

Academic development and the new professional in Higher Education.

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Introduction

In many countries professional work including academic work is changing. During the past fifty years third level 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, there are increased pressures through increased teaching loads, growing reporting and administrative requirements and pressure to develop and strengthen their research profile. There is much talk of added value, economic growth and increased performance, which has all combined to challenge their sense of professionalism. There is ongoing debate about different and competing conceptions of academic work but the primacy of the teaching role has been asserted in a recent report.

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 principal defining characteristic of the academic

(Skilbeck, 2001, p.72)

Surveys of academic staff consistently report that teaching is a source of reward but staff say that they are working longer hours and dealing with a more diverse student group. (Mc Innis, 2000) In higher education, we still have much to learn about the nature of teacher thinking, about the construction of curricula, and about how teachers become reflective about their practice. Also, it is argued in the most recent literature (Day & Sachs 2004) that there is a gap in our knowledge of the effects of CPD upon the thinking, planning and practice of individual teachers. Research into these areas will inform our thinking as will studies of ways in which professionals generally develop understanding of their roles and their capacities to carry them out. Eraut (1994) emphasised that professionals continually learn on the job but that unless time is set aside to deliberate, the learning may not be integrated into any general theory of practice. Boud (1999) contends that the practice of academic development must be grounded in the nature of academic work and Knight (2002) argues that widespread good teaching will only develop with leadership, processes and systemic expectation. Kelchtermans (2004) highlights the need to answer the key question as to what kind of professionalism continuous professional development should contribute. This paper sets out to explore important issues in relation to the professional development of the academic community. The paper argues that a new professionalism in higher education can be realised through an approach to professional development that focuses on nurturing inquiry, building reflective practice and encouraging dialogue and collaboration within a tradition of scholarship.

Context Issues

This paper has developed from reflection on work over the last two years on a postgraduate certificate programme in learning and teaching in higher education, which supports the professional development of teachers in higher education. The programme has a modularised structure and is part of a comprehensive postgraduate programme in learning and teaching in higher education. The broad aim of the programme is to enable participants to be effective, competent lecturers. The objectives are to deepen teachers' knowledge, develop individual practice, improve learning and teaching, encourage debate and build towards a culture of inquiry. Kolb's experiential model of learning (Kolb, 1984) is the model of learning for the course. The learning in the certificate programme begins with the real experience of the lecturers in their role as teachers and facilitators of learning. Participants reflect

on their experiences in order to make links between their reflections on practice and the theories of learning and teaching. The abstraction takes many forms including reading, exploring best national and international practice, book reviews and developing a personal teaching philosophy. Active experimentation is a major key to learning and participants try out different ideas and methods in their own situations through lesson planning, project work and peer observation.

Through the experiences, the interaction with the literature, the reflection on practice, the development of a portfolio and the collaborative project work focused on the curriculum I would argue that academics participating on the programme are developing a deeper understanding of learning and teaching in higher education. A discourse has developed around important issues in teaching and learning and there is a developing critical community of learners endeavouring to articulate and become competent in their professional roles. There is a critical and reflective approach evident in relation to classroom realities, student learning and the role of the teacher.

Professionalism and Teaching

Before discussing approaches to professional development, it is useful to set the discussion in the wider context of the debate about the professionalism of the academic community in these changed times. In relation to schoolteachers, Day and Sachs (2004) outline two dominant current discourses of professionalism managerial professionalism and democratic professionalism. Both have as a common aim to improve the performance and skills of teachers and thereby improve student learning but operate from very different principles. The managerial approach places emphasis on state control, external regulations, efficiency in meeting standards, accountability and compliancy. The democratic approach places emphasis on professional regulation, professional development and collaborative and cooperative action between teachers and other stakeholders. Although their work is focused on teaching in schools, I would argue that there are great similarities in terms of the present reality for teachers in higher education. Nixon et al (1997) writing about the new management of education introduced the notion of 'emergent professionalism' which argues for the importance of the ongoing dialogue between professionals and their public in regard to the purposes of learning and the focus is on values and practice not status and regulation. Uncertainty is acknowledged as part of the reality of the

teaching situation and 'emergent professionalism' involves an acceptance of uncertainty allied to a commitment to learning to live with it. Such discourses are informing professional development and the need for continued investment in professional development is captured eloquently in the following words.

Whereas in the past it was enough to describe professions in a politically neutral way as 'restricted' or 'extended', in the twenty-first century, in which the struggle for the soul of professionalism is acute, professionals no longer have the choice. Indeed, it may be argued that the new agenda is concerned with being compliant or 'activist'. CPD is no longer an option but an expectation of all professionals.

(Day & Sachs, 2004, p.4)

Developing as a professional

Becoming a good teacher is a career long process of personal and professional development. It involves accommodating general principles and concepts to the continually varying particulars of your school, your students, your own changing personality and life's circumstances. Professional development is an intrinsic part of the growth and development cycle of a professional career. It has been argued that:

One of the hallmarks of being identified externally as professional is to continue learning throughout a career, deepening knowledge, skill and judgement, staying abreast of important developments in the field and experimenting with innovations that promise improvements in practice.

(Sachs, 2000, p.79)

Academics have continued to learn and deepen knowledge through their careers but the changing landscape of higher education has challenged their sense of professional competence and they have been expected to shift in role from experts in their field of knowledge to facilitators of learning. Teachers in higher education must be supported to make this transition. Teachers as professionals must be encouraged to adopt new and more effective conceptions of teaching and learning and to reflect critically on their practice.

This perspective does not imply an individualistic approach to teaching. Instead, the process by which a teacher gives a meaning to his/her own professional experience always occurs in a social and cultural context. Thus, it is important to have opportunities for communication between members of the community of practice. By so communicating, they have the possibility to re-construe the language, knowledge and beliefs, which emerge in their interactions, and to share the meaning of the most frequently experienced situations and practices. It is also important to create opportunities for conversation between members of different communities, for example science and arts teachers, postgraduate and apprenticeship teachers, teachers from different institutions. These conversations allow the members to analyse and interpret instructional practices in the perspectives of the different communities, and thus to enrich them through reciprocal comparison. Professional development should offer opportunities for conversations because within these are uncovered personal stories which are a powerful way to make sense of experience and to recognise and reinterpret personal knowledge.

Argyris (1976) makes the distinction between espoused theories and theories in use. He contends that there is often a substantial contradiction between what we say we believe and how we actually act. Therefore, uncovering the contradictions in our professional work is demanding but an important stage in reaching an understanding of the complexity of the classroom or tutorial.

Simply telling teachers about new curricular initiatives, asking them to take on new instructional methodology without helping them to understand the assumptions they are operating from, is a waste of time. People might take away 'nifty tips', but nothing really changes for students.

(Newman, 1998, p.191)

Newman argues for the use of critical incidents to allow the tensions of teaching to surface and bring people face to face with the reality of professional work. Moon (1999) outlines a variety of practical activities that provide a context in which reflection can be encouraged. However, supporting reflection on practice is not enough and it is important for professionals to interact with the literature on the scholarship of teaching. A questioning exploratory stance supported by engagement

with the literature and conversing around issues strengthens professional knowledge and enhances understanding of learning and teaching.

CPD and the programme experience

There are a variety of reasons for continuous professional development in higher education and this has resulted in many different forms, locations and practices appropriate to the purpose. 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. 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. 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 through ideas about the learning process. (Moon, 2000) Teaching is an intellectual undertaking and teachers 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. In a real sense it seems to me that teaching without learning is just talking. However, teaching is not just about teaching something, it is about teaching someone. Teaching is thoughtful, considerate and kindly, not just technical and cognitive. Teachers 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 teacher 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.

Reflection on practice, a concern with improvement and a spirit of inquiry are fundamental to professional work in higher education and these are evident in the comments above. Teachers 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. Sachs (2000,p.89) argues that what should emerge over time are 'cultures which place educational practice at their centre'. This is indeed a challenge but there is evidence in the comments of staff involved in the programme that their teaching practice has become a focus for considered reflection and this offers hope and direction for the future.

Biggs (1999) contends that since teaching is a personal matter, new ideas need to be used reflectively and turned to one's own context. Teachers learn by doing, reading and reflecting, collaborating with other teachers, giving consideration to their students' learning and discussing what they see. Mc Laughlin (1997, p.82) contends that such learning can only take place 'in settings that support teacher inquiry and collaboration, strategies grounded in teachers' questions and concerns and a theoretically powerful base of knowledge'. I would contend that the certificate programme creates a space for teachers in higher education to dialogue and converse with teachers in higher education 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.

Looking to the future

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 the 'new professionalism' 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, collaboration and learning.

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, p.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, P.74)

Conclusion

In building towards a new professionalism for teachers 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. I 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. Initial research into the experience of the academic staff on the postgraduate certificate programme in learning and teaching would suggest that it has impacted on the thinking, planning and practices of the lecturers. In supporting the professional development of academics it is essential that teachers 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.

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