Encouraging personalised CPD – organisational approaches

(Adapted from Scales, P., Pickering, J., Senior, L., Headley, K., Garner, p. and Boulton, H. (2011) <u>**Continuing Professional Development in the Lifelong Learning Sector**</u> **Maidenhead: Open University Press.**

Since the incorporation of FE colleges in 1993 and the infiltration of managerialism and audit cultures, college managements have changed as a consequence. Anecdotal evidence suggests there are managers and management teams who enjoy the tight control and opportunities for 'macho' management which have been made possible by this environment. It is likely, however, that there as many managers who do not like this environment but feel unable to take risks. Management teams are frequently set seemingly impossible, and contradictory, tasks, such as widening participation whilst simultaneously raising standards and improving results. Managers may indeed wish to support their staff in being professional and making their own judgements and decisions but fear that such autonomy may lessen the effectiveness and success of delivering educational 'products'. Managers such as these probably know that teachers feel a loss of autonomy and respect but consider these to be lesser problems than the penalties, redundancies and possible takeover or closure which follow a poor inspection or lack of 'success' in measurable terms.

There are several ways in which management teams can encourage personalised CPD; three main approaches will be considered here:

1. Provide a structured CPD framework
2. Encourage collaboration and the development of learning communities
3. Set the tone – appreciative inquiry

Provide a structured CPD framework

The teachers' dream scenario might be one where managers adopt a "Set my people free" approach in which teachers are completely free to manage teaching and learning and associated CPD. This is not going to happen. Given that budgets will remain tight and external control is not likely to disappear soon, CPD needs to be organised within a structured framework, if only to avoid repetition and waste. More importantly development needs to be coordinated and it will have to be in line, as far as possible within the organisation's agreed mission and goals. A key question concerns how and at what level are such goals discussed and agreed; if teachers are to be valued and their professionalism encouraged it would seem appropriate for them to be involved in committees and

other bodies which formulate policy and procedures related to teaching, learning and CPD. A strategic approach to CPD needs to be supported, not necessarily led, right from the top. Managers need to signify that CPD is valued as a key driver for improvement, rather than just another policy to be written and signed off.

Encouraging collaboration and the development of learning communities

There is a body of learning theory, social constructivism, which asserts that learners learn best in groups where they can share and develop ideas and contribute to solving problems. The same is true for teachers who, to use a clichéd old phrase, need peers and, possibly, colleagues from different disciplines, to 'bounce ideas off.'

Good teachers are also good learners; their CPD is based on learning. Coffield (2008) suggests two contrasting metaphors of learning which apply equally well to learners and teachers. The first is the *acquisition* metaphor in which learning is seen as gaining ownership of knowledge and skills, endorsed by certificates from examination boards or certificates of attendance at training events. This metaphor employs such key words as 'delivery' and 'transmission'. In contrast the *participation* metaphor, with its associated key words, "community, identity, meaning, practice, dialogue, co-operation and belonging," (Coffield 2008: 8) suggests that learning results from participation in communities of practice which learn, share, develop and communicate within a common, shared context. This clearly relates to the IfL's belief in 'professional dialogue' and teachers researching into their own practice as the bases of meaningful CPD. Wells (1986: 221) refers to teachers as 'theory-builders' and states his belief that:

> "Every teacher needs to become his or her own 'theory-builder' but a builder
> of theory that grows out of practice and has as its aim to improve the quality of
> practice. For too long, 'experts' from outside the classroom have told teachers
> what to think and do. They have even designed programs that are 'teacher-
> proof' in an attempt to bypass teacher involvement in the same way that so
> many teachers have bypassed student involvement."

Wells' criticism of "'experts' from outside' may bring to mind official advice and guidance and examples of 'best practice' which are considered to be transferable to any place of learning regardless of context. For some time now teachers in the compulsory sector have become accustomed to documents, CDs and DVDs demonstrating good practice arriving at their schools. In FE the 'Gold Dust' resources are admirable examples of the kinds of materials that can be produced by

groups of people working together and they are often usefully adapted by teachers in the sector. However, the physical versions of the 'Gold Dust' resources can often be seen on staffroom shelves in serried ranks and in pristine condition. The difficulty with such materials is that they seem to be produced in 'context-free' environments and, as such, may not easily translate to a particular teaching and learning environment.

The idea that learning materials, resources and methods can be successful in one place and must, therefore, be successful in another place is part of a wider culture of 'best practice.' This links to some of the central tenets of managerialism and the contention that all places of learning are more or less the same and that methods can be uniformly applied regardless of context. An A-level teacher in a college sixth form centre; a literacy tutor in a young offenders' institution and a work-based learning assessor in a training provider could, no doubt, have interesting and useful discussions about what they do and how they do it and might learn much from each other. It seems unlikely, however, that they could develop a range of materials that would meet the needs of all, or indeed any, of their learners. The notion of 'best practice' is frequently extended to areas other than teaching and learning – to management; administration; funding and record-keeping.

James and Biesta (2007) undertook a large-scale longditudinal research project, published as 'Improving Learning Cultures in Further Education' in which they develop a cultural approach to understanding learning. They argue for the transformation of learning cultures in further education based on their conclusions that all places of learning are particular and located in their own contexts and, whilst there will be many similarities, they are all unique.

> "The cultural approach also enables us to adopt a different and in our opinion more realistic way to understand and manage the improvement of teaching and learning. The essence of this approach is to work to enhance learning cultures, in ways that make successful learning more rather than less likely. Because of the relational complexity of learning, and of the differing positions and dispositions of learners, there is no approach that can ever guarantee universal learning success, however success is defined. Rather than looking for universal solutions that will work always, everywhere and for everyone, the cultural approach helps us to see that the improvement of learning cultures always asks for contextualised judgement rather than for general recipes." (James and Biesta, 2007:37)

Even if you don't read the whole book, James and Biesta's conclusions, particularly the suggested 'principles of procedure' for transforming learning cultures in FE, should be required reading for anyone interested in improving teaching and learning. These conclusions also provide a good contextual underpinning for considering your CPD in its widest sense.

Setting the right tone – appreciative inquiry

Without recourse to long lists of academic references, it seems fairly well-established that learners don't learn very well if they are simply told to learn without any explanation of why they should. They will not learn if they are made to feel that they are deficient in some way or if we don't try to build self-esteem and develop a sense of 'agency' and a belief that they can take some control over their own lives and learning. Strangely, when people become teachers these, or any other kinds of paid work, these ideas frequently aren't applied.

A model based on the 'delivery' of educational 'products', audited and inspected by external bodies can result in a blame culture which focuses on 'broken' teachers who need to be fixed. Realistically, there will always be some who aren't very good at their jobs; who don't treat their learners with respect and don't provide a very good service. Coffield (2008: 22) says:

> "Post-compulsory education is not a job creation scheme for incompetent staff, who should be firmly but sensitively removed. The much greater problem is unimaginative and uninspiring teaching; and I suggest that we talk of 'poor teaching' rather than of 'poor teachers' on the principle that we castigate the sin but cherish the sinner."

This second part of this quote reminds us that very few people are beyond redemption. Many teachers who are not currently operating at their best might be able to do so if given appropriate support and encouragement. So how can this be done?

One way is for senior and middle managers to try to set a different tone and an atmosphere more conducive to improvement than a 'blame culture'. The principles of 'appreciative inquiry' were initially developed by David Cooperrider (1990) in the context of organisational change. Organisational change often flounders because of over-emphasis on negatives and deep inquiry into what's wrong. It may be necessary in cases of serious organisational failure to find out what went wrong prior to rebuilding. But, I would suggest, organisational change should be built on positives and recognising the existing strengths of the organisation and all of its members. People, in this case

teachers, are unlikely to improve by government or management dictat or because more procedures and systems are imposed to monitor them and ensure compliance.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) takes a different starting point by suggesting that organisations should not focus their inquiries on what doesn't work or identify gaps and inadequacies, rather they should look at what *does* work and what are the existing strengths and abilities of its members. These kinds of inquiries are collaborative and predicated on exploring possibilities. The basic process of AI was originally built on the 4 D's – Discover; Dream: Design: Destiny. These may be a little too sugary for some tastes; I prefer the 4 I's model:

Initiate

Introduce the principles of AI to the whole organisation and explain its core message of improvement built on positives. Get the 'big picture' of the project in place and identify areas to work on and people to work on them.

Inquire

Get people talking and finding out about each other and themselves. Find out about what kind of organisation they want and what they can do to bring it about. Unstructured or semi-structured interviews and focus groups are particularly useful. Encourage creative thinking. Listen without prejudice or preconceptions.

Imagine

Collate and share the key themes which emerge from the inquiries and develop ideas and possible, even provocative, solutions. Share and validate them with as many people as possible.

Innovate

Begin the process. Keep people involved in conversations about the change. Review and adapt change in light of discussion and evaluation.

The essence of AI is encapsulated in the words of the old Johnny Mercer song: "Accentuate the positive; eliminate the negative; latch on to the affirmative."

Learning organisations – the way forward?

One of the key elements of appreciative inquiry is that organisations should be creative in their organisational change and explore new ideas. Peter Senge, one of the leading writers on organisational learning, makes a distinction between *adaptive* and *generative* learning.

> "The impulse to learn, at its heart, is an impulse to be generative, to extend our capability. This is why leading corporations are focusing on *generative* learning which is about creating as well as *adaptive* learning, which is about coping." (Senge 1996: 289)

Generative learning is a key characteristic of a *learning organisation*. A learning organisation is one which actively incorporates structures and processes to encourage and enable continuous learning and improvement. Senge (1992) describes the five 'disciplines' of a learning organisation. The following account is a very brief overview of his ideas; for a more detailed discussion of his ideas in an educational setting see Martin (1995; Chapter 4). The five disciplines are:

1. Personal mastery
2. Mental models
3. Shared vision
4. Team learning
5. Systems thinking

Personal mastery

Personal mastery means every member of the organisation having a personal vision of, and a belief in, what they can do. It's rather like the idea of 'agency' which we try to encourage in our learners, that is the belief that you can make a difference and that you can make things happen rather than just having things happen to you. Teachers often feel, sometimes justifiably, the 'system', the management, or their colleagues are working against them. Personal mastery means still hanging on to your personal vision, regardless of real or imagined threats. An ethos of 'appreciative inquiry' (see above) might be more conducive to personal mastery.

Mental models

Mental models could be described as our 'working models'. They are our conceptions of how we do things or how things should be done. In a learning organisation each individual should attuned to change; this involves challenging, and changing, our mental models. As Martin, writing about universities as learning organisations, (1995: 59) says:

> "Mental models are the prejudices and assumptions which inform our everyday thinking and doing. They are the things which get in the way of us working positively together and learning from experiences. Our commitment to mental models means that we are often not tuned to learning, but to defensiveness and appearing rational in advocating our existing positions."

Martin acknowledges that changing our mental models makes us feel vulnerable and is "challenging and courageous". However, if learning organisations intend to continually learn and adapt, then so must each individual within it. This links to the next discipline – shared vision.

Shared vision

In essence, shared vision is informed, possibly formed, by the sum of the personal visions within an organisation. It is very similar to the 'inquire' and 'imagine' stages of the appreciative inquiry model. It is important that shared vision is a *commitment* based on the involvement of all staff, rather than *compliance* with an imposed 'vision'.

Team learning

In most educational settings we work in teams – subject teams; task teams; management teams. When they work well teams are extremely effective at producing things which are greater than any one individual could achieve. At their worst they can be counter-productive, competitive and emotionally damaging. In a learning organisation teams collaborate to extend the pool of knowledge and to provide an arena for challenging personal and collective mental models.

Systems thinking

Systems thinking means that an organisation and its constituent members can see the 'big picture' of the organisation. It's about understanding how the parts contribute to the whole. 'Silo mentality' is a frequent metaphor used to describe people who work within a contained mental, and possibly physical space, without reference to the wider organisation. The metaphor also has a defensive connotation in that those within it seek to repel outside influences with 'alien' ideas. Part of the

managers' work is to help people have a holistic view of the organisation and to see the benefits of cooperation and collaboration.

The principles and processes of structured CPD; appreciative inquiry and organisational learning can have a powerful effect on the development of meaningful and effective CPD in the lifelong learning sector.

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