

Educational Development in Universities: Issues of Purpose

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***Abstract:** This paper explores the purposes of educational development, as represented in the discourses of learning, lifelong learning, the learning organisation, improvement and change. These discourses tend to be taken-for-granted aspects of educational development. This discussion engages with the emergent conditions of supercomplexity (Barnett 2000) and postmodernism (Lyotard 1994) and invites a consideration of additional purposes that might be associated with development. Thus, this exploration invites a questioning, rather than a celebration, of 'the various ways in which educational development acts to improve teaching and learning in higher education'.*

The thesis is that 'development' activities tend to invite academics to reconstitute their views of themselves as learner-workers, and their learning-working environment, in particular ways. In the context of this thesis, the paper provides an argument for the extension of notions of educational development in a number of directions beyond change and improvement. One involves an extension to more effectively engage with the complexities of the organisational and intellectual context of academic work, acknowledging the tentativeness and partiality of all knowledge, including that underlying educational development. A second proposed extension involves issues of sustainability, both organisational and environmental. Here the suggestion is to extend the sense of academic professionalism to include the ethic of care, and a concern for sustainability. Thus the paper provides an argument for educational development that is more balanced and inclusive.

"The more actors understand about their situation, the more they will be able to make judgements and take actions that are likely to anticipate emerging circumstances".
(Barnett 2000, p.135)

The current historical moment invites, if not demands, both organisational learning by institutions and lifelong learning by individuals (NCIHE 1997). In this context, development, and therefore learning (individual, lifelong and organisational), necessarily blur the distinction between working and learning environments, and between workers and learners. It is also a time where the borders around institutions are increasingly permeable to a flows of information and expectations, with the result that institutions are unable to isolate themselves, or those who work within them, from surrounding economic, social and cultural environments. In these circumstances, this paper explores the purposes of educational development, as represented in the taken-for-granted discourses associated with it— those of learning, lifelong learning, the learning organisation, improvement and change. Thus, it invites a questioning, rather than a celebration, of 'the various ways in which educational development acts to improve teaching and learning in higher education'.

In contemporary higher education it tends to be assumed that there is a synergistic relationship between educational development and improvement—development leads to improvement, improvement to development. The elaboration of the conference theme in the 'flyer' instantiates this assumption. And both require learning and contribute to change. It is also a context where reference to 'development' should be read as also a reference to attempts to change the working environment. Thus, to paraphrase Hobart (1993, p.1), 'development' is effectively a synonym for more or less planned organisational change—to understand, in order to anticipate, in order to change.

The thesis of this paper is that 'development' activities tend to invite academics to reconstitute their views of themselves as learner-workers, and their learning-working environment, in particular ways. This invitation works for better *and worse* in the organisational culture of universities and the lives of academics themselves. The discussion is based, in part, on Michel Foucault's theorising of power as inseparable from knowledge. According to Foucault (1985), human experience is historically and culturally constituted through games of truth and error, rather than being the outcome of some natural or intuitive process. It is through such 'games' that we come to believe that "something ... can and must be thought" (p. 7). The object of Foucault's analysis is the manner in which human activity and experience are formed through the work of "prescriptive texts", that is, "texts that elaborate rules, opinions and advice as to how one should behave" (p. 12). Such 'texts' serve as devices to invite individuals to "question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape them themselves as ... subjects" (p. 13).

My contention is that staff development activities also function in this way. Indeed, it is only through such self-forming by academics that staff development can 'act to improve teaching and learning in higher education'. This paper asks 'in whose interests is the venture of educational development being promoted and activated'? It works from the assumption that the 'development' that results cannot escape the political and ethical dimensions of this question.

In this paper, the object of 'development' is taken to be academic staff. Thus, all references to work and learning are to the work and learning of academic staff, and all references to working and learning environments are to the work and learning environments of academic staff. References to general staff, managers and/or students in terms of their work-learning or work-learning places will be made explicit.

The current context of higher education

At a broad social level we are seen by many to be living out 'the postmodern condition' (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard's interpretation of this 'condition' focuses on knowledge, emphasising the tentative, conditional nature of knowledge, including the suggestion that there can be no truth separate from those who believe, and therefore there is no possibility of an 'objective' truth. The postmodern view of knowledge represents a radical departure from earlier commitments to Truth and universal, objective knowledge, often associated with so-called scientific reasoning. These were the commitments of the Enlightenment (Lyotard 1984), and they became the central self-forming focus of universities as they shifted their allegiance from the sacred, and the transmission of knowledge, to the secular and scientific approach to knowledge production (Blomqvist 1997). For many these 'Enlightenment' commitments retain a central formative role in 'proper' academic conduct.

Postmodern views of knowledge have significant implications for the very conceptualisation of knowledge production. Rather than seeing this as a global project underpinned by shared values and understandings, engagement with the postmodern condition highlights the contestability of interpretive frameworks, and therefore the tentativeness and partialness of the knowledge that results from their use. The argument is not that global programs or shared values are impossible. Rather, the point is that global projects and their outcomes are, and will continue to be, subject to contestation. Protests surrounding recent forums on economic globalisation attest to this. The result is a need to acknowledge the absence of universal agreement on what 'progress' and/or 'development' means, let alone how it/they might be achieved.

What does all this mean in the context of academic organisations? Ronald Barnett (2000) explores some of the implications of 'the postmodern condition' for universities in his book *Realizing the University in the age of supercomplexity*. His reference to 'supercomplexity' acknowledges three contributions that universities are making to this condition. First, university researchers continue to create radically new ways of understanding the world. Second, universities are the primary sites in which these interpretive frameworks are subjected to critical scrutiny and thus contestation. And, third, universities continue to champion the intellectual values of tolerance, openness and reflexivity that encourage both the proliferation of frameworks and the process of contestation. These are very different roles to those associated with 'Enlightenment universities'. Here the focus is on the creation, contestation, integration and application of knowledge rather than its accumulation and transmission.

Barnett identifies six conditions that, in an age of supercomplexity, an institution might create in order to give it "a fair chance of approaching what it might be to be a university" (p.103). In particular, he draws attention (pp.104-109) to the need to achieve conditions of critical interdisciplinarity, collective self-scrutiny, purposive renewal, moving borders, engagement, and communicative tolerance. His position is that "[t]he post-modern university is one that lives purposively with its uneasiness" (p.108).

The focus on renewal draws attention to the need for organisational and individual learning. In particular, the information technology revolution is transforming our thinking about learning, largely through extending the scope of learning, from the individualised learning that occurs in formal educational settings, to include both the lifelong learning of individuals, and organisational learning (NCIHE 1997, Taylor 1999). This new thinking recognises that *how* learning is to be supported is being transformed, with decreasing reliance on formal learning environments, as well as changes in *what* is to be learned. The latter includes an increasing emphasis on development by individuals of "the knowledge, skills and understanding which [they] can use as a basis to secure further knowledge and skills" (NCIHE, 1998, para 4.14), ie, capacities for lifelong learning. This new thinking about learning underpins the synergistic relationships between change and learning noted earlier, where it is assumed that learning leads to change, and change to learning. This is one of the key reasons for the expansion of the focus on learning for both individuals and organisations. It is also one of the reasons for the decreasing importance of formal learning environments—learning cannot be the exclusive province of schools and universities if it is to be life-long, and play a central role in economic and social change.

Discussions of development and lifelong learning are consistent with Foucault's advocacy of a kind of a 'permanent revolution' in self-formation, given his focus on the need to achieve constant change (Greenman 2001). He was interested in the notion that individuals "are

formed by the techniques and rules, limits and controls, which each person imposes on himself or herself in order to create his or her subject, or self" (Greenman 2001, p.79). Coming to know how one formed oneself is, for Foucault, "the undefined work of freedom" (p.81), and is the necessary work of permanent personal revolution. Greenman concludes that this might be achieved through "being in a state of permanent *reconstruction* of an institution, not in a state of permanent *revolution* against it and ourselves" (p.97: his emphasis). Thus for Greenman, as for Foucault, the challenge is permanent reconstruction, a notion that has clear similarities with the notions of organisational and lifelong learning, and with renewal.

However there are differences between the context that Foucault was addressing and the context of Barnett's call for renewal. Foucault's 'permanent revolution' was always focused on transgression against the techniques and rules, limits and controls that otherwise seem natural, if not necessary. Similarly, the notion of revolution comes with an assumption of opposition to some orthodoxy, whether that orthodoxy be sexual or political or theological or intellectual in nature. Now we have 'permanent reconstruction', in the guise of organisational and lifelong learning, as **the** orthodoxy. In this context, Barnett's argument that: "The more actors understand about their situation, the more they will be able to make judgements and take actions that are likely to anticipate emerging circumstances" (2000, p.135) can be understood as inviting both *reconstruction* of the orthodoxy and *revolution* against it.

The discourse and purpose of 'development'

Generally, the discourse on education development focuses on strategies. Again the flyer for the conference exemplifies this—"What are we doing now? What will we be doing in the future?" Purposes are taken-for-granted, or perhaps taken-as-given—to improve the practices of universities and the academics who work within them. The concept of 'development' tends not to be problematised. It is treated as a universal good. However, it has been treated more sceptically in other contexts.

The edited collection, *An Anthropological Critique of Development* (Hobart, 1993), is one such sceptical reading. Mark Hobart (1993, p. 2) argues that 'development' as a generic idea tends to involve a set of techniques for producing a particular set of power relations between 'developers' and those understood to need developing, relations that are inevitably constituted by the developer's knowledge and categories. The resultant unequal power relationship is rendered less problematic when the developer or the sponsor insists on the importance of 'communication' between developer and developpee. The 'need to communicate' is thus a commonly stated imperative in development policy documentation (Hobart 1993, p.10). This is not to say that development is a disreputable activity or that developers are conspiring to deceive developpees. It is simply that, because development is always predicated on the idea that someone is knowledge-able while someone else is knowledge deficient, such communication cannot be a conversation among equals. The developer's knowledge, rather than the knowledge of the developpee, is necessarily assumed to be what will lead to improvement.

The anthropologists whose works appear in the Hobart collection understand 'developmental' knowledge as having a number of key characteristics. First, it is rational, scientific—scholarly—knowledge rather than local, folkloric or spiritual knowledge (p.2). Second, it is "couched predominantly in the idiom of economics, technology and management" (p.2), rather than the idiom of academic, theoretical or disciplinary knowledge. Third, preferred theoretical models are those which are "generalisable or appear to offer the greatest predictability or the semblance of control over events" (p.9). When it comes to implementing

that knowledge, developers usually have "absurdly short time-spans", and so "have to work within pre-established guidelines and assume that particular conditions fit a general mould" (p.9). These conditions may appear uncomfortably familiar. According to Hobart, 'charming absurdities' often result, some quite context specific and others less so.

A second source of sceptical commentary is provided by the *International Social Science Journal*, in a special issue entitled "The development debate: beyond the Washington Consensus" (Volume 52 [4], 2000). Two papers in that issue offer particular insights for this discussion. Rubens Ricupero (2000, p. 442) draws attention to "the experience of development over the last few decades". This is motivated by a desire to seek alternatives to "the paradigm of development that has been hegemonic for the last 12 years" (p. 442), a paradigm that emphasised macro-economic concerns "such as economic growth, capital accumulation, and productivity increases" while largely overlooking issues such as "the quality of life and social aspects such as the distribution of income or wealth" (p. 444). Thus a major theme of Ricupero's work is the need to address development in terms of both social and economic agendas.

The second paper, by Christian Comelieu (2000) challenges the 'limitless growth assumption underlying development theory. His argument rests on two propositions: that "Development theories are constructed almost exclusively around [economic] growth models and the study of the various factors and conditions governing [economic] growth"; and, "Development practices and strategies have been conceived primarily as growth strategies ..." (p. 459, emphasis in original). His argument is that "*limitless expansion in the long term of commodity output ... increasingly clearly, seems unsustainable*" (p. 460, emphasis in original). Given this, he points to the need to diversify the potential developmental goals beyond economic growth, including social and environmental goals, and, to develop a corresponding variety of development strategies (p. 464). It is clear that neither of these authors is arguing against 'development' per se, but they are arguing for a more inclusive and balanced conception of, and therefore purposes for, this term.

The context of academic work

Discussion of academics' capacity to engage with 'change and improvement' provides diverse interpretations. A review of discussions of the evolution of higher education (Taylor 1999), concluded that academics roles and employment conditions have changed throughout that evolution. He speculated that "the longevity of universities has been achieved only through academics' long-standing openness to and capacity for change" (p. 21). Given that optimism, it is sobering to note the conclusions offered in a recent empirical study of the roles of academics in Australian universities (McInnis 1999). McInnis's concludes:

If the results of this survey are any guide, we have possibly reached a limit to the total time academics can reasonably be expected to spend on their work ... We are perhaps at a critical point for the academic profession where the amount of hours worked, and the diffusion and fragmentation of tasks seriously threatens the quality of both research and teaching. (p. 63)

These comments reflect the general perception, supported by empirical research, that academic roles are overloaded. For example, McConville's (2000, p. 23) research identifies issues related to teaching/learning, especially "increased student contact and the implications of new technology based teaching", as the major contributors to increased workload. McInnis (1999) states that two thirds of his respondents "report that developing course materials for

new technologies has had a major impact on their [increasing] work hours" (p. xiv). Further, "they are typically facing the demands in teaching with little or no formal teaching" (p. xiv). This research tends to suggest that role overload is a result of corporate work practices and requirements, particularly demands for staff to work smarter and harder, rather than any shared yet aberrant academic eccentricity.

Academics roles and identities remain focused on their disciplines and research (McInnis 1999, Taylor 1999). The pattern of role expansion is consistent with this, and suggests that radical disengagement with the self-formation undertaken during their academic apprenticeship are unlikely to be achieved through anything other than a systematic long-term developmental process. But the literature reveals no such campaigns. Rather, it suggests that few academics experience any sustained educational development, and there is even less evidence to suggest that those charged with leadership and management are advocates of change in academic work through any systematic and long-term educative process (McInnis 1999). While this may reflect the 'absurdly short time-spans' that tend to characterise 'development', it also recognises that development of the academic workplace is largely driven by policies that appeal to self-interest, supported by intermittent and uncoordinated developmental activities. And participation in these activities is largely a matter of individual choice. In a context of work overload, and a preferred focus on disciplines and research, it is clear that only a small proportion of academics seek out opportunities for educational development, and an even smaller proportion is able to maintain a commitment to long-term engagement in such optional activities.

There are three emergent concerns. The first focuses on the reality that corporate demands to work smarter and harder are a primary contributor to declining academic morale. The earlier quotation from McInnis (1999) points to the urgent necessity for a corporate response. The second involves the assumption of universities as benevolent employers. Winter and Sarros (2002) provide evidence of the violation of the assumed or 'psychological contract' between academics and their universities. They indicate that long-serving academic staff are questioning the validity of the assumed relationship between their hard work and loyalty and the recognition and reward offered by universities as employers. Finally, given the perception by academics of violation of this 'psychological contract' in a context of work overload, and the perception that educational development tends to be focused on corporate priorities it seems likely opportunities for educational development will be viewed with increasing scepticism, if not cynicism.

Implications for educational development

It has been argued that educational development provides 'prescriptive texts' for doing the work of academic self-formation. What does it prescribe? What ought it prescribe? I want to begin a response to these questions by returning to the earlier discussion of the context of higher education. The co-emergence of the recognition of supercomplexity and the focus on individual and organisational learning have implications for 'traditional' educational development. That development, as noted, tends to be driven by corporate agendas, and to be focused on the achievement of 'more or less planned organisational change'. Yet the new thinking on learning recognises transformations in both *how* learning is to be supported is being transformed, as well as in *what* is to be learned. In part, these transformations represent and legitimate the postmodern contestation of knowledge, and they are consistent with Barnett's 'conditions for a post-modern university', especially the notions of interdisciplinarity, the dissolution of borders, engagement, and communicative tolerance.

These contestations are inconsistent with the desire for 'planned organisational change'. They call into question the very power relations that underpin traditional 'development'. The contestations are also likely to involve challenges to the very diagnosis of need, as well as to question whether the proposed strategies are likely to lead to 'improvement'. The very notion of 'improvement' speaks to values, and there is little reason to assume that these are agreed. Academics' scepticism leads to such questioning, as does their propensity to engage in argument. In some instances, those who are asking the questions are far more knowledgeable than the developers in relation to the specific issue. The irony is that those academics with disciplinary expertise in change management are seldom consulted by those who seek and/or promote change.

There are three implications here. First, there is a need for developers 'to listen as well as to tell' academics about the need for change, and about how it is to be achieved. Second, there is a need to acknowledge the tentativeness and partialness of the knowledge that underpins all development 'prescriptions'. Third, developers ought engage more authentically with the local knowledge of departments, and the specific conditions of academic work within them. My experience suggests there is enormous variation in the actual work conditions within any university, yet traditional developmental strategies have tended to be highly generic in nature. The point here is that universalising prescriptions of 'best practice' are not designed to engage with the context-specific nuances.

Academic development works out of a hegemonic logic, which foregrounds change and improvement. The discussion of the context of academic work suggests that this hegemony, as with economic growth, is unsustainable. The version of change that has been institutionalised is one of change through accumulation and accretion of roles and responsibilities. The question 'what do I stop doing, in order to undertake this new work' is unaskable, even foolish in terms of the management of one's academic career. Yet asking it seems to be fundamental to any attempts to redress declining academic morale.

This implies an opportunity to expand the current interpretation of the corporate mantra of 'work smarter and harder'. The notion of 'smarter' needs to include "the difficult and threatening task of making strategic choices and reconceptualising what it means to be an effective and productive academic" (Coaldrake & Stedman 1999, p. 9). The difficulty here is that strategic choice and reconceptualisation are part of the accepted role description of those charged with leading and managing universities, including Peter Coaldrake himself, in his role as Deputy Vice-Chancellor at the Queensland University of Technology. They tend not to be the focus of academic work, or of educational development for academics, at least not a standard part of that work. That work, as represented by Erica McWilliam (2002) tends to focus on corporate issues:

In my university, as in many other 'enterprising' universities in Australia, the sort of knowledge that currently counts as 'developmental' emanates largely from three domain – health-and-safety, leadership-and-management, and information-technology. These are tightly bound up with larger cost imperatives for universities in general – the need to guard against expensive litigation, the need to meet demanding corporate criteria for administrative 'best practice', and the need to engage efficiently and effectively with new communication technologies. (in press)

One direction for expansion of the focus of educational development involves assisting academics to become more self-interested in their self-management. This need is implied by the Dearing Committee (NCIHE 1997) and Coaldrake and Stedman (1999), and advocated by

Taylor (1999). Thus, rather than workshops on writing 'teaching portfolios' to meet the demands of the institution, there might be workshops on the development and management of career portfolios. In the context of the postmodern condition career management is a highly political matter, not simply a technical issues of keeping a cv and a skill base up to date. Such work would seem to require constant 'boundary scanning' of both organisational agendas and the wider literature in order to 'anticipate emerging circumstances'. At a more micro-level it requires development of strategies to ensure that the workplace is supportive of potential responses to those circumstances. These include opportunities to negotiate changes in roles and workloads with supervisors to ensure the overall demands of the work are reasonable. Clearly, this would involve an engagement with political and industrial agendas. That will pose a challenge for educational development because it risks alienating the hand that tends to fund it—academic management.

More fundamentally, it poses a challenge to the assumed purpose of educational development—change and improvement in the interests of the institution. The latter acknowledgment is not one that is usually made explicit. Yet it is implicit in all attempts to 'sell' the significance of educational development to academic colleagues as well senior managers. What is also not usually acknowledged is that the discussion of strategies to promote change and improvement tends to privilege institutional over individual or collective academic interests. It is as though institutional 'improvement' will guarantee individual benefits—an ivory tower version of the 'trickle down' theory of economic welfare. It ignores the industrial realities of massive casualisation of academic work, as advocated by the Dearing Committee (NCIHE 1997), and as noted by McInnis (1999) and Taylor (1999).

This suggests another opportunity to expand the focus of educational development, an expansion that recognises that academic work occurs in a relatively hostile environment. In such an environment there are ethical and moral reasons for developing policies and strategies to minimise risk to and maximise wellbeing in individuals, as well as to the organisation. These are more than human resource management workshops on stress management and the like. The work of Roger Mourad (2001) offers some insight into what this might entail. His argument is that, for the most part, education tends not to question "the increasing complexity of civil society and the multiplicity of factors that intellect is expected to deal with" (p. 754). He calls for greater attention to be given to the "fragility of the human being" (p. 752), including recognition that we cannot 'conquer' the hostile conditions. Rather, we need help to cope with, and live well in spite of, them. Mourad argues this in relation to education more generally:

We believe that education is rightly about improvement. This philosophy of improvement is not necessarily consistent with enhancement of living. It often has the opposite effect. (p. 755)

This argument resonates with that of John Ralston Saul (1993), who argues against our over-reliance on rationality as a means of understanding. Surely the focus on well-being would be a welcome addition to the work of educational development, particularly in a context of declining morale.

An additional purpose for educational development involves a focus on sustainability, both institutional and environmental. The very narrow focus on organisational improvement, or on individual well-being, are likely to be of little significance if the 'improvements' are unsustainable or broader current environmental concerns are ignored. In particular, it seems inconsistent with the broader roles of universities, as discussed by Barnett (2000), to ignore

environmental sustainability. Comeliau (2001) and Ricupero (2001) criticise third world 'development' for ignoring this issue. Others, such as van Wensveen (2001) and Ayres, van den Bergh and Gowdy (2001), argue that sustainability, at least some versions of it, can be seen as a 'genuine virtue', as well as being fundamental to the goal of a sustainable society.

Current development prescriptions rely on the formation of an academic professionalism, as exemplified in the work of Coaldrake and Stedman (1999). Those prescriptions tend to focus on the development of more 'worldly' capacities and attitudes. The capacities include technological literacy, teamwork, strategic planning and financial management associated with innovative entrepreneurialism. This is a prescription for technical professionalism, focused as it is on the development of particular capacities. The call to focus on issues of sustainability would involve an extension of the sense of professionalism to include ethical and moral concerns necessary to the achievement of a civic and sustainable society.

Conclusion

This paper was motivated by a view of development consistent with Barnett's (2000, p.135) observation that: "The more actors understand about their situation, the more they will be able to make judgements and take actions that are likely to anticipate emerging circumstances". It has been argued that traditional development practices are overly focused on the purposes of institutional improvement and change. This means that a range of aspects of academics' work situations and contexts are inadvertently, yet systematically, ignored through one-size-fits-all prescriptions—a form of top-down development. That is, educational development is too often designed and delivered without due attention to the diversity in the specific work contexts, knowledge, and experiences of academics.

This is an approach that is flawed, failing to anticipate emerging circumstances within and beyond universities as organisations. It needs to be expanded to recognise purposes beyond institutional improvement and change. In particular it needs to recognise that a range of the challenges facing academics cannot be 'conquered', and that rather than seeing these as 'problems to be solved', there is a need to represent and address them as dilemmas to be lived with and conditions to be worked on and within. This expansion in focus is seen to be essential to any attempt to redress declining academic morale. In addition, there is a need to recognise that sustainability may be no less an important goal than improvement. There has been no attempt to map the strategies by which these purposes might be pursued—the focus here is on making a case for these additional purposes. In a context where working and learning are becoming inseparable, educational development needs to extend its influence from the development of academics as individuals to the development of work cultures with strong connections to the broader society and environment—a more balanced and inclusive version of development.

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