The story of South African academic development in international perspective: have we lost the plot?

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This article is an adaptation of a chapter in the doctoral thesis entitled Plot and practice: a narrative inquiry into academic development, language policy and lifelong learning as frameworks for literacy development at the University of the Western Cape.

ABSTRACT
South African Academic Development (AD) emerged as a liberatory educational and social movement in the 1980s. AD (often called educational development) has burgeoned as an international phenomenon, but with a focus on quality rather than on liberation. South African AD now seems to be struggling to construct its post apartheid identity, if one considers the demise of the South African Association for Academic Development (SAAAD) in 2002 and the fragile state of its interim successor, the South African Academic Development Association (SAADA). This article gives an analytical account of the history of international and South African AD. It attempts to explain what has divided and weakened the latter and makes some recommendations for the future.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT
South African AD has for some time been struggling to construct its post apartheid identity, if one considers the decline of the South African Association for Academic Development (SAAAD) and its demise in 2002, as well as the fragile state of its interim successor, the South African Academic Development Association. In this article I want to reflect on some international and national trends in AD (sometimes referred to as Educational Development) and in doing so attempt to explain South African AD’s identity crisis and suggest what might be done to resolve it.

My recommendations will flow from a focus on two related trends. The first is an increasing tendency to interrogate the nature and epistemological foundations of higher education practice. The other is what Candy (1996:8) identifies as the movement of Academic Development “from the margins to the mainstream”.

Barnett (1995:3-4) suggests that it is helpful to think of four discourses being operative in the theory/practice of higher education. Firstly, there is what he calls the discourse of practice, involving pragmatic adjustments within day to day professional practice. Secondly, there is the discourse of public debate. In this discourse he includes practice oriented conferences, policy making within and around institutions and the writing and reading of journalistic texts like The Times Higher Education Supplement. Thirdly, there is the discourse constituted through formalised reflection on and research into higher education. The texts produced in this discourse are academic journal articles and the texts used and produced in formal programmes involving the study of higher education. In this discourse “higher education” is regarded as an academic discipline or interdisciplinary field. And fourthly, there are the discourses associated with those disciplines that provide theoretical frameworks and epistemological resources for the third discourse (higher education as a field of formal study).

Barnett does not identify Academic Development or Educational Development as a discourse in its own right in the set of discourses that he proposes. I would argue that Academic Development straddles the whole set. In order to understand how it does this one can extend Barnett’s model by adapting and
including the informal, specialised and reflexive discourses identified by Macken Horarik (1996).

Macken Horarik, in outlining the elements of a semiotic view of learning and literacy development, proposes a definition of register as “the meaning potential privileged within a particular cultural domain” (1996:242). She suggests that there are broadly three domains of learning “in which all members of a culture participate to some degree and which privilege certain kinds of learning” (Macken Horarik 1996:237). These domains she characterises as the everyday, the specialised and the reflexive.

Her characterisation of the everyday domain (1996:237 238) focuses on the learning of children in everyday (mainly oral) communication around the home and local community. In transposing her characterisation of this domain to the learning of educators in higher education, we can see that it is similar to Barnett’s discourse of practice or what current South African policy discourse classifies as “informal” learning (eg SAQA 2000:9).

Specialised learning, the second domain, is defined by Macken Horarik (1996:236 237) as what people do when they “train in or devote themselves to a particular area of study, occupation or activity”. The knowledge in this domain is “systematically organised” (1996:238). In this domain language is no longer a taken for granted part of everyday reality and to a large extent, with literacy, it becomes central to constructing reality. In other words, this is “formal” learning, and as such has affinities with Barnett’s third discourse.

The third or reflexive domain is described by Macken Horarik (1996:237) as “a world of competing discourses” in which “knowledge is considered as a social construction open to scrutiny, challenge and change”. In this domain, learning entails negotiating a path through competing discourses on the meanings produced in the everyday and specialised domains. It is important to note that learning in any of the three domains is a product of its relationship with the other domains (1996:244).

There are domains or discourses that do not fall neatly into Macken Horarik’s idealised model. An example of this is the domain of policy making and debate, which may be located across or within any of the three domains. Another example is networking, which may also entail an interrelationship between the three broad domains.

Neither Macken Horarik’s nor Barnett’s typology fully captures the nature of the multiple areas of specialised knowledge that constitute formalised reflection on higher education. These areas are not coterminous with the traditional disciplines in Barnett’s fourth category, but include many specialised domains of research and scholarship such as curriculum studies, staff development, and the role of information and communication technology (ICT) in higher education, to name a few.

Barnett’s typology also tends to conflate the specialised discourse of inquiry into higher education and the reflexive discourse as characterised by Macken Horarik. The key point here is that it is possible to promote specialised discourse about higher education and how it should be practised without challenging, in a reflexive way, the underlying assumptions about higher education as a discourse. We could therefore make a distinction between a formalised discourse of reflection and a formalised discourse of critical reflection and activism that is concerned with the relationship between educational practice and social justice.

With regard to the second major trend, what we might call the mainstreaming of Academic or Educational Development, one of the most significant developments internationally is the growing realisation, which stems from the emerging critical discourse on higher education, that staff development is key to student, curriculum and institutional development (see, for example, Gibbs 2002).

Alongside this realisation there is an increasing interest in the professionalisation and accreditation of teaching in higher education on the one hand, and in the professionalisation of Academic Development work itself on the other. Both these trends have led to the growth of national and international AD networks and, to a lesser extent, and variously across national cultures, to the strengthening of a policy discourse around AD at national and institutional levels. I will illustrate this with reference to the emergence of the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) and trends in the UK and the USA.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (ICED)

ICED was formed in England in 1993 as a network “whose members are themselves national organisations or networks concerned with promoting good practice in higher education” (ICED Web site 2001). South Africa was represented at the second international meeting in 1995, which also drew the presidents or representatives of educational development networks from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, the UK and the USA. South Africa was notably absent in the period from 1997 to 1999, perhaps an indication of the weakening of South African AD in this period.

Although the composition of ICED is predominantly Northern and First World, one of its aims is “to support educational development in higher education
in developing countries” (ICED Web site 2001). In addition to running a conference every two years, ICED publishes a journal, the International Journal of Academic Development (IJAD). The journal “enables academic staff and educational developers around the world to debate and extend the theory and practice of academic development, in support of the quality of higher education” (ICED Website 2001). IJAD may be regarded as one of the first journals to make issues around staff development central to reflection on the broader Academic Development discourse.

AD IN THE UNITED KINGDOM – THE STAFF AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION (SEDA) AND THE INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING (ILT)

In the United Kingdom, the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) defines itself as “the professional association for staff and educational developers in the UK, promoting innovation and good practice in higher education” (SEDA Website 2001).

SEDA’s activities are clustered into four main areas, namely accreditation, networks and events, membership services and publications. With regard to accreditation, the Professional Development in Higher Education (PDHE) scheme promotes accreditation of all levels of staff involved in higher education practice. In addition, SEDA awards fellowships and associate fellowships to educational developers.

In addition to SEDA, the UK now has the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT), which was formed in 1999 as a consequence of the Dearing Report (Dearing 1997). It provides accreditation, membership and corporate services, as well as publications and an annual conference (ILT Website 2001). The News section of the ILT Web site provides strong evidence (ILT News 2001) that its approach to accreditation is drawing wide support from staff in higher education.

STAFF (FACULTY) DEVELOPMENT IN THE USA

The centrality of staff development to the discourses of AD in ICED is also evident in the USA, where a long history of student development, particularly with regard to writing or composition, is now being complemented by a burgeoning interest in staff development.

According to Graf, Albright and Wheeler (1992), the early 1990s saw expansion in the scope of faculty development, with identified priorities including the establishment and retention of new faculty, multicultural sensitivity, leadership and support of departmental chairs, preparation of teaching assistants, assessment, holistic or enhanced faculty development, distance education, preparation of part-time faculty and curriculum development.

Lewis (1997:23) notes that the period 1990 1995 saw “rapid increases in memberships in a) the Professional and Organisational Development (POD) Network in Higher education (the professional home of many faculty and instructional developers at mostly four year and research institutions) and b) the National Council of Staff, Programme, and Organisational Development (NCSPOD) and the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) (the professional organisation of choice for ‘staff’ developers at two year institutions)”.

At the institutional level, however, Lewis notes (1997:25) that despite the increase in the number of faculty development centres, their predominantly tiny size suggests that staff development has some way to go before it is perceived as part of a university’s core business or fully embedded in international academic culture.

Lewis (1997:28 29) concludes that there is a need for further research “to determine which faculty development programmes are effective” and points out that questions raised by the POD network include:

- What is the correlation between faculty/organisational development and student learning?
- What is scholarship in faculty development?
- How can POD facilitate communication to the public/legislators about what faculty actually do?
- What skills or competencies do people need to do faculty development well and how can they get them?

In the international context, the reflexive turn in higher education and the mainstreaming of Academic Development would appear to provide an enabling environment for similar trends in South Africa. However, while the first of these trends has certainly taken hold in South Africa, the second has not established itself as firmly as one might have anticipated. In the next section I will attempt to show why the Academic Development discourse does not seem to have moved as far into the mainstream as appears to be the case in the other countries I have considered here.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

Mehl (2000) suggests that in the early days of South African AD, “…the philosophical tension was between ‘Development’ as supposed to ‘Support’. Was it a question of enabling the student to be ready for the unchanging institution? Or was it a question of changing the institution to meet the student?”
Mehl also notes that it was the Education Portfolio of the Independent Development Trust that became the major supporter of Academic Development in the country. He then asks: “Now 15 years later as you attempt to resuscitate the enterprise, are the issues still the same?” (Mehl 2000:1).

These remarks and questions highlight three crucial points. The first is the counterpoising of student support and institutional change, which I believe accurately reflects an ongoing tendency in South African AD discourse not to see the centrality of staff development to the issue of institutional change. The second is the reference to the IDT, which shows how reliant the South African AD enterprise was on “soft” funding. When, at the end of 1995, the IDT withdrew its funding for the staffing of AD units and projects in South African higher education institutions, there was a hiatus in funding while policy makers began work on a new funding formula for higher education.

This hiatus, combined with other factors in the organisational politics of SAAAD in the nineties (most notably the shutting down of the SAAAD national office after its CEO was found guilty of fraud), dealt a severe blow to SAAAD and to AD units and projects in many institutions. This is the third crucial point. Mehl’s reference to the 2000 SAAAD conference as an attempt “to resuscitate the enterprise” is a clear pointer to what had happened.

THE SPLIT BETWEEN AD AND FORMAL HE STUDIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

As regards the development of specialised discourses around higher education it is important to note that SAAAD, which was largely composed of AD staff at white and historically Black English medium universities, was not the only site where such a discourse was emerging. White Afrikaans speaking academics interested in Higher Education as a field of study, including those working in Academic Support, were mainly represented in the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (SAARDHE) and its journal, The South African Journal of Higher Education. While SAARDHE and SAAAD have never been confined to white Afrikaans speaking South Africans, they have not become a vehicle for the revitalization of the AD movement (as defined by SAAAD) in SA.

The lack of a clear focus on staff development in SAAAD and the location of academic programmes pertaining to the formal study of higher education in South African Afrikaans speaking universities combined to ensure that the specialised discourses developing around higher education could not create a vibrant national network around the professionalisation and accreditation of university teaching in the 1980s and 1990s. SAAAD’s lack of clear focus on staff development was exacerbated in some cases at the institutional level when staff development or teaching methods units not liked to Quality Assurance were margined or closed. However, the creation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) towards the end of the 1990s and the gradual emergence of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in the early 2000s, have created an enabling frame for policies and practices that may effectively incorporate staff development into South African AD.

AD AS A DISCOURSE OF LIBERATION

In the 1980s and early 1990s it was SAAAD rather than SAARDHE that promoted the idea of AD as a liberatory discourse. Morphet (1995:7) has pointed out the way in which people in SAAAD were held together by “…a powerful extended discourse which presently reaches across the whole of the South African social spectrum. It roots lie in the political practices of the liberation struggle of black people and the achievement of a new social order. It articulates strongly with conceptions of transformation of the systems of society and it therefore finds its way into higher education as a whole. It is this discourse which sets the outer boundaries of SAAAD and which provides the association with its core values of access, redress, equity and efficiency.”

Perhaps the most striking difference between AD as a South African discourse and the international AD discourse I have briefly outlined is the primary emphasis on social justice in the former and the primary emphasis on quality in the latter.

THREE SUB-DISCOURSES IN SAAAD: SUPPORT, POLICY AND CAPACITY

Morphet points out that in SAAAD, the framing discourse was unable to prevent the operation of an order of discourse within SAAAD in which three sub discourses struggled to find the right synergy amongst themselves. These were, according to Morphet (1995), the “support” discourse, the “policy” discourse and the black “capacity” discourse.

The way in which these discourses interacted with each other (and in fact continue to do so) has major implications for any attempt to promote an approach to higher education practice and development that is inclusive of the discourses identified by Barnett, Macken Horarik and myself.

The “support” discourse is not confined to support of “underprepared” students. It also refers to “support” as the dominant mode for relationships between AD and “mainstream” staff and between AD practitioners themselves. This indicates a preference for what Scott
(1994:203) refers to as a “collaborative” rather than “hierarchical” view of the pedagogic relation. This leads to the dominance of non formal and informal modes of learning with little or no strategies or policy initiatives with regard to accredited qualifications for AD and other academic staff.

Thus, despite the philosophical shift from “support” to “development” indicated by Mehl (2000), this did not alter what Morphet (1995:14) describes as “the effective practical dominance of the ‘support’ discourse”.

The policy discourse, according to Morphet, had its origins in attempts in the early 1980s to reconstitute historically black tertiary institutions as “centres of learning rather than tools of white domination”. This discourse is concerned with institutional and systemic issues, and is “organised around the issues of transforming the structures of Departments, Faculties, Universities, Technikons and Colleges, and of finding ways of locating the practices of Academic Development within the system as a whole” (1995:8).

The capacity discourse is mainly concerned with the historical inequities that have created the need for a specific focus on building the capacity of black students and black academic staff, and of ensuring equity and redress in the system as whole.

Morphet (1995) shows how SAAAD in the 1993-1995 period made two major attempts, in strategic planning workshops, to bring the three discourses together in coherent plans. He notes that the 1993 plan, which included the setting up of special interest groups and the networks surrounding them, failed to advance the policy discourse, with the result that 1995 saw the dominance of a fused policy/capacity discourse, with the establishment of a lobbying group to participate in national policy making around the reconstruction of the national higher education system. However the policy discourse within SAAAD gradually weakened because policy decisions in involved an increasing range of other stakeholders working independently of SAAAD.

One should note at this point that South African AD as conceptualised by SAAAD has been subject to the ephemerality of social movements as they are incorporated into state structures (Eyerman & Jamison 1991).

Morphet (1995:36) proposes that “the gap between the present ‘support’ and ‘policy’ practices in SAAAD will have to be narrowed. Both can be strengthened as a result, and this kind of more or less unified discourse will need to operate across the HWI/HBI divide”.

THE WHITE PAPER ON AD

Developments within SAAAD and in the arena of higher education policy making since 1995 have not, in my view, resulted in the kind of synergy between the three discourses that Morphet had in mind. This is evident in the White Paper (DoE 1997) and in subsequent policy documents. The White Paper’s treatment of the concept of AD is incoherent. The main problem is that there is no clear or consistent demarcation of the nature and scope of AD. For example, at one point (DoE 1997:53) AD is listed alongside management capacity development, staff development and curriculum development.

THE EDUCATION, TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES PROJECT

While SAAAD was playing a lobbying role in the shaping of national higher education policy documents and evidently failing to inscribe a coherent AD policy in these documents, important work outside the ambit of SAAAD was being conducted to bring coherence to Education, Training and Development as one of the fields of learning in the emerging National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In this regard, the National Training Board, assisted by German technical cooperation, launched the Education, Training and Development Practices (ETDP) Project, which did research based work towards an indigenous model for progression paths, qualifications and standards within the NQF.

RESEARCH ON THE SUB-FIELD OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

One of the research studies (ETDP 1997) that contributed to the writing of the Final Report of the ETDP Project was an analysis of the sub field of higher education and training. Unlike the Higher education policy documents of the late 1990s, the ETDP Project gave due analytical attention to the historical and theoretical aspects of AD. According to this analysis

Transforming the HET sub field at operational level from a trinary to a co-ordinated unitary system necessitates

- redefining practitioner categories in terms of specialist fields and focal practices rather than institutional location within the hierarchy, and
- rooting professional identity in role function rather than institutional status.

The difficulty of change in this direction should not be underestimated, since “the real currency of academic progression” can be identified as “the production of a research profile with teaching (and possibly higher level management) derivative of such a profile”
As Mehl (2000) has indicated, there have been since 1999.

South African Academic Development discourse I now turn to a reflection on developments in the its relation to the other aspects of AD.

SAAAD as regards academic staff development and led to the development of a reflexive discourse within Ministries of Labour and Education, this might have there had been more effective interaction between the latter being the main target of SAAAD lobbying. If Board rather than the Department of Education, with project under the auspices of the National Training arguments like the above emerged from a research recommendations and the ensuring of "adequate funding for staff development''.

It is perhaps significant that recommendations and arguments like the above emerged from a research project under the auspices of the National Training Board rather than the Department of Education, with the latter being the main target of SAAAD lobbying. If there had been more effective interaction between the Ministries of Labour and Education, this might have led to the development of a reflexive discourse within SAAAD as regards academic staff development and its relation to the other aspects of AD.

AD IN SOUTH AFRICA POST-1999

I now turn to a reflection on developments in the South African Academic Development discourse since 1999.

As Mehl (2000) has indicated, there have been attempts to revive the AD discourse of the 1980s and early 1990s. These have included conferences on AD in 2000, 2001 and 2002. These conferences have begun to explore alternatives to SAAAD and SAARDHE as vehicles for academic staff development in SA higher education and training. The 2000 conference was followed by the creation of an electronic AD Forum. The 2001 conference, held at the University of the North, focused on the changing landscape of teaching and learning within the context of the African Renaissance. This suggests a return to what Morphet (1995) calls the black "capacity" discourse in another form. Despite its crucial importance, this focus may have distracted conference participants from what I see as the key strategic focus for SAAAD and SAARDHE, which is to build momentum around staff development in a manner similar to that achieved in ICED and SEDA. The naming of the 2002 AD conference as "Student centred learning. Challenges and opportunities for knowledge in Southern Africa" strongly suggests a return to the support discourse, unless it includes the idea of seeing staff seeking formal qualifications in higher education practice as students.

Among the major difficulties facing attempts to resuscitate or reinvent AD in the current national context are firstly, the general weakening of AD at the institutional level in the period after 1995, and secondly, the persistent tendency by the Department of Education to perpetuate SAAAD’s previous failure to chart a clear strategic path for staff development for education, training and development practitioners in higher education.

The weakness at the institutional level, particularly with regard to leadership around AD is evident in the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE 2001:26). However, the main focus in the Plan is clearly on student, curriculum and (to a lesser extent) institutional development, and not on staff development, despite the fact that early in the Plan (2001:7) “human resource development” is seen as vital to the “mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing society”.

With the National Plan failing to give any direction with regard to staff development in South African Higher Education, it remains to be seen whether other role players in the policy arena can do so. The SAQA National Standards Body (NSB) for Education Training and Development, and the SGB for Higher Education and Training which reports to it, are taking responsibility at the national level for the crucial task of articulating, reconceptualising and transforming the dominant relationship between formal, non formal and informal learning and between policy, practice and study/research in South African HET ETD practice. Designing learning pathways for higher
educators related to their various roles (and, in some cases, to the standards developed for these roles at the national level) will be a critical factor in this regard. Another crucial factor will be the extent to which the work of the SGB can activate institutional, regional and national networks around staff development that can link up with and draw strength from international networks such as the ICED.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have attempted to show some of the major differences between South African AD and the dominant international versions of AD. I have firstly shown that South African AD has identified itself with the grand narrative of liberation (Lyotard 1984; Morphet 1995) in ways different from the international versions, which have a primary focus on quality. In its heyday South African AD also sought to provide a totalising framework for institutional transformation in higher education that does not have a parallel in other countries. I have also shown that the international tendency to identify AD with staff development has not been emulated in South African higher education institutions, where it continues to be weakly conceptualised and developed. There are, however, initial indications of a shift in keeping with international trends to professionalise university teaching in the work of the South African SGB for educators in higher education and training.

If South African AD is to rejoin ICED and give the “plotting” of AD a more critical and reflexive edge, several things would need to happen, such as:

- The formation of a vibrant and dynamic staff and educational academic/development association in South Africa;
- The professionalising of university teaching and academic development work through collaboration between such an association and various stakeholders including the HEQC;
- Clearer definition at the national policy level on the relationship between student, staff, curriculum and organisational development in AD work;
- The development of appropriate funding mechanisms and staffing policies related to all aspects of AD, especially staff development.

Finally, we need to be clear that the story of AD is now part of the broader narrative of lifelong learning, and as such needs to be related to all sites of learning and knowledge production. This poses many challenges to those committed to retaining the identity of AD as an educational and social force in narratives of transformation.

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