It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it: an analysis of the language of educational development

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If you had to identify the single most important thing that educational developers do, would communication with the wider community of higher education staff be a contender? My guess is most people would say 'yes'.

Half-joking comments made by colleagues about the jargon in educational development encouraged me to delve a little further into what kinds of language are associated with educational development. I presented a small group of volunteers with two texts. One text was an extract from a university learning and teaching strategy, printed off the web. The other was an extract from an article published in the ILTHE's journal *Active Learning in Higher Education*. I used texts rather than spoken language for practical purposes, but the differences between speech and writing (as discussed by Biber 1988 and Hughes 1996, amongst others) mean that my conclusions can only partially be applied to spoken language. The eleven volunteers were drawn from across the science/arts/humanities range, and included a postgraduate student, newly appointed and established lecturing staff, a professor, and one member of academic related and one member of student support staff. I choose the texts as ones which communicate about educational development issues, and whose target audiences could be assumed to include those in an academic community with an interest in learning and teaching, a description which covered my group of respondents. (I'll consider later whether institutional learning and teaching strategies are supposed to be read by the academic community). I asked my readers to mark the texts for words and phrases which they didn't understand, which they found confusing, or which they didn't like. I also asked them whether they considered the texts were typical of what their expectations of an educational development text.

Their responses suggested what many of us must suspect from experience, that language which is widely used in the texts associated with educational development does not communicate well with the academic community. My texts used expressions which were not understood, and a discourse which was disliked. If expressions which are commonplace in the discourse of educational development are not consistently understood in the academic community, then communication simply does not take place. There is no exchange of information, or at least, not of the information which it was the writer's intention to communicate. That the discourse is disliked may be a more serious matter than that it is not understood. How do readers respond to a discourse they dislike? Often by ceasing to read, or by projecting their dislike of the discourse onto the concepts and intention of the writing. In the production of educational development texts, we may be actively building barriers between ourselves and the community which it is our job to influence.

From my respondents' comments, the aspects of the texts which they identified as difficult to understand, or as features they disliked, are:
1)   Use of specialist terms without appropriate explanation; e.g. *experiential learning*; *reflective activities*, *learning strategies*; *reusable learning resources.*

2)   Abstraction; that is, describing learning and teaching as processes and products in which teachers and students aren't mentioned. For example, "checklists and questioning approaches […] can foster mere compliance with externally set demands than genuine self-questioning and appraisal"; "new developments and staff training will be introduced to support the adoption of new web tools to support e-Learning and the creation and capture of content to allow re-use within a virtual learning environment". Arguably, abstraction is a requirement for the discussion of complex phenomena, and is a characteristic of academic language. However, this doesn't mean people who teach like to read about teaching and learning as abstract processes which they have been written out of.

3)   The discourse of marketing and management; for example, terms such as *new knowledge economy*, *stakeholders*, *monitoring learning*, and descriptions of learning and teaching as processes and products. The discourse associated with educational development is partly disliked because it locates higher education in an environment driven by the concerns of management and marketing (i.e. concerns for profit, for efficiency, for results identified because they can be measured rather than because they are valued). Even when there are no explicit indicators of this discourse in a text, there are what are interpreted as indirect markers, such as a focus on processes and results, abstracted from the direct experiences of teachers and students; see *abstraction* above.

4)   Implicit assumptions not shared by the readers. Texts depend on shared implicit assumptions for coherence. Where these are not shared, the text seems illogical or incoherent to the reader, as explored by Christie (2000) in terms of cross-gender misunderstandings.

5)   Habitual collocations, referred to by one of my respondents as 'formulae' and by another as 'mantras'; that is, words that are often used together, so that a writer will use one automatically if they have already used the other. Examples include *checks and balances, robust mechanisms, skills framework, knowledge economy, content capture* and *maintaining excellence*.

6)   Low editorial standards; these included long sentences, poor grammar and punctuation, lack of coherence between subheadings, lack of relationship between sub-headings and the main text, ambiguity, and what might be termed 'poor rhetoric', where the features of language which can be used for emphasis (such as repetition) are used randomly, with no care given to the aesthetic dimension of the writing.

My colleagues viewed these texts as having been written without the intention to communicate with them as readers. They deduced from this that they were not the intended audience, and my interpretation of their reactions is that the texts made them feel as if there was an attempt to diminish their experience and their worldview.

The experience of asking colleagues to consider these texts was salutary. If this is the way the wider academic community feels about educational development texts, then we are failing to communicate, and in fact, are driving a wedge between educational developers and the academic community through our use of language. Instead of progressively informing colleagues of the values and evidence of educational development, and encouraging engagement with its principles, we may be having the opposite effect each time we speak, or press 'print'.

However, perhaps these texts were not in fact typical educational development texts, in which case, the community of educational development might be innocent of the worst of these charges. The learning and teaching strategy certainly may have been the output of some corporate committee with its focus on the requirements of the funding council, without an educational developer ever going near it. The journal article was from the first issue of *Active Learning*, and perhaps as such not representative of later papers. However, even making this allowance, educational development is not absolved. My readers were almost entirely in consensus that the texts were representative of educational development texts. None said, 'Wait a moment, educational development texts are much more accessible and 'simpatico' than this'. So even if to the eye of another educational developer these texts were a-typical in some respects, my respondents associated texts like these with educational development.

One reader did not think the learning and teaching strategy was a typical educational development text, but a 'management-strategy-jargon thing', and educational developers may agree. But I don't think this lets us off the hook either. Shouldn't learning and teaching strategies be educational development texts and reflect those values? And shouldn't they be documents which have the academic community as a significant target readership? After all, who does the teaching in our universities? Shouldn't academic staff want to read learning and teaching strategies? Shouldn't their departments want to discuss them? What's gone wrong if this isn't the case? Even if the funding council needs documents written in the discourse of corporate management, isn't the learning and teaching strategy important enough to be edited for internal communication and discussion?

What are the implications for our practice? It's my view that communication is a core element of the work of educational development. The evidence of this small study has reinforced my intuition that our communication practices are problematic. Indeed, texts of which I was previously tolerant, because I understood them and because the ideology was acceptable or invisible to me, I now find troubling. Are there different ways of writing, and indeed talking, about educational development which we should cultivate and promote? Certainly, I am now more critical of texts that I encounter in the course of my work, and more aware of the need to examine my own language as I prepare course handbooks and papers for circulation amongst colleagues.

Communication is not a transparent process; there is not a one-to-one relationship between words and concepts as there would be if each time you used a word it directed the listener or reader unambiguously to the concept you had in mind (see Singh 2004 for a straightforward discussion of this fundamental linguistic principle). Language is inherently ambiguous and, once written or uttered, communicates information other than then originator intended. And it is far from easy to find out from our readers and listeners what has been understood from our attempts at communication. Furthermore, words and phrases cannot escape the associations of where they have been used before and who has used them. Their effect on the reader relates to the identity and politics of the speakers and writers who have used them in the past (Birch 1996).

Academic disciplines have their own codes as we know (Becher and Trowler 2001), designed to enable communication which deals with abstract concepts, to allow a level of precision in the discussion of shared concepts, and to permit fine grading of attitude towards the relative strength of a claim. Academic codes also ID speakers and writers, allowing insiders to detect the exact branch of a discipline or school of thought the speaker belongs to, and a gatekeeper function, intentionally or unintentionally keeping the uninitiated out (discussed in Becher and Trowler 2001 pp104-130).

The educational development community is currently engaged in a debate about whether educational development is a discipline in its own right (Macdonald 2002, 2003, Stefani 2003, Rowland 2004). The arguments for a discipline of educational development include the existence of an extensive and growing literature, of peer-reviewed journals, of networks of people engaged in conferences, seminars and other activities, and of the learning and teaching programmes throughout the UK, validated within academic frameworks and developed and delivered by educational developers. The arguments against include that educational developers come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and do not necessarily share methodological approaches, or refer to the same texts as intrinsic to their practice. This debate still has its course to run. However, the argument 'for' might unfortunately include the perception by those in the wider academic community that our use of language is both distinctive (i.e. allowing readers to say 'that looks like an educational development text') and opaque. This surely is a feature of an academic discipline we do not wish to share (at least not in texts such as the ones discussed here, which are apparently aimed at the community of academic staff, rather than at the specialist community of educational developers). Our role is arguably different from that of staff in other academic disciplines; it is not just to talk to one another, but to talk across disciplines to all staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning. As members of a discipline in the process of defining itself, perhaps we as educational developers need to particularly consider our communication practices.

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