

Supporting Teaching Practice Development Through Brokerage: A reflective case study from a third-space professional

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Abstract

Academic literacies have developed an increasingly prominent profile in curriculum design and delivery in higher education, which has seen an increase in those with learning development (LD) roles taking on academic development (AD) responsibilities. Learning Developers have joined other academic 'third-space professionals' (Whitchurch, 2012) in pursuing recognition of their work, and its value, through Advance HE senior fellowship (SFHEA), but who may also find aligning their experiences and expertise to the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) (AdvanceHE, 2023) challenging.

This paper is based on a case study used in my successful SFHEA application, aligned to the previous UKPSF (2011) descriptors. It focuses on the use of 'brokerage' to support and mentor academics in relation to teaching and learning in my previous role as a learning developer (LD) with academic development responsibilities and reflects on how working relationships between teaching faculty and LD or AD colleagues might be transformed to create a more inclusive curriculum. It is also hoped that other 'third space professionals' may find this case study useful in their own Senior Fellowship HEA applications.

Introduction

My approach to supporting academic development is a form of 'brokerage' (Kubiak, 2009) based on collegiality and collaboration, which was developed through my experience as a teacher-trainer in FE, a research fellowship in educational leadership and an Education MA. It combines threshold concept discussions (Meyer and Land, 2003) about academic literacies (Lea & Street, 1998), as a key to critical reflection, with participatory action research methods (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) as a model for individual academic practitioner development, focused on learning.

In terms of the relationship of the academic developer to the community of practice they are organising, the notion of 'brokerage' emerging from earlier writing by Wenger (1998) and recommended by Fielding et al. (2005) is significant. It re-positions the facilitator from one of expert trainer or 'knower' and can therefore support the desired move towards a shared leadership approach. "Brokering practices" and "brokering relationships" (Fielding et al., p.p. 49-51) have been a guiding framework for my work, with the idea that it is the development of trust that allows the broker to be "constructively challenging" (p.51) as a key concept.

Wenger (1998) observed that brokers who supported or facilitated communities of practice are in the interesting position of being neither entirely in nor entirely out of the community, which is both a privilege and a challenge, and brokering therefore, "requires an ability to manage carefully the co-existence of membership and non-membership, yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to." (p.78). Kubiak (2009) develops Wenger's metaphor of brokerage to facilitators of educational networks specifically, highlighting Fielding's (2005) focus on the 'relationship brokerage' aspect of facilitation as a key to success. Kubiak emphasises the distinctiveness of the broker's position but also highlights the challenges and the privileges of having a dual role in bringing together the interests of the organisation and the individuals within

it: "Facilitators are boundary creatures serving the dual agendas of the networks and their employing organisation." (Kubiak, p.28).

A problem-solving-together quality, which Fuller and Unwin (2007) identify as crucial to an expansive workplace, reinforces the notion of critical and collaborative reflection as the cornerstone of professional development. Academic developers are often caught in the contest between cascading desirable 'best' practices in the technical tradition and supporting individual and critical development for professional autonomy. The relationship of academic developers with teachers and their practice is problematic: taking a position of expertise and classical leadership can encourage a technical, uncritical and convergent approach to workplace learning; a claim to no expertise or leadership risks loss of the credibility and trust that allows the facilitator to play the role of broker effectively. Stenhouse (1975) coined the phrase 'critical friend' to capture the aspiration for that relationship to be both collegiate and disruptive and critical friends are now seen as a vital part of pedagogical participative action research, providing an informed but external lens on analysis and reflection (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2021).

Whitchurch (2012) coined the term 'third-space professionals', which gave name to the boundary-crossing roles of academic developers, learning developers and academic librarians that have proliferated in the UK as higher education has expanded, becoming increasingly concerned with, and measured on, the quality of its teaching and learning. It is noted that academics also increasingly cross the boundary into the third space, with responsibility for work that would have previously been done by professional services staff. Indeed, the term itself has latterly been challenged, with 'blended professional' mirroring a contemporary metaphor, and McIntosh and Nutt (2022) championing 'integrated professional' in their work, which highlights the role of the pandemic in making more explicit the value of third space work in student success. However, they acknowledge that our third space work, "always had some success from the shadows, but greater success can be achieved with real recognition, reward and leadership of, and

through, the third space.” It is the potential for third space work to disrupt the status quo that others see as a crucial advantage to be harnessed by institutions (Hall, 2022).

The LD work described here, which reflects my personal pedagogic values and principles, focuses on embedding academic skills and practices within the curriculum in line with Wingate’s (2006) still relevant call for a move away from remediality in developing academic skills, where both skills and students who ‘need’ them are extraneous to the programme, which in its deficit approach can collude with exclusionary practices. It locates academic practice within the discipline and as a fundamental aspect of knowledge acquisition, engagement and production, aligning with an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998) and drawing on notions of research connectedness (Fung, 2017). This work remains significant as UK universities continue to struggle with awarding gaps and student success for the diverse student body that has emerged in the 21st-century in response to the flurry of Higher Education Acts at the turn of the century and the then Labour government’s target for a 50% university participation rate by 2010. The emergence of study skills centres (SCC) has been argued to exacerbate the disconnect between academic practice and academic study, and also academic teaching (Barkas, 2010). Wingate (2007) warns that this approach fails to develop the independent learning and knowledge-making ‘skills’ fundamental to all in higher education, and pertinent to both traditional and non-traditional students alike (Preece & Godfrey, 2004).

In summary, this brokerage approach is an attempt to facilitate critical reflection and individual discoveries for academics who teach through communal support and discussion. It attempts to avoid a simple, technical, path of consultation and solution provision. It aspires to improve inclusive practices to support successful study for the diverse student community.

The Remit

My role as a faculty liaison with a remit to, "...advise and support academic staff in strategies and approaches for curriculum design to support the development of effective academic... practices" (role description), came with a vision to transform an established but problematic system for faculty liaison: its extra-curricular identity. The LD would deliver 'awaydays' for programmes on topics such as critical thinking, which were neither a day (sometimes an hour or two) nor away (utilising students' usual classrooms and venues). It *was*, however, away from the curriculum, the discipline and the academic teaching staff, who were rarely involved.

This system cast academic practice development as remedial, with responsibility for the challenges that the increasingly diverse student population faces in studying at a higher level placed firmly with the students and without the curriculum design or delivery (Wingate, 2006). In effect, it worked against widening participation, precluding the development of a more inclusive curriculum that could support learners throughout their journey and within their discipline (Morgan, 2011).

The response

From 2015 to 2019 I shaped three significant changes to academic practices across much of the faculty I was assigned. Firstly, a move from generic to contextualised content and materials that located the development of academic literacies such as reading or writing within the discipline and the module's subject-related focus. This was facilitated in conversation with academics, exploring cross-disciplinary scholarship threshold concepts that were challenging but transformative, thereby supporting students to recognise their role as active knowledge producers: Over four years, 100% of the 80 sessions developed in an academic year were fully embedded within current module theories, assignments and topics.

Secondly, a move from extra-curricular to embedded delivery of academic 'skills' that sat inside the students' regular and timetable, limiting any sense of

the remedial or extraneous: 100% of all academic skills events gradually became embedded within the students' timetabled programme, in their usual rooms, and with their usual academic teachers (though sometimes observing rather than delivering), providing a more inclusive and learning-centred curriculum (Morgan & Houghton, 2011).

Thirdly, a shift in my relationship with academics from 'doing for' to 'doing with', with all sessions planned collaboratively and most taught together, offering opportunities to share my knowledge and experience with colleagues, and for them to explore their own: By 2019, 89% of sessions in the faculty were delivered *with* lecturers, allowing me to model and support participative and innovative teaching strategies, leading to enhanced practices beyond the event as academics adopted, adapted and shaped the strategies to their own needs. Additionally, most became collaboratively reviewed and developed based on our shared reflections, student feedback and data analysis that employed the expansive processes of participative action research. For many that development became iterative and cyclical.

The evaluation of feedback and data evidenced that our developments led to improvements in students' learning experiences and outcomes. Possibly more significantly for my brokerage role though, it also led to continuing relationships with academics that enabled sustained informal mentoring and academic development support, described by some as that of a 'critical friend'.

Anonymous feedback from lecturers on the benefits of our collaborations (emphasis added)

Lecturer 1:

*"It made me question my own practice and how I assist students. Very valuable to have someone **alongside** that can advise how students learn.*

*Getting together to **share ideas** etc. and to **come up with** ways that best help the students but that are also geared towards the module "*

Lecturer 2:

*"...participating in sessions has informed my own teaching practice; I've been able to reflect on how we best encourage our students to learn academic skills; I've been convinced that students need to actively participate in activities to learn academic skills (e.g. working on a paragraph of text to think about referencing skills; reviewing examples of bibliographies to think about the range of reading an essay requires); I've also **gained a colleague with whom I can reflect** on teaching approaches and good practice."*

Lecturer 3:

*"Encouragement, affirmation, support; accessibility to students; being prepared to be a **critical friend**; sharing time and resources"*

Lecturer 4:

*"Angela is able to provide staff and students with a perspective that, whilst *** focused, **draws on a much wider range of disciplines and approaches**. She has enthusiastically engaged with School Based projects, and been a valuable **critical friend**. ..."*

It was rewarding to see evidence of the potential sustainability of this brokerage approach, with collaborative projects influencing teaching and learning beyond their formal allotted time. Several years later, academics with whom I collaborated continue to develop innovative practice in embedding academic literacies; equally, the references to the relationship itself demonstrate the positive impact of development which respects disciplinary context and the experience of the practitioner. Moreover, it suggests that a brokerage approach might circumnavigate the negative effects of more

managerial and technical approaches to academic development, such as 'best practice' imposition, that initially led me to explore alternative approaches.

However, the success of shifting the faculty approach to academic literacies within the programme does not represent the wide range of engagement beyond the original project. The diversity of the collaboration that ensued is positive evidence of 'following the learning' (Biesta, 2011) and engaging with the complex nature of teaching and learning. The following examples illustrate some of the different ways this worked:

1. 'Formal' Module Liaison

Perhaps the best example of collaboration and the success of brokerage on an individual's teaching practice is with a colleague who I met in my first semester. After a preliminary threshold concept discussion aligned with scholarship and academic practices, plans emerged for further development of their aspirations for their second-year learners. They had already begun to focus on the academic practices that students appeared to find most challenging, reading academic journals, but continued to be frustrated by the poor quality of submitted work and a lack of engagement in seminars. Over three iterations we collaborated together with an academic librarian on a series of lectures and tutorials, redesigning the module with powerful outcomes:

"...Not only have the students benefited from [Angela's] input into this module in terms of academic achievement, they have also thoroughly enjoyed these sessions. This is evidenced by the extremely favourable comments made in discussions after each class and in the module evaluation questionnaires disseminated at the end of the term.

However also of great significance is the impact that Angela has had on my own teaching practice. I can honestly state that I have learnt more from working with Angela and from witnessing her interaction with students than I have following any more formal teacher training programmes.

Angela has taught me to be far more reflective in my practice and has given me the confidence to plan and deliver sessions in response to student needs as they emerge over the course of the module..."

2. Informal Programme Mentoring

Informal mentoring and support has also emerged from initial threshold discussions or events that sit outside the delivery of sessions but are equally influential in supporting teaching and learning. My work with one school stems from a close collaboration with an academic year lead. Our discussions and reflections began with shared design and delivery of sessions focused on assignments and reading practices but branched out to include support in redesigning module handbooks, assessments and activities. We met regularly to consider how to better support learning, both in modules they lead and on a wider basis within a critical friend framework. From this, the lecturer launched a forum, which brings together academics in their school who have a particular interest in pedagogy. Together, we developed cross-modular, holistic learning events for second year students leading to a research project on student-staff aspirations and experiences in the school community, which received further funding.

3. 'Accidental' Mentoring

A good example of the power of organic collaboration can be seen in a later development of Middlebrook's 'scrolling' technique (Abegglen et al., 2019), which I use in learning development events about academic reading (Rhead, 2019), that emerged from a passionate discussion in a school's regular teaching and learning forum. The module lead for a core Law module invited me to join them in addressing their students' lack of confidence in reading cases and judgements and together we experimented with scrolling as a way to analyse judicial review, both excited by the possibilities and potential. The academic proceeded to develop this approach in following years, publish their findings and continuing to focus closely on students' academic reading practices, in effect crossing boundaries to work in the third space themselves.

Involvement in these local forums and discussions, gained through brokerage with individuals, afforded me access to a wider range of colleagues and collaborative opportunities to support academic development from 'within' and longitudinally.

Reflections

My role was an ideal opportunity to utilise my professional and pedagogic experience to introduce an alternative, less hierarchical approach to the development of academics' teaching practices. I was given freedom to collaborate and develop partnerships with academics keen to work with me and equally, to turn down requests to 'service' a programme with generic extra-curricular sessions. As Kubiak (2009) highlights, facilitators need to enjoy the freedom to act flexibly and independently in order to adapt to the differences inherent in any community. I suspect that making it non-compulsory for academics to work with me changed the nature of our working relationships. Presenting a vision of partnership and collaboration, with a focus on student learning within the discipline, not teaching deficit, and an appreciation of the fundamental status of academic literacies for all students, often allowed for a rich and 'emergent' distributed leadership approach (Bolden, 2009) that shared leadership horizontally between the academic and the broker. But not in all cases, and not always sustained.

Over the course of twenty-five years, I believe (hope) I have shifted from what I fear was a managerialist and autocratic leadership approach to teaching / academic development to a more democratic, tentative, enquiry-based approach (Stenhouse, 1975). This change was driven as much by my successes as my failures in influencing practice: compliance, with enthusiastic or disgruntled lecturers performing the models uncritically and returning for answers to new hurdles, was as unproductive as refusal, with experienced practitioners often requiring more evidence to adopt (Porter & Graham, 2016) or recognising the professional disrespect in such a managerialist approach

(Argyris, 1991). Neither responses resulted in independently evaluated practice, therefore limiting the potential for sustained and longitudinal development for the academic themselves. For autonomous academics, imposition and a technical, uncritical presentation of 'best practice' often creates barriers to critical reflection and development, which can undermine the influence of a brokerage approach.

One challenge for both me and the academics I worked with converges around identity. For some academics, academic literacy development was simply not part of their role as they saw it, mirroring the competing ideologies of the role of higher education in society, and as Barkas (2011) maintains, the two main areas of conflict: 'teaching' and 'skills'. "The academy often seems to portray an image of clear demarcation of activity and role; and in relation to student success this line is often imagined to be between academic and professional roles" (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). That demarcation often has an impact on the perceived legitimacy of a broker that Wenger (1998) highlighted as crucial. In a few cases, I was unable to successfully navigate the liminal third space to establish credibility. In some cases, while establishing credibility to advise and act within a programme, there remained that demarcation and I was unable to persuade colleagues to cross the boundary into the third space. The increased profile and value of LD work afforded by the sudden shift in teaching strategies during the pandemic may increase the legitimacy and confidence of third space professionals, who are known to commonly report imposter syndrome (McIntosh & Nutt, 2022). However, as Hall (2022) highlights, much of the value of our work remains hidden and ill-defined within the institutions that might benefit from it.

The reliance on relationships and soft working in a brokerage approach may explain the persistently hidden value of LD and AD work, which exacerbates lack of credibility for third space professionals themselves, but which can also undermine the longitudinal impact of practice development as student success initiatives fluctuate or are even lost with the individual academics or

developers who 'own' them. Kubiak (2009) argues that if facilitators are to establish a relationship built on trust and credibility, then organisations must commit suitable time and resource for this to be established. However, in a landscape of increasing workload and accountability that demands hard evidence of impact, these ways of working may be at risk. The problematic nature of much learning in the workplace, which is often informal or unsystematic and therefore less easily recorded, measured, evaluated and costed makes it much more difficult for organisations to embrace or utilise at a strategic level (Fuller & Unwin, 2003).

Conclusion

The timeframe of my journey from autocratic to shared leadership in academic development work mirrors the widening participation agenda of higher education in the UK, the emergence of the brokerage role I hold, and its inherent conflicts. Universities have yet to 'solve' the perceived teaching and skills conflict or the awarding gaps that are symptomatic of a flawed curriculum. Professionals working in the third space, be they learning developers, academic developers, librarians, digital educators or increasingly, academics, will need to focus closely on representing and uncovering the value of relational work to influence the institutional approach towards student success. SFHEA applications from the third space can increase confidence for individuals, working against the self-destructive imposter syndrome; but if shared, can also provide evidence of its efficacy to a wider audience, and across those demarcated lines.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. All materials included in the article represent the authors own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere.

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