
Disciplinary Traditions and Cultures and how they Influence Implementation of Academic Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

Academic professional development is an institutional tool employed to improve lecturing quality in universities. However, its effectiveness appears to be limited by academic traditions that are discipline based. The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence of discipline-based research on academic professional development implementation in universities in Zimbabwe. A qualitative research design was used for this study considering that it provides rich data required to understand the problem of academic professional development. Purpose sampling was used from which 12 participants each were sampled including 2 Deans, 8 Lecturers, 1 Teaching and Learning Centre Director and 1 Vice Chancellor from each of the institutions under study. Open-ended questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews were used to collect data. Thematic coding of interview transcriptions was employed to analyze data. The study revealed that disciplined based traditions in faculties constrained academic professional development implementation. Academic identities are heavily influenced by disciplinary research rather than scholarship of teaching while development practitioners are described as non-academic. Findings established that disciplinary conditions led to poor implementation of academic professional development programmes. It is recommended that Boyer's model of scholarship can be used to counter lecturers' misconceptions about academic professional development. That approach will reflect the expanded role of the academic, based on both research and teaching rather than research of the discipline alone.

Key words: professional development, scholarship of teaching, community of practice, practitioner

INTRODUCTION AND

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Independent African countries, Zimbabwe included, invest in higher education because of its potential to bring about economic development (Bloom, Cuning and Chou, 2006). In Zimbabwe 10 universities, one for each province was built between 1989 and 1999. High budgetary allocations were made by treasury in the hope that these universities would produce human capital that would drive sustainable development for the country. Expectations on these initiatives were high.

The expected dividends from higher education institutions were, however, low. Educational quality was low attributed to challenges associated with democratization of education. Challenges that affected quality included high student enrolment and shortage of learning materials (Boughey, 2012). Key

stakeholders like industry, commerce and employers expressed their concern about the low quality in universities (Abel, 2010; Beijmath, 2010) given the high investments made.

Given this development higher education needed to be transformed to improve its quality. Lecturers as members of faculty had to develop a consciousness on the challenges which affected effectiveness and efficiency of university education (Candey, 1996; Quinn, 2012). Centres of teaching and learning were set up in universities with the objective of capacitating academics with teaching skills to meet new curriculum demands in higher education. The implication was that the teaching status in a faculty had to be revised and valued. It is imperative to define academic professional development (APD) to place the study in context. It can be characterized as a deliberate plan made up of designed programmes meant to improve academics' teaching skills in faculty departments (Volbrecht, 2005; Quinn 2012). According to

Polinscar (1998:343) academic development is a form of scholarship which involves “intellectual activity” as well as “reflective practice” that professionalizes the teaching role of the academic. Classroom experiences are subjected to scholarly inquiry in which the lecturer engages in critical reflection about teaching of the discipline. This is the scholarship of teaching and learning that explores challenges associated with teaching of a discipline in a classroom as a form of inquiry (Gosling, 2008).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Low teacher quality in universities has been identified as a major challenge in higher education institutions (HEIs). So, the transformative power of APD that can capacitate lecturers to enhance quality of their teaching in universities has been adopted as an effective strategy to address the challenge. Investments were made through the establishment of centres of Teaching and Learning as well as appointment of development practitioners to develop and implement APD programmes. However, in spite of these initiatives, interest of academics in APD programmes has been low and less encouraging. Consequently, this perpetrated low quality teaching and by implication the quality of graduates produced. There is no research which has been conducted in this critical area of APD in Zimbabwe. The study draws on a larger doctoral study conducted on APD in state universities in Zimbabwe (Author 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following research questions:

Do disciplinary traditions and cultures influence implementation of APD programmes and practices in Zimbabwe’s state universities?

Does lack of disciplinary identity among development practitioners influence uptake of APD programmes?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK CRITICAL THEORY

This study is premised on critical theory since the discourse around APD is associated with bringing about change and transformation in university teaching. According to Freire (1997) critical theory concerns itself with correcting human conditions that are unjust. It also challenges power structures that disadvantage the weak. In higher education critical theory can have relevant application by capacitating university teachers to change the status quo through APD. Through it, university teaching will be delivered in a manner that does not favour students from privileged backgrounds at the expense of the disadvantaged. So, dependence on one’s social background will not count but equality of educational opportunity will. That way APD embedded in critical theory will bring about change and transformation in higher education delivery. Academics would be turned into transformative intellectuals.

Scholars like Brookfield (2005), Giroux (1994) and Habermas (1997) advocate that critical pedagogy which draws from critical theory can be a basis on which higher education professional development programmes can be embedded to have transformative power. The resultant APD programmes would have an empowering content that will produce graduates with critical thinking skills with capacity to drive national development.

Boyer’s (1990) four forms of scholarship

Boyer’s (1990) four forms of scholarship challenged the superior status given to research of the discipline over the teaching status in a university. Boyer’s model advanced that academics engage in the following activities: discover, teaching, application, and integration which he characterized as scholarships. Boyer (1990) gave these scholarships the same weight. By implication disciplinary research had the

same value and weight as teaching based inquiry (scholarship of teaching). Emerging is the view that higher education should adopt the term 'scholarship' to reflect the scholarship of teaching whose status is comparable to that of research. This interpretation suggests that APD should promote research into teaching practices associated with the teaching of a discipline that will promote the quality of teaching (Gosling, 2009). The implication would be that scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTC) would be applied as a form of APD. The consequence of such an approach would be that it will transform the quality of students' learning experiences. However, academics resist Boyer's (1990) model that treats teaching as a form of scholarship that is comparable to the scholarship of research. Academics regard research as their core business. 'Publish or perish' is an aphorism that strongly influences the behaviour of academics at research institutions which results in the marginalization of teaching in faculties.

Influence of the disciplinary identity of academics on academic professional development

In universities, disciplines have a huge influence on how academics construct their identities. Studies by Lazecky and Badger (2007), Stainforth and Herb (2006), and Henkel (2002) suggest that professional development programmes conducted in faculties are influenced by research cultures embedded in lecturers' academic practices. The basis for this reason is that APD is not based on discipline-based research. Academics view it as a non-academic activity that is not embedded in a disciplinary context. This misconceptualisation of APD by lecturers negatively affects how APD is developed and implemented (Becker, 1989; Becker and Trowler, 1997). UK academics' experiences with outstanding teaching performance have shown that, despite their teaching prowess, they are not preferred for hire in strong research-based universities compared to those candidates who are distinguished

discipline-based researchers (Kilfoil, 2010). This trend points to the low status accorded to the scholarship of teaching in universities. This low status given to teaching is reflective of the strength of disciplinary traditions that are found in research-based universities. However, according to Tynan and Lee (2009) the role of a university is broader and not limited to research interests.

Using Boyer's (1990) four forms of scholarship, it appears there have been initiatives to present APD as a bona-fide disciplinary inquiry comparable to discipline-based research (Rowland, 2002). Academics should appreciate the relationship between scholarship of research and scholarship of teaching. This argument might raise the status of teaching (Kreber, 2000) since university teachers would appreciate their broader academic roles by giving equal weight to both scholarships of teaching and research.

In the UK, scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) is promoted by national structures. Examples of these include Continuous Professional Development Framework (CPDF) and UK Professional Framework (PSF). Professional development in these structures shows that there is no difference between scholarly approach to pedagogy and the scholarly nature of disciplinary inquiry (Thomas, 2006). Instead, the relationship between the two is emphasised.

Influence of APD programmes on practitioners' identity and credibility

In any higher education context, successful implementation of an educational programme is partly dependant on the existence of qualified personnel. As a result, practitioners should have credibility if they are to successfully implement APD activities (Quinn, 2012). However, lack of bona-fide disciplinary identity by practitioners has attracted a dim view of practitioners by lecturers, thereby compromising their capacity to drive APD implementation in universities (Gosling, 2009; Jawitz and Perez,

2014). Prevailing perceptions among academics is that APD lacks a body of knowledge that qualifies it as a legitimate discipline (Makura and Tony, 2014) with distinguishable disciplinary traits such as language and values (Henkel and Trowler, 2002). Consequently, APD fails to qualify as a bona-fide discipline (Taylor, 2005). The emerging implication is that academic development practitioners would lack recognition in the eyes of academics which would have a negative effect on their effectiveness as implementors of APD. This perspective would negatively affect their effectiveness as APD implementors. Manathunga (2007) and Lee et al. (2010) describe practitioners as discipline migrants, a view that undermines their legitimacy as agents of APD.

Internationally, there are case studies that show that lack of credibility by academic development practitioners has a negative effect on staff development. In Australia, studies by Gosling (2008) show that practitioners lacked credibility on account of both qualifications and experience in APD work. In the UK, developers are viewed as colleagues who attempt to push common sense into educational jargon that lacks its own pedagogic literature (Halstead, 2012; Haig, 2007). In South Africa, Scott's (1998) report blamed resistance to APD programmes by lecturers on the grounds of practitioners' lack of credibility. These perspectives create challenges for practitioners in the implementation of APD. Another challenge faced by academic developers is inspiring professors' confidence in their ability to develop and implement APD is a scholarship. The challenge is that professors have not bought into Boyer's (1990) scholarship of teaching as a new specialisation of knowledge (Lee, et al., 2010) that can be classified as a discipline. This lack of academic credibility has a constraining effect on APD programme implementation.

Academic development literature (Boughey, 2012; Rowland, 2002) strongly suggests that practitioners should acquire formal

qualifications to address their credibility challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed in this study. It was appropriate since it provides an in-depth understanding of the nature of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of the study was to find out the influence of discipline specific traditions and cultures on the implementation of APD programmes in Zimbabwe's state universities.

A multi-case study approach involving two case study institutions was applied since it enabled the researcher to capture the influence of the variables in the two institutions (Dean, Fraser and Ryan, 1998) that might have impacted on APD implementation. Through convenience sampling 8 lecturers and 2 deans were selected while 1 Director of a Centre for Teaching and Learning and 1 Vice Chancellor were also selected through purposive sampling from each case study institution. A total of 24 participants was selected from the two case study institutions, X representing a group of older and established universities, and Y representing newer universities. Participants' consent was negotiated and participants' freedom to withdraw from the research for any reason was guaranteed.

Research instruments used to collect data included interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaires. The semi-structured interview instrument was chosen for this qualitative research because it had the advantage of eliciting in-depth data from participants from preset open-ended questions about APD development and its implementation (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). The instruments had questions on the influence of academic traditions and cultures on APD implementation. Two digital voice recorders (one for each case study institution) were used for both interviews and focus group discussions. Researcher's biases on data collection and interpretation were managed through bracketing assumptions (Hein and Austin, 2001) to enhance

objectivity. Validity of the qualitative study was enhanced through two forms of triangulations involving data sources and methodological triangulation (Mounton, 2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two research questions on implementation of APD programmes formed the basis on which the findings were analyzed.

Discipline-based research and academic's identity and their influence on APD implementation

Results from case study institutions X and Y revealed that discipline-based research negatively affected how APD programmes were implemented. Interview extracts showed that marginalisation of teaching, and by implication, APD programmes was a consequence of disciplinary cultures particularly discipline-based research on which academics-based construction of their identities.

In case study institution X, P₃ observed that:

Recognition and status are given to professors. Regardless of their poor rating by students.

This is clear marginalisation of teaching in favour of research. Teaching is not considered for promotion. This reflects the power and influence of disciplinary research over teaching. Disciplinary inquiry delivers research output described by Hankel (2002) as “goods” while teaching attracts no recognition on account of producing no “goods”. According to Ramsden and Moses (1992) the scholarship of teaching is not considered part of academic traditions compared to discipline-based research that is embedded in such cultures and traditions. In participant P₃'s view, a student is treated as a partner in disciplinary research leading to joint publication, which is reflective of the strong influence of discipline-specific cultures and traditions. This integrative approach that treats

teaching as part of research becomes an interesting innovation for APD programme design and development. The emerging implication is that a student is considered an academic's partner through disciplinary research rather than in an educational encounter experienced in a teaching discourse. This strongly suggests that an academic's identity and role in a department are viewed through discipline-specific research (Clark, Hyde and Drennan, 2011; Deem, 2006).

Resistance by academics to new identities based on university teaching has been highlighted by Weller (2011) who emphasises lecturers' preference for discipline-based identities. The influence of disciplinary identity was also voiced by participants P₄ and P₅. P₄, for example, recounted that:

I aim to specialise in my discipline. I intend to be a professor.

Participant P₅'s voice made the pressure exerted by disciplinary research on academics more evident. P₅ recounted that:

Development of science should be at the heart of one's Philosophy. More should be done for Geography. If we die Geography in Africa won't develop.

Voices of both participants P₄ and P₅ reflect the strength and influence of the discipline. In the case of P₄ the participant aspires to be a prominent professor and not a good teacher. Developing expertise through research is associated with rewards and honours such as recognition, status, and self-esteem (Hankel, 2005) while teaching is not. On the other hand, P₅ is equally concerned about the dearth of research in geography that might affect the knowledge growth of the discipline. Low status given to teaching in universities does not worry the participant but lack of advancement in research in Geography as witnessed in universities in Africa is his concern.

However, in the same case study institution X, participant P₆ called for an expanded role of the academic. P₆ highlighted that:

The role of the lecturer was not broad to show reality.

Colleagues experience challenges to disengage in their disciplines. Lecturers are encouraged to reflect.

The emerging implication is that lecturers have a limited understanding of their academic role, which does not resonate with reality that prevails in a teaching department. The responsibility of lecturers towards students is imperative given the call for academics to disengage from disciplinary research in favour of reflective practice that places students' learning needs at the centre of their role. According to Boyer (1990) and Newman (1996) both the scholarship of teaching and the scholarship of the discipline should be promoted in APD to broaden the role of the academic in universities.

Results in case study institution Y revealed similar trends that disciplinary traditions have stronger influence on academics' identity compared to teaching. Interview extracts from participants P₉, P₁₀ and P₁₂ reflect this view. P₉, for example, recounted that APD was viewed as an "auxiliary function" of the role of an academic if evaluated from a disciplinary perspective of "linguists." The discourse suggests that academic traditions embedded in departments marginalise teaching in favour of discipline-based research. Emphasizing the strength of discipline-based research over teaching-based inquiry P₁₂ highlighted that:

I am not a disher of knowledge. First and foremost, I consider myself an academic.

Results reveal that the participant is averse to being a disher of knowledge. Instead, he sees himself as an academic more than a teacher. The emerging perspective is that

teaching is given low status compared to research. P₁₂ reflects a negative perception of teaching which he associates with "banking concept" (Giroux and Maclaren, 1996; Jeiytan and Woodrum, 1996) captured in the "disher of knowledge" discourse where students are treated as "passive receptacles of knowledge" (Freire, 1997). Passive learning is criticized by critical realists (Habermas, 1989; Jeistyán and Woodrum, 1996). Instead, they advocate problem solving approaches that are associated with critical thinking on the part of the student (Freire, 1997; Giroux, 2004). Although P₁₀ recounted a similar view, workshops on teaching were not prioritised. Instead, research workshops were advocated for in APD programmes. Participant P₁₀ commented that:

My research interests influence are influenced by my discipline.

Multidisciplinary research is embraced by academics.

Research collaboration is strengthened. Workshops that focus on research are preferred.

Contrary to established APD practice prevalent in Teaching and Learning Centres, research-based workshops are preferred compared to teaching-based workshops. The reason being that research is more beneficial to the growth and development of an academic's discipline in a department. There is also evidence that suggests that academics embrace multidisciplinary research approaches on account of their value in advancing the development of communities of practice (Mathias, 2005; Trowler and Knight, 2000; Viskoz, 2006) as well as the promotion of collegiality whose main academic trait is knowledge sharing.

Participant P₁₃, unlike participants P₉, P₁₀ and P₁₂ introduces the concept of "academic tribes" (Becher and Trowler, 2001) where members of the department are described as a "family". The implication is that departmental members see themselves as "a tribe" whose

common characteristics are “language, values, conceptual framework, and disciplinary identity” (Kongan, 2000). By comparison, teaching has no disciplinary traits found among members of the academic tribe (Gosling, 2008) and, consequently, it is marginalised in the matrix of the academic’s role. In addition, P₁₃ presents disciplinary interests of members of the tribe as paramount, which is detrimental to APD initiatives that might be viewed as an obstacle to the development of the discipline through research. The point was presented by participant P₁₃ so well, thus:

*See us as a family.
As a family and something (APD) comes
along. It (APD) interferes us.*

The interview extract reveals that departmental members view themselves as a tribe. Disciplinary traditions have notions of academic tribes strongly embedded in them to the extent that APD initiatives are considered peripheral and interference.

From the results there is evidence to suggest that academics construct their identities based on discipline-based research. The idea of discipline tribes that featured strengthened the notion of community of practice that is associated with departmental members who share the same disciplinary traits (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Consequently, the teaching discourse as a form of scholarship is not used by academics as a basis on which they can construct their identity. Lack of rewards associated with scholarship of teaching tends to undervalue the status of teaching in a university (Weller, 2011). The implication is that academic traditions marginalise teaching. Similarly, APD is equally peripheralized. The influence of these academic traditions would be that academics would develop negative attitudes towards APD programmes which would in turn result in its constrained implementation.

Practitioners’ lack of discipline-specific identity and its influence on APD programmes implementation

Results from case study institutions X and Y reveal that development practitioners were described as non-academic. However, in some cases some voices of participants displayed interesting insights in which APD activities were viewed as academic in nature. Participants’ interview extracts reveal that disciplinary knowledge stands out as a significant factor in determining practitioners’ credibility in faculties. Case study institution X’s interview data below demonstrates this.

*P₁ Philosophy is subject
specialization to gain status*

*P₄ It’s not clear if a practitioner
qualifies to be an academic. Academic status is
compromised.*

Researcher: Is academic professional development a career you can take up?

*P₄, I have my doubts because it’s for
those who are less academic.*

*P₆ Directors of centres of teaching
and learning are not seen as
academic leaders.*

Focus Group Participant (XU)

*Centre of Teaching and Learning is not a
faculty unity. Credibility lacks in it.*

*Dean (D₁) Academic developers are
academics. They give support and administration
in their centers to faculties.*

Researcher: What is the form of that support?

*Dean (D₁) Supporting lecturers with
module production, assessment guidelines,
managing large groups of students.*

*This is helpful in social sciences.
Induction workshops.*

Vice Chancellor (XU)

A Director who understands Centre of Teaching and

Learning as an academy

It (T&LC should be a specialist area focusing on inquiry.

Data from both case study institutions particularly case study institution X show that the status of practitioners lack disciplinary identity. Against the strong voices of P₁ and P₄ who advocate for the development of subject knowledge for the purpose of attaining subject mastery, the dominant view emerging from other participants, particularly P₄, P₆ and D₁ is that APD activities are non-academic. Activities cited by D₁ are administrative in nature and, therefore, not academic in status. In case study institution X, dean (D₁) viewed APD programme content consisting of “hosting workshops” while in case study institution Y, dean (D₃) described the role of practitioners as that of “dishing out lots of teaching methods”. Because of that, practitioners are described as non-academic. P₄’s attitude is that he cannot work as a professional development practitioner because it’s a post he alleges is reserved for those “who are less academic.” It is a position that “compromises” one’s academic status. Also emerging is the view that a Teaching and Learning Centre is categorized as a non-faculty unit. So, the implication of this discourse is that practitioners are an agency without a discipline. Significantly, they are viewed as paraprofessionals not academics (Rowland, 2003; McDonald, 2003) rather than academics. According to Deem (2006) and Kogan (2006) this development reflects the immense influence of the discipline in the construction of the identity of an academic. Since academics doubt the status of APD as a discipline (Gosling, 2001), practitioners are consequently described as non-academic. This compromises their legitimacy in the eyes of

academics and might result in poor development and implementation of APD programmes.

Equally revealing is data from case study institution Y that is presented below. Significantly, practitioners’ qualifications and other related requirements stipulated for hire, dominate participants’ voices. This is what some participants said:

Participant (P₁₂)

Qualifications for a director (T& LC) should be one with a

vision, buy in of a Vice Chancellor, knowledgeable, a people’s person

Participant (P₁₅)

Developers have a lot of experience in n high schools. Pedagogy

is suitable for high schools. Its challenging. Andragogy

is compatible with universities. Practitioners should be strongly rooted in university experience.

Dean 3 (YU)

Teaching methods are drawn from the Education Faculty. So, practitioners should be recruited from that faculty. A variety of teaching methods should be used by lecturers. Developers qualify to be academics.

Dean 4 (YU)

Academic professional development involves activities that are academic.

Researcher: Why?

Dean 4(YU)

Professional development activities have theories.

Participants’ voices point to the non-academic nature of the qualifications required for practitioners to be hired. Unlike academics where

PhD training is a requirement for hire (Gosling, 2008; Volbrecht, 2003), in the case of practitioners it is not. People's skills, buy in of the Vice Chancellor's vision and loyalty are the requirements to be met for a practitioner to be hired. Disciplinary research training associated with PhD "property and power" are absent (Archer, 1995). Another dimension is that practitioner's background experience is not university based but high school based. The psychology of teaching expected in teaching in these two systems are different. High school teaching is pedagogy based while university teaching is andragogy based. There is limited connection between the two, thereby making practitioners less effective in APD implementation. Experience rooted in a university environment is more relevant. Data also reveals a common perception held by some academics that APD is about holding workshops on teaching methods and by implication that practitioners should be recruited from the Faculty of Education (Bouhey, 2013; Quinn, 2012). This is a misconceptualisation of APD practice. Professionalization of the professoriate is open to all academics (Boyer, 1990) who have demonstrated scholarship in teaching of their disciplines and can demonstrate intellectual rigour in the practice of APD.

In order to counter this perspective, Ramsden (2009) and Kell (2005) suggest that APD should be packaged and presented as a discipline with its own knowledge and literature. The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) as proposed by Boyer (1990) can be used in APD activities to promote their academic legitimacy and scholarship. In case study institution X, the Vice Chancellor called for a paradigm shift in approach in which APD would be presented as a scholarly inquiry in which research into the teaching of a discipline is pursued with intellectual rigour like is the case with discipline-based research. Similarly, in case study institution Y, D₄ commented that APD has a body of knowledge with its own theories like any other discipline. This resonates with studies by

McDonald (2003) who advances the view that scholarly inquiry into teaching of a discipline qualifies as a scholarship. However, this perspective is resisted by participant P₄ who comments that pursuing a career in APD risked "compromising one's academic future". This perspective was highlighted by Clarke (1997) who notes that the behaviour of academics in departments was heavily influenced by bodies of knowledge of their disciplines. This suggests that academics view APD as an area that is not linked to disciplinary knowledge. Consequently, the traditional perspective of APD as a non-academic one, characterizes the interview data. The emerging implication is that lack of discipline-specific identity affects practitioners' credibility with the result of negatively affecting academics' uptake of APD programmes.

CONCLUSIONS

Practitioners are categorized as non-academic on account of lacking disciplinary knowledge of their own. Academics identity and behaviour is heavily influenced by academic traditions particularly disciplinary knowledge. Participants' views showed that academics' disciplinary identity influenced them to resist taking up APD. Practitioners viewed as non-academics were less effective as actors of APD implementation on account of lacking credibility. Clearly, disciplinary traditions and cultures affect less effectively implementation of APD.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that practitioners should take up studies in higher education to develop as scholars of HE. This will raise their credibility. It is also recommended that APD activities should research into the teaching of a discipline with intellectual rigour to demonstrate its status as a scholarship. These approaches will counter resistance by academics towards APD leading to higher uptake of its programmes. Finally it is recommended that Boyer's model of scholarship can be used to address lecturers' misconceptions about APD. The

approach will reflect the expanded role of the academic that includes the scholarship of teaching.

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