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Change, agency, and boundary spanning in dynamic contexts

Henk Huijser , Kwong Nui Sim & Peter Felten

Even before the global pandemic, it had become a cliché to state that we are living in uncertain and dynamic times. Then a virus emerged to hammer home the truth in that claim. Nearly everything in higher education shifted online overnight, disrupting practices and policies that had long been considered stable and reliable in teaching, learning, and academic development.

Fortunately, professionals in our field are experienced with and skilled at navigating shifting and unstable terrain. Academic developers are like ‘the chameleon on a tartan rug’ (Kensington-Miller et al., 2015) with ‘hybrid identities’ that allow us to work effectively – if precariously – ‘between cultures’ and within ‘institutional power dynamics’ (Little & Green, 2012). Managing change and spanning boundaries have long been core elements of academic development practice as we bridge both the disciplines and the structures within and between higher education institutions. This often requires academic developers to ‘get comfortable with being uncomfortable’ (Fyffe, 2018), and at the same time may contribute to workplace burnout (Kolomitro et al., 2020). While difficult work, academic development has a rich history of managing and brokering change in dynamic environments. Covid-19 has only underscored the centrality of our work in academic institutions – and the challenges of doing it well and sustainably.

In this issue, scholars from seven countries on three continents draw on ‘situated local knowledge’ (Bamber & Stefani, 2016, p. 252) to critically analyze questions about change, agency, and boundary spanning in dynamic contexts. What they find has ‘promising and potentially problematic’ (Fitzgerald et al., 2020, p. 135) implications for academic development and academic developers.

McGrath’s opening article synthesizes five empirical studies on change and agency. This research raises troubling questions about the outcomes of any academic development work that feels like an institutionally-imposed burden to participants. McGrath invites readers to consider a new model that shifts ‘from identifying the individual as a recipient of training to one where academic development is more focused on context-based change practice for groups of teachers and leaders’ (p. 103). In this model, academic developers act with partners in departments and other ‘microcultures’ (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015) that significantly shape teaching practices and policies within our institutions.

Fremstad, Bergh, Solbrekke, and Fosslund dig more deeply into agency and context through the lens of ‘epistemic living spaces’ articulated in interviews with academic developers at four universities. They demonstrate ‘how temporal trajectories and organizational location support and restrain agency’ for individual academic developers (p. 116). Like McGrath, they encourage readers to attend to the possibilities of ‘collective agency’ that is ‘embedded in specific structural and cultural contexts’ (p. 109), and that can be cultivated between and among academic developers and their faculty partners.

Mercer-Mapstone shifts the frame to bring student-staff partnership into focus. She draws on Palmer's (1992) 'movement approach to change' (p. 10) to outline a four-stage model to map the evolution of student-staff partnerships in higher education. After presenting a somewhat hopeful interpretation of the flowering of student-staff partnership internationally, Mercer-Mapstone notes that: 'The process of change is more complex than I have portrayed here - happening in iterative waves' (p. 130). Like the two previous articles, she urges academic developers to look beyond individual efforts toward a 'broader, collective' (p. 130) movement.

Fitzgerald, Huijser, Meth, and Neilan also concentrate on student-staff partnerships, but they explore how academic developers can play a key role in making such practices sustainable within departments and institutions. They present a study of a Course Design Studio model for nurturing partnerships, concluding: 'Combining holistic course design in a Course Design Studio context with academic developer-facilitated deep-level interactions between disciplinary academics and students as partners may bring greater longevity and stability to course design' (p. 143).

The next article considers a Norwegian university's mandatory interdisciplinary master's course, 'Experts in Teamwork,' as opening new territory for academic development. Veine, Anderson, Andersen, Espenes, Søyland, Wallin, and Reams draw on a combination of individual, team, and meta-reflections to facilitate students and teaching staff going through an 'abstraction process' that 'lifts them above their own subjective experiences' to 'find new solutions and define actions for improvement' (p. 155). Like other articles in this issue, these authors describe this innovative course as creating new 'boundary conditions' between academic developers and teaching staff that enable meaningful, lasting change.

Digging more deeply into the qualities that allow for change, Charlier and Lambert propose a theoretical framework for the evaluation of academic development programs, using a case of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning initiative to illustrate and elaborate on this approach. Their framework centers on how individual participant characteristics interact with the learning environment 'to explain inter-individual differences in learning and understanding' (p. 163). This framework offers a novel way of comparing academic development programs across contexts, which could be used to identify practices that support positive change across disciplinary and institutional boundaries.

In a provocative departure from calls for 'grass roots' and incentives-based approaches to academic development (perhaps even McGrath's article in this issue), Wichmann-Hansen Godskesen, and Kiley analyze a required development program for experienced doctoral supervisors. They use statistical and longitudinal analysis to demonstrate that in their context this mandated, top-down approach has a positive impact on: a) supervisors' competence development; b) supervision culture within a unit; and c) doctoral students' satisfaction with their supervisors. They conclude with a clear message for all academic developers: 'Large-scale and long-term programs are more likely to enable cultural change' (p. 185).

To foster such change, Brown Wilson and Slade reflect on the value of engaging a wide array of stakeholders in discussions about curriculum. They suggest that

curriculum development should be a collaborative and outward looking process, rather than an internal and inward looking one. They demonstrate the power of linking professional and social context, stakeholder groups, and curriculum visioning processes.

Finally, Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, and Siebrits close the issue with a timely reflection on ePedagogy as a threshold concept. They note that TAs and lecturers often struggle with the troublesome concept of ePedagogy. When academic developers help teaching staff navigate this threshold, however, the results are meaningful: 'a focus on ePedagogy can transform [TAs' and lecturers'] thinking to curriculum design in relation to student needs' (p. 198).

The articles and reflections in this issue underscore the difficulties of navigating change, developing individual and collective agency, and spanning boundaries in our work. In the face of a pandemic, these challenges are magnified. Yet judging from the articles in this issue, academic developers have powerful research, theories, practices, and communities to draw upon as we work to facilitate meaningful change within our institutions and across higher education.

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