Knowledge Building Through Academic Development

Kemlall R Ramdass
University of South Africa, Johannesburg
ramdakr@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: In order to counter-act obsolescence, an important aspect of organisational well-being in turbulent times, is the collective responsibility and capability of all workers to co-create organisational knowing -- in other words, what constitutes quality in the open distance learning (ODL) context. This implies a culture of innovation in an environment that is continuously changing. In this context where social change is the norm the organisation cannot depend on existing practices. Rather, it requires the ability to re-invent the collective understanding of the organisation; this is known as contextual knowledge building. Knowledge building is the creation of ideas and the improvement of ideas that have a life out in the world where they are subject to social processes of evaluation, revision and application. Within such an organisational culture, learning refers to ongoing reflective work which brings innovation closer to the central work of the organisation. This, in turn, leads to a shared community in which an individual contributes to the shared intellectual property of the organisation as a whole. Therefore, learning is necessitated by this process and integral to it. The resulting community knowledge is a form of new information that other community members can all build on together. There is continual movement beyond current understanding and best practice toward “lifelong innovativeness”. Thus, capacity development and knowledge building involve everyone in the institution, not only the academic staff. The paper reflects the importance of academic development in a continuously changing environment through a reflective case study analysis.

Keywords: Academic Development, Knowledge Building, Socialisation

1. Introduction

In view of continuous change in higher education, it is imperative to start conceptualizing a framework for the development of academic developers systematically. The field of academic development (AD) has grown to become recognized in higher education. It is suggested that a formal induction course be created for developers (Quinn and Vorster, 2014). Quinn and Vorster (2014) mention’s that most academic developers are ‘migrants’ from other departments and disciplines with valuable knowledge, experience and skills but lack the practical experience in AD and this is experienced at the organization. It is time that the university develops a formal, coherent strategy to address newcomers into AD (Quinn and Vorster, 2014).

Boughey (2007) argues that AD requires contextualisation that would contribute to differentiated learning in a differentiated system. The positioning of AD and its linkage with QA would enable programmes that are fit for purpose, value for money and address the transformational agenda as envisaged by the HEQC through strategic positioning. This relocation offers validation of AD work that enables the strengthening of a field that would resolve much of the quality assurance and enhancement issues of teaching and learning suffered by the current system (Boughey (2007).

2. Literature Review

Knowledge building, according to Scardamalia & Bereiter (2010) is the conceptualization of innovative ideas that stimulate and generate socialisation. Further, Boughey (2013) argues the scholarly approach to academic development in terms of structure, culture and agency where infrastructure may be used as a vantage point to position academic development under the domain of the Vice Principal academic. In this structure, academic development is well positioned in terms of the introduction of AD qualifications such as the Post Graduate Diploma in higher education (HE) as well as the development of support for staff and students in teaching and learning.

Bradley and Cooper (2002) offers’ a pragmatic eclectic approach to academic development that requires academic development practitioners to have a “scholarship approach” that would enable them to be part of the academic community. As active members of the academy, they would be able to contribute actively to all teaching and learning discourses in contrast to current experiences of indifference and disregard towards AD in the institution.

One of the fundamental issues as highlighted by Webb (2012) is the concern that staff/academics regard being developed as impertinent. At this stage of the organisation overt attempts are being made by management through the Integrated Performance Management System (IPMS) for academics to attend development programmes managed by the Centre for Professional Development (CPD).
Brew and Peseta (2008) summarise the precarious existence of the academic development unit through a description of the justification of the existence of such a unit through its complexity, ambiguities, and contradictions. In view of continuous engagement and learning taking place which may be referred to as “lifelong learning” the academic development department (CPD) regenerates itself through research and practice in a continuously changing environment. Progress in teaching and learning in terms of “structure” in the form of policies and committees are valid, however theoretical and cultural underpinning are limited in teaching and learning as may be experienced. Significant progress has been made in terms of communities of practice such as HELTASA in establishing AD as a driving force for teaching and learning in higher education.

Within such an organisational learning culture, learning refers to ongoing reflective work which brings innovation closer to the central work of the organisation. This, in turn, leads to a shared community in which an individual contributes to the shared intellectual property of the organisation as a whole. Therefore, learning is necessitated by this process and integral to it. The resulting community knowledge is a form of new information that other community members can all build on together. Thus, capacity development and knowledge building involve everyone in the institution, not only the academic staff (Shay, 2012).

Academic development is an integral component of the teaching and learning process in higher education and takes place all the time: within the department, in professional networking sessions, in research, in student engagements, chatting with colleagues, resolving problems. However, this may not provide the attributes required for being a “good teacher.” Therefore, academic development, especially with older colleagues moving out of the system, needs to be formalised within the organisational structure where it is visible and has the greatest impact. The justification for this is that academic identity is enhanced through organised development. It needs to be conceptualised as a process of socialisation and peer learning in the workplace (Boud, 1999). Academic development can add value and optimise the use of resources through the following:

- Improving student access, success and throughput rates
- Address the “gap” between equity of access and equity of outcomes
- Developing systems to evaluate student progress and address the requirement for student support.
- Provision of support in respect of socialisation, culture and agency through discourses
- Professional development of academic staff

It is imperative that management of institutions understand the importance of such a department and strive to position it effectively.

3. Research Methodology

Al Zefeiti and Mohamad (2015) suggest that research methodology is a framework of a research strategy that outlines the manner a study is to be undertaken. It covers an arrangement of principles and philosophical worldviews which grounds the research questions and influences the research methods to be executed. Kothari (2004) suggests that research is a systematic inquiry into suitable material in the area under consideration. Saunders et al. (2009) coined the research onion approach to research methodology with the first layer as the philosophical worldview, followed by the research approach, then research strategy, research methodological choice, time horizons and lastly, data collection procedure and analysis tools. The onion research framework is depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1: The research onion (Saunders et al.)](image-url)
This study adopted an interpretivist philosophical worldview which grounded the study to follow an inductive approach. A case study research strategy was adopted because the phenomenon under study required a reflective approach to the qualitative data at hand. Academicians are presumed to be competent in their field of expertise, which is inclined towards their area of research. It is imperative to be able to reflect not only on practical aspects of research but also from a cognitive mental state that enables the construction of meaning through practice. Reflection provides an environment where one can participate in learning through thoughtful relationships with everything around and is practiced in qualitative research. Data were assimilated through academic literature and reflection on the practices of teaching and learning in the organization as well as through meetings and discussions.

4. Reflection of Academic Development as a Driver for Continuous Enhancement

4.1 Changing Social Demands

In order to avoid obsolescence, the organization is required to adapt to the challenging social demands by fostering a culture of organisational learning and knowledge building. Thus, planned academic development is necessary because change is inevitable (Quinn and Voster, 2014).

4.2 Positioning of the Centre for Professional Development (CPD)

The current positioning of academic development is constrained within the Directorate of Instructional Support and Services (DISS) which is not under the Vice Principal Academic. This poses tremendous challenges as management within this domain do not understand the importance of academic development and do not provide the leadership that this function deserves. Therefore, it is recommended that this should be restructured and report directly to the Vice Principal Academic. This would prevent the current challenges experienced in terms of structure, culture and agency where the CPD is not recognized for the work that is done. In addition, there is regular conflict between the manager of DISS and CPD due to the lack of understanding of the function of CPD. The amalgamation of the Quality Department currently under the auspices of The Directorate of Strategic Planning with Academic development would enable powerful teaching and learning strategies to emerge and would resolve many of the problems currently experienced. D’Andrea and Gosling (2005) espouse the quality development model (QD) which proposes key dimensions:

- curriculum development; pedagogical process; teaching and learning; and SoTL
- The focus on the T&L interface as central to quality
- A non-burdensome process

The central theme of the model is development and proposes the integration of three areas, i.e. Academic development, learning development and quality development that holistically focuses on educational development. In addition, the process is about continuous evaluation and research that add value to the student experience. There is more emphasis on the development of knowledge, skill and attributes of all stakeholders through systematic reflection. This developmental process encourages the development of trust in academics. The developmental approach will consume more time and energy but would definitely lead to change for those who believe in it and strive to make it work (D’Andrea and Gosling, 2005).

4.3 Academic Development Reflection in positioning

The Centre for Professional Development was in its developmental stage with low impact to the academic community in its infant stage. The team engaged with the development of the rationale that outlined the purpose, objectives, and function of the CPD. It is not an official document therefore no reference is made of it.

4.4 Professional Identity

Higher education in South Africa is complex and changing continuously. Thus, the academic’s professional identity is complex and molded by circumstantial factors. Clark et al (2020) mention that there is insufficient research on professional identity in higher education. Also, there is no clear definition of professional identity. In order to get a better understanding, one needs to study the relationships, conditions and experiences in an organization that is multi-disciplined. Clark, Hyde and Drennan (2013) categorized professional identity into sections: “1. Bounded professionals who perform clear and prescribed roles. 2. Cross Boundary professionals.
who perform transactional functions and contribute to capacity building. 3. Unbounded professionals who contribute to projects across the university and 4. Blended professionals who contribute to both professional and academic areas.” The categorization of people into these four simple areas simplifies the complexity of professional identity in higher education. Thus, professional identity may be seen as an ongoing developmental process similar to life-long learning that is a never-ending journey of development. Professional identity is molded by structure, culture, and agency throughout the lifespan of the individual and the sociological factors that surround the individual.

4.5 The Centre for Professional Development (Academic Development)

The Centre for Professional Development (hereafter known as CPD) makes use of a comprehensive and integrated approach to provide continuous professional development for the teaching community in an open distance learning (ODL) environment. The purpose is to address the need for a balance between building organisational capacity as well as satisfying the career needs of individual members of this community.

The current method of functioning is through communique of invitation via the intranet to the community to attend CPD offerings. The challenge faced is the low number of people attending, as well as cancellations just before a workshop can start. This places strain on the CPD in terms of resources for 1 or two people attending and also the waste of catering. There is very little in terms of relationships with the colleges. This may be addressed through roadshows as well as collegial relationships with the deans of the colleges.

The CPD offerings are informed by and grounded in current research on professional learning in higher education. Learning at work is often informal and the CPD believes its role is also to create conditions and spaces where collegial conversations may occur. Therefore, these offerings will be situated in authentic work-based contexts, with participants often working in teams. For this reason, the CPD initiatives would be flexible and provide access to offerings ranging from short learning programmes to open and informal programmes, to stand-alone tutorials.

The CPD proposes an integrated and comprehensive approach for continuous professional learning for all academic staff of the university. This approach places professional development at the centre of organisational capacity development, academic community building, and the development of insight into the complexities of the ODL environment.

4.5.1 Rationale for Introducing CPD

In this section current trends in the field of professional development in the context of higher education is discussed. At the same time a brief overview will be given of those theoretical developments in the domain of professional development of academics that have informed critical decisions behind this ‘Menu of Services’ (offerings of CPD). As a point of departure, it is accepted that CPD is an underpinning mechanism for organisational as well as individual capacity development in order to drive productive institutional change and innovation.

4.5.2 Continuous Professional Learning

One of the most common definitions used to describe Continuous Professional Learning comes from Day in her writing about preparing teachers for professional careers in education. In Day’s words, continuing professional learning, “is the process by which alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking” (Day and Hadfield, 2020).

Although the definition of Day and Hadfield can be helpful, one needs to acknowledge the full complexity of working as an academic in the context of higher education and specifically in an ODL environment. Therefore, in addition to those dimensions identified by Day and Hadfield, there needs to be consideration of the variety of roles that academics have to perform at a professional level that require expertise and skills in areas that extend beyond the academic’s specific area of scholarly expertise; some examples of new roles would be management of distance learning provision, the design and development of learning environments, learning experiences and resources, as well as learning technologies and subsequent research. Furthermore, Day’s definition focuses specifically on the teaching dimension and therefore the teachers. In the research on organisational learning in the higher education domain, however, there is a clear shift to broaden the scope of traditional staff development to include other institutional workers as well. This is especially vital in ODL
4.5.3 Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Primarily, CPD is a process of dynamic socialisation embedded in individual and organisational relationships and the shaping of individual professional and organisational identity and agency. As a natural result leading off from Day’s definition of continuous professional learning, continuous professional development (CPD) is much more than just increasing the competencies of employees in service of organisational goals. While CPD focuses on the well-being of the individual, it is also crucial that the organisation takes responsibility for the support that it can offer. In this way, both the individual and organisation benefit.

Another important distinction is that CPD also targets all academic workers within an educational institution. Therefore, the provision of quality CPD is applied to academics, professional and support personnel in the institution, in an on-going, sustained manner through conferences, workshops, discussions and presentations by colleagues from CPD and from other institutions.

4.5.4 Capacity Development

Capacity development is the process by which individuals, and the organisation develop the appropriate capabilities (individually and collectively) to perform functions, solve problems, and set and achieve objectives/goals. To improve the capacity of organisations to perform well, the notions of capable and capability are important. Capable people are more likely to be able to deal effectively with the turbulent and complex environment in which they live. They are more than competent because they are able to see beyond the ‘normal’ solutions to think creatively and innovatively on a daily basis. Capability and capacity are also more than knowledge and skills and is defined in the following way:

“Capability is the confident and mindful application of both current and potential ability (competence and capacity) and values within varied and changing situations to formulate problems and actively work towards solutions as a self-managed process” (Malloch, Cairns, & Hase, 1998: 9).

The development of a capable organisation and capable individuals requires a holistic systemic approach in the development of strategies and interventions in capacity development that would impact academic development in all its contexts, thereby contributing to organizational effectiveness.

4.5.5 Conceptualization of Academic Development

Gravani’s (2007) theory mentions a shift from the conventional delivery of courses to an understanding of systemic social processes by which professional learning is developed. Structure, culture and agency in education systems are continuously changing and this environment enables lifelong learning to counter the rapid pace of change. The teacher is the adult professional learner and there needs to be continuous professional development in a “knowledge-based society that requires lifelong learning” (Gravani 2007: 687).

In this context there are two models of consideration that are of crucial importance: the traditional training model and professional learning system. At this stage, the traditional training model informs CPD activities. The professional learning system has enabled rigorous discourses on quality teaching practices through continuous debates on the delivery of teaching and learning.

The traditional training model enables teaching and learning to evolve as a craft. In this model a repertoire of skills or competencies are gleaned over time. The perspective of continuous professional development as a professional learning system is built on the assumptions of complexity theory, the premises of which are that reality is dynamic and continuously changing. The professional learning model interrelates as a system in which the structure, culture and agency are intertwined in molding teacher competencies. The following dimensions espouse the conditions as the basis:

- It should be acknowledged that there is a synergy between the macro-, the meso- and micro-levels of teaching and learning in a particular context. Therefore, the symbiotic relationship between the professional development “needs” of individual academics and academic departments, the development of the institution, as well as the socio-political realities influencing the higher education context should inform professional development strategies.
Teaching should be approached as an art and a profession, therefore every teaching situation should be perceived as unique, and should be approached considering multiple perspectives and imagining multiple possibilities. Thus, lecturers should be prepared to apply professional knowledge differently in each situation.

Professional practice is required to accompany a reflexive appraisal of each activity. Lecturers are required to negotiate within educational settings and apply themselves accordingly.

Critical to the success of this approach is the organisational conditions that promote learning for teachers:

“Such organizational conditions include resources, time and structural conditions that facilitate teachers to have space and energy to devote to their professional development, as well as the culture and ethos of the organization that genuinely support teacher professional development” (Tang & Choi 2009:2).

4.5.6 Socialisation: a Critical Aspect of Organisational Learning Theory

A systemic understanding of professional development has contributed to a strong focus on socialisation as a critical dimension of organisational development and professional learning. The definition of socialisation provided by Ajjawi and Higgs (2008), promulgates socialisation as continuous life-long learning through engagement of academics across boundaries that share and reflect on all teaching and learning aspects.

Danielson (2004: 369) posited a conceptual model based on organizational renewal through the process of ongoing socialization. Danielson proposed that “boundary changes resulting from changing contexts are catalysts for the next iteration of the socialization cycle.” Trowler and Knight (1999:185) strengthen the argument by alluding to academics as agents of change who are in a battle with the construction of identity in a changing environment especially in terms of induction processes. They also mention that in order to better understand socialization, there needs to be an awareness of different needs in the career stages of academics.

According to Broadbent (2002) socialization and induction require entanglement, and believe that organisational socialisation is a complex process when compared to conventional induction, and define it as “the accommodative process which takes place when new entrants to an organisation engage with aspects of the cultural configuration they find there”. The research by Ajjawi and Higgs (2008) concludes that the induction of new academics requires reconceptualization as current practices are poorly planned and ineffective.

4.6 The Need for a Professional Qualification in Higher Education

Under the increasing pressure for accountable, quality teaching in higher education, the spontaneous reaction of many countries was to introduce a compulsory, formal qualification supported by further qualification pathways. As a result, the ‘professionalisation’ of teaching in higher education institutions through formal degree programmes has become one of the most dynamic fields of research in the higher education domain. For example, at the Universities of Stellenbosch and Cape Town, there is a Diploma in Higher Education for their academic communities.

It is important to be aware of current developments with regards to the ‘professionalisation’ of academics in the context of higher education in South Africa. On many occasions Dr. Blade Nzimande, the Minister for Higher Education and Training, reinforced the need for university lecturers to be taught how to teach (e.g. Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa [Heltasa] Conference in Tzaneen, Nov 2012). This message is also reinforced by other academics: “How can Heltasa influence the government towards regulating that all university teachers are professionally qualified as educators?” (Kilfoil, 2015).

These developments have a radical impact on CPD initiatives in the future. It may be beneficial if the organisation could follow these developments very carefully and even find ways in which to contribute to these very important processes.

It is believed that academics should be able to fulfil all the demands of their jobs in order to be considered Higher Education professionals in the context of ODL. This belief is based on several premises that govern the thinking behind the Centre for Professional Development. The justification for such a department can be espoused by the following principles.
4.6.1 First Premise: an Interrelated Systemic Approach

The first premise that underpins the view of the task at hand is that professional learning is an interrelated system in which the personal, social and contextual conditions of professional learning are intertwined. Therefore, building capacity for academic professionals in the context of the organization is much “more than merely teaching ‘technical skills’” (Gravani 2007:689).

While traditional staff training has usually focused on giving ‘trainees’ a generic repertoire of skills or competencies, these initiatives were usually totally out of context and staff members attended to gain knowledge about these skills in short, generic workshops (Knight, 2002). The systemic approach, however, takes cognisance of the professional identities of individual academics, as well as the complexities of the roles and responsibilities of higher education academics in their various contexts. Professional development programmes are flexible and adaptable to fit various demands – to benefit academics, while complying with institutional strategic visions.

4.6.2 Second Premise: Complex Range of Roles and Responsibilities

A second premise that governs the view of professional development is that it must encompass the whole of the wide, complex range of tasks involved in teaching, learning and research. ODL academics need to perform a variety of diverse roles. Within these roles, academics deal with routine tasks, as well as uncommon and unknown situations; therefore, the need to be versatile, flexible, and innovative within the systems of an ODL institution. Such roles were identified which informed decisions around strategy:

- **Mediator of learning** at a distance within a particular subject field, with sensitivity to diverse student populations.
- **Assessor and moderator**, planning and using assessment strategies reflectively to support learning, and then doing the requisite moderation of the existing practices and procedures.
- **Designer and developer of learning programmes** in the complex ODL context.
- **Reflective practitioner** concerned with pedagogical problems, contributing to research, and the improvement of ODL practices.
- **Leader of pedagogical conversations** in rapidly changing learning contexts and working environments (Ramdass, 2016).

4.6.3 Third Premise: Ongoing Socialisation

A third premise that informs strategy is that of the ongoing socialisation of staff in the institution. This is the process through which members in an organisation move along various pathways in the institution – weaving their way through various tasks and challenges, crossing the professional boundaries of rank and departmental structures, confronted by new professional roles and added responsibilities. This process allows new members access to the internal workings of the organisation. This is in contrast to the out-dated ‘skills and competencies approach’ which presumes that once professionals have been trained, they will be able to be effective as long as they have to do a particular job. Socialisation processes are well planned, because they are critical for maintaining a loyal workforce, for the wellbeing and growth of the whole organisation. These processes also reduce uncertainty and role ambiguity and provide a sense of how a particular role contributes to the overall organisation.

4.7 The Different Stages of an ODL Academic’s Career Path

The premises make it clear that professional development activities in an institution are not completed in just one or two years, but carry on, over the whole of the academic career of the academic.

Three distinct target groups who are in the following stages in their careers were identified:

- **Newcomers**: These are usually new academics, or simply academics that are new to the context of ODL. They are usually hired for their subject matter expertise but may have little or no experience in higher education.
- **More experienced academics**: These are academics who have been in their job for a while, but who are now faced with other roles and responsibilities with accompanying challenges. At the same time this group of academics are faced with new challenges as the organisation moves forward in terms of new pedagogies (Ramdass, 2016).
Pedagogical leaders: These are academics who have reached a point in their academic careers where they are moving into roles of management, governance, and leadership, and who therefore need professional development support in these areas.

It was acknowledged that there may be a need for appropriate professional development support at each of these stages in an academic’s career. This means that the CPD should provide a wide variety of offerings to meet the various needs of this complex target group.

4.8 Different Purposes

In the context of the organisation, there is a need for coherent strategies to convert academics into teachers in their respective subject fields. When teaching staff are appointed, they are usually judged on their qualifications as subject matter experts. Yet they are expected to meet the heavy demands of teaching and assessing their students – for which they are sometimes not at all prepared. In order to fill this gap in teaching competence, the CPD is prepared to provide various initiatives that will help academics all along the way – from newcomers, to designers and authors of study materials, to researchers, to leaders in their departments.

The CPD designed a Menu of Services to capture professional development interventions, allowing for different purposes:

- **Formal qualification** – Towards a professional qualification for those who are pursuing a possible career in higher education.
- **Non-formal short learning programmes/courses** – A basket of modules, clustered around key performance roles and responsibilities. These can be compiled into various credit-bearing certificate qualifications or taken as single modules for non-degree purposes, depending on the specific needs of the academics.
- **Informal offerings** – These are designed to respond to the emerging needs of the institution, a department, or the academic community at large. They are very flexible and open to a wider audience. Because of their immediacy, they can be put in place quickly and meet urgent needs. At the same time, these informal offerings may be a place to pilot-test materials that will feed into the non-formal and formal offerings.

The reason behind such thinking was developed from Entwistle’s (2000) theory of learning which considered reproduction of knowledge, conceptions of learning and the transformation process in developing a person.

5. Conclusion

Continuous professional development for academic excellence and quality in the provision of higher education is a long-standing goal of the organisation. The knowledge building through proposed programmes and socialisation by professionals is linked to the knowers of academic development. Therefore, the courses recommended should provide cumulative learning for both academics and academic development practitioners over time where knowledge and pedagogy shape professional identities. For AD to be successful, it needs to be strategically positioned and requires the commitment from top management. Structurally, it is believed that the department is located in an area of minimal impact where culture and agency is constrained. Should this change, the impact of the CPD would definitely be enhanced.

In conclusion this paper is mapped by the complexity of the academic task, and mapping the morphogenesis that may occur should academics follow the professional paths at the various stages of their careers. At the same time, there are various ways and means to address the demands of academics’ jobs and tasks through formal, non-formal and informal means. The paper positions the CPD in the context of the organisation and is open to new trends and emerging needs as they arise in the institution, in the broader community and in the South African higher education landscape.

References


