Factors impacting the ability of 'EdAdvisors' to support and enhance technology-enhanced learning and teaching in Australian Higher Education

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Technology-enhanced learning and teaching practice in Higher Education is facilitated in different ways by 'Third Space' support staff including Learning Designers, Education Technologists and Academic Developers, broadly defined as 'EdAdvisors' – educator/advisors. EdAdvisors offer rich experience and expertise across both pedagogy and technology can be hampered by workplace factors that diminish their ability to have meaningful impact. The work that EdAdvisors do is increasingly represented in existing research but there less is known of the barriers to their practice, particularly across different role-types. This doctoral research uses a Practice Theory lens and mixed methods to examine the complex web of factors in Australian Higher Education that shape the practices of EdAdvisors, including cultural, epistemic, material, organisational and relational, in an attempt to identify problems and suggest solutions. One significant problem is that EdAdvisor roles are often poorly defined. This work adds clarity to the understanding of these roles by comparing core activities and knowledge areas associated with them and using this analysis to find distinguishing characteristics and areas of overlap. It contributes to deeper understanding of the ways that teaching is and should be supported in Australian Higher Education. Feedback is sought on the theoretical lenses and methodology

Keywords: Learning Designer, Academic Developer, Education Technologist, Third Space, Practice theory

Introduction

A combination of the rapid evolution of Information and Communications Technologies and the rise of Neoliberal approaches to university management over the last thirty years has brought increasing complexity to learning and teaching in Higher Education. Our relationship with information and the production of knowledge has changed profoundly, creating new opportunities to provide students with learning experiences that are authentic, engaging, individual and which build on personal connection in ways that it seldom has before. With these opportunities though, comes a need for a deeper understanding of pedagogy and technology, and the ways these things are entangled (Fawns, 2022), than has been asked of educators previously. At the same time, universities have become more corporate in many ways, with greater expectations of accountability and ever-tightening financial pressures requiring academics to do their work with fewer resources and in less time. (Quinn, 2012; Bamber & Stefani, 2016).

In order to support the learning and teaching practices of academics and priorities of the institution, a new category of personnel has emerged with specialist expertise in pedagogy and technology. These people occupy a liminal area between academic and professional domains referred to as the 'Third Space' (Whitchurch, 2008). Third Space roles go by many names (Mitchell et al., 2017) but can broadly be arranged in three categories: academic developer, learning designer, and education technologist. This research uses the term EdAdvisor (Educator Advisor) as an umbrella term for these roles as a common focus of all three is to advise educators. Many EdAdvisors also have professional backgrounds as educators, so the term serves double duty in recognising this.

EdAdvisors may occupy roles that are classified as either professional or academic (Gokbel et al., 2023) and, depending on the institution, may work in central teams with a whole-of-university focus or in faculty-based units (Drysdale, 2018). While EdAdvisors can bring significant experience and expertise to their work in supporting and extending good teaching and learning practices, many EdAdvisors report frustration in their work (Brew et al., 2017; Murcray, 2023). They find themselves unable to affect meaningful changes for a wide range of reasons including political, cultural, material and organisational. This research aims to understand the factors in Australian Higher Education institutions that impact the effectiveness of EdAdvisors in doing their work, both negatively and positively, with a view to proposing actions that may be taken to make the most

effective use of these workers in supporting and extending good learning and teaching.

As such, the research questions are:

1. Who are EdAdvisors in Australian Higher Education and what do they do?
2. What factors affect the work of EdAdvisors in supporting and enhancing technology-enhanced learning and teaching practices in Australian Higher Education?
3. What actions can be taken in complex Higher Education ecosystems to enable EdAdvisors to make a greater contribution to learning and teaching?

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Literature review

While Instructional Designers have existed since the Second World War (Uibelhoer, 2020), research about EdAdvisors only started in the mid-1990s (Allen, 1996; Gosling, 1996; Thach & Murphy, 1995) as distance and online learning came to prominence. Different EdAdvisor role types have markedly different levels of visibility in research. Academic Developers and development appear prominently in academic research, likely due to the fact that many Academic Developer roles are held by people in academic positions who have a research component in their work (Kek & Hammer, 2015; Shephard et al., 2020). Learning Designers have a similar presence as the field of Learning Design has come to be a significant part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Dalziel et al. 2016; Zhou, 2023). Research specifically about Education Technologists however is far scarcer, in spite of the abundance of research about Education Technologies (Lowenthal & Lomellini, 2022; Ritzhaupt et al., 2018). While there is a growing body of research about specific types of EdAdvisors, there is very little that examines these three roles and their interrelationships holistically.

The absence of a body of research about EdAdvisors collectively means that there has been little consideration of the idea that these roles occupy a spectrum between Pedagogy and Technology in terms of their role focus and specialist expertise. This does not mean that any role types have an exclusive focus on either of these areas, rather that some roles pay more attention to one or the other (Fawns, 2022).

Looking firstly at the pedagogy end of the spectrum, Academic Developers (ADs) tend to focus largely on the teaching practice of educators, with an emphasis on what might be considered higher-order knowledge and skills and a more long-term strategic outlook (Leibowitz, 2014). This focus tends to mean that they are mostly found in centrally based units (as opposed to faculty-based), possibly because these concerns relate to university level policies about teaching quality. In practice this orientation sees them involved in curriculum co-design, promotion of teaching quality standards through policy work, support of learning and teaching awards and recognition schemes, and the design and development of more formal professional development for academics related to learning and teaching (Nygren & Sjöberg, 2023). Of the three EdAdvisor types identified in research literature, ADs have the most to do with face-to-face teaching. (They still also have significant involvement in online teaching). ADs are the most likely to hold an academic position of the EdAdvisor types and frequently moved into these positions from other academic roles (Brogt, 2021). Holding academic positions means that they tend to have more opportunities to engage in scholarly research in their work and many report that the combination of research and past HE teaching stand them in good stead with the academics that they work with in the early stages of their working relationships (Stensaker, 2018). The perception that they understand the pressures that academics encounter, and their needs offer a shortcut to acceptance by academics that EdAdvisors in professionally classified roles report not having (Kek & Hammer, 2015). ADs also frequently have more academic sounding role titles, such as Lecturer in Higher Education, which also contributes to their acceptance (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Education Technologists (ETs) occupy the technology end of the Ped/Tech Spectrum; however, an understanding of pedagogy is an essential part of this role as they serve as a bridge between IT and teaching (Corbeil & Corbeil, 2013). ETs are responsible for ensuring that educators and students have the educational technologies they need to best support good learning and teaching. In practice, this entails oversight, support and updating of existing institutional education technologies, as well as evaluating, implementing and developing capabilities to use new tools where needed (Mayes et al.,2015). Occupying professional staff roles almost exclusively, ETs work hard to find balance between meeting the needs of good learning and teaching and

ensuring that the ed technology ecosystem also serves wider institutional needs in technological, legal, accessibility and other areas (Shurville et al., 2009). ETs' work can vary significantly depending on whether they are part of a central or a faculty-based unit. Those in a central team often take responsibility for enterprise level systems and liaise directly with the university IT dept in their work realising the strategic priorities of university leadership. These priorities might include implementing or decommissioning institutional educational technologies. ETs in faculty teams commonly have closer engagement with academics that those in central units and work on more operational, day to day tasks needed to facilitate learning and teaching activities. These tasks commonly include providing 1:1 support on the use of technologies, populating and editing content in Learning Management System (LMS) units and facilitating technology focused administrative tasks like uploading grades (Corbeil & Corbeil, 2013; Dokubo, 2021) .

Learning Designers (LDs) occupy a space between ADs and ETs in the Ped/Tech Spectrum, perceived as having a greater focus on pedagogical activities than ETs and on technology than ADs (Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Tay et al., 2022). A significant part of the role involves working with academics to design and build resources and activities to support learning and teaching, generally delivered through the university's LMS. LDs commonly hold professional staff positions however it is not uncommon for these to be classified as academic positions, depending on the organisation (Zhou, 2023). As with ETs, Learning Designers can be found in both central and faculty-based units supporting learning and teaching and their responsibilities often vary depending on where they are located (Altena et al., 2019). Centrally based LDs often work on longer term strategic unit redevelopment or 'uplift' type projects, in which they may work closely with a teaching team to redesign and build an entire unit over a period of months. At other times they will be focused on professional development of academics with an emphasis on good practice in relation to teaching with technology and also developing guides and resources relating to this (Hinze et al., 2022). Faculty-based LDs tend to provide more operational and immediate support to academics, advising on educational resources, activities, and teaching practices in general on an ad hoc basis and building relationships with these academics over time. They will also often be responsible for local training of academics, advocate for the needs of their faculty in engagements with central units and commonly find themselves called on to provide more technical support in the use of learning technologies (D'Souza,et al., 2022). The latter in particular can be a source of tension for LDs as some can feel that their pedagogical knowledge is undervalued in these interactions and that they are not able to contribute to better learning and teaching practices in the university to the full extent of their capabilities (Tay et al., 2022).

Problems:

While there are several recurring themes in research about the work of people in all EdAdvisor roles, including a lack of role clarity and purpose, they almost invariably coalesce in some degree of frustration about limitations on the extent to which EdAdvisors feel that they are able to contribute to meaningful change in relation to learning and teaching (D'Souza et al., 2022; Zhou, 2023). EdAdvisors come to their roles in Higher Education from wildly diverse professional backgrounds and bring extensive experience and knowledge of pedagogy and educational technology (Sage & Sankey, 2021) but commonly report that their advice is either not sought or not accepted by both academics and institutional leaders. This is attributed to a number of significant and challenging factors. EdAdvisor role titles can vary significantly for the same purposive role, even between faculties and departments in the same university. Mitchell et. al. (2017) identified 27 different titles for 37 EdAdvisor roles advertised in 13 Australian universities between 2012 and 2017. In the absence of clear and consistent nomenclature, academics can be unclear on the best people to approach for advice for a given need. The lack of clarity also extends to role purpose and common activities, meaning that a Learning Designer in a centrally based unit might be tasked with a long-term project designing and building learning resources as part of the redevelopment of a single online unit (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2021) while a Learning Designer working in a faculty unit in the same university may be responsible for providing ad hoc guidance to any academic about any aspect of their pedagogy or use of educational technology. While they share a title, their work may serve a noticeably different function for the university (Altena et al., 2019).

Some academics express concerns that EdAdvisors in professional staff roles lack lived experience or understanding of academic and disciplinary practices and needs and do not seek their support for these reasons. (Bird et al., 2007). EdAdvisors holding academic classified roles, or who have transitioned from academia, report that this shared experience makes being accepted by academics much easier (Bailey, 2023). In practice, EdAdvisors of both classifications work with many academics and a vital aspect of good practice in their roles involves the ability to identify practical needs, with or without lived experience of them (Veles et al., 2023). Many EdAdvisors report that the breadth of their experience working with many academics gives them a big-

picture understanding of learning and teaching in Higher Education. A parallel concern expressed by some academics relates to many EdAdvisors reporting to university management and that they serve institutional interests as "agents of managerialism" (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009) more than those of educators or students. In a similar vein, some academics express concerns that EdAdvisors prioritise "the latest shiny thing" (King, 2017) over pedagogy in their implementation of education technologies. Additional barriers to academics and leaders seeking or following the advice of EdAdvisors include the fact that many academics are expected to have a certain level of proficiency in teaching as part of their practice, yet commonly receive little if any formal pedagogical training as they become an academic (Bennett, Agostinho & Lockyer, 2016; Deaker et al., 2016). This can mean that seeking help with regard to teaching practice can require displaying a level of vulnerability that they may find uncomfortable. For others again, simple time or resourcing limitations can get in the way.

In addition to things directly influencing whether academics and leaders seek or follow advice from EdAdvisors, researchers identify several bigger picture factors in Higher Education that can shape the ability of EdAdvisors to contribute to good learning and teaching practice. A significant one is that learning and teaching does not always carry the same level of prestige in academic culture as research (Shaw et al., 2023). The sector is slowly moving to address this, but academic career progression, funding, institutional rankings, and disciplinary status are often strongly tied to research practice (Furutomo, 2022). The organisational nature of the university can also impact communication and collaboration between EdAdvisors individually and in their units. Differing structures might see all EdAdvisors located in a centrally led area or some based centrally, and others found in faculty based units (Drysdale, 2018). The latter approach can contribute to tensions as each advocate for university-wide vs faculty priorities. Other organisational groups in the university, such as the IT department, HR and Communications and Marketing can also have priorities that compete with those of EdAdvisors and their units (Gibbs et al., 2008).

As many of these factors have been known issues for some time, potential solutions have also been discussed in research around EdAdvisors and their practices. Significant work has been done to document the skillsets and practices of EdAdvisor role types separately (Green & Little, 2016; Ritzhaupt et al., 2018; Ritzhaupt et al., 2021) with a view toward providing greater clarity of these roles and their purpose. In recent years a widening array of professional qualifications have emerged, principally for learning designers, which help to codify and professionalise these roles further (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2021). A branch of Third Space theory, popularised by Celia Whitchurch (2009), has provided insights into the professional working lives of EdAdvisors, particularly in terms of the extent to which they cross boundaries between administrative/institutional and academic/educational work. Attention is also being paid to the nature of organisational structures for EdAdvisors and the ways in which these might best be configured to facilitate greater collaboration and understanding (Deacon, 2022; Drysdale, 2018).

Nonetheless, several gaps exist in current research relating to the work and impact of EdAdvisors, particularly in Australian Higher Education. There is virtually no examination of the interrelationships between the three main EdAdvisor role types – Academic Developers, Education Technologists and Learning Designers – in spite of the differing but complementary contributions they make to the support of learning and teaching. The work of Education Technologists is notably underrepresented, which may reflect the fact that a major proportion of research about EdAdvisors is undertaken by non-practitioner academics or by practitioners in academic roles with academic development and learning design responsibilities. A key focus of this research is on addressing both of these gaps in understanding and representation.

Methodology

Given that much of the contribution of EdAdvisors to supporting and extending good learning and teaching relies on the things that they do, this research uses a Practice Theory and Practice Architectures lens drawing on the work of Kemmis (2013) and other theorists in this space including Schatzki (2010) and Shove (2012). This allows exploration of a range of arrangements that make up a practice (doings, sayings and relatings) as well as the supports that EdAdvisors put in place – 'Practice architectures' – that enable academics to teach. Practice Architecture mirrors the 'saying, doing, relating' elements in some ways, with 'Cultural-discursive' arrangements relating to what is known about a practice and how it should be performed; 'Material-Economic' arrangements relating to resources needed to undertake a practice, and 'Socio-Political' arrangements relating to underlying power dynamics in each context that influence the ability of someone to perform a practice. Schatzki (2010) contextualises activities as 'temporalspatial' events occurring at a point in time and space and Shove (2012) introduces the concept of clusters of practices.

Given the overall desire for this research to contribute to tangible positive outcomes for EdAdvisors (and Higher Education in general) and for it to also give a voice to a group of people traditionally underrepresented in academic research, it is broadly positioned within a Critical paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Wherever possible, the intention is for the truths of EdAdvisors to emerge from their own voices. At the same time, given the enormous scope of possible factors influencing their work in Higher Education, using a theoretical lens such as Practice Theory is useful in offering a structure through which to examine these factors.

A mixed methods approach was taken to data collection and analysis, with a preliminary survey conducted of 58 people working in EdAdvisor roles in Australian Higher Education, which informed the design of subsequent semi-structured interviews of six Academic Developers, six Education Technologists and four Learning Designers (though several had experience across different role types) and a main survey of 161 EdAdvisors. The focus of the surveys was multifold, gathering broad demographic and workplace data, perceptions of EdAdvisor work being understood and valued by different working partners, perceptions of ability to influence decisions on pedagogy/edtech and perceptions of key activities and knowledge areas associated with the three key EdAdvisor roles. The semi-structured interviews gave EdAdvisors an opportunity to discuss their professional identity, positive and negative experiences in working with academics, leaders and EdAdvisors in other roles and general perceptions of barriers and enablers in Higher Education.

A reliability test was conducted on the data in the first survey looking for Cronbach's Alpha of reliability which returned a value of .781 (Simpson et al., 2021). According to Goforth (2015), "many methodologists recommend a minimum α coefficient between 0.65 and 0.8", indicating that this data is reliable. Chi-square testing was also conducted on the data relating to these perceptions and the factors that may influence them, to see whether what was observed differed from what might be expected at random. Approximately 10% of the data has statistical significance ($p \leq 0.05$), therefore most of the findings from this data were treated as indicative only. Analysis of the data in the main survey is yet to be undertaken however the plan is to perform a more rigorous analysis between the various quantitative variables . This includes conducting Spearman correlation analyses to discover factors that may be (or may not be) interrelated, and also Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests to determine if there are differences between participant subpopulations. Further visualisations on the data from the main survey will also help to identify differences in perceptions and realities around the practices and skills that different EdAdvisor roles take. In this doctoral symposium I would appreciate advice on the variables and relationships that might be most meaningful to investigate in this research, as well as feedback on the analysis techniques.

With the interview data, I first undertook (largely) Open Coding to draw as many ideas from the interviewees as possible. Given that I had used a small set of questions aimed at uncovering perceptions and experiences about EdAdvisors work experiences with academics, leaders and each other, I created some code categories that naturally reflected these topics. These included Activities, Emotions, Understanding, Valuing, People-Academic/Leader/EdAdvisor, Problems and Strategies. The majority of codes that were not easily located in these categories were created in a Processing category, to be further refined in a second cycle of Axial coding (Saldaña, 2016). The Axial coding cycle is currently in progress and has seen the addition of top-level categories for Impact (Positive/Negative), Knowledge areas, Meaning and Culture and Organisation. These categories are partially informed by Practice Theory and Practice Architectures. At this stage I am drawing on the ideas of abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) in the formulation of theory as this approach allows for a useful blend of Grounded Theory and the application of Practice Theory. This supports my desire to let ideas emerge from the EdAdvisor voices freely but also offers a complementary scaffold on which to organise these ideas.

Findings

Detailed analysis of data from the interviews and main survey is currently underway but some noteworthy findings emerged from the first survey about factors shaping EdAdvisors' perceptions of their work being understood and valued by different stakeholders. Due to the sample size, many results were not statistically significant, but it is expected that with the larger sample in the main survey there will be opportunities to validate these findings and explore other factors. These findings were presented in a paper at the 2021 ASCILITE conference. (Simpson et al., 2021).

Impact of interacting roles
- Learning designers overall feel more understood and valued by leaders, academics and other EdAdvisors

than ADs or ETs do
- Academics are perceived to understand and value EdAdvisors with titles that align with their role type

Impact of titles
- Learning designer titles are applied more consistently and people in these roles feel a stronger association with them than ADs or ETs do their own
- EdAdvisors working in teams with words like 'design' in the name feel more understood and valued by academics than those who don't

Impact of role types
- EdAdvisors do not report a notable difference in how they feel understood/valued by academics based on whether they hold academic or professional roles
- LDs in professional roles feel their work is valued more by their direct managers than do LDs in academic roles
- EdAds in professional roles feel more understood and valued by EdAds in other roles than EdAds in academic roles do

Impact of organisational factors
- LDs in central units and faculty units felt understood and valued by direct managers and academics at broadly the same level
- ETs in Go8 universities feel more understood by academics than ETs in other university groupings

Other factors
- Female ADs feel more valued by academics and direct managers than male ADs do
- LDs with no educational qualifications felt more understood by other EdAdvisors than LDs with educational qualifications

Discussion

Given that one of the most commonly noted issues in discussion of EdAdvisor research is the lack of clarity around roles, titles and purpose, the fact that the Learning Designer title appears to be used more consistently for the role may contribute the strength of practitioner association with the role and overall stronger perceptions among LDs of being understood and valued by the stakeholders that they work with. This in turn suggests that finding and consistently applying a common role title for Academic Developers and Education Technologists may similarly enhance the extent to which they feel their work is understood and valued.

The academic/professional cultural divide in Higher Education is frequently discussed in research literature relating to EdAdvisors (Hobson et al., 2018; McInnis, 1998) but its direct impact on the relationships that EdAdvisors have with academics and each other may not be as straightforward as first thought. Qualitative data from the interviews does suggest that EdAdvisors in academic positions do broadly feel that this status does allow them to form connections with the academics that they work with more quickly, so further review of these data is clearly needed.

Other factors including the culture of the university grouping, gender, location within a central or faculty based unit or possession of education qualifications all revealed some unexpected findings that will also be explored in more depth in the analysis of data from the second survey and semi-structured interviews.

In exploring these factors across the three different role types, this research has already added nuance of understanding to a body of work that usually focuses on one role type only. The complex nature of relationships between EdAdvisors was not something that I had initially considered to be a major factor in terms of things that shape their ability to affect good learning and teaching practice in HE but some of the early data suggests that this may play a larger part than institutional culture or academic/professional status.

Feedback for discussion

During this symposium, I would be grateful for feedback relating to:

- The integration of Practice theory and Practice architectures in the analysis of data
- The use of Third Space theory
- The approach taken to analysing interview data
- The approach taken to the analysis of the qualitative questions in the main survey and options for integrating this into the analysis of the interview data
- Possible approaches to identifying the extent to which factors shaping the ability of EdAdvisors to contribute to learning and teaching reflect international data and trends.

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