

‘Messy Business’: Academic developers leading other academic developers in a curriculum realignment exercise in a contemporary Australian university.

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Very little has been written about academic developers working in teams leading other academic developers. This paper chronicles the experience of a group of academic developers in one Australian university working on a curriculum realignment exercise. Unexpectedly the *dynamics* of the group, rather than the *process*, emerged as the dominant theme in participants’ reflections. Although based on a small study, this paper provides valuable insight into a previously unexplored area: academic developers working with other academic developers in teams, as both ‘change agents’ and ‘change recipients’, exhibiting compliance and resistance as insiders and outsiders – typifying academics’ response to change when working with academic developers. In particular, it reflects the changing identity of academic developers as ‘academics’ rather than ‘service providers’ and reveals the potential benefits of academic developers reconceptualising resistance as a resource (Ford et al., 2008).

Recent calls for a broadening of perspectives on methodologies in social science research, including higher education research, highlight ways in which standard research methods are limiting. Koro-Ljungberg and Mazzei (2012, p. 728), for example, critique methods that are ‘devoid of critical reflection and contextual considerations’. They reiterate Law’s (2004, p.3) concern with research practices that attempt to order and simplify that which is inherently ‘complex and messy’ in the human world. This is echoed by Kelly and Brailsford (2013, p. 4), who argue for ‘methodologies that enable complexity (or even messiness) to be explored and retained’. This paper responds to this call by deliberately delving into the ‘messy’ and complex professional lives of academic developers and unapologetically includes reference to the role of ‘emotion’, a move advocated by Gibbs (2013) and supported by the *International Journal for Academic Development*’s (2013, 18,(1)) editorial commitment to publishing papers about the emotional toll in academic work. Provocative questions should be raised about why this focus has been largely overlooked. Some of our own experiences as authors – where we have been asked by editors and peer reviewers of higher education journals to tone down and not fully investigate the emotional toll of our academic development work – might suggest that there is an inherent expectation that such papers be sanitised and ordered, ‘measuring’ rather than ‘troubling’ what it is we do. We suggest that when academic developers are ‘overwhelmingly concerned with issues of identity and their own insecurity’ (Clegg, 2009, p.54) and focussed on their desire to legitimise their production of, and acceptance into, the world of scholarly activity, they unwittingly inflict limitations upon themselves by reproducing decontextualised, standardised research.

The performativity discourse originally used to frame this curriculum realignment exercise influenced not only what we did as academic developers, but whom we became

(Ball, 2003) – ‘corporate employees delivering a high quality product for the market’ (Tennant et al, 2010, p. 10). It is a salutary reminder that academic developer work, even with your own kin, does not exist in a vacuum divorced from broader social, political and institutional contexts, including learning and teaching discourses that both constrain and delimit discussion.

References

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