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Supporting the Professional Development of Teachers in Higher Education

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Abstract

During the past fifty years higher education has expanded and diversified and the demands and expectations being placed on Higher Education Institutions are now formidable, with changes in the student body and increased pressure from government on costs, procedures and results. For academic staff (faculty), there are increased pressures through increased teaching loads and growing reporting and administrative requirements. These staff are also under great pressure to develop and strengthen their research profile while also achieving excellence in teaching and fulfilling the expectations of their learners and other stakeholders.

"New and improved ways of teaching students is one of the challenges facing higher education staff. The status and prestige of research notwithstanding, according to the Carnegie Commissions international survey of the academic profession, teaching students emerged very strongly as the principle defining characteristic of the academic."

(Skilbeck, 2001: 72)

This paper aims to explore the role of educational development in supporting academic staff operating in today's educational arena.

Keywords

Professional Educational Development, Teacher Professionalism, Educational Change

Introduction

To support academic staff in the area of new and improved ways of teaching and to deepen their understanding of how students learn is a challenge for educational developers everywhere. Walker (2001) describes the dominant paradigm in academic staff development in Britain as too often emphasizing 'the practice and perfection only of methods and techniques'. As educational developers, we are concerned in our professional activity not to promote a surface learning approach but rather to facilitate the intellectual, personal and professional growth of teachers through learning, reflection and conversation and provide a supportive and challenging environment in which teachers in higher education can learn and grow and students can enjoy quality learning experiences.

In higher education generally, this is a time of increasing emphasis on measurable outcomes and standards, transferability and accountability. This paper will explore experiences of professional development from the perspective of the provider and consideration will be given to concepts of professionalism, models of professional development provision, the development and support of academic staff as reflective

practitioners, and allude to the importance of establishment and support of collaborative communities of practice.

Overall, the context will explore a number of perspectives and will be informed by a pilot action research study on improving support for staff in relation to the scholarship of third level learning and teaching and resultant impact on practice. As a result of the continuing expansion of higher education, there are growing demands on higher education professionals and in this context, the professional development of academics takes on a greater significance. The paper will give a critical view of professional development and will be of interest to all those involved in staff and educational development. It is also an investigation of the development of scholarship and skills in teaching in higher education and in this context will be a useful resource for both those who are new to teaching in higher education and those who have experience as teachers.

As educational developers, it is important that we create space for teachers to find their voice and encourage and support them to uncover their own educational values and teaching philosophy. We believe that a great deal of learning can emerge through the discussion of important personal issues or concerns around teaching and learning and an interdisciplinary approach does not mean that differences are not recognized, but rather, collaborative conversations grounded in principles of mutual recognition and respect can develop a broad tradition of scholarship in teaching. In this context the ideas of Sachs (2000) on 'active professionalism' which focus on the individual creating new spaces for debate and action leading to collective and collaborative action are very relevant.

What challenges emerge from the consideration of current practice?

Higher education has given ample proof of its viability over the centuries and of its ability to change and to induce change and progress in society. At the dawn of a new century, there is an unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education. This leads to challenges as well as opportunities for those working as educational developers in higher education.

A major challenge is knowing how to prompt and support staff to want to make progress with Continuous Professional Development (CPD); how to best generate enthusiasm and interest? There is significant movement towards formalising academic development taking place in locations where academics spend most of their time: departments, professional settings and research sites. We would argue that it is vital to support academics in maintaining their high levels of enthusiasm and drive when leaving the settings in which accredited qualifications in learning and teaching take place and returning to what was originally a lonely and somewhat isolated state. This is indeed a

challenge but there is evidence in the comments of staff involved in the research that their teaching practice has become a focus for considered reflection and discussion and this offers hope for the future. Reflection on practice, a concern with improvement and a spirit of inquiry are fundamental to professional work. Lecturers can be encouraged and supported in their learning by professional development opportunities which focus on supporting inquiry into practice and this helps to minimise the problems of transferring learning from courses into practice.

Biggs (1999) contends that since teaching is a personal matter, new ideas need to be used reflectively and turned to one's own context. Lecturers learn by doing, reading and reflecting, collaborating with other lecturers, giving consideration to their students' learning and discussing what they see. Mc Laughlin (1997: 82) contends that such learning can only take place '*in settings that support lecturer inquiry and collaboration, strategies grounded in lecturers' questions and concerns and a theoretically powerful base of knowledge*'. From our experience as educational developers, lecturers become excited and enthused when they have an opportunity to discuss the challenges they encounter daily and their own experiences of how their students' learn. We would contend that to generate excitement and commitment to CPD amongst academic staff, it is essential to create a space for lecturers in higher education to dialogue and converse with their peers about their teaching, to interact with the literature on the scholarship of teaching and to make explicit their theories about teaching, learning, the curriculum and the students they are teaching.

The identification of needs is a first step and must be followed by a programme which provides tangible support and genuine commitment and encouragement for teacher development acknowledging that their needs as professionals are complex and continuing. Professional development is a process over time not a just-in-time training event and the issue of continuity in professional development poses challenges and we have outlined a variety of methods that can be used to support professional learning over time.

Nature of Teacher Professionalism

In relation to teacher professionalism a considerable literature exists which has relevance in the context of professionalism in higher education. Hargreaves (1994) writes of a '*new professionalism*', which involves a movement away from traditional teacher autonomy to new forms of relationship with colleagues, students and parents. McLaughlin (1997) in writing about this also moves the focus for analysis, debate and action from the individual to the group. Sachs (2000) argues for a new form of teacher professionalism called activist professionalism which develops from educators

understanding their practice and understanding themselves in relation to the society in which they live and central to the idea is trust, and collaboration. She argues that

“The activist professional creates new spaces for action and debate, and in so doing improves the learning opportunities for all who are recipients or providers of education.”

(Sachs, 2000: 93)

At the core of the ideas are the development of an understanding of practice in the context of the changing society in which we live and the challenge in becoming a ‘new’ or ‘activist’ professional is that it demands a commitment in terms of intellectual endeavour, time and energy. The primary and most significant characteristic of professionals is that professionals enjoy more autonomy on the basis of competence, responsibility, integrity, initiative and devotion to duty. Professionals enjoy greater autonomy but they have a commensurate duty to be exacting in their demands on themselves. For the teacher in higher education this translates into commitment to supporting students’ learning so that they can discharge their professionalism in the best possible ways. The argument has been made that what is needed is not new systems of control and accreditation but “a reformulation of academic practice with a view to generating new forms of participation in and access to the intrinsic goods of learning”. (Nicholls, 2001: 74)

Action Research Study

The outcome of the pilot study are as follows: there were 25 responses from graduates from an accredited Masters programme in Third Level Learning and Teaching, 40 responses within an institutional School-based environment and 10 responses from heads of learning development in Faculties.

Initial research into the experience of the academic staff on the Postgraduate Certificate programme in Third Level Learning and Teaching would suggest that it has impacted on the thinking, planning and practices of the lecturers. The main outcomes in terms of the learning from participation in the programme were categorised as:

- Improved reflection on current teaching practice;
- Adoption of new teaching strategies;
- Focus on design and delivery of class;
- Further work on course teams;
- Increased confidence in their teaching practice.
- More student-centred approach to learning and teaching.

As Land (2001) contends a significant feature of academic development practice is the recognition that a process of change must be facilitated. Figure 1 illustrates this in the context of the research conducted.

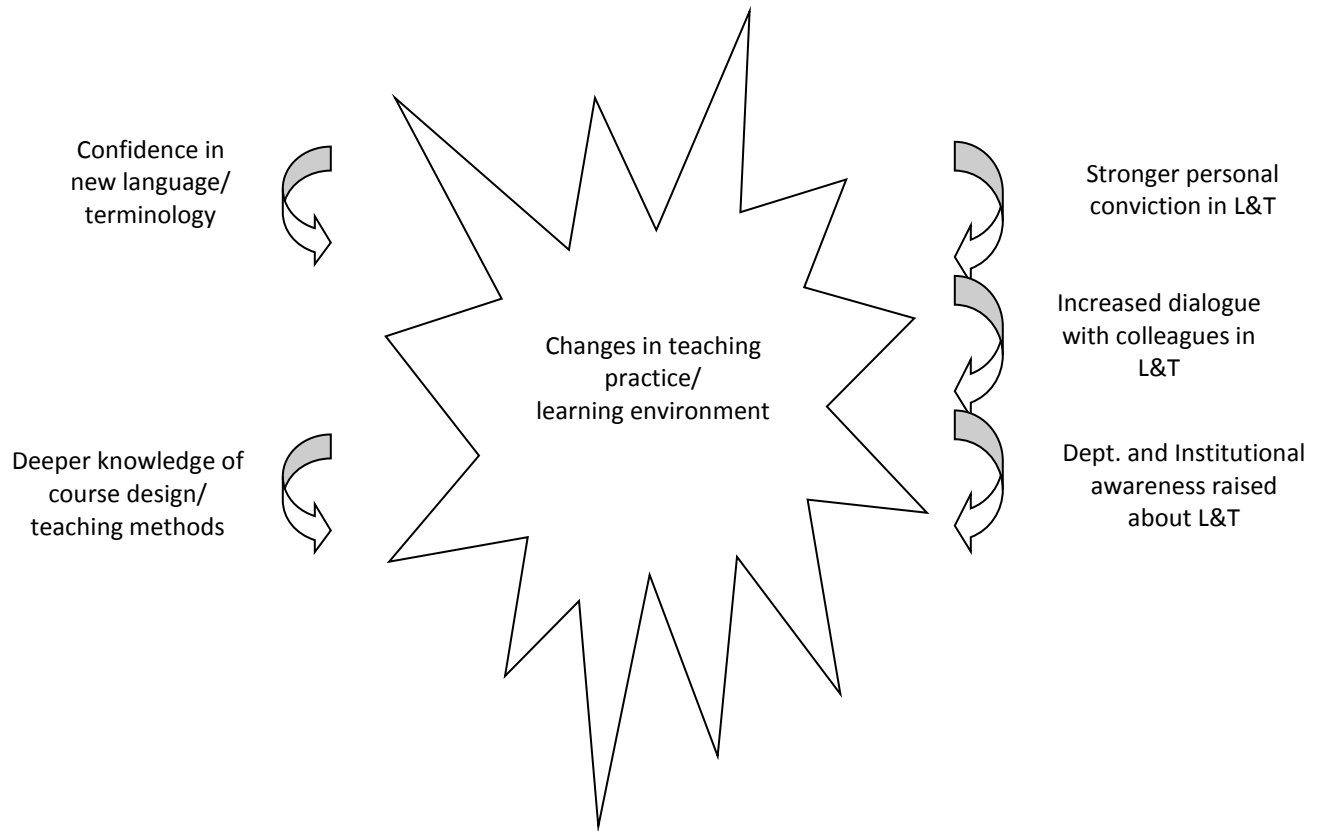


Figure 1 Changes in Educational Practice and Environment

Clearly, professional competence is much more than just developing a repertoire of strategies and methodologies. This was voiced very powerfully by one of the course participants.

I have developed skills and knowledge to deliver and organise better lectures and tutorials but the most important professional development has been gaining an understanding, awareness and ability to question myself about the approaches I use in teaching and ask myself why I do it and could I do it more effectively.

In terms of professional development there is a growing recognition that successful professional development programmes articulate well-thought through ideas about the learning process (Moon, 2000). Teaching is an intellectual undertaking and lecturers are

representatives of academic disciplines who work hard to understand the knowledge, traditions and terminology of mathematics, business, science, language and the arts but also continually deal with the challenge of representing knowledge usefully and understandably to their students. However, teaching is not just about teaching something, it is about teaching someone. Teaching is thoughtful, considerate and kindly, not just technical and cognitive. Lecturers in higher education have the potential to enhance the quality of education by bringing life to curriculum and inspiring students in higher education to curiosity and self-directed learning. The intellectual and relational elements of teaching are both vital from preschool to college. This is reflected in the comments from the participants on the programme.

You become less concerned with the content although that is important and reflect more on why you are teaching what you are teaching, how it links to everything else and the most appropriate way to present it to a particular group of students.

I now think about the learning rather than the teaching and that make me think about the best way I as a lecturer can enhance the learning experience. I certainly reflect more on what I do.

I question much more what I do, why I am doing it and what the students will get from it.

In the certificate programme there are structured activities that encourage reflection on classroom situations, episodes and experiences in the microteaching group and there are opportunities for lecturers to discuss their own and other participants' educational practices from a professional point of view. Sharing both professional experiences and difficulties led to a collegiality and this has implications for building a professional culture. In the words of the participants:

The opportunity to talk about your teaching was probably the most valuable aspect of the course. I teach in an environment where people tend to teach their courses individually and while it is possible to discuss your teaching it's not the norm.

I think as a group we were striving to learn and improve our knowledge and practice through reading and reflecting. There was also a sense of support and sharing and encouragement.

In building towards a new professionalism for lecturers in higher education we cannot depend on a single model but rather seek to develop approaches to continuing professional development, which acknowledges the dynamic nature of practice and the complexity of learning and teaching. We would argue that there are several key principles which should underpin professional development for academics in relation to teaching in higher education:

- providing opportunities for professional dialogue
- seeking improvements in classroom practices in a variety of settings
- acknowledging the complexity of learning and teaching
- promoting collaboration
- creating an environment of trust and mutual respect
- developing a culture of inquiry
- a realistic understanding of how external realities affect what we can do.

Successful courses exhibit an understanding of the culture of higher education institutions and the discourse of academia. In supporting the professional development of academics it is essential that lecturers are not cast in the role of passive participants in a process but that they are recognised as the source of change and transformation working in collaboration with others. In such a culture critical conversations about learning and teaching in higher education will be the norm to the benefit of academic staff and students.

The innovations cited by the respondents were largely curriculum or classroom focused changes. The characteristics of the changes can be looked at in terms of their size, complexity, prescriptiveness and practicality for the lecturers involved. Simple changes may be easier to carry out, but they may not make much of a difference. Practical changes are those that address salient needs, that fit well with the lecturers' situation, that are focused and that include concrete how-to-do-it possibilities (Bennett *et al*, 1992: 115).

Values and meanings are a crucial part of considering the way in which these individuals and their organizations can manage educational change. According to Bennett *et al*, (1992: 4) the best way of thinking about how to deal with change is by being eclectic: pragmatism informed by a clear sense of meanings and values, which recognizes the role of 'theory' in developing a sense of good practice. The individual lecturer's characteristics can play a role in determining implementation of change. Some lecturers, depending on their personality, and influenced by their experiences on this course, are more self-actualised and have a greater sense of efficacy, which leads them to take action and persist in the effort required to bring about successful implementation of change. In the final analysis, according to Fullan (Bennett *et al*, 1992: 117), it is the actions of the individual that count. All participants on the course were aware that change involved

learning to do something new. This, alongside having a work environment that could stimulate continuous improvements was an important factor emerging from this research.

Within this, there is also attentiveness to the idea that almost every important learning experience we have ever had has been stressful. Those issues that create stress for us give us clues about the uncooked seeds within us that need attention. This means that the capacity to suspend belief, take risks and experience the unknown are essential to learning. Under conditions of uncertainty, learning, anxiety, difficulties and fear of the unknown are intrinsic to all change processes, especially at the early stages (Fullan, 1993: 25). As indicated by some of the respondents, some form of conflict is essential to any successful change effort; change itself is learning. They can be more selective in what they try (as distinct from accepting all change) but in exploring selected new ideas, they should be encouraged to be patient enough to learn more about them and to look for longer term consequences before drawing conclusions.

Developing a personal philosophy of teaching, which is informed by and contributes to the organizational, community, societal and global contexts of education is an important facet of the work of the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching. When these lecturers work on personal vision-building and see how their commitment to making a difference in the classroom is connected to the wider purpose of education, it gives practical and moral meaning to their profession. The Course uses the Teaching Portfolio as a vehicle to get them started on this, by enabling them to pursue learning through constant inquiry; thereby they are practicing what they preach, benefiting themselves and their students by always learning.

When one lecturer collaborates with another, or many lecturers work in a new alliance with each other and external partners, they are enlarging their horizons as they lengthen and strengthen the levers of improvement. When many educators act this way, systems start to change, and according to Fullan (1993: 145) become the environments that prod and support further growth and development.

However, with all the emphasis we place on collegiality and collaboration, the capacity to think and work independently is also essential to educational reform. Meaningful reform can escape the typical lecturer in favour of superficial, episodic reform (Fullan, 2001: 36). It is important for these lecturers to be aware of false clarity whereby they think their practice has changed, but it has only occurred in a superficial way. This point can be made to future course participants now as a result of this study.

Educational change has been a learning experience for all involved. These lecturers still need to focus on making a difference with individual students, but they must also work

on department-wide change to create the working conditions that will be most effective in helping all students learn. As revealed in the questionnaire responses, they must continue to look for opportunities to join forces with others in their departments, and must realize that they are part of a larger movement to develop a learning society through their work with students. It is only by these individuals continuing to take action to alter their own environments that there is any chance for deep change.

In terms of how we see ourselves in the Centre, Sarasen (cited in Fullan 1993: 120), has captured its essence: *“as long as educators see themselves as lacking the power to change anything in a meaningful way, they will remain part of the problem.”* The development of a knowledge base for change within our Centre is a powerful potential asset for altering the quality and the status of lecturer preparation.

In terms of the institution, it needs to be actively plugged into its environment responding to and contributing to the issues of the day. We would contend that small scale improvement will not last if we do not identify with and help improve the surrounding system. It will focus on the development of personal strategies by individuals to respond to, and seek to influence the impact of continued structural and cultural change in the HE sector in the Republic of Ireland. Lecturers with a moral purpose will always be key players in any progress made in educational reform (Fullan, 1999: 84).

What directions should we be considering for future developments?

If we as educational developers are to truly support the professional development of academic staff in higher education, it has to be with an appreciation of the twin pillars of both research and practice. There has to be an acknowledgement of both the “high ground” and “swampy lowlands” (Schon, 1987).

This, combined with conversations with peers and an interaction with the key literature in teaching and learning, will arm teaching practitioners with a theoretical insight to help with their practical day-to-day challenges.

“We cannot expect to leap for a solution to the complex of educational problems. We can only aim to embark on a line of development which will give promise of a fairly long process of systematic and thoughtful improvement.”

(Stenhouse, 1975: 125)

In order to keep building for a future in which the younger generations will need to be equipped with new skills, knowledge and ideals, both academic staff and educational developers need to be cognizant of this.

We have raised the issue of the extent to which professional development can be an individualistic activity or a collective one; we have highlighted the issue of how teachers learn and explored the need to take account of learning styles when planning professional development. Consideration has been given to issues around access to professional learning and growth opportunities and to strategies to ensure that where appropriate the outcomes from professional learning are disseminated.

This paper argues that valid research and evaluation evidence continues to be needed to challenge and inform our practices, and deepen our understanding about how teachers learn to teach so that together we can transcend the challenges that face us today as academic educators and incorporate deeper dimensions of learning and teaching for the benefit of all involved. Continuing work is taking cognizance of the ways in which new technologies are bringing about new possibilities for professional development.

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