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Re-shaping practices of academic development: The *Disciplinary Commons*

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Abstract

This paper reports on a model for academic development which inverts the usual expectation that support for teaching and learning is located at an institutional level, to suggest that such support is more effective when organised at a disciplinary level. We also suggest that this re-conceptualisation has concomitant effects on academic identity. The model, called the *Disciplinary Commons*, has been instantiated twice in computer science and is currently being expanded to other disciplinary areas.

Introduction

The 21st century student experience is no longer confined to the classroom, but encompasses a wide variety of resources (traditional and electronic) as well as other scaffolds to success (such as learning enhancement centres, pastoral tutors and peer mentors). The 21st century teacher in Higher Education, however, has no more resources for support than those historically available—institutionally-based academic development workshops, perhaps a conference (or conference thread) on teaching and learning, some literature. As the HE environment develops, so should our professional practices. In this paper we report on a model which delivers scrutiny, capture and representation of practice across institutional boundaries.

The dilemma of academic development

To improve educational practice it is necessary be exposed to the excellent practices others, and to adapt and adopt them into our own practice. This is hard to accomplish locally because "a lot of what I do is simply because that is the way I (and my colleagues) have always done it" (*itp Disciplinary Commons*, 2005). And it is hard to accomplish institutionally because of the twin horns of the dilemma of academic development: specificity and generality:

Specific educators have specific problems. The specific classroom, the details and minutae of learning auto-ionization, Kant's ethics, or how to program a computer using the language Haskell, are not available to the average institutionally-based academic developer. This necessitates a vast input of one-to-one effort to find out "why the students aren't learning" or an acknowledgement that there is no local help to be had. Not an efficient approach.

Some problems *are* generic Almost any educator can, for instance, take a "project-based learning" approach; can learn how to do "action research"; can learn some of Cross & Angelo's Classroom Assessment Techniques (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Each of these is applicable to many subjects and many different classrooms. An institutionally-based academic developer can have expertise in one (or several) of these sorts of approaches, and deliver it to several educators. But educators have to self-identify that they want to do this/learn about this, then they have to take that generalised knowledge and adapt it to their own situation, they have to "work the bugs out" and fill in the gaps on their own. They can't support each other through this implementation process because they're in different disciplines[i], and they can't find other people doing it in their *own* discipline, because those people are in different institutions and have different conditions and constraints. A more efficient approach, but not effective.

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The Disciplinary Commons

In this context, we present a new model of academic development: The *Disciplinary Commons*. This model has the twin aims to:

- *Document* and *share* knowledge about teaching and student learning in the UK.
- Establish practices whereby the scholarship of teaching becomes *public*, *peer-reviewed*, and amenable for *future use and development* by other educators, in particular by creating a teaching-appropriate document of practice equivalent to the research-appropriate journal paper. (*itp Disciplinary Commons*, 2005)

A *Disciplinary Commons* is constituted from 10-20 practitioners sharing the same disciplinary background, teaching the same subject – sometimes the same module – in different institutions. They come together for monthly meetings over the course of an academic year. During these meetings, aspects of teaching practice are shared, peer-reviewed and ultimately documented in course portfolios. Part of the sharing of practice is cross-institutional peer observation of teaching: each member of a *Commons* observes the classroom teaching of another and is, in their turn, observed.

A course portfolio is a set of documents that "focuses on the unfolding of a single course, from conception to results" (Hutchings, 1998) and is an established method for advancing teaching practice and improving student learning. The purpose of the course portfolio "is in revealing how teaching practice and student performance are connected with each other" (Bernstein, 1998). Portfolios typically include a course's learning objectives, its contents and structure, a rationale for how this course design meets its objectives, and the course's role in a larger degree program. Importantly, they also include evaluations of student work throughout the term, indicating the extent to which students are meeting course objectives and the type and quantity of feedback they are receiving.

As well as providing a forum for sharing practice in a disciplinary community, a *Commons* also provides as a public deliverable a rich set of contextualised data. *Commons* portfolios have common form, so facilitate comparison.

Re-shaping Academic Development

A *Disciplinary Commons* re-shapes academic development and reflective practice in three key ways:

Professional development: As consistently reported in the research literature (Bernstein, 1998; Hutchings, 1996, , 1998), the critical reflection involved in portfolio construction results in significant and lasting changes to the course under investigation and to practitioners' own subsequent teaching. Of course, this can be undertaken at an individual, or institutional level. However, the practice is enhanced within a *Commons* where the meetings parallel the critical practices of the fine arts, and studio learning. Donald Schon (Schon, 1990) discusses such mutual reflection on practice as a *hall of mirrors,* (although he was primarily concerned with the dyadic master-apprentice relationship) where practitioners expose their work to a "coach" and their peers. In a *Commons* each participant is a knowledgeable expert, skilled in their own practice, there is no "teacher", all meet on equal ground. By exposing *Commons* participants to practices of scholarly enquiry in this *disciplinary* forum the breadth of context from which to draw questions and solutions is greatly expanded and teachers are exposed to a greater variety of "reference material" than otherwise possible. Each individual sees their practice reflected in others – and others' in theirs – and inside this "hall of mirrors" learns their way to their own expertise.

> [Herbert] Good to find a group where everyone is treated as equal and ownership is shared. Not a common thing in my experiences of HE up to now!

The knowledge shared and created in a *Commons* is precisely at a scholarly and professional level. Prior to starting their lives within the profession, educators have essentially no

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experience of what will be their daily tasks. Then, having started, they almost always practice behind closed doors, isolated from the very community of professional colleagues with whom they might (but usually do not) share collective cultural knowledge about how to teach and how to become better teachers. Academic development within the *Commons* reclaims professionalism and, by vitue of the way it is structured, places individual work in a wider context establishing baseline scholarly reflections. A *Commons* portfolio is not the product of isolated individual reflection, nor is it presented in a format more suited to the reporting of other sorts of knowledge (research papers): it is *contextualised, comparative and collegiate* – created and exchanged within a community of peers.

Community development: Although a culture of peer review and discourse is common within research communities it is unusual among teachers, as teaching most often happens in isolation, and research norms of citation and attribution of practice are not widely held. Within a *Commons,* practitioners gain an unusually deep knowledge of practice in other communities, which facilitates the identification of, and sharing of, "best practices". By adapting key features of research-based activity (externality and peer review) a *Disciplinary Commons* empowers practitioners. The most common report of participation is that it gives educators "confidence" in their home context; confidence that what they are doing is comparable to other insitutions, and confidence to contribute to Departmental decisions by being able to say – with absolute certainty – "that's not how they do it at institution x" or perhaps "17 other institutions do it this way". This is uncommon knowledge, otherwise only obtainable by having worked within one institution and then moved to another.

> [Elizabeth] it's just that the whole thing about meeting other people who are interested in teaching and interested in [this subject], we know more about each other's courses and our views and attitudes than we know about our colleagues that we work with day in and day out.

The unusual practice of cross-institutional peer-observation is a crucial part of this development. It is *not* a common practice among tertiary educators to observe teaching in someone else's institution. Although peer observation is becoming more common within departments (sometimes within institutions) (Gosling, 2002) it is essentially unheard of between institutions. And when the motivations for observation are examined, this is not surprising. They are, in general, linked to the quality assurance and professional development of the observed teacher. From that perspective there is simply no point in observing practice to ensure the quality of teaching in some other institution, nor any incentive to develop their staff. The power of this practice within a *Commons* rests precisely on the fact that there is no purpose in undertaking it except to exchange ideas and to be of help to one other. No judgments are passed, no quality mechanisms engaged. Additionally, because the participants are in the same discipline observers easily understand the significance of what is taught.

> [Elizabeth] I can still clearly remember the day, more than 20 years ago, the feelings of dread and guilt I had when I walked into my first class as a lecturer. Dread that I wasn't going to be able to control this class, and guilt that I shouldn't really be there in the first place. Over the years the feelings subsided as I gained confidence in my abilities. But one phrase can always bring them back: 'peer observation'. As a necessary and semi-regular part of my job, I view it like a visit to the dentist; painful but soon over. What about the feedback? I ignore positive comments as, "S/he's just being kind". Negative comments support the notion that I should not be in this job. As the observer, I always rate myself unfavourably with the other person. What a wretched business! How can this process be helpful?

> [Now] I can approach peer observation differently. It's not meant to 'catch me out'. Whether I'm the observer or the observed, I can investigate teaching from a different

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perspective to my own. I can see what works, what doesn't and consider alternatives. We can work together. Neither of us is the 'expert'. Instead, we can both learn.

[Daniel] I have never had any externality on teaching – the peer review process, the exposure of ideas, you present ideas and get them hammered down, that's all part of what I do on a day-to-day basis in the research, whereas teaching's something I keep in my pocket, you know? … the thing that kept me going was the fact that I'm getting this externality on the process … This peer review. Those things that characterize good research projects … keeping up in the field, being aware of what other people are doing. I didn't do any of that for my teaching. I do now.

Documentation of practice: Documentation of practice is rare in teaching, and when it does occur it is in non-standard, and therefore, non-comparable forms. *Disciplinary Commons* portfolios shared a common form, and give participants a persistent, peer-reviewed, documented deliverable. One of the criticisms of the course portfolio approach is that complete examples are isolated (both by institution and by discipline). However the power of the portfolio approach is multiplied when there are several examples available for a single disciplinary aspect: a *Disciplinary Commons* thus acts as a repository and archive, charting and calibrating development over time.

As our professional practices become more complex, our reflective and developmental practices need to be re-examined. The *Commons'* new collaborative form and co-operative culture is a model that takes disciplinary activity as its focus and adapts key features of research-based activity to bring considerable additional value to academic development.

Acknowledgements

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[i] Although John Websters "4 x 4" model instantiated at the University of Washington, Seattle does address this issue at an institutional level. Some details are available from his website: http://faculty.washington.edu/cicero/SOTL.htm