Higher education teachers' professional learning: Process and outcome

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we first offer an analytic perspective on the papers in this volume, framing our discussion within the context of academic development as a discipline and highlighting common lines that cut across the nine contributions. We then offer insights about the current state of research on the evaluation of academic development and suggest directions that are likely to advance our theoretical and empirical knowledge in this area and anchor us firmly in evidence-based practice. We suggest that clarifying the mechanisms of change when professional learning occurs and measuring the changes in student learning outcomes that are associated with professional learning are important avenues for future research.

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Introduction

The necessity for improving quality teaching has never been as compelling or as challenging as it is today, in an ever-changing higher education climate. New trends continually define higher education, crossing institutional and national borders. They impact the way effective teaching is conceptualized, fostered and supported, evaluated, valued, and rewarded (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; OECD, 2013; Ramsden, 2003; Saroyan, 2010; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001). The papers in this volume highlight why teaching quality is so important at this particular time. They point to inadequate preparation for academic work in graduate studies, the inability of faculty to transfer skills, the increasing complexity of academic environments, institutional expectations and accountability, the necessity to better prepare students with diverse needs, and the need to keep in step with shifts in knowledge and ongoing changes in the vocations.

Professional learning, a fundamental cornerstone of dynamic, learning organizations (Garvin, 1993; Senge, 1990) and organizational learning (Cohen & Sproull, 1996; March, 1991) is an effective way to address the need for effective teaching. Dill (1999) suggests that university teaching and learning centres were created to provide "...structural support for organizational learning ..." (p. 139). Indeed, the mandate of such centres coalesce around two

types of activities: enhancing teaching and learning capacity and leadership in the academic community, and advocating for teaching and learning quality by drawing on evidence-based practice (Bédard, Clement, & Taylor, 2010; Chalmers and O'Brien, 2004; Gosling, 2009; Land, 2004; Grabove et al., 2012; Saroyan & Amundsen, 2004; Saroyan & Frenay, 2010).

The papers in this volume offer the reader a broad, albeit porous perspective on the literature on academic development, and an exposure to the microcosm of activities designed and implemented to foster professional learning about teaching. Our contribution to this volume is twofold. First, we offer an analytic perspective on the papers. We frame this discussion within the broader context of academic development: what the literature in general and the papers in this volume tell us about the state of our field as a discipline, and common lines that cut across the nine contributions. We then offer our insights about the current state of research on the evaluation of academic development and suggest directions that are likely to advance our theoretical and empirical knowledge in this area and more importantly, anchor us firmly in evidence-based practice.

An analytic perspective

Framing academic development as a discipline

Well-established academic disciplines share a number of attributes. These include the use of common terminologies and technical terms, a dominant paradigm to orient the research,

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shared theories and concepts that can organize the body of knowledge and provide direction for further advancement, common research methods, a body of specialized knowledge, and institutional presence in the form of academic programs taught in universities and professional associations affiliated with the discipline (Krishnan, 2009; Kuhn, 1962). Given these characteristics, what do the literature and the papers in this volume tell us about where we stand as a discipline?

Our first observation is that a plethora of terms are used in the chapters to describe formative processes intended to foster improved pedagogies and teaching. The terms used in the chapters and those used in the broader literature (see for example, Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010; Taylor & Bédard, 2010) include "faculty development", "educational development", "academic development", "instructional development", "professional development" and "professional competence". These are sometimes used synonymously and sometimes differently, rendering it difficult to make sense of findings and to generalize based on a cumulative body of knowledge. We also note a preference not to use the term "development" and "developer" so as not to undermine the role and agency of academics in the development process. van Schalkwyk, Herman, Leibowitz, and Farmer (2015) refer to professional development as a "catchall phrase" and following the recommendation of others (see for example, Trowler & Knight, 1999), suggest the use of "professional learning" in reference to activities that result in enhancing teaching and learning. We agree with this definition and from hereon, use the term professional learning to denote activities and processes that academics engage in to ameliorate their academic performance and the impact of their performance on student learning. While academic performance cannot be limited just to teaching and pedagogical matters, to remain aligned with the theme of this volume, we do not extend our discussion to performance related to research and service, which broadly constitute the other two dimensions of academic performance. Later on in this chapter, we draw similarities between the outcome of professional learning with Shulman's (2005) notion of apprenticeships that result in thinking and acting responsibly in professional contexts.

Our second observation is the variation in goals of professional learning projects elaborated in the papers in this volume. These goals cluster around changing conceptions and beliefs, learning about and applying new pedagogical skills, fostering reflection based on feedback from multiple sources and processes, developing a professional identity, fostering engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and networking and community building. Again, this spread is more or less in line with what is reported in the literature, in particular in a framework proposed by Amundsen and Wilson (2012). Following a comprehensive and critical literature review, they identify clusters of "educational development" initiatives coalescing around skills, methods, reflection, the institution, disciplinary, and action research/inquiry. Amundsen and Wilson (2012) specify that skills, methods, and institutional focus clusters are outcome oriented while reflection, disciplinary, and action research or inquiry focus clusters are process oriented (p. 107). Two important points are to be made here. One is that the focus of an "educational development initiative" is seldom one-dimensional. For instance, Taylor and Znajda's (2015) project aims to foster course design knowledge (skills), change in conceptions and reflective practice (reflection), institutional and community development (institutional), and interest in documenting professional learning (inquiry) (Taylor & Znajda, 2015). The second is that Amundsen and Wilson's (2012) framework is not necessarily comprehensive and may not account for all processes and outcomes of educational development initiatives. Nevgi and Löfström's (2015) reported initiative is a case in point. In their study, they explored the potential of a formal University Teaching Development (UTD) program comprising

credited courses on basic and subject studies in university pedagogy (teaching and learning, course alignment, assessment, curriculum design, discipline specific approaches, research in higher education, and practical training) as a means of developing teacher identity. This construct is not included in Amundsen and Wilson's (2012) framework. Indeed, the often multidimensional focus of professional learning programs, and the need to target new goals as the higher educational climate changes (for example, an emerging need to address fiscal constraints which may lead to larger enrollments and require greater efficacy in teaching large classes) highlight the complications inherent in designing research on academic development and the challenges involved in developing a common body of knowledge to advance the field.

A third observation is the spread of the reported studies on the deductive–inductive continuum. Some (Hum, Amundsen, & Emmioglu, 2015; Nevgi & Löfström, 2015; van Waes, van den Bossche, Moolenaar, Stes, & van Petergem, 2015) outline a theoretical or conceptual framework and the specific way in which it has informed the design and the interpretation of findings. Others report baseline research that is fundamental to theory building (e.g., Chalmers et al., 2015; van Schalkwyk et al., 2015). The value of both types of research cannot be over-emphasized. However, it is also important to remind ourselves that there is a perennial shortcoming in our field with respect to theoretically driven research (see for example Steinert et al., 2006; Stes et al., 2010). Amundsen and Wilson (2012) even assert that little has changed with respect to theoretically driven research since the seminal review and recommendations offered by Levinson-Rose and Menges (1981) when they conducted the first critical review of the faculty development literature four decades ago. Clearly, to advance the field, we need to conceptualize and conduct studies that are theoretically driven and are conceptually and methodologically robust enough to contribute to theory development.

The fourth and final observation is the variation in methodological approaches and the extent to which reliability measures and data treatment have been elaborated to convey trustworthiness and to readily support warrants for claim. For instance, reporting inter-rater reliability procedures and coefficients (e.g., Cohen's Kappa, Krippendorff's alpha), and specifying attempts to triangulate data would help establish a clearer relationship between the initiatives and their impact on professional learning. Samples size and data sources also require greater attention. In line with much of the literature on educational development, studies reported in this volume are conducted on a small scale and involve primarily self-reports. One exception is the study conducted by van Waes et al. (2015). Their use of social network theory to capture the extent to which participation in a professional learning initiative fosters networking demonstrates the potential of new methodologies and data sources, especially when the intent of professional learning extends to community building. While small-scale studies with robust methodologies have their own merit and value, especially if they use multiple data sources, they still require complementary large-scale correlational studies to render findings generalizable.

Converging themes

Five common lines cut across the papers in this volume. We highlight them below and draw attention to their prevalence.

Institution

The first common line is the role of the institution in supporting initiatives that foster improved teaching. In Amundsen and Wilson's (2012) framework, the "institution" cluster signals a "coordinated plan for academic development at the institutional