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Synergizing Partnerships between Academics and Academic Developers: A Collaborative Autoethnography Case Study

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ABSTRACT

CONTEXT
Addressing students' needs, enhancing their learning outcomes, and the overall quality of teaching and learning are primary objectives of academics in higher education. To achieve this, academics may need to reflect on their teaching practices and, when necessary, redesign their courses. For some, this process is easily integrated into their routine activities, as their work naturally entails design as part of their job. However, for others, it represents a challenge that can be effectively addressed through pedagogical academic partnerships. Typically, pedagogical academic partnerships involve individuals' collaboration in various roles across disciplines, departments and institutions, bridging the gap between research and pedagogy.

PURPOSE OR GOAL
This paper draws upon the individual partnership of two academics with different levels of seniority and teaching experience and an academic developer. To explore the academics' experiences of a pedagogical academic partnership, we posed the following research question: '*What insights can a pedagogical academic partnership between an academic and an academic developer offer?*'

APPROACH OR METHODOLOGY/METHODS
In this case study, a collaborative autoethnography methodology was adopted. It involved engaging two academics in a reflective and iterative process to present their reflections, unpack their experiences, and reflect on their individual partnerships within a biomedical engineering school at a metropolitan Australian university. The data was systematically collected and collaboratively analysed using thematic analysis for identifying, analysing, and interpreting themes within the data.

ACTUAL OR ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES
Findings reveal the significance of (i) a school-based academic developer, (ii) self-confidence and expansion for change, and (iii) strategies for a sustainable partnership.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS/SUMMARY
These findings underscore the importance of a context-dependent partnership in developing educational support structures to address students' needs, enhance their learning outcomes and the overall quality of teaching. This lays the groundwork for more resilient and dynamic educational ecosystems that meet the evolving needs of academics, students, and the broader community.

KEYWORDS
Pedagogical Partnership, Academic Developer, Collaborative Autoethnography

Introduction

Over the past decade, the tertiary education sector has evolved into a dynamic and complex environment. Academics need to '*architect'* their teaching practices while considering their abilities and time constraints, the growing number of students and their diverse needs, the expectations of preparing work-ready and highly qualified graduates, and the emphasis on quality assurance and outcome measurements (Debowski, 2014; Goodyear, 2015; Pham and Tanner, 2015). These demands require highly developed design skills, which explain why teaching has been referred to as design (Goodyear, 2015), design science (Laurillard, 2013), design profession (Augustsson, 2018; Warr & Mishra, 2021), learning engineering (Lee, 2023), and, more recently, similar to engineers engaging in problem-solving (Prestigiacomo & Markauskaite, 2024). Akin to designers, engineers, and architects, academics' work entails design as part of their routine activities throughout the teaching process (Warr & Mishra, 2021). Despite this, a paradigm shift in recognising design as a significant teaching component may take time. Hence, we argue that pedagogical academic partnerships have the potential to offer bespoke educational support, enabling academics to critically analyse their teaching practices, redesign their courses to better address students' needs, improve outcomes and ultimately enhance the quality of teaching and learning (T&L).

This study poses the following research question, '*What insights can a pedagogical academic partnership between academics and an academic developer (AD) offer?*' It presents the reflections of two academics and unpacks their experiences on the partnership. Collaborative autoethnography (CAE), a multivocal and interpretative analysis approach of systematically and collaboratively collected data drawn from the individual experiences of two academics with an AD, was adopted. This study begins with an overview of partnerships in higher education and the role, impact and responsibilities of ADs. This is followed by a discussion of the research context and the methodological design. Next, it discusses the findings and finally presents our conclusions, outlining the limitations of this study and identifying calls for future research.

Academic Partnerships in Higher Education

Partnerships are "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7). Developing new ways of teaching and creating learning experiences that enhance the quality of T&L are among the aims of academic pedagogical partnerships, which ensure that the solutions created are a "balanced give and take not of commodities but of perspectives" (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017, p. 176), representing academics and students' needs.

In higher education, partnerships vary in terms of their aims and context. They have been adopted to develop assessment criteria at a module level (Deeley & Brown, 2014), evaluate T&L (Butler et al., 2004), and program-level assessments (Curtis and Anderson, 2021). Some partnerships extend across departments (Snelling et al., 2019) whilst others have a limited impact beyond the immediate context (Marie & McGowan, 2017). They also involve individuals in different roles, including staff and students (Dianati & Oberhollenzer, 2020; Smith et al., 2021), librarians and academics (Francis & Wingrove, 2017; Pham & Tanner, 2015), academics and ADs, at a faculty or university level (Cordiner, 2014; Nelson et al., 2018; Sharif et al., 2019). This study emerged from a limited understanding of how ADs operate at a school level, aiming to contribute to the existing literature on partnerships between academics and ADs, whose roles, impact and responsibilities are discussed in the following section.

Academic Developers: Role, impact and responsibilities

ADs are a novel and complex profession, that continuously evolves to meet the diverse needs in T&L (Sharif et al., 2019), while governments and stakeholders actively shape university policy and

priorities (Debowski, 2014). Their roles are very diverse (Fraser, 2001) and tend to be under-valued and unacknowledged (Detienne et al., 2023). For some, ADs act as change partners, educators, lobbyists, influencers, intermediaries, group work coordinators and support community builders (Becuwe et al., 2016; Debowski, 2014; Szkudlarek et al., 2014; Wouters et al., 2014). For others, the AD role is often limited to "'help mates' and/or 'adjuncts' to core teaching and research practice, who, as supports, are there to respond, react, problem solve and provide a quick fix to a myriad of issues" (Francis & Wingrove, 2017, p. 43). This perception, as Francis & Wingrove (2017) argues, excludes "deeper, respectful and collegiate relationships characterised by the reciprocal exchange of practice, which acknowledge and respect the diverse discipline ways of knowing we bring to each academic partnership" (p. 43). There is also consensus over a lack of understanding of ADs' impact. This lack of understanding is affected by their level of influence and ability to (i) balance power dynamics, (ii) manage differing expectations from academic leaders (Cordiner, 2014), (iii) engage stakeholders and (iv) navigate the dynamicity and unpredictability of institutional context.

This lack of clarity impacts not only ADs' institutional legitimacy, but also their sense of identity, positionality toward colleagues and themselves (Debowski, 2014; Detienne et al., 2023) and their ability to understand "how their voice and influence might be effectively enacted" (Debowski, 2014, p. 51). This contributes to nurturing what Manathunga (2007) calls an "unhomely" feeling deriving from being migrants from other disciplines, bringing with them existing disciplinary identities and knowledge, and finding themselves [ADs] working in an in-between space, at times uncomfortable and ambiguous, as they perform "hybrid, liminal roles at the "fault lines" between teachers and learners, between academics and managers, and between teaching and research" (p. 25). It is not surprising that, especially within Australasia, ADs are often a scarce resource (Kek et al., 2016).

Despite role and identity challenges, there are clear expectations and responsibilities for ADs, regardless of their centralised (Wright & Miller, 2000) or faculty position (Nelson et al., 2018; Sharif et al., 2019). They play a pivotal role in shaping and enhancing T&L processes, practices and methods, driving innovation, making significant contributions to foster pedagogical excellence, and cultivating a culture of continuous improvement within academia. In practical terms, this means offering (i) learning resources, (ii) a structure to facilitate the design process (Becuwe et al., 2016; Wright & Miller, 2000), (iii) expert guidance to encourage enhancing educational design outcomes (Debowski, 2014; Cordiner, 2014; Kek et al., 2016), and (iv) a learning environment that models processes and behaviours to promote active reflection and inquiry (Cordiner, 2014), encouraging a shift in teaching beliefs, best practices, and innovative ideas to address students' learning needs (Sharif et al., 2019).

Given the transformative nature of their work, ADs are expected to build a strong community and establish close working relationships with subject matter experts of the content knowledge to be taught to "help them reach a higher state of understanding and critique around their systems, practice and outcomes" (Debowski, 2014, p. 54), to transform their teaching practices and improve students' outcomes. To achieve this, a deep understanding of the academic community, its disciplinary contexts, and its needs would be at the core of ADs' focus. This understanding is pivotal to encouraging appropriate, productive, and adequate quality T&L outcomes resulting from fit-for-purpose responses. However, ADs positioned centrally or at a faculty level may have limited knowledge of a school's localised and highly contextual environment, whose needs may be very different from the institution's. We argue that if ADs were to be embedded in the micro context of a school, with its own culture and (tacit) needs and requirements, this would enable them to work more adaptively, collaboratively and efficiently in partnership with academics to achieve changes in educational practice, and perhaps contribute to their identity and positionality challenges. With the opportunity given to a biomedical engineering school at a metropolitan Australian university, this study aims to explore the reflections and experiences of two academics on their partnerships. The subsequent section of this paper will delve into the specifics of our approach.

Methodology

For this case study, we adopted CAE, a qualitative, multivocal research methodology (Chang et al., 2013). This combines personal narratives and collective analysis, in which team members are researchers and research participants at the same time. Typically, they share, reflect, analyse and interpret systematically and collaboratively collected data drawn from their individual experiences to explore and understand shared experiences or cultural phenomena from multiple perspectives. This process often involves shared storytelling, dialogue, and collective interpretations to uncover broader sociocultural insights.

This study focuses on the individual partnership of two academics, with different seniority levels and teaching experience, and an AD based in the same engineering school in a metropolitan university in Australia over the course of a year. Penny Martens is an experienced academic with over 20 years of experience designing and delivering courses. During that time, her teaching portfolio has spanned from undergraduate and postgraduate coursework to higher degree research training to training of higher degree research supervisors and research leaders. Luca Modenese is a new teaching academic who coordinated and taught his first academic course for the second year after a career of research-focused appointments. He received the compulsory training offered by the University and, in the first year, support from a senior colleague in the school. He had to create the lecture content and design the assignments for a course that had not been offered by the school for several years.

Data collection and analysis

Using CAE methodology, the data collection unfolded through alternating individual and group work, with individual researcher-participants' data probed through written reflections and conversations. Written reflections were compiled by the academics about their individual experiences in partnering with the AD. These essays were then discussed and unpacked collaboratively for three one-hour recorded conversations that offered the occasion to discuss individual observations and explore connections, feelings and attitudes experienced before, during and after the partnership. These essays, with the verbatim transcriptions of the conversations, were then analysed individually by the AD and the participating academics. This analysis included identifying codes for emerging themes that were critically reviewed and refined through a collaborative analysis as the researchers exchanged feedback multiple times until converging to some key findings, as discussed in the following section. Quotes were edited for clarity, aiming to preserve the original expression. Ellipses were used to denote that some text was removed.

Findings

Findings were organised into three main themes: (i) a school-based academic developer, (ii) self-confidence and expansion for change, and (iii) strategies for a sustainable partnership.

A school-based AD

The academics reflected that with an AD embedded within the fabric and culture of a school, there is greater chance for a more personal, tailored, and long-term partnership. A school-based AD would have the time, resources and desire to gain an in-depth understanding of course convenors and students' needs to be able to tailor solutions. The knowledge that the AD would be around in the long term meant that if the academics felt lost, confused or bewildered, they knew they were not alone. This underscored the notion of an extended partnership rather than a one-off, transactional interaction.

> *It was the comfort of knowing that you were not going anywhere […], that I got to work with you a little more personally and one-on-one, that you would take the time, and that you would not have a bazillion other projects and things going on […]. You checked in throughout the course after your job was done. You still cared, and you demonstrated that caring. The fact that I could always just ask you [a question] because you were not centrally but school-located made the relationship much deeper. At times, some*

things do not pan out. Luckily, they did, but if they hadn't worked, and we had to revise the course and come back and workshop new ideas, it meant that this was not just a one-and-done type of thing. I knew that you were also in it for the long haul, which made it more comfortable for me (Penny).

If the educational developer is in the same school as the course convenors being helped, that really makes them your colleagues. This makes the relationship automatically collaborative. […] I already work with you. You are in my school. I know you, and I trust you. It is very easy to work together. It is like avoiding restarting almost every time when someone must understand your needs. I can give you an example to synthesise this aspect […]. When I had an issue with Moodle, I asked support from our IT centre, and, for some reason, I was assigned the same person, and it was great. They really helped me a lot, and then they changed job […] and I thought: "Oh my God, you know, someone else will come and I don't know if they understand exactly what I want to do (Luca).

Overall, these extracts point to a deep sense of appreciation and comfort in having support for the longer term, allowing for more testing and trying of things in smaller bite-size batches. Being school located implies physical and emotional proximity that moves beyond the traditional academic and non-academic staff partition. Being in the same school creates a natural and durable bond, fostering deep and meaningful connections and trust. This makes the AD a colleague rather than an external or centralist consultant.

Self-Confidence and Expansion for Change

Before the partnership, significantly modifying an existing course or designing a new one were overwhelming tasks for the academics. The expected workload, the time pressure of execution, and the uncertainty about what to do resulted in a lack of confidence, as Penny pointed out: "I felt like I was stuck. I did everything I could think of, but I was really at this roadblock. I did not know how to improve [the course] anymore. […] Any of the changes seemed impossibly hard with an incredibly busy schedule. The things that I could do were way too hard for me to do in the timeframe that I had".

However, through constructive discussions during the pedagogical academic partnership, several options could be critically evaluated until practically applicable and feasible solutions appropriate to the course context were identified. This resulted in less demanding and more effective changes to the course structures, creating a beneficial self-confidence in the academic staff. For example, Luca commented:

The second iteration of the course was, in my opinion, very successful […] and a less stressful experience […]. I think the outcome was certainly achieved because of this partnership, which "polished" some of my ideas, gave me some experienced approaches and "tricks" to implement and, even more importantly, self-confidence.

Self-reflection and clarification resulted in a heightened expansion for change in the academics' course design and teaching practice beyond their initial plan, independent of their teaching experience and seniority. This is reflected in Penny's comment:

I have come to realise that even small changes can affect the students' perceptions and improve their experiences and enjoyment of the class. I also realised that I didn't have to do everything all at once. I know there are a few more things in my back pocket that I can keep improving over time. […] I can do the bigger things that aren't as hard as I think they are.

In summary, findings pointed to a clear change in approach and attitude from before to after the collaboration, with a clear benefit for the academics in terms of their self-confidence and desire to implement future changes. Under the AD guidance, this resulted in experiencing a new and more self-aware perspective in which smaller effective modifications to their courses could be more gradually and successfully introduced.

Strategies for Sustainable Partnership

A partnership is sustainable when both the AD and the academics, employed within the same school, have a vested interest in a common goal. This common goal translates into a greater chance of success. While the AD and academics want the same thing—a great course—how that

is measured and deemed successful is slightly different for both. Both can “claim credit” for the work in a way that does not interfere with academic promotion for either party. The following extract from Penny supports this sentiment.

> *What makes a partnership successful is complementary goals and wants, with possibly disparate capabilities. In this sense, we were both aiming for the same thing. I knew the course content and how it had been taught, you [AD] had all these new bright shiny ideas for me. Because we were coming together from two different worlds, but in a very complementary way with the same outcome and goal, we could mesh those two worlds.*

Combining different disciplinary backgrounds - the content expert and educational and pedagogical knowledge expert- allows for an interdisciplinary synergistic partnership. Typically, ADs employed at the university or faculty level do not always have educational disciplinary knowledge. They may be great educators in their base discipline but may not have studied education. Merging these two disciplines allows both parties to bring their knowledge base non-competitively. For instance, Luca stated: “we [the academics] have the biomed and tech expertise, and the educational AD has education training. We needed to mix our knowledge of our subject area and your knowledge of how to teach”.

A key element of a sustainable partnership is that all parties are focused on the same outcome. There is a common goal, although both parties can benefit from the collaboration in very different ways. Finally, ensuring that a school-based AD comes from an education discipline allows for an interdisciplinary and synergistic blending of knowledge areas, creating the conditions for a greater outcome, better classroom engagement and student satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study adopted a CAE methodology and explored the reflections and experiences in the particular context of two academics who independently collaborated with an AD with educational training (Stake, 1995). Despite the two academics’ different levels of seniority and teaching expertise, findings showed the importance of (i) a school-based AD, (ii) self-confidence and expansion for change, and (iii) strategies for sustainable partnership.

Embedding ADs within a school would enhance their accessibility and develop a further sense of agency among academics, typically, working under a generalised mandate. This model underscores the importance of “the temporal and spatial dimensions of collaborative partnerships” (Pham and Tanner, 2015, p. 10). It requires time to develop academic pedagogical partnerships to profoundly explore the unique characteristics, needs, and challenges faced by course convenors and students. In addition, understanding the complexities and nuances of a school’s local culture and context (Debowski, 2014), including its own specific (academic) goals, dynamics, and resource availability, in addition to institutional priorities, is crucial to shaping the development and success of partnerships. In this context, an AD becomes a “critical friend” (Handal, 2008) who assists the academic community in T&L with fine-tuned educational design responses that are contextually relevant and aligned with academics’ intentions and students’ intended outcomes. This strongly resonates with Debowski’s (2014) invitation to see the potential of ADs as “partners in arms” (Debowski, 2014, p. 50) to increase the “penetration of good pedagogy into organizational practice” (p. 55) and the creation of “new initiatives work in real settings” (p. 55). Moving away from a centralised role that guides policy, practice and institutional priorities in T&L would favour a more adaptive, local and reflective partnership model that blends best pedagogical principles with local practice(s) to help academics design and deliver quality education (Debowski, et. al., 2012). This model would also contribute to ongoing discussions aiming to eschew a hierarchical and silo system endemic to academic culture (Campbell-Perry, 2022).

The academics discussed how the partnership increased self-confidence despite initially feeling stuck and overwhelmed. This resonates with Bond et al.’s (2023) findings that individuals build their confidence as they gain new skills and knowledge on how to enact the desired changes. The

academics showed an “expansive” appetite for change, vaguely reminiscent of Engeström’s (1987) expansive theory of learning. This theory proposes that learning is not just an individual cognitive process but is shaped by a collective activity embracing a wider horizon of possibilities, in which ADs model active reflection as part of their role.

Regarding the strategies for a sustainable partnership, the academics identified the critical role of a shared common goal, measured and deemed successful in slightly different ways for the academics and the AD, with each participant acknowledging and understanding their own roles and responsibilities (Bond et al., 2023; Detienne et al, 2023). Having a common goal underscores the success of a partnership which hinges on maintaining mutual benefits over time, as unequal benefits can lead to disengagement from less motivated partners and overinvestment from highly motivated ones (Amey et al., 2007). Academics’ reflections and comments acknowledged the significance of interdisciplinarity, specifically the convergence and integration of diverse disciplinary expertise, perspectives and ways of knowing leading to richer results, beyond what could be achieved individually (Bond et al., 2023; Francis & Wingrove, 2017).

This study suffers from several limitations. While findings cannot be generalised and may not represent the broader academic population, they offer insights into some necessary conditions for the development and sustainment of pedagogical academic partnerships of academics and ADs. Future studies could be undertaken with a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalisability of the findings. They could also delve into how the partnership improved students' learning experiences. The academics recognise that their insider perspectives may have influenced the data analysis process. However, being closely involved allowed them to capture nuances in their reflections that might have been overlooked by an external observer. Nevertheless, the data analysis by the first author contributed to providing an additional layer of reflection and rigour. The challenge that remains is of institutional nature and appropriate incentives to embed and sustain ADs within schools for long-term partnerships in an ongoing effort to improve students’ learning experiences. This challenge is currently being addressed by the Nexus Program at UNSW, which aims to elevate student learning and teaching quality by enhancing cross-disciplinary collaboration across UNSW.

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