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Working together to develop a professional learning community



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***Abstract:** There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that traditional formal models of staff development are failing to help educators to integrate ideas into practice and that staff development is, “ ...done to teachers rather than with them” (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991:17). This pilot project supplements the traditional workshop model with one in which educators learn in their own professional communities through discussion that is embedded in their work. This case study follows the experiences of a group of staff in tertiary education who participated in informal professional practice groups in order to foster their own professional learning and reduce professional isolation. Each professional practice group comprising both academic and allied staff, met on a regular basis usually in an informal setting, with the aim of learning by sharing ideas and experience and constructing knowledge through conversations focused on teaching, learning and other organisational matters. The findings suggest that participation in a professional learning group fosters a collaborative learning culture and reduces professional isolation. It was found that collaborative groups are not easy to build or sustain. It appears that people will give their time voluntarily to collaborate with colleagues, with whom they would not normally work, providing that they are learning and feel that they have something to contribute.*

***Keywords:** collaborative, professional dialogue, learning*

Introduction

In considering an alternative model of staff development in higher education, I have drawn on examples of collaborative staff development and professional isolation from literature that relates to experiences in schools as well as examples of collaboration in business and the university context. Studies in schools found that the norm of teaching has been one of isolation and independent practice and that it is rare for teachers to have either the opportunity or the time to develop networks for support and professional learning. In collaborative learning cultures, innovation flourished and teacher isolation was significantly reduced (Meyers 1998). These experiences informed the development of professional practice groups (PPG), as an alternative to the more traditional workshop model of staff development. A PPG consists of a group of about seven – nine people who voluntarily come together from different parts of the organisation on a regular basis to share professional knowledge and expertise, give feedback and value one another as colleagues engaging in a common enterprise.

Professional Isolation

Teaching is one of the loneliest professions and one of the few where it is legitimate to work alone, safe from the influence of outsiders (Lortie 1975). We know from experience that people learn through intellectual and emotional engagement with one another. Teachers however, are often starved for learning opportunities with colleagues outside their immediate area. Increased organisational demands, workload, norms of privacy, departmental membership, timetabling and the physical nature of the institution are often used as an excuse for not having time to collaborate (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991).

Teacher isolation is complex and generally means that great things that individual teachers do go unnoticed and the bad things go uncorrected (Fullan & Hargreaves 1991). Isolation may limit access to ideas, drive stress inward and allow conservatism and resistance to innovation. In addition, there is a link between the widespread presence of isolation to safer, less risk taking teaching methods (Lortie 1975; Fullan & Hargreaves 1991).

Collaboration

Collaboration is not new and over a hundred years ago Dewey was writing about the importance of learning “by sharing ideas with others who may have different experiences and perspectives” (Hoban 1999:174). There has been a shift of emphasis in professional development with collaborative learning groups supplementing the traditional expert-led model (Hargreaves 1997). The critical element of this model recognises that teachers learn best in their own professional communities where they can process information in ways that have value and meaning to their workplaces (Darling-Hammond 1998; Hargreaves 1997; Little 1993). This collaborative model relates theory to practice, is experiential, grounded in inquiry and focuses on discussion and action (Little 1993:98). Studies of successful collaborative cultures have found that teachers, who were committed to ongoing professional growth, demonstrated high levels of innovation, energy and enthusiasm. In these cultures the workplace became the teacher and the teachers were the learners (McLaughlin 1993; Little 1993). “The most important impact of collaboration is its impact on the uncertainty of the job, which, when faced alone, can otherwise so undermine a teacher’s sense of confidence” (Rosenholtz 1989:45). Those who choose to work alone miss out on colleagues as a source of growth and development.

Little (1990) suggests that there is an expectation that any interaction that breaks isolation will enhance the collective capacity of groups. Whilst social support, is important Little, (1990), cautions that there must be more to these relationships if they are to be a vehicle for learning. To be of value they need to encourage risk taking and inquiry. Some collaborative efforts tended to be unstable, short-lived and not a priority for teachers. “Serious collaboration, by which teachers engage in the rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning turns out to be rare” (Little 1987:513).

Examples of collaborative staff development

Study groups have the potential to build professional learning communities. Teachers participating in study groups reported reduction of isolation, encouragement of critical thinking, increased reflection, collegiality and improved student learning (Moher 1998; Murphy 1992; Little 1987). Suggested guidelines for these groups included voluntary participation, between six and twelve participants, shared goals, commitment and decision making regarding meeting times, leadership and content (Roberts 1999). Another example

can be found in teacher initiated support groups. These groups are established from within or across institutions with meetings taking place in a social setting. Fullan & Hargreaves (1991) found that although these groups have a strong social dimension, conversations extend into critical examination and reflection on practice with improvements and changes being implemented where appropriate. An opportunity for joint work within or across departments provides a positive contribution to collaboration through shared responsibility for the work of teaching. Collaboration of this type has been seen to improve practice in contexts where interdisciplinary teams debate and discuss issues or use action research projects as a basis for collaboration (Little 1990).

The idea of communities of practice or activity systems has been associated with the induction process of faculty staff in some universities (Trowler & Knight 2000). In this context communities of practice were recognised as important vehicles for the acquisition of common knowledge about professional life and daily practice and helped with the socialisation of new academic staff into the university system. Communities of practice are also developing in the business community through a force that is both social and professional. In all collaborative initiatives, people belong because they have something to learn and something to contribute. Although professional learning communities are not easy to build, sustain, or integrate into an organisation some can be nurtured, but many are best left alone and may not survive under the institutional spotlight. However, "... the harvest they yield makes them well worth the effort" (Wenger & Snyder 2000:140).

Issues and Challenges

Collaboration is not a panacea for teacher development and Hargreaves (1993) wonders whether collaboration will be able to deliver on its promise and cautions that people may find themselves collaborating for the sake of collaboration. Some models are best avoided being seen as superficial, counterproductive and of limited impact. In a balkanised culture made up of separate and competing groups, collaboration may be detrimental to teacher development. Contrived collaboration can sometimes be negative and inflexible and used to ensure that teachers comply with the implementation of educational reforms, or become involved in mandatory mentoring, coaching or compulsory supervision (Fuller & Hargreaves 1991).

To be beneficial collaborative groups must be flexible in composition and purpose and allowed to form and disintegrate based on individual needs (Wildman and Niles 1987). Breaking the cycle of isolation is a matter of changing attitudes and changing the culture. Such changes do not happen quickly but given time they can happen. Those contemplating informal collaborative models of staff development in higher education may need to carefully consider whether working together and discussing practice within or across faculty will advance professional knowledge, raise awareness of issues and improve student learning or merely confirm existing practice?

The Project

Pilot study

Discussion with a group of colleagues identified both the need and interest to pilot a staff development project which would help develop a collaborative learning culture and reduce professional isolation. This group of colleagues, who comprised both academic and allied staff from different departments, formed the core of the original professional practice group. Leadership was discussed and protocols for practice were established such as developing a confidential and trusting environment and an agreement that discussions and debates would be of educational or organisational interest. Another three groups evolved over time with

informal presentations and networking by members of the original group creating the required interest, encouragement and momentum. As a participant / observer in the project I provided additional advice and encouragement to new groups until they began to function independently.

The research question enabled me to explore whether the collaborative experiences outlined in the literature, were similar to those of staff working in higher education. The research question was: Does participation in a professional practice group, which is characterised by collegiality, sharing knowledge and professional dialogue, foster a collaborative learning culture and help reduce or minimise feelings of professional isolation for staff in tertiary education?

Methodology

A case study approach provided the opportunity to study an aspect of current practice within an agreed timeframe (Bell 1987). The research method located within the interpretive paradigm was chosen because the focus of study was about “ the act of making sense out of a social interaction” (Glesne & Peshkin 1992:19). Rubin & Rubin (1995:31) believe that the interpretive approach “ emphasises the importance of understanding the overall text of conversation” and “ of seeing meaning in context”.

Purposeful sampling was adopted with specific criteria developed to ensure that a reasonably representative group was selected for interview. In order to select a sample from which the most could be learned, the criteria identified experienced and inexperienced academic and allied staff working on different campus sites and in different subject disciplines and departments. Eight people (two from each of the four groups), were selected and formally interviewed twice over five months. The interviews were semi-structured with standardised open-ended questions being used to take each respondent through the same sequence, with the opportunity for follow-up and probing questions where appropriate. This approach was used to minimise variations in the questions and reduce the possibility of bias whilst also allowing for flexibility (Rubin & Rubin 1995). The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, analysed and clustered into themes. Tentative themes and categories were systematically grouped with the main themes from interview one forming the basis of the questions for the subsequent interview.

Informal conversational interviews with other participants were also held throughout the study period with questions emerging from the immediate context. Although this approach is not systematic and data analysis difficult, it is considered to be a major collection tool where the interviewer is a participant in the study (Patton 1990). Conversational interviews were subsequently summarised and used to corroborate formal data. All the data and resulting themes were analysed and reported.

As a participant / observer in the project I had a responsibility to adopt a neutral stance and be open-minded as well as thoughtful and considerate of the needs and feelings of others. The ethical considerations addressed individual rights to dignity, privacy and confidentiality (Glesne & Peshkin 1992). I was mindful of the advice of Patton (1990) and adopted strategies to deal with selective perception and personal and theoretical biases including, systematic procedures, multiple data sources, triangulation, and external review in order to produce credible accurate data.

Observations analysis and discussion

Although tertiary education provided the context for this study the experiences as described by the participants were similar in nature to those in the literature, which related to a primary or secondary school context.

As collaborative cultures do not often happen by themselves some contrivance was necessary to establish the project and this may account for the fact that whilst some groups were successful, others were not. Two of the four groups in the project established a collaborative learning culture and reduced professional isolation, another was partially successful with the remaining group struggling to get off the ground. A wide range of factors, all of which were features of professional learning communities, contributed to the experiences. These included, voluntary participation, diversity, commitment, shared goals, strong leadership, reflective practice, trust and a willingness to learn from each other.

Working towards a collaborative learning culture

For the successful groups participation fostered a collaborative learning culture. Participants experienced strong socialisation, with groups meeting on a 6 – 8 weekly basis at an agreeable venue. Meetings were held either in the relaxed informal environment of a café or restaurant or at another suitable venue. The venue, as well as chatty conversations and food, was important as people had to feel comfortable before they were able to focus on professional dialogue. Although there was a social side people experienced a clear separation of professional and social needs.

Professional practice are the two words that stick in my mind. Different teaching ideas, techniques, reading papers and sharing and taking ideas from these. You can get feedback from different people. Somebody would have information because of who they are and what are they are working on (P3:35).

The chance to meet with colleagues, personal commitment and making time for things that really mattered was a challenge but one that was valued.

I recognised the benefits and the chance of meeting with colleagues, peers who were grounded, positive people, willing to commit to professionalism (P1:28).

I've learned from people who have been around for a while. Have learned things from others that I can actually do (P5:34).

Whilst there was sometimes no agenda people felt that their learning was embedded in practice and focused on gaining knowledge and sharing ideas about teaching and learning.

I just think that at the moment it feels like it has a momentum of its own now. Like there is less and less you have to do and it just kick starts itself and goes (P5:36).

The sharing of information for some groups focused around broad topics. Some people thought that although this was valuable it was more socially supportive than intellectually challenging. In another group people were ready for something more in-depth and became involved in assisting colleagues with aspects of research, debating current literature, sharing resources and skills or helping with planning. The group that had been established the longest

regularly experienced examination of practice and because trust levels were high, risks were taken and beliefs and values challenged and tested.

There were so many good ideas coming out of that conversation - the challenges were there which was realism - not just a feel good thing. We are not just there to make one another feel good but we were able to look at the issue realistically - it really tested our values (P1:35).

Leadership

Leadership was a central component of a successful group. It seemed that whoever assumed the leadership role influenced the learning culture and created a sense of continuity for the group. Successful groups had either strong individual or shared leadership, which provided clear direction and sense of purpose.

There is a sense of people sitting around waiting! I initiate meetings and I am happy to do that. It's my thing about taking charge and not wasting my time (P5:31).

I'll take the bull by the horns; I'll facilitate and try to stop the domination. It is hard to visualise it succeeding without a clear direction and a facilitator (P8:31).

In one group, there was reluctance for anyone to take charge. A participant, who was more than capable, wanted someone else to be the leader but that didn't happen. Although initial commitment was high after several meetings she perceived that the lack of leadership resulted in the group dissolving. In hindsight more attention needed to be placed on the role of group leadership in the initial stages of development.

I think that I had really high expectations that things were going to be terrific. I have been really, really disappointed because it hasn't happened. Our group has just not formed. It just hasn't gone anywhere - it has been a big fizzer (P4:28).

Membership

The mix of academic and allied staff was considered to be a positive feature as it promoted diversity of opinion. Although one person was critical of the presence of allied staff generally diversity was seen to strengthen networks with people who would not normally interact on a professional basis.

Participation was voluntary and people felt that if membership was compulsory, ownership and commitment might be compromised. Some found it difficult to set aside time to meet and felt that they were being taken away from other institutional demands. It was agreed that an important aspect of voluntary membership was that if individual professional learning needs were not being met, then there was an opportunity to easily opt out. More allied than academic staff left the project because it was not a priority for them and they felt their needs were not being met. The others recruited new members but this affected both the dynamics and group advancement.

Professional isolation minimised

This study found that feelings of isolation had in some way been reduced or minimised through participation in a PPG. The majority of participants had experienced varying degrees of professional isolation with increased workload, working on another campus site, or working in a department where people tended not to work collaboratively or cooperate, being

identified as contributing factors. Some people did not have opportunities or reasons to collaborate with those from another area and acknowledged that working in isolation prevented them from using colleagues as a source of information. They valued being able to access and subsequently implement new ideas. Even participants from the unsuccessful group felt that feelings of isolation had been reduced, because they had a network of colleagues from whom to informally access information and support. Although the context was different similar findings were reported by Little (1990) ; Fullan & Hargreaves (1991).

People talked about having a sense of connection. Someone, who worked in a department where there was limited cooperation and isolation, anxiety and uncertainty were the norm, made the point that no matter how confident people appear to be, they are all capable of going to that place of doubt. This person thought that anxiety and uncertainty were unhealthy when faced alone and for him the professional practice group went some way towards reducing his isolation.

There is that sense now of connection so you see these people outside the context of the group whether it's at morning tea or walking across the campus you have a sense of connection with them - it's a group thing - about belonging. It's a great idea. After all we spend so much time at work it's a shame not to enjoy it (P5:38).

Conclusion

Although some obstacles were encountered in this staff development project generally participation not only provided opportunities for staff to learn from each other but professional isolation, which had previously been experienced by the majority of participants, was reduced or minimised.

The project continues to evolve and complement the more formal staff development learning opportunities. Recent organisational restructuring has resulted in some changes as members have opted out or are no longer employed in the organisation. Those who continue to participate do so because the group continues to meet their professional needs. As workload and timing were identified as hindering participation, the use of technology to support the initiative is worthy of discussion and may provide a more flexible approach to collaboration for some staff. It may also be helpful to formalise guidelines to assist best practice for future groups.

The message is simple; professional learning communities are not easy to build, sustain or integrate into an organisation but it would appear that as long as the experience provides people with something to learn and an opportunity to contribute they will continue to belong. Careful nurturing is required in the initial stages of establishment but "*the harvest they yield makes them well worth the effort*" (Wenger & Snyder 2000:140).

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