Identities in Development

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the implications for a team of educational developers who are now operating within a research environment when they have traditionally have placed greater emphasis on support within a collegiate culture. The context is a new capacity-building pedagogical research initiative within a UK higher education institution. This paper offers a preliminary analysis by attempting to map the research/development terrain to reveal synergies and dysfunctions that require attention if a community of inquiry is to flourish. We have used an action research approach in order to make sense of our own situation and provide a case study of our professional context. The implications are particularly evident in the online and email communities, where sharing data, permitting access and privacy are potential zones of conflict.

Keywords
Identity, pedagogical research, online communities, educational development

INTRODUCTION
In this paper, we offer an initial analysis of the effects on a small team of a new institutional pedagogic research initiative. The initiative, called the iPED research network, has emerged out of an existing educational development community of practice. A principal aim of the initiative has been to maintain the powerful links between research and practice that have been established through a supportive, collegiate culture, whilst at the same time raising the research profile. We have used an action research approach in order to make sense of our situation and provide a case study of our professional context. In this paper we explore the strength of the forces acting upon us as we, active members in the research network with educational development roles, reconceptualise our own identities within a changing institutional and national context. This preliminary analysis will attempt to map the research/development terrain to reveal synergies and dysfunctions between the two that require attention if a community of inquiry is to flourish in our particular setting, paying particular attention to our understanding of identity as revealed through the online and collaborative dimensions of our case.

At an institutional level, the decision was taken to deploy funds released for supporting professional standards (HEA et al, 2004) in order to boost the scholarly base of our teaching development and hence the iPED (inquiring pedagogies) research network was formed. The rationale for the establishment of the research network is in line with national trends to increase the scholarly base for learning and teaching, however it could be viewed locally as calling into question the value of educational development. There has undoubtedly been an opportunity cost in diverting the funds in this direction, with a weakening of the established community of practice within the organisation that has been described elsewhere (Beaty & Cousin, 2002; Cousin & Deepwell, 2005).

Nonetheless, the purpose of the research initiative in which we are engaged is to build capacity in pedagogical research across the widest community of academic colleagues in the University. This includes inquiry into learning and teaching practices as well as fostering research and research-mindedness amongst students and staff. The activities of the iPED research network therefore include workshops on research methods, writing groups, mentoring, seminars and various guides to conduct research. The activities of the network also tie in with teaching developments, continuing professional development and support for innovations in academic practice. In all this, the network strives to foster an online community of inquiry which offers members of the community some benefit from participating. Set against this, however, lies an established research agenda, which sets up the need for publication outputs or income generation. This agenda often stands in opposition to the academic need for applied pedagogic research to inform teaching in very specific settings. The need to cite "principal authors", for example, invokes a hierarchy of ownership of ideas that undermines the collaborative principles by which we operate. Similarly, the autonomy of research is compromised by the necessity of responding to new policy initiatives within the organisation. This is a tension between what Macfarlane (2005) characterises by the research-led agenda and individualistic reward structures as opposed to notions of academic citizenship. MacFarlane (2005) argues that the research-driven agenda predicates individualistic pursuits over

collaborative endeavours which he has termed "service" to the organisation. The reward structures within higher education are such that promotion and esteem come from activities that are not in the service of the organisation nor the disciplinary community.

AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY AND VALUES

Educational development has evolved over the past few decades and is recognised as a fluid organisational entity, as typified by the variety of locations of units with academic development remits in universities in the UK, for example. By its very nature the modes of activity and focus of development work change in a dynamic relationship with policy, practice and strategy (Beaty, 1995). What remains in the flows and ebbs of change, however, is a set of more enduring values or principles which set an ethical and professional framework to our role. A brief discussion of values serves to show the tensions we face in our changing context. Henkel (2005) argues in a study of identity amongst scientists that academic identity is formed from both the discipline and the higher education institution: "Disciplines are given tangible form and defined boundaries in the basic units or departments of universities and their role in the shaping and the substance of academic identities is there reinforced" (p.158). Henkel's study identifies the importance of the "discipline" and "academic freedom" and that these values are strong enough to prevail in the face of the changing policy environment where "track record" and strategic research dominate.

Within educational development, on the other hand, a clear set of values have been articulated by members of professional organisations, such as the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) in the UK and affiliated organisations in other countries. Commonly articulated are values such as developing learning communities, promoting inclusivity, continuing reflection, scholarship and ethical practice. We argue that these values that have been challenged by the introduction of the new research network. Scholarship in a research context is often defined narrowly and refers solely to the search for new knowledge. However, this is not the received definition within contemporary learning and teaching contexts. Here, the concept of scholarship is a broader one, extended through lengthy debate prompted by the seminal paper by Boyer (1990) who defined four scholarships, namely: teaching, discovery, application and integration. A further value which is perceived to be in conflict with the new reality is the commitment to developing a learning community. This value requires collaborative effort and reward, often involving compromise and surrender of any claims to intellectual territory and paths to individual publications.

As educational developers, therefore, we have entered a research culture and are finding ourselves in unfamiliar terrain. Our existing alliegances are brought under scrutiny and new negotiations and shared understandings are required. This is not a process that we are unfamiliar with. Each of us has come previously into the domain of educational development from another specialist discipline, with its own research methodologies. We still carry vestiges of these disciplinary cultures with us but have adapted our understandings of knowledge and research within the relatively accommodating domain of educational development. Our reflections now, however, as we shift once more into the educational research culture reveal numerous questions about whether we can continue to be effective in our development roles whilst driving forward a competitive research agenda. Each one of us approaches our development work in different ways, but we are coherent in our desire to innovate and move thinking forward, at an individual, community and institutional level. It is important to us that this is reflected in the strategic and applied research agenda that shapes the iPED network.

TRANSFERANCE OF CULTURAL PRACTICES AND METHODOLOGIES

The educational development community in this context has thrived over a number of years and benefits from established cultural practices as part of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) particularly in online communication and networking. These practices include email, web pages and virtual learning environment tools, used with familiarity and relative ease by the wider community inside the organisation with whom the educational developers interact. There are protocols for gaining access at differing layers within the network, depending on what the development need requires and our educational development identity is framed by a particular set of online tools and practices. The new research agenda, however, has required us to shift the balance of access such that our colleagues within the organisation (our client base, in other words) now form just part of our target audience. The layering needs adjusting to bring material out from behind password restrictions to heighten the visibility of the work in which we are engaged. How this might be realised without compromising the "service" we provide is currently subject to debate.

Methodologically speaking, the move from developer-researcher in a development context to researcher-developer within a research and development context has also posed challenges. The research underpinning the teaching developments supported by the network so far has been largely action research, for example, which is a methodology that enables participation and collaborative research within a practice setting. Whilst action research has proven its value in strengthening the knowledge base within many areas of our local practice, it

need not lead to publishable outputs. Its success can be measured within the practitioner context. Cousin (2002) argues the case for action research as a means to support educational development and addresses some of the criticisms levelled at it by the disciplinary research community. There is now a strong onus on us to reassert the rigour of the framework used in our prior research in order that we can transfer this methodology into the new arena. There is also a need for us to expand the range of research methodologies to accommodate the different inquiry frameworks that exist within the inter-disciplinary community that are to be embraced by the network. As the following section shows, the network furthermore relies on online communication strategies, but has yet to develop an inclusive approach to online collaborative activity.

EMERGENCE AS AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

The members of the iPED research network have come together with a wealth of previous experiences and expectations of what the network will provide. One of the expectations was that the community would communicate using the online tools available.

E-literacy is high in our University, particularly amongst teaching innovators and educational developers who constitute the largest part of the newly formed research network. The members of the research network have multiple software tools at their disposal including the well-established university-wide virtual learning environment, with proven examples of its use to support development initiatives and collaborative projects. Amongst the research network is also the desire to adopt and adapt new technologies for appropriate collaborative or personal research functions.

The online dimensions of the network currently include:

- email – for selective targeting of individuals or small groups
- email lists – for general mailing to a broader group
- VLE 1 – intended for the central agents of the network: discussions and diary functions
- VLE 2 – intended for the members of the network: discussion, diary, project areas, resources
- Public website - has a corporate look which is not conducive to active, and sometimes messy, collaborative development of information
- individual and collaborative blogs – resources and discussions around thematic areas

Email is the most frequent online technology for this network, but most of the postings made do, in fact, relate to functional aspects such as meeting arrangements and documentation needed rather than community-building prompts. From the activity logs and evidence of postings to the public online evidence, it is clear that the VLE online areas are visited only rarely by any of the members of the network. Where there has been activity, though, it was of high quality and sharing of resources is a frequent focus for contributions. There is therefore a qualitative difference in the ways in which technological tools are being used by the members of the network.

FOUR DOMAINS OF IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In previous research within the EQUEL project, Cousin et al (2004) investigated the factors and processes at play in implementing online learning within higher education institutions. The research produced an explanatory framework which can usefully be applied to other complex technology-rich situations, such as the current context. In the investigation, it became evident from a study of a set of narrative accounts of implementation that "a 'blueprint approach' (schematic stages, lessons, phases) does not fully take account of the forces at play within HE institutional cultures. These forces and outcomes cannot be mandated or necessarily predicted, such as personalities and personal investment, cultural resistances, failures of technology to deliver at deciding moments, new policy directives and legislation in other areas of higher education." (Cousin et al, 2004). The explanatory framework centres around four inter-related domains: pedagogical; technological; cultural and organisational. Whilst this research focused on the implementation of technology innovations and posited the case for defining an "ecology" of implementation, the framework needs little adaptation to find relevance to the establishment of a research network under discussion here and assists us in explaining imbalances and tensions within the process, in particular relating to the emerging online community. For this purpose we have replaced the heading "pedagogical" with "methodological" to produce the present analysis.

With regard to the iPED network, there has so far been much attention paid to the **organisational** aspects (appointments to roles, management of people, space allocation, production of a newsletter and a website etc)

but the other areas are relatively underdeveloped. As the network establishes itself, the four areas of implementation will need to balance and be developed further.

Organisationally, the network operates at (at least) two tiers within the university: there is an inner tier where most members have some time allocation to be involved in the research network building process; and an outer tier of colleagues who are interested or active in pedagogical research within other roles. Beyond this, there are multiple constituencies outside the organisation who are associated with the research network through previous, current or potential projects or similar connections.

Methodologically, the network has yet to define its territory. The individuals within its membership have so far done little shared research activity – "What we really need is to collaborate on a joint project", as one member put it at a meeting (November 2005) where it became evident that there were widely differing views in the group about what made for good research. The forthcoming Research Assessment Exercise 2008 has also influenced which research activities are better regarded within the network and what is encouraged.

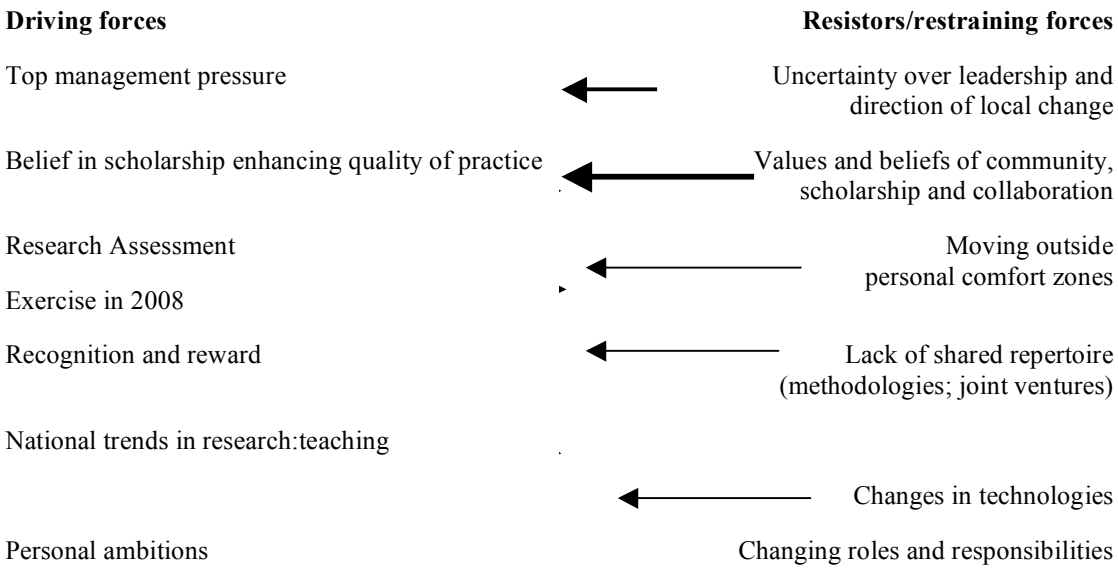
Culturally, the network still lies slightly outside the flows of the organisation (Alvesson, 2002). The organisation as a whole is in the process of redefining itself with a new ethos and firm leadership. In addition to this, many new or re-arranged groupings are being set up and the constellation of agencies is in formation. The research network in itself is a new entity, with no established protocols or practices. Valuable meeting time, for example, was recently spent discussing how to log our contacts and what to report and to whom in order to evidence the "capacity-building" activity provided by the newly setup network. Some of the members belonged previously to a very strong community of practice with established cultural practices that they expected to find again in the new network: "I've come to realise how much I've been used to working in a team and I miss that".

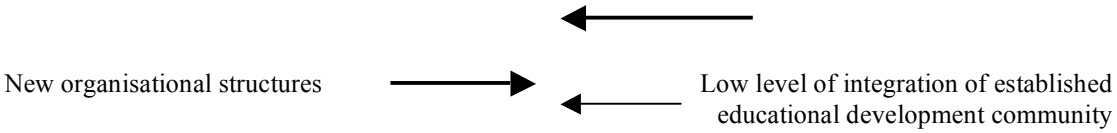
Technologically, the iPED research network has developed out of its online teaching rather than its online research technologies, primarily a teaching innovators' email list and use of a VLE for teaching or educational development. There is a certain amount of resistance to viewing the VLE as a collaborative space, given its concept of tutor and student roles with differential functionality. Furthermore, there has been little formalised exploration so far of the VLE as a research environment. The two layers within the emerging community instantly caused confusion and two membership sites for online collaborative activity were established with differing notions of audience and purpose. At the same time, the differing skill levels and habits of working online differ widely and a shared protocol is called for. Further technologies are on the horizon which fall into the category of virtual research environments that may offer new perspectives on how to organise and motivate the community online, for example the Virtual Research Environments Programme (JISC, 2004).

DEVELOPER-RESEARCHER FORCE FIELD

There is a fine distinction in terminology between developer-researcher and researcher-developer, but it is a transformative process that we are feeling keenly. The following force field analysis seeks to capture a sense of the drivers and resistors to the development of our identities as members of the research network.

Proposed change: Redefining identity from researcher-**developer** to developer-**researcher**





Preliminary force field analysis of the drivers and resistors for developer-researcher identity formation

It can be seen from the above force field analysis that the strength of the drivers outweighs the resistors to change and we are indeed moving into the domain of research. The most significant driver currently is in fact the forthcoming Research Assessment Exercise. Inevitably this identity shift to be more active in educational research will entail loss. It also requires us to construct new meanings and to determine our own conception of our roles and the contingent activities which we undertake.

MEANING-MAKING AND ONLINE PRESENCE

The environment in which we find ourselves is one of rapid change, value shifts and development of ideas. "We can thus talk about dynamic *cultural repositionings*, fuelled by the multitude and dynamics of social and ideational sources of meanings, ideas and identifications. Here we have a cultural traffic between the multitude of meanings and values made possible between the ideologies and discourses that are or can be made present in an organisation." (Alvesson, 2002:192).

It is a time for meaning-making, both of our own contexts and of the wider work environment in which we function. With the new emphasis on pedagogic research and rhetoric on applied research, we need to establish what increased engagement in pedagogic research means in terms of organisational culture. There exist amongst colleagues from elsewhere within the institution, some clear tensions between pursuing disciplinary research and contributing to the pedagogical research agenda. What does it mean for academic staff to engage in pedagogic research? What constitutes pedagogic research in its broadest sense? What kinds of resources do lecturers need who have not so far engaged in pedagogic research in order to do so now? What are the implications in terms of training and support? and in terms of reward and recognition?

From our educational development experiences, particularly in the support of online learning, we know the value of examples in order to envision potential developments and changed practices. This method of instantiating ideas is a powerful tool in meaning-making and we are seeking to construct this through the online medium and thereby generate an online presence for ourselves. The fostering of a shared understanding of the purpose of the iPED research network and where it sits within the organisational dynamic is at the heart of our sense-making processes. As a top-down process, the establishment of the iPED research network is growing in awareness. More needs to be done to enmesh the aims of the network with the institutional aims, as Kreber (2003), for example, writes: Policy change in academe is more likely to ensue as a result of the wider academic community reaching consensus on the meaning, and nature, of the scholarship of teaching. (Kreber, 2003: 93)

The establishment of the iPED group needs to be followed by a focus on shared meaning-making. There is a danger to miss out this important step in community development,, in favour of moving on to actual projects where academic staff already have a vision on how to proceed. This leaves many colleagues out in the cold, and above all, misses out on the opportunity of community building which allows for more members of staff to participate and collaborate in pedagogic research as intended by those in charge of this strategic initiative.

There are steps in place to create shared understandings – for example, a programme of seminars and a newsletter. The former requires physical attendance, the latter is a one-way means of communication. The online options need to be explored more effectively, in order to reach more individuals and create a space which can reliably share up-to-date information that is relevant to this emerging community of pedagogic researchers.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have discussed the difficult terrain that we find ourselves in – it lies somewhere between educational development and educational research. Whilst we are encouraged to inform our ideas and practice through participating in active research, supported by both national and local pressures, our role is also to retain an identity as a facilitator, mentor and motivator for others to enable them to become researchers into their practice. The force field analysis demonstrates that there is a drive for us to move across to the research side and develop our individual research profiles (for reward and recognition purposes), whilst our existing value set and established cultural practices mitigate against this. We have discussed the values and nature of scholarship, as well as the notion of academic citizenship which stretches beyond the disciplinary cultures into the wider organisational and national agendas. From our force field analysis it can be seen that the drivers are strong

enough to move us toward the new identity of ourselves as researchers within an inquiry network. The difficulties and constraints on us are also our lived experiences and need to be addressed, not least the understanding of the set of values and principles by which we define our professional selves.

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