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Against Professional Development

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Abstract:

This paper raises questions about the sort of knowledge which has come to count as professional development knowledge. The author interrogates the curriculum and pedagogy of academic professional development programs in Australian universities, drawing parallels with Third World development programs. She argues that professional development knowledge is privileged over disciplinary knowledge in setting lifelong learning agendas for academics, and notes some problematic consequences of this for academics engaged in professional development programs.

Against Professional Development

All professional workers need to be *developed*. Moreover, there should be no end to this process - the true professional knows that learning is for life. I want to explore how these two propositions have come to be true for academics and other professional workers at the beginning of the new millennium, and with what effects. In doing so, I seek to provoke debate about 'professional development' as a discursively organised domain whose practices are neither innocent nor neutral. In declaring this to be a paper *against* professional development, I am signalling my ambivalence about the truth claims made within this discursive domain as much as my interest in how such claims have gained the status of Truth. My rationale does not arise out of any belief in the sufficiency of my own knowledge or that of my professional colleagues. Rather it arises out of my concerns about the sort of knowledge that is coming to count as worthwhile for all professionals, including academics, and the current proliferation of mechanisms for disseminating this knowledge, for better *and* worse. It is too easy to forget the latter point. Just as the work done to develop Third World communities can often contribute to the deterioration of those same communities, so too the knowledge presumed to be relevant to the development of professional workers can undermine worthwhile local and context-sensitive knowledge. In the discussion that follows, I use Australian higher education as a case study to draw parallels between Third World development and the development of professional academic workers, using anthropological critiques of Western knowledge applications as conceptual tools relevant for this purpose.

To ask questions about the sort of knowledge which comes to count as truth in a particular institutional and/or historical setting, and the processes by which this occurs, is to imply a theoretical understanding of the nature of knowledge, power and subjectivity. I therefore acknowledge my debt to Michel Foucault's theorising of power as inseparable from knowledge, inasmuch as knowledge is something that makes us its subjects. According to Foucault (1985), human experience does not occur 'naturally', or through rational or true fields of learning. Instead, experience is historically constituted out of games of truth and error. This is how we come to believe that "something…can and must be thought" (p. 7). Foucault's interest is in *problematisations* (the ways "being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought"), and the practices on the basis of which such *problematisations* are formed (p. 11). So Foucault takes as the object of his analysis the manner in which human activity (eg, institutional behaviour, sexual activity) is made problematic in "prescriptive texts, " i.e., "texts that elaborate rules, opinions and advice as to how to behave as one should" (p. 12). His understanding is that such texts serve as devices that enable individuals to "question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as … subjects" (p. 13). In universities, professional development activities provide scripts for turning ourselves into better (more professional) academics. Inasmuch as we make sense of our academic selves by reference to these bodies of knowledge, they produce or constitute us. It is in this sense that professional development can be read as both a site of knowledge production and a system of power relations.

The edited collection, *An Anthropological Critique of Development* (Hobart, 1993), provides some useful insights into how 'development' as a generic idea can be turned into a set of techniques for producing a particular set of power relations between 'developers' and those understood to need developing. It is a relationship in which is inevitably constituted by the developer's knowledge and categories (Hobart, 1993: 2). The resultant unequal power relationship is rendered less problematic – apparently more equitable – when the developer insists on the importance of 'communication' between developer and developee. The 'need to communicate' is thus a commonly stated imperative in Third World development policy documentation (Hobart, 1993: 10). This is not to say that development is a nefarious activity or that developers are conspiring to hoodwink developees. 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 is already assumed to be what leads to progress, not the knowledge of the developee.

The anthropologists whose works appear in the Hobart collection understand 'developmental' knowledge as having a number of key characteristics. First, developmental knowledge is rational, scientific knowledge rather than local, folkloric or spiritual knowledge (p.2). Second, developmental knowledge 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). According to Hobart, 'charming absurdities' often result.

I want to consider now the sort of knowledge that produces academics as university-based professionals. In doing so, I attempt to flesh out some of the 'charming absurdities' which arise when university managers set about the task of developing academics by means of models of management that 'apply…to everywhere and nowhere, everybody and nobody' (Vitebsky, 1993: 100).

'Charming absurdities'

One absurdity that demands scrutiny is the ironic marriage of the humanist ends of professional development with its technicist means. An important premise underpinning the imperative to develop others is that development is much more than 'training'. Training is understood to focus too narrowly on technical capacities, not the sort of personal and professional growth that leads to leadership skill and managerial 'best practice'. Unlike training, development demands nothing less than an entirely new worker identity (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; McWilliam, Meadmore and Hatcher, 1999; Taylor, 1999). To respond to change, so the logic goes, an entire self must be completely made over as an enterprising individual. An OECD report *Enterprising Culture': A Challenge for Education and Training* (1989) provides a script for comporting oneself as an enterprising individual:

> An enterprising individual has a positive, flexible, adaptable disposition towards change, seeing it as normal, and as an opportunity rather than a problem. To see change in this way, an enterprising individual has a security borne of self-confidence, and is at ease in dealing with insecurity, risks, difficulty and the unknown. An enterprising individual has the capacity to initiate creative ideas, and develop them individually or in collaboration with others, and see them through into action in a determined manner. An enterprising individual is able, even anxious, to take responsibility, and is an effective communicator, negotiator, influencer, planner and organiser. An enterprising individual is active, confident, and purposeful, not passive, uncertain, and dependent. (p. 36*)*

In declaring itself to be 'much more than training', professional development is geared up to producing just such an individual in keeping with the needs and demands of enterprise culture, underpinned as it is by two distinct understandings. The first is the idea that the market is the best way to achieve effective organisational arrangements. As such, the market has 'paradigmatic status' for 'any form of institutional organisation and provision of goods and services' (du Gay, 1991: 45). The second understanding is about the most appropriate ethical comportment of the individual – *any* individual - in a society, and what their relationship to the economy should entail. In this way of thinking, the creation of wealth, which is understood to be the final measure of success, is best achieved by a 'highly individualistic form of capitalism' (Heelas & Morris, 1992: 3), drawing heavily upon psychology and psychotherapy for its theorising of the nature of the self. From pastry-cook to president, every individual must work industriously and competitively to achieve their individual potential. Autonomy is paramount, and dependence frowned

upon. According to such a view, individuals should be prepared to take risks and to accept responsibility for achieving bold, ambitious goals which are regarded as 'human virtues' (du Gay, 1994; Heelas & Morris, 1992).

'Enterprising' knowledge

If the goal of development is to turn workers into enterprising individuals, then the sort of knowledge which counts as 'developmental' is of necessity the knowledge needed for effective communication, negotiation, influencing, planning and organising, as well as the knowledge which develops personal leadership skills, ie, confidence, and purposefulness, certainty, independence and energy. Because 'effective communication' is the cornerstone of enterprise, competence in the use of new information systems is now *de rigeur* in any professional development curriculum. As a result, departments of Information Technology now have unprecedented status in many universities – they are regarded as rich in the very knowledges that all university staff should acquire to be active and enterprising in a technology-led world. Those academics yet to be 'converted' to Powerpoint use for lecture presentation are unlikely to hail from Information Technology. However this conversion experience is only a matter of time, given the speed with which Voluntary Early Retirements are being requested and approved in Australian universities. Exit Anthony Giddens, enter Bill Gates.

The discipline of psychology is another important knowledge component of the professional development curriculum. This is an effect of the hegemonic status of psychology in defining and explaining everything about human beings and their behaviour – organisational, personal, relational, cognitive and developmental. *In Governing the Soul: The shaping of the private self* (1991), Nikolas Rose argues that psychology is now so pervasive as a way of seeing the world that Western individuals use it constantly to make meaning out of their everyday life and work. Rose argues calls this process of seeing the 'psychologization of the mundane'. He explains:

> A *psychologization of the mundane*, involv[es] the translation of exigencies from debt, through house purchase, childbirth, marriage, and divorce into "life events," problems of coping and maladjustment, in which each is to be addressed by recognizing it as, at root, the space in which are played out forces and determinants of a subjective order (fears, denials, repressions, lack of psycho-social skills) and whose consequences are similarly subjective (neurosis, tension, stress, illness). Such events become the site of a practice that is normalizing, in that it establishes certain canons of living according to which failures may be evaluated. It is clinical in that it entails forensic work to identify signs and symptoms and interpretive work to link them to that hidden realm that generates them. It is pedagogic in that it seeks to educate the subject in the arts of coping. It is subjectifying in that the quotidian affairs of life become the occasion for confession, for introspection, for the internal assumption of responsibility. (Rose 1990, 244, his emphasis)

If we accept the validity of Rose's contention, then by implication, psychological categories, classifications and processes of remediation have become mechanisms for

doing the sort of forensic work needed in the production of an enterprising self. This would explain professional development's greater fascination with Myers-Briggs than with molecules.

Above all, of course, the professional development curriculum must be constantly informed by, and responsive to, market forces. The new broom of enterprise is designed to sweep away the cobwebs of ivory-towerism, including any special pleading that higher education should have special (non-market) status in the cultural order of things. Such special pleading has already been heard and de-legitimised by an earlier generation of free-market advocates who argue the *morality* of the market, by means of linking the achievement of individual enterprise with the improvement of 'community' outcomes. Such a re-configuration makes it possible to equate the market's ability to achieve a 'trickle down effect' (and so improve socio-economic standards) with greater democratic opportunity. Indeed, some of the most influential architects of the 'free market' have directly linked democratic values and capitalism (Friedman and Friedman, 1990). The power of the 'trickle down effect' argument is its conflation of 'individualism of enterprise' (Young, 1992: 42) with egalitarianism (Heelas & Morris, 1992: 21). Such a representation rescues what is often despairingly and negatively described as economic rationalism, allowing world leaders like Margaret Thatcher to describe the 'free market' imperative as working positively 'to change the soul' (Thatcher, *Sunday Times*, 7 May, 1988, quoted in Heelas & Morris, 1992: 7). Concomitant with this appeal to enterprise is the portrayal of a culture of enterprise paying back the active participation of all citizens by being 'generating' and 'encompassing', rather than encouraging dependency (p. 7). It is this moral dimension which, when taken together with the incitement to efficiency, takes the sting out of so much academic angst about 'selling out' to market forces.

From elite to excellent

The current fascination with economic, technology and management knowledge and its performance is occurring, not co-incidentally, at a time when Western governments are re-positioning themselves as buyers of education services rather than patrons of education. In the new educational market, Australian universities are scrambling to demonstrate their utility to anyone who might be a potential sponsor. A new educational marketplace demands a new vision of the university and its management. The elaboration of the 'new vision' inevitably entails the denunciation of traditionally accepted forms of organisation. New wave management theorists of the 1980s (who include Peters and Waterman, 1982; Naisbitt, 1984; Peters, 1989; & Naisbitt & Aburdenne, 1985) shift the emphasis from bureaucratic to entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial styles of management, ie, 'from reactive to proactive' (du Gay, 1991: 47; Moss Kanter, 1989) engagement. The effect is that Australian universities are now understood to be workplaces where client-driven activity is the norm. This notion of enterprise that floods the *excellence* and *quality* literature is strongly linked to how the individual should act at an ethical level (Gordon, 1991: 48). Individual citizens are constituted as 'desiring' the opportunity to participate in this way, thereby realising their true selves.

Enterprising activity is very much at the heart of recent calls for the transformation of Australian universities along corporate lines. Paul Ramsden's (1998a, 1998b) work is a

highly influential exemplar of this sort of advocacy. To make his case, Ramsden draws on the significant and influential knowledge production of so-called 'academic gurus' such as Charles Handy, Rosabeth Moss Kanter, and Michael Porter, and 'consultant gurus' such as Tom Peters, Stephen Covey, and Peter Drucker. As significant players in the management-fashion-setting community, these people not only distribute their ideas through management texts, but are also often highly successful orators who specialise in persuasive communication (Clark & Salaman, 1998). In 'Out of the Wilderness' (Ramsden 1998a), Ramsden calls for the pedagogical and administrative transformation of Australia's universities by way of a more professional -- and less "bureaucratic" -- approach to leadership and management. The biblical metaphor used in the title of the article leaves the reader in no doubt about the current state of oppression and barrenness among those who work in universities (academics, students, and administrators); nor can the reader doubt the sanctity of the vision splendid that the writer shares of a promised land flowing with the milk of effective management and the honey of good leadership. The promised land is, as Ramsden sees it, the 'effective university' and the effective university is one which can 'manage change…to produce, in all its endeavours, the qualities of excellence' (p. 39).

Learning how to manage change to this end means, according to Ramsden, learning from 'studies of other businesses' about the relation between employees' attitudes and company performance (p. 39). We need to accept firstly that universities 'are not intrinsically different from other organisations'. We are then told that, in other organisations, studies show:

> The better the attitude the better the profitability and the productivity. The better the staff development and people management, the better the capacity of the organisation to adapt to new demands, new technologies and to maintain its position in the market. (p. 39)

Improving the performance of universities, according to Ramsden, demands 'new ways of inspiring academics to work both independently and collaboratively', a problem that is solved, he argues, by 'more effective leadership'. More effective (good) leadership is understood thus:

> Good leadership can transform the commonplace and average into the remarkable and excellent. It has the effect of making everyone feel personally responsible for the standard of work produced by themselves and their colleagues. It makes everyone into a leader. (p. 39)

The idea that everyone can and ought to be a leader is an idea which has its seductions. However it also contains its own 'charming absurdity' (viz: If everyone is a leader, who is left to be led?). However the absurdity is mitigated somewhat if leadership is to be understood as a matter of taking responsibility for self-regulation rather than as regulating the affairs of others – in Foucault's terms, engaging with one's self as an *oeuvre* or work of art.

Development as pedagogy
In search of excellence, academics are called, as any other vocational group, to 'develop' themselves as professionals through an unprecedented array of workshops, seminars, motivational speakers, kits, consultants, websites and self-help books. In my university, as in many other 'enterprising' universities in Australia, the sort of knowledge that currently counts as 'developmental' emanates largely from three domains – 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. As is the case in Third World developmental programs, this knowledge is transferred through pedagogical processes that are generally predictable, both in terms of content as well as design. Professional development for postgraduate doctoral supervision, for instance, may now be difficult to distinguish from professional development for personal promotion or for flexible delivery. As is the case in the Third World development, the sort of knowledge which counts as developmental is generalisable economic, technological and management knowledge, underpinned as it often is by psychologised models of human behaviour and organisational life. In universities, those who get to be 'developers' transfer this knowledge to those academics who are deficient in it, preoccupied as they are with their own 'local' disciplinary knowledge for performing their teaching and research.

The new imperative to teach by means of flexible delivery is a case in point, predicated as it is on the assumption that academics are deficient as teachers, and that, by and large, it is knowledge about new information and communication technologies that can remediate that deficiency. In the same way that subsistence mixed cropping has been declared to be a form of ignorance and mono-cropping for the market a form of knowing in the Third World (Vitebsky, 1993: 104-107), so too local academic enactments of pedagogical work can come to be framed as a form of ignorance, to be overcome with the application of new techniques. These new techniques include mechanisms for 'on-line' teaching, the use of Powerpoint, email and CD-Roms, multi-media and computer-assisted learning, and so on. The difficulty here is not that any one is these techniques not worth knowing. It is rather that 'flexible delivery' threatens to collapse the complexity of pedagogical processes into a 'technology will deliver' quick fix, a version of mono-cropping to meet the student market. Two myths are kept in place here. Not only does the myth that 'technology will deliver' get maintained, but so too does the myth that students' preference is for virtual pedagogies over campus-based ones. While some students do find it useful to have off-campus access to course materials and the like, there is no clear evidence to date that any group of students, apart from those studying in distance mode, want to *replace* on-campus teaching and learning with web-based pedagogy. Nor is there as yet any evidence that transferring Overhead Transparencies onto Powerpoint slides will dramatically enhance student learning.

It is the usual practice that Human Resource Management staff and/or Information Technology staff deliver 'flexible delivery' and similar developmental knowledge by means of professional development workshops. Workshops may involve role plays of one

sort and another, especially if staff relations or conflict resolution is the theme. However, the preferred pedagogy is usually didactic. Most workshops are predicated on the (flawed) assumption that if you tell a person something, they know it. Where once didactic workshops consisted of presenter talk accompanied by a plethora of Overhead Transparency Slides, they are now more likely to involve presenter talk accompanied by a plethora of Powerpoint slides. The predictability of the pedagogy arises out of the generalisability of the formula for defining the functions that need to be performed in order to meet the relevant quality criteria. A good developer knows, for example, that visions should be shared, that aims should be clearly stated, and that audiences need to be engaged. A good developer knows to use simple language and visual images which enable the developee to gain quick access to an idea. This was done very efficiently on my campus by a motivational speaker 'from industry' who began her presentation on 'What Makes A Quality Brand?' by asking a group of sociologists and philosophers: 'When I say "soup", what brand do you think of?' Having allowed time for reflection, the presenter then displayed a bright red can of Heinz soup on the screen. The lyrics are Bob Dylan, but the voice is Pollyanna. The point is not simply that the knowledge being transferred was mind numbing in its simplicity - the problem was also the total disregard for what the developees brought with them by way of their own knowledge. The only knowledge that mattered was their knowledge as *naïve consumer*.

Performing quality

So important are professional development activities like these that evidence of diligent attendance and participation is now available to be read as a key indicator of 'quality' academic performance. Regular attendance demonstrates an academic's recognition of their own shortcomings, and their acceptance of responsibility for addressing these shortcomings. Failure to attend, on the other hand, signifies an academic's inability or refusal both to notice their own limitations and to take responsibility for them. A 'quality' academic in search of excellence would regard all such activities as opportunities for personal and professional growth. So new performance criteria work to displace old ones. For example, in making the claim that one should be permitted to supervise postgraduate research, the issue of whether or not one has published recently (or indeed, whether one has conducted any research) threatens to become less important than whether one can prove attendance at a large number of 'quality' workshops. Developees must not only attend, but they must provide feedback on the workshop so that the performance of developers can be measured against 'quality' criteria. It is for this reason that frenzied efforts are made to ensure that no participant leaves a workshop without providing filling in the requisite feedback sheet. Professional development must be seen to be done – it must be demonstrated, so it must be performed in ways that can be measured. Evidence of attendance and bureaucratic attentiveness is presumed to be evidence of new learning.

The process of benchmarking is crucial in this process. Benchmarks are by definition knowledge which is transportable, ie, knowledge which is separable from a particular context or situation. In Vitabsky's (1993: 013) terms, the process of benchmarking relies on 'commoditised' knowledge. So the effect of benchmarking on academics' work can have much in common with the effects mono-cropping for the market has on local subsistence mixed croppers. For those academics who are sustained by what flourishes in

their disciplinary garden, the call to a culture of performativity comes as a call to replace what sustains the scholar in favour of what sustains a market-driven economy. Quality assurance is to academic thought as rubber is to repast.

To illustrate, I draw once again on my own workplace experience of the absurd effects of the commoditised knowledge that informs the performance of 'health and safety' in my university. All academics are now considered suitable persons to act as Fire Wardens for the University buildings and all are under pressure to perform the associated tasks for a particular floor in a particular building during office hours. This is so despite the fact that academics' duties may take them well beyond that floor and/or that building for much of their work time, which is very often outside regular office hours. It is not that my university is peculiar in this regard. The issue is that, as illustrated in Third World developmental scenarios, a homogenised system of knowledge like 'health-and-safety' cannot cope with local discontinuities and anomalies, however they occur (Hobart, 1993: 6). 'Health-and-safety' presumes the sort of stability and predictability that may have characterised workplaces in the government Public Service three or four decades ago -- ie, a desk for everyone, and everyone at their desk during 'office hours'. This is an absurd assumption at a time when the call to more 'flexibility' in teaching practices sees academics doing much more work on evenings and weekends. Unfortunately, irony deficiency is all too often a characteristic of professional development knowledge.

As Fire Wardens, academics must attend training sessions – they are warned that it is a legal requirement that refresher courses be attended scrupulously. Thus Fire Warden-ship demands of academics not only that they now be in predictable places at predictable times, but also that they develop themselves as lifelong learners of 'health and safety' knowledge. Moreover, safety policy demands that a deputy be appointed who is equally conversant with the rules and procedures, so two academics will be needed per floor. Thus idealised, depersonalised health-and-safety knowledge competes directly with academic, disciplinary, pedagogical knowledge for the time and attention of a significant number of academics as professional workers.

Many academics can and do resist this sort of colonisation of their time and activities; others are more Machiavellian, choosing instead to enter the discursive domain of health-and-safety by framing their particular research and teaching needs as health-and-safety issues. 'If you really need funding', I was recently told by a leading scholar, 'see if you can mount a health-and-safety argument'. These are the sorts of language games that consume heads of university departments when the logic is to 'do more with less'. In paying attention to these games, academics must necessarily spend significantly less time engaging with knowledge that produces new scholarship. I am not arguing that scholarship is or even *ought* to be devoid of language games. Indeed, Lyotard (1979) reminds us that 'new moves' or 'new games' are at the heart of the professor's work. Moreover he argues that the age of the professor is ending because professors are incapacitated in relation to play – 'no more competent than memory bank networks in *transmitting* established knowledge, no more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games' (p.53). What I am arguing here is that scholarly games usually revolve around more compelling knowledge objects.

'Sentencing Learners to Life'

Self-regulation for greater professionalism means there can be no end to learning. Academics are no different from any other occupational group in terms of the expectation that they will accumulate new skills and knowledge throughout the entire life span. Moreover, they should expect that others will want to do the same. Chris Falk (1999) understands this imperative as 'sentencing learners to life', arguing that 'life-long learning' is now working as a vehicle for selling commodities and as a profitable commodity in itself. To Falk, life-long learning 'is largely a project of economic, social and epistemological recuperation dedicated to delimiting rather than expanding the subjectivities of learners exposed to it' (p. 7). He claims that life-long learning has departed from its original intent to make learning more attractive by disassociating it from schooling, and now acts to make education more intrusive and more damning of those who choose not to engage in it (p.8). To the extent that professional development is part of the modern populist form of adult education called life-long learning, it must be suspect for its 'headlong pursuit of relevance as defined by the Market' (p.1), and its complicity in the production of the 'malleable-but-disciplined' individual that is so necessary to enterprising culture.

I have argued in this paper that professional development uses a particular sort of knowledge to do a particular sort of work on individuals. It is work that those individuals are supposed to want to do on themselves in order to enhance their capacities to function in changing times. My concerns are that the knowledge which counts as professional development, and the processes through which that development is supposed to occur, ought to be scrutinised more closely in universities than in currently the case. In the rush to embrace the knowledge that apparently positions an organisation at the cutting edge of 'best practice', we may well find that radical doubt itself has become a casualty of the change process.

Third World development can and does fall seriously short of its professed goals of advancing the technological capacity, material prosperity and political stability of 'underdeveloped' countries (Hobart, 1993). So too professional development must be acknowledged to be a flawed project that constructs new power/knowledge relationships in universities for better and worse. Academics and academic managers should bring to professional development the same systematic curiosity and capacity for scepticism that is the hallmark of good science and good scholarship whatever the object of analysis. These capacities should not be rendered irrelevant by a new order of thinking which insists that generalisable theories are the only useful knowledge, and naïve optimism is the only legitimate basis for engagement.

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