Collaborative Partnerships to Facilitate Change in Higher Education

Maxine Shandler

Head: Access Programmes Academic Development Centre, University of Johannesburg
Email: mshandler@uj.ac.za

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Abstract

With the democratisation of education changes in student bodies at Higher Education institutions have put new demands on subject specialists' teaching practices. This article illustrates how collaborative partnerships between subject specialists and academic developers enhance teaching, learning and assessment in the subject area. In this qualitative study, data were collected from electronic questionnaires and group interviews. The findings indicate that subject specialists considered the discussions with academic developers as crucial for changing their teaching focus and enhancing the accessibility of their subjects to the students. This article's significance is that it provides an example of successful collaboration and indicates the willingness of subject specialists to be involved in partnerships that lead to them embracing the value of pedagogic knowledge in the teaching profession. It is recommended that institutions acknowledge that pedagogic knowledge on its own has little value unless it is integrated into discipline-specific subject knowledge and that they investigate ways in which to promote successful collaboration.

Keywords: Collaborative partnerships; academic developer; curriculum development; teaching, learning and assessment; higher education

1. Introduction

The changes in the student body at HE institutions put new demands on the teaching practices of subject specialists in their facilitation of teaching, learning and assessment. Many of the underprepared students who enter higher education from disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds have the potential to succeed but they have educational gaps and thus need additional support.

There are several challenges related to teaching these students that the HE institution needs to overcome. The students are second/third or fourth language English speakers whose functional English is insufficient for them to engage in an interactive learning environment. Their study skills have not been sufficiently developed to support their mainstream subjects and they lack the prerequisite knowledge for the academic demands of higher education or may lack the ability to use the knowledge that they do have. They struggle to apply theory to real-life situations and thus require pedagogical teaching strategies which introduce concepts gradually using examples from their own frame of reference. Many of these students are first generation students who are not part of a tradition of post-matric study and their inadequate interpersonal and communication skills often prevent them from engaging effectively at a higher education level. Their self-confidence and self-esteem needs to be boosted as many of them have come from schools where they have been told that they will never succeed in their studies. In order for these underprepared students to be successful in the extended programmes learning material should be made accessible to them. This can be achieved by incorporating pedagogical knowledge into lecturers' specialised subject knowledge.

Faculty lecturers are content specialists who often do not have the time to search the literature for alternative methods to meet the challenges presented by teaching non-traditional students. These lecturers tend to continue using traditional teaching practices in their large classes which might not necessarily provide for the needs of the underprepared students. Many mainstream lecturers justifiably assume that since the students gained access to the university their prior knowledge should be in place. They thus start teaching from a level where they expect the students to be instead of meeting the students at the level where they are. This often results in further gaps in the students' knowledge and consequently the quality of the students' work remains at an unacceptable standard.

Academic Developers are appointed at HE institutions to focus on enhancing the quality and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment in order to ensure equity of access and academic outcomes. They need to assist students who have the potential to become successful in their studies by developing innovative pedagogic strategies and interventions to counteract the 'articulation gap' between the students' prior learning and higher education's expectations.

Academic development staff members are acutely aware of the challenges related to under-prepared students and take trouble to make provision for the students' problems when they plan contact sessions and design teaching material. Central to the work of academic developers is to prepare these students for mainstream study in a specific discipline. They constantly try out alternative methods which with wider application can exert a beneficial impact on the structure of teaching and learning in the mainstream curricula.

A combination of subject content knowledge and knowledge of teaching and learning is necessary to overcome the challenges posed by the inclusion of under-prepared students in mainstream classes. This article aims to illustrate how collaboration between the subject specialist from a specific discipline and the academic developer enhances teaching, learning and assessment in the subject area.

The process followed to establish the collaborative partnerships as well as the roles and functions of the respective partners are discussed. The first section of this article deals with the rationale, the underlying principles, advantages and methodology of the Academic Development Centre's (ADC) materials development process. This is followed by a description of the collection of qualitative data by means of electronic questionnaires and a group interview. The results indicate how the collaborative partnerships that were established during the materials development process have aided lecturers with their teaching, learning and assessment practices in their subject areas. The article concludes with some recommendations for making staff development workshops more hands-on and discipline-specific and for encouraging collaborative partnerships between faculty lecturers and academic developers.

The term Academic Development (AD) is used interchangeably in literature with professional development, educational development, staff development and learning development. For the purposes of this article the term Academic Development is used.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 The collaborative process

In order to incorporate foundational provision into the mainstream modules the ADC embarked on a materials development process with the subject specialists for all foundational provision modules. Materials development workshops were offered for all subject specialists and academic developers to provide them with a common understanding of student-centred education, the design features of learner-centred education and the type of materials required when additional support needs to be provided. These workshops created an opportunity for the subject specialists to focus on student-centred assessment strategies and to work on their own course materials during the workshops. The information provided during the workshops could be used to ensure consistency in the style and format of the materials.

2.2 Subject Specialists

Academics (subject specialists) are acknowledged as 'experts in their circumstances' (Devlin 2006: 102) however, they need to have both content knowledge and knowledge of the pedagogical principles that underpin teaching (Boyer 1990). Often the professional development of subject specialists is diverse and discipline-based which gives rise to varied challenges and learning needs (Karm 2010: 212). Their descriptions of teaching range from presenting or imparting knowledge to lecturer-student interactions and facilitating understanding in order to bring about conceptual change and intellectual development (Kember and Kwan 2000; Trigwell and Prosser 1996). Many subject specialists are of the opinion that the only way to make the curriculum accessible is to water it down. Without additional knowledge of the educational requirements for designing effective learning activities and learner materials, subject specialists might find it difficult to make their subject accessible to under-prepared students. The discussions between the subject specialists and the academic developer during the materials development process stimulate the subject specialists' thinking about teaching and learning and consequently their teaching strategies and practices improve and develop. As a result of the process, the subject specialist is able to adapt approaches that have previously not worked and implement varied teaching approaches to suit different group dynamics and student profiles (Trigwell and Shale 2004: 532). The discussions and peer reviews that occur during the course of the on-going collaborative relationship between the subject specialists and the academic developer assist the subject specialists to realise the importance of identifying the threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2003) of their subject and the way in which students make meaning of them. Threshold concepts are important concepts that students find difficult to master (McCartney et al. 2009: 383). Once the subject specialists become mindful of how students experience these concepts they can make their subject accessible to the

students owing to their growing awareness of the different learning styles and preferences of students, alternate ways of teaching subject concepts, as well as the importance of showing students *how* to learn in a particular discipline instead of just making them aware of *what* to learn. As a result of the collaborative partnership with the academic developer, the subject specialists realises that when teaching and assessment invite peer collaboration and review, and when it is informed not only by the latest ideas in the field but by current ideas about teaching in the field (Hutchings and Shulman 1999:,12) their subject is made accessible to students. In addition, participation in the materials development process creates an awareness that teaching excellence requires sound subject knowledge and a good understanding of how students grow within and beyond the discipline as well as the knowledge about how to motivate students, how to convey concepts and how to help students overcome difficulties in their learning (Kreber 2002: 9).

2.3 *The Academic Developer*

Academic Development is defined as an open set of practices concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning and the professional development of teaching staff in higher education (De Kadt 2008: 1; Volbrecht and Boughey 2004: 58). Academic developers theorise, conduct research on and are cognisant of research findings on teaching and learning which can be applied by subject specialists to their learner materials and in their classrooms (Rowland in Jones 2010: 245). Academic developers, who are paired with subject specialists, are able to assist the subject specialists to interrogate their curriculum from an educational point of view. The subject specialists are encouraged to reflect on their view of knowledge and how learning occurs, to deliberate about the outcomes of their modules and how these are expressed, to think about the purpose that assessment serves and to consider how the content is chosen and organised (Toohey in O'Neill 2010: 63). For example, questions are asked about whether there is a logical sequence in the way that the curriculum is presented, whether the way that the curriculum is presented promotes rote learning or understanding and whether students have been provided with the fundamental skills and competencies in the materials if they have not got them at school.

Lecturers are encouraged to guide, support and accompany student learning and in so doing encourage active learning and develop an environment or an attitude in which students seek (Rowland 2006: 109) answers to their questions. The academic developers encourage guided reflection on teacher/student interfaces, the level of language used in the materials, how to formulate learning outcomes and assessment criteria, alternate ways of explaining concepts and whether assessments are in line with assessment criteria. Furthermore, the academic developer emphasises that curriculum design, content and lecturing is informed by the assessment of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed by students. Academic developers make use of a kind of professional knowledge that is context-adaptable, usable, inter/intra disciplinary and therefore apparently fuzzy in nature (Di Napoli et al. 2010: 15), this fuzziness, however, allows for a multi-perspective and multi-disciplinary interpretation (Carew et al. 2008) to fit different contexts and student needs. Through the collaboration and the exchange of ideas between the academic developers and the subject specialists, the subject specialists have the opportunity to engage with and take ownership of the principles upon which the academic development methodology and pedagogy are based and to translate them into their own subject field. These principles are then incorporated into the learner materials that they are developing for their subject. For example, Enquiry Based Learning (EBL) which encompasses Problem-Based learning and small-scale investigations, such as small scale case studies and project work (Kahn and O'Rourke 2004) could be used. The underlying principle is: in order to encourage students to better understand theory they need to apply it to real life situations in a guided and scaffolded way.

2.4 *Collaborative partnerships in the higher education environment*

Materials development workshops are scheduled for subject specialists who have volunteered to participate in the process, during these workshops the subject specialists are partnered with academic developers from the Academic Development Centre. These partnerships allow the subject specialists to reflect on their practice from a different perspective and to gain insight into how they think and work through a different lens to that of the academic developer (Karm 2010: 205). As far as possible, subject specialists are paired with academic developers with qualifications in the same discipline. For example, the Maths or Chemistry subject specialist is partnered with an academic developer who has a maths or chemistry education qualification and thus has sufficient understanding of the discipline to enable the academic developer to work together with the subject specialist during the development of their learner materials. The academic developer ensures that the materials conform to educational principles as set out during the initial workshop. Since these partnerships are usually lengthy, they have the opportunity to cultivate a collaborative, non-threatening

relationship built on trust and respect. In addition, these partnerships have significant potential to embed educational change expertise within faculties (Leibowitz et al. 2011: 28).

The subject specialist starts developing the first unit of the materials in the workshop with input from the academic developer and this relationship continues until all the materials for the module are complete. This peer development approach is characterised by critical reflection, discussions about teaching and learning and the development of teaching expertise (Byrne, Brown and Challen in Taylor 2010: 186). During this process they learn not only from discussions, but also from practice, trial and error and reflection (Leibowitz et al. 2011: 21). When subject specialists reflect they think about their professional identity, their own teaching philosophy and their approach to teaching. It is through reflection that they are able to link theory to practice and create knowledge through experience (Loughran 2002).

These collaborative partnerships often extend beyond the materials development process since most of the subject specialists lecture in the foundational provision modules for which they are developing the learner materials. While lecturing they are prompted to consider and interrogate fundamental questions about the nature of teaching and learning and to take cognisance of the student voice which leads to the clarification of the fundamental principles underpinning academic development pedagogy (Bovill 2011: 136-138). There is also the opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness of the materials for the extended programme students. The subject specialist is responsible for the quality assurance of the content of the materials and the academic developer is responsible for ensuring that the academic development interventions and foundational provision have been incorporated into the materials. Subject specialists who are involved in the materials development process benefit most from reviewing their own practice, rather than by being presented with the pedagogical theory that they have to apply to their own subject field. Academic Developers respond to the concerns of subject specialists and encourage them to develop teaching and learning expertise in their subject field, in this manner a more inclusive and holistic approach to the professional development of subject specialists is achieved (Crawford 2010: 199).

The focus of the partnerships is to change the subject specialists' approach to teaching and learning which can only be accomplished if the academic developer can add value and research-based evidence is provided. These collaborative partnerships are underpinned by engagement, collegiality and empowerment which according to Elton (in McLinden and Edwards 2011: 158) are the most effective bases for change in Higher Education.

2.5 *Learner Materials*

During the materials development process the subject specialists in tandem with the academic developers embark on the process of integrating foundational provision into their subject and ultimately on a path of curriculum development and revision. Initially, they engage in exhaustive discussions about the profile of the students for whom they are developing the materials and their needs as well as the context in which they will be using these materials. In the initial stages the deliberations focus on how the curriculum will be planned, implemented and evaluated (Ornstein and Hunkins 2009: 15). The materials explain difficult concepts and terms in easy to understand language, they scaffold theory and application exercises from basic to progressively more advanced as the topic develops and they provide additional, real life application exercises and case studies which encourage students to create their own knowledge and understanding. The materials also encourage students to take an interest in and make a commitment to their learning thus promoting student engagement which Bovill (2011: 134) considers to be crucial to student success in higher education. Placing students at the centre of the learning process and the active participation of students in their learning is an integral part of quality education. Through the learner materials, the subject specialist is able to create a student-centred learning environment which fosters active learning by providing opportunities for students to reflect, analyse, synthesise and communicate in the context of their learning and in their lectures (Mulryan-Kyne 2010: 180-181).

The academic development materials constantly refer to the textbooks thus encouraging the integration of resources and pointing out how skills can be used in other subjects and the world of work. They also allow for multiple assessment opportunities which further encourage understanding as opposed to rote learning. Alternate teaching strategies for lecturers are provided in the materials, thus encouraging them to move away from 'chalk and talk' modes of teaching and to aid them in the preparation of lectures. In addition, the examples used are from the students' own frame of reference which is often lacking in international and traditional textbooks. In the materials, pedagogical teaching strategies are employed to guide the student into the discipline (Northedge and McArthur in Leibowitz 2011: 21). These strategies are gradually reduced in an effort to show students how to become independent learners who take responsibility for their own learning. Subject specialists work according to specific module and unit templates provided by the academic developer and they have 3 steps in common with most models of curriculum revision namely, developing (1) the learning outcomes/goals/aims; (2) the design of the teaching and learning approaches; and (3) the design of

assessment methods (O'Neill 2010: 63).

3. Methodology

A qualitative study was undertaken using data from 30 lecturers (subject specialists) who had all participated in the materials development process together with an academic developer for the duration of the process. The lecturers were from the Science, Engineering, Management and Humanities faculties at the university where the research was conducted. Academic developers had either studied in the discipline of the lecturer they worked with, or had other relevant experience of the specific discipline.

3.1 Data collection

In order to learn as much as I could from the participants, it was essential for me to identify "*information-rich cases*" (Patton 2002: 230), thus, I used purposive sampling. The data was collected with an electronic questionnaire containing mainly open-ended questions that was e-mailed to the lecturers to complete in their own time. The questionnaires comprised 17 open- and three closed-ended questions and was divided into five main focus areas which were the materials development background of the lecturer, the materials development workshops, the materials development process, the academic developer who they had been paired with, as well as teaching, learning and assessment practices. Of the 30 lecturers who received the questionnaire 24 responded within the time frame required.

A follow-up group interview was conducted with lecturers who had completed the questionnaire to seek additional information and clarification through asking probing questions based on the most pertinent information gleaned from the electronic questionnaires. The interview was used to ascertain whether participants had interpreted the items in the way that they were intended. Five lecturers, two from Management, one from Economic and Financial Sciences, one from Engineering and one from Science were invited to the group interview; two of the lecturers had no previous experience of materials development while three had developed materials before. On the day of the interview only two lecturers arrived neither of whom had materials development experience. Two central open-ended questions were asked to determine firstly, whether the lecturers viewed the materials development process as a form of staff development and secondly, how they think that working on their own materials in the workshops had enabled them to translate educational theory into practice.

3.2 Data Analysis

I decided to follow Henning et al.'s (2004), system of data management in order to deal with the copious amount of data generated by the electronic questionnaire and group interview. Henning's system entails:

- Data preparation – transcribing interviews;
- Immersing oneself in the data;
- Open coding –identifying units of meaning;
- Categorisation – related codes are grouped or categorised;
- Identification of themes.

As part of the data preparation I transcribed the interviews. I then collated the answers to each of the open-ended questions from the electronic questionnaire according to the focus areas into which the questions were grouped. Thereafter, I read the entire text to get a comprehensive view of the content. I then moved on to open coding. This entailed reading through the text once again and labelling the units of meaning by allocating codes to them. Then, I categorised the codes. Lastly, I identified themes by grouping categories together related to each of the original focus areas.

4. Findings and Discussion

The reference system used with the verbatim quotes is as follows: G1 indicates that the quote is found in group interview number 1. Quotes found in the electronic questionnaires are denoted by EQ1 to EQ24.

The results indicate that lecturers (subject specialists) are of the opinion that their teaching, learning and assessment practices have been enhanced by participating in the materials development process. Furthermore, it is their belief that their ability to integrate academic development interventions into their subject field has made the subject more

accessible to their mainstream classes as well.

Five main themes were identified, namely, a focus on learner-centred teaching and a constant awareness of the intention of assessment, a positive move towards reflective practice, the role of materials in aiding the preparation, logical sequencing and presentation of classes, recognition of how the accessibility of subjects is enhanced by AD, and how this whole process ultimately contributes to the professional development of the subject specialist.

The changing nature of the subject specialists' focus on teaching was chosen as a starting point since it is of great concern in most HE institutions. The subject specialists indicated that prior to their collaboration with the academic developer and their participation in the materials development process they used to "just go to class and lecture" (G1) whereas now with the realisation that "teaching is not about feeding learners with facts but also about getting them to be proactive and interactive" (EQ4) their teaching strategies have changed. This confirms Kreber's (2002) stance that teaching excellence requires sound disciplinary knowledge as well as an understanding of how students grow within and beyond the discipline. The subject specialists reiterated that they focus on giving a "more holistic lesson" (EQ15) rather than purely emphasising the curriculum thus ensuring a "learner-focused experience" (EQ11). In addition, they are "constantly looking for new examples or case studies" (EQ22) aimed at the students' own experience which they work through "step by step highlighting theory" (EQ1) along the way and constantly bearing in mind "the level on which I pitch my lectures (EQ10). Many respondents claimed that they will "promote and apply the AD teaching methodology" (EQ3) in all their classes since they no longer teach facts but rather work through what Karm (2010) refers to as a different lens and devise an activity that helps them (students) deduce the facts on their own or offer "opportunities to relate and remind students of what they read, experienced and observed" (EQ19).

Hand in hand with the change in the teaching strategies of the subject specialists comes an increased awareness of the intention of assessment and the need for transparency in assessment (EQ23). Many of the subject specialists revealed that for the first time in many years of lecturing they "really started looking at am I assessing what I am supposed to be assessing?" (G1) and being "more critical of (the) meaning of the question posed" (EQ1). This improved way of looking at assessment confirms Toohey's recommendation (in O'Neill 2010) that ascertaining the purpose that assessment serves should come before thinking about goals and content. The participants claimed that they had learnt that a class activity could be employed "so that misconceptions can be identified" prior to a formal assessment being written (EQ4). In addition, subject specialists claimed that they now "spend more time on feedback" (EQ11) which gives them time to clarify misunderstandings prior to moving onto a new section of work. Some respondents reported a change in the assessment methods employed in mainstream with assessments becoming a lot more practical and including case studies in order to test a wider scope of students' ability. This is reflective of Leibowitz et al.'s (2011) view that collaboration between academic developers and subject specialists leads to educational change expertise being embedded within faculties.

Changes in teaching and assessment strategies usually come about due to a positive move towards reflective practice. Many participants reported that involvement in the materials development process had encouraged them to think a lot more about teaching, learning and assessment. They are constantly aware of the changing profile and needs of the underprepared students in their classes as well as the necessity to explain new concepts and terms in their most basic form. Some participants observed that conversations with the academic developer had prompted them to reflect on and interrogate their curriculum which led to the "elimination of considerable overlap" in some modules (EQ12). These observations confirm Taylor's (2010) view that interaction between academic staff result in learning. Other participants claimed that the process had increased their subject knowledge and prompted them to identify the theory that students struggle with in their subjects and to provide lots of examples for students to practice and work through (EQ7, 8). The recognition that there are areas of the curriculum that students have difficulty with is comparable to Meyer and Land's (2003) idea of threshold concepts. Of great significance is the recognition that "one is always a learner, and that as I use the material; I see already where I can make changes to improve" (EQ14) which endorses Leibowitz et al.'s (2011) observation that subject specialists learn most meaningfully by practice, trial and error and reflection.

Many subject specialists are of the opinion that the learner materials, which resulted from the collaborative process, aid with the preparation, logical sequencing and presentation of classes. Some reported that they "no longer rely on simple slides for lectures" (EQ6) but rather make use of case studies where they make learning fun by "taking every day events and relating them to theory" (EQ19). The use of a problem to define and drive the whole learning experience is similar to that proposed by Kahn and O'Rourke (2004) in their Guide to Curriculum Design. Furthermore, the subject specialists believed that the use of case studies improved their ability to relate theory to practical application in industry as well as developing an environment where students are encouraged to become self-directed life-long learners. This confirms Rowland's (2006) view that the most important task of a teacher is to develop an atmosphere in which students seek information. Subject specialists are also of the opinion that the materials development process is an innovative and

creative approach to making their subject fields accessible to students and that the "style of the materials determines the style of the presentation" (EQ23). Some participants discovered that it is much "easier to plan lessons" (EQ12) and to "teach concepts in class when you have material developed in advance" (EQ4). According to many subject specialists the learner-focused materials encouraged them to "start every topic at the lowest possible level" (EQ8) and to approach theory and their subject field in a "new and fresh" manner (EQ19).

The data indicated that the subject specialists had accredited the academic developer with enabling them to enhance the accessibility of their subjects to students. They indicated that the pointers provided by the academic developers throughout the process were insightful, challenging, encouraging, enthusiastic, positive and viewed as constructively critical. One participant claimed that her collaboration with the academic developer was "truly educational not only for me but for the benefit of the learners" and qualified her statement by saying "she contributed most to my learning" (EQ14) which supports Hutchings and Schulman's (1999) claim that when teaching invites peer collaboration and review it is scholarly and reflective. Other subject specialists felt that they had learnt quickly that if their mentor had requested them to clarify concepts and terms it was a clear indication of "sections that I would have to concentrate on in class" (EQ23). Many participants described their collaboration with the academic developer as an "eye opener regarding writing style and cognition of students" (EQ17) as well as new approaches to learning materials and "monitoring structures enabling feedback on student progress (EQ19). The academic developer is recognised by most participants as encouraging the subject specialist to break the work down into more manageable steps and to try and "Keep the student in a 'closed loop' system (i.e. keep him focused on the end product)" (EQ9).

It is the view of the majority of the subject specialists that their collaboration with the academic developer had led to their professional development. They claimed that in previous staff development workshops they were given "a whole lot of jargon, you know Bloom's and Solo taxonomy" (G1:1:6) and they were expected to apply the theory from the workshop to their subject. They also maintained that these workshops had not helped them develop in terms of "preparing for my class..., knowing how to conduct lectures ..., or how to get a learner to a certain level" (G1:1:12). However, in the ADCA workshops they worked on their own materials and learnt how to formulate learning outcomes and assessment criteria in their own field. The subject specialists placed great value on the duration of their collaboration with the academic developer, claiming that the "ongoing process... (with)...the same mentor throughout" gave them a "sense of continuity" (G1:6:142-145). They believed that the constructive criticism and feedback from the academic developer prompted them to think "Wow! That's another way of looking at it. I didn't think of that. And that has developed me" (G1:7:167-168). This type of professional development is espoused by Trigwell and Shale (2004) who believe that university teachers should be more engaged with knowledge about teaching.

5. Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

In order to overcome the pressure exerted on subject specialists by the inclusion of an under-prepared and diverse student population into higher education it has become imperative for subject specialists to not only have content knowledge but to be skilled in teaching, learning and assessment. The results of this study confirm that a collaborative partnership between a subject specialist and an academic developer, who has knowledge of the subject leads to the subject specialist embracing the value that pedagogic knowledge brings to the teaching profession. This study provides an example of successful collaboration and the willingness of subject specialists to be involved in this type of process. There are a number of ways in which to promote successful collaboration in higher education and these should be investigated further. Changes to and the expansion of the suggested process should be investigated in different contexts. However, it is important to acknowledge that pedagogic knowledge on its own has little value if it is not integrated into discipline-specific subject knowledge. It is through a collaborative and mutually respectful partnership that the academic developer and subject specialist together makes meaning of pedagogical knowledge.

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