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**ARTICLE**

Transformation narratives in academic practice

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This paper is an investigation of ‘transformation narratives’ emerging from early career academics’ reflective writing. The pieces of writing analysed describe self-initiated teaching development activities embedded in the early career academics’ practice. Using a transformative learning framework, the analysis reveals the following changes in early career academics’ practice: a move from non-reflective habitual action to more conscious practice; a more sophisticated view of teaching than was previously held; increased agency where teaching practice is perceived as something that can be developed; increased confidence; and a more multifaceted conception of an academic role than their original conception. The limitations of the transformative learning approach and implications this might have to those designing and delivering these types of programs are then explored.

**Introduction**

Recent higher education literature increasingly draws our attention to the changes in academic work and practice. Several studies describe a perceived shift from academic work as a largely self-determined and self-regulated autonomous endeavour to academic work shaped by accountability and performative regimes in the corporatised higher education environment (Ball, 2003; Fanghanel & Trowler, 2008; Malcolm & Zukas, 2009). This literature suggests that the very meaning of being an academic has become highly contested in today’s university as our understanding of what constitutes academic work is continuously negotiated and re-defined by various stakeholders, and increasingly so by university management (Churchman & Sharron, 2009; Nixon, 2004). Recent studies report that early career academics feel particularly vulnerable in this environment (Archer, 2008; Hakala 2009; Smith, 2010). Smith (2010) describes the difficulties that new academics, in particular those on probation, encounter in the process of establishing themselves as ‘real’ academics. A recurring complaint of early career academics is that they find university expectations for their performance opaque and ambiguous; for instance, an explicit requirement to complete a teaching qualification is juxtaposed with the implicit expectation that they will ‘publish or perish’ (Smith, 2010). The feeling of lack of control and clarity about one’s work does not disappear later in the academic career - the academic role itself is fraught with tensions and ambiguities characterised by the multiplicity of demands in the constantly changing higher education environment (Baldwin, DeCruz, Shaw & Moretto, 2008). The essential learning for early career academics is to find a way to work within these ambiguities and tensions of the academic environment, and accept that an academic role might require them to balance multiple and seemingly incompatible academic duties. According to Tennant, McMullen and Kaczynski (2010), this requires more than the ability to adapt to change and includes the development of self-awareness and understanding of the academic workplace context, which enables individuals to negotiate ‘the trajectory through insecurities and risks associated with change’ (p. 41).

Nowhere are the underlying fractures of the academic role and the sense of loss of control more apparent than in teaching. Even though some new academics come from professional or industry backgrounds with limited exposure to academic research, the majority have some experience in conducting research, through having completed a research thesis, for instance. The experience of teaching and awareness of the complexities involved in creating learning opportunities for students, however, are often virtually non-existent among early career academics. The ambiguities and uncertainties in teaching can be bewildering even to experienced academics – I am doing my best, why aren’t students turning up to my classes? How do I interpret student evaluations? Why is assessment marking taking up so much of my time? Why aren’t students interested in my feedback…? The most frequently available opportunity for newly appointed academics to explore these questions and gain some insight into teaching is in programs focusing on developing early career academics’ teaching practice. These programs (often known as Foundations of University Learning and Teaching programs and herein referred to as ‘Foundations’) are offered and are often mandatory to early career academics in most Australian universities (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson & Luezeckyj, 2010). Similar programs exist in universities in other countries, for example, South Africa, Netherlands, and Sweden, although in the UK early career academics’ teaching development needs are addressed through externally accredited and often mandatory Postgraduate Certificate programs (Fry, 2006). In this paper I do not make a distinction between literature discussing Foundations programs and the Postgraduate Certificates - although the mode of these programs can vary substantially, they essentially fulfill a similar purpose.

In reviewing Postgraduate Certificate programs in Australasia and the United Kingdom, Kandlbinder and Peseta (2009) found that most higher education teaching preparation programs use some form of reflective framework to explore and address some of the issues linked to the complexities of today’s higher education environment and academic work, in particular related to teaching practice. Reflection allows the participants of these programs to build on the individual or collective analysis of their prior teaching experiences in order to identify the problem areas and reframe their practice to address the issues (Kandlbinder & Peseta, 2009).

In this study I explore a case of a Foundations program, and analyse written reflective pieces describing self-initiated changes in the participants’ teaching practice that take place after attending the program. Following a strong theme of transformation in the data I use Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning framework and Kegan’s (2000) constructive developmental theory to examine these reflective pieces further. Based on this analysis I propose that the program supports newly appointed academics in developing their confidence and agency through enabling them to re-imagine their teaching practice as something that can be affected and developed, rather than something that is beyond their control and can only be ‘fumbled’ through. I then explore the limitations of a transformative learning approach and the implications this might have to those designing and delivering these types of programs.

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Background

The case of Foundations program

The Foundations of University Learning and Teaching program examined in this study is offered to academics newly appointed to an Australian research-intensive university. The program introduces new academics to a range of topics and issues related to their teaching role with a particular focus on the development and enhancement of their teaching practice.

The program consists of a five-day face-to-face workshop followed by a self-selected teaching development activity carried out by participants after attendance at the workshop. The program is designed to cater mostly to early career academics and is mandatory for all newly appointed academics with an ongoing teaching role (up to the Senior Lecturer level). The program is focused on scholarly teaching practice development, which requires the participants to reflect on and inquire into their teaching practice, and as such it is not an induction program - new academics with no teaching experience are encouraged to teach at least one semester at the university before they attend the program. In this paper I refer to the academics who attend this program as ‘participants’.

Elements of reflection are integrated throughout the face-to-face component of the program, for example, in group discussions drawing on participants’ prior teaching experiences, in examining and developing participants’ teaching philosophy and rationale, and through daily learning partnership conversations. In addition, participants are required to describe a self-selected teaching initiative that they undertake in their teaching practice in a written reflective piece, which is submitted to the program convener after completion of the formal part of the program. This study is an investigation of ‘transformation narratives’ emerging from these written reflective pieces describing program participants’ teaching practice. The self-reported change described in these narratives appears to be quite significant and in some cases might be considered transformational.

Transformative learning framework

The reflective narratives were analysed using Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning framework and Kegan’s (2000) constructive-developmental theory. Transformative learning is defined as qualitatively different from incremental development where new learning expands the existing knowledge and experience. Where transformative learning occurs, the whole ‘frame of reference’ through which we filter our perceptions is changed (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). Mezirow (1991, p. 168) suggests that the process of transformative learning might involve a ‘disorienting dilemma’, which leads to ‘self-examination’ in isolation and culminates in ‘a critical assessment of one’s assumptions’. Further stages in Mezirow’s (1991, p. 168-169) framework involve ‘recognizing that others have gone through a similar process’, ‘exploring options’ and developing a ‘plan for action’, which leads to the final phase of ‘reintegration’ of learning back into one’s life.

Transformative learning is underpinned by reflection. Mezirow (1991) draws a clear distinction between reflective and non-reflective action, where the latter involves habitual action, thoughtful action (using prior experience to make decisions without examining one’s underlying beliefs) and introspection (thinking about oneself without examining prior learning). According to this framework, individuals are able to reflect on content – ‘what we perceive, think, feel or act upon’; process – ‘how one performs the functions of perceiving, thinking, feeling or acting’ and premise – ‘becoming aware of why we perceive, think, feel or act as we do’. (Mezirow 1991, p. 107-108). Transformative learning necessarily involves premise reflection and takes place when ‘assumptions are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise unjustified’ (Mezirow 1991, p. 111), which leads to a transformation in an individual’s perspective.

Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning framework is closely linked to Kegan’s (2000) constructive-developmental theory. According to Kegan (2000), our practice and lives can be defined through the relationship between the object – something that we perceive ourselves as being in control of, and subject – something that we are ‘run by’ and unable to distinguish from ourselves (Kegan, 2000, p. 53). In other words, ‘we have’ object; we ‘are’ subject’ (Kegan, 2000, p. 53). Similarly to Mezirow’s (1991) conception of transformative learning, which involves becoming aware of one’s implicit assumptions and making them explicit, Kegan conceptualises transformative learning as an epistemological transformation where the ‘subject’ in our knowing becomes the ‘object’ of our knowing (Kegan, 2000).

Mezirow’s (1991) framework clearly influenced Brookfield’s (1995) ideas around critical reflection, which, as mentioned previously, has been identified as a core concept underpinning the majority of similar programs in Australasia and the United Kingdom (Kandilbinder & Peseta, 2009). According to Brookfield, becoming a critically reflective teacher involves becoming aware of one’s assumptions, which renders ‘power and hegemony’ relationships visible, and this is achieved through deliberate attempts to ‘stand outside oneself’ (Brookfield 1995, p. 29).

Research design

This study is based on content analysis of 23 reflective pieces written by the program participants describing teaching initiatives situated in their academic practice. These reflective pieces were not purpose-written for this study or selected to answer pre-determined research questions. The participants were encouraged to write about any change in their teaching practice that they implemented after attending the program, such as curriculum review, participation in broader learning and teaching initiatives in their Faculty, scholarly research into teaching, or any other self-selected or externally driven teaching activity in order to complete the program. Simple criteria were crafted for the actual writing task, mostly proposing a structure for a piece. This follow-up activity was conceptualised as a developmental task requiring the participants to make sense of learning and teaching ideas in their unique contexts of practice. No judgment on the quality of the initiative (or writing) was passed and the participants were not required to demonstrate their knowledge of or adherence to the learning and teaching ideas in that sense it was not an assessment task per se. Instead, the participants received extensive feedback on their reflective pieces directing them to further resources and literature, linking them with colleagues working on similar issues, and inviting them to present their ideas at further events. After the formal completion of the program, I approached the participants about the possibility of using their reflective pieces for research. Consent was given by 12 male and 11 female early career academics representing a wide range of discipline areas.

This study is a naturalistic inquiry situated within the interpretive paradigm. It is based on the idea that individuals construct their realities through interactions with the world and that there is a multiplicity of ways of being in the world. The core belief underpinning this study is that a phenomenon can only be understood from the perspective of individuals who are engaged in the activities being studied; furthermore, the researcher has to share the frame of reference with the participants in order make credible inferences about their understanding of the world (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The aim of this study was to develop a believable and trustworthy explanation of participants’ narratives rather than to present an ‘objective’ account of reality or a de-contextualised generalisable interpretation. As a convenor of the program, I was immersed into the practice of teaching in this program and had an ongoing relationship with the participants, which constituted the prolonged engagement necessary to analyse and interpret the participants’ narratives. I was mindful of the reflexivity required in conducting this study and took a critical stance supported by the literature in the analysis.

As this study is underpinned by the principles of naturalistic inquiry, I am not concerned about the authenticity of the reflective pieces (or the performativity prevalent in reflective pieces as suggested by...
Macfarlane and Gourley (2009)). Similarly, I am not concerned whether they represent the actual reality of individuals’ academic practice. My assumption is that any reflective piece is inevitably a subjectively constructed narrative representing an individual’s perspective in particular circumstances and at a particular point in time. I do not see the narratives analysed in this study as the only singular narratives of the ‘true’ self that individuals have or are able to produce – I assume that individuals are able to construct a multiplicity of narratives of the self that are at constant interplay and that ‘remain fluid, open to the shifting tides of circumstance’ (Gergen and Kaye 1992: 255, cited in Chappell, Rhodes, Solomon, Tennant & Yates, 2003) and as such are always partial and relational.

I analysed the reflective pieces by first looking for patterns and identifying broad areas where changes in teaching practice occurred. When a strong theme of transformation emerged, I examined the relevant literature around transformative learning and looked at the narratives using Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning framework and Kegan’s (2000) constructive developmental theory in an iterative process comparing the data, emerging categories and the literature, focusing on cases where reflection on assumptions about teaching practice and a subsequent transformation in an individual’s perspective had occurred.

Findings
Changes after attending the Foundations program were identified in eight key areas of participants’ teaching practice. These changes were grouped into two broad categories focused around external ‘change to practice’ and internal ‘change to self’. Table 1 includes these categories with examples from the written reflective pieces. To protect confidentiality, participants are assigned a number and the letter ‘L’ to represent their status as lecturers.

Change to practice
The most common area of externally oriented change to early career academics’ teaching practice is review of aspects of the curriculum, such as rewriting course outlines to ensure constructive alignment between student learning outcomes, teaching strategies and assessment tasks (Biggs 2003). Constructive alignment is discussed extensively in the program and the reflective pieces indicate that although various curriculum elements are often initially misaligned in participants’ courses, the idea of alignment intuitively makes sense and is perceived as relatively easy to implement.

Closely related to curriculum review are reports of expanded repertoire of teaching strategies. During the program participants experience a number of teaching strategies, such as an ice-breaker, a role-play, and various feedback mechanisms, from the perspective of a learner. In their reflective pieces participants describe positive student reactions to similar student-centred strategies implemented into their own teaching practice, for instance, group work, student-led seminars, reflective tasks, and so on.

Although accounts of taking a more scholarly approach to teaching and leadership in teaching appear in the reflective pieces examined in this study, they are quite infrequent. Where references to scholarship occur, participants talk about searching for and reading learning and teaching literature to inform their teaching practice and address particular issues. Evidence of contribution to learning and teaching literature is occurring, part in the reflective pieces examined in this study, they are quite infrequent. Where references to scholarship include these categories with examples from the written reflective pieces.

Change to self
Participants frequently report a changed understanding of the rationale for and appreciation of various university processes and systems, which often results in a shift from compliance and ‘mimicking’ practice to a more integrated approach. This indicates the beginning of a ‘change to self’, including a shift in perception of one’s teaching practice and an increased awareness of its context. For example, understanding the reasons for having curriculum documents often moves early career academics from a perception that the need for a course outline is a bureaucratic university requirement that creates ‘busy work’ for academics to an understanding that curriculum documents not only function as a guide for the teacher, but also outline a learning pathway for students.

A number of reflective pieces demonstrate that participants have reconsidered their role as a teacher, which indicates further changes to participants’ awareness about the self. Participants stories show that they came to realize the need to take a more student-centred teaching approach: to ‘step back a little’ and allow more space for students to engage in discussions, or to incorporate more student dialogue in tutorials rather than treating them as ‘mini-lectures’ (L8).

Importantly, almost all reflective pieces are underpinned by a sense of increased confidence in the way participants approach their teaching practice. Participants report feeling affirmed regarding the ‘good’ aspects of their practice, as well as feeling surprised and relieved to learn that their teaching does not have to be perfect, that taking risks, making mistakes and developing one’s practice incrementally is a part of what teaching practice is and is expected to be. A lot of early career academics inherit courses from their senior colleagues and reflective pieces examined in this study suggest that after attending the program they feel much more ownership of their teaching – they see courses and their teaching not as something that has been ‘handed down’, but as something that is theirs and that can be changed and developed further.

In addition to increased confidence a number of reflective pieces show evidence of transformation and change in a ‘frame of reference’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). Unlike the reflections discussed so far these narratives describe a dramatic change in the way teaching practice and one’s position towards students is conceived. For example, a reflection on a ‘defensive’ teaching style evident in the tendency to over-prepare for lectures is now seen as driven by fear of exposure of one’s thinking to students where they might be able to identify ‘confusion error, misunderstanding, woolly reasoning or lack of knowledge’ (L13). This realization leads the academic to shift from the ‘self-absorbed focus’ to ‘how the students are experiencing learning’ (L13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change to practice</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review of aspects of curriculum</td>
<td>I reflected on the concepts and ideas I have learnt in the [Foundations program] last year, and drastically revised the course outline, instead of using the outline the previous lecturer of the course gave me. In addition, I even changed the contents of the course, employing some ideas from the [Foundations] workshop. <strong>L5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded repertoire of teaching strategies</td>
<td>I thought the reason for non-cooperation and lack of communication among group members was basically because they didn’t feel themselves as part of a group. (...) After taking [Foundations] workshop, I thought I might emphasize “Ice-Breakers” when I assign groups. (...) [G]roups proved to be a big success this semester, with members becoming literally friends, keeping contacts and a lot of time staying outside class and conversing about their works and businesses  [sic]. <strong>L6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scholarly approach to teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[The Foundations program] encouraged me to read up more on current teaching practices.</td>
<td>L10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Following the [Foundations program] (...) I initiated communication between the tutors for the various language streams (...). This had not been done before. (...) It is planned to keep this communication going and to meet regularly once a semester, especially with new tutors, to encourage exchange.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Discussion

Based on Mezirow’s (1991) transformative learning framework and Kegan’s (2000) constructive developmental framework I argue that the shift in early career academics’ conceptualization of their practice described in the reflective pieces involves the following:

- a move from non-reflective habitual action to a more conscious practice. The program encourages the participants to bring teaching issues to the forefront of their mind and it exposes them to a range of ideas that could enhance their teaching practice. Almost all reflective pieces indicate that participants are putting conscious effort into developing their teaching and many refer to having ‘sleepwalked’ through their teaching prior to attending the program. Teaching practice is still perceived as puzzling and full of ambiguities; there is, however, an emergent sense that university learning and teaching systems and processes have an underlying logic and rationale. The way this influences their own teaching practice is appreciated and university requirements are seen as less arbitrary and bureaucratic.

- a change in perspective, a more sophisticated view of teaching than was previously held. The idea that it is possible to approach teaching in a scholarly way and that learning and teaching literature could be consulted in addressing one’s teaching issues surfaces in some reflective pieces. Additionally, some participants describe a shift from a teacher-centred approach to a more student-centred perspective. This is experienced as empowering, but also requiring further work and constant awareness of one’s position as a teacher.

- increased sense of agency - teaching practice is perceived as something that can be developed. The growing awareness of one’s ability to change and shape one’s teaching practice is experienced as particularly empowering by the program participants. In a number of reflective pieces academics describe the realization that they can ‘own’ their courses and that they do not have to continue teaching the way their previous colleagues did. Most of the participants report that they are able to change the curriculum documents and introduce new ideas, teaching strategies and assessment tasks into their teaching and they often express a commitment to ongoing development of their teaching practice in the future.

- increased confidence to take risks and experiment. Closely linked to the sense of increased agency is a feeling of increased confidence, which allows the participants to take risks, experiment and change one’s teaching in ways they wouldn’t have considered before attending the program. Increased confidence was visible in virtually all the reflective pieces.

- a more multifaceted conception of what being an academic is than the original conception. The growing appreciation of teaching is visible in most of the reflective pieces. Participants are more likely to consider teaching as an essential part of an academic role rather than seeing it as a non-intellectual chore that needs to be done quickly and efficiently to move on to research and other more interesting, stimulating and ‘real’ academic duties.

Building on Kegan’s (2000) constructive-developmental framework I propose that the Foundations program supports early career academics in shifting their perception of their role from conceptualising teaching and academic practice in a subject position – viewing it as something which they are ‘run by, identified with, fused with, at the effect of’ (Kegan, 2000, p. 53) – to viewing academic practice as an object which they can ‘look at, take responsibility for, reflect upon, exercise control over, integrate with some other way of knowing’ (Kegan, 2000, p. 53). Program participants report feeling more confident about changing their teaching practice and freer to take risks and experiment in their work, which indicates that academic practice is perceived more as an object that can be controlled and shaped rather than as something that one is either good or bad at, as determined by externally imposed, constantly shifting expectations and bureaucratic rules to which one is subjected. The transformation narratives show us that this shift in thinking about teaching and academic practice can be experienced as particularly powerful.

It is important to acknowledge that early career academics attending the Foundations program come from a multiplicity of backgrounds and it cannot be presumed that they have not started reflecting on their practice, academic career and academic workplace prior to attending the program or even before their
appointment to the university. In the majority of narratives analysed in this study, however, the participants attribute the significant change to their perception of their teaching practice to having attended the Foundations program; there is insufficient information to draw conclusions about the development of their reflective capacity outside of this context. Based on the analysis I argue that the program creates a conducive environment for new academics to examine their teaching practice, which allows for the transformative experiences described above to occur. By bringing a range of early career academics together, the program provides a social context where ‘disorienting dilemmas’ (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168) encountered in academic practice can be examined and assumptions about academic work and teaching can be questioned and explored. The cross-disciplinary context creates opportunities for academics to expand their awareness about the diverse ways teaching is practiced, which sometimes nudges the participants to re-examine their habitual practice and encourages them to explore ideas outside their comfort zone. In addition, the program might be seen as a supportive and safe transitional space where a new ‘frame of reference’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16) can be developed and tested by the participants, and where reintegration of learning into practice is enabled through the post-program follow-up activity.

**Limitations**

Transformative learning is a useful lens through which to view, analyse and explain the type of learning that might be happening in higher education teaching preparation programs. However, this conceptualisation of learning, and particularly the over-reliance on reflection inherent in this framework, has limitations.

Macfarlane and Gourlay (2009) question the prevailing use of reflective assignments in Postgraduate Certificate programs, arguing that academics are able to ‘fake’ the reflection and produce accounts of dramatic revelations ‘on demand’ in order to pass mandatory courses. They suggest that the programs contain a “hidden curriculum” of emotional performativity which encourages conformity and calls for formulaic ‘confessions’ that demonstrate ‘ideological conversion’, and which academics are all too happy to supply (Macfarlane & Gourlay, 2009, p. 456). As discussed previously, I believe that the transformation narratives examined in this paper do not constitute a single, final and ‘correct’ narrative of the self that new academics construct and live by. Instead, they present a snapshot of how early career academics function and make sense of a complex and ambiguous higher education workplace environment, which calls for a ‘multiplicity of self-accounts (…), but a commitment to none’ (Chappell et al, 2003, p. 21).

The Foundations program described in this paper does not focus on transformation as an outcome, and I believe that it should not. The question of what constitutes transformation has to be asked; in particular, does transformation necessarily involve a dramatic epiphany, an ‘apocalyptic event’, or can it happen incrementally (Brookfield, 2000), in which case the effects might be visible only over longer-term. If the idea of transformational outcome is to be used to form the curriculum of the program, there is almost certainly bound to be a misalignment between participants’ expectations and the program aims, as, I suspect, none of the early career academics come to the program expecting to be or interested in being ‘transformed’.

Similarly, viewing the program as a discrete event with a transformational outcome as an end point would be problematic. As we know, this type of centrally provided program constitutes only occasional brief encounters for academics, while their academic practice is located in the discipline, the department or School, and the actual workplace context (Clegg, 2003). The learning that happens in these programs can only be seen as one element of the development that takes place over the entirety of an academic career.

**Concluding remarks**

The transformative learning lens reveals a complex process and powerful experiences that participants undergo in their transition to an academic workplace and in conceptualising their teaching practice. I do not claim that there is a direct causal relationship between attending the Foundations program and a ‘real’ transformation in academics’ perspectives, and as such this is not a study of the ‘impact’ of the program. One might argue that a similar change would have occurred in early career academics’ conceptualization of their practice over time and with experience. I propose, however, that the Foundations program creates the conditions for the narrative highlighting the intellectual autonomy, agency and self-authorship in one’s teaching to emerge more quickly through the following key aspects: the provision of space, time and social context to think about one’s teaching; the explicit focus on reflective practice, which allows the participants to name the implicit and ‘unnamed’ aspects of their practice; and the requirement to ‘do’ something in their teaching practice after the program. This enables early career academics not to ‘discover who one is’, but to create ‘who one might become’ (Chappell et al, 2003, p. 23). Further studies focusing on the specific aspects of these types of programs might reveal more detail about the factors that might trigger this type of change.

This study allowed us to gain an insight into how, through the construction of transformation narratives, the participants in a higher education teaching preparation program are able to make the university happen for them rather than to them (Peseta 2010). Further contributions examining and conceptualising the change that participants in such programs go through are necessary if we are to consider academics’ development in their roles more holistically, and in particular, if we are to move beyond narrowly conceived ‘before and after-type’ impact evaluations. Conceptualising the way the notoriously elusive ‘evidence’ of effectiveness of these programs is constructed is particularly important considering the demands within the performativity environment that we all operate in. Our ability to define the types of ‘evidence’, ‘effectiveness’ and ‘impact’ that we’re looking for might eventually determine the kind of work we will be doing.

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**Notes on Contributors**

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6146 WORDS IN TOTAL.