Academic development as cultural work:
Responding to the organizational complexity of modern higher
education institutions

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Abstract

Current developments within universities add to the complexity of academic development work at the same time as modern universities heavily depend on a number of activities that can facilitate a more collective orientation among staff and students. The article provides a reflection upon the factors driving the fragmentation of universities, the increasing tensions associated with this development, and the potential role academic developers may play as interest negotiators. Cultural work is identified as a potential concept for academic developers to explore as a way of maintaining relevance within the university and adapting to future changes.

Keywords: Academic development, tensions, complexity, cultural work

Introduction

Research has shown that the professional field variously labelled as academic, educational or staff development (Brew, 2009), often faces what one might call systemic constraints – taken-for-granted assumptions about what this activity is all about, what academic developers do, the effects of their work, and how they are embedded in the institutions in which they work (Moses, 1987; Gosling, 1996; 2001; Rowland, 2003; D’Andrea & Gosling, 2001; Fraser & Ling, 2014). At the same time, academic development work has changed and developed quite dramatically the last couple of decades. In recent overviews, Gibbs (2013) and Knapper (2016) noticed that over time academic development has moved from focusing on developing individual teachers, groups of teachers, and learning environments towards focusing more on developing the institution and institutional policies on teaching and learning. The focus has shifted to the ways study programs are assured and assessed, undertaking educational research, and promoting the scholarship of teaching and learning in general.

These changes should not be seen as a shift from one mode to another, but rather as a form of layering where new tasks and responsibilities have been added to existing ones. As underlined by Gibbs (2013), one can also identify quite distinct national characteristics and development paths within this general picture, allowing for variations between countries and institutions both regarding pace and focus. However, the point to be made here is that there still seems to be a dominant belief that academic development should be about teaching and learning issues (Ling, Fraser, & Gosling, 2013, p. 115). The rise of the interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and increased attention directed at the professional practice of academic developers, could be interpreted as a way of institutionalizing academic development as a distinct subset of the academic profession (Boud & Brew 2013, p. 208). This development towards an institutionalization of academic development in general can be understood when taking into consideration the shifting environmental conditions surrounding this area within the last three decades. Signs of the turbulent context in which academic developers work (Kolmos et al., 2001) include: the well-known scepticism about academic development

stemming from traditional disciplines and subject areas that consider teaching a menial and amateurish task (Rowland 2003, p. 15); the criticism of the research foundations of academic development (Gosling 2001, p. 86); and the many re-organizations of academic development units (Hicks 1999, p. 47). As recent studies have indicated, academic development is an activity that seems to be in constant flux, where change is regarded as an almost constant condition (Brew, 2003; Gosling, 2009; Holt, Palmer, & Challis, 2011; Ling et al., 2013).

While many of the studies that describe the changes academic development is undergoing shed light on the implications of the changes for academic development as such, there are fewer contributions that consider these changes from an organizational perspective. In an article written some years ago, Havnes and Stensaker (2006) argued that some academic development centres in the Nordic region were moving from a focus on only academic development towards a focus also on organizational development. The current article further reflects on this issue by discussing how modern universities are changing as organizations; the tensions that are developing as a result of these changes; and how this might affect academic development work both at present, and in the future. The main argument put forward is that the broader context surrounding the core activities of academic development – teaching and learning – is becoming more organizationally complex, and that this complexity is an important area to address for academic development. The concept of cultural work is re-deployed as a way to identify future areas for academic development.

Academic development and the changing university

The notion of change is an almost constant element in the numerous articles that have been written on the role, identity, and purpose of academic development during the last two decades. Such change can partly be related to the intrinsic dynamics of academic development, but is mostly linked to extrinsic developments within the field of higher education, which have led to the adoption of new ways of organizing and governing universities and colleges (Delanty, 2003; Maassen & Stensaker, 2003). These include an administrative expansion of tasks and responsibilities, increased professionalization, increased specialization, and a more managed university (Ramirez & Christensen, 2013; Stensaker & Vabø, 2013).

Regarding the first of these change processes, Slaughter & Rhoades (2004) have shown how commercialization and commodification have influenced the organizational foundations of the university, forcing institutions to pay more attention to their external relations and responsibilities. Hence, universities and colleges have become skilled market players devoting much time, energy and resources towards branding themselves in relation to prospective students in order to attract partner institutions, private sector sponsors, and collaborators. The new tasks and responsibilities also include setting up units and functions capable of responding to the increasing demands for accountability directed at higher education, ranging from commercial ranking activities to reporting to public funding agencies (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010). Hence, public relations offices and officers, departments dealing with analysis of institutional productivity and efficiency, and a range of functions intended to support

technology transfer and collaboration with regional authorities, industry, and start-ups have proliferated (Greenberg, 2007).

This expansion of tasks and activities undertaken by universities has led to internal changes within university organization (Clark, 2004; Stensaker & Vabø, 2013; Seeber et al., 2015). Typically, this is visible through an increased professionalization of how tasks are being dealt with, which is often combined with increased specialization of roles and functions. While administrative staff used to devote much of their time to providing service functions for those holding academic positions, currently we see a build-up of specialist administrative capacity in financial issues, marketing, economic analysis, PR, human resource management, and research policy support, for example (Whitchurch, 2012).

This expansion of tasks alongside increased professionalization and specialization also create new challenges for the internal governance of universities and colleges. Expansion may cause increased fragmentation, and hence the need for coordination and internal control. While the distribution of authority inside institutions may vary both between countries and institutions, a number of reports indicate a more hierarchical governance structure, and more centralized steering of universities and colleges (Frølich et al., 2013; Shattock, 2014). In short, a more managed university has appeared. Whether this type of university is designed for stimulating organizational learning is another question (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

The trend towards a more managed university is noticeable also in the ways academic development is increasingly linked to so-called strategic decisions and developments (Gibbs, 2013). However, it is less common to see a broader discussion of what these organizational changes might imply for the focus and role of academic development. As the university is becoming more professional, the role of academic developers is often taken for granted: i.e., for them to develop into yet another 'specialist group', as a distinct subset of the academic profession (Di Napoli et al., 2010), with its own professional standards, recognition, and training (Boud & Brew 2013, p. 208). However, if everyone is becoming professionals and specialists, who should then take responsibility for organizational coordination and coherence? While one could argue that in the modern university this is a responsibility of a more prominent management layer, one could question whether the new cadre of managers is capable of achieving this. As a number of studies have demonstrated, there seems to be a growing gap in the understanding between management and staff in both identifying what the current challenges are, and not least, how they should be solved (Teichler & Höhle, 2013). Given the fact that academic developers have extensive knowledge about teaching and learning activities and practices, while also being increasingly informed about institutional strategies and ambitions, it could be argued that academic developers might have a key role to play in stimulating increased collaboration, coherence, and even organizational learning in the modern university.

Dimensions of cultural work in modern universities

In principle, university integration, intra-organizational communication, and cooperation can be achieved in a number of ways. In this article, one particular approach is pursued: that of

seeing academic development as cultural work. To understand universities and colleges as cultural constructs is an established way of perceiving these organizations (Bergquist, 1992; Henkel, 2000; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Clark, 2004). Many authors have also underlined the number of different cultures that may be found within any given university (Bergquist, 1992; Becher & Trowler 2001). However, it may be argued that during the last decades the cultural fragmentation of universities has further increased as a result of the acquisition of new tasks, and the increased professionalization and specialization that have taken place (Stensaker, Vålmaa, & Sarrico, 2012). Hence, in addition to disciplinary cultures, we see stronger administrative and specialist cultures appearing, and the emergence of new roles and responsibilities as well (Whitchurch, 2012). The result is not only increased complexity, but also increased levels of tension and conflict in the university. It is this development that drives the need for cultural work.

The term cultural work in this article is derived from the ideas of `double loop` learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) i.e., how goals, decision-making and routines are modified in the light of experience and acquired knowledge. Cultural work can be defined as deliberate attempts to develop and disrupt the organization on the basis of established and emerging practices and knowledge. It follows from this definition that cultural work should be seen as both constructive and critical: as a rather dynamic process guided by the need sometimes to question formal objectives and goals, as well as established traditions and historical practices.

It may be argued that the need for cultural work is especially noticeable in the teaching and learning area. This is due to the fact that this activity involves so many stakeholders; academic, administrative, and legal components; economic, personnel, and organizational issues; as well as, increasingly, external expectations, rules, and regulations that go beyond the traditional focus of academic development. Internal and external quality assurance, learning outcome requirements, and other external accountability demands are growing quickly in many countries. At the same time, understanding the way a study program or a specific course functions is very different when seen from various perspectives: those of individual academic staff, students, student recruitment, marketing, managers, and so on. These different understandings are often the result of values, norms, practices, and the roles of various actors and groups, where mutual understanding of one another's perspectives and perceptions is not always high, leading to tensions and interest struggles (Henkel, 2000; Whitchurch, 2012). In the modern university, a number of recurrent tensions can be identified.

Tensions between students and academic staff/faculty

While students and academic staff/faculty in general may have a good relationship, there are several trends within the modern university that are creating tensions between them (Ling et al., 2013). One development that causes increasing tension is the more diverse student population found in higher education (Quaye & Harper, 2014). As students become older, more culturally diverse, and have increasingly different aims and objectives with their educational undertaking, the demands for more tailored and flexible trajectories are increasing. In short, more diverse students are asking for teaching and learning arrangements that are more suited to their specific needs. While many institutions and teachers are trying to

find ways to accommodate such demands, there are many teachers who are struggling to identify appropriate practices and responses (Quaye & Harper, 2014). Part of the challenge is related to concerns about how much time teachers are to spend on their educational obligations while at the same time pursuing their research. Hence, finding a balance between teaching and research is an issue many teachers are battling with.

Increased student demands with respect to how teaching and the learning environment is adapted to their needs also comes at a time when many countries are experiencing cuts in public spending on higher education. For the individual teachers, often having much sympathy for their students, the result is often longer working hours, and perhaps even more unpaid work spent on teaching. In some countries reduced public spending has also resulted in the introduction of or an increase in tuition fees for students. Seen from a student perspective, increased tuition can be seen as a way to legitimate demands for further improvements in teaching and learning processes (Wilkins, Shams, & Huisman, 2013).

In many countries, not least ones in Europe, more student-centred, active-learning approaches are being advocated as a solution to the perceived quality challenges in higher education. While such approaches undoubtedly may have many benefits with respect to what students learn, it may nevertheless be a challenge for many teachers to introduce them at a time when students are expecting more value for their tuition and for the time they spend on their studies (Vukasovic, Jungblut, & Stensaker, 2015). These approaches are demanding for both teachers and for students to implement successfully. As students are getting more diverse, and where obtaining credentials is becoming an issue (Knapper, 2016), it is possible to question whether such approaches are suitable for all learners, and if not, what the implications are when adding new challenges for the teachers responsible, who may need to balance partly conflicting demands from the students.

Tensions between academic staff/faculty and management

As institutions of higher education are increasingly being pressured to demonstrate their added value with respect to teaching and learning, and as educational accountability is expected more and more (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010), increased tensions can also be identified between academic staff/faculty and the various layers of management in higher education institutions. More stringent demands for accountability often result in increased pressure for documentation and reporting by the teachers (Brennan & Shah, 2000). More comprehensive quality management systems, more frequent student evaluations of teaching, and the introduction of – in many countries – national student satisfaction surveys, are only some of the drivers that trigger more tensions between management and teachers (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010).

Part of these increased tensions stem from the recent interest in formalizing the teaching qualifications of the academic staff/faculty. In a number of countries, including the US, the traditional approach to academic development has focused on the need of the individual faculty members (Gosling, 2009). This approach is, in many countries, in the process of being transformed into the development of more systematic qualification schemes. These

qualification schemes are far more standardised, and are increasingly mandatory for teachers to attend and respond to. While this development certainly can be seen as a positive initiative from an academic development perspective, it is highly unlikely that teachers will always see such initiatives as beneficial, especially if demands for stronger formalization and accountability are not matched by arrangements for strengthening academic quality or by some other types of incentives.

The trend towards formalization of teaching qualifications can be seen as part of an even larger trend related to the development of a transformed university becoming and increasingly behaving like 'normal' organizations (Seeber et al., 2015). This development is partly shaped by public sector reforms granting universities more autonomy, but this strengthened institutional autonomy may mean less individual autonomy for those working in the institutions through the establishment of more hierarchical command lines, stronger alignment between the institutional leadership, human resource management, and activities related to teaching and learning (Blackwell & Blackmore, 2003; Shattock, 2014).

Tensions between academic staff and administration

In the modern university, the administration is also fast transforming– a transformation that sometimes creates new types of tensions in relation to academic staff/faculty. A key aspect of the transformation of university administration can be found in the increased specialization and professionalization of administrative functions (Whitchurch, 2012). This development has resulted in a decrease in the number of traditional generic support staff (secretaries) surrounding the delivery of teaching, and an increase in more specialized functions (admission, marketing, quality assurance, and so forth). Many individual teachers perceive this development as unfortunate, not least in that they are expected to take over some of the duties the former secretaries carried out (Teichler & Höhle, 2013).

The new professionals in the administration are at the same time expecting teachers to be involved in various accountability measures and engage in more administrative responsibilities, often leading to academics perceiving an increased administrative workload altogether. An unwanted side-effect of a more professional and specialized staff is also that the individual flexibility teachers enjoyed in the past, has been reduced due to the push for predictability and long-term planning driven by the new administrators (Teichler & Höhle, 2013). The need for predictability, order, and structure is often related to the establishment of administrative systems in areas such as ICT, human resources, and financial management.

A side effect of a more professional and specialized administration is also that academic authority related to teaching and learning issues may be challenged by externally and internally imposed regulations, standards, and criteria mediated through administrative staff (Shattock, 2014). When increasingly administrators hold PhD degrees and have acquired specialized competence in specific areas, it may be more challenging for teachers to persuade them to take account of disciplinary differences and subject-specific characteristics during organizational change.

Tensions between compartmentalized units

Modern universities are often described as consisting of different tribes and territories (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Disciplines and different subject areas tend to approach teaching in different ways, reflecting their thinking about how knowledge should be organized and structured. When universities have encouraged organizational learning across and between such knowledge boundaries, this has been a continuing source of tension (Healey & Jenkins, 2003).

While the modern university strategically claims that it is more inter- and multidisciplinary than even before, traditional departments continue to thrive and continue to have significant influence over their own affairs (Blackwell, 2003). However, due to a changing landscape with respect to external funding, some disciplines and subject areas are experiencing an increase of funding opportunities, while others are seeing external funding being significantly reduced and running the danger of being shut down altogether. In this situation, tensions also increase between departments, centres, and units inside the university as they struggle over how resources are to be allocated internally.

While increased tension between departments can be a problem in itself, such tension may be very damaging for any collaborative efforts in which departments engage (Quinn, 2012). Many universities have the ambition of increasing the number of inter- and multidisciplinary programs and educational offerings, initiatives that often depend on inter-departmental collaboration and coordination. To be able to find common ground for development of such initiatives is not easy when resources, teaching traditions, and organizational structures are very different.

Tensions between a more individualized academic staff/faculty

Collegiality is often highlighted as one of the great cultural characteristics of the modern university. This label is often used as a signifier for joint responsibility for important decisions, and joint responsibility for implementation, not least with respect to educational offerings. However, a number of studies indicate that academic staff are becoming increasingly individualized as a result of more individually designed reward systems and a more competitive environment, especially in research (Teichler & Höhle, 2013). Other drivers for individualizing academic staff include the tendency toward temporary employment in the university, and of splitting up combined positions in many universities into more specialized research and teaching positions (Teichler & Höhle, 2013).

Hence, for quite some time claims have been made about the dissolution of the collegial spirit and the lack of joint responsibility for an academic commons. If academic staff perceive that others are not contributing to teaching, or that they are buying time out of what is seen as their core responsibility, collegiality might suffer and tensions could arise.

Reflections and implications

The list of tensions above is certainly not exhaustive, and several other interest contestations and power struggles can be identified as well. However, the point to be made here is that the modern university is undergoing rather profound changes – changes that affect academic development in a number of ways, not least illustrated by the many reports about how academic developers are intimately engaged in the power and interest struggles that go on in the university (Ling et al., 2013; Di Napoli, 2014; Knapper, 2016). Sometimes the result is that academic developers are unable to take on their role as cultural workers due to ‘provider-capture’ (Boud & Brew, 2013, p. 210), and are driven by the needs of those who take decisions and frame actions in the university. Gosling (2009) has also reported that an increasing number of academic development centres are reporting to and embedded within the senior management of their institutions. This is a development that could draw academic development further into a number of the power and interest struggles described above.

However, in the light of the developments described, one could argue that academic developers have some particular advantages in engaging in cultural work. First, those who work within academic development usually have quite intimate knowledge of the organization in which they work, as they are engaged with numerous units, levels, and activities throughout the organization. Second, those who work within academic development may, as a result of these experiences, develop what one might call an ‘insider-outsider’ view of the organization – questioning practices and world-views that might be taken for granted. Third, those who work within academic development have extensive experience in handling the tension between on the one hand control and improvement in an academic setting, since it is so inherent in their own work. Below, some examples are given of how various forms of cultural work could play out in practice.

Scholarship is often seen as a way to develop critical reflection (Brew, 2010). In the last few decades, scholarship of teaching and learning has received much attention, and is seen as a fruitful and promising way to further strengthen academic development (Knapper, 2016). While scholarship indeed may have a key role to play in the cultural work needed in modern universities, one could still question whether the current and quite narrow teaching and learning focus of this line of research really addresses the many tensions described earlier in this article. This is not to say that research on teaching and learning should be downplayed or reduced; it is rather a plea for a broader and more inclusive line of research where the organizational context surrounding research, teaching, and learning practices is scrutinised in greater detail. Too narrow a research approach will not be able to capture the new dynamics, complex structures, and interests found in the modern university. Hence, what is needed is more research on the structural, financial, cultural, and managerial factors that influence current practices in both research and teaching.

In the definition of cultural work suggested in the current article, much weight is also given to the constant modification of practices and dynamic change processes that may emerge in the light of experience and acquired knowledge. An implication of this is that cultural work is not about developing ‘best practice’, to uncritically ‘import’ knowledge, nor imitate popular organizational solutions and structures. On the contrary, the idea is rather to develop local

practices which, although they may be inspired and influenced by generic research or developing knowledge, are crafted in ways that are quite unique to the individual organization. Seen in this light, cultural work may take on different forms and formats, adapting to the individual organization and its changing needs.

A key characteristic of cultural work is that it will have to face the many complexities and conflicts that exist in the modern university. While academic development certainly runs the risk of provider-capture when engaging in cultural work, it can be argued that there are few alternatives to engaging more closely with institutional management. As indicated in this article, the university is changing in ways that also could make the traditional role of academic developers redundant. For example, human resource management departments have for years developed competence schemes in universities, and are increasingly offering training and consulting in areas which academic development have tended to view as part of their exclusive portfolio. As universities are increasingly developing more ambitious strategies in teaching and learning, it is critical for academic development and developers to be part of the thinking behind and the framing of these strategies. Given that what is considered as academic development has broadened, one should not rule out the possibility that much of the future activity in this area could take place without any involvement of those who currently work under the label of academic development (see also Fraser & Ling, 2014).

The development sketched in this article hints at a rather unclear role for academic development in the future. If academic development is to be framed as cultural work, a natural question to ask is whose interests should academic development then serve. Is the future of academic development intimately and inevitable linked to the more strategic institutional leadership, where those working with development issues are merely the ‘implementers’ of the latest institutional strategy? The notion of cultural work presented here does not advocate for academic development to act as an instrumental tool for those in power. Rather, and especially if academic development is able to develop a solid and independent research base underpinning the ideas and arguments brought forward, cultural work could be a much-needed arena for deliberation, organizational learning, and cross-cultural understanding in the university (see also Argyris & Schön, 1978; Boud, 1999; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Knapper, 2016). As in other disciplines and subject areas where the search for truth, facts, and trustworthy knowledge guides the development of their field, academic developers should perceive their role as providing evidence and knowledge to a university where – unfortunately – many decisions are still based on taken for granted traditions and beliefs. While solid experiences and research findings may of course still be overruled and ignored when decisions are taken, the existence of such research might at least challenge, or perhaps even compel those in power to provide better explanations for decisions taken.

The notion of academic development as cultural work can be seen as partly linked to a trend within academic development that calls for a more holistic approach to the field (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2001), especially addressing how different aspects of academic work – research, teaching, and administration - need to be more closely related through a better understanding of practice (Brew & Boud, 1995; Boud & Brew, 2013; Mårtensson, Roxå, & Stensaker,

2014). While this understanding of academic work certainly should be encouraged, it could also be asked whether academics are the only group of people that it is important to consider when deliberating, designing, and delivering the educational experience. Hence, cultural work has the potential of addressing a broader spectrum of stakeholders and organizational structures in the modern university, and can be said to be a reflection of the broadening of academic development witnessed during the last decades. Of course, academic development as cultural work may be only one of a range of solutions in responding to a more fragmented and complex university. While one could certainly claim that cultural work is a weak type of measure, where both the process and the possible outcomes are uncertain, it is offered as a heuristic that reflects some of the core values of higher education – the idea that facts and evidence-based arguments are important, and that arenas for deliberation are important for encouraging participation and engagement in the decisions taken.

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