Academic developers as brokers of change: insights from a research project on change practice and agency

Cormac McGrath

To cite this article: Cormac McGrath (2019): Academic developers as brokers of change: insights from a research project on change practice and agency, International Journal for Academic Development, DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2019.1665524

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2019.1665524

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 17 Oct 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 391

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Academic developers as brokers of change: insights from a research project on change practice and agency

Cormac McGrath

Department of Education, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; Department of LIME, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT
This paper presents the findings of a four-year research project studying change practice and agency in higher education. The main findings of five empirical studies are presented. These findings lay bare how academic staff perceive opportunities to change their practice, identify leaders’ strategies when trying to bring about change, illustrate the different and at times incompatible ways of understanding change initiatives, acknowledge the importance of moral dimensions in change, and demonstrate how leaders mobilise theory when engaging in change practice. The article synthesizes the results of the project and draws conclusions with a view to how academic developers may best engage with critical stakeholders in higher education institutions. The paper concludes by presenting some thoughts on how a new model for academic development may take form. The paper aims to provide insights, inspiration, and critical dialogue to researchers in academic development.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 8 March 2019
Accepted 22 June 2019

KEYWORDS
Continued professional development; research project; Academic development; change agency

Introduction
Although universities have engaged in formal activities for developing teachers’ and leaders’ competence since the 1960s (Bolander Laksov, 2007; Steinert, Naismith, & Mann, 2012) the field of academic development is still a nascent one in terms of clarifying its identity, functions and, methodologies (Debowski, 2014). There is an on-going debate in the academic developer community on how best to work with stakeholders, ranging from suggestions to move away from centralized approaches, where training is offered in the form of courses, seminars, and workshops led by academic developers (Gibbs, 1996, 2013; Gosling, Bolden, & Petrov, 2009; Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson, & Luzeckyj, 2010; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2008) to more adaptive, reflective partnership approaches that enable academic developers to be invited to and engage with more localized groups so as to accommodate and recognize their specific needs (Clavert, Löfström, & Nevgi, 2015; Debowski, 2014; Söderhjelm, Björklund, Sandahl, & Bolander-Laksov, 2018).

During the last four years, I have explored different aspects of academic development, in particular with a view to changing practice and agency, and I have had the opportunity to study first-hand university teachers’ and leaders’ practice. This paper is
a result of the process and has three main goals: first, to provide insights into the findings of the larger research project; second, to comment on the state of current practices within academic development and address the ongoing discussion on how academic developers may engage with different stakeholders in higher education institutions; and third, the paper hopes to inspire other academic developers who may wish to do research in the field. The paper starts with a brief discussion of the objects of study: change practice and agency. The research project and its findings are then briefly presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for academic developers’ practice.

**Change practice and agency as research objects**

This next section introduces the two main concepts studied during the research project: change practice and agency. These concepts are presented as two concepts, but they overlap. Practice here addresses the types of activities people engage in, whereas agency addresses the preconditions for practice to happen.

**Change practice**

Change practice as a research object presents many challenges, mainly due to the fact that the concepts of change and change practice remain somewhat vague. In the literature there is, however, a common and helpful distinction between two types of change: first-order and second-order change (Kezar, 2001b, 2001a, 2003; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). First-order change is generally presented as something that is non-invasive, involving minor adjustments to an individual, group, or organization’s practice. Such examples include lecturers implementing diagnostic testing in their own teaching. This is an endeavour that requires some work, but it can be implemented without causing any troublesome ripple effects within the organization, and it is unlikely to affect the organization’s core purpose or composition, consequently evoking little or no resistance (Kezar, 2001b). Second-order change is, however, more transformational, involving people at different levels. It requires a re-thinking of practice at a deeper and more profound level, evoking a need to change other people’s practices, but it also may involve questioning the assumptions of individual teachers and working groups (Kezar, 2001b).

Change initiatives in higher education come packaged in different robes: as enhancements, innovation(s), externally mandated changes, natural progression of practice, and supra-national policy implementation. However, change practice may also be viewed in more insidious terms, for example as institutional isomorphism or the quiet, often copycat, re-formation of practice to meet the demands of a new public management discourse (Barman, 2015; Bornemark, 2018; Karlsson, 2016; Kezar, 2013). When portrayed in positive and progressive terms, change is often presented as quality improvement (Bamber, Trowler, Saunders, & Knight, 2009; Mårtensson, Roxå, & Stensaker, 2014). However, while quality improvement involves change, it is not always the case that change leads to quality improvement. In fact, it may be reasonable to assume that much change takes place for the sake of change itself. In its most portentous moments, the research literature on change implementation estimates that as many as 70% of all
corporate changes do not lead to desired outcomes (Burnes & Jackson, 2011; Higgs & Rowland, 2000; Hughes, 2011). While specific data do not exist for higher education initiatives, the figure provides an interesting point of departure for further research in the context of change practices. In this paper, ‘change practice’ serves as a term for the focus on the processes outlined above, where academics go about changing elements of their work and practice, in relation to both first and second-order initiatives (Christensen, Lægreid, & Røvik, 2007). Change practice is further complicated by the fact that change initiatives rarely occur in isolation; instead, they usually involve a series or a plurality of events that affect other people and bring new insights and perspectives. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that there are a number of different stakeholders involved in change initiatives, so what may be perceived as enhancement by one stakeholder, or one group of stakeholders, may inevitably be perceived as a deterioration of practice by another (Alvesson, 1993; McGrath, 2017; Trowler, 2008). An extended description and conceptualization of change as a research phenomenon, discussing different theories and models of change, has been presented previously elsewhere (McGrath, 2017).

Agency

Agency in simplest form relates to the ability of a person to act according to his/her wishes. However, agency is a more complex phenomenon. At least four non-chronological discourses or ways of thinking about agency within organizations are identified in the literature on organizational development (Caldwell, 2006). Rationalist discourses address instrumental views of agency and change, dispersalist discourses represent a de-centred discourse addressing group self-organization and auto-genesis, constructionist discourses represent a post-modern take on power relations in organization, and finally contextualist discourses situate agency in the context of bounded choices (Caldwell, 2006). One discourse in particular, the contextualist, places the notion of human agency in the context of bounded choices that occur within competing groups’ interests, organizational politics, and power struggles. The contextualist and bounded view of agency formed the backbone of the empirical work in the present research project as a way of understanding agency in situ. Giddens’ theory of structuration was used as a sensitizing device, as a way of conceptualizing social practice in a non-dualistic (structure-action) way (Giddens, 1984). In structuration, agent and structure exist in symbiosis, to the extent that neither is subservient to the other. In sociology, this is seen as a break from, on the one hand, structuralist approaches, which emphasize the power that structures have over individual agency, and on the other hand, subjectivist approaches, which emphasize the subjective nature of reality. Giddens’ theory of structuration can be seen as an attempt to establish a unifying theory, which allows for intentional human action and agency while also addressing the structures (bounded choices) that govern and restrict the possibility of action. In structuration, there is an ongoing interaction between structure and agent, where social structures are the medium and outcome of social action and interaction. The duality of structure means that there is an ongoing cycle of production and reproduction, to the extent that rules exist in the periphery of an organization and are interpreted in social practices by members. In organizational settings, this may become manifest when working groups generate feedback through regulatory processes
and engage in reflexive self-regulation, which in turn changes the structure and leads to new and modified rules and regulations. A central idea in the theory of structuration is that structures, generative rules, and regulations are stretched across a time-space continuum. Consequently, regulations are introduced at one level of the organization, which apparently replace old rules and regulations, but in reality these regulations may live on, residually, as part of the daily practice conducted within the organization. This is one reason why context-based studies are needed as a way to study change in practice and agency, so that academic developers and researchers alike can understand how practice is brought about, what changes actually occur, and what kind of resistance arises.

The research project

The research project set out empirically to explore context-bound change practices in higher education settings. It explored how universities and their members engage around and view opportunities for change, examining theoretical perspectives of change practice and presenting five empirical studies that, in different ways, contribute to the academic development community’s understanding of how these entities engage around and view opportunities for change. The five studies are schematically presented below in Table 1, with full and abbreviated titles, an overview of methods, samples, and a summary of the main findings. The abbreviated titles are used to identify the articles throughout the rest of the paper.

Findings from the research project

The next section presents an overview of the key findings from the research studies outlined above. It presents study-by-study thematic findings with a focus on change practice and agency.

Change without change

Study One, Crosstalk (McGrath & Bolander Laksov, 2014), illustrates the types of expectations but also the tensions that staff at the departmental level of a university experience when faced with the opportunities afforded by a capacity-building initiative. The initiative here was a result of the Bologna process, which involved trans-European educational reform, and the range of courses and workshops that were provided by academic development units as a result of the universities’ work to adhere to the Bologna agreement. This paper illustrates both teachers’ new-found enthusiasm for development and the enhancement of practice as a result of having attended a continuing professional development course (CPD), but shows at the same time the difficulties teachers have in translating and transforming this new-found enthusiasm for education into development-oriented practice. The findings here suggest that the university’s structures (rules and regulations) do not allow newly trained teachers sufficient room for manoeuvre to take the initiative in the post-training period. This has, in part, to do with tenure, as some teachers have to fight for research funding on a yearly basis to secure their continued employment, but also with traditions within their home departments. The study suggests that while there may be ample opportunities to turn
Table 1. Overview of the five empirical papers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study: Full/Abbreviated title title</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Main findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study One: <em>Laying Bare Educational crosstalk/Crosstalk</em></td>
<td>Discourse, text analysis</td>
<td>University teachers (n = 24)</td>
<td>Enthusiasm for teaching practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Two: <em>The Ebb &amp; flow of educational change/Ebb &amp; flow</em></td>
<td>In-depth interviews</td>
<td>Middle management (n = 3)</td>
<td>Focus on significant colleagues to help drive change practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Three: <em>Exploring dimensions of change: the case of MOOC conceptions/Change conceptions</em></td>
<td>Phenomenography</td>
<td>Stakeholders throughout the university (n = 12)</td>
<td>Change is systemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Four: <em>Dilemmas of change practice/Dilemmas</em></td>
<td>Longitudinal, Narrative, observation, and interviews</td>
<td>Group of clinical teachers (n = 9)</td>
<td>Change of practice is morally grounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Five: <em>Change in a culture of collegiality and consensus-seeking: a double-edged sword/Double-edged sword</em></td>
<td>Quasi-longitudinal. Interview-to-the-double</td>
<td>Middle management collegial leaders (n = 14)</td>
<td>Change theory is cosmetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents experience multiple structural obstacles.

Dialogue as strategy.

Negotiation, formal and informal, is key and change takes time.
enthusiasm into action, the staff who attend training are unable to recognize and capitalize on such opportunities. The respondents became aware of their own personal development and had a new awareness of their own pedagogical point of departure as a result of attending a CPD course, but they seemed unable to see where and how this could be taken care of and translated into practice.

This was the first study carried out in the context of the research project, and the friction between different expectations and desires was conceptualized somewhat naively as crosstalk, where people have different ideas about possible outcomes of training and CPD initiatives and talk at cross purposes. My subsequent thinking on crosstalk suggests that some crosstalk is necessary. In retrospect, it may be more useful to think of a crosstalk continuum. A healthy crosstalk balance may act as a catalyst for change initiatives and have a dialectic or synthesising function. In this study, agency was seen as a potential outcome of training when teachers and course leaders either felt that they were empowered or inspired, but perhaps also realised that the likelihood of bringing about change was not entirely a matter for them to decide. Some of them felt that there was little possibility to develop and use the tools they had picked up in CPD programmes in the post-training period.

**Change as getting unstuck through dialogue**

Study Two, *Ebb & flow* (McGrath et al., 2016), identified collegial leaders who had an academic track record and held a leadership position. Consequently, they were recognised as collegial leaders or leaders among peers (Askling & Stensaker, 2002; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2016). At the same time, they did not have extensive leadership training for leading a knowledge-intensive organization. The focus of the study was to explore collegial leaders’ narratives of working with change and change management. It was believed that insights could be shown that would have implications for how these leaders went about the business of bringing about change at the departmental level. By means of recurring individual, in-depth interviews, four themes were identified which express how the collegial leaders dealt with bringing about change initiatives in an environment of autonomous academics. The findings represent some of the possible types of strategies collegial leaders adopt when setting about change practice in a higher-education settings, for example by *negotiation*. Equally important in this study was the notion of collegial leaders getting stuck; metaphorically, they were busy *putting out fires* or addressing pressing matters and had little time to engage in long-term development work. Practice, it was argued in the paper, has a tripartite temporal dimension: it is forward looking, often focused on what has to be done now, but can never really be free from previous experiences. This view of change as something fluid also relates to the cultural dimension of higher education institutions, in that it is in these cultural contexts that changes are negotiated and where the negotiation itself has to become a part of the temporal dimension. The temporal aspect constitutes one of the ever-present challenges of change practice, where the collegial leaders have to balance on-going operations with driving change initiatives. These challenges were resolved to a large degree through dialogue, in which the leaders were constantly seeking reassurance that colleagues were on-board and willing to engage in the change practice. The
insecurities leaders felt were re-enforced by not knowing well enough the range of their mandate.

In this study, agency was defined as a feature of being a known face at the department. This meant that when action was required, or change was going to be implemented, the agents of change often turned or returned to people they had known before as a way of enhancing their likelihood to succeed. When new colleagues were recruited into a change process, the respondents reported that they needed to rely on their good will or good standing in the department in order to bring about change. Dialogue may be viewed as a form of exploratory, consensus-seeking process. The respondents in *Ebb & flow* identified the importance of contextualization with reference to efforts to translate theory or models into practice. They also gave voice to a moral commitment to the practice of change. This same moral commitment was also seen elsewhere in the research project, for example in Studies Three, Four, and Five, and is discussed separately later on.

**Change as a challenge of sense and reference**

If dialogue was a way of getting unstuck, then lack of dialogue is perhaps best viewed as a way of getting stuck. This is a concern borne out by the findings of Study Three, *Change conceptions* (McGrath, Stenfors-Hayes, Roxå, & Laksov, 2017), which addresses various stakeholders’ conceptions and experiences of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). This study focused on the variation of experiences in relation to the many stakeholders that are involved in strategizing, implementing, and running such an initiative at a higher education institution. These types of large-scale change initiatives come around every so often, affording the university an opportunity to take on a whole-of-campus approach, building intelligence, developing capacity, and so on (D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005). However, the broader question is: Do universities have the ability to translate such radical change initiatives into their everyday practice? The focus of this paper was to identify the conceptions of a range of stakeholders around the emergence of a new and potentially disruptive phenomenon in higher education. This study identified overlapping categories focused on learning, and a fifth category focused more on marketing and institutional positioning was found. This study drew attention to how these different ways of understanding what a MOOC is could be plotted along different dimensions of change awareness, from the myopic to the global and from the causal to the systemic (Senge, 2006). In the study, it was argued that it is important to understand what conceptions stakeholders have in relation to a change phenomenon, both in terms of the scope of the change initiative and also in relation to how change is brought about. The findings also suggest that some of the conceptions may be incompatible with each other and that there is a risk when the language used about a new phenomenon becomes normalized given potential conflict in what is meant or understood by the underlying concepts. For this reason, concepts such as ‘MOOC’ may have one reference but entirely different ‘Fregean’ senses. A further concern was that universities go about implementing change initiatives clouded in a form of institutional isomorphism, without proper reflection on how they may be implemented in everyday practices.

This study identified the underlying conceptions around a specific change initiative, and in doing so demonstrated how different conceptions exist and how these could drive practice in different and to some extent incompatible directions. Here the agentic
aspect of the particular initiative is toned down, but the underlying conceptions are in focus, which may act as catalysts for change initiatives and have bearing on their success. It was also apparent that the nomenclature around the change initiative remained the same even though the connotations changed.

**Change as being morally grounded**

Study Four, *Dilemmas* (McGrath et al., under review), explored how a group of teachers got organized around the practice of assessment. This study demonstrates how feedback loops at a group level enable the academics to change the structures and governing rules to best suit their own practice. This study also represents a situation in which group autonomy is brought into focus. Moreover, it identifies the value of the auto-genesis of change: how teachers self-organize and take agency, how they go about creating their own structures (rules and regulations) for understanding and how they self-organize in order to work in an ethically sound way with assessment. Together with Study Two, *Ebb & flow*, and Study five, *Double-edged sword*, this study demonstrates the processes of enacting change, the messiness that arises and the challenges involved. At the same time, it reflects how a self-organising group’s work is driven by a need to develop an understanding and practice that is primarily contextual, but also, and more importantly, morally grounded. The moral aspects of change which were predominant in Study Four were also apparent in Studies One, Three and Five and were often articulated by the respondents as that a change had to be pre-empted by a sense that it was meaningful and important and had to relate to the hands-on practice of teaching and learning. Study Four showed how a group of teachers/clinicians took command of agency when bringing about a change in practice at their own department. Here, the research team could see how a group of academic staff took charge of their own practice, much of it due to the fact that there was no governing practice. The lack of formal designated structure seemed to act as a catalyst for agency enabling a change in practice.

**Change as non-theoretical practice**

In Study Five, *Double-edged sword* (McGrath, Roxå, & Bolander Laksov, 2019), the focus changed to exploring collegial leaders’ practice of change at two knowledge-intensive organizations. Here, the respondents were identified as quasi-formal leaders, and they had also attended formal, albeit limited, CPD leadership training. The training was often quite brief, but it was also very similar to the type of training many academic development units actually offer. *Double-edged sword* examined the experiences of collegial leaders in relation to their practice of change. It explored their practice and also the extent to which theory impacted on it. In a similar way as in study two, the collegial leaders experienced frustration over conflicting roles, discovering that change practice takes much more time than expected. Further, they reported that they were not inclined to use theory or models of change. They also reported that they engaged in repeated negotiations, a finding also of Study Two, *Ebb & flow*. Study Five demonstrated the challenges of engaging in the practice of leadership and change management in a knowledge-intensive organization for people who in contrast to those in *Ebb & flow* had attended some form of formal leadership training. The concept of time and the
timing of change is also something that was addressed specifically in Study Five. It was found that change in the context of the university could take a number of years, during which there are multiple structures (rules and regulations), some formally mandated, others informally understood, that make agency difficult. This study also demonstrated the tensions that arise when knowledgeable agents find it difficult to enact change in their own working environment, demonstrating how collegial leaders must negotiate multiple structures up and down the hierarchy at the same time. Here the tripartite nature of time is once again identified as an important factor, where structures were sometimes out of synch with each other, or where there were competing rules and regulations at the same time. In line with Giddens’ theory of structuration, there seems to be a residual effect of previous governing structures that plays a role in creating opportunities for agents (Giddens, 1984). Each change initiative is arguably governed either explicitly or implicitly by a structure (rules and regulations) which is influenced by the strategic, political, and cultural dimensions of an organization. Moreover, these structures (rules and regulations) are framed temporally and constituted by how things were governed (structure) and enacted (system) earlier (Giddens, 1984).

Studies One, Two, and Five show how the temporal nature of change is influenced by parallel strategies and structures, which potentially throw individual agency into states of disarray. It is argued here that dealing with the complexity of several concurrent structures presents one of the biggest challenges to agency. As outlined above, many working groups of knowledgeable agents may co-exist in a number of cultures at the same time without being fully aware of the values and norms of the governing structures, even though they are articulated implicitly.

**Implications for academic development**

The research conducted in this project has implications for academic development work. This article synthesizes that project in order to draw conclusions for the academic development community. When taken together, the findings suggest that individual agency in the context of second-order change practice in a higher education setting meets multiple challenges, for example: *structural challenges, perceived lack of opportunities to implement ideas, inability to mobilize theory into practice, lack of mandate, and different understanding of key concepts*. These challenges relate to structures and strategies, but also to the politics and the culture of change within the organization. Other challenges come in the form of the temporal nature of change practice within higher education institutions. Not only does it seem difficult to introduce radical change, but several instances of past and present structures and strategies may co-exist, which could make changing practice more difficult; for example, when trying to implement criterion-referenced assessment, many teachers evoked a norm-referenced approach to explain their practice. Moreover, the findings of the research project suggest that teachers and leaders find themselves isolated in the post-training period, that theory does not necessarily get internalized, and that both teachers and leaders may have difficulty in integrating theory into functional knowledge.

The results of the research project do not paint an entirely bright picture of the outcomes of academic development work and present a somewhat different story than studies demonstrating the often positive impact of academic development, at least in terms of course satisfaction (Ödalen, Brommesson, Erlingsson, Schaffer, & Fogelgren, 2019;
Weurlander & Stenfors-Hayes, 2008). It is argued that the post-training, informal learning environments are of particular importance, and that the stakeholders with whom academic developers engage should work towards understanding how a change in their practice can be brought about in relation to both first- and second-order initiatives. If academic development does not work to this end, there is a risk that participants will view it as a suppressive force or as a burden, as something that is enforced by their institutions, and something that lacks long-term, meaningful effects (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017). Given the challenges outlined above, and the fact that troublesome situations may arise when informal collegial and formal line management models overlap, this paper postulates that perhaps a new model of practice for academic development may be needed in order to shift the focus from identifying the individual as a recipient of training to one where academic development is more focused on context-based change practice for groups of teachers and leaders (Debowksi, 2014). In such a model, the focus might instead be on working groups at the departmental level of knowledge-intensive organizations, so that by taking that focus the value and importance of people in clusters or working groups as the bearers of practices in higher education can be acknowledged (Mårtensson, Roxå, & Stensaker, 2014; Ohlsson, 2014; Trowler, Saunders, & Bamber, 2012). This would see academic developers working specifically with groups of teachers and leaders over time in context-bound development work, as a way of building communities, creating capacity, and enabling brokering and knowledge mobilization across organizations (Clavert et al., 2015). Examples of such initiatives are starting to emerge (Söderhjelm et al., 2018) as well as critical thinking on whole-of-institution approaches (Sutherland, 2018). However, in many universities this type of model presents a radically new way of thinking about the ways in which academic development work is framed and financed. How this new paradigm would become manifest may well have to be the focus of future work and research projects to come.

**Conclusion**

Research suggests that academic development work in general is well received and people who attend our courses are satisfied. However, the research project presented here suggests that many challenges remain for the academic development community, not least in terms of working with academic staff to best enable them to make meaningful changes to their practice. Such changes might be brought about by a new model of academic development work, one that sees academic developers working together with teams that focus on changing practices.

**Acknowledgments**

The author would like to extend his sincere gratitude especially to the anonymous reviewers, and editors, and also to colleagues at the Swedish Higher Education Research Network, who provided invaluable feedback on the article. A special thank you to the co-authors and respondents who made the project possible.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Cormac McGrath is an educational developer at Stockholm University and affiliated to Karolinska Institutet.

ORCID

Cormac McGrath http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8215-3646

References


Söderhjelm, T., Björklund, C., Sandahl, C., & Bolander-Laksov, K. (2018). Academic leadership: Management of groups or leadership of teams? A multiple-case study on designing and


