Un-hijacking’ teachers’ professional learning: thoughts from a dialogue among practitioners

Report from the Professional Learning for Educators Working Group

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the ‘Professional Learning for Educators’ strand at the Reimagining Further Education 2018 conference. Using Coffield’s original (2008) work “Just suppose…” as a starting point to consider professional learning in the UK FE sector, it also seeks to provide a record of the day itself and the vibrant contributions made by the wide range of individuals present.

Current perceptions of professional learning are discussed in relation to both the recent ETF Training Needs Analysis (2018) and the discussions and feedback from participants in the workshops. Definitions of professional learning are also examined as a way of attempting to provide some clarity. Using Kennedy’s (2005) framework for analysing models of CPD as a starting point, participants addressed their priorities for professional learning,
with the emergence of recurring themes such as the need for teacher agency, the desirability of professional discussion-led approaches and a requirement for permission to take risks. A detailed ‘practitioner research cycle’ is identified, built on the principles of ‘personalisation, choice, collaboration and exploration’.

Inevitably barriers to effective professional learning are discussed, in particular those which make the achievement of teacher agency less likely. That said, in the spirit of the event, we set out key ‘manifesto’ points from the day as a positive call to give ownership of professional learning to teachers and for those at all levels within and across organisations to work together to achieve this through genuine commitment and shared curiosity.

**Keywords**: teacher professional learning, CPD, teacher professionalism, collaborative learning, teacher agency

**Introduction**

At a conference whose prompt was “Just suppose teaching and learning were the first priority…” (Coffield, 2008), why choose teachers' learning as a workshop, given the richness of options available? An easy answer is that this is where our independently undertaken doctoral research lay; beyond this, impetus came from the many tutors’ voices from the sector seeking to discuss professional learning as a hot topic. We were proven right in our choice of subject as the workshops were quickly over-subscribed and the ensuing dialogues were vibrant and passionate in their calls for agency.

A useful starting point in a reflection on our experience might be to acknowledge the contentious nature of language and examine the vocabulary used to describe activities which may lead to teachers building professional knowledge and skills. Culler (1997:60) notes that language is ‘both the concrete manifestation of ideology – the categories in which speakers are authorised to think – and the site of its questioning and undoing’. If language is a manifestation of ideology and language use provides a way of legitimising or discouraging discourse, depending on any dominance of ideological standpoints, then it matters a great deal how we choose our words.
Though many practitioners habitually use the term CPD, as this affords us a commonly employed shorthand, ‘Professional learning’ (PL) has gained in commonality of use of late. The move from ‘development’ to ‘learning’ may seem to be an insignificant semantic shift but this may not be so if our use of language allows us to explore personal meaning and undertake the ‘questioning’ and even perhaps ‘undoing’ of ideology.

Kennedy (2005: 239) contends that the use of the word ‘development’ suggests a deficit model; this can be problematic as it may be unclear ‘whose notion of competence’ the performance standards being worked towards during development reflects. Importantly, she notes that use of the word ‘learning’ ‘casts teachers as learners, too’ therefore surely giving them all of the rights to inclusion and a supportive environment which are made available to the educators’ own learners. Coffield (2017:45) prefers the term ‘professional learning’, describing this activity as the ‘major engine of improvement’ for an FE organisation; he adds the proviso that organisational culture should be ‘as conducive to the learning of tutors as it is to the learning of students’ (2017:45) for PL to be effective. This article will refer to the activity of teachers’ learning as ‘professional learning’ (PL) or ‘CPD’.

Our working group was spurred in part by ETF’s Training Needs Analysis (ETF, 2018) which informed us that though 90% of staff engaged in professional learning in 2016-17, only 59% of practitioners reported receiving all the training they needed or wanted (ETF, 2018:8). Perhaps most worryingly, 38% of respondents stated that some CPD was ‘tick box’ (ibid:56) and 68% of staff reported that they undertook some training solely because their organisation required them to do so.

Significant funding and considerable facilitator and tutor time may be devoted to CPD and there would rightly be consternation if learner voice surveys reported such significant gaps between provision and need. Other ETF (2018) findings may reveal the cause of dissatisfaction. FE providers stated that ‘ensuring the effective performance of the organisation’ was the most frequent driver of training; only 18% of providers cited ‘the needs of the workforce’ as the key driver (ibid:83) for CPD. Practitioners, however, cited ‘subject knowledge and teaching’ and ‘classroom competences’ as their most important target areas for professional learning, yet just 26% undertook CPD to build self-identified
skills or knowledge (ibid:44), and only 20% of CPD was described as ‘self-initiated’ by practitioners (ibid:50).

Might change be in the air? Perhaps as a response to some mismatch between current CPD provision and identified practitioner development needs, vibrant informal practitioner networks, often spurred by events (such as Reimagining FE), are establishing themselves both on and offline. We wished to ask Reimagining FE participants what they wanted from professional learning. In the same way that “Just suppose teaching and learning were the first priority…” (Coffield, 2008), provided the theme of the 2018 conference, as facilitators, we took this key work as the starting point for the planning of our workshop and for the initial discussion on the day itself.

In his consideration of how to maximise the professionalism of tutors, Coffield questions the efficacy of the ‘smorgasbord’ approach to CPD ‘where individuals [choose] from a long list of options whatever suits them’ as this is unlikely to develop the work of teams. He also stresses the need for tutors to have the time to reflect on their work, discuss teaching and learning with colleagues, or engage with further study (ibid: 23-24). With CPD declared to be a ‘right’ as much as a responsibility he foregrounds the need for tutors to have time and space ‘to devote to whatever they feel they need to make them or keep them lifelong learners’ (ibid: 24). This perhaps gets to the heart of the matter, as with a lack of ‘time, resources and support’ often acting as a barrier to the implementation of changes in the beliefs, assumptions and practices of teachers and managers, Coffield states that it is ‘no wonder so little real change takes place’ (ibid: 25).

Part of our task then, was to (re)consider this work in the light of more recent developments in terms of both policy and practice and to draw on the considerable expertise in the room to assess not only the current state of teachers’ professional learning, but also ways of maximising this professionalism to the benefit of all in the FE sector.

One thing we agreed on at the outset was the ‘value of a vent’, having both attended numerous conferences and professional learning events where dialogues became stuck in the mud of how awful things were, monopolised by moaning and so failed to produce significant productive discourse. Our solution was a ‘cleansing vent’ for 30 minutes at the outset during which working group participants were encouraged to air and
share their views on the significant obstacles which impeded their professional learning. After this time we invited the group to move forward with constructive suggestions only, leaving behind if possible negativity and frustrations experienced with PL to this point. This opening activity not only served to release the strong emotions and opinions which may be held by educators on their learning but informed us of participants’ views on the barriers to effective professional learning.

This activity revealed many tensions and contradictions. Alongside the perhaps more expected barriers of lack of funding and free time, pressure of teachers’ workload and institutional ‘gatekeeping’ (of budgets and staff cover), more nuanced cultural barriers including poor organisational planning, leading to a shortage of contextualised, coherent and organic CPD programmes, served to minimise the value of extant offers.

Beyond this, more Machiavellian, performative motives for CPD, perhaps resonating with what Freire (1968:1) termed ‘false charity’ emerged. Freire considered that resources given by oppressors to an oppressed group which did not help them, or moreover acted to reinforce oppression, could be termed ‘false charity’. It is perhaps not too far a stretch to imagine that professional learning activities provided with the motive of easing standardisation and enabling expanded management oversight rather than encouraging teacher agency and creative experimentation in the training room could be termed ‘false charity’. One participant commented that ‘professional development is seen as a euphemism for performance management’; others referred to professional learning as a ‘prescribed’ activity which is ‘done to’ practitioners therefore perhaps adopting the vocabulary of the oppressed.

The discussion of barriers to meaningful professional learning prompted several participants to comment that there was no secure, agreed definition of what CPD actually is and this was a required foundation for progress. This then led to a fuller discussion of how those present defined professional learning or CPD.

Whilst one group succinctly defined professional learning as ‘learning that results in personal change or growth that ultimately benefits learners’, the other groups incorporated suggestions of how this might be achieved and of the potential barriers to this. Amongst the suggestions were coaching, personalised learning, collaboration, reflection, peer support and transparency. This is in contrast to an acute awareness of the tensions between
professional learning and institutional compliance, with the suggestion from some that CPD has in essence been appropriated for this end and needs to be, in the words of delegates, ‘un-hijacked’. As the following section shows, it becomes almost impossible to shape clear definitions of professional learning without some reference to either suggested requirements for effective professional learning or (potential) obstacles to its achievement.

Subsequent discussions built upon the ‘vent’ (what are the barriers to undertaking relevant CPD) and the definitions (what is professional learning?) dialogues to attempt the challenging task of devising a model for ideal professional learning for sector practitioners. Our prompt here for participants was to consider the framework for analysing CPD proposed by Kennedy (2005) who identifies nine models of CPD and considers them in relation to their underlying purpose and potential outcomes.

Kennedy (ibid: 248) aligns these models on a spectrum of purposes for CPD ranging from ‘transmission’ which fulfils the ‘function of preparing teachers to implement reforms’ and includes ‘training, award-bearing and deficit models’ through to ‘transformative’ CPD which is ‘conceived of as supporting teachers in contributing to and shaping education policy and practice’ and includes the action research model. Between the transmission and transformative categories lies the ‘transitional’ purpose which encompasses standards-based models and coaching, mentoring and communities of practice-based activities. Kennedy (ibid:248) suggests that there is ‘increasing capacity for teacher autonomy as one moves from transmission, through transitional to transformative categories’.

Given this prompt, participants developed a range of responses and models to address their priorities for ‘professional learning’. An online discussion space in the form of a Padlet board allowed dialogues to continue beyond the day of Reimagining FE and allowed participants from other working groups to share their views on professional learning.

Recurring themes were the need for teacher agency, the desirability of professional discussion-led approaches and a requirement for permission to take risks. A clear focus throughout the discussion and resulting notes was that the ownership of professional development should rest with teachers. Although the importance of teacher agency was raised throughout, the need to provide an environment which supports the achievement of such agency was viewed as equally important. Culture change within (and beyond) organisations, which supported the empowerment of teachers to make informed,
thoughtful choices regarding their professional learning, was seen as crucial to helping realise this.

Another significant dialogue which was engaged in by several of the discussion groups centred upon the old axiom ‘decisions are made by those who turn up’. It had not gone unnoticed by several participants that conferences such as Reimagining FE tend to be populated by ‘the usual suspects’, just as many online professional dialogues perhaps have a spine of ‘core contributors’.

That is not to say that these engaged educators are monopolising learning dialogues on- or offline, but rather to note that we may be ‘preaching to the gallery’ when we gather to discuss how we might reframe and re-energise educators’ professional learning. Those who wish to minimise, or even absent themselves from learning conversations might welcome a more didactic, ‘sheep-dip’ style of CPD (Scales, 2012:3) which involves minimal engagement, commitment and energy on their part. This is not intended as a criticism of these practitioners’ reticence to engage in learning dialogues; there may be complex factors at work including work pressures, lack of sufficient confidence to initiate or lead dialogues or an unwillingness to disrupt an existing organisational agenda.

How we engage these practitioners was the topic of significant debate with several groups, but one on which no straightforward conclusions were drawn on this occasion. This dialogue, along with the items raised in the working group’s manifesto certainly seem fruitful topics for further future dialogues among educators in the sector.

During the discussions one group stated eloquently that it was essential to ‘take learning to where the teacher is’ and to ‘engage in dialogue that is with them and for them’. This appears to be a clear attempt to move away from a deficit (or predominantly transmission) model of professional learning and to build on a more collaborative and reflective way of learning, which allows for risk-taking and a shared curiosity in learning.

One model which seemed particularly to resonate with the wider group was the use of a ‘practitioner research cycle’ (Figure 1). Built on principles of ‘personalisation, choice and exploration’, the model uses the academic year as its scaffold and proposes that participants employ digital channels (Yammer, Google Hangouts, Facebook groups) and
tools (Dropbox, Microsoft Team) alongside face-to-face dialogues in which coaching teams work with representatives from each curriculum area.

**June – August**
- Examine organisational priorities
- Use data, learner voice and personal reflection
- Identify resulting areas/topics for exploration
- Form cross-curricular groups based on expertise

**September – October**
- Drill down to tightly define areas of focus
- Explore relevant research
- Use visits/dialogues to consult outside organisation
- Plan specific goals, milestones & responsibilities
- Plan how to evaluate and assess impacts
- Discuss progress and challenges to identify new actions

**December – February**
- Involve learners in planning and actions taken
- Gather evidence of impacts
- Use skills development assessments, data on attendance, satisfaction surveys, supportive observations, videos
- Discuss progress and challenges to identify new actions

**March – April**
- Evaluate and summarise impact findings and reflections
- Identify ways to embed emerging ideas for future
- Discuss progress and challenges to identify new actions

**May**
- Share learning points
- Discuss challenges and 'glitches'
- Propose next steps for new cycle

Figure 1: Practitioner Research Cycle
It seems certain that the increasingly performative culture of the FE sector is likely to make the achievement of agency less likely (Priestley et al, 2015), discouraging the risk-taking and curiosity which form part of a democratic learning process. If then, it is so hard to effect genuine change (Coffield, 2008), how can the ideas and contributions from one day make a real difference as we look forward? Here we highlight some of the key points made in the manifesto for professional learning authored by the Reimagining FE working group.

It is hoped that these conclusions might provide thinking and talking points for future action and guidance for teachers and managers planning professional learning programmes based on an ethos of agency and trust:

- Individual educators must be supported and empowered by their managers to take ownership of their professional learning; they should fulfil their part in this contract by assuming personal responsibility for that learning
- Teaching teams need to be encouraged to build collaborative, collegiate links within their own organisations and more widely with other organisations in order to share ideas and resources, even though the increasingly competitive climate in the sector may discourage this
- Organisations should employ coaching models in a positive way, rather than as part of a deficit model, facilitating supportive peer dialogues and encouraging curiosity and risk-taking in pedagogy and practice
- In order for the first three items in the manifesto to have the best possible chance of success there needs to be a concerted focus on institutional culture change and sufficient time must be allowed for this to take place. Leaders and managers must show engagement with teachers around professional learning which is genuine; this engagement should be not about making judgements but about shared curiosity and being ‘in it together’.

To finish, and in the spirit of #RelImagineFE18, we return to Coffield, first to highlight the challenges and barriers facing professionals in the sector. Almost a decade ago, Coffield and Edwards (2009:388) stated that in order to flourish, FE required ‘continuity for institutions, stability for students, professional autonomy and adequate funding.’ Today, with little sign of those demands for continuity, stability and autonomy being met, Coffield again calls for FE management to ‘stop prescribing or controlling teachers’ efforts at change’,
instead insisting that we must seek to ‘nurture the improvisations that flow from the new ideas’ that practitioners create (2017:41).

To end on a positive note, we join Coffield (2009:388) in asking that all involved in the FE sector consider the value of building a ‘vibrant democracy’ where professional learning remains within the ‘control of reflective learning professionals, sensitive to constantly changing local contexts’, in other words, to view teachers as continuously learning, too, and to truly make teaching and learning the first priority.

References:


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