

## BOOK REVIEW

**Re-imagining academic staff development: spaces for disruption**, edited by Lynn Quinn, Stellenbosch, Sun Press, 2012, 147 pp., ZAR200.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-920338-76-3

As an academic developer in a UK university, I am always on the look-out for readings that I can draw on to spark conversations with colleagues who are yet to be convinced that their teaching can or should have any role in transforming an unequal society. I am also eager for ideas that will develop and challenge my own thinking about the ethical and political dimensions of my work. This enticing title promises imaginative and disruptive possibilities on both counts and it does not disappoint. The contributors draw on more than 10 years of collaboration in academic staff development in South African universities and frame their experience in ethical and conceptual terms that have worldwide relevance.

The text is divided into eight chapters. In Lynn Quinn's introductory chapter, she traces the history of academic development and staff development in South African universities. She defines academic development as 'a range of formal and informal activities aimed at contributing towards academics' capacities as scholarly educators' (p. 3). She states that the aim of this book is to provide a variety of ways of theorising those activities, and emphasises its concern with *disruption*, here defined as 'adopting a stance of questioning, challenging and critiquing taken-for-granted ways of doing things in higher education' (p. 1).

In Chapter 2, Sioux McKenna reminds us that it is down to academic developers to bring about *disruption*. She challenges us to take our places as deeply committed activists who can provide a theorised space for interrogating what it is to be an academic. This is in marked contrast with the unattractive alternatives she conjures up of academic developers as a bunch of insensitive outsiders, lackeys of management, and/or collaborators in the neoliberal project of degrading disciplinary and academic values.

In a particularly clear and persuasive Chapter 3, Lynn Quinn lays out her argument for the role of academic development in ensuring better and more equitable outcomes for all students and looks at what helps and what gets in the way. She identifies three influential discourses and the potential of each for enabling and inhibiting the kinds of development activities that could contribute to positive change, namely transformation, quality assurance, and teaching and learning. She also makes practical suggestions for how lecturers, academic development practitioners, and institutional leaders can exercise agency and equip themselves better for their roles as agents of change.

The fourth chapter, by Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quinn, theorises the pedagogy of a postgraduate diploma in higher education. They describe a programme with a strong and explicit value-base constructed around four principles: epistemological access, valuing of disciplinary difference, development of reflexive practice, and disruption of everyday conceptions of teaching and learning. Their account suggests

good, hard questions for those of us who have responsibility for designing development programmes for academics. How do we decide what to include? How do we make those decisions transparent to participants? How are activities paced and sequenced? How do we balance contextual and conceptual coherence? How can development be assessed?

In Chapter 5, Jo-Anne Vorster and Lynn Quinn use concepts borrowed from Maton (2014) to map out their programme and to examine what they teach and why. At first, I found the language of ‘specialisation codes,’ ‘epistemic and social relations,’ and ‘semantic gravity and semantic density’ to be a stumbling block, but eventually these concepts helped me to look again at the ways in which colleagues from different disciplinary backgrounds are likely to have different levels of difficulty in engaging with the higher education literature(s).

In Chapter 6, Sue Southwood calls for a dialogical reimagining of academic development, offering one module of a postgraduate diploma in higher education as an exemplar. This chapter, with its repetitions and contemplative tone invites the reader to think again and to think more deeply about topics including space, engagement, debate, and blended learning. Quotations from students interspersed throughout the text provide evidence of the high value they place on the module. Understandably, but perhaps disappointingly, they support, rather than disrupt, the main text.

In Chapter 7, Markus Mostert and Lynn Quinn reflect on the place of technology in academic professional development. Using the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), they show how content, pedagogy, and technology can be reintegrated. The Venn diagram is helpful, but less useful is the assumption that ‘content’ and ‘pedagogy’ are separate entities that can be peeled apart unproblematically.

Chapter 8 is not an easy read, but it repays repeated interrogation and reflection. Dina Zoe Belluigi’s starting point is that higher education has been complicit in perpetuating structural privilege and disadvantage and that academic staff development has a role to play in the dismantling of those structures. By presenting her work on a formal staff development programme as the offering of a series of ‘spaces’ – safe, critical, reflective, and discursive – and by identifying ways of working directly with ‘difference,’ she begins to suggest ways in which old patterns can be disrupted. Along the way she offers insight into the helpfulness for academic development of different conceptualisations of the self and the social, and the status of experience and the literature in the programme. Her text is ‘interlaced’ with comments from participants and alumni. I was a little disappointed that these comments, rather bland certainties, did not live up to the subtleties of her theorising.

Overall, this is a lively, engaging, and encouraging book. It has helped me see continuities and discontinuities between experiences in my own country and those of academic developers in South Africa. It has provided me with some answers to Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice participants who ask what politics has got to do with university teaching. Finally, it challenges me to face up to my own responsibilities as an academic developer to contribute to the disruption of old habits and to remind colleagues of ‘the idea that universities have a role to play in transforming an uneven society’ (p. 16).

## References

- Maton, K. (2014). *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge. Retrieved from <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415479998/>
- Mishra, P., & Koehler, M. J. (2006). Technological pedagogical content knowledge: A framework for teacher knowledge. *Teachers' College Record*, 108, 1017–1054.

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