

# AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES: COMPLEMENTARY ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

There are numerous websites and considerable literature which describe approaches to learning and teaching using a range of technologies in higher education contexts for academic staff. Further, that as academic staff development is increasingly recognized as having an essential role to play in the recasting of ways in which teachers work with students and how students best learn, that this is an area ripe for new consideration. It is the author's contention here, that embracing the role of student, as a lived experience, can assist academic developers in reconsidering and renewing their conceptions of learning and teaching. This could go in some part in informing the practice and processes of academic staff developers in understanding, promoting and supporting flexible learning modes.

## KEYWORDS

Academic staff development, reflection, story telling, technology

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions struggle to find appropriate ways in which to support their staff in using technologies in appropriate ways in their teaching. Numerous methodologies are used to support staff. These include workshops, seminars and various other accreditation formats amongst others. However, there remains a competing agenda for time and energy spent on enhancing academics' teaching in a modern and highly complex world where new technologies are increasingly viewed as a future we cannot ignore. What Collis (1998) stated ten years ago still remains true for many Australian academics:

*...we must publish; we must obtain research funding and carry out empirical research; we may have inadequate access to the technical support needed to attempt innovation in our teaching; we are evaluated in our teaching on the basis of student satisfaction and course completion, goals not always compatible with attempting innovative practice; or attempts at innovation, when they do occur, may not fit the organisational practice of our institutions; we may not perceive ourselves any relevance in all these calls for change within our own courses. And yet we are supposed to be educating our own students to become professionals in the new type of educational environments that we do not even know how to demonstrate ourselves. We need to practice the change we are preaching, if we even are preaching it. Who do we look to as models for ourselves? (Collis, 1998, p.3).*

While this paper explores the professional development of the author it attempts to link this intensely personal experience as a suitable embedded approach to staff development which may be of use to others. The potential of narrative as a way to understand ourselves and the consequent making sense of the experience can be a powerful experience. Formal learning for staff, as an organizational strategy, may provide a serious option for encouraging meaningful engagement with learning and detaching when using technology.

The term *academic developer* is used in this paper to describe those individuals whose job description within universities in Australia (and in other countries) requires them to develop, organize and manage professional development opportunities for academic staff. This might include workshops, seminars, visiting

scholars and formal courses. For the author this includes policy development, change management and engagement with technologies to enhance the learning experience of students.

## 1.1 Duality

The duality of experience had when academic staff take on the role of student, according to Al-Mahmood and McLoughlin (2004) is the opportunity for a unique vantage point in reframing and reconceptualisation of online teaching. When academic staff participate in formal studies and become students again they are placed in the position of reflecting on their own behaviors, conceptions about learning and teaching. Al-Mahmood and McLoughlin report that

Re-learning through e-learning is about reflecting on teaching and learning practices in a creatively different way by changing roles from online teacher to online student. This moves beyond traditional paradigms of staff development programs that 'tell' how to improve online practice or prescribe online teaching practices (p.37)

The aim of the discussion here is to reflect on the authors own experience of becoming a student and using that experience to think about academic staff development in higher education. The ideas which have emerged here find support in the literature, and as such this, albeit highly personalised account, is a contribution to how we think about academic staff development. As Sharpe, Beetham & Ravenscroft (2005) have recently pointed out

as teaching in higher education becomes more evidenced based, there is a drive to integrate research with practices, leaving developers with the challenge of how to support staff to make greater use of available theoretical concepts and research evidence.(p. 6)

It was therefore important, for me, as an academic staff developer to draw together research and practice in order to inform my work. This was one of the reasons why I chose to experience the position of being a student. Within my role I support academic staff in their ongoing professional development about how they can better enhance the student learning experience when using technology. For many years I had worked within the typical academic development modes of workshops, seminars and presentations but I have felt for some time that there was a lack of deep engagement by staff in the issues. So, I wondered whether a formal learning experience could alter that. And, if it could would it be a suitable way in which to engage academic staff in professional development that could perhaps be transformative?

The focus of this case is the duality of being both an academic staff developer and a student. Here, the author attempts to reflect critically on her own learning through narrative. An additional aim is to detail the affordances that this experience may have for staff development practices. Sharpe, Beetham and Ravenscroft (2005) state that the greatest impact on how educators undertake their work and adopt new approaches has been by “narratives from colleagues about what they did, what went wrong, and how they survived” and that “practice is most effectively supported by richly contextualised representations, mediated by expert users” (p.8). Likewise, the work presented here is one such narrative.

What follows are a number of sections that first describe the context of this discussion and related concerns in the literature, second, the story of the duality of being a student and an academic developer and finally, implications for academic staff development and reflective practices in higher education are raised.

## 2. CONTEXT

As an academic staff developer I am engaged with a number of practices to do with enhancing learning and teaching. Like many of my colleagues I coordinate, develop and present workshops, induction programmes, project-based professional development and teach within accredited certified courses. In my role I am also concerned with the needs of academics in working with technology which are linked to the quality imperatives of an institutional strategy for the improvement of learning and teaching when using web based technologies. In considering how I undertake my work it is important to me that I explore in a scholarly way how I arrive at ideas and practices and how these are informed by own values beliefs and assumptions. By exploring the duality of being both an academic developer and a student I hoped to inform my practice within a centralized teaching and Learning Centre and develop recommendations for embedded professional development as a complementary organizational strategy related to the effective use of technology. Al-

Mahmood and McLoughlin (2004) explore the same duality and it is alongside their work that I was prompted to experience my own development as a student and what the implications for academic staff development might be.

## 2.1 Academic Staff Development

Typically, academic staff development is characterised by a focus on knowledge, skills and attitudes and often the telling of how to do things (Brew, 2002; Fraser, 2001; Gosling, 2001; Land; Reid, 2002; Sharpe, Beetham & Ravenscroft, 2005). This is undertaken in many countries, for example, in a range of ways through short courses, seminars, visiting experts and award bearing programmes. This work places the staff developer in the position of assisting academic staff to reflect on “their role in relation to teaching, research, scholarship, leadership, funding applications and supervision of students” (Fraser, p.55).

With increased interest in the quality of learning and teaching generally (Dearing, 1997; Ramsden, 1992; Rowland, 2001), and the intense focus on effective use of new technologies there is a substantial reconsideration of how academic staff developers can contribute in affecting change and supporting quality imperatives as academic staff transfer knowledge into practice. Sharpe, Beetham & Ravenscroft (2005) write that many representations of effective practice seem to bear little impact as practitioners work is often “context dependent and untheorised” (p.7). Mahmood and McLoughlin (2004), in reference to academic staff development also note that the literature details many instances of “staff development programs that *tell* how to improve online practice or prescribe online teaching practices” (p.37). They go on to say that “reflection can stretch our traditional comfort zones to question and explore our underlying assumptions, values and beliefs and move us into uncomfortable zones to inform our praxis” (p.37).

Much recent higher education literature suggests that effective academic development is had when individuals undertake to problematise their own teaching and see the problem as researchable with the intention of understanding and transforming practice. The field of reflective practice is well reported and given limited space here readers might consult the work of Boud, Cohen & Walker (1993), Mezirow (1990), Moon (2001), Schon (1983). In short, Schon states that reflection can raise “awareness of tacit knowledge and transforming knowing-in-action to knowledge-in-action” (McDrury & Alterio, 2002, p. 20). Little and Heffernan (2002) feel that impact on teacher practice is greatest when teachers engage with real reflective practices as this enables personal insight and improvement of learning and teaching. This is a move away from telling others what to do and is rather enabling teachers to know and explore how “implicit conceptions of teaching and learning which so pervade lecturers’ thinking and decision-making” (Gibbs, 1999, p.22). This becomes a critical step in applying ideas into practice. Given these ideas I have purposefully *problematized* my own practices as an academic developer in order to move beyond *telling* about technologies that I had not experienced. I wanted to do as Collis reminds “We need to practice the change we are preaching, if we even are preaching it. Who do we look to as models for ourselves?” (Collis, 1998, p.3).

## 2.2 Reflecting on Practice: Story Telling as a Way of Knowing

Inquiry into my own practice as an educator and academic developer has taken many forms. Recently it has had as its focus what Diamond (1995) refers to as reflexive narrative where “narrative of self emphasizes the mapping of a lifetime of meanings over time” (p.80). This has involved the weaving of “conceptual and romantic tales to lead to my present reintegration of knowledge, using intuition and tacit understandings” (p.80). Fundamentally I believe that in order to truly know myself in practice that stories can assist in discovering meaning (for example see Schon 1983; Bruner, 2003). The story presented here and consequent analysis and discussion does not seek to find truth and definitive statements but rather to add to my ongoing construction of the meaning of myself as a learner and how my lived experience might inform academic staff development. This reflection becomes a conceptual and romantic story, which attempts to reveal professional ‘knowings’ of the principles, practices and aspirations of being a life-long learner and how this impacts on my role as an academic staff developer.

The interpretation of the story I tell is through a framework provided by McDrury and Alterio (2002) where the participant is involved in five stages. These are a) story finding; b) story telling; c) story expanding; d) story processing, and; d) story reconstructing.

### **2.2.1 Story Finding**

As an academic developer one of the areas that I need to keep abreast of is the use of technology for enhancing learning experiences. The days of academic developers not having skills in this area were long gone. I found finding appropriate professional development opportunities a challenge. While I attended conferences, read about what others have done and consulted with colleagues that it was not enough. In renewing how I understood the role of technology I decided to undertake a formal accredited programme.

### **2.2.2 Story Telling**

Distance education was not totally new to me as I had previously explored open and distance learning in a doctoral study of how home tutors manage the schooling of their children within the Schools of the Air through the use of High Frequency (HF) transmission (Tynan & O'Neill, 2007). That research contrasts sharply with the technologies that I use in my day-to-day practice as an academic staff developer. By taking on the role of student I was seeking renewal so as to inform my own practice as someone who provides professional development about designing effective online learning experiences. I considered that this experience could inform my work and particularly how technology impacts on learning and teaching. I believe that my experience as a student was significant for it provided me with a reminder of what it 'feels' like to be a student. The duality of the experience is where the story is found. This story has a focus on using and developing a wiki (although there were many technologies that could have been chosen and by way of example the wiki story was deliberately chosen as a focus). There were many stories within my experience but I have deliberately narrowed the subject here to focus on the experience of the learning for the purpose of proposing that the duality of the experience could be a powerful form of academic staff development. The real story is one of learning rather than the wiki itself.

### **2.2.3 Story Expanding and Story Processing**

Initially I was very excited about the new course. Learning about emerging technologies by experiencing them was also intriguing. The key learning strategy was the development of a course wiki about emerging technologies. We were encouraged to explore new technologies that we were interested in and then share these experiences with our peers. It was fabulous. I found that I was willing to 'go with' the programme. The key players were my peers and the teacher. We were all very excited about the possibilities. There was a pioneering spirit in the way in which we all keenly dedicated ourselves to the tasks at hand. My working group were all from the higher education sector and busy and dedicated professionals. They too exhibited a willingness during the course. The teacher was responsive and available via a range of new technologies. We also used a range of communication formats such as VoIP. As the course progressed I experienced unease and my motivation altered. This happened for a number of reasons. We had been asked to do a number of tasks that required us to work together. And as Christmas came about during this time many of us dropped out for holidays and the work only occurred sporadically. It felt disconnected, we lost momentum and we had lost our sense of community. A new issue emerged with the suggestion that we 'open' the environment to the web. In retrospect I can see why the teacher and others were suggesting this as it is linked to the notion of the wiki itself. However, many, including myself, were worried about our work as students being public and open to critique on the web. Our loss of confidence in the group we knew. In the end it was decided that post the course that we could choose to join an open wiki. Discussion was found in two places. These were within the learning management system (WebCT) and in the course wiki. The discussions were hard to follow being in two places. The experimental nature of the course and working across what became two learning management systems was cumbersome and unnecessary. The assessment changed a few times and the workload was high. It had crept up on me that I needed to be more responsible for my learning and I recognized a petulance for wanting the teacher to motivate me to do so. This did not last long as my peers drove me along in the need to keep up or I would miss out. I was being challenged by the emerging curriculum and processes and this surprised me as I thought I was more flexible in the way I learned things. In the end, the content and processes of learning all merged and created an authentic learning experience. The experience of being a student became increasingly a positive one and I felt empowered by the ups and downs and how I managed this. I experienced, I believe, a social constructivist environment (for example see De Boer, & Collis, 2005; Garrison, & Anderson, 2003; Gunawardena, & Zittle, 1996; Jonassen, (ND); Gunn, 2000; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Bannan Haag, 1995). True to such an environment there were opportunities for me to direct and design my own path. Where this unraveled can be seen in some of the

choices that I made and their consequences for my learning of what I thought was significant content. However, I made discoveries about the process and duality of being both a student and an educator and what this might mean for practice. In fact, I learned more about myself as a learner alongside the content.

### 3. STORY RECONSTRUCTING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The use of the wiki as an emerging flexible interactive technology in the experience that I had is just one example of new emerging social technologies and there is an extraordinary amount of literature to digest in the field more generally that is complementary to effective practices in web based technologies. In fact the current research agenda across the international sector is multifarious. See for example Beetham's (2005) article, which describes concisely the emerging agendas in e-Learning pedagogy, technical frameworks and tools, innovation and distributed e-Learning.

Wikis themselves are being heralded as alternative collaborative or groupware system where "access restrictions, rigidly defined workflows, and structures" (Lamb, 2004) are considered an anathema to users. Derived from an Hawaiian word for *quick*, wikis enable users to use simple hypertext markup as they read and edit concurrently. This is significantly different to the usual restricted access to read only browsers found on the WWW. This technology has successfully been used as a powerful collaborative tool over a number years and is considered reliable and relatively easy to use (Augar, Raitman and Zhou, 2004; Educause, 2005). How the wiki is used for pedagogical purposes remains limited but there is a growing number of instances of its use in higher education settings (Farmer, 2004). Lamb however reminds us that emerging technologies tend to surface when IT strategies are not meeting the needs of users. So, while wikis, blogs and other mobile applications are increasingly being used they are still considered by some to be outside of the mainstream and "typically dismissed as intriguing yet somehow trivial by many practitioners and managers" (p.48). Whereas Farmer challenges that along with the acceptance of online systems and the emerging technologies that "a degree of critical reflection on not only the pedagogy that we can use with these but also the pedagogy able to be effectively facilitated through the technology which has been employed would seem appropriate and necessary" (p.277).

My experience as a student has thrown up a considerable number of issues in the use and development of a wikis (alongside other technologies) for my practice as an academic developer. Not least is its power to interrupt and be subversive to known processes. For example, like Lamb (2004) and others such as Educause (2004) report, I found the wiki disorienting. I was more accustomed to the hierarchical organisation of the commercial learning environment. However, while I felt discomfort with this, in my participation, I realize that if you sacrifice function for design you could limit the spontaneous approach to building information and ideas. This is a key aspect and fundamental purpose of a wiki within the field of social technologies. Administrators could however, if they wished to, ease the discomfort by providing templates for users.

Editing the wiki using hypertext markup was empowering. It was not difficult and gave me access to a new collaborative approach to learning. I was also in control in that I did not need to ask anyone to edit my web based work. It was fun, interesting, highly collaborative, interactive, constructive and purposeful. In particular the roles of students and teachers and their communications altered significantly. As a student, my story indicated a disruption to how learning had previously been presented to me and how I had engaged in my own learning. I had been well trained or become use to certain processes and procedures. For example, the assessment changed several times. I had been previously use to assessment being stated and mostly inflexible. In using the wiki I had to redefine what learning I needed to do and how the assessment would measure that. I had to construct my own learning and this proved to be critical in my understanding of how I learn-both the good and bad practices. As an academic developer this holds lessons. For example, it is worth being reminded that ways in which we learn are based on sustained practices that have been ingrained over a long period of time. In encouraging others to use new technologies a there is a need to prepare for disruption and ensure opportunities for staff to reflect purposefully. Otherwise the affordances that technology has to offer, may well be lost in *going* about the technology in ways that are more familiar. Again, there is support for this assumption within the literature (Kirkup, & Kirkwood, 2005).

## 4. CONCLUSION

This paper is qualitative in nature and relies on the narrative produced through story-telling by one academic developer in order to engage with the use of new technologies. The author purposefully sought to experience the duality of educator and student in order to reflect deeply on the learning experience. The impact of being a student has provided her with scope to reflect on the understandings of how powerful the learning environment is on how students learn and behave. It has also reminded her of the importance of good learning design when using technologies. In transferring that experience as a student to what she does as an academic developer she is reminded of how complex the learning experience is. The participation as a student nestled alongside her tacit understandings of the processes and purposes of emerging technology can inform the actions and practice in the role of academic developer.

As noted earlier it may be a useful organizational strategy to provide academics with access to formal accredited courses and time to undertake them so that the use of technology goes beyond what academics already know and do. As many academics have competing demands on their time the practicality of formal courses may be undermined. However, it appears that there is scope to promote engagement of academics in this way and that powerful and deep learning experiences can be had. These deep experiences had by academics could perhaps ultimately enhance the student learning experience. For universities it could be a useful organizational strategy to consider including the “lived experience” of being a student as a powerful learning tool. While such a generalization cannot be supported through the experience of one individual or as reported by Al-Mahmood & McLoughlin (2004) this paper contributes in part to build cases for the substantive field of academic development more generally and engagement of academic staff with technology.

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