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A Framework for the development of Researching Professionals

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Hilary Lindsay & Inma Alvarez

The Open University, UK

A Framework for the Development of Researching Professionals

Innovative impact

When the Researching Professional Development Framework (RPDF) was first piloted with year one EdD students at the Open University in the UK, they found it very valuable. It gave them a tool that helped them reflect and work on three key learning dimensions. It also helped them consider, at the start of their degrees, how their identity might change during and after their doctoral studies; that their studies were not an end in themselves but a means to their becoming a researching professional. Moreover, the framework helped them to think beyond their studies; to imagine what their post-doctoral futures might look like and how they might make a difference through their research and through the skills they were developing.

The RPDF has now been integrated into the OU's EdD programme where doctoral researchers are not only using the planning tool regularly, but are also sharing their recorded reflections and plans with their supervisors. The framework will be a key resource in future PD programmes at the OU.

The OU has also plans to make the RPDF available online to other institutions. It is keen to share knowledge of this resource more widely. For more information, please contact: WELS-Prof-Docs@open.ac.uk

Introduction

The Researching Professional Development Framework (RPDF) is an online reflective resource that supports the development of students on a professional doctorate (PD) programme. The framework has been designed from empirical research undertaken with students enrolled in a Doctorate in Education (EdD) and graduates with such a degree. The resource prompts students to reflect on their own development as researchers. Following a successful pilot with EdD year one students, the resource is now being introduced in PD programmes across the Open University (OU) in the UK.

What distinguishes Professional Doctorates?

Those studying for a PD are likely to be self-funded, mid-career, experienced professionals who are undertaking research to inform their ongoing professional practice (Mellors-Burne et al., 2016). This contrasts with the Doctorate in Philosophy (PhD) which tends to be pursued as an early-career qualification, with the expectation of a subsequent career in academia. This distinction can be summarised by saying that while the PhD creates *professional researchers*, the PD creates *researching professionals* (Bourner et al., 2001; Butcher and Sieminski, 2006). In similar vein, Maxwell & Shanahan contrast the knowledge created by a PhD with the "knowledge in practice" gained through a PD (1997, p. 142).

The theory behind the RPDF

In her EdD research into the learning of professional accountants, Lindsay (2013) had built a framework based on the three dimensions of learning developed by Illeris (2002): cognitive, emotional and social. Later, Keegan (2009) described them as the cognitive, intrapersonal and interpersonal. Both Illeris and Keegan recognised that although learning (or education as it was often then described) had favoured the cognitive dimension, the other two dimensions, the more personal aspects of learning, were increasingly important in the ever-changing world of the twenty-first century. The framework Lindsay (2016) developed subdivided the triangle created from the three dimensions into nine sub-triangles, each comprising a different element of learning. She emphasised that if learning activities encompassed all nine areas, then learning and development would be as complete as possible. Lindsay had also aligned the three dimensions of learning to equivalent learning metaphors. The cognitive

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and interpersonal dimensions were aligned with the metaphors of learning as acquisition and learning as participation (Sfard, 1998) and the intrapersonal dimension with learning as becoming (Wenger, 1998). Overall, the framework very much reflected the learning on the job that was a key element of the learning of all professionals.

Developing the RPDF

After achieving her own PD, Lindsay became an Affiliated Researcher at the OU. Conversations with her mentor led to the realisation that her framework had the potential to be used in any context which involved learning from theory and from practice, not least in the OU's EdD programme itself. As a result, a programme of research was undertaken in which nine current and former EdD students were interviewed about their learning experiences. Rigorous thematic analysis led to the identification of the three overarching themes (reflecting the three dimensions) and nine areas of learning that make up the RPDF (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - The Researching Professional Development Framework (Lindsay et al., 2017)

Developing the RPDF interactive tool

The RPDF was subsequently developed into an online interactive tool for EdD students at the OU. Each segment of the framework is clickable and takes doctoral researchers to a page where one specific aspect of their development is explained. Here they are also invited to read and reflect on the quotes from other students, and then identify development actions using the Researching Professional Development Plan (RPDP) (Lindsay, et al., 2017). The intention behind the quotes from doctoral researchers is to help them realise that others had had similar concerns and faced similar issues as they did. This aspect of the framework also aims at contributing to the building of a sense of community among part-time students in dispersed locations.

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Piloting the RPDF

The online resource was piloted with six doctoral researchers during their first year of study and a second programme of research conducted. Each participant was interviewed at the start, middle and end of the year (Lindsay & Floyd, 2019). The quotes from the interviewees included below give an indication of their overall experiences of using the three dimensions of the RPDF.

Working as a researcher

"It helped me to think more broadly about the skills and attitudes I need to bring to the EdD." (student 1)

"It gave me insight from the students' comments that it is a very up and down journey and it is okay to not know what you are doing and have times of self-doubt." (student 2)

Developing ways of thinking

"*Developing my Identity* is something I am only just starting to grapple with. Not only do I need to develop my criticality, but I need to be aware of my own stand in the world, my principles and underpinning beliefs when reading and writing." (student 3)

Moving on with your research

"I think that I wouldn't have dared to have a page or sign in on ResearchGate because I'm not so confident as a person. The framework has made me think about other listings also. Otherwise I would be hiding, I think, and shy in a corner and wouldn't talk about my research until I have my results." (student 4)

Conclusion

While a considerable amount of attention has been directed to the development of PhD students' research and employability skills, not enough has been done to address the specific development needs of those studying a PD. The research conducted by Lindsay since 2015 has focused on the design and testing of a learning tool for PD researchers.

The testing showed that doctoral researchers begin their studies assuming that their learning would primarily be by acquisition (Sfard, 1998) through the development of appropriate knowledge and skills. However, through using the RPDF they realise that they also need to consider who they are and who they might become (Wenger, 1998) through their doctoral studies. They are also made aware of the wider research community to which they could belong and in which they could begin to participate (Sfard, 1998), even early in their studies.

In her final interview a student reflected on her overall development: "As the year has gone on, I've looked back at the framework from time to time and it's more about developing me as a researcher as a whole which has been valuable."