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# Actions informed by values in academic development: agency, opportunity and responsibility

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We leverage our recent (and ongoing) collaborative auto-ethnographic project to explore how the values, expectations and experiences that we each bring to our roles function in tension (or synergy) with the current higher education climate. This exploration is to help inform what we do in our roles: how do we choose to act in the neo-liberal university and why. Firstly, we trace a narrative that explores the positioning of academic developers with respect to expectations, signaling that we have an active relationship with the discourses that we work within. This leads us to consider the political dimensions of academic development work, and, in that context, our power, agency and values. Such focus encourages a critically reflexive approach and segues to the second part of the article, where, through the lens of identity, we interrogate how our own actions (as developers) are linked to the expectations and discourses with which we might find tension or conflict. It is here, drawing on notions of privileged irresponsibility and a scholarship of ‘re-description’, that our exploration turns to action: we argue that academic developers have not only an opportunity, but a *responsibility* to engage with redefining the discourses that give rise to the tensions and ambiguities in our roles. To do this, we suggest that a reflexive approach informed by values is essential: failure to do so contributes to a lack of clarity about what academic development work is for and risks promulgating the antithesis of its purpose.

Keywords: academic development, values, agency

## Introduction

In order to explore the position of academic developers in the changing HE landscape, we turned to collaborative autoethnography which offers

an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p1).

We have sought to better understand how the values, expectations and experiences that we each bring to our roles as academic developers function in tension with the changes occurring in higher education.

Having more than one author on board could help to have multiple voices in the story, hence, to fulfil the requirement to embed the life that is under study into the social-cultural environment (Winkler, 2017, p239).

For us, one of the strengths of the collaborative approach is that it starts to give a sense of the field of academic development more broadly, as we explore it through our various experiences and perspectives.

I think one of the potential benefits of autoethnography might be its capacity to expose culture through individual stories, and that might give us greater insight into our roles and the expectations of us (although I think these are probably strongly influenced by the organisation). I have learnt lots about how my institution operates and what it expects through stories that have been recounted to me first- or second-hand. (Author 2)

We have recognised in ourselves a desire to practice inclusively and collaboratively; striving for compassion and integrity, in pursuit of a praxis that is authentic to our sense of professional self. This has demanded on-going conversations about the larger purposes of (higher) education, and especially the challenges (and opportunities?) of the current performance-driven culture and the potential to engage with and contest that culture. We have surfaced a number of barriers, often structured around a dichotomy between what we expect of ourselves, and what others (senior managers as well as the colleagues who we are tasked with ‘developing’) expect of us. Our collaboration has surfaced how things are actually very similar for us on different continents (UK/Australia), at different types of institution (teaching-focussed/research-intensive) and in managerial vs academic roles. Collectively we embody a diverse range of academic and academic development experience.

We ... value a variety of different perspectives on development work, ... the ‘ethno-’ part of the approach ... allows us to do this, and the collaborative ‘auto-’ [assists] us to be humble in doing so (Author 1).

We are early, mid- and late-career: two of us are in our forties, the other is in his sixties. Two are British, and the other Australian, but two have lived and worked in Australia for much of our careers. We all have experience of research-intensive universities, but one currently works in a more teaching-focussed institution. We all hold PhDs – two of us in the sciences, and one in the arts – and we are, therefore, not unrepresentative in that we came to our development roles having established an initial expertise and professional identity in another discipline. One of us is currently an academic, one is ‘professional support’ and the third, having previously occupied both ‘professional’ and academic positions, now holds an honorary appointment. Each of us is very aware that our original discipline differs (substantially) from the world of ethnography. Yet, it was very much a deliberate, shared and thoughtful process that – more than two years ago – saw the three of us first tentatively explore this whole approach and, subsequently, commit to further sustained exchanges. Our primary motivation (authors 1 and 2) in making this commitment and working together was to support and further inform our day-to-day work practices rather than the production of another piece of published academic work. At the same time, we were aware that our shared endeavour was, potentially, of much wider interest and value, eg via conference presentations and/or publication. For author 3, the primary motivation was to continue to stay engaged with the work (and world) of academic development and to lend whatever support proved possible to two long-term respected and valued colleagues:

experience had made it clear to me that each of these colleagues' values and aspirations in regard to academic development very much resonated with my own (Author 3).

This variety of experience and perspectives has strengthened our approach, providing a range of similarities and contrasts, that have informed and helped validate our observations and conclusions.

The approach has evolved as we learned from the experience, and further consolidated our shared trust and understanding. Our exchanges have been via e-mail, a WhatsApp chat group, as well as face-to-face and Skype discussions. It has included regular sharing of perspectives and observations, often backed up by research papers to further prompt ongoing discussions, typically revolving around particular work-related challenges (or opportunities). (For example, in a 12 month period we exchanged more than 150 emails, along with papers that, ultimately, were sufficient to support the preparation of one book chapter and two conference presentations.) 'Discussion', in this context implies thoughtful and considered attention being paid to the input of others, and making a supportive, developmental response: an act that, unfortunately, experience shows stands in marked contrast to much of our collective experience of what occurs in the name of modern university management. Drawing on our learning from this ongoing dialogue, we have formulated an argument and anchored it here using selected extracts in our individual voices. The circulation of draft papers (of our collaborative writing) and related questions has often prompted further questions or discussion.

Thanks both for sending around some fab detailed notes. Yes, rough, but very valuable indeed. They have provoked lots of ideas that I want to pursue (Author 3).

Autoethnography is both product and process (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Doing autoethnography in order to produce an autoethnographic output has alerted us to the interplay between product and process, the significance of product in underpinning process, and the potential for the process to change that which is being researched. This interplay highlights the potential of autoethnography to impact praxis, as the researcher/researched is alerted to the inherent connection between reflection/analysis and further action.

## **Part 1 – Why Values?**

### **The 'positioning' of developers with respect to expectations**

A founding element of our collaborative auto-ethnographic project was a dialogue about expectations.

I find myself sharing information (like my academic background) to try to temper expectations that I might 'know' what they want me to tell them... On the one hand we may wish to 'establish credibility' as academic developers, and on the other, we have to duck the expectation that we are 'teaching experts' who can transmit best practice to them. This might also raise questions about how much we role model, coach, mentor, act as critical friend, and how accepting our colleagues are of us acting in these ways. Do they value us if we are 'only' there to ask challenging questions or point to relevant literature and scholarship? (Author 2)

This led naturally, for us, to explore values: our values and why we hold them.

The key question is: How do academic developers position themselves if their own values do not reflect the social and institutional discourses of their workplaces?  
(Di Napoli, 2014, p4)

Prompts such as this aligned with our discussions at a time when we began to question ourselves more deeply; “how well do we understand the values that we hold dear; how have they come about, [ ?] and what are they – can we name them?” The positioning of developers with respect to expectations also raises questions, for us, about our relationship with the discourses that we work within – the neo-liberal agenda and performance-driven culture being a specific example. We can relate to notions of “discourses in conflict” and developers as “brokers of discourses”, as discussed by Di Napoli (2014, p9):

In other words, how can academic developers become brokers of different and often contrasting discourses, while keeping their own values alive and recognisable to the academic community?

Key to our argument is that we have a relationship with these discourses. We are not a passive recipient of them, rather we are part of the discourse, entwined with it – we shape the discourse because it is a part of us. Here we signal an interest in Lee and McWilliam’s (2008) perspective of “living with” academic development where they

... seek to move towards imagining a critical scholarship for academic development that can engage productively in the ongoing reinvention of the academy (Lee and McWilliam 2008, p69).

It is their engagement with the “unstable and often contradictory positionings for academic developers” (Lee and McWilliam 2008, p72) in terms of Foucault’s ‘games of truth and error’ and Rorty’s scholarship of ‘re-description’ that have given fresh light to our ways of thinking about the relationship between our actions, our values, and our discourses. As Lee and McWilliam (2008, p73)

...turn to the ironic work of Rorty (1989) and of Haraway (1991) to find a way to live and work with the daily experience of contradiction and ambiguity within the modern university

and “imagin[e] a new leaderly disposition in the field” (Lee and McWilliam, 2008 p75), so do we interrogate our values to give us direction in the burgeoning neo-liberal university. Di Napoli (2014) discusses ‘value gaming’ and ‘positioning’, exploring the

sets of values academic developers import into their work and how these values may or may not be enacted in their own institutional space (Di Napoli, 2014, p1)

and how

positioning shapes expectations about the work these professionals carry out and the activities they should be involved in (Di Napoli, 2014, p5).

The metaphor of ‘gaming’ speaks to how we feel about our ‘positioning’ with respect to many of the expectations made of us. Our collaborative work has revealed how we have been

challenged in identifying this for ourselves, and benefited from a process of writing ourselves into understanding:

I am still left stranded right where I started, feeling like I have only just set foot on a path of becoming and unsure about who I am supposed to be as I am thrust into a leadership role (Author 1).

### **The political dimension of academic development work**

... how do academic developers enact and imagine a future for themselves (and the profession) in ways that recognise and take seriously the business of their own political power, and in particular, their responsibility to speak truth to power? (Peseta, 2014, p65)

The political dimension of our work (eg Peseta, 2014) triggered a need to look closely at the question of values so as to keep us grounded and offer direction amidst the vast array of competing and conflicting priorities we experience.

This project, for me, is all about unravelling what I might mean by this ‘why do I care?’ narrative prose (is that what it is? I don’t know, but I did enjoy writing it). What ‘definitions’ am I so hung up on? Whose are they? Why does it matter? (Author 1).

We argue that it is essential for academic developers to both take – and be seen to take – a reflexive approach to their work. Failure to do so, we suggest, risks deviating from a stance that is true to values, contributes to the lack of clarity about what academic development work is for, and potentially promulgates the antithesis of its purpose. Clarifying the purpose of academic development however is fraught when the whole idea of a university is seemingly contentious (cf O’Byrne and Bond, 2014). Whilst a plurality of purpose, at least, can be anticipated, it is not our intent here to further expound on this theme.

Because we are working in political arenas, or at least navigating political seas, we need to be cognisant of the discourses that we work within, asking: how do we relate to them? This, for us, highlights a critical need for a reflexive approach to academic development work.

... agendas of quality and audit ... can sometimes trouble the way an individual academic developer understands and goes about the work, especially if institutional demands are at odds with their professional judgement. (Peseta, 2014, p1).

We worry that, in the absence of any coherent, sustained or agreed sense of the ‘big-picture’ view of what we are trying to ‘do’ in academia (cf O’Byrne and Bond, 2014), then our day-to-day actions as developers will be vulnerable to the whim of the ‘ongoing churn’ in the discourses within which we inevitably are embedded.

### **Power, agency and values**

... the stress and flow of events trick us into a tunnel-vision where contradictions and dissonant aspects disappear during a fast and fluent way of thinking (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017, p97)

Our project has involved reflecting on why we hold certain values that may be at odds with some of the demands placed on us.

For me, teaching is an act of enabling/empowering/supporting/facilitating others to become something more than they are now. I have avoided the use of the word 'develop' (and 'improve') here, deliberately, as I think it (they) can be problematic: it suggests that we do something to another, to 'fix' them or to 'make' them better, it reduces the 'other' to an object and ignores their necessary agency in the learning process (Author 1).

We argue that such awareness is essential if we are to avoid the “stress and flow” consequences of which Roxå & Mårtensson (2017) speak. This is why we are investing so much energy in our dialogue on values.

Roxå & Mårtensson (2017, p102) argue that academic developers

are power-holders linked to expertise, institutional management, and policies and through them the teachers encounter the language and perspective of these forces, policies and worldviews.

Unlike Manathunga (2007), Roxå & Mårtensson (2017, p102) suggest that academic developers do have power as

the position occupied by developers affords them power through resources they sometimes control and sometimes are unaware of.

We suggest that to ignore or misuse this power is to take a pass on responsibility, or exercise ‘privileged irresponsibility’ (Zembylas et al. 2014), which may ultimately be to the detriment of the larger purpose(s) of academic development – assuming this is adequately understood or shared (as noted above). This is because

privileged irresponsibility allows those who benefit from being in superior positions in a hierarchical system to remain oblivious about the part they play themselves in maintaining the system (Zembylas et al. 2014, p207)

and

another way in which responsibility is avoided by powerful groups of people is by absenting themselves from discussions about responsibilities (Zembylas et al. 2014, p205).

Academic developers’ ‘positioning’ with respect to expectations has pointed us toward the relationship between our values and the political ‘game’ that we inhabit as the lived experience of academic development work. Whether we like it or not, we are part of this game, and the game part of us: we shape each other. The agency and power that we bring to this game gives us not just an opportunity, but a responsibility to engage in ways that benefit the ultimate goals of the academic development project: to ignore or fail to grasp this opportunity is to exercise privileged irresponsibility.

## **Part 2: Values in Conflict (or synergy): Alignment, agency and action**

### **History(ies) of values-alignment – where are we now, really?**

Our concern that failure to be reflexive in academic development work risks being caught in the current of the dominant (or strongest) discourse is reflected in others' stances as well. Roxå & Mårtensson (2017, 96) for example, suggest:

An image emerges that, while striving to elevate the importance of teaching and learning in their institutions, academic development as a profession has lost something, its history, its values, and thereby its power to steer development.

They turn the lens on themselves (and the profession), much as we have been attempting to do, and prompt us to consider that there are consequences of our (developer) actions that we do not see. We agree, but still do not want to lose sight of those things that we do see quite clearly, and have to decide on how to respond in quite a conscious and often fairly public manner.

It reminds me of the stance I [personally] took when accepting the manager's job for my previous role. The College came second, with the people in the team as first priority, and specifically for the purpose of upskilling/developing them so they could jump ship and move on (Author 1).

The three of us worry. Have we displayed compliance, or worse – willful ignorance – in contributing to the situation that we so deeply feel creates tensions and conflict with our values and *raison d'être* for development work? Halffman and Radder (2015, p166) state:

Management has proclaimed academics the enemy within: academics cannot be trusted, and so have to be tested and monitored, under the permanent threat of reorganization, termination and dismissal.

They continue:

... they [Management] actually mean that academic professionals must deprofessionalise: they have to be demoted to executors, subject to a strict regime of supervision by another group of professionals: educational experts, marketing and communications staff ... (Halffman and Radder, 2015, p171)

Does this cast us 'educational experts' as tools of management surveillance? Here we argue that we must be acutely aware and critical of our positioning as academic developers with respect to the discourses we inhabit, and as brokers of those discourses: how are academic developers positioned if 'Management' has proclaimed academics the enemy within? And what should we do about it? Paying close attention to our values can be crucial in guiding our actions, particularly if, as Roxå & Mårtensson, (2017 ) contend, there are consequences of our actions that we do not see.

Halffman and Radder (2015, p173) ask

How could this happen? ... The colonisation of the university [by Management] is a success because we cooperated en masse – and still do to this day.

The imperative to be reflexive is apparent: ‘we’, too, are a part of this machinery – and potentially an ominous part – and the political game we inhabit means that we have a responsibility to ensure our values inform our actions, as well as to hone our capacity to articulate how and why we see things in a particular way.

### **Values and agency through the lens of identity**

Academic developers are located in institutional cultures that can both empower and inhibit their scope of agency (Kensington-Miller et al., 2015, p280).

Personal accounts, such as the narrative inquiry of Kensington-Miller and colleagues, that interrogate matters of identity, prompt us to broaden our inquiry to consider not just personal values, but also the ‘value’ of the work we do . However, clearly understanding and communicating this can be challenging :

the changing parameters of our work mean it can be particularly hard to evaluate our activities and demonstrate the value of what we have achieved (Bamber & Stefani, 2016, p243).

The lens of identity has been particularly powerful:

the challenge of ‘others (academics) not understanding what it is that we do’ comes up time and time again: and to be clear I actually think this is a question of more than what we do, but foremost who we are (identity) and why we do it. The interplay of these perspectives, which for me has identity in the foreground, has significant impact on the ways in which developers and academics engage with each other (Author 1).

There is thus a diversity of expectations that we have to negotiate: at the least, this milieu might comprise (formal, ‘performance-based’) institutional expectations, expectations held by academic colleagues (that may well vary widely; be implicit, and/or under-explored) as well as those we hold of ourselves. This is powerfully portrayed by Kensington-Miller et al. (2015, p285) where they note

Joanna uses the metaphor of a chameleon on a tartan rug, to illustrate the constant changing of roles as she attempts to blend into what is expected of her in different contexts.

Barbara Grant (2007) provides a way for us to blend together the two flavours of our inquiry into values in academic development work; namely recognising, 1) the political milieu in which we work and the relationships we have with the diverse discourses we inhabit, 2) along with the identities and the expectations brought to and/or imposed on ‘us’.

In my understanding, identity, like mourning, is a term that is at once political and ethical (Grant, 2007, p36).

Our identities are part of this political game and not separable, which reinforces our stance that we not only have an opportunity but a responsibility to use our agency to take values-informed action. Otherwise,

... the myriad ways in which that identity is perceived by others as either fraudulently academic, or baselessly know-it-all, or servilely a tool of managerialism (Grant, 2007, p37),

poses a risk in

... making a strong claim for a particular identity. For one thing, identities don't come out of nowhere – they are given meaning (especially status) by particular discourses of higher education (Grant, 2007, p38).

Lee & McWilliam (2008) likewise aspire that we look beyond just categorisation of 'roles and identities' and want academic developers imaginatively integrated into the work of the academy, even contributing direction and leadership. We go further, demanding that we have a responsibility to recognise our agency in the wider political milieu in which we operate, and that our very professionalism requires a reflexive approach centred around considered values .

This got me thinking about the spaces that we might have to (safely?) enact this responsibility. Is it in personal opinion (clearly expressed as such) rather than within roles? Is it by working with those on the periphery (eg GTAs/learning technologists/technicians) who may have less overt power but who therefore do have more freedom? Is it through refusing some of the identities that others try to impose (eg being a REF-able academic)? I guess I'm asking if it lies in discrete subversion? (Author 2)

Personally, I don't know if I actually want to stick to 'safe' spaces to do this – am I happy to do this 'unsafely' – and what might that actually imply? And I think I can take that stance (of doing it 'unsafely') because I am privileged: white, hetero, cis-gender, male, upper middle class, stable 'everything' in life: I can afford to lose my job because I know I will get another (just like it, if I wanted to). (Author 1)

Revealingly, one of the 'safest places' available is denoted by the term 'emeritus', and it might be helpful to ask: what scope is there for further enhancing the contributions and roles ('critical friend'; 'personal coach'; 'professional mentor', etc) that might be played by those of us who now wear this label? Indeed, we might even ask if it is 'privileged irresponsibility' to duck such options? (Author 3)

## **Conclusion - Values in action**

Are we trapped in a positivist, new managerialist spiral of demonstrating the value of our work, or can we take the lead in reframing the discourse on how educational development proves its worth? (Bamber & Stefani, 2016, p242)

While much of our ongoing project has been exploratory, stemming from a focus on identity and values, the very practical question "well, what can (or should) we do about it?" has always been in the foreground. Bamber & Stefani (2016, p243) advocate a call to arms:

Taking a stand on demonstrating the value of our work does require developers to be courageous

For us, when we experience conflict between our own values and the HE climate within which we are working, the question “what can we do about it?” results in answers ranging from “advocating whatever is necessary to survive and maintain some sanity” to “redefining the discourse”. Lee & McWilliams (2008, p73) suggest we need:

to find a way to live and work with the daily experience of contradiction and ambiguity within the modern university,

and

in this way we seek to move towards imagining a critical scholarship for academic development that can engage productively in the ongoing reinvention of the academy (Lee & McWilliam, 2008, p69).

The elevation of academic development work into political arenas in HE affords us the opportunity, agency and *responsibility* to deliver on these sorts of ambitions.

Whether we like it or not (or even whether we ‘see’ it or not), because academic developers operate politically and in a political environment, we have a *responsibility* to be reflexive in the way we engage with reshaping the HE agenda. Academic developers are not separable from the discourses they work within, whether we agree with them or not, and so our actions *can* and *do* shape those agendas and consequent outcomes. We need a means of guiding our agency in this political milieu, and a values-informed approach seems particularly suitable and useful. Lee & McWilliam (2008, p72) note that

a key rhetorical feature of much of the recent published work is a concern to embrace and reconcile the tensions and differences within the field [of academic development].

We argue that it is crucial and perhaps more fruitful long-term to pay attention to and grapple with the discourses that give rise to these tensions, rather than with the tensions themselves.

The value of a ‘re-description’ lies in the extent to which one is able to identify those contradictions that are ironies of academic development practice, rather than problems to be resolved (Lee & McWilliam, 2008, p75).

Perhaps we can “deliver on our KPIs” in a way that contests the KPI agenda, and in doing so take up the challenge of evidencing value in development work (Bamber & Stefani 2016) to enact a new leaderly disposition (Lee & McWilliam 2008) in the academic development field and the academy?

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