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Professional development as a cornerstone of a new university: the contribution of the MA in Professional Development to the UHI story

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Abstract

This paper gives a brief outline of the development of the first Masters programme at the University of the Highlands and Islands, the Masters in Professional Development (MAPD) and the new addition to the portfolio, the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert THE). It briefly examines the evolution of the MAPD award since its inception in 1999 and the political backdrop that, to some degree, facilitated it and the ideology underpinning it. It then looks at the requirement of lecturers to engage in continued professional development (CPD) and suggests conditions that may facilitate this.

Keywords

Professional development; pedagogy; Masters, communities of practice, situated learning, online learning, collaboration.

Introduction

The MAPD is a part-time postgraduate programme designed to support lecturing staff teaching at further and higher education level. One of the original intentions of the award was to help develop staff capacity in the move from a further education (FE) context to the provision of higher education (HE). The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) comprises 11 tertiary colleges and 2 research institutions across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. It was recognised, early on in its inception, that if UHI was to be a viable university, the organisation needed to invest in its staff and 'grow' its capability, capacity and professionalism to reflect 'universitiness'. Many staff had substantial further education experience, but little experience of higher education. Tizard, Minty and Newton (2001:169) point to the significance of this and state that:

"...the development of staff would be the key to the UHI's success in creating a sustainable and growing institution."

There was a clear ethos that UHI should deliver a programme which facilitated reflective learning and which was firmly placed in the lecturer's professional practice. Dewey (1910:57) describes reflection as:

"...turning a topic over in various aspects and in various lights so that nothing significant about it shall be overlooked – almost as one might turn a stone over to see what its hidden side is like or what is covered by it."

There was a clear desire to engage staff in this type of reflection where meaning is held in suspense and examined and evaluated – rather than just reported on – and where reflection is built into the action process itself to give 'reflection in action' (Schon, 1996). Dewey (1910) emphasised the value of the professional community of which we are part: if we are to reflect on our own practice, we should do so within our professional communities and in dialogue with our colleagues. Recognition of this was central to the development of the award and an approach was sought that could be more interactive than other distance learning courses currently on offer.

Initially, video conferencing (VC) was used to interact across the sites, but problems with technology meant that it was not an ideal method of delivery or communication; traditional ideas of teaching and learning were being challenged as feedback from participants informed the development of the award. There was recognition that a different pedagogic approach was required where, instead of grafting technology onto the traditional way of teaching, there was a requirement to radically rethink how we taught and how our students learned.

Wenger (1998, 1999) developed the concept of communities of practice as a useful theory in learning where those:

"...groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002:4).

This collaborative approach which developed 'criticality' (Barnett, 1997) where 'knowing'; 'acting' and 'being' are intertwined was desired. King (2004:28) believes in the centrality of collaboration and communication for academics engaging in CPD. She states that:

"All the literature on professional development in higher education emphasises collaboration as a key component."

However, there was recognition that developing professional communities collaboratively where the immediacy of face-to-face responses and speech and facial clues was absent was not an easy task. Eraut (1994:19) reminds us that:

"...professional knowledge cannot be characterized in a manner that is independent of how it is learned and how it is used. It is through looking at the contexts of its acquisition and its use that its essential nature is revealed."

In a similar vein, Goodyear and Ellis (2007:340) emphasise the social context of learning and state that:

"...a great deal of learning and performance is influenced – sometimes subtly and sometimes in more powerful ways – by the social and physical context."

Lave and Wenger (1991:14) move the discussion forward by examining the cognitive processes and conceptual structures involved. They ask:

"What kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place?"

Learning, they believe, involves participation in a community of practice where they construct their own knowledge through the perspectives of others (Johnson and Johnson, 1994). Knowledge is thus co-constructed and negotiated on the one hand, and situated in the participant's professional practice on the other. This constructivist approach underpinned the development of the award and an approach was sought which could facilitate this online through discussion groups, chat facilities and email. A move away from simply having knowledge to actively using that knowledge in an interactive and experiential way was sought. Su (2011) draws on the work of Heidegger (1973) and suggests that

"...the ability that a lifelong learner is expected to demonstrate changes from a focus on how much 'static' knowledge one has to the development of a 'dynamic' ability to make sense of knowledge in order to be within change" (Su, 2011:58).

Similarly, Palloff and Pratt (2003) advocated a learner centered approach which valued 'community building' and where there was an interactive role between the tutor and the student in the construction of knowledge. They describe the online community as:

"...engaging in collaborative learning and reflective practice involved in transformative learning" (p.17).

The role of the tutor in this is more of a facilitator or 'guide on the side', assisting the students to find the information and 'pulling' the information from the resources available, rather than directing and 'pushing' information to students. This emphasis was important for the MAPD as the students are also staff with a lot of professional experience and expertise. Recognition of this was essential and a democratic approach to online learning which involves the learner and hears their voice (Broocker and Macdonald, 1999) was a key factor in the development of the award.

Nicol, Minty and Sinclair's (2003:279) examination of the social dimensions of online study using a module on the MAPD indicated that this interactivity and learner centered approach was beginning to happen. They observed that:

"Not only are new modes of interaction and communication emerging in the online situation but online dialogues are also resulting in products that are more enduring when compared with the face-to-face situation."

There was evidence that the online environment encouraged reflective practice and the ability to view the online conversations added another valuable dimension to their learning:

"By seeing students' comments it can make you re-assess what you thought you understood which is challenging and can be reassuring."

I think about what they have said and the extent to which I agree/disagree, what I might add in addition. It also makes me question some of the things I think, even if the outcome is re-affirming my own views or evidence, the process is valuable" (276–277).

The shift in the learning paradigm from a one-to-many model to a more interactive and student-centred model (Scott and Hannafin, 2000) through the effective use of technology was moving forward. As the award developed and the course team and participants gained confidence in the use of technology, this development of professional communities and dialogue with colleagues has grown.

"...the ability to hold discussions across geographical distances was not only changing the social aspects of learning but it was also helping to develop a stronger sense of community across the UHI network" (Nicol, Minty and Sinclair 2003:276) .

This ability to collaborate across the UHI network has been invaluable in terms of developing educational resources and sharing workloads as new communities of practice are being formed and strengthened. Stacey, Smith and Barty's (2004) research on adult learners in the workplace explored how membership of one community of practice might impact on another. Their research showed a stronger affiliation to the workplace community of practice than to the online learning community as the work communities of practice were considered to be dealing with 'real issues' whereas the online community only dealt with 'theoretical issues'; the ties to the online community were not strong and were seen as transient or temporary.

A different picture is beginning to emerge from the MAPD; there is a joint context at play where the participants explore their professional context through the course material while adding another dimension by collaboratively working with staff outside their immediate locality and discipline but still part of UHI. Membership of both networks is long-term and linked; this might explain a little about why this sense of community appears to be strengthening and paying dividends across the network. More research, however, is required on multi-membership of communities which are contextualised and situated in professional practice and also on the social dimension and duality of such communities.

Structure of the award and HEA (Higher Education Academy)

There are two intermediate exit points on the MAPD leading to the award of either:

- Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (PGCert THE) which is directed at staff who teach at HE level and accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA); or
- Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Development (PGPD), which is primarily directed at those who teach at FE level.

The structure is set out in Table 1.

Learning: the individual, the group and the organisation 30 credits	Theory and Practice of E-Learning 15 credits	Developing a Research Capability 15 credits	OPTION Module 2 15 credits	OPTION Module 3 15 credits	CORE Professional Development through Action Research 30 credits	CORE Research Dissertation 60 credits
Exit with Post Graduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education (accredited by HEA) 60 M level credits			Exit with Post Graduate Diploma 120 M level credits			Exit with MA 180 M level credits
CORE Learning: the individual, the group and the organisation 30 credits	CORE Information and Communication Technology 15 credits	OPTION Module 1 15 credits	OPTION Module 2 15 credits	OPTION Module 3 15 credits	CORE Professional Development through Action Research 30 credits	CORE Research Dissertation 60 credits
Exit with Post Graduate Certificate in Professional Development 60 M level credits			Exit with Post Graduate Diploma 120 M level credits			Exit with MA 180 M level credits

Table 1. Structure of the MAPD award

These modules bring together support for student learning in a virtual learning environment (VLE), the pedagogy of e-learning; peer observation and reflection and research skills which help to improve learning and scholarship. Harris (1998) reminds us that effective practice is linked to inquiry, reflection, and continuous professional growth. These modules are seen as essential building blocks in raising standards in teaching and are underpinned by the core knowledge and professional values required by Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. They also link closely to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) which emphasise quality enhancement and scholarly inquiry. More information can be found at www.heacademy.ac.uk/.

Optional modules vary from Professional Leadership through to Developing Potential through Placement. The award is due for revalidation in 2011/12 and it is anticipated that the award will be revalidated as a Masters of Education with 20, 40 and 60 credit modules.

Socio-political backdrop

To set this award in context, it is useful to examine a little of the socio-political backdrop. In 1997 the newly elected Labour government came to power with the aim to progress towards a 50% tertiary education sector (Scottish Office, 1998) by 2010. There was a clear link being made between the need for a highly skilled workforce and a strong economy, on the one hand, and social inclusion on the other:

"The UK, and particularly Scotland, cannot compete in the modern market place on the basis of a low-cost, low-skills workforce" (Department of Trade and Industry, 1998:3).

The marketisation of education was being put forward as the key to economic development:

"Education is the best economic policy we have" (Blair, 1998:9).

Alongside this, the Dearing Report (1997) drew a strong correlation between participation in HE and social class. This fuelled a policy agenda for the incoming government to increase demand for HE from previously under-represented groups. FE colleges were in the ideal position to meet the policy drivers (Scottish Office, 1999). The Kennedy Report concluded:

"Further education has a unique contribution to make to widening participation in post-16 learning and the creation of a self-perpetuating learning society" (Kennedy, 1997:25).

The Dearing Report also proposed the establishment of a professional Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. CPD was thus high on the agenda for UK Higher Education, culminating in the 2003 Government white paper *The Future of Higher Education* which emphasised CPD, widening access and inclusion. In 2003 *The Future of Higher Education* strategy document stated that it would:

"...expect all new teaching staff to obtain a teaching qualification from 2006" (Department for Education and Skills, 2003:50).

Getting the message across

However, the requirement to engage in CPD can prove a difficult message to get across in an environment which is both demanding and fast moving. In the emerging University of the Highlands and Islands, staff were being personally challenged by new requirements to teach and develop work at degree level while simultaneously embracing the technology that made all this possible and still retaining their affiliation and links to FE. This was particularly demanding for some lecturers, who had been mostly recruited under a different framework, where there was no statutory requirement to hold a professional qualification.

As Lucas (1996) points out, FE staff have traditionally underplayed the importance of having a statutory qualification placing "specialist knowledge of subject or trade above pedagogy" (p.69). Robson (1998) echoes this in her study of FE in England, when she states that, for students and staff, the subject affiliation is the strongest aspect of identity. This culture of 'specialist knowledge above pedagogy' was firmly embedded in the aspiring university and created challenges in moving the perception of FE lecturers to one that valued pedagogy and recognised the importance of embedding this in their specialist knowledge and practice.

However, it would be unfair and overly simplistic to suggest that it was just a shift in the perception of academic staff which was required; where staff did engage with the award they did so with enthusiasm and commitment despite the turbulent and difficult environment they often had to work in. There were other barriers to participation which staff faced due to the extremely diverse structures throughout UHI. The management of the academic partners (APs) in UHI is extremely complex. Most are headed by a principal who is directly responsible to an independent board of management, the chair of whom is, in turn, a member of the UHI Board. The commitment to CPD varies depending on the commitment from the senior management. Some academic partners allow staff remission to undergo CPD while others offer no remission.

The class contact hours from someone teaching at FE level is also significantly greater than at HE, but again this varies from partner to partner. There is also a clear audit culture, partly historically and partly as a result of the evolution of UHI, which creates additional pressures on staff who feel they are going from one review to another with the attendant pressures from external bodies. This is exacerbated by the fact that staff feel they now have two masters, one their employer in the FE college, with whom they identify most closely, and the other their federal head in UHI. External examiners and auditing bodies often push the agenda for 'scholarly activity', research activity and engagement in CPD but there is limited direction from UHI to help colleges implement this.

Where are we now?

In the early days of the award the student numbers were in single figures and the programme was largely paper-based and mainly delivered through video conferencing. We now have a programme which has attracted over 120 participants over the past two years and which is now gaining interest from outside UHI. We have moved from text-based and VC to an approach that uses technology in a more interactive way and which is constantly developing and growing as the technology evolves and facilitates it. The programme can be studied from almost anywhere in the world through the Blackboard VLE. The take-up of the new accredited PGCert THE is also very encouraging, and we are receiving very good feedback from participants:

I must say TPEL [Theory and Practise of E-Learning] was one of the best MAPD modules I have studied so far and the whole package of the course has been very useful. You have given us a wealth of resources and links to use. The knowledge generated through all the discussions is invaluable. Along with my colleagues, we will definitely be using our skills and experience to design and deliver online courses at our centre (Course participant feedback).

There is, however, a cautionary note to this; to date only three members of staff have graduated with the full MA and only nine members of staff have graduated with a postgraduate certificate. The attrition rate is also over 25% with 'pressure of work' and 'not enough time' being cited as reasons for withdrawal. This is unacceptable for an aspiring university with an award on its books that has been commended by external examiners and external bodies. UHI urgently needs to devise a coherent strategic vision that values CPD and incorporates a formula for remission for staff undergoing higher degrees which:

- is consistent and equitable across the network; and
- shows they value the creativity and professionalism of staff as an important resource in fulfilling their mission.

There is also a requirement for UHI to commit to the PGCert THE as an alternative to the Teaching Qualification in Further Education (TQFE), where appropriate, and as a mandatory route for new staff not in possession of a teaching qualification.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly reviewed the evolution of the MAPD and the social constructivist ideology that underpins it. Recent innovations in technology have resulted in major changes in how we deliver education. This has afforded opportunities as well as threats and challenged staff and programme developers to think in new and unfamiliar ways. In the context of UHI there has been a strategic objective to build staff capacity (UHI Strategic Plan:19) as it has developed from a selection of FE colleges to a new university. However, commitment to this has been variable across the partners; there is a requirement for equity and a unified voice on CPD from UHI and a requirement for staff to recognise the importance of CPD and the link between professional development and effective teaching.

The collaborative construction of knowledge is the model proposed in this paper and the development of online communities of learning which suggest new ways of being and which, because of their situated nature, are reflective and responsive to change. This model is enabling communication and networking across UHI to grow in an organic and interactive way. More research, however, is required on multi-membership of communities which are contextualised and situated in professional practice and also on the social dimension of such communities.

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