

Researching and Extending Developments in Contemporary Educational Practice

Abstract

The field of contemporary education abounds with multiple practices designed to enhance the effectiveness of teaching approaches and to maximise students' learning outcomes. Yet we still know relatively little about *what works* in terms of teaching and learning in different educational contexts. In particular, if we are to advocate the wider application of particular kinds of educational developments, we need to conduct and evaluate research about the foundations of those developments and the factors that promote and/or inhibit their success.

This chapter distils some key findings from current scholarship about educational developments and how they are practised in varied professional contexts. The analysis of these findings is informed by a number of conceptual frameworks gleaned from contemporary research into the elements of effective educational strategies in specific teaching and learning domains. Key concepts from these frameworks are in turn used to identify the central questions about educational developments and practices addressed by the authors of the subsequent chapters in this book. More broadly, this chapter contributes to continuing debates about both the pre-requisites and the effects of effective teaching and learning approaches and strategies in widely varying educational contexts.

Introduction

Educational practice is centrally concerned with the quality and impact of teaching and learning designs and techniques. Developing that practice in ways that enhance and increase that quality and impact is the mission of educational practitioners and researchers alike. This kind of educational development is predicated on understanding the multiple contexts in which students learn and the diverse means available to educators to teach their students effectively. Yet appreciating why and how particular educational strategies succeed in specific circumstances does not necessarily guarantee equivalent success in different contexts.

From this perspective, Alexander (2000) suggested that we 'search for evidence as to what it means to be educated' (p. 28) and at the same time consider, 'What benchmarks of "sound" academic development have we, as educational researchers, offered as alternatives?' (p. 28) to government-mandated educational standards. On the basis of this tension, even contradiction, Alexander 'proffer[ed] the study of academic development as a viable agenda for the research community' (p. 28). The complexity of this construct of academic development is paralleled by the equivalent complexity of teaching and learning, the dynamic nature of human beings and the large range of sociocultural and contextual spaces in which education occurs.

Accordingly this chapter, like this book, is focused directly on exploring research and scholarship pertaining to developments in contemporary educational practice. We see such developments as having a positive semantic valence, akin to terms such as 'advances', 'changes', 'improvements', 'refinements', 'reforms' and 'transformations'. At the same time, we concede that educational developments are complex and multifaceted phenomena that elude easy analysis and resist automatic application to other contexts. Furthermore, we accept that the concept of educational development is contested in the literature, reflecting diverse and sometimes contradictory assumptions about the character and significance of formal education and the contributions of development to enacting relevant educational provision (see for example Amundsen & Wilson, 2012; Bridges, 2014; Gibbs, 2013). The concept is 'multi-faceted, inter-related, overlapping and dynamic' (Land, 2001, p. 10). Educational

development once articulated is then recontextualised to address problems in specific fields of practice (Shay, 2012). Solutions and explanations in one context may not suit a different context.

Moreover, there are distinct forms of educational development (Taylor & Rege Colet, 2010) and we note that the term *educational developers* has a specific meaning in further and higher educational contexts (Shay, 2012), which is certainly germane to the concerns of this book. At the same time, we envisage *educational development* as having a wider reach and relevance, and as referring more broadly to the processes of conceptualising, initiating, implementing and evaluating educational change at varying levels of complexity (see also Lehtomäki, Janhonen-Abuquah, Tuomi, Okkolin, Posti-Ahokas, & Palojoki, 2014).

Even the concept of development is contested in the terrain of academic development, where it ‘can be interpreted according to various ontological and epistemological standpoints’ (Webb, 1996, p. 65). Multiple perspectives about the complexity of knowledge are not new and can explain the wide range of definitions and approaches to research practice in the area of education development identified by Alexander (2000), who also suggested that, if we consider that development ‘refers to systemic change over time’ (p. 30), then ‘[i]n the case of academic development, the focus of that transformation is centred on the process of formal learning’ (p. 30). In addition, ‘[a] further significant attribute of academic development practice is the practitioner’s attitude to change’ (Land, 2001, p. 10).

The objective of this chapter is to situate the subsequent chapters and the book as a whole in a larger field of scholarship that frames the discussions in the individual chapters and to which those chapters also contribute additional perspectives and understandings. The chapter consists of the following three sections:

- Selected current literature about educational developments and practice;
- A conceptual framework for analysing and evaluating educational developments and practice; and
- The book’s rationale, structure and intended contributions to extending current understandings of educational developments and practice.

Educational Developments and Practice

Inevitably, given the breadth and depth of the subject matter and the diversity of approaches to researching it, the current literature about educational development and practice reveals considerable variability in understandings of, and strategies for implementing, educational development. For instance, Amundsen and Wilson (2012) articulated six distinct clusters of techniques for enacting educational development in various contexts:

- The *skill focus cluster*...that focus[es] on the acquisition or enhancement of observable teaching skills and techniques....
- The *method focus cluster*...that focus[es] on mastery of a particular teaching method....
- The *reflection focus cluster*...that focus[es] on change in individual teacher conceptions of teaching and learning.
- The *institutional focus cluster*...that focus[es] on coordinated institutional plans to support teaching improvement.
- The *disciplinary focus cluster*...that focus[es] on disciplinary understanding to develop pedagogical knowledge.
- The *action research or inquiry focus cluster*...that focus[es] on individuals or groups of faculty investigating teaching and learning questions of interest to them. (p. 97; *emphasis in original*)

While we lack the space in this section of the chapter to demonstrate and elaborate each cluster identified by Amundsen and Wilson (2012), their relevance to this discussion lies in

highlighting the multiple understandings of educational developments and practice operating at very different levels of activity, including systems and institutional foci through to individual lessons and classroom interactions. Certainly the literature exhibits a wide diversity of teaching and learning approaches from equally varied perspectives. For instance, current examples of this research encompass the impact of cognitive and learning styles (Evans & Cools, 2011), engaging with students with disabilities (Bunning, Smith, Kennedy, & Greenham, 2013), the opportunities and challenges of medical education (Dolmans & van der Vleuten, 2010), and contemporary practices in maximising the relevance and sustainability of workplace learning (Cairns & Malloch, 2011).

A significant subset of this scholarship about educational developments and practices has taken up the complex yet crucial question of *what works* in relation to educational development – that is, which factors appear to be influential in generating successful outcomes from educational development strategies. Again these factors vary according to educational contexts, disciplines and systems. For example, Biggs and Tang (2011) elicited several elements of effective approaches to teaching and learning in the higher education sector. With regard to teaching, they synthesised at least some of the current thinking about quality teaching as follows:

Quality teaching produces quality learning[;] hence the importance of staff development and reflective practice. Quality teaching has two aspects: what the teacher does when interacting with students, and how the curriculum is structured and organized. A number of teaching methods encourage student metacognition, but no particular method is as important as the way the teacher interacts with the student, whatever the method. (p. 77)

Similarly, Hattie (2012) synthesised decades of research into the multifaceted relationship between teaching and learning, and about ““what works”” (p. 2) in successful teaching. He summarised those success factors in a way that resonates with some of the points made earlier in this chapter as well as with the succeeding chapters in this volume:

The fundamental thesis of this book is that there is a ‘practice’ of teaching. The word *practice*, and not *science*, is deliberately chosen because there is no fixed recipe for ensuring that teaching has the maximum possible effect on student learning, and no set of principles that apply to all learning for all students. But there are practices that we know are effective and many practices that we know are not....Instead, evidence of impact or not may mean that teachers need to modify or dramatically change their theories of action. Practice invokes notions of a way of thinking and doing, and particularly of learning constantly from the deliberate practice in teaching. (p. 4; *emphasis in original*)

On a different but equally diverse canvas, Bhuasiri, Xaymoungkhoun, Zo, Rho and Ciganek (2012) articulated ‘6 dimensions and 20 critical success factors for e-learning systems in developing countries’, including ‘the importance of curriculum design for learning performance’ and the centrality of ‘[t]echnology awareness, motivation, and changing learners’ behaviour...’ (p. 843). Likewise Cochrane (2010) distilled the following ‘[c]ritical success factors’ in maximising the effectiveness of mobile learning projects:

...the importance of the pedagogical integration of the technology into the course assessment, lecturer modelling of the pedagogical use of the tools, the need for regular formative feedback from lecturers to students, and the appropriate choice of mobile devices and software to support the pedagogical model underlying the course. (p. 133)

On a smaller but no less significant scale, various scholars have outlined the perceived relationship between educational development and enhanced teaching and learning practices in relation to specific disciplines. These accounts have been directed at disciplines as diverse

and multifaceted as media education (Buckingham, 2003), medical education (Kern, Thomas, & Hughes, 2009), music education (Mark & Madura, 2014) and science education (Appleton, 2006). Similarly, focused analyses have examined this same relationship with regard to particular levels and types of educational provision, including early childhood education (Miles Gordon & Williams Browne, 2011), elementary or primary education (Graham, McKeown, Kihara, & Harris, 2012), secondary education (Singer & the Hofstra New Teachers Network, 2014), special education (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010), teacher education (Alexander & Hammond, 2012), adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 2007) and higher education (Tight, 2012). Likewise, attention has been given to these same relationships in terms of currently topical educational issues such as the implications of educational futures research (Young & Muller, 2010) and the notion of interprofessional education (Thistlethwaite & Moran, 2010).

This necessarily short overview of current scholarship has highlighted the contextualised character of understandings of and approaches to educational developments and practices and how that character varies according to the disciplinary focus and/or the level and type of educational provision. At the same time, the literature demonstrated convergences and synergies across these different forms of teaching and learning that reflected the potential for some kind of consensus about at least some of the elements of effective educational development and of ‘what works’ in contemporary educational practices. These elements include, for example, appropriate alignment among various aspects of the educational enterprise (Lam & Tsui, 2013) and the importance of authentic assessment (Dennis, Rueter, & Simpson, 2013). Certainly there is a considerable need for further research in this specific scholarly field, such as that portrayed in this book.

Conceptual Frameworks for Analysing and Evaluating Educational Developments and Practice

Table 1.1 presents a comparison of different conceptual frameworks distilled from the literature for analysing and evaluating educational developments and practice. There are some general consistencies across the different perspectives. There seems to be agreement that attention must be paid to the institutional focus, the ongoing professional competence of the educator through professional development and reflective practice, research-based practice and the impact of technology.

Table 1.1: Comparison of conceptual frameworks about educational developments and practice

Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil (2004)	Gibbs (2013)	Land (2001)	Amundsen & Wilson (2012)	Moutafidou, Melliou, & Georgopoulou (2012)
Institutional strategic direction	Developing the institution	Managerial orientation and political strategist orientation	Institutional focus	Participating in decision-making

Culture of institution		Interpretive – hermeneutic orientation		Cooperation with experienced colleagues and the academic community
Student characteristics	Developing students			
Educators’ teaching philosophies and styles		Reflective practitioner and Romantic (ecological humanist)	Reflection focus	Assessment of daily practices
Educational design principles	Ongoing teacher development	Professional competence	Skills and methods focus	Professional development
	Educational evaluation and research	Consultant researcher orientation	Action research/inquiry focus	Modification of strategies based on recent research
Technological innovations and institutional infrastructure	Developing learning environments			Implementation of innovative practices
	Impact of external environment	Entrepreneurial orientation		
		Disciplinary orientation	Disciplinary focus	

Interestingly, the focus seems to be on teaching rather than on learning, even though Alexander (2000) suggested that research in academic development is a search for ‘long-term changes that students undergo when engaged in formal learning’ (p. 28), including cognitive, social and emotional lifelong and lifewide learning rather than cognitive learning that would be relevant until a student completed the related assessment. Moreover, academic development includes ‘interactions between teachers and students, as well as between students and students’ (Alexander, 2000, p. 31). Table 1.1 also highlights that academic development is a complex theoretical concept that is influenced strongly by internal and external stakeholders and relationships.

In relation to learning, Biggs and Tang (2011) encapsulated the three components of student motivation most likely to promote sustained learning outcomes:

1. The task provided – the teaching/learning activity itself – must be *valued* by the student and not seen as busy-work or trivial...
2. The student must have a reasonable *probability of success* in achieving the task....
3. A Theory Y climate is best for quality learning. Learners learn best when they feel free to move, are trusted and are able to make decisions and take responsibility for their own learning – *consistent with* clear policies and procedures and with an organized environment for learning. (p. 66; *emphasis in original*)

In a review of the literature relating to academic staff development and student learning outcomes conducted for the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Rivers (2005) asserted that ‘good teaching has positive impacts on student outcomes; and teachers can be assisted to improve the quality of their teaching through a variety of academic interventions’ (p. 3). Ongoing professional competence of the educator through professional development academic development programs or interventions may occur using some of the following activities: short training courses; *in situ* training; consulting, peer assessment and mentoring; student assessment of teaching; and intensive staff development (Rivers, 2005, p. 5). Moutafidou et al. (2012) also proposed ongoing tertiary study and participating in conferences as forms of educational development.

The construct of reflective practice as part of academic development was supported by the research of Moutafidou et al. (2012). According to Land (2001), a reflective practitioner is concerned with continuous improvement and ‘[s]eeks to foster a culture of self- or peer-evaluative, critical reflection amongst colleagues’ (p. 6). This aligns with the work of Schön (1987), who argued strongly that educators should evaluate their practice through research.

Adding to the complexity of designing learning environments for development is the impact of technology integration on teaching and learning. Considerations include the institution’s technology infrastructure being enabled to provide access for students, as well as the educator’s own technology knowledge and skills that support teaching and learning within technology-enhanced learning environments. There must also be an element of participation in innovative uses of technology for teaching and learning purposes. Innovators are learning within the context of the work, which then helps to inform others who follow their lead in using different kinds of technology.

Evidence-based practice through ongoing research also plays a key role in educational development. Moutafidou et al. (2012) suggested that educators modify their teaching strategies after participating in evaluations of their programs or after considering the academic body of literature. Evidence helps to inform decisions and practice, which may then create an opportunity for further iterations of data collection and/or evaluation.

There is a need to have a clear and far-sighted institutional focus on academic development. Such issues as the strategic directions, policies and institutional cultures influence the nature and type of resources and supports allocated for educational development. Well-aligned strategic plans with appropriate resources result in a greater impact at the individual and institutional levels.

In summary, we have elaborated some of the foundational principles that we see as central to developing a conceptual framework that is sufficiently rigorous and robust to facilitate the analysis of current research exploring educational developments and practice. We have assembled these principles from carefully selected teaching and learning approaches and strategies across a range of contexts and with a diversity of purposes and outcomes, gleaned from the contemporary literature.

The Book’s Rationale, Structure and Intended Contributions to Knowledge

This book, *Educational developments, practices and effectiveness: Global perspectives and contexts*, presents a range of educational developments and practices in different international

contexts. The goal of the book is to apply sustained analysis and evaluation to the notion of academic development in today's complex, socially, politically and culturally charged educational sectors. The chapters in the book offer distinctive and powerful ideas for educational development. They explore different ways to enhance the quality of teaching in order to improve the quality of learning. In doing so, they chart a possible way forward in challenging and contesting current political rhetoric attached to *educational reform* and in advocating evidence-based strategies based on shrewd understandings of *what works* in relation to educational developments and practice.

At this point it is appropriate to record that all the chapters in the book, including this one, have undergone a process of rigorous *double blind* peer review, with each chapter being read separately by at least two reviewers. Chapter authors also had the opportunity to participate in two structured writing workshops, in order to enhance the quality of the final versions of the texts. Moreover, each editor read each chapter in a process of continuous review and quality enhancement.

The remaining chapters in the book have been clustered around two organising themes that themselves reflect broader debates in current scholarship. Section One focuses on educational developments and specialised teaching and learning strategies. Within that focus, in Chapter 2 Sabine Seufert and Christoph Meier investigate the implementation of 'Social-Business-Learning' as a new field for corporate learning. D. Randy Garrison and Zehra Akyol use Chapter 3 to provide a Canadian perspective on metacognition analysed within the communities of inquiry framework. This is followed by an investigation by Shalene Werth and Shaunaugh Brady in Chapter 4 of the changing nature of educational advocacy for students with disabilities. In Chapter 5 Karen Trimmer shares a conceptual framework and methodology to assess teacher competence and utilisation of ICT and e-learning.

The interplay between educational developments and specialised disciplines of knowledge – in this case some of the subject areas making up the increasingly researched science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) – constitutes Section Two of the book. In Chapter 6 David Thorpe presents an innovative approach to embedding sustainability in engineering practice. Linda Galligan, Christine McDonald, Carola Hobohm, Birgit Loch and Janet Taylor use Chapter 7 to review and evaluate a decade of innovation in the use of digital technology for mathematical understanding by a group of mathematics educators. Finally, in Chapter 8 Jennifer Donovan outlines an innovative approach to exploring media as entertainment or education in order to examine the impact that the mass media have on our children's learning about science concepts.

In combination, this chapter's articulation of the conceptual framework distilled in Table 1.1, and the following chapters' elaborations of the three identified themes – educational developments in relation to specialised teaching and learning strategies, specialised groups of learners and specialised disciplines of knowledge – are intended to contribute to linking with and building on existing research in these and related domains. In particular, the editors and the authors seek to contribute to continuing conversations about some of the *hardy perennials* in educational policy-making and provision, including *what works* in specific contexts with regard to certain educational developments and practices. That contribution is framed by theoretically rigorous and empirically grounded scholarship and is enriched by the application of multiple disciplinary and national perspectives.

Conclusion

It is clear from the preceding discussion that the effectiveness of particular educational developments and practices is by no means guaranteed. On the contrary, the complexity and diversity of such developments and practices, and the operation of powerful but not necessarily complementary influences from outside as well as within the educational sphere,

reinforce the importance and timeliness of a set of accounts of specific educational developments and practices in certain contexts. This book presents just that set of accounts. The editors and the authors hope that readers will appreciate and enjoy the chapters in their own right, as well as for their broader significance in suggesting new and valuable ways of researching and extending developments in contemporary educational practice.

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