The ghost of disciplines past: Educational developers and intersecting identities

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Educational development (ED) has been described as an interdisciplinary "family of strangers" (Harland & Staniforth, 2008), where developers have typically transitioned from other academic fields (Rowland, 2003). Yet identification with a prior discipline runs deep for developers. Our conferences are rife with asides about our original fields: to explain the arcane knowledge we reference, to justify an epistemological or philosophical stance, to account for utter bafflement at an unfamiliar term or methodology. So how do our academic backgrounds influence our present work, and how we see ourselves as academics? How do our prior academic associations converge or conflict with our new interdisciplinary home?

In this session, we explore how developers' academic identities and their disciplinary backgrounds intertwine, drawing on our own international studies of developers and comparing the data with participants' reflections during the session. We consider, for instance: what differences we find in attitudes and approaches between developers from clusters of disciplines (e.g. natural sciences or humanities); whether developers are drawn to particular kinds of ED research (ethnographic, quantitative, narrative) at the expense of others; and more broadly, how developers see "the nature of our knowledge building" (Shay, 2012) in ED — as more like or unlike that of their home discipline, as systematic or "craft" knowledge (Scott, 2009, quoted in Shay).

Given that developers typically occupy an interdisciplinary space, these questions carry meaning. At a personal level, we often work with academics from disciplines with different epistemologies from our own; how we frame our work and envision our identities can therefore greatly affect our capacity as developers and agents of change.

And at an institutional level, how we identify and present ourselves as academics can create alignment or friction with various institutional discourses. At the same time, we may find ourselves having to build our academic identities in opposition to the identities "bestowed" on us by others—be they academics or university leaders—in order to succeed in our roles. For instance, are we viewed by some as "unbundled" "para-academics" (Macfarlane, 2011), with only a slender range of expertise, or might we be seen as "meta-academics," performing regular academic roles of teaching, research, and service (albeit in different proportions from "regular" academics), as exemplars for our academic colleagues?

As well as reporting on the findings of our studies, we will end by inviting attendees to discuss and critique this approach, including reflecting on how their own ghosts of disciplines past haunt and enrich their present work.

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