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How to be a good professional: existentialist continuing professional development (CPD)

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This article reflects on the construct and practice of continuing professional development (CPD) and its significance for the professional careers workforce. The article presents the idea of the CPD triad and considers how professional bodies, employers and individuals can each benefit from a practitioner's ongoing commitment to continuing professional development. The tension between the practitioner's quest for lifelong learning is set against professional body demands, leading to the conclusion that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Consideration is given to propositional, practical and procedural knowledge, and to overall competence. The article explores an existentialist approach to professional learning, and concludes that, along with personal agency, this could usefully be adopted by career practitioners to weather turbulent times.

Keywords: professionalisation; professional development; existentialist; competences; systems practice

Continuing professional development (CPD) as a hallmark of professionals

Continued or continuing professional development (CPD) has emerged as key in a number of professions (Becher, 1999; Doyle, 2003; Friedman, Phillips, & Timlett, 2002) and it would seem that a point has now been reached where CPD is not only expected of members, but is a formal requirement for registration and/or membership of the relevant professional association. The principle of CPD is enshrined in the notion of professionalism, even though the notion of professionalism itself is the subject of much debate, notably by Evetts (2011) who articulates both the challenges and opportunities of professionalism in the current, turbulent times. Whilst recognising that the very concept of professionalism is contested, we can still examine common practices of individual professionals as articulated by the professional bodies that admit and govern them. In this light, CPD endures as one hallmark of professional regulation. As such, if the career workforce aspires to be recognised as professional, the need for undertaking and demonstrating continuous learning must be addressed.

Common mechanisms or models for the recognition of CPD include self-reporting by the practitioner, or the professional body either sampling or auditing all records submitted periodically by their members. Parallel to this professional body path, it is possible to engage in accreditation of CPD towards named awards at higher academic level, specifically master's degrees or professional doctorates. In

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some professions, there has been a marked trend towards the use of such degrees as benchmarks for admission to higher levels of membership within the professional association, typically that of chartered member.

The CPD triad

It is clear from this brief outline that a number of actors are involved in the design, delivery and recognition of CPD, based on the key relationship between the individual professional practitioner and their professional body, the former seeking recognition of professional learning, the latter requiring it in the first place, then bestowing it. For the career workforce (be they advisers, counsellors, coaches, mentors, educators, public employment officers or managers), given that the majority are employed, an additional actor is the employer. Practitioner, professional body and employer therefore comprise the CPD triad, in which there are inherent tensions but which can interact smoothly to the benefit of all.

How CPD benefits employers

The problem for an employer is that CPD costs money. It might be a real, cash cost – paying for a training course, buying a book, some software or a new piece of equipment. It might be a real cost in terms of staff time – buying in cover when someone is out on a training course or allowing non-productive time while new approaches and techniques are mastered. However, the most challenging cost for an employer is allocating time, not to go out on a course, not to master some new piece of kit, but time to think. It is a risk, but a risk of investing for the future. That is because all organisations, large or small, public or private, are in competition; competing for customers, for commissions, for funding. In the present economic climate, with the dual emphasis on reducing costs and increasing productivity, the more an enterprise can offer (in the way of additional services, added value, greater effectiveness), the better their chances of attracting, securing and retaining sources of income. For all service providers, staff payroll is their major cost, effective staff their major asset and up-to-date staff their best source of innovation. It makes sense for an employer to invest in CPD, even where return on such investment seems uncertain. When the reluctant employer articulates the common fear: ‘What if I train them and they leave?’, the compelling answer is: ‘What if you don’t train them – and they stay?’.

How CPD benefits professional bodies

In broad terms, what the professional body gets out of CPD is public trust. The age-old suspicion that professions are a conspiracy against the public can be disproved by a clear commitment that all registered practitioners keep their practice up to date, and do so for the benefit of their clients. Specifically, it demonstrates appropriate governance and reasonable care in that it can assure itself, and its stakeholders (the public, the government, potential clients, the press), that standards are monitored and exacted. It is likely, therefore, that the demand for CPD to be undertaken (and to be recorded) will only increase. Once the decision is taken to record all CPD activity, the next issue is whether such recording should be voluntary or mandatory. If voluntary, it is helpful if there is some incentive for the member. If mandatory, there must be some redress if a member is derelict in her duty (demotion from one

membership category to another, or suspension perhaps, until the situation is rectified). Whether voluntary or mandatory, once records are kept, the professional body faces something of an ethical dilemma. If the public is to trust our members, is it sufficient that they are trusted by us? Should the self-reporting of our members be trusted implicitly, or should their records be examined for corroboration? In consideration of these issues, the balance of trust between professional and client, and the equal (if opposing) balance of trust between professional and professional body, is aired. How the issue is tackled for career guidance professionals in particular is considered later in this article.

How CPD benefits the individual professional

Doyle, as a chartered occupational psychologist, argued that much CPD will be undertaken in the natural course of one's work (Doyle, 2003). This happens most often in terms of what Becher (1999) refers to as solving specific problems. For the career professional this is often in response to a client presenting with a new issue or concern. In seeking to do their best for their client (which is another hallmark of professional practice), the practitioner will be motivated to expand knowledge and or competence, which will in turn benefit all subsequent clients. But Doyle articulates why CPD is a must:

There is a need for lifelong learning to cope with technological change, to keep abreast of developments within one's area of expertise, to develop one's skills and competences. In short there is a need for constant CPD throughout one's career. (Doyle, 2003, p. 134)

These assertions are put to the test on an individual basis: why should we bother with continuing professional development? Having earned the right to put the requisite letters after our name, having proved that we can do this, that we are competent, that we can be trusted, why can't we leave it at that? It is an attractive premise: once you have come through the initial professional training, once you have been admitted into the inner court of those who are permitted to practise, you are in. For those who do qualify, and engage in autonomous professional practice, the realisation dawns that qualifying is not the point of arrival, but the point of departure. Not only does our own competence develop as we practise, and with it perhaps the recognition that there are gaps which only the real test of live practice could have revealed, but another harsh reality of professional practice confronts us: the knowledge base on which our practice is founded is not static, but dynamic. It is not fixed, it is relentlessly evolving. If we don't keep up with the inevitable changes and developments in the professional domain, we will perforce find ourselves, sooner or later, left behind. The autonomous professional needs to develop their professional repertoire in order to deal with the novel and unfamiliar. Keeping up to date enhances individual employability and offers the inherent satisfaction of doing a good job. It often refreshes, and can renew the self-confidence which encourages client trust in professional practice.

Tensions inherent in the triad

For all the benefits of CPD to those in the triad, there is an inherent tension where cycles of development are not in alignment. For an employed professional, the

development needs of the employer might determine the development needs of the individual. For example, if the organisation has to accommodate outside pressure (say from a major contractor) to adopt a particular management information system, the training emphasis will be on mastering that system. Where a service provider has reorganised, the training emphasis will be on managing change. While there will be demonstrable benefits to the individual employee, the needs of the organisation will override any individual development plans. Equally, where professional bodies articulate their expectations of CPD in a systematic way, typically so as to streamline the approval process, this can make it difficult for the individual to articulate individualised learning. These tensions can be experienced to a greater or lesser extent and can be overcome, primarily through an open dialogue about what is expected and careful articulation of what exactly has been learned. Despite such tension, the residual outcome of CPD is that the individual has indeed developed for professional practice.

Career professionals and their professional body requirements in England

For the main part, this article takes the broadest possible view of professionals, considering universal questions about CPD within the context of careers work. More specifically, it refers to the career-prefixed cadre of career(s) advisers/counsellors/coaches/mentors/educators/public employment officers and managers, and will later draw on a pan-European perspective of competences needed for effective career practice. It is worthwhile considering a specific national case because it demonstrates significant development with regard to a unifying professional body and what it asks of its members in terms of CPD. In 2008 an inquiry into the provision of careers education and guidance in England expressed strong reservations about the training of career professionals (The Skills Commission, 2008). As part of its response, the government created an independent Task Force on the Careers Profession (TFCP). In the course of its deliberations, the TFCP considered what it means to be a professional, and continuing professional development (Mulvey, 2011, p. 5), then concluded that this cadre is weakly professionalised (Department for Education, 2010), and challenged the professionals in question to forge a stronger profession. It thus recommended that a common set of standards and ethics should be developed (*ibid.*, recommendation 3) by the Careers Profession Alliance (CPA) and was explicit with regard to CPD: ‘...the Careers Profession Alliance should expect their members (whether individual members...or employers of careers professional) to demonstrate a commitment to CPD’ (*ibid.*, recommendation 6), thus tackling head on the need for joint commitment by professional and employer.

The Careers Profession Alliance

The CPA brings together some of the relevant professional bodies, including the Institute of Career Guidance, the Association of Careers Education and Guidance, the National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults and the Association of Careers Professional International. The intention is that from 2013 there will be one single professional body, to be known as the Career Development Institute. In the meantime, the CPA has published its code of ethics, which has two notable features. Firstly, it articulates all those who stand to benefit from the code, namely ‘clients/users; society; my employer; my colleagues; the career development

profession and myself' (CPA, 2012). In doing so, it represents the CPD triad and expands the orbit of interaction to include other stakeholders. Secondly, it asks members to abide by this standard: 'In my professional practice, I will maintain and update my professional competence, knowledge and skills through undertaking suitable CPD' (ibid.). This leads to a closer consideration of competences.

Competences

Competence is really a catch-all term for the combination of skills, knowledge and attitudes which enable people to do their job well. Skills are not innate; they are learned or acquired, usually through some effort (although such effort may be pleasurable). Knowledge is the outcome of assimilation of information through learning, and learning comes in at least three different forms: propositional learning or knowing that (*savoir*); practical learning or knowing how (*savoir faire*); and procedural or knowing how to be (*savoir être*). The French terms are included here simply in acknowledgement of the work done by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2009) in capturing competence as part of the professionalising of career guidance. In defining six foundation competences, which in turn support a range of task- and context-specific competences, there is a clear requirement for CPD: 'Develop one's own capabilities and understand any limitations – this requires a reflective approach to consideration of own capacity and limitations . . . and making use of management and peer support' (Cedefop, 2009, p. 78). Peers here would include, of course, fellow members of the relevant professional body. The Network for Innovation in Career Guidance and Counselling in Europe (NICE)¹ was set up in 2009 with support from the European Commission as an Erasmus network, and defines competence as 'the ability of people to meet complex demands in particular situations, drawing upon adequate affective, behavioural and cognitive resources in a reflective manner' (NICE, 2012, p. 34). Their research has informed a handbook setting out common points of reference for professional training, including a set of core competences, broken down further into sub competences, which can be readily adopted in designing and delivering academic training for the career workforce. They depict six professional roles (ibid., p. 44) which together encompass the work undertaken by career professionals, from career counsellor to service manager. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of 'Career Guidance and Counselling Professionals' (CGC) who 'ensure their professionalism in all NICE Professional Roles' (ibid., p. 47). This role is deemed to be the 'fundamental and unifying role concept which anchors CGC professionals in their practice' (ibid., p. 52) and demands that the individual professional recognises that they need to continuously develop their own competence in order to move apace with developments in technology and in society. They can do so by keeping up with current research and theory and by engaging in reflective practice. The challenge of teaching practitioners how to reflect is discussed in detail in the handbook, but a brief note on developing this key competence is called for here.

Schön's seminal work on reflective learning (1991) has offered generations of professionals a way of bridging the gap between academic learning and its counterpart, learning through practice. This is not an easy gap to bridge, and while it is evident that reflective practice is common currency in professional learning, the approach and its techniques are not without challenge. In his own reflective consideration of his experience of training and mentoring guidance practitioners,

Winter points out that traditional approaches to reflection offer thematic analysis of what has happened, and distils his concern that ‘many [practitioners] have found it hard to engage with reflective practice on a consistent basis’ (Winter, 2012, p. 26). He advocates a range of approaches, drawing on narrative and constructivist techniques in particular, so as to help practitioners develop a deeper appreciation of their work which could in turn lead to a stronger sense of professional identity.

An existentialist perspective on professional identity

In mid career

The issue of professional identity covers both how a profession sees itself and how an individual sees him or herself in a particular professional role. Closely aligned to this notion of owning and/or inhabiting a professional role is procedural knowledge or knowing how to be (referred to above). CPD picks up where initial professional training leaves off, and Eraut (2008) argues cogently that it is in mid career that CPD takes place. He identifies learning opportunities inherent in meeting challenges at work, which occurs naturally and inevitably by simply doing things at work, or by seeking out learning opportunities. He sees confidence and mastery as key in enabling mid-career learning, and the sense of feeling supported as critical (Eraut, 2008). But mid career can also lead to stasis, and with it to professionals asking themselves profound questions around their professional direction and identity; profound enough to shade into mid-career crisis. Cooper’s research on social workers and their approach to CPD led him to ask his readers whether professional practice is ‘a minimum-requirements activity’ or an ‘opportunity for life-long learning, challenge and growth’ (Cooper, 2010, p. 180). He articulates some of the metaphors these social workers used to describe their situation. These included descriptions such as ‘trapped’, ‘stuck’ and ‘bogged down’, all indicative of a sense of stagnation. Some of the social workers wondered how they had got into this profession and expressed uncertainty as to where they were going. Social work, as a sector and as a profession, has of course been under intense scrutiny in the past decade and these responses, while somewhat shocking at first view, may not be surprising given that context. There is a resonance here with existentialist counselling, which focuses on helping people in coming to terms with life in all its confusing complexity (Van Deurzen, 2000).

In early career

Confusing complexity is by no means reserved for professionals in mid career; it can of course be experienced in early career too. The BBC documentary *Junior Doctors* (BBC, 2011) follows a group of junior doctors who, having completed five years of medical school, go full time on hospital wards. The group includes those just starting on this transition (the so-called F1s) and those who have completed one year and are progressing to the second year (the F2s). Suzi is a 24-year-old female doctor just starting on the wards. She talks at home to her flatmate Kier, a 28-year-old male F2 doctor. This is a verbatim transcript of the exchange:

Suzi: It’s fine with like staff. I do wish I looked a bit older with patients sometimes. I do feel they don’t take me seriously. And they never think I’m the doctor, ever. In fact I do go in and say *I’m Suzi, I’m one of the doctors*. It’s my opening line for every patient.

Kier: I wouldn't even do that. I'd say: *My name is Dr Batchelor.*

Suzi: But that's just like, not me though.

It is clear from this exchange that, in her transition period, this new doctor is struggling with being a doctor. Having been given licence to practise by a professional body, the individual still has to give herself permission to adjust to that new professional identity. She isn't struggling with practising, but with being. The issue for her isn't about actions, or reflecting, or reflecting on action, or noticing or assessing or striving. It is about being. Perhaps a useful analogy here is that of being an understudy. Imagine the actor who is understudy, say, for David Tennant in the role of Hamlet. When the understudy eventually gets the call to go on stage, it is not to play David Tennant, it is to play Hamlet, actually to be Hamlet for the duration of that play. Part of being a professional is about being, by mastering the procedural knowledge of knowing how to be.

Kabat-Zinn (2001) offers a structured programme of mindfulness meditation as a means of coping with stress. He draws on a cognitive and behavioural therapeutic basis, combining this with physical and physiological exercises focusing on breathing and learned awareness of the here and now. Crucially, he does not offer solutions to the problems people present with, but encourages a way of being with those problems, of embracing the full catastrophe as he puts it. In this he echoes existentialist approaches to counselling, where the intention is not to reduce complexity and confusion but to find a way of being with it. Anyone who has tried meditation or mindfulness will know that the challenge of simply being is quite demanding, but Kabat-Zinn (2001), while emphasising the need for continuous practice, holds out no hope of mastery, just a way of being. An existentialist approach may help with the transition into professional career and with being a professional throughout the arc of a career life. So what can be of help to professionals, and the professions they make up, when weathering turbulent times?

Individual practice within systems: the personal is political

This article has already discussed how career professional bodies in England are in the process of reorganisation in order to strengthen the career profession – a profession which can only exist because of the individual professionals it represents. The winds of change are by no means restricted to England; the impact of economic and political change is keenly felt at present across all sectors and all countries. Whether it is their clients or indeed themselves who are going through it, for many people these are turbulent times. Prominent in the women's liberation movement, Hamisch (1970, 2006) defended the sustained attack on consciousness raising as merely therapy by arguing that the 'personal is political', going on to clarify that in this context, political is to do with power. This focus pulling, from the individual (either professional or personal) to whole (the profession or the political context), is one that could serve the career cadre well, by offering a means of making sense of being one individual practitioner, apparently powerless to make any difference to the prevailing politico-economic system within which one practises. But how might this be brought into professional training?

The NICE academic network proposes a curriculum framework, comprising nine broad modules, which can form the basis of professional training for career workers. Each is outcome orientated and competence based, with a set of learning outcomes

for performing well in the related NICE professional roles. The module entitled ‘Social systems interventions and developments’ (NICE, 2012, p. 74) reflects the need for career professionals to work directly with clients (possibly even clients in crisis) but also to change systems for the better. It comes as no surprise that the relevant competences include networking, referral and advocacy. ‘Developing professionalism’ is the module which is promoted as developing core competence for initial training (which carries through into CPD). Learning to be reflexive is in here, along with developing ethical practice. The interplay between individual practitioner and wider society is here, too, articulated in a couple of powerful sub competences, namely ‘engaging in societal debate about the purposes of career guidance and counselling’ (ibid.). In this way, the personal, the professional and the political are developed concurrently and integrated systematically in a powerful affirmation of the collective values underpinning the career profession.

Using agentic theory to develop professionalism

If much is thus asked of the individual professional, they could readily draw on Bandura’s theory of personal agency in developing these competences and achieving the challenges inherent within them. Bandura (2006) situates agentic theory within human development, arguing that it helps with adaption and change; indeed the theory of agency commits us to the process of changing and adapting. It permits a visualised future which may be different from the predicted path, and thus allows for subtle but significant shifts within the systems that constrain us. At the heart of personal agency sits self-efficacy. This can affect whether thinking is positive or negative and as such can be self-enhancing or self-debilitating. Bandura includes self-reflectiveness as one of the four connected characteristics of self-efficacy. He describes this as the process by which the individual makes meaning of actions both now and in the future, and argues that it is necessary for finding fit, by making adjustments or gaining leverage, thereby moving from the static to the desired future. It is useful to us in turbulent times because developing agentic ability widens options. It can help the individual professional make sense of the systems within which they practise, including the system of professional peers, with their expectations and constraints. Systems can challenge our assumptions and our working practices. This is particularly true when prevailing politico-economic systems are not conducive to delivering the kind of services we aspire to. Nevertheless, working with and through systems brings the inevitable realisation that although we each practise autonomously, we never practise truly in isolation.

Conclusion

This article set out to consider the construct and practice of continuing professional development and its significance for the professional career workforce. It presented the notion of a CPD triad in which practitioner, professional body and employer each have vested interest and purchase in the process and practice of initial training and lifelong CPD. Clearly, the theatre of operation extends far beyond this triad, given that all of them are operating within wider systems. For career professionals in particular, the prevailing economic and political systems have considerable impact on the work they do and the way they do it. The current socio-economic context is such

that it is reasonable to expect that many are finding themselves in confusing complexity or even experiencing something like the full catastrophe.

Current pan-European research into academic training of the career workforce (NICE, 2012) recognises the need to develop skills and competences in initial training, and places great emphasis on developing professionalism as a fundamental competence, and one which translates readily to lifelong CPD. Learning lies at the heart of CPD, and competences demonstrably mastered through initial professional training need constant investment and updating merely to keep abreast of developments in research and practice. Indeed if practitioners (and the organisations employing them) are to succeed in business terms, innovation and adding value are vital, so investing in CPD makes sense even though it presents a cost in real terms at a time when costs are under scrutiny.

Committing to CPD may be a professional body requirement, but embracing CPD as a challenge for personal growth is, inevitably, an individual choice. It is of course at the individual level that professionals choose how they act, and they must accept the professional responsibility that goes with such freedom. While much learning will take place in the course of professional work, knowledge thus acquired fits into a scale from practical, through procedural to knowing how to be. Developing existentialist CPD for career guidance practice, by drawing on existentialist counselling in general, and on mindfulness in particular (Kabat-Zinn, 2001) could help the individual professional in making sense of practising career work within the wider system, particularly when those wider systems are inimical to helping clients in economic or personal crisis.

Throughout this article, the individual practitioner is challenged to act: to take responsibility for professional actions, to commit to lifelong CPD and to articulate how their practice fits into politico-economic systems. The counterbalance to such demands comprises practical suggestions for concepts and practices which would sustain the professional in facing up to these challenges. Not least is the suggestion that the personal is political, so that a small action taken by one career guidance professional can, and does, make a valuable contribution to the careers profession as a whole. After all, a profession owes its very existence to the individuals who belong to it. From the personal to the political, by way of existentialist CPD, may not secure the future of careers work, but could go a long way to making its voice heard and its presence felt for the good of all its stakeholders, not least among them our clients.

Note

1. NICE brings together 41 partners from 28 European countries, most of which run academic training programmes (at either undergraduate or postgraduate level) for the spectrum of careers work, ranging from education, guidance, counselling, programme and service management to social systems interventions.

Notes on contributor

A chartered psychologist and principal fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Professor Rachel Mulvey is fellow and past president of the Institute of Career Guidance and a director of the International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance. She has exceptional expertise in graduate employability, having co-authored *Brilliant Graduate Career Handbook* (Pearson, 2011) and developed the Transferable Employability Skills Scale (TESS) for BBC LabUK which has been completed by over 36,000 people.

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