Transitioning from the Central Teaching and Learning Centre to a Faculty's Centre: Adaptations and Career Growth as an Educational Developer

Isabeau Iqbal, PhD,
University of British Columbia

Author's Contact Information

Isabeau Iqbal, PhD
Educational Developer
UBC Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT)
Irving K. Barber Learning Centre
1961 East Mall, University of British Columbia,
Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z1
eportfolio: http://isabeauiqbal.ca
Email: Isabeau.iqbal@ubc.ca

Abstract:

Educational developers who seek to evolve in their roles and careers are likely to transition from one teaching and learning centre to another at least once, if not multiple times, during their professional lives. This reflection discusses several issues that arose when I moved from the University's large and well-established central teaching and learning centre to a newly formed centre within a Faculty at the same university. I describe the significance of staying connected to my educational development community, and note how the lack of established processes was beneficial in my career growth. I observe the important role of collegiality and leadership for supporting me in my development. Finally, I conclude with some general suggestions for promoting our profession and our own personal growth as educational developers.

Key Words:

educational developer, educational development, career growth, leadership, teaching and learner centre, university, collegiality.

Introduction

For almost 10 years, I worked as an educational developer at the University of British Columbia's (UBC) centralized teaching and learning centre (The Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, also known as CTLT). In my role at that centre, I collaborated closely with other educational developer colleagues to create and implement programs, facilitate communities of practice, and offer workshops on a variety of topics that had, as a general goal, enhancing teaching and student learning in

post-secondary education. The participants who benefited from these initiatives were from varied disciplinary backgrounds and included graduate students, faculty members, staff, undergraduate students and even visitors from outside the University. I enjoyed serving this broad university community.

But after nearly a decade at the CTLT and once I completed my PhD, which had higher education as its focus, I was eager for a change. And to my delight that's what I got: in spring 2013, I transferred[1] to UBC's Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science to work in their recently created teaching and learning centre, called the Office of Educational Support and Development (OESD). So it was that I moved from working in a large, well-established central unit with a staff of approximately 70, to a unit that was only a few months old and consisted of 4 core people. Whereas the central unit had approximately 23 people on its "teaching and learning professional development team", the OESD had one educational developer (me), one program manager assigned to helping the Faculty transition to a new undergraduate curriculum, a director, and an associate director.

It will come as no surprise that there were many differences between my "new" and "old" educational developer positions. I have reflected upon these a great deal over the past year and am keen to document some of my thoughts for following two main reasons:

1. In the educational development community, there is a thirst for literature and other resources that examine the career progression of educational developers. Seasoned and new educational developers alike recognize that "there is no prescribed…career progression to guide access to and movement within the field of educational development" (McDonald & Stockley, 2010, p. 7). As such, it is imperative that we write about our careers so as to build our understanding of the profession and the possibilities for growth within.

2. As the structure and organization of educational development centres continues to evolve (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013), personal accounts about our experiences within these different structures may help inform decisions about best practices within new and growing centres.

The reflections below are grouped into sub-headings that, for me, capture the most significant shifts and adaptations as I transitioned from the central unit to the one within a Faculty. These combined experiences have had direct implications on my career growth and satisfaction.

Missing my educational developer colleagues

During most of the years I worked at CTLT, the centre was under the direction of an individual who was actively involved in the Educational Developers Caucus (EDC) of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) and who enthusiastically encouraged—and supported—his staff to do the same. Many CTLT staff, as a result, engaged with that community and presented at the annual EDC conference, joined the listserv, and/or took on leadership roles within the organization.

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[1] Though the transfer was initially intended to last only one year, I was given the opportunity to extend it and ended up spending two years in the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences. In Spring 2015, I returned to CTLT.

Over time, the majority of colleagues with whom I collaborated, despite their varied backgrounds, self-identified as educational developers. I now recognize the extent to which we held common values, beliefs and assumptions about our work in higher education. From an academic culture perspective, we shared similar attitudes, behavioural norms, rituals, and other traditions; indeed, we belonged to the same culture (O'Meara, 2011; Trowler, 2008). Over the past year in the OESD, where I am the only person who claims the EDC as her professional tribe, I have missed the day-to-day interactions with my CTLT educational developer colleagues, most whom understood—by virtue of our shared culture—where I was "coming from" in my professional practice. Thanks in large part to the fact that the transfer to OESD was temporary (and therefore feels I am legitimately associated with the CTLT), I have found ways to continue to collaborate with my educational developer colleagues at CTLT. These relationships remain very important and dear to me. I have also taken every opportunity possible to introduce initiatives and concepts from our EDC professional body to my work at the OESD.

Defining and settling into my role

CTLT is a large, hierarchical organization with a clear reporting structure. People are assigned titles such as director, associate director, senior manager, manager, coordinator, assistant, co-op student, etcetera, and these titles are linked to roles which are generally well-defined. Within these CTLT roles, there is at least one person, but usually several, with extensive experience performing within that job title. For example, there are managers who have a strong understanding of what it means to be a manager and associate directors who clearly understand the roles and responsibilities of associate directors within the unit. As an educational developer at CTLT, I was accustomed to working with seasoned directors and managers and, because I had been with the unit for so long, was also deeply familiar with my own role within the organization.

This changed dramatically when I began at the OESD. Suddenly, I was performing my work within a newly established unit whose director and associate director were also learning their roles. Both these faculty members had extensive experience, and a record of success, leading major educational initiatives with their Faculty, but neither had directed an educational development unit before.

In addition to being a centre where roles and hierarchies are well-defined, CTLT is rather homogeneous in that nearly all employees, aside from the director and student hires, have "staff"—not "faculty member"—status. Though I think educational developers in Canada should be hired as faculty members (and several centres in our country have started doing so), the advantage of everyone having "staff status" is that there is a strong understanding among colleagues of all that entails. As a staff person at CTLT, there is no need to explain to one's manager or director, the "staff version" of a work week, benefits, reporting and other aspects because they have this knowledge. This is relevant because, in my experience of working at UBC, individuals with staff roles (regardless of whether they hold doctoral degrees or not) have significantly different career paths than do faculty members.

When I transferred to the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, I retained my staff status, but the circumstances within the teaching and learning centre were markedly different and this posed some unexpected challenges. For example, once at the OESD, I found myself having frequent conversations with my associate director about the implications of being a staff person. In his mind, I was a colleague of equal rank; in my mind, I was not, for he was my "boss" and I was staff. Breaking free of the structures I was accustomed to at CTLT was not an easy thing. Another challenge of being a staff member tasked to promote change among faculty members pertains to issues of legitimacy and authority. That is, I have sometimes wondered whether faculty members might be more receptive to change if the changes were being suggested by a faculty peer. In the case of the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences at UBC, where there are many non-traditional faculty positions[2], my hunch is that my status would not alter the situation much. However, in a more traditional Faculty, this might not be the case.

One of the most striking and positive benefits of working with directors who were not in the habit of distinguishing between "faculty" and "staff" within an educational development unit was that I was treated as a colleague and did not feel bound by a rigid hierarchy as I had in the past. Practically, the differences included that I now did research as part of my job (to my delight), was included in broader-reaching discussions about teaching and learning and had a stronger voice when it came to related policies and procedures within the Faculty. It was very much a case of my role as educational-developer-change agent becoming more prominent. As Dawson, Mighty and Britnell (2010) have described, facilitating change management is a key function of senior educational developers.

Growing as an educational developer

Given the newness of the OESD, the awareness that we were all in a state of defining our roles/establishing our practices, and the fact that my directors and Associate Dean Academic were responsive to my interests and leadership, I had quite a bit of flexibility when it came to finding my place within the unit. Initially, I gravitated to those areas where I had previous experience and comfort (e.g. peer review of teaching policy and practice, workshop planning and facilitation). Over time, however, I have taken on a greater leadership role in tasks and initiatives that I had no previous experience with. These include planning and facilitating a strategic planning process for the OESD, co-leading an educational development working group with the Associate Dean Academic, contributing to a curriculum transformation initiative, and helping to manage the student evaluation of teaching process for the Faculty.

Upon reflection, I recognize that my first year within the OESD was a period during which I was provided time and space to get acquainted with my new context. It was also a phase during which I learned that those in official positions of leadership (i.e., the OESD Director and Associate Director and the Associate Dean Academic) were receptive to my contributions and open to (and unthreatened by) my own desire to take a leadership role as an educational developer within the Faculty. As confirmed by the

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[2] In the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences at UBC, several faculty members have extensive pharmacy-practice experience but do not have doctorate degrees.

literature on teaching and learning leadership in higher education (e.g. Scott, Coates, Anderson, 2008), these individuals were demonstrating effective leadership, of which key qualities are fostering a collegial working environment, encouraging others to be leaders in their own areas of expertise, and doing what is needed to successfully implement new initiatives. This approach has allowed me to grow professionally in ways that are immensely rewarding.

Lessons Learned

Much more could be said about my transition to the OESD and I am in a continual process of adapting to the new-to-me culture in the Faculty. For those who read introductions and skip to the conclusion, here is what I hope you will take away:

1. As a growing community and profession, I encourage us to document our experiences and share these with our colleagues. These seemingly simple accounts of our every-day practice may be helpful to others.

2. Whether you are a seasoned or new educational developer, consider how the problems/issues/challenges in your unit/university/Faculty present you with opportunities to grow as an educational developer. That is, think about how your skills (ones you have and/or ones you want to build) may help in the given situation.

3. Unless you work at an established teaching and learning centre, chances are that most of the people you interact with regularly will not be familiar with the educational development profession. See this as an opening to educate others about our professional body and the value we bring to our institutions.

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