2016-06-02

Book Review: Advancing Practice in Academic Development (Baume, D. & Popovic, C. (Eds) (2016)

Claire McAvinia
Dublin Institute of Technology, claire.mcavinia@dit.ie

Follow this and additional works at: http://arrow.dit.ie/ijap

BOOK REVIEW

Baume, D. & Popovic, C. (Eds.) (2016). *Advancing Practice in Academic Development*. **Abingdon: Routledge.**

Claire McAvinia
Learning, Teaching & Technology Centre
Dublin Institute of Technology

This welcome text, edited by David Baume and Celia Popovic, is the most recent in an impressive 20-year programme of publications in Routledge's *Staff and Educational Development Series*, aligned with the work of the UK's Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA, www.seda.ac.uk).

Series Editor James Wisdom notes in the *Foreword* the continuity from previous volumes in 2003 and 2004 to this new publication in mapping the territory of academic development. Each text has provided research-informed perspectives on the many facets of this work, and the new one does this comprehensively. This book is a valuable resource for anyone working in, or with interests in, academic professional development. However, it also has a practical function, which is to support the formal programmes and Fellowship process offered by SEDA to academic developers. Therefore, this is a text likely to be most useful to people working in academic development roles or as e-learning specialists and less likely to be immediately useful to academics seeking ideas for their teaching.

Academic developers may be located within teaching and learning centres in higher education, or within the subject disciplines, but usually work with academics and others to support the development of learning and teaching in their institutions. The roles of academic developers are complex and challenging, and one of the greatest challenges is the sense of isolation developers can experience, particularly in smaller institutions. This book offers an

immediate sense of support and assistance in that regard, with 18 chapters and 26 authors giving an immediate sense of there being a local and international community.

Given the scope and range of the text, only a brief summary of topics addressed in each chapter can be included here – the reader is encouraged to read on in the full text itself. Starting from first principles, the book begins with an examination of whether there is a need for academic development, and where opportunities for this work arise. This leads into a discussion of professionalism and the professionalisation of teaching, and the roles that emerge for developers, consultants, coaches, and mentors in this space. Challenges are then addressed, including the issue of support for casual lecturers and part-time staff (which is becoming acute in the US, UK and Ireland), and the use of technologies in academic development. Quality assurance, evaluation and scholarship in the examination of academic development work are then addressed. The final chapters of the book progress to consideration of the management and leadership of projects, teams, and educational change in the broadest sense. The roles of academic development leaders in writing institutional strategies and shaping their own futures are discussed to bring the book to a close.

This range of themes and perspectives indicates the extent to which academic development has evolved as both a field of practice and a field of scholarship, particularly over the past two decades. Although the frequently quoted aphorism that developers "should be working to put ourselves out of a job" appears in several chapters, there is also the sense that this work has growing importance in helping institutions navigate the changes they face. The increasingly diverse nature of student groups, the growing casualisation of the workforce within our institutions, and the challenges of new structures within and outwith institutions are all addressed here. These issues have been well-rehearsed in many books and papers

concerned with academic development in recent years. Arguably, the strength of this new contribution is its challenge to the reader (and likely academic developer) to raise the quality of his/her practice in response to such challenges, rather than looking only outside.

This self-reflexive stance is refreshing but also unsettling: raising and sustaining the quality of teaching and learning depends upon raising and sustaining the quality of our own practice as academic developers, and perhaps recognising again the potential power of academic development work within our institutions. This stance (rightly) forces us to look at what we have in our positions, rather than focusing on the constraints of the role. Given the scale of the changes influencing the sector – and likely to continue to influence it for many years to come – the authors are justified in challenging their readers in this way. Academic developers often have the sense of being caught in the middle, between academics and senior management. The authors in this book seek to inform us about the strengths and opportunities of that position and of academic development roles. Academic developers are (and need to be) informed, scholarly, and reflective practitioners. We are not managers, but we can nonetheless manage projects and manage change. We are encouraged to research our work, reflect and evaluate, to integrate and embed change meaningfully and with a stance informed by theories of learning and social practices. These are important messages and should drive forward the advancement of practice in academic development work.

The strength of the book in its comprehensive nature is perhaps also a minor weakness: a very large number of chapters has been included, some of which are comparatively brief. However, this structure is understandable given that the text accompanies the programmes and Fellowship processes offered by SEDA. Examples and case studies of work are drawn from the UK but also internationally. It is just a little unfortunate that no voices from Ireland

are included in this edition, in spite of the work of sister networks such as EDIN and AISHE which interact with SEDA from here. Perhaps this is something that will be rectified in future versions of the book. Overall, though, this is a highly useful, stimulating and valuable text for all those working in academic development in Ireland at present.