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Voices from the deck: lecturers' and middle managers' perceptions of effective FE sector professional development

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the findings of research into further education (FE) lecturers' and middle managers' perceptions of what constitutes effective professional development. This focus addresses an area of paucity in the literature that requires attention in this historically under-funded, yet ever-more burdened, education sector which can ill afford to divert scarce resources to forms of professional development that do not result in salient learning, and consequential improved student outcomes. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed that effective professional development is perceived to involve: the participation of lecturers in determining the focus of their own professional learning; opportunities for reflection; active learning and an element of fun; and learning within communities of practice.

Introduction

Ongoing professional learning is a critically important activity across education sectors, primarily to improve students' outcomes (Desimone 2009; Kennedy 2016). Duncombe and Armour (2004, 142) draw on Schön (1983) to argue, rightly, that becoming a professional teacher 'requires both initial and ongoing training' since 'initial teacher training alone is insufficient in giving teachers the knowledge and skills required for their entire careers'. Developments in theories of learning, pedagogical approaches, learning technologies and changes in sector policy mean that the ongoing nature of professional learning is crucial in order that educators remain cognisant of such changes.

In this paper both terms 'teacher' and 'lecturer' are used to refer to educators, according to their professional context. The former term is used in reference to educators in the primary and secondary education

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sectors, while the latter word is used when referring to educators in the further education (FE) sector. From the authors' experience of working in FE for a combined period of over 30 years, it was felt that the usage of both terms were contested among colleagues in reference to their own job title, and that there was no clear preference (see also Illsley and Waller 2017). Such differing preferences mirror the inconsistent application of these terms across literature in connection with educators working in FE. While some authors use the term 'teachers' (for instance Broad 2015), some use 'lecturers' (see Lloyd and Jones 2018), and others use both words interchangeably within the same article (for example Bathmaker and Avis 2005).

Unsurprisingly, it has been found that professional development perceived as effective by teachers tends to address the individual professional learning needs of those in attendance (Goodall et al. 2005). In the early years (Ingleby 2018), primary (Duncombe and Armour 2004) and secondary (Goodall et al. 2005) sectors, however, teachers often perceive their experiences of professional development to be ineffective in achieving this goal (also see Keay, Carse, and Jess 2018). As with other areas of research in FE (Daley, Orr, and Petrie 2015), there is relatively little current research focused on this sector's professional development.

What constitutes 'effective' professional development will remain an elusive and inherently contestable concept, as attempts to define efficacy in this field are informed by divergent beliefs and approaches, including: the positivist leaning evaluation of impact against predefined objectives (McChesney and Aldridge 2019); evaluating development activities *per se* to determine subject relevant content (Desimone 2009); or interpretive approaches, such as obtaining the perceptions of the planners, deliverers and/or recipients of professional development (Earley and Porritt 2010). It should be recognised, therefore, that what comprises effective professional development will vary considerably according to the positionality of stakeholders, including policy makers, Ofsted, FE college management, and lecturers.

The research discussed here gives voice to FE lecturers and middle managers through ascertaining their perceptions of professional development. The authors' own value positioning determined that FE lecturers' and middle managers' perceptions should be central to an exploration of their own professional learning. As Freire (2004, 15) argued, people are 'able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing – of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't'. Taubman (in Daley, Orr, and Petrie 2015) argues that there remains a lack of respect for the expertise and views of professional lecturers in the FE sector among neo-liberal managerialist education policy. Constructs of professionalism in a sector subject to

market forces and competition instead comprise reductionist notions of compliance to management control (Illsley and Waller 2017) and regulation (Daley, Orr, and Petrie 2015).

Furthermore, FE is situated in a culture with a poor tradition of establishing and supporting professional learning (Hodgson 2015). There is therefore currently an underdeveloped analysis of ongoing professional development in the sector, and this is important: lecturers and middle managers as adult learners themselves have diverse preferences, experiences, motivations, dispositions and agency (Illeris 2007; Jarvis 2010) which influence their views of, and engagement with, professional development.

Coffield's (2000) observation that discourses of professional development are marked by a 'conceptual vagueness' remain true over two decades later, whilst O'Brian and Jones (2014) contend, rightly, that the term itself is ambiguous and contested in nature. The words 'professional development' are used in this paper as an umbrella label to reference any form of activity in which learning takes place in connection with lecturers' and middle managers' work. This encompasses both formal and informal professional development activities which are either compulsory or voluntary in nature; take place internally or externally to their place of work; occur in groups or individually; are planned or unplanned in advance; and are initiated or realised with or without the involvement or direction of other parties, such as college managers or external consultants (Fraser et al. 2007). Professional development can also take place consciously or unconsciously (Illeris 2007), the latter form often involving implicit learning (Reber 1989).

Our belief when this research began was that there was a culture of compliance and efficiency driven managerialism (Tummons 2014; Illsley and Waller 2017) in the FE sector that 'limits professional agency' and 'encourages uncritical compliance' (Taubman in Daley, Orr, and Petrie 2015, 110) on the part of lecturers. Most mandatory professional development experienced by the lead author in FE comprised didactic, one-size-fits-all sessions led by a senior manager or external 'expert' whose aim was to transmit information to lecturers who were often apparently assumed to be empty '"receptacles" to be filled' (Freire 1970, 72), or blank slate learners (Dewey 1938). It was often unclear as to who planned mandatory professional development, and decisions regarding the learning objectives at events did not involve input from lecturers mandated to attend. This anecdotal experience suggested that the learning content of such events was often irrelevant or at the periphery of FE lecturers' professional learning needs as perceived by themselves. Indeed, the occurrence of this dynamic for mandatory professional development in other education sectors is found elsewhere (see for example Luneta 2012; Ingleby 2018).

Context

These views were cultivated in an FE sector affected by neo-liberal policies enacted by successive governments since the late 1970s, which had injected a discourse justifying reduced public expenditure (Lucas and Crowther 2016), meaning in the FE context a top-down approach to professional development in the sector (Broad 2015). This resulted in a shift away from individual-centred professional development practices and towards a managerial culture.

The period following incorporation in 1992 marked a further divergence in priorities between college management and lecturers (Randle and Brady 1997). Responsibility for the planning and realisation of professional development in FE now rested fully with organisational leaders (Broad 2015) and concerns for professional autonomy and addressing individual development needs had been side-lined (Orr 2008). Many college leadership teams took a 'whole organisation approach' to professional development, characterised by knowledge transmission (Broad 2015).

From 1997 successive New Labour Governments embraced the preceding Conservative policy of spreading marketisation and designated this sector specifically as the principal vehicle responsible for ensuring a globally competitive workforce (DfEE 1998; DfES 2002, 2006). This discourse was interlaced with the language of social justice and widening participation (Aubrey and Bell 2017) and urgent messages of a need to address the requirements of globalisation (Leitch 2006; Simmons 2010). To ensure the FE sector workforce could meet these responsibilities, legislation was introduced requiring that FE lecturers were obliged to hold a teaching qualification (HMSO 2001) and from 2007 new FE lecturers were mandated to gain Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills status (HMSO 2007b). Between 2008 and 2012 FE lecturers were also required by legislation to participate in, and record, thirty hours of continuing professional development on an annual basis (HMSO 2007a). In 2007 mandated paid membership of the Institute for Learning (IfL) was introduced, an organisation which purported to validate the professional status of FE lecturers and support professional development opportunities for those in the sector (IfL 2012). It was with the IfL that lecturers were required to log their professional development hours each year.

However, early in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government the Lingfield (2012) regarded these requirements as overly prescriptive. Lingfield marked the end of the mandatory completion of a teaching qualification and the requirement to log at least thirty hours of professional development. Membership of the IfL also returned to a voluntary basis. Implementing the recommendations of the Lingfield (2012) represented a further policy swing, this time from

policy diktat to de-regulation (Aubrey and Bell 2017; Gleeson et al. 2015). Responsibility for lecturers' professional development was once more devolved to college leadership, meaning practice became highly variable across the sector, and subject to the whims of local college leadership.

In 2014 the IfL was replaced by (or, arguably rebranded as) the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). The ETF received legacy assets from the IfL and explicitly took 'on its [the IfL's] legacy' (stated on its website on 19 June 2019; this wording has since been removed). Successive governments have subsequently funded a branch of the ETF branded the Society for Education and Training (SET), whose main concerns include 'raising standards' and 'increasing professionalism' (as described on its website on 24 October 2022).

Literature on professional development

The literature on perceptions of professional development across education sectors indicates that one-size-fits-all activities disconnected from teachers' every-day practices are often regarded poorly by educators (for example Luneta 2012; Ingleby 2018), whereas teachers consider effective professional development as involving high relevance and applicability to the classroom (Hustler et al. 2003). There is little recent literature focusing on FE lecturers' in-service professional development. Postholm (2012) identified a paucity in literature exploring the efficacy of current in-service professional development for academic and vocational FE lecturers (which remains true at the time of writing), reflecting a sector with a poor tradition of supporting professional learning (Hodgson 2015).

This paucity specifically concerns the perceptions of specifically mid-career lecturers (defined below) in FE. Existing literature explores the perceptions of those in initial teacher education or early career lecturers (for example Harkin, Clow, and Hillier 2003; Orr and Simmons 2010; Bathmaker and Avis 2005, 2013); professional development for higher education (HE) provision lecturers in FE (Turner et al. 2015); the perceptions of teacher educators regarding professional learning in FE (Eliahoo 2016); and valuable work by O'Leary and Wood (2017) relating specifically to the role of observation. Husband (2020) also provides a useful insight into the role of mentoring in FE in the Scottish and Welsh contexts. This work departs from such literature in that it concerns any forms of professional development identified by mid-career lecturers and middle-managers; our core interest was exploring what features of professional development are perceived to be effective by its recipients, and why.

Research approach

Underpinned by a constructivist epistemology, this research comprised a personalised evaluation case study. We align with the purpose of evaluation as articulated by McChesney and Aldridge (2019, 308):

> . . . to 'e-valu-ate' something is to articulate its value – its worth, contribution or effects. Thus, in the context of professional development. . .evaluation involves identifying and describing the value (worth, contribution or effects) of professional development activities.

Kushner (2000) argues that personalising evaluation also recognises that participants' own lives, beliefs, values and work contexts is important. Thus, evaluating (professional development) activities against their objectives is meaningless, unless we consider how those objectives relate to the lives of people.

Case study research offers a framework in which to gain a holistic view of a particular issue in its contexts (Stake 1995; Yin 2009). Case studies recognise the multiple variables operating within a particular case (Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007) to enable the development of a representation of what is occurring (Balbach, 1999). This research is thus the case of professional development (the issue) in a large, urban FE college in England (the context) through the perceptions of its key participants (lecturers and middle managers). This framing enabled the discovery and analysis of rich, in-depth and context specific knowledge (Thomas 2011).

One-to-one face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used with lecturers and middle managers at the 'College'. Purposive sampling was used to attempt some degree of representativeness – both demographic and of subject areas within the College workforce. The insider-researcher (Floyd and Arthur 2012) nature of this work facilitated easy access to research participants. As an employee of the College for over a decade and as a teaching and learning coach who worked across subject areas, the lead author had existing contact and access to colleagues across the breadth of curricula provision at the College. The second author had also worked at the College for a considerable period previously and had remained in contact with many staff through various networks. The interviews were recorded by a voice recorder for later transcription and analysis.

Ten mid-career lecturers and four middle managers were interviewed. 'Mid-career' is defined as lecturers and middle managers with between five- and twenty-years' experience, using as a reference point Sammons et al. (2007, 693) who identified a similar broad range as encompassing the common middle 'professional life phase' of FE lecturers' careers. The lecturer participants taught across a range of academic and vocational range of subject areas.

The research adhered to all salient aspects of the British Education Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA 2018), and received ethical approval from the university where the research took place and the college where the research was conducted. The participants' names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants. Additional considerations were made for the insider-researcher dynamic (Floyd and Arthur 2012) particularly in relation to the researcher-participant power dynamic (Kvale 1996; Munro et al. 2004) and to the danger of distortion with interview answers, given the need for participants to continue a professional relationship with the lead researcher after the interview (Mercer 2007).

Framework for analysis

Data was clustered according to the triple lens composite framework proposed by Fraser et al. (2007). Through the first lens, professional development could be characterised as 'transmission', for passive skills updating; 'transitional', meaning activities that can address the underlying agendas of both the organisation and the individual; or 'transformative', when characterised by professional autonomy and professional inquiry. The second lens considers professional development in reference to personal, social and occupational contexts, and the third lens through learning activities as formal or informal, planned or incidental.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to seek patterns of meaning, themes and interconnections in the data to address the research question (Braun and Clarke 2006). The lead author began to notice codes while transcribing the interview data, and through subsequent, repeated readings of the transcriptions. While reading, the lead author completed a process of open coding, meaning the identification and labelling (using a highlighter tool) of potentially salient ideas or categories in addressing the research question (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These codes then informed the development of themes, constituting 'larger patterns of meaning, underpinned by a central organising concept' (Clarke and Braun 2017, 297). Patterns of data were considered to constitute a theme according to our judgement informed by both their prevalence in the data and its salience to the research question: what are FE lecturers' and middle managers' perceptions of what constitutes effective professional development? For instance, the codes 'peer learning', 'sharing practice' and 'sharing research in a community', unified by an underlying reference to learning within a community, were amalgamated into the theme: 'Learning in a community (of practice)'.

Findings and implications

It is acknowledged that participants' responses were not always binary, meaning the activities discussed were not always regarded by participants as universally either effective or ineffective in all circumstances. For example, Jack perceives a key feature of effective professional development to be whether he considers a learning event to be cost and time efficient. Therefore, it is not intended that the findings are presented in a manner to indicate that specific professional development activities were perceived as intrinsically effective *per se*, while others are ineffective, rather that particular features indicate what is considered by participants to be effective. We focus discussion of our results on the four specific themes that emerged from the data.

Theme 1. agency and learning focus: subject knowledge, classroom practices and other professional interests

Professional development was mostly considered effective when comprising subject specific learning which serves to enhance their pedagogical practices, and ultimately their students' learning. There is a clear distinction between how participants tended to perceive transmissive, generic (mandatory) professional development and what participants perceived to be effective. The following comments most succinctly summarise this position:

> [Milo] CPD needs to be specific to what I do.

> [Derek] . . . it benefits you because you learn more, but it also benefits your students in a direct way.

Participants gave many examples of engagement with non-mandatory professional development that is subject specific or relates to aspects of pedagogy they specifically wanted to learn about. Such professional learning encompasses the personal and occupational aspects of professional learning as defined by Fraser et al. (2007). Maya follows government requirements for her vocational sector, and often reads a professional publication to keep abreast with vocational knowledge. Olive engages with an exam board for the same purpose. Derek attends workshops salient to his field to:

> learn skills which you can immediately translate to the classroom . . . immediately latch onto aspects of the curriculum.

Hugh engages with awarding bodies, at both in-person events and online. According to Hugh this engagement has 'been vital' to understand the requirements of the awarding bodies. Yahya and Poppy linked their engagement with webinars to subject specific learning. For Poppy, webinars are useful as ' . . . it's like choosing the things that will be relevant to you'.

Personal uptake of professional development was not always located within participants' subject specialisms, however. John explained his engagement with online time management and lesson planning courses to inform and enhance his work as an FE lecturer:

> . . . courses online like Coursera [an online learning platform] . . . it's like a twelve week course where you just follow it online. . .being a teacher I'm always trying to streamline what I do. . .is there something I can glean from here to help me to be a better practitioner . . .

At the core of this theme is professional development that enables participants' individual professional learning needs (as they perceive them) to be addressed, in connection with subject knowledge, pedagogical practices, and wider aspects of their role. Such professional development is determined by the agency of participants to identify themselves what their learning needs are and how they might address them. As Illeris (2007, 26) argues:

> It might be uncertainty, curiosity or unfulfilled needs that cause us to seek out new knowledge or new skills.

'Agency' is an elusive and contested concept. However, this term can be understood in broad terms as individuals' 'capacity to act' (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015, in Bovill et al. 2019, 2). In reference to specifically ecological agency, Bovill et al. (2019, 2) elaborate:

> An ecological model of agency is useful in understanding the interplay of an individual's capacity to act, with the structures and contexts in which they are enabled or constrained.

Thus, in discussing agency we refer to the choices and actions of individuals as located within interlinking cultural, structural and material features, that can facilitate or inhibit agency. Bovill et al. (2019, 2) express agency as not a thing that an individual simply owns, rather, a 'property which can be cultivated given conducive [external and internal] circumstances'. Agency is further affected by internal features, including personal beliefs, values, life histories, and personal ambition(s) (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

The identification of agency as a feature of effective professional learning is consistent with Knowles' (1984) conception of andragogy whereby adult learners need to be self-directive and engage with content they consider relevant. Further, it resonates with Rogers (1969) who had earlier emphasised that adult learners require self-direction. Likewise, Murphy and de Paor (2017) consider that effective teacher professional development addresses the specific learning needs they themselves identify. The findings corresponding to theme 1 suggest that this well-rehearsed argument of the need to recognise learners' agency therefore extends to the FE context.

Theme 2. vehicles for reflective practice

Many participants described effective professional development as involving or enabling some form of reflection. Reflection is frequently cited favourably in connection with effective professional development activities (for example Moon 1999; Hillier 2002; Spencer et al. 2018). Dewey (1933, 9) defined reflection as:

> [...] the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends.

Brookfield (1987) similarly advocated (critical) reflection, in which current meanings, concepts and assumptions are challenged and other approaches or possibilities are explored by the person engaged in such reflection.

Stuart perceived any professional development activity to be effective when it facilitates apparently any form of reflection: 'anything that's led to reflection is effective'. Milo discussed what reflection means for her, and why it is effective:

> I like it when you're asked to do tasks and think about what you're doing and reflect on your own practice and learn from other people who do similar things to you . . . it's more meaningful and it's more memorable.

For Milo, reflection means considering or comparing colleagues' pedagogical approaches in relation to her own in considering how to improve her own teaching practices. Esmerelda argued that reflection enables educators to develop their own practice:

> It's been about us working together as a team and all-embracing what the trainer is getting us to do and coming away thinking 'gosh that's, that's made me think; that's made me reflect . . . '

Reflection that takes place during professional development activities can be considered as 'reflection-on-action' (Schön 1983), meaning reflection of an event that took place in the past. This contrasts with 'reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983), involving an immediacy in reflection (during the even). Mezirow (1990) posits that reflection encompasses the application of something learned in a later situation. Similarly, Illeris (2007, 66) defines reflection as 'afterthought', and proposes:

> As a learning process, reflection can, therefore, be characterised as accommodative learning that does not occur immediately in connection with the trigger impulses, but after a time lag implying the further elaboration of the impulses.

However, Illeris (2007, 66) also rightly acknowledges that:

[...] it is also quite possible that some immediate learning from this interaction has taken place.

The participants' responses indicated that the reflection to which they referred was reflection-on-action. Many participants appeared to consider professional development as effective when it enables reflection defined by Gore and Zeichner (1991, 121) as:

[...] an academic version, which focuses on teachers' skills in disseminating the discipline content and presenting in such a way as to maximise its accessibility for their students.

It should be recognised that the notion of reflection in relation to professional learning for educators is not without criticism. Despite widespread advocacy for reflective practice among teacher training textbooks, professional standards for the training of vocational teachers, and inspectors of education, Canning (2011, 610) argues that 'the very notion of reflective practice lacks conceptual clarity and that this, in turn, may lead to poor educational practices'. Cornford (2002, 219) meanwhile suggests that 'Reflection and reflective teaching are related approaches that have been very fashionable in teacher education and adult education circles for the past decade', and highlights difficulties associated with defining the term. Canning (2011, 616) suggests that for the experienced teacher, good practice involves '[not particularly reflective thought [...] but a willingness to share experience and [...] support to others'. Despite these concerns, the involvement of reflection, however understood by the research participants in this research, was widely perceived as an ingredient of effective professional development.

Theme 3. active learning and fun

Some participants discussed effective professional development as incorporating some form of immediate active interaction with new knowledge or skills. Active learning refers, in broad terms, to the learner doing more than engaging through passive listening (Bonwell and Eison 1991). This notion is developed further below. Interlaced with this feature, effective professional development was also sometimes described as including an element of enjoyment, or 'fun'. Olive recalled a fun, active session:

I personally prefer interactive things and I've had some fun ones where...you were playing with the stuff, learning how to do it, and we gained a lot out of it.

Derek considered that:

> . . . it has to be very engaging; it has to be very practical and interactive and physical all the time. . .that's the style of teaching that appeals to me.

John and Jen explained why, for them, active forms of professional learning are effective:

> [Jen] There's one that definitely stands out . . . wasn't just about learning the latest, kind of IT, record keeping thing . . . we had a brilliant day . . . we did a lot of teamwork . . . felt during the day [we] learnt to do some new things . . . it was good fun and we did stuff. . .

> [John] I actually prefer doing stuff . . . I quite like a mixture of like, getting a bit of theory and going away to apply that into whatever I'm doing. For example, there was a really good development session that we had where we were being introduced to a piece of software . . . then we went away to computer rooms . . . we actually get to do it straight away. If it's just being told I can't really translate that necessarily into practice.

For John, transmissive professional development sessions where information is didactically communicated is less likely to be applied at a later stage. John therefore feels that for him, a didactic, passive (as opposed to active) approach is likely to incur surface level, lower order learning (Bloom 1956; Gagné 1977).

Likewise, Derek specifically related effective development with a feeling of enjoyment: '. . .it's fun for you to do as well'. Esmerelda described a development session she found to be effective due, in part, to an energising approach to the session:

> . . . we had to work together and we were put in groups . . . it was about describing an apple which really opened up our minds. . .so it was a really simple activity that really set the bar for the rest of the training . . . also the sort of energising activities.

Active engagement is noted elsewhere as a feature of effective learning (for example Dewey 1961; Knowles 1990) as it can facilitate the acquisition and retention of new knowledge through students' sustained engagement with, and application of learning content. Dewey (1961) argued that active learning was of greater importance than the learning content *per se* as this feature facilitates the development of students' voice and self-esteem.

Willis (2007, 1) argues that 'superior learning takes place when classroom experiences are enjoyable' as such conditions lead to positive experiences and, crucially, lower stress levels within the learning environment, which facilitate learning. Further, professional development activities characterised as fun by participants (when perceived positively) can stimulate positive emotions, motivation and the volition of learners to engage in learning content (Illeris 2007).

It must be recognised, however, that individuals process experiences in different ways as informed by their biographies, perceptions and

personalities (Jarvis 2010). Thus, the extent to which participants perceive activities to be fun, and the perceived importance placed on fun as a feature of effective professional development, is deeply subjective.

Theme 4. learning in a community (of practice)

Discussing teaching practices and ideas among peers was identified by many participants as a specific feature of effective professional development. This theme relates to engagement in communities of practice (Wenger 1998) and, more widely, landscapes of practice (Wenger 2014). The latter term refers to engagement in learning across communities of practice.
Milo and Stuart explained why they perceive such learning to be effective:

> [Milo] I like the CPD we have within our small teams . . . my colleagues are very experienced and very full of new ideas.

> [Stuart] The most engaging stuff . . . is just conversations with other professionals on social media. . .it let me question and challenge . . . that has been the most effective.

John spoke keenly about a particular mandatory College development day where the activities were led by internal lecturer colleagues rather than managers or external experts. John explained that these sessions were effective as internal colleagues have an acute understanding of contextual features relevant to those attending the sessions:

> I thought it actually works really well if you've got colleagues doing the CPD for you. . .as opposed to having external people because . . . external providers, sometimes they will lead according to what they've prepared and not necessarily according to our needs, whereas the, our colleagues, they have the same students that we have, they understand where we are located. . .they understand the challenges we face . . . they understand that sometimes maybe a computer doesn't work . . . their CPD was brilliant, I really enjoyed their CPD, I felt it was very relevant to me.

John found these activities effective as they embraced both the social and occupational aspects of professional learning (Fraser et al. 2007). Indeed, Jack, albeit from the position of the middle manager who oversaw the planning of these specific sessions, suggested that John's positive perceptions of these peer-led sessions were more widely held: 'the feedback was quite positive'.

Discussion and conclusion

The participants expressed a preference for learning activities characterised as enabling transformative learning that recognise and incorporate the personal, occupational and often social aspects of professional learning (Fraser et al. 2007). Effective professional development was perceived as

involving the agency to self-identify and address professional learning needs that relate directly to individuals' subject specialisms, aspects of teaching and learning, or other professional interests (theme 1). This theme is consistent with findings from the secondary sector where professional development is considered effective when it relates directly to pedagogical knowledge in teachers' own fields (Desimone 2009). There have also been similar findings in HE in FE (Lawrence and Hall 2018). Theme 1 also aligns with Appova and Arbaugh (2018, 17) who argue that to be effective, content specific professional development:

> [...] needs to be differentiated to specifically address and accommodate the differences in teachers' professional and learning needs [...] as well as the differences in the student populations that teachers serve.

A need for participants to self-identify their learning focus can be understood as located within their locus of control (Rotter 1966), since 'individuals who believe they are in control of their success or failures are more motivated to engage in learning' (Appova and Arbaugh 2018, 7). Nonetheless, it would be wise to recognise that not all adult learners can be assumed to be self-directed (Jarvis 2010). Further, two participants here (David and Maya) have positive perceptions of mandatory professional development of which the purposes, content, and form are outside of their control. Their perceptions are perhaps distinct from those of the others due to specific aspects of how they are biographically situated. David holds no subject specific or sector specific teaching qualification, perhaps explaining why he speaks favourably of professional development sessions focusing on elementary aspects of teaching and learning. For Maya, the positive regard for professional development focussing on policy compliance may correspond to her former career as an Ofsted inspector, a role characterised through values of compliance, regulation and adherence to prescribed standards.

The second theme concerns participants' desire for professional development that enables some form of reflection. Reflection is a widely cited feature of professional learning (Kyndt et al. 2018; Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner 2017) as an 'instrument of change' (McElearney, Murphy, and Radcliffe 2018, 5). Schön (1983, 62) notes that reflection serves as a vehicle to address contextualised issues whereby the teacher can:

> Reflect on the way he [sic] has framed the problem he is trying to solve, or on the role he has constructed for himself within a larger institutional context.

Reflective practice thus complements an approach to professional development that values learner agency and a salient focus, informed by context, subject and individual learners' needs, as discussed in connection with theme 1.

The third theme relates to the inclusion of active learning and a fun element in professional development sessions. Bonwell and Eison (1991) define active learning as engagement in higher order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) through discussion, reading, writing and problem solving. These features appear to enhance educators' motivation to participate and learn during professional development activities. Further, located within what Illeris (2007) terms the incentive dynamic of learning, fun activities, when favoured, can stimulate motivation and volition to learn. It would therefore be ill-advised to perceive 'fun' as a superficial feature. Many participants articulated a preference for the inclusion of active engagement with learning and (often) fun as part of what stimulated their interest, engagement and ultimately learning. In contrast to a transmissive, didactic approach, active learning complements the learner-centred approach discussed in connection with themes 1 and 2.

It is recognised that these features are not required in all instances for learning to take place. For instance, a passive learning dynamic can also stimulate ideas and lead to new thinking (Postholm 2012). Thus, it should not be assumed that learning occurs solely through active learning activities. Further, generalisations in relation to the role of fun must be tempered given the fundamentally subjective conceptualisations of 'fun' and individuals' perceived desire for it as a feature of professional learning.

The fourth theme comprises learning among communities and landscapes of practice (Wenger 1998, 2014). These forms of professional development are considered by participants to be effective as the knowledge and ideas exchanged relate to shared contextual features such as the subject taught, student cohorts, or organisational matters. Indeed, it has been argued that learning through communities of practice provides a conduit for enhanced pedagogical knowledge, classroom practices and student achievement (Thurlings and den Brok 2017; McElearney, Murphy, and Radcliffe 2018).

It should not be concluded that all four themes were perceived as necessary prerequisites of effective professional development on every occasion. For example, some participants considered professional development sessions effective despite not themselves determining the learning focus, but where colleagues in another department had planned and led these sessions. It appears that these peer-led sessions were instead perceived effective as they were held within a community of practice where those delivering the sessions understood and addressed the shared professional contexts and challenges of the participants.

The research in this paper discussed is intended to represent some level of phronesis corresponding to the field. Future more widespread endeavours to give voice to those in FE concerning professional development could contribute to an emergent counter-narrative of FE that contrasts with the

dominant neo-liberal discourse, towards earlier articulated values for adult education (Russell Report, 1973, xi):

> The value of adult education is not solely to be measured by direct increases in earning power or productive capacity or by any other materialistic yardstick, but by the quality of life it inspires in the individual and generates for the community at large.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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