

OPINION PIECE

Isn't it time to start thinking about 'developing' academic developers in a more systematic way?

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There is no defined route to becoming an academic developer. The research on pathways into the field (e.g. Kensington-Miller, Brailsford, & Gossman, 2012; McDonald, 2010; McDonald & Stockley, 2008) shows that in most cases 'serendipity and chance played a role' (McDonald, 2010, p. 40). Moreover, induction into academic development (AD) is often ad hoc, haphazard, and informal. Due to the changing higher education (HE) context, the field has grown exponentially and in many countries now plays a central role in institutions. This has generated increased demand for knowledgeable and competent developers that are able to contribute towards solving some vexing problems in contemporary HE. Current recruitment and induction processes of new developers do not necessarily meet this demand.

In light of the above, we pose the question: given the changing context of HE and the field of AD, is it not time for us to induct newcomers into the field more systematically? As Kensington-Miller et al. (2012) suggest, we should not leave the induction of the next generation of developers to chance. We suggest that one way of ensuring appropriate induction is through a formal course for developers.

Difficulties for newcomers to the field are illustrated by Kensington-Miller et al. (2012) when they report seeking 'top tips' at a HERDSA conference. We do not dismiss informal learning at conferences or the role of mentoring, coaching, apprenticeship, and so on, in inducting developers, nor do we minimise the benefits of relatively structured processes such as fellowship programmes, workshops, and postgraduate qualifications in related fields. However, these ways of induction may not offer novices the structured and systematic developmental opportunities needed to become developers able to fulfil varied, complex, and sometimes contradictory roles.

Manathunga (2007, p. 25) highlights that most developers are 'migrants' from other disciplines who bring valuable experience and knowledge, but are unlikely to have been prepared systematically for AD work. They acquire the knowledge, practices, and identities for AD work 'on the job.' For many, AD feels an 'unhomely' space (Manathunga, 2007) for which they lack the necessary theoretical grounding or practical experience. The lucky ones work in centres where experienced colleagues act as mentors who induct them into their new roles.

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As mentioned earlier, AD has moved into the centre of many institutions and developers contribute to shaping teaching and learning at national and international levels (Boughey, 2007; Gibbs, 2013; McDonald & Stockley, 2008). Developers therefore need experience of HE and specialised meta-level knowledge of all aspects of HE to enable them to design contextually appropriate initiatives. Through postgraduate degrees, research, and experience, many developers have built considerable expertise and knowledge about the field and there has been much progress in building ‘an inclusive discourse community’ (Taylor, 2009).

For the reasons outlined, we propose that the time has come in our maturing field for the ‘oldtimers’ to join together and devise coherent, formal ways to prepare novice developers to contribute to the academic project of HE; indeed Peseta (2011, p. 184) suggests it is our ‘ethical obligation’ to consider how we induct newcomers to our field. Who designs and offers a formal course will vary depending on national contexts. Our own centre has built expertise in, and experience of, AD work at a range of South African HE institutions. Using this experience and drawing on HE research, we offer a course for South African developers that provides participants with theoretical and conceptual tools to analyse their contexts, and devise appropriate AD practices and approaches.

Our intention here is not to discuss our course (the topic of a future paper), but rather to argue the necessity of such a course. We find Karl Maton’s theoretical framework useful for theorising curricula and pedagogic processes. Maton’s theory is premised on the understanding that every practice, belief, and knowledge claim is about something and is enacted by someone (2007), thus there is always ‘knowledge’ and there are always ‘knowers.’ The former is about what constitutes legitimate knowledge in a field and the latter about who can claim to produce and/or have legitimate knowledge. Although the two are analytically distinct, together they ‘shape educational and intellectual fields’ (Maton, 2010, p. 161). Applying this to our context, we suggest that induction for newcomers should consider both knowledge and knowers. A pedagogically sound course should offer opportunities to engage with the powerful knowledge of the field, and explore identities and dispositions for developers in a coherent and structured manner.

Maton (2009) argues that the kind of knowledge and how it is introduced in pedagogic contexts could lead to two different kinds of learning: *segmented learning* and *cumulative learning*. Informal, unstructured induction is likely to result in acquiring discrete chunks of context-dependent knowledge leading to segmented learning. This is unlikely to prepare professionals to handle complex problems in novel situations. However, where cumulative learning is developed, people are better able to integrate past knowledge with new knowledge and to apply it in various workplace settings. Cumulative learning is essential preparation for professional practice; novices need access to a coherent body of context-independent knowledge which they can apply in various circumstances. Cumulative learning is particularly important for developers due to the diversity of institutional environments, the different conceptualisations of AD, and thus the range of AD practices. It is arguably much harder for cumulative learning to occur through unstructured induction. A formal course enables iterative movement from context-rich understandings and experience to generalisable principles that can be applied to various contexts (Shay, 2012).

Designing the curriculum for such a course requires designers to examine critically the knowledge produced in the fields of AD (Peseta, 2011) and HE studies

over the last five decades (Shay, 2012). They should identify the kinds of knowledge required to practice AD in multiple, complex contexts. Much thought is required to recontextualise (Bernstein, 1996) the knowledge base to construct an appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for such a course. We do not envisage a generic, one-size-fits-all course for developers; given different contexts and multiple institutional and pedagogic challenges, such a course must take into account the varied roles of developers.

The kind of knowledge legitimised by ‘experts’ in a field is closely linked to the kinds of knowers a practice aims to develop. Thus a course for developers should consider how cumulative learning can occur over time, and how knowledge and pedagogy contribute to shaping the professional identities to practise AD in diverse contexts.

Knower identities are not uncontested or simple in any field and particularly not in AD, where some continue to feel like ‘migrants’ and struggle to establish ‘stable and authoritative – respected’ identities (Grant, 2007, p. 38). Preparation for professional practice should offer explicit opportunities for exploring issues around identity, which may not occur in informal induction processes.

In theorising knower identities, Maton uses the concept of ‘gazes’ in a way similar to how people talk of someone having an ‘ear’ for music or ‘feel’ for various arts (Maton, 2010). People are born with some ‘gazes,’ are socialised into others, and need training for yet others. However, a professional role such as AD requires what Maton calls ‘a cultivated gaze’ one in which ‘legitimacy arises from dispositions of the knower that can be inculcated ... [T]he cultivated gaze offers the possibility of attaining legitimacy through prolonged immersion in a way of being, seeing or acting ...’ (Maton, 2013, p. 95). While a cultivated gaze could be developed without a formal course, research in the field means it is now possible for seasoned developers to offer ‘a coherent journey towards a cultivated gaze’ (Maton, 2013, p. 100) through a formal course.

The kind of course proposed here should contribute towards good practice and to AD’s status as a profession in its own right within HE. It could contribute to growing a generation of developers better able to cope with what Grant (2007) refers to as ‘zones marked by uncertainty and ambiguity’ (p. 35); it could lead to the ‘respected identity’ (p. 38) she suggests we need and to developers’ work contributing to HE in ways which are more than just ‘practically useful’ (p. 42). For this to happen, such a course must be underpinned by a commitment to deep, scholarly engagement so that the content becomes meaningful knowledge, not the ‘dirty word’ Peseta is concerned about, so that ‘the conversations offered to neophytes ... might be more than learning-on-the-job’ (Peseta, 2011, p. 83). Like McDonald and Stockley (2008, p. 216), we argue that it is time ‘to grow, sustain and facilitate entry to the field, as well as advance the profession.’

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