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FEATURE ARTICLE

Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education: what do academics do?

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Abstract

Continuing professional development is currently high on the agenda for UK Higher Education. A small number of studies have been undertaken with mixed disciplinary groups of academic and other HE staff to ascertain the different activities undertaken to develop teaching practice. The aim of this small-scale research was to complement these studies by looking at the experiences of academics from a single discipline, Earth Science, across 31 different institutions in the UK. Responses from 192 academics indicated that CPD takes a wide variety of forms; discussions with colleagues was the most frequently-cited form of CPD undertaken. The main barrier was perceived to be lack of time or the need to focus on research in most institutions. It is suggested that challenges for HEIs in integrating CPD include: the valuing and monitoring of both formal and informal CPD activities; exploring synergies between professional development for teaching and for research; and supporting collaboration and communication between educational developers and academic staff, between disciplines, and across institutions. CPD needs to be considered as a normal part of professional life for all academic staff; it needs to be self-directed and planned within the relevant context.

Introduction

Continuing professional development is currently high on the agenda for UK Higher Education. Further to proposals put forward in the Government's 2003 White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education', a consultation process is currently underway to support "the development of professional standards for academic practice and continuing professional development (CPD) that will support teaching and learning in higher education (HE)." (Universities UK et al, 2004). At the same time, institutions funded by HEFCE are being required to develop their Human Resource and Teaching & Learning strategies to include provision for rewarding excellent teaching and supporting CPD. In addition to these policy developments at Governmental and institutional level, changes are underway with respect to UK-wide support for academic practice. In May 2004, the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) joined forces with the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) and National Co-ordination Team (NCT) to form the basis of the new Higher Education Academy (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>).

It is timely, therefore, to reflect on the nature of professional development in higher education and to acquire a better understanding of what academics currently do to develop their teaching practice. This understanding of current attitudes and behaviours with respect to CPD will then provide a good basis on which to build support for the imminent changes in policy.

This article outlines a small-scale research project, funded through a Staff & Educational Development Association (SEDA) award, to look at the CPD activities of one discipline in UK HE: Earth Sciences. The results are summarised and collated with other similar research in order to develop some broad guidelines and recommendations for the future support of academic CPD.

What constitutes CPD in higher education?

For many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK, CPD is synonymous with formal courses or events that provide some form of 'training'. Such training is often provided as CPD for

external professions such as law, business and finance, medicine and so on. However, there is some evidence to suggest that although HEIs have a "tendency to regard formal courses as the most appropriate mode of teaching provision, ... practitioners in general take a different view" (Becher, 1996, p. 54). Becher's research into the CPD activities undertaken by practitioners in medicine, pharmacy, law, accountancy, architecture and structural engineering indicated that professional learning takes many forms. He identified seven categories or modes of learning:

- Courses and conferences
- Professional interactions
- Networking
- Consulting experts
- Personal research
- Learning by doing, and
- Learning by teaching

Becher suggested that

"a clear awareness of the large part played by other forms of interaction [beyond formal courses or events] might perhaps encourage professional schools [in HEIs] to adjust their own priorities: for example in helping to set up professional interactions, to promote and underpin specialist networks and to support personal research." (*ibid.*)

As well as supporting the CPD of external practitioners, HEIs are of course also concerned with the development of their own staff and, in general, formal workshops and seminars again seem to be the dominant model. Interestingly, although many other forms of learning are recognised for initial HE lecturer training courses - e.g. action learning sets, projects, peer observation, reflection - these seem to be much less of a feature of CPD provision. There is, of course, an important place for formal 'off-the-peg' activities but these should be considered as part of a broader spectrum of learning opportunities.

What do academics actually do to develop their teaching practice?

A small number of studies have been undertaken with mixed disciplinary groups of academic and other HE staff (e.g. Ferman, 2002; Dunne; LTSN Generic Centre, 2002; Luedekke, 2003) to ascertain the different activities undertaken to develop teaching practice. The aim of the small-scale research project reported here was to complement these studies by looking at the experiences of a large number of academics from a single discipline (Earth Science) across 31 different institutions in the UK, and to draw together some common concepts and conclusions.

Earth Science was chosen for the study as it is my own discipline in which I have credibility as an educational developer. Although a well-established and 'traditional' discipline, the study of Earth Science involves many different learning environments that require innovative thinking in order to support learning. The discipline is relatively small in terms of number of institutions and hence it was possible to target named academics through a search of departmental web-sites.

A short questionnaire was posted to 475 named academics. The questionnaire listed a variety of different possible CPD

Table 1. Responses to CPD activities questionnaire

Type of CPD Activity (in order of frequency of response)	No. of Responses
Discussions with colleagues in your department	180 (94%)
Supported colleagues to develop their teaching	88 (46%)
Networked with colleagues from other institutions	76 (40%)
Read books / articles on learning & teaching	72 (38%)
Read web-based information on learning & teaching	60 (31%)
Participated in a learning & teaching workshop	52 (27%)
Discussions with staff in your institutional EDU	47 (24%)
Studied for / hold a L&T qualification (inc ILT)	31 (16%)
Attended a learning & teaching conference	21 (11%)
Applied for teaching development funding	17 (9%)
Undertook research into learning & teaching	11 (6%)
Member of Earth Science Teachers' Association or National Association of Geoscience Teachers	8 (4%)

activities (see Table 1 above) and asked respondents to tick those they had done within the last 12 months. Respondents were also asked to state whether or not they had any formal obligations to undertake CPD for teaching, and to identify the main barriers to such professional development. Basic demographic data was also collected including gender and number of years teaching. 192 responses were received (40%) and knowledge of the Earth Science community in the UK suggests that the gender and age profiles of the sample were a reasonable representation of the population.

The distribution of participation in each activity grouped by number of years teaching was analysed using the χ^2 test for independent samples. Only two of the activities showed a statistically significant difference between the groups:

- **L&T qualification:** Groups 5-10yrs and 21+ yrs significantly less than expected on a random distribution ($p=0.003$)
- **Participated in a workshop:** Groups 1-4yrs and 5-10yrs significantly more, 11-20 and 21+ years significantly less than expected from a random distribution ($p=0.04$)

Respondents were also asked to note any other activity they had undertaken. These included responding to student feedback, reflecting on their experiences, peer review, external examining, achieving learning and teaching awards, looking at objects in other disciplines, and hosting a learning and teaching conference. In addition to enhancing teaching practice, 11 respondents indicated that their motivations for undertaking professional development for teaching were related to ensuring that the subject content of

their courses was up-to-date.

The questionnaire asked respondents to select the main barriers to their undertaking CPD for teaching (table 2). Within each category, there was no significant difference between the spread of responses by age group.

For many academics, lack of time and pressures from other priorities (i.e. research) seem to be related to the culture of the department as exemplified by this comment from one respondent. "Academic promotion solely relies on one's international research reputation. Time spent on teaching and teaching-related activities (such as CPD) is applauded but it is weighted close to zero by promotion panels."

It can be inferred from additional comments provided by some respondents that the main other reason for not undertaking CPD was due to bad experiences of formal courses (or even personality clashes with educational developers and other colleagues!). These respondents had very strong views and assumed that 'educationalists' define CPD as only involving formal courses and events. For example, despite the fact that the questionnaire listed 'discussions with colleagues, networking and reading' as the first few possible CPD activities, the following types of comment were still made:

"As usual, the educationalist view is that CPD requires a course or equivalent teaching us how to teach."

"I value teaching quality very highly, and am constantly striving to do it better. I have just found the formal routes to CPD you emphasise here to be much less helpful than talking to others, emulating those I think are effective etc."

Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they were formally required to undertake CPD (e.g. either for membership of a professional body or by their institution). Respondents from 18 departments indicated that they were formally required by their institution to undertake CPD. Of these 18 institutions:

- 9 require new staff to take a formal course
- 8 have some form of internal or peer review
- (2 have both of the above)
- 4 use peer observation
- 1 has CPD as school policy for both new staff and experienced staff.

Interestingly, there was virtually no reference to staff appraisal as a mechanism to support CPD, with only one person mentioning appraising colleagues as a means of professional development.

Discussion, conclusions and implications

If the results of this small-scale study can be taken to be representative, they suggest that, despite pressures of time and other priorities such as research, the vast majority of Earth Science academics do consider the development of their teaching practice to be important. Although only 16 out of the 192 respondents were members of the ILTHE¹ (and, therefore, had formal requirements to 'remain in good standing'), only 4 of the remaining 176 implied that they did not engage in any CPD for teaching. Additionally, the research indicates that professional development for teaching in higher education takes a wide variety of forms, including discussions with colleagues, responding to student feedback and peer review, as well as more formal activities such as qualifications, workshops and conferences. Such a variety is to be expected from a large sample of individuals in

Table 2. Barriers to undertaking CPD for teaching

Barrier (in order of frequency)	No. of Responses
Time	161 (84%)
Emphasis on research	102 (53%)
Funding (e.g. to attend events)	41 (21%)
Lack of personal interest	23 (12%)
Lack of encouragement	23 (12%)
None	9 (5%)

1. Now part of the Higher Education Academy

which there are likely to be several different learning styles.

These findings echo those by previous researchers who have undertaken more in-depth studies of smaller samples of mixed disciplinary groups of academics. For example, Ferman (2002) identified a wide range of collaborative and individual activities including working with an educational designer; attending workshops, discussions with peers, presenting at conferences, being mentored and undertaking professional reading. Such variation of activities is also recognised by those offering guidelines and recommendations for professional development in higher education. Baume (1999) suggests that "choosing or making the right developmental opportunities involves first knowing something about the way you prefer to learn about teaching." She then details a range of such opportunities including 'off-the-peg' courses and workshops, conferences, mentoring, action learning sets, reading, discussions with colleagues, learning by doing and reflection, and development through committees, working groups, professional work, job shadowing and exchange.

My research has led me to consider that there are two ways of looking at CPD. Firstly, it might be considered as an explicit part of professional practice, linked to the requirements of membership of a professional body, whereby practitioners are required to demonstrate that they have engaged in CPD in order to 'remain in good standing'. In my experience, this seems to be the default definition of CPD in most professions (including HE). Secondly, the concept of ongoing development or learning is part of all our working lives, whether or not we are formally required to evidence it. This latter perspective is one that lies behind much of the work of educational development in HE to date (including that of institutional units and national organisations such as the Higher Education Academy Subject Centres): opportunities for developing or learning are provided to all those who teach or support learning not just those who are members of a professional body.

Challenges

Higher Education in the UK has reached a pivotal time with respect to professional development. My research and my review of other's work in this area suggests four main challenges for HEIs:

- Ongoing development should be a key feature of all professionals' work, not just those who are formally required to evidence it. With the introduction of professional standards for teaching in higher education, the challenge for HEIs will be to ensure that their CPD support is fully inclusive and not just targeted at 'registered practitioners' (eg members of a professional body) who are required to 'remain in good standing'. This is linked to the need to develop a culture where CPD for teaching is valued and rewarded in the same way as CPD for research, and that ongoing professional learning is something that everyone should be engaged in (Johnston, 1998; Norris, 2003).
- Different people have different learning styles and evidence shows that academics learn about and develop their teaching in many different ways. The challenge for the Higher Education Academy as it develops a professional standards framework and for educational developers who are required to support it, is how to acknowledge, value, provide support for and enable the recording / monitoring of this multiplicity of formal and informal activities. As Sue Johnston (1998)

noted in her overview of professional learning, "Formal courses and similar activities need to comprise part of an integrated and coherent program of professional learning undertaken by the academic and they need to take place in an environment in which such learning is expected and valued."

- As well as developing teaching practice, ensuring the subject content is up-to-date is also an important feature of CPD. In Earth Science, education sessions have been a feature of major international conferences for several years (including the Geological Society of America's annual conference and the quadrennial International Geological Congress) thus allowing participants to engage in professional development related to both their research (subject content) and teaching. One challenge for the Higher Education Academy's Subject Centres is to explore the synergies between professional development for teaching and for research.
- All the literature on professional development in higher education emphasises collaboration as a key component. Academics collaborate with their colleagues through curriculum development, peer review, formal and informal networking, research and so on. Collaboration may occur within a department, across different faculties and disciplines, between different institutions, regionally, nationally and internationally. Collaboration and communication should also be the key to the relationship between educational developers and academic staff (Wareing, 2004). This relationship is analogous to and as important as that between academics and their students (Cowan, 2001). Rather than using a transmission model of teaching, educational developers work with academic staff to support their curriculum and professional development - CPD should not be something that is 'done' to one group of HE staff by another. Perhaps part of the success of the Subject Centres is not just that they 'speak the same language' as the disciplinary communities but that they work with them to help them support themselves.

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Recommendations: a possible framework for CPD

The above four 'challenges' are relevant to all those who support CPD in higher education, including institutional educational developers, national Subject Centres and professional bodies and associations. Recommendations for supporting CPD have also been made by other authors. Eraut (1994) suggested that support for professional development requires: a suitable combination of learning environments; appropriate time and space; availability of both learning resources and people able to offer support; and the capacity of the professional to learn and to make the most of available development opportunities. Similarly, Johnston (1998) identified four ways of thinking about professional learning such that: professional learning should be evidenced at all stages of every academic's career; professional learning should be related to institutional contexts, and supported by institutional structures and rewards; any programme of professional learning should be self-directed and related to the needs of the individual; and there needs to be opportunities for collaboration.

To conclude, comparison of these two sets of recommendations with the findings from the research reported here shows four common elements that might be highlighted in a framework for CPD in higher education:

- (1) Professional development for all elements of the academic

role (including teaching and research) needs to be considered as a normal part of professional life for all academic staff. As such, professional development for teaching should be part of institutional structures and reward policies in parity with research;

- (2) Professional development needs to be self-directed and planned within the relevant context (institutional, disciplinary and personal). Staff should be supported in enhancing their understanding of their own preferred learning styles and needs in order to make the most of available opportunities for developing their practice;
- (3) There needs to be recognition of and support for the complex nature of professional development which occurs in a variety of learning settings involving many different formal and informal activities;
- (4) The collaborative nature of professional development needs to be enhanced, allowing for and supporting interactions between academics within departments, between different disciplines, and across different institutions, and between all those who teach and support learning.

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