Educational developers: The multiple structures and influences that support our work

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Globalization of higher education is developing at a relentless pace as colleges, universities, and student enrollments burgeon throughout countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. As a result, educational developers in Australia, Canada, Europe, and the United States, all of which have well-established higher education contexts and educational development programs, are increasingly called on to share and exchange expertise and experience with colleagues in emerging contexts.

As faculty members and faculty developers with more than fifty years of collective experience in higher education in the United States and internationally, we believe that educational development is a key strategic lever for ensuring institutional quality and supporting institutional change around the globe. We also believe that professional preparation and continued development of practitioners in the field merits attention so that developers can better support faculty and institutions in their efforts to grow and change.

In this chapter, then, we look at several aspects of educational developers’ career pathways in a context where educational development has been in place for a number of years. To do so, we draw on findings from an in-depth study of educational development professionals in North America (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy, and Beach, 2006). Specifically, we surveyed developers from the United States and Canada who were members of the
The oldest and largest professional association for educational development scholars and practitioners in North America, the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network in Higher Education. Formed in 1974, POD’s membership currently includes educational developers from some forty countries, with the largest membership in the United States and Canada. From the outset, POD’s purpose has been to support improvement in higher education through faculty, instructional, and organizational development activities.

In our study, we addressed several key questions: What are the structural variations among educational development programs (typically called faculty development in the United States)? What goals, purposes, and resources guide and influence our work? What are the top challenges facing faculty members, institutions, and educational development programs? What are new directions for the field of educational development? In this chapter, we closely examine the demographics and key dimensions of the career paths of educational developers in the United States and Canada, including their range of titles, positions, and length of time on the job. We also identify the organizations and literatures that influence and shape their work, programs, and practices.

Introduction to Our Study of Educational Developers

Overall, we learned that U.S. and Canadian educational developers represent a truly eclectic group of professionals with varied types of appointments, structural contexts, goals, and influences on their work. This finding corresponds with the conclusions of other researchers who have studied international educational development (Chism, Gosling, and Sorcinelli, 2010; Gosling, 2008; Gosling, McDonald, and Stockley, 2007; Fraser, 2005). At the same time, we did find commonalities among developers across North America. We hope that sharing our findings helps to advance an international perspective on pathways into educational development. We also hope that our findings offer suggestions for how institutions and professional associations can support educational developers as they progress in their careers, regardless of where in the world they practice.

A few issues concerning our study require special note. The individuals we studied were members of the POD Network in Higher Education. The survey was sent to the full POD mailing list (999 names). We received completed surveys from 494 developers at three hundred higher education institutions in the United States and thirty-one institutions in Canada, for an overall response rate to the survey of 50 percent. Fifty-three percent of Canadian POD members responded, as did 49 percent of U.S. POD members. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents were men and 61 percent were women. We recognize that this census of educational developers does not necessarily represent the scope and proportion of all educational development professionals around the globe. At the same time, it is representative.
of the membership of the field's largest professional organization in North America.

**Titles and Experience in Educational Development**

We wanted to know all of the titles educational developers held at their institutions, as well as which title they considered primary. We were also interested in how long educational developers had held a position of responsibility in educational development.

**Multiple Positions.** We learned that it is not unusual for individuals responsible for educational development at U.S. and Canadian institutions to occupy more than one professional position. For example, one-third (33 percent) of the respondents listed their primary title as “director” of educational development. Almost one-quarter (21 percent) identified their faculty role as primary, and a similar percentage (23 percent) identified themselves as senior administrators (for example, associate provost, associate vice chancellor) or midlevel administrators (academic dean, associate dean, department chair). Almost three-quarters (70 percent) of the respondents reported holding two titles. The most prevalent combinations of titles were “director” or “associate/assistant director” and “faculty member,” with 60 percent of respondents indicating they were a director of a center also holding a faculty appointment. We surmise that educational developers with faculty status as well as an administrative title are more likely to carry credibility on issues of teaching and learning because of their direct involvement in the classroom.

**Length of Time in Educational Development.** When we examined the length of time educational developers had held a position of responsibility in the field, our study suggested that current educational development professionals were quite new to the field. In analyzing our data, we categorized “new developers” as individuals with five or fewer years of experience and “experienced developers” as those with more than ten years of experience. Overall, more than half of the respondents clustered in the new-developers category. Only about a quarter fell into the category of experienced developers.

**Length of Time in Primary Role.** We then looked at respondents’ number of years in educational development, organized according to their primary title and responsibility. Among directors of educational development programs, a surprisingly large group (43 percent) had five or fewer years of educational development experience. Thus a large percentage of respondents who are relatively new to educational development hold the title of director. Likewise, well over half of associate and assistant directors (56 percent), program coordinators (66 percent), midlevel administrators (72 percent), and faculty members (61 percent) also had five or fewer years of experience. Of respondents with more than ten years of experience, the majority were in positions other than director of educational development.
Only about one-third of directors (33 percent) had more than ten years of experience; the same was true for senior-level administrators (31 percent) responsible for guiding educational development efforts.

The amount of experience educational developers reported was less than we predicted and this pattern held even for developers in leadership positions (for example, directors and associate directors). The high percentage of inexperienced developers may reflect the extensive recent growth of educational development centers and programs in the United States and Canada. Other international studies also support an image of educational development “on the move.” Chism (2008) found that the proportion of educational developers who assumed their first development position without prior experience in educational development seemed to be much more common in North America than in other regions of the world (for example, Australia, United Kingdom).

Although a large number of developers in the United States and Canada are new to the field, it is important to note that about one-quarter of those who chose “director” (24 percent) or “senior level administrator” (23 percent) as their primary title have been involved in educational development for more than fifteen years. Recently, some directors of centers have moved into positions such as associate provost, vice chancellor, and advisor to the president. These titles suggest legitimization of educational development as central to the mission of an institution. Thus novices can draw advice from a small cadre of seasoned colleagues.

Differences by Professional Training. Technology is one of the most compelling issues in higher education overall and in educational development in particular. Developers are deeply concerned about and engaged in issues of technology and teaching, yet we noted that only a small fraction (1 percent) of our survey respondents identified their primary title as “technology coordinator.” It may be that technology coordinators involved in educational development are largely affiliated with other professional associations, or they are located in information technology or other technology-oriented campus departments and thus were not captured as part of our study. At the same time, the small percentage of educational developers who identified themselves as technology coordinators raises the question of whether—and how—educational development programs are incorporating technological issues into their concerns about teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, the technology coordinators who did respond to the survey are the newest in the field of educational development; none reported more than ten years of experience.

Influences on Individual Practice of Educational Developers

Our study also examined the sources from which developers derive their ideas. We asked developers to indicate the extent to which a number of
potential sources of information, research, networking, and professional development provided through literature and organizations contributed to their “ideas about educational development practice.” Respondents rated the influence of a list of possible sources (which included various publications and associations) on a 1-to-4 scale (1 = not at all, 4 = greatly influences). Means using this scale will be reported later in the chapter.

**Literature Influences.** Overall, educational developers agreed on the most important influences on their practice. Interestingly, they reported that their practices were influenced more by literature than by professional or scholarly organizations. The literature developers were asked to consider pertained to these topics: higher education, college teaching and learning, adult and continuing education, human resources and personal development, educational development (for example, POD or STLHE, that is, Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, literature), organizational development, and disciplinary teaching journals. Within this volume, Lynn Taylor’s chapter offers a lens on the relationship between educational development and disciplinary knowledge.

Educational development literature has expanded greatly over the last decade with the advent of new journals, newsletters, and handbooks on teaching, learning, and faculty motivation and development. Menges, Weimer, and Associates (1999) argue that such new scholarship can inform the practice of instruction, increase the value of teaching for those who do it, and promote changes in the faculty role, largely in response to new realities and challenges. The literature shows too that critical new findings can inform and enhance day-to-day practice not only in the classroom but also in educational development centers.

Developers found that the literature on college teaching and learning (mean: 3.64); the literature in educational development, such as POD and STLHE publications (mean: 3.47); and the literature in higher education (mean: 3.36) contributed most to their ideas about educational development and influenced their practice. Not surprisingly, educational developers rely primarily on literature that can help them and the faculty members with whom they work to think more creatively and systematically about teaching and learning processes. Such literature can include guidelines for planning, providing, evaluating, and improving instruction, as well as the results of research on learners and the learning process. Developers can use literature on teaching and learning in a variety of ways (among them bringing articles with practical ideas to the attention of new faculty members, offering suggestions for professional reading to experienced colleagues seeking to engage in innovative practices, and seeding committees charged with the leadership of institutional projects with a range of ideas reported in the literature). Similarly, the literature in educational development and in higher education can provide useful resources on educational development programs, development as teachers, development as individuals, career development, and organizational development. Developers turn to
professional and scholarly literature as a source to support their own ongoing professional development.

We note that Canadian developers are influenced more by the literature in adult and continuing education (mean: 3.03) than developers in the United States (mean: 2.45), perhaps due to the strong Canadian literature and research base in this domain and the quality of “adult-centered” colleges and universities in Canada (Mancuso, 2001). We also note that a key difference between educational development in the United States and Canada and in other English-speaking countries lies in the literature that has been most influential, particularly scholarly and practice-based literature from the United Kingdom and Australia (Chism, Gosling, and Sorcinelli, 2010).

**Professional Association Influences.** The respondents were also asked to use the same scale to rate the influence of various associations on their thinking and practice. Those associations included national higher education associations, professional educational development associations, disciplinary or interdisciplinary associations, and regional educational development consortia.

Overall, North American educational developers most used the intellectual and collegial resources of educational development associations. They indicated the value of the POD Network in Higher Education (U.S. mean: 3.41; Canadian mean: 3.14). However, Canadian faculty developers gave their highest rating to their own professional association, the STLHE (3.53). Both POD and STLHE conferences are attended by educational developers, faculty across the disciplines, administrators, students, and staff. Their conferences and publications also address issues critical to academic affairs and undergraduate reform agendas: teaching, learning, curriculum, assessment, diversity, faculty roles, and the pedagogic aspects of technology.

**Influences by Career Stage and Experience.** When the ratings of influences on educational development practices were examined by the primary title of the respondent, a number of interesting differences emerged. Senior administrators rated the broad literature in higher education more highly than literature in educational development. They differed in this from directors, assistant and associate directors, and midlevel administrators, who rely more heavily on the latter source. Senior administrators may rely on the broad literature in higher education because it may speak more to systemic, organizational change in higher education (a focus that their senior-level higher education positions may require), while educational development literature focuses more on contributing to and disseminating the body of knowledge on teaching, learning, academic career development, and educational development practices (the topics on which those focused daily on direct work with faculty most likely concentrate). Not only do more experienced educational developers seem to draw on a wider range of research and literature; they also rely more on
resources in adult and continuing education and personal and organizational development, areas that new developers did not note as influential. Experienced developers also seem to have more awareness of and connections to a range of professional associations. These differences may suggest that professional educational development organizations could furnish additional online information to alert developers to the range of resources they might fruitfully explore.

**International Differences.** Canadian respondents reported being influenced by regional educational development consortia (mean: 3.13) far more than did American respondents (2.24). Factors of size, geography, language, and culture may help account for the influence of regional consortia among Canadian developers. For example, educational development professionals in Canada met informally for a number of years at universities across the provinces prior to forming a national educational development organization (STLHE), thus developing strong networks and highly regarded forums within as well as among the provinces (Knapper, 1985).

The modest influence of regional educational development consortia reported by American respondents was somewhat surprising. There are a number of well-regarded regional consortia (notably the Great Plains Regional Consortium on Instructional Development, the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Faculty Development Network, and the New England Faculty Development Consortium) that facilitate efforts for exchanging information on faculty and instructional development through Web sites, newsletters, annual conferences, and other activities.

At the same time, national and international associations such as POD and STLHE are characterized by greater capacity and resources than regional networks have. The ability of these associations to engage multiple constituencies, institutions, and stakeholders in higher education in multiple ways (envisioning and articulating national agendas for change, convening forums of opinion leaders, collaborating with organizations engaged in complementary work, and disseminating knowledge on teaching, learning, and academic careers) may contribute to their greater influence on thinking and practice.

**Influences on Educational Development Program Goals**

Because educational development programs can be influenced by the priorities of a number of stakeholders, and by issues within and outside of institutions, it is important to understand what factors influence their foci and activities.

Our survey presented developers with a list of eight potential factors that guide programming selections (drawn from our experience in educational development and current topics in the literature) and asked them to indicate the extent to which each factor influenced the focus and
activities of their educational development program. The potential factors, listed here as worded in the survey, were faculty interests and concerns; priorities of department chairs and deans; priorities of senior-level institutional leaders; priorities of the director or person leading your program; immediate organizational issues, concerns, or problems; institutional strategic plan; your educational development program's strategic plan; and priorities indicated in the higher education or educational development literature.

**Needs and Interests of Faculty.** Overwhelmingly, the factor most influencing the foci and activities of respondents' educational development efforts were the needs and interests of faculty in their institutions (mean: 3.71). Because the primary responsibility of educational developers is to enhance the professional development of the faculty members at their institutions, their attention to faculty needs and interests is not surprising. In fact, many centers develop ongoing structures for continuously assessing faculty interests and program outcomes through a variety of means such as an advisory committee or faculty interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Such needs assessments and program reviews can be conducted internally or by an external consultant. The influence of faculty on developers' priorities is also reinforced by studies that indicate that educational development programs are most effective when they have strong faculty ownership and involvement (Sorcinelli, 2002), which helps ensure that the program remains responsive to faculty needs. Faculty engagement is also a channel for emergence of faculty who can take a leadership role in teaching development and renewal and student learning.

**Priorities of Program and Institutional Leaders.** Not surprisingly, the priorities of the educational development program director were also cited as a primary influence (mean: 3.16). The significant influence of program directors on the direction of programs argues for their ongoing engagement in professional development through reading, attending conferences and other training, and networking, an issue we return to later in this chapter. Educational developers were equally well aware of and responsive to the priorities of senior-level institutional leaders (mean: 3.00). An administration that is committed to the concept of educational development and takes specific actions to create and support a positive environment for teaching is as crucial as faculty involvement. Optimally, the administration lends budgetary support for the educational development center's staffing and programs. Additionally, senior academic officers give tremendous credibility and visibility to the program by participating in its activities (programs, award ceremonies, and the like) and by highlighting these activities as important to the institution and its values. The special role that academic administrators can take in fostering educational development, particularly through symbolic leadership and innovative structures for faculty incentives and rewards, has been well documented (Sorcinelli and Aitken, 1995).
Least Influential to Educational Development Goals. It is important to note that, overall, educational developers were more influenced by the interests and concerns of faculty members and the priorities of senior-level administrators than by the priorities of department chairs and deans, whose influence was only “slight” to “moderate” (mean: 2.76). There may be several reasons for this. Administrators such as chairs often rotate, so that developers must routinely make time to build relationships with new appointees. It may also be difficult for developers to gain access to midlevel administrators, who often feel overwhelmed by paperwork and administrative tasks and may not interact regularly with developers. Additionally, developers may not have extensive skills in the areas of planned change, organizational development, or leadership training, topics that are of potential interest to department chairs or other administrators. Finally, as mentioned earlier, educational developers are constrained by limits of time and resources. Nevertheless, departments and colleges within universities often have legitimate priorities that would be well served by the support of educational development expertise.

Overall, the least powerful influences on educational developers’ program goals and activities were issues highlighted in the literature in higher education and educational development (mean: 2.64). We suspect that, in their day-to-day work, developers spend most of their time responding to and being influenced by faculty members and provosts rather than sorting through the mountains of information available on higher education and educational development. At the same time, literature does strongly influence individual practice, as already discussed. This finding may again suggest that educational developers, much like faculty, already have more priorities and obligations than can reasonably be met. It also suggests that, as educational developers progress in their careers, they would welcome more avenues and opportunities for scholarly reflection on practice.

Conclusion

Our study of U.S. and Canadian educational developers and their careers suggests that individuals responsible for educational development in these two countries hold multiple titles and have multiple responsibilities to go along with them. The majority of respondents identify themselves as administrators, but many hold a faculty appointment as well. Perhaps most striking, as a group they tend to be relatively new to the field, with only one-quarter reporting that they have been in educational development for a decade or more. As we face a field with relatively few senior developers and some number of them nearing retirement, we may need to create more mechanisms for peer and near-peer mentoring and support along the pathway.

This portrait of educational developers also illuminates the range of sources that influence the individual practices of educational development
professionals and the goals of their programs. Across all institutions in the United States and Canada, educational developers are most influenced by the interests and concerns of faculty members, the literature on college teaching and learning, and their professional organizations. Experienced educational developers tend to be more influenced by numerous literatures and organizations than are new developers, and Canadian developers are more influenced by regional educational development consortia than those in the United States.

These findings suggest that developing the careers of educational developers themselves offers both challenges and opportunities. There is no specified route to become an educational developer; the work of educational developers is expanding and is recognized at many universities and colleges as important to the success of institutional missions and goals. Educational developers who make this work their career will need to find ways to maintain their own vitality and engage in continuous learning. They will need to find ways to stay current with rapidly expanding bodies of literature pertaining to faculty careers, adult learning, faculty work, organizational change, and teaching and learning, and to use such research to inform their practice. Educational developers will also have the responsibility to continue to expand the body of scholarly knowledge in the field.

Fortunately, the profession is increasingly aware of the need to make available skills training and professional orientation for new developers as well as venues for continuous renewal of experienced developers. For example, the large professional associations in the English-speaking countries of Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States offer workshops prior to their annual conferences, occasional institutes, ongoing networks, and online and print resources for both new and experienced developers. New professional associations are emerging in such countries as Thailand and China. As well, international educational development has generated a wealth of resources for exchange of scholarship and practices. In particular, the International Consortium for Educational Development brings together members of professional associations for faculty developers around the world, sponsoring an international conference for developers in a new host country every other year.

Finally, as we mentioned at the start of this chapter, our research has focused on faculty development in North America. However, we have had opportunities to consult and work internationally on four continents: Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe. Our travels have given us insight into the work and careers of educational developers in a number of other countries. We conclude, along with Fraser (2005), that pivotal to understanding international education development is recognition of the “multi-layered context in which we work, the complex structures that both support and constrain our work, and the variety of processes and strategies that we develop to engage teachers, the university, and the higher education sector in educational development” (p. 1). Further exploration of the pathways,
experiences, influences, and approaches of educational developers, both in countries with well-established educational development programs and in those newer to establishing faculty and educational development programs, will be important in the years to come.

References


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