

Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education

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Abstract

The Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT) is a professional body set up to support teaching in higher education. It is intending to be a membership driven organisation and has recently reported to have built up a membership of over 3000 in its first year. Part of its remit is to develop a framework for continuing professional development (CPD) and as a membership-driven organisation will need to consult the membership on the design and implementation of a CPD scheme. This article sets out to reflect upon the approaches to CPD currently in use and explore the underlying assumptions and issues that need to be considered as part of the debate.

Introduction

There is a consensus that CPD is a good thing which all professionals should undertake. The argument is the rate of change is increasing all the time and to cope with the level of change all of us must continue to learn. Lifelong learning is a theme adopted by government to encourage us to remain competitive in the global market place. No professional completes their initial training equipped to practice competently for the rest of their life. Therefore, professionals need both learning to learn skills and to undertake CPD. I agree that this is a good argument and one to which I subscribe as well as advocate to others.

The difficulty arises with applying this abstract 'good thing' to the real world. There is a great deal of confusion over whether CPD is a product or a process. If it is a product then what is the outcome? Is it learning or is it evidence about the process undertaken for CPD? If it is the process that is important then CPD schemes should be facilitating the process. If it is learning outcomes achieved then the CPD process should facilitate that. Most schemes seem to arrive at some sort of fudge somewhere in the middle by not helping the learning and requiring outcomes to be documented.

Purpose of CPD

The reasons individuals join professional bodies must be considered. They may be interested in the professional area. Membership may be required to undertake a particular course of study; it may be needed to progress in a career. For some jobs it may be a statutory requirement to practise or an employer requirement as a condition of employment.

The purposes of CPD can be explored beyond the general issue of continuous improvement. CPD may be to improve job performance, to maintain or develop the image of a professional body, to maintain and develop professional standards, regulate membership, provide a permit to work for public safety (physical, mental and financial) through registration and accreditation. I am interested in my own CPD so that I can feel confident of the job I am doing and can demonstrate to my employer and my students that I am up to date. CPD also offers the individual continuing employability as long-term employment with one employer becomes less certain and individual responsibility for maintaining employability is emphasised.

Stakeholders on CPD

In considering design of CPD schemes, it seems that we are not all clear both about the various stakeholders involved and the purpose of a scheme beyond being a 'good thing'. Looking first at stakeholders the most obvious are individual members and the professional body to which they belong. Within the category of members, we may separate the current members, past members

and potential future members. All professional bodies like to grow their membership as it improves their finances, their influence and credibility. Therefore, CPD requirements have to satisfy the drive for professionalism and encourage actual and potential members. Beyond these direct stakeholders there are several others. The employers of professional staff are stakeholders concerned with maintaining the competence of their professional employees. Similarly the clients/customers of professionals are stakeholders interested that professionals are up to date and competent. Trade unions may be seen as stakeholders where their members are subject to CPD requirements such as with the ILT. On the more global scale, government and society as a whole are concerned about professionals keeping up to date.

There seems to be confusion over who are the important stakeholders in CPD activity. Is it for individual professionals to maintain their performance, the professional body to maintain credibility, the employer or the customer/client? If the answer is yes to all of them does the same process apply to satisfy them and why is the professional body taking the lead?

Content of CPD

If CPD is about maintaining and improving performance through learning then what should be learned? The consensus seems to be that three areas of CPD learning can be identified. The first is extending technical knowledge in the specialist subject area. Beyond the technical knowledge and skills the development of personal transferable skills and attributes such as team working and problem solving are appropriate for CPD activities. As professionals develop in their careers and take on responsibilities for others the third area of CPD activity is the development of general managerial skills. Roles that are more senior often require less specific subject expertise and more skills in managing a team of professionals who have a range of up to date specialist expertise. There are dimensions to CPD taking in the narrow specialism, the management of others in that specialism and supporting the learning of others to perform in the specialism. There is a risk that CPD mechanisms can miss this differentiation.

Many professionals are members of more than one professional body. Each can be expected to have requirements for CPD, which are usually expressed in terms unique to the particular body. A requirement for CPD in terms of hours per year is often given by professional bodies and pitched at around 35 hours. If one takes that as one week of activity then it could be seen as one week required by each professional body with which an individual is in membership. Yet the content of CPD developing personal transferable skills and general management skills is surely appropriate to all professional bodies. An individual should be able to gain credit for generic development across all professional bodies in membership. That is made difficult and onerous by the differing requirements for presentation of evidence by different bodies. Whilst I have heard professional bodies acknowledge that their members face expectations for CPD from other professional bodies to which their members belong I have not noticed that reflected in any CPD scheme guidance.

Motivation for CPD

Why do individuals undertake CPD? Most often CPD is spontaneous and opportunistic, reacting to direct experience of the individual circumstances. It seems to me, having worked with training and development professionals in considering their professional development, that often they are not aware of their development activities. They see CPD only in terms of attendance at course and events. CPD is rarely undertaken just to satisfy their professional bodies. If that is the reason then surely that is a negation of CPD as a development process. Other reasons may be credibility with colleagues, clients and their employer, to improve current job performance, widen and deepen the capacity to perform in the current role and develop future capacity to enable promotion and progression. Where development activities are contributing to current

performance they are likely to be supported by the employer and become integrated into work and are legitimate work activity. In this case, CPD is not an additional activity to be undertaken alone and in the individual's free time.

CPD may also be undertaken to develop into another job with the current employer, therefore for promotion. It may also be undertaken for career development that may be beyond the current employer. Where members of a professional body are unable or unwilling to produce evidence for a CPD scheme there is a presumption that these are the lower performers. Lower performers may not be in the professional body or may meet the requirements for CPD mechanistically without necessarily raising their performance.

Design of CPD Systems

The different approaches taken by the various professional bodies reflect their assumptions about the purpose of CPD. There seems very little co-ordination between professional bodies on the approaches they adopt to CPD. Some very mechanistic and prescriptive models are in place which produce results which I feel undermine the very principles of CPD. For some, CPD is clearly voluntary and presented as a good thing that members will want to do. For others, it is mandatory as a condition of membership. The enforcement of the CPD may be by regular inspection of evidence presented by the individual or by sampling across the membership. Where membership forms a working requirement then regular assessment of CPD activity must be built in.

The primary measure of CPD which has been adopted is in terms of hours of activity per year. This is often weighted so that hours on courses are full value towards a target of 35 hours per year whereas reading of books and journals receives half credit in terms of time. There are issues here about the suitability of specifying a target in terms of hours, what are recognised activities which 'earn' hours and whether the time spent results in any useful learning which has been, or can be, applied. The selling of activities which hit CPD requirements like 35 hours per year which probably contributes little or nothing to the development of the individual illustrate the limitations of this approach. Given the relative ease of claiming CPD activity I do question whether hours targets are appropriate and suggest outcomes are more important.

Most CPD schemes seem to treat formal courses as the primary source of CPD. This has administrative and documentation attractions but can it be the way to develop technical skills, team working skills, personal transferable skills and general management skills? All my experience of designing ways to develop skills suggests that open courses are the least effective way of developing such skills. CPD schemes I have looked at barely mention 'workplace learning' yet this is increasingly recognised as the most powerful learning opportunity for skills development. Particularly when working in multi-disciplinary teams. It seems that CPD is presented in professional schemes as an individual activity and responsibility, thereby ignoring development arising through the workplace. The reason CPD schemes target courses seems to be related to administrative convenience of showing attendance at courses which are separate from 'everyday' work in time, location and context and the difficulty of documenting real workplace learning.

Another area offering CPD opportunities which seems to be overlooked in current CPD schemes is the Internet. It is certainly a rich resource and one in which it is easy to get lost and waste significant amounts of time. It does have a role to play in CPD and I know several professionals for whom it is a key development resource for their specialism. PARN (see references at end) have been running some discussion forums for professionals to share approaches to using the Internet for professional development. These have included face to face focus groups and Internet discussions on their website. Their website is worth a visit on CPD.

Most models of learning include reference to planning, experiencing, reflecting, theorising and receiving feedback as key parts of the learning process. Such theories seem to underpin the presumption in most CPD schemes that CPD must be planned a year in advance and captured on a formal document. This seems to remove the spontaneity from CPD and reinforce an essentially bureaucratic approach with a plan to be followed rather than a dynamic process of exploring and responding to learning opportunities.

Reflection on learning is also proposed as a powerful contribution to learning. This is followed in most CPD schemes by the implication that the process of trying to document learning to meet the requirements of a CPD scheme is actually facilitating reflection on learning. I think that the process of trying to produce evidence gets in the way of reflecting upon learning rather than facilitating it.

CPD guidance which I have seen seems to concentrate on forms to be filled about planned learning and documenting past learning activities. This documenting of activities often seems to be 'writing for the file' and serves little useful learning purpose. When learning has taken place a process requiring documenting it some time later does not really seem to enhance the learning. The various formats for documenting CPD provided by professional bodies including forms and computer software seem to create their own additional learning demands as a burden imposed by the professional body.

In my experience, formal CPD tends to be seen by the individual as a paperchase to satisfy a bureaucratic requirement. It is not perceived as a powerful development process encouraging reflection on learning and facilitating the planning of future learning. Many people seem to find the idea and process of documenting their learning deeply unattractive. Any supposed benefits from theories of learning advocating the benefits of reflection are not recognised.

Feedback to the learner is vital for confirming success and identifying areas for improvement. The most effective learning results from a dialogue between the learner and a mentor or coach. The provision of feedback is demanding in time, expertise and is context specific. The costs of providing feedback on an individual basis are such that no CPD schemes attempt it. The extent of feedback tends to be limited to 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' which provides no information about particular areas nor whether the activities undertaken were appropriate to the individual and his or her learning needs.

When considering monitoring CPD there are issues of who should do it, how it should be done, when it should be done, how long it should take, what is the purpose and what are the consequences of satisfying or not satisfying the requirements. I know that I felt very dissatisfied to receive feedback on a portfolio nine months after submission with the blandest of feedback and no guidance on the criteria applied or what it meant for my future performance. Tick box feedback of satisfactory, good, excellent, poor, unsatisfactory just is not helpful for improving!

Schemes which operate like school inspections can only be seen as threatening and not as a development opportunity. The limitation of peer review within an institution I see as being constrained by the ethos of the organisation whereas CPD should be looking to wider horizons. Appraisal schemes within institutions already cover some of the issues around past development and future development needs.

CPD schemes have associated costs and also potential for income generation for professional bodies. The costs are for publicising the scheme and providing any resources to members such as booklets and computer software on CD or floppy disk. There are also costs of receiving CPD evidence, storing it, doing something with it, informing the member of the results and returning

the material. The revenue opportunities are in charging for the process and approving providers of CPD training.

A scheme for the ILT

The ILT is seeking to establish a scheme which meets the needs of its members. Higher education is unusual in that half the workforce are academics who are professionals with responsibility to teaching and learning. This represents a much higher proportion of professional staff than in almost any other organisation. The ILT should encourage the embedding of CPD in a common format across institutions.

The issues I believe the ILT should address are the following:

- Membership is voluntary
- Need to encourage additional members not deter them with punitive CPD
- CPD should be a supported and rewarding process
- Those resistant to change and CPD will not join the ILT
- Any documentation should facilitate the learning process of CPD
 - Targets for hours of activities per year are inappropriate
 - Not seeking to expel members over CPD but improve overall individual performance
 - Using the employing institution to monitor individual CPD will result in ILT not being a member driven but an employer organisation with no individual relationship.
 - ILT's CPD requirements will influence non-members in HE as well as members.
 - Central assessment of CPD portfolios will be demotivating and resource expensive

References

Many professional bodies have details of their CPD schemes on their websites with free access to details. Entering 'CPD' into an Internet search engine turns up many interesting entries on this issue. There are also some journals on CPD.

The following websites have helped inform my thinking:

Professional Associations' Research Network. URL: <http://www.parn.org.uk> [19 February 2001]
TrainingZone: training e-magazine. URL: <http://www.trainingzone.co.uk> [19 February 2001]
Council for Industry and Higher Education. URL: <http://www.cihe-uk.com> [19 February 2001]
Royal Institute of British Architects. URL: <http://www.architects.com> [19 February 2001]
Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development URL: <http://www.cipd.co.uk> [19 February 2001]
Institution of Electrical Engineers. URL: <http://www.iee.org.uk/CPD/> [19 February 2001]
Institute of Learning and Teaching. URL: <http://www.ilt.ac.uk> [19 February 2001]
Institute of Management. URL: <http://www.inst-mgt.org.uk> [19 February 2001]
Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors. URL: <http://www.ricsonline.org> [19 February 2001]
Royal Institution of Naval Architects. URL: <http://www.rina.org.uk/careers/cpd.htm> [19 February 2001]
Road Town Planning Institute. URL: <http://www.rtpi.org.uk/cpd/cpd.htm> [19 February 2001]

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