Abbreviations

APQ	Academic planning and Quality Assurance
BLC	Blended learning coordinator
CHE	Council for Higher Education
CHEC	Cape Higher Education Consortium
CLT	Centre for Learning Technologies
CoP	Community of practice
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DLTE	Division for Learning and Teaching Enhancement
DRD	Division for Research Development
ECA s	Early Career Academics
FIG s	Focused Interest Groups
FIRLT	Fund for Innovation and Research in Learning and Teaching
FMF	Fees Must Fall
FYA	First-Year Academy
GAs	Graduate Attributes
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HoD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LC	Language Centre
LCT	Legitimation Code Theory
NAA	Newly appointed academics
NRF	National Research Foundation
PASS	Professional and Administrative Support Services

PGDip	Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education
PL	Professional learning
PREDAC	Professional Educational Development for Academics
REEP	Recommended Engineering Education Practices
SAHEI	South African Higher Education Institution
SAS	Student Academic Support Services
SoEL	Scholarship of Educational Leadership
SOTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics
SU	Stellenbosch University
T&L	Teaching and Learning
UBC	University of British Columbia
UniEd	Division of University Education

INTRODUCTION

Opening the academic development space

Gert Young

1 Academic development as complex phenomenon

Introducing this book with a statement like “This book is about academic development” would at the same time be simple and true, as well as exceedingly complex and in need of numerous clarifications. Academic development is a recognised, if contentious, concept in higher education (Bath & Smith, 2004; Clegg, 2009; Debowski, 2014; Fraser & Ling, 2014; Kek & Hammer, 2015; McNaught, 2020). It is associated with professional staff and academics (Fraser & Ling, 2014), as well as both scholarship and development practices (Baume, 2016), although I think the broader higher education community tends to think of academic developers more as practitioners than scholars. Following from these varied descriptions of academic development, I contend that the challenge for higher education is not so much to figure out whether academic developers are practitioners or scholars (or professionals or academics). Rather, it is to understand how they can be both. There are few, if any, roles in higher education that have the same complex connection to institutions and their identities. With due apology for some inappropriate language, consider the following: if it is argued that academics primarily interact with external clients (students) for the benefit of society (and not just economic benefit – Boulton & Lucas, 2011) while support services primarily interact with the institution (think of financial, legal or human resources services) for the benefit of the institution, where are academic developers located? Although they interact primarily with the institution (think of professional development events), they certainly engage in pursuit of both societal and institutional benefits (Wisker, 2012; Sutherland, 2018; McGrath, 2020).

I suspect that if you were to inquire within higher education institutions about the extent of knowledge regarding academic development, the majority response would indicate some knowledge. But this is likely where the simplicity ends. If the question were to be reformulated to ask about conceptual definitions¹ of academic development or to describe the nature or purpose

¹ It is a conscious decision not to offer a specific definition of academic development in this introduction as the concept is subject to a variety of descriptions (Leibowitz, 2014). However, given the history of academic development, both nationally and internationally, it is necessary to make some (over simplified) distinctions for readers. The current Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) description of academic development distinguishes between student development, staff development, curriculum development

of activities of academic development units, there would eventually be an acknowledgement of either a limit to understanding or a diversity of perspectives that make it difficult to pin the concept down. This has in fact been demonstrated by a number of scholars representing various discussions about academic development (Blackmore et al., 2004; Gosling, 2009; Challis, Holt & Palmer, 2009; Leibowitz, 2014).

Much of the thinking about academic development tends to focus on the explicit purpose (the *raison d'être*) of units tasked with this function. But does this instrumentalist thinking consider the nature of the identity of academic developers and the sometimes dialectical relationship between their identity and their purpose? Or the space academic development occupies in the larger 'idea of the university' (Blackmore et al., 2004)? It is well established that academic identities are becoming more complex (e.g. Trowler & Knight, 2000; Billot, 2010; Simmons, Abrahamson, Deshler, Kensington-Miller, Manarin, Moron-Garcia-Oliver & Renc-Roe, 2013) and reciprocally tied to their beliefs and behaviours (Clegg, 2008). Academic identities are, as Drennan, Clarke, Hyde and Politis (2017) argue, more than just an expression of professional roles. In the context of universities this means, *inter alia*, that identities transcend organisational configurations. A Department of Sociology, for example, is not the same thing as a sociologist. Or a School of Mathematics is not the same thing as a mathematician. The identities of these academics are more than just that ascribed based on their organisational affiliation. Most of these points can also be made in relation to academic developers and their identities. These identities are complex and difficult (Kinash & Wood, 2013; Cottom & Atwell, 2018), often tied to some kind of organisational entity (more often than not a centre for teaching and learning) but still working to establish their legitimacy (Bath & Smith, 2004; Behari-Leak, Vorster, Chitanand, Ganas, Padayachee, Merkel, & Masehela, 2018; Vorster, 2020), often having to contend with marginalisation. Despite the challenges, these identities are still informative of practice (Little, Green & Felten, 2019). Academic developers are, following the example of the argument above, not the same thing as an academic development unit. There is certainly a relationship, but it is not always an unequivocal one. It is true that some employed in such units adopt an ascribed identity. But many operate from an internalised identity and cultivate this identity regardless of their location in the organisation. In fact, much of the tension that is experienced by academic developers (Sugrue et al., 2018; Harland & Staniforth, 2008) is based on their (intentional and unintentional) efforts to extend the meaning of this identity by challenging certain narratives regarding the role of academic development. Many of these narratives regard academic development as an institutional service rather than a profession with an academic basis (Harland & Staniforth, 2008).

From social psychology it is clear that three of the basic defining conditions of social identities are 1) that members of groups are aware that they are thought of as part of a group, 2) that they value this association and 3) that there is an emotional significance to this association (Tajfel, 1981). In the case of academic developers the first condition is satisfied by their organisational

and institutional development (HEQC, 2007). Despite its strong historical focus on addressing students' academic needs (Scott, 2009), academic development in South Africa has, through various evolutions, shifted much of its focus to the professional development of academic staff (commonly referred to as "educational professional development" in other contexts (Knight, 2006)). In this book then the concept is used mostly as reference to staff, curriculum and institutional development with due acknowledgement of the fact that all of these are also related to student development.

affiliation. But the second and third conditions present challenges to some working in academic development. It has been shown that many enter academic development not as part of an intentional career plan (Fraser, 1999; Peseta & Barrie, 2017; Fyffe, 2018). In fact, the attentive reader will also pick this up from some of the chapters included in the book. So, if many in academic development find their way here not because of choice but perhaps because of lack of choice (something that is probably a greater reality in the South African context), what is the extent of their emotional investment in this identity (to be distinguished from loyalty to units they are appointed in)? And how do their experiences of the marginalisation of their work (Little & Green, 2012), influence their affective connection to this identity?

Academic development is thus, we hope to suggest through this book, a complex social phenomenon in higher education that is determined by more than just affiliation to an organisational structure such as an academic development unit. The complexity stems, in part, from the expectations institutions have of academic development and academic development units. But this complexity is also a function of the variety of beliefs held by individual academic developers. In order to reflect this, we offer the book as an insider perspective. We are not trying to systematically delineate academic development. Rather, we are attempting to give readers a glimpse into the thinking/beliefs and experiences of individual academic developers. Ultimately the reader should come away with Polkinghorne's (1989:46) feeling after reading phenomenologies – "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that (with 'that' being academic development)". This, we believe, will contribute more to an understanding of academic development than any systematic attempt to describe it.

Apart from this overall message about the complex nature of academic development, there are also various specific messages for selected audiences. The book is thus intended for the higher education sector in general as well as a variety of specific audiences within the sector. The particular purpose it serves will largely depend on the audience its reader associates with.

2 A framework for reading this book

I want to propose at least three different ways readers can engage with this book. First I suggest they keep three questions posed below (2.1) in mind as they work through the book and attempt to make sense of the purpose and value of each of the individual contributions. These questions are not really research questions in the sense that the book has set out to answer them in a systematic way. They are rather intellectual prompts that are meant to sensitise readers to important issues.

A second possible strategy is to read the book with an explicit awareness of the groups readers meaningfully identify with (in other words, reading the book knowing what their own identities are). Literature indicates that our identifications have a significant influence on how we process various forms of communication (Postmes, 2003). So it makes sense to read these chapters with the understanding that how we view ourselves will influence how we respond to what we read.

As a final reading strategy I suggest readers consider the the themes below (2.3) that became apparent to the editorial team as we read through all the contributions. These themes were not presented to authors in advance as guidance for their contributions. Authors were only asked to consider their own thinking, practice, experience and research and make a contribution in terms of these. The idea was that by not asking them to write in terms of a specific theme, readers will have the opportunity to develop, in an inductive way, characteristics of academic development work. Of course there was the risk that we would end up with a collection of entirely unconnected contributions. But as we started reading the contributions, we were delighted to find certain recurring ideas. They may not all be explicit all the time. But we were satisfied that they are visible if the chapters are read attentively and in relation to each other.

2.1 Guided by questions

Most readers will approach this book with their own questions regarding academic development. It is difficult to anticipate what all these will be. There are, however, at least three the authors would like readers to think about throughout. The first deals with the concept academic development itself. Already in the first paragraph of this chapter one of the major complexities that this book engages with – how to conceptualise academic development – was introduced. This is posed as both an ontological and an epistemological question. In other words, what is academic development as well as in what ways should we think in order to arrive at an answer to the question? The importance of thinking about the nature of academic development is probably obvious and has been explored by many scholars. But why concern ourselves with epistemological considerations? This question is probably best answered by Leibowitz, Bozalek and Khan who state that “Theorising learning to teach is the form of expertise one requires in order to provide guidance to administrators and academics and to strengthen one’s own sense of authority and identity” (2017:2). In other words, how academic developers go about thinking about academic development potentially gives direction to institutions about what to expect from academic development units as well as informs the academic developers’ identities.

The second question (related to the question above but more specific) many readers will struggle with throughout this book is whether academic development should be thought of as a set of practices, a scholarly discipline (Fraser & Ling, 2014; Kek & Hammer, 2015) or even a way of being (Zou & Felton, 2019). It is very likely that many readers already have a sense that it is all of these. But what are the implications of saying it is all of these? How should academic development be thought of as a practice if it is also acknowledged as a scholarly discipline? And how should it be approached as a scholarly discipline if it is also considered to be a way of being? By pondering these particular distinctions, readers may develop specific understandings of the importance of all of these in higher education.

A final question readers are encouraged to engage with is related to the previous two but of sufficient importance to higher education to warrant its restatement as a dedicated intellectual challenge – what is the role of academic development in higher education? Again, turning to the descriptions offered by the mandates of various academic development units, we might be tempted to formulate simple and easily measured answers (e.g. staff training/development). But, as demonstrated by Challis, Holt and Palmer (2009), even the stated purposes of these units are contentious. As readers progress through the book and experience some of what

academic developers do and how they think, they should ask themselves whether the role of academic development presented here is something different to what their commonly held views suggest.

2.2 Identification and audience

One question authors grappled with as they were writing the contributions for this book is who the intended audiences of this book are supposed to be. The identity through which the content presented here is interpreted, has a significant influence on how it is evaluated. Of course it is highly unlikely that any reader will approach this book from only a single identity perspective. While reading this book, you may think of yourself in terms of your role (teaching academic, researcher, manager, administrator, etc.), institutional organisation (departmental/unit, faculty affiliation) or disciplinary identification (mathematician, sociologist, etc.). Or you may read this book fully aware of the multiple identities that influence your expectation and interpretation. It is difficult to plan a book for the multitude of possible identity configurations. But I found it useful to think of the book as directed at at least three specific role identities in higher education.

The first is higher education institution managers/leaders who are trying to understand how to enhance university teaching and learning and what purposes academic development can serve in this effort. Work done by Challis, Holt and Palmer (2009), Holt, Challis and Palmer (2011), to name but a few, has indicated that higher education leaders still often struggle to understand how best to use academic development units in the pursuit of strategic goals. This challenge comes from at least competing views within institutions about the purpose of these units (and, by extension, the purpose of academic development) and the need for managers to lead units that demonstrate strategic value. For these readers we believe all the chapters offer a perspective not just on what academic developers do but also on the diversity of thinking within academic development. This diversity, McNaught (2020) has argued, is one of the potential strengths of academic development but because of the external pressures faced by higher education, one of the most difficult to harness. In fact, if it cannot be harnessed, it becomes a significant risk from a managerial point. I hope that in reading the very different accounts of academic developers in this book, executive leaders will be convinced that the potential value of this diversity outweighs the challenge of creating academic development structures and spaces that transcend the tightly defined organisational units leaders are often expected to institute and manage. Furthermore, it is hoped that the chapter by Herman and Van der Merwe demonstrates what is possible, given patience and dedication, in terms of influencing thinking about the contribution academic development makes in the institution's pursuit of strategic goals.

The second kind of reader envisioned by this book is the individual academic working in higher education, looking for innovative teaching suggestions, creative solutions to teaching challenges or even just an understanding of how to engage academic developers in pursuit of teaching goals. For this group of readers I hope that the chapters contribute to their conceptualisation of teaching and learning and stimulate thinking about the relationship between academic developers and other academics. Is this relationship a competitive or collaborative relationship? Is it one dictated by competing or shared purposes? While these questions are, at face value, relatively simple questions, closer inspection could surface some of the difficulties already suggested by others. In their study of the factors that determine the extent to which academic

development units are accepted as valued members of teaching and learning communities in higher education institutions, Challis, Holt and Palmer (2009) pointed out that the only way for such units to receive broad acceptance is by partnering or connecting with academics and academic environments. The chapters by Swart-Jansen van Vuuren, Herman and Adendorff; Adendorff, Rewitzky and Rootman-le Grange and Wolff reflect this connection in different ways. The first details a formal educational development programme but also makes it clear that there is a level of co-construction of learning in the programme. The other two are examples of how academic developers contextualise educational development and do collaborative and situated work. A key to these chapters is the idea of shared purpose. From Self-categorisation theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987) it is argued that identities are hierarchically structured and accessed according to the dictates of context. For this book it means that when the context prioritises the differences (based on perceived different purposes) between academics and academic developers, the engagement is likely to have an underlying competitive structure (even if only at the level of the psychological). As an example, think of biologists and philosophers meeting in a conversation about their disciplines. As long as the context requires that they engage as biologists and philosophers (rather than as researchers or academics – which might be the higher level in their identity structure), they are likely to emphasise their differences. But a re-imagining of context may result in either a redefinition of identities or the pursuit of superordinate goals (in other words, goals that are important to identities at a higher level than the disciplinary) which in turn changes the structure of engagement to cooperation (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001). If you approach this book identifying with this second group of readers (teaching academics), I want to encourage you to think about the relationship between academics and academic developers and how this relationship can be imagined as a cooperative one based on shared purpose.

A final group of readers we hope engages with this book is colleagues working in academic development. For this audience the purpose of the book is also varied. They could read this book wanting to know how like-minded colleagues elsewhere engage in their work and deal with challenges. They may find that they face the same identity challenges referred to in the chapters by Van der Merwe and Skead. These chapters are part of a larger conversation, as evidenced by, *inter alia*, Fyffe (2018) and Zou and Felten (2019), about developing identity as an academic developer. At a minimum we hope other academic developers will discover shared experiences in this book and through this find ways of validating and situating their own identity. One informative question this group of readers could ask is what it means for identity to consider academic development as a profession (rather than as a set of practices). Of course there are other challenges faced by academic developers. Two chapters in particular – those by Farmer and Dullaart – like works by Behari-Leak, Vorster, Chitanand, Ganas, Padayachee, Merkel, Masehela (2018), Sutherland (2018), and McGrath (2020) – argue for significant change in higher education contexts, the kind that is “transformational, involving people at different levels” and “requires a re-thinking of practice at a deeper and more profound level, evoking a need to change other people’s practices, but it also may involve questioning the assumptions of individual teachers and working groups” (McGrath 2020:94). By reading at least these two chapters, we believe other academic developers will be encouraged to engage in difficult intellectual and social problems that need to be addressed in higher education.

I am aware that there might be another group of readers that engage with this book – those who are skeptical about the nature of and need for academic development work. It is to be expected in a community as diverse as the higher education community that there will be those that hold to arguments and opinions different to those made by this book. I would like to encourage this group of readers to continue engaging with the academic development thinking represented in this book. For even if they conclude by the end of the book that we have been unable to sway their opinions, they will have had the opportunity to view some of the most pressing current issues in higher education through the experiences of others to the benefit of their own thinking on these matters.

2.3 The characteristics of academic development

Below I set out what the chapters in this book highlight as defining characteristics of academic development. There have been numerous (and more comprehensive) efforts at this. The *International Journal for Academic Development* (IJAD), for example, published a special edition in 2016 exploring what academic development is beyond its engagement with teaching and learning practices. Most professional academic developers will be aware of these conversations. But as this book is also intended for a non-academic developer audience, I felt it important to introduce this question by referencing the contributions made here rather than simply providing a review of the extensive and complex literature available on the matter (although this introduction does give readers some idea of the wide range of academic development literature available). As mentioned already, none of the authors were given guidance in terms of a coherent theme for this book. What is presented here is my analysis of their contributions. Of course prevailing thinking in academic development research influenced this analysis. But the effort is much more inductive than deductive.

It is quite possible that readers may find other recurring ideas that were not identified. Or they may even disagree with my description of these ideas. I encourage this as academic development is an impossible-to-comprehensively-define part of higher education (Leibowitz, 2014).

2.3.1 *Academic development as scholarly endeavour*

At a minimum these chapters point to academic development work being scholarly despite claims to the contrary (Andresen, 2000) or institutional expectations that do not encourage academic developers to engage in research (van Hattum-Janssen, Morgado & Vieira, 2012). The chapters included show, in different ways, systematic, rigorous and creative engagement with research problems. They make it clear that academic development work is not (and should not be) based on intuitive and commonsensical inferences (Felten, Kalish, Pingree & Plank, 2007). While intuition and common sense are required in any professional activity, we hope this book firmly establishes the conviction among readers that this work has the characteristics (and therefore challenges and affordances) of academic disciplines (Bath & Smith, 2004).

Academic development research has over the years been associated with particular kinds of approaches to research (mostly qualitative). Despite this seeming limitation we hope to show that the discipline has the creative ability to apply diverse methods and theoretical frameworks

as it strives to continue to build knowledge about teaching and learning. This diversity also reflects the reality of the scholarly background of academic developers as many of them come to the field with training developed in and through other disciplines.

The claim that academic development work is scholarly is not only a descriptive statement but also presents some normative challenges to the field. While the shortcomings of academic development research have been pointed out (Kek & Hammer, 2015; McNaught, 2020), this does not detract from what it should be. Rather, it should encourage us to improve in this area. Generally speaking academic development research has focused on the practitioners, the field and examples/case studies of their work (Baume, 2016). Readers will certainly see scholarly engagement related to all three of these. But if we claim scholarship, we should also not shy away from the challenges that need to be confronted. McNaught (2020) has, for example, pointed out that much of the value of academic development research available is limited due to its *ad hoc* nature and inability to show “real change in the academic experience of students, and development of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)” (2020:83). And Geertsema (2016) alerts us to the fact that academic developers need to distinguish between the scholarship of academic development and the scholarship of teaching and learning as these serve different purposes. It remains for readers thinking about academic development work as a scholarly practice to decide whether the authors have succeeded in making this distinction and thus improved understanding of the implications of the distinction.

2.3.2 *Academic development as practice and perspective*

The general perception of academic development work is that it is a set of practices. There are some debates about the nature and focus of these practices with arguments for centralised (i.e. offered by institutional units) and situated (i.e. offered by units dedicated to specific disciplinary contexts) as well as formal and non-formal practices made (Boud, 1999; Knight, 2006; Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006; Maphosa & Mudzielwana, 2014). It is, however, clear that institutions’ expectations of academic development work is primarily in terms of practices and not scholarship (Challis, Holt & Palmer 2009). The unresolved question though is what role scholarship plays in these practices. There is a growing acknowledgement that academic development practices should be research-informed (Andresen, 2000; Geertsema, 2016; Kinchin, Heron, Hosein, Lygo-Baker, Medland, Morely & Winstone, 2018). But how should the research agenda for academic development be conceptualised? Should it be dictated by institutional managers and policy environments, as often happens (Rowland, Byron, Furedi, Padfield & Smyth, 1998; Leibowitz, 2014), as part of the pursuit of strategic goals? Should it be determined by situated needs of academics with a view to enhancing their practice (Boud & Brew, 2013)? Or should the field generate its own research agenda? For readers thinking about academic development as a practice, one question that can open up their thinking throughout is whether it is a practice in service of institutions, individual academics or teaching and learning. As with many analytical distinctions this one is probably difficult to maintain in reality. But as a thinking tool I am convinced that it can add value to readers’ processing of the content presented here.

Readers will certainly encounter academic development as a set of practices in these chapters. Some describe the formal nature of these practices (e.g. Swart-Jansen van Vuuren, Herman

and Adendorff; Pietersen, van Schalkwyk and Bitzer) while others demonstrate more non-formal interactions (e.g. Wolff). Some reflect on enhancement practices (e.g. Jacobs) while others engage in philosophical practices (e.g. Dullaart).

What readers will also notice is that academic development is not only what developers do but also a way of thinking and being. It is a way of viewing higher education. In this sense it is also a perspective (Scott, 2009). From the chapters it should be clear that academic developers are socially minded and struggle with questions about how societal realities impact (or should impact) higher education. But the thinking extends beyond societal influence on higher education to the role of higher education in transforming society. Academic developers have come to realise that the basis for much of their work is situated in their understandings of the purposes of universities in society (Fyffe, 2018).

In the South African context the history of academic development has arguably made it easier to see it as practices very much informed by political perspectives. While academic development has changed since the 1980s, its political origins (Scott, 2009) have continued to exert influence and, either attracted activists or transformed many of its practitioners into activists (Lee, Manathunga & Kandlbinder, 2010). Academic development work, at least as represented in the chapters in this book, thus also lives in the activist perspectives of its practitioners. This is probably most obvious in the chapters by Farmer and Jacobs.

2.3.3 Academic development and transformation

Related to the preceding, readers are likely to encounter thinking about transformation or practices aimed at promoting transformation in all the chapters. General higher education literature routinely indicates the transformative nature of academic development work (Linguist, 2018). Throughout this book readers will see different authors struggle with different questions about transformation/change in and of higher education. Some of these relate very specifically to South Africa's history of exclusion and the need to deal with both the exclusion and its impact (e.g. Farmer). Some relate to our unique institutional context (e.g. Herman and Van der Merwe). Still others concern themselves with the transformation of academic development thinking and practice (e.g. Dullaart; Wolff). Regardless of the change envisioned, the underlying theme of transformation suggests that academic development work that remains static and uncritical, eventually turns into something other than academic development.

Which brings us to the concomitant theme for academic developers. Earlier I referred to academic developers as change agents/activists. They are not merely the performers of certain functions. In exploring the discursive positioning of academic developers, Linguist (2018) clearly conceptualises them in terms of their group relationship to other groups in higher education institutions. One avenue offered us for the exploration of these relationships comes from social psychology and its ideas about intergroup relationships. The particular framework that has long fascinated me (but is by no means the only intergroup framework in social psychology) is the social identity theory (SIT) framework (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It has been pointed out that while this theory is descriptively powerful, it also pursues and promotes change (Reicher, Haslam & Hopkins, 2005; Meyer, Durrheim & Foster, 2016). Applying SIT to thinking about academic development work means thinking about the work not primarily in terms of

what and how it is done but rather in terms of how the relationships within which it is done, operate. As one example, consider the fact that the theory suggests one possible experience of people in intergroup contexts is threat. In the case of academic development think of the descriptions of this group as “marginal” (Leibowitz, 2014:358; Scott, 2009). Under such conditions SIT suggests that members of groups have three options – abandon the devalued identity for another with greater status, increase the distinctions between themselves and other groups in a way that enhances their esteem or redefine the characteristics of their group in order to change the comparison between themselves and other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These options, while addressing a negative situation, offer the possibility of transformation of either identities or contexts. For all readers it remains to think about how transformation in higher education happens, whether it be transformation of ways of thinking, of enacting relationships or even defining identities. I am convinced that the chapters included here offer space and guidance for this kind of consideration.

2.3.4 Academic development as multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary

Without venturing into the debate about the difference between multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity (for some discussions see Choi & Pak, 2006; Nicolescu, 2014), I want to point out that the contributions to this book make it clear that academic developers and academic development rely on multiple theories from different disciplines in its pursuit of knowledge and transformed teaching and learning practices. While many see this as one the strengths of academic development work, some could infer a lack of focus from this. There is some research that suggests that such approaches could, at least at a symbolic level, be contrasted with disciplinarity and rigour and thus be associated with ‘lack of theory’ (Muller & Kaltenbrunner, 2019).

Academic developers have faced this criticism from other academics – that their work is not sufficiently rigorous and theory-informed (Rowland, Byron, Furedi, Padfield & Smyth, 1998). And from within its own ranks some have argued that academic development is under-theorised and overly dependent on appropriations from psychology and sociology for its theoretical lenses (Kek & Hammer, 2015) as well as in need of larger, unifying theories (Laksov, 2019). This reality influences not only how academic developers are viewed, but also how they view themselves. Little, Green & Felten (2019) argued that a “sense of shared disciplinarity” (2019:11) is crucial to academic identities, including academic developer identities and that without this, people have more difficulty finding guidance for their beliefs and practices from their group membership.

These arguments, while all valid, should not be taken as arguments against the multidisciplinary nature of academic development work. Some have argued that academic development cannot be anything other than such (Peseta, Manathunga & Jones, 2010). The chapters included here certainly point to multidisciplinary, or at least multi-theoretical, approaches. Readers will encounter Activity theory, Legitimation code theory, hermeneutics, post-Marxist thinking and critical complexity theory, to name but a few. What the inclusion of these hopes to achieve is to indicate Little, Green and Felten’s (2019) “shared sense of disciplinarity”, even if it is not based on unified approaches or theories. Readers are encouraged to find connections and unity between the chapters at the level of belief and purpose. In this sense these chapters reflect the necessary foundations of academic identity.

One of the interesting results of the varied pathways academic developers follow to enter the field is that they themselves often represent interdisciplinary conversations. Coming from other disciplines where the theoretical, methodological and teaching practices of the discipline were acquired, academic developers regularly engage in individual, internal interdisciplinary conversations when their acquired and required frames of reference meet. Add to this the fact that their required frame of reference demands access to at least two separate bodies of knowledge – knowledge about teaching and learning and knowledge about academic development practice (Ashwin, 2016) – and it becomes apparent that academic developers should be in constant internal theoretical dialogues. Given their different academic and professional backgrounds and roles, the chapter by Adendorff, Rewitzky and Rootman-la Grange best represents the interdisciplinary interaction that characterises academic development. We leave it to readers to ponder the challenges and opportunities that arise from the multi/interdisciplinary nature of academic development.

2.3.5 *Academic development as a liminal space*

It has been argued that academic developers occupy an in-between or liminal space in academia (Manathunga, 2007). This liminal space is not to be thought of in exactly the same way as liminal spaces were conceptualised by Turner (1969) with regard to social rituals or Meyer and Land (2003) with regard to student learning. In both cases the liminal spaces represent a phase in a 'becoming' process, a process aptly described by Land, Meyer and Baillie (2010) as consisting of preliminal, liminal and postliminal phases. But, if the liminal relationship between academic development and academia is not transitional, how should it be thought of? Some have suggested that the relationship is dialectical (Land, 2001). This too can be problematic, at least if dialectics are thought of in strict Hegelian terms. However, if we hold on to general dialectic ideas such as internal conflicts in complex situations and perpetual change (Magee, 1987), it could serve as a useful conceptual framework to think about academic development. It would help us move beyond the thinking of academic development work as marginal or peripheral in higher education to a state where it is viewed as a dialogical partner or counter point to higher education *status quo*. In this view academic development is not the disregarded stepchild that is tolerated because it is necessitated by external pressures or the expectations of institutional executives (Clegg, 2008), but rather an important critical sibling (Handal, 2008) that is sometimes (but not always) responsible for discomfort because it represents contradictions.

Another way of thinking about the liminal position of academic development is in terms of Whitchurch's (2008) idea of a 'third space' – a space in which academic development is not solely either academic or professional, yet partly both. It is a conceptualisation that could help academic developers to avoid the Faustian choice between solidarity with academics and loyalty to management. It does not necessarily suggest a singular agenda that academic developers share with others but rather varied but complementary agendas (Gray, 2015). Readers may find it fruitful to consider the implications of this kind of liminal relationship between academic development and higher education as they work through these chapters. Within traditional academic disciplines critical relationship and engagement is encouraged as a challenge to disciplinary thinking leads to advances in the discipline. Should we value the critical position of academic development in higher education for the same reason?

2.3.6 *Academic development as generative space*

The idea that academic development can act as a critical counterpoint to *status quo* thinking in higher education leads us to the last characteristic apparent in these chapters, namely that academic development is a generative space. Literature on the nature of conflict points out that tensions can, in fact, have generative advantages (Clements, 1997). Tensions that materialise as conflicts are thus not always conditions that need to be resolved. Where the tension is understood and acknowledged as having this generative potential, it can be harnessed for significant change. This also applies to academic development as a domain of tension. Scholars have pointed out that academic development is often associated with change, a reality that engenders resistance and tension (Linguist, 2018). But, as Manathunga (2007) has pointed out, the very contentious nature of academic development can create opportunities to “work creatively and critically with our academic colleagues and bring back the intellectual playfulness of reciprocal, interdisciplinary exchanges about teaching and learning” (2007:31). As readers engage with this book, they might consider whether the contributions offer examples of and ideas for how potential tensions can generate new and valuable outcomes. Important for all readers, but especially those reading as academic developers, is the realisation that changes generated by tensions in higher education apply not only to academics and their practices but also to our (academic developer) practices. We should be prepared for new and different ways thinking and doing to challenge academic development practices as well.

3 Conclusion

I hope that the framework suggested above assists readers in discovering value in the chapters to follow. While the framework is presented as consisting of discrete analytical instruments, the reality is that many of these overlap or are associated with others, resulting in readers relying on more than one of the guides suggested.

All that remains is to make a few comments about some technical matters to further assist readers in navigating the book. First, the complexity of academic development was apparent even in the editing of the entire volume as I had to decide if we should abbreviate “academic development” as “AD” or write it out in every instance. On the one hand it can be written as broad descriptor (‘academic development’), suggesting that it encompasses a wide range of activities and purposes. On the other it can be abbreviated as “AD”, suggesting that it is more than just a common sense reference but rather a very specific discipline (think of the difference between popular references to psychology and references to Psychology as a specific discipline). Ultimately I decided to have each instance written out (‘academic development’) as having it both written out and abbreviated could be confusing (and appear like sloppy editing).

Second, and staying with terminology, in this book we follow the practice of using “academic developer” and “academic development” consistently even though elsewhere it is used interchangeably with “educational developer” and “educational professional development”. For non-South African readers I also point out that in the South African context we generally refer to teaching academics as ‘lecturers’. In our context a “tutor” is not an employed academic but a student (undergraduate or postgraduate) that offers adjunct support to the primary teacher of

academic content. "Faculty" is an organisational designation (as in Faculty of Science), not a reference to teaching staff, as is the case in some other parts of the world. We generally also refer to separate units of learning as 'modules' or 'courses'.

Third, even though the chapters are all written by people who work in the same context, we decided not to offer only a single description of the context. Of course all the contributors' accounts of the context have some things in common – that the institution is a medium-sized, research-intensive university in South Africa. Beyond this though, we felt that part of offering readers an insider's perspective is to allow the insiders the opportunity to share their own descriptions and understandings of their context. Even in their descriptions of the context, readers might become aware of the complexities that inform academic developers' self-perception and their understanding of contextual dynamics.

Finally, where appropriate or required, authors applied for and received ethics clearance from the relevant bodies in the institution. As editor I also received institutional permission to name the institution as well as specific units in the institution.

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