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Educational developers: A strategic community

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Abstract: *In Sweden, in 2001, a national inquiry into teaching and learning in Higher Education identified Educational Developers as a strategic tool for the improvement of university teaching. This somewhat double-edged honour raised questions about the enterprise for Educational Development. On one hand it carried an invitation to power, but also a threat of an alienation from the teachers' perspective. This paper includes a background summarising the Swedish context and a presentation of a course for Educational Developers focusing on Strategic Educational Development. Observations from the course lead into a discussion about the enterprise for Educational Developers as a Community of Practice. It is argued that the increasing divide between university management and the teaching practice should be in focus for Educational Developers´ facilitation of Strategic development. Further, it is argued that Educational Developers, as everybody active in higher education, must have a scholarly approach to their practice.*

Keywords: *strategic educational development, community of practice*

Introduction

Conditions for teaching and learning in higher education are changing and thereby demand development in teaching practice. This is true in Sweden as in many other countries. More students, with various backgrounds, as well as reduced funding and demands on accountability are factors calling for teaching improvement. The higher education institutions are demanded to contribute to the society's prosperity. To the list could be added the academic society's own sense of quality and epistemological beliefs about what knowledge is, how it is constructed and how it should be recognised. Taken together it all requires development and improved teaching, as a way of supporting student learning.

This paper brings into focus the role of educational developers in the changing higher education context outlined above. As many scholars have described (e.g., Knapper, 2003), educational development traditionally supported individual teachers, in various forms. Funding was sometimes provided for teachers making it possible, often together with educational developers, to elaborate ideas and try them out in different settings. Projects were reported and added to lists of publication seemingly without impact on the system as a whole. The lack of interest from colleagues came to be labelled as: *Not invented here.* The process of collective learning (Bowden and Marton, 1998), so significant for research

communities, was not seemingly present on the teaching agenda. The need for a broader perspective on educational development has therefore become more and more apparent. The widened scope of interest for educational developers from individual teachers and their initiatives to a practice clearly adding to the institutional enterprise can be interpreted as a search for a new professional role as a whole.

The situation constitutes a challenge for the developers similar to what has been happening in many other countries, e.g. UK and Australia. The aim of this paper is to discuss the changing conditions for educational developers in Sweden, to contribute to a deeper understanding of how the community of developers have been affected during the last decade and to suggest directions for the future.

Background

In Sweden, a fairly small European country with high ambitions for higher education, the educational developers have had an active role in the main institutions since the beginning of the 1970s. They have been supporting teachers as described above, and they have often been responsible for the pedagogical courses offered to individual teachers with a special interest for teaching and learning. Within the different institutions the educational developers have been organised and financed in various ways. The focus of practice has differed as well as the relation to the senior management of the institution. Some educational developers worked close to their senior management, formulating policies and/or organising pedagogical courses with a focus on local policies and other rules and regulations. Others were placed in departments for education. Generally, however, the majority worked with individual teachers and the senior management mostly let it go on without showing much interest.

But, something happened to the academic society in Sweden. The conservative government rearranged the field in 1993. The major points of the reform were to decentralise power and control from national level to institutional (Bauer, Askling et al., 1999) The institutions were given the rights to introduce study programmes, to appoint professors, etc. In return they were supposed to educate more students to a lower cost for the society. Overall the academic society embraced the reform. As Bauer et al. (1999) show, the result was much harder work for the teachers, but also possibilities for them to design programmes and courses following their line of interest – as long as the courses and programmes attracted students, and could be organised without extra funding.

The senior managers within institutions found themselves more powerful than before, but also with more responsibility. From above (the government) they were pressed by demands on admitting more and more students without increased funding. They were also asked to transform higher education to an active contributor to the prosperity of the society to an extent never experienced before. In parallel, national and institutional systems for quality assurance were introduced and legislation continued to push students´ democratic rights to express their opinion, to influence and control their individual study situation. The senior management was made responsible and as a consequense clearly experienced a need for development. As described by Bauer et al. (1999) the management level started to produce policies focusing on the improvement of teaching (Uppsala university, 1996; Lund university, 2001). The ambition often was to align the institution´s efforts in order to produce more graduates without lowering the quality.

As a means for change of teaching practice these policies, however, in many cases proved to have limited value. An evaluation studying the effects of one of them (Hedin, 2004) shows that many teachers, several years after the launching of the policy decided by the university board, did not even know about its existence. In fact, as Bauer et al. (1999) show, the massive changes in Swedish higher education did affect the individual teachers in terms of workload but not much in terms of how they understood their task.

They summarise, "under the surface, the basic academic values seem to be as strong as ever" (p.247). The teachers´ understanding of quality in teaching and the basic values governing the everyday practice were more or less unaffected by the systemic changes introduced 1993. The phenomenon, in a UK context, has been researched and described in similar terms by Trowler (1998).

Educational development as a means for change

In February 2001 the Committee of Inquiry into the renewal of learning and teaching in higher education in Sweden published its report (Fransson, 2001). It recognised the need for change and improvement of teaching in Swedish higher education and placed an emphasis on institutions and departments as responsible for developing university teaching. "It is the responsibility of the individual teacher, the department and the institutions to take initiatives that will develop learning and teaching" (p. 35). In order to accomplish this, the committee proposed that all institutions should establish organisations to support the development of teaching: educational development centres populated with educational developers.

The 2001 committee did not recognise any major improvements in teaching and learning as a result of the 1993 reform. That supports and extends Bauer et al. (1999). What is new is an emphasis on *how* institutions are to support change, namely by the use of specific organisations supporting teaching and learning development– educational development centres. (In the report the use of educational development centres is not the only suggestion, but this text will focus on education development centres, since the aim of the paper is to discuss how educational developers can contribute to the development of teaching and learning.) The committee suggested that every institution should establish such centres (if they did not already have one) and that effort should be made in order to support the educational developers working there.

The idea of centres for educational development was by no means new. The main universities in Sweden already had them, sometimes dating back as long as to the end of the 1960s.

As another result of the 2001 report, the Council for renewal of higher education in Sweden was assigned, by the secretary for higher education, the task to organise support for educational developers active in the various institutions. Through collaboration with Swednet (Swedish Network for Educational Development in Higher Education) it was decided that a course was to be organised inviting all educational developers in Swedish higher education. The theme was to be *Strategic Educational Development*.

The course: strategic educational development

The overall aim of the course was to support a growing community of educational developers while defining their enterprise in the present context of a changing higher education. This was to be obtained mainly via discussions about educational development practice, its purpose, practice and outcomes, input from literature and international experiences and the process of scholarly reporting of strategic development projects.

The formal course objectives were for the participants to:

- Develop their knowledge about the systemic processes, which influence long-term improvement in university teaching
- Develop insights in how they, themselves, can influence this change
- Gain an understanding of strategic development of university teaching and learning

- Develop an awareness of some critical aspects related to strategic development of university teaching
- Report, in writing, insights gained for a university audience

The course was announced in January 2004. It had 43 applicants, each with an outlined strategic development project. Four external, experienced educational developers reviewed all applications and made recommendations for admittance based primarily on each outlined project´s potential to fulfil the course objectives. 22 participants were admitted, representing more than a third of Swedish higher education institutions.

The course corresponded to five weeks of work, over a period of ten months.

The main part of the course consisted of a project, established in the participants´ own context and launched as a strategic attempt to improve teaching and learning. The project should aim for enhancing the conditions for student learning in the long- and short-term perspective, and result in increased knowledge of such processes. Furthermore the participants´ competence and ability to initiate and support strategic educational development within their institutions was to progress. The project should be reported in a scholarly way, for the benefit of the field of educational development.

An important part of the course was one week in Oxford, UK, providing opportunities for intensified discussions and interactions with people representing different experiences and strategic perspectives. A workshop on how to formulate Teaching and Learning Strategies within institutions was run by Graham Gibbs (Director of the Insititute of the Advancement of University Learning, Oxford University). A seminar about national strategies to enhance quality in teaching and learning was led by Liz Beaty (Director, Learning and Teaching at HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council of England). That seminar was also commented upon by Sverker Sörlin (Research Director of Swedish Institute for Studies in Education and Research).

In addition to face-to-face discussions the interaction within the course was supported by a web-platform and literature (Academics responding to change by Paul Trowler, (1998), Agency, context and change in academic development by Ray Land, (Land, 2001), and specific literature relevant for the various projects).

Early observations in the course

The strategic development projects differed substantially, depending on the context in which they were established, the approach that characterized them, and the role of the educational developer. Course participants initially thematized and clustered their projects into smaller working groups:

A Policy development (5 participants)
B Policy implementation (4 participants)
C Development through organisational change (5)
D Cognition, context and practice (8 participants)

Group A & B focused their work on policies, to be formulated or already formulated; how to effectively produce and use policies as a means for change. Group C focused organisational issues, the flow of information or internal interaction supporting development. Group D focused on teachers´ understanding of development, what influences it as well as how teaching competence can be understood.

During the initial phase of the course, four months, a web-board was used for discussions of project progessions and Trowler's book. Striking was the long, sometimes prestigious, contributions, with few

references to each other. Notable was also the manifold reactions on the book; from enthusiastic or mere neutral to harsh critique.

The comments after the week in Oxford, four months into the course, were mainly positive reactions to sharing knowledge and experiences with colleagues. The early experience of isolation from other developers was now replaced with recognition of the interaction with colleagues dealing with similar problems, from different perspectives.

Discussion

The initiative – a strategic educational development course

The course in it self represents something interesting and its existence deserves attention. It was a national initiative originating from the Fransson report in 2001, taken with the previous development in higher education in mind. It seems legitimate to consider the 1990s in Swedish higher education as a decade where the governmental strategy, rendering power to the management level in institutions failed in relation to improved teaching, as pointed out by Bauer et al. (1999). In 2001, by Fransson, the educational developers are put into focus as a way to accomplish improved teaching.

As described in the background, during the 1990s the management level, within institutions (the mezzo-level), formulated policies and strategies and the teaching level (micro-level) created new courses and programs. It was a creative period but also a period when the divide between the two levels became apparent. After 2000, the management level still has its newly gained power. The teaching level is again returning to fewer courses, due to shortage of resources, and stumble because of even harder work, pressed to teach more students without lowering standards (Bauer et al., 1999). The system is on the edge of being cut into two, leaving the teachers isolated from the managers in a situation where they need them the most.

It is in this situation of an increasing divide between management and teachers that Fransson puts the light on the educational developers. The developers' tradition to inspire and to support individual teachers is however no longer enough. It is clear that the aim for their work has to be more strategic, using a wider scope than before, but it is unclear *how* this is going to happen. The initial, somewhat fumbling, discussion on the web-board during the course reveals the complexity of this new task. It also shows a lack of a shared understanding of what being strategic means. It clearly underlines the need for a continuous informed discussion about strategic educational development.

The strategic development projects

The majority of the strategic development projects in the course mirror this general development: nine participants work with policy creation or implementation, and eight work with projects aiming for deeper understanding of the teaching level. The strategic ambitions in the first group are the use of policies in order to transform and develop teaching from a management perspective: the problem is that of implementation. Using an analogy from teaching this could be labelled a teaching focused paradigm. The managers know what they want to achieve and how the work should be done. The problem is the teachers who do not understand the direction.

In the latter group, within the course, the strategic ambitions are to develop teaching through a process of deepening understanding of, either the teachers' understanding of learning or the management's understanding of the teachers and the teaching context. There is a built-in ambition to inform the system, to produce data usable for individuals on all levels.

We argue that even though these two directions both aim for development of teaching, they also illustrate the divide discussed above. The somewhat searching and often elaborated discussions within the course represent a process where the gap between two perspectives is being bridged. The discussion itself represents something valuable since it concerns a crucial phenomenon within Swedish higher education, the division between mezzo- and microlevel within institutions.

The discussion also represents something genuinely important, the dialogue between the top- down and the bottom-up perspectives. We claim that development is to be found when perspectives are shared and variations between the foci are identified. One very important objective in strategic educational development is to improve the quality of the communication between the different institutional levels.

A community of educational developers

It has been claimed that educational developers lack a culture (Becher cited in (Cooper, 2004)). Ray Land has described a whole range (12) of different orientations towards development as described by educational developers (Land, 2001). Elsewhere it has been pointed out that educational developers do not relate to theory ("cafeteria approach to theory utilisation", (Malcolm and Zukas, 2001) p. 36) or relate too much to narrow and ill-supported theory (Webb, 1996a; Webb, 1996b; Lindsay, 2004). Taken literally this critique may imply that educational developers do not constitute a community at all. We oppose such a conclusion and argue that educational developers are a community, but a changing community in search of a new professional role and a widened understanding of change and development.

Wenger (1999) describes a community of practice as a group of people focusing on a practice trying to improve it by sharing their understanding of things. Key features are mutual engagement, a shared repertoire and a joint enterprise. We found it fruitful to view the group of educational developers participating in the course in the light of Wenger's theory.

So, do Swedish educational developers have a common enterprise? Initially in the course, we would have answered no! The difficulties to define a common ground for discussions initially during the course would have suggested such an answer. On the other hand, the difficulties can be due to a shift, or a different understanding of the enterprise rather than a sign of a non-existing community. Of the two groups above clearly one is identifying itself with the management level. The members of the other group view their enterprise more like researchers, investigating the teaching level's perspective, making it explicit, leaving the results for others to use. Following the reasoning above (discussion point 2) neither of these two is efficient enough. On the other hand both follow the tradition of educational developers to identify themselves with someone's perspective and basically be a supporter. So in a way the developers still are supportive. The problem is that some members of the community support managers and others teachers.

In order to increase the community's possibility to contribute to change and development the enterprise should be redefined and formulated as an effort to facilitate communication within the institution. That is, supporting a more informed communication within and between different organisational levels. This should be done not by carrying information between different parties. Instead the enterprise would be to support different party's ability to express there own views and to understand others'. The enterprise would be close to the one formulated by Boyer (1990), as the quest for scholarship on all levels. Any position within an institutions deserves its own scholarship. Scholarship would no longer be something associated with research or teaching only, but also with management, student support, administration, educational development, etc. All responsibilities deserve an urge for discovery, integration and application.

Conclusion

The academic world in Sweden, and in many other countries, is complex and changing. As a result educational developers have to reconstruct their understanding of their enterprise, and therefore also develop the repertoire of their practice to a wider scope than before. Our suggestion is that developers should form a community focusing on facilitation. If development radically means transformation of the entire institution, different levels and agents within the organsation need to have increased pedagogical awareness and competence everywhere in the organsation as well as more collaboration, interaction and communication. This dialogue and discussion need to be scholarly and research-informed.

The role of the educational developer would then be a matter of being trustworthy and significant at all levels, a delicate matter of timing and relevance.

This means taking part in the formulation of policies, but not the decisions. It means discussing the policies, but not implementing them. It means informing policy-making with experiences made on the teacher-student level, and also supporting policies by helping teachers to widen their perspective while deciding how to interpret policies.

Above all this implies the formulation of a territory and the constitution of a unifying professional culture – a community of practice focusing on strategic educational development. Without these two conditions educational developers run the risk of being used and overrun by a single level's perspective; and the institutions run the risk of losing the unique ability to have a change agent – a neutral player, a critical friend, hosting knowledge and competence about and within educational change and development.

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