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Six of the best: priorities for continuing professional development (CPD) of academics

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Introduction

This article reports on a small-scale study at Northumbria University to determine which development activities – formal and informal – staff had found most influential on their CPD. The formal involves such activities as attending workshops, formal training sessions and conferences, consulting experts, undertaking research, getting published, keeping a reflective journal and designing curriculum, teaching materials and teaching strategies. The informal involves reading, conversations with colleagues, receiving informal feedback from colleagues and students and networking.

It was hoped that, as a result of the study, we might identify, and further build upon, those formal events which most impacted on that development.

Methodology

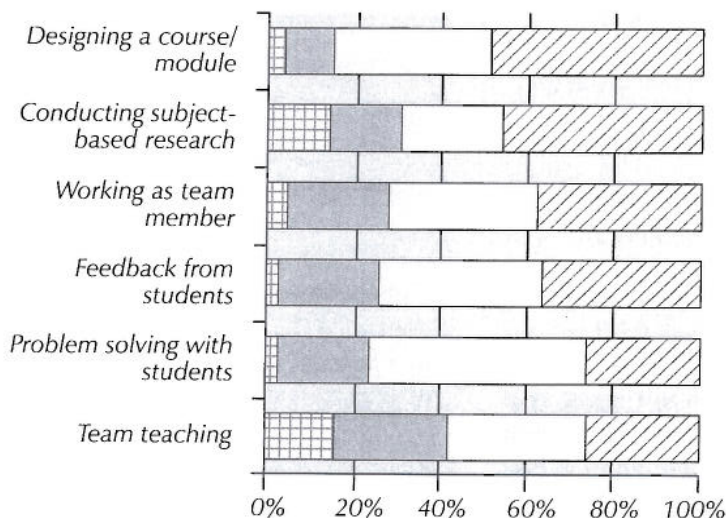
Key statements pertaining to the development of knowledge and skills for teaching were incorporated into a short

questionnaire, which was piloted prior to being emailed out to all academic staff at the home University. (Questionnaire design was influenced by the work of Norman Jackson who had run something similar at an HEA event.) In order to encourage responses, a prize draw was offered as an incentive to respondents and to staff prepared to be interviewed as a follow-up.

Results

A total of 125 questionnaires were received. Eight staff volunteered to be interviewed further. The survey was conducted at a time when lecturing staff at the University were involved in industrial action, and this may partly explain the somewhat disappointing response rate.

This article, as the title suggests, is concentrating on the six top ranked activities (see table on page 18), i.e. with the highest percentage of staff deeming them 'very important' to their CPD.



The six top ranked activities for CPD

Designing a course or module was the top ranked activity (47.6%) for contributing to staff's CPD. This finding is in contrast to that of Ferman (2002) which identified course design with peers and individual research as a minor theme in CPD.

Staff comments on course/module design included the following:

'Developing and teaching a post-graduate course overseas... helped me to reflect on and develop my teaching skills, which has helped me to identify strengths and weaknesses in my teaching practice...the most useful experience that I have ever had in terms of developing knowledge about the relationship between teaching and learning.'

Reid and Petocz (2003) explore an approach to CPD that focuses on developing and using research as a means of understanding the complexity of teaching and learning within specific discipline environments. Focusing on research development affords academics the opportunity to develop their teaching scholarship, prepare publishable work, and to develop teaching and learning practices aligned with their specific discipline environments. Certainly, in this survey, conducting subject-based research was the second highest ranked activity (44.2%) for contributing to CPD. This finding, while endorsing the arguments of Reid and Petocz and Harland and Staniforth (2000), is in contrast to that of Ferman (2002) which identified individual research as a minor theme in CPD.

One respondent in the survey equated the development of confidence with subject-based research:

'Good 'teaching' (or lecturing) comes from self confidence. This in turn comes from being confident in your subject knowledge and being highly qualified (to PhD standard).'

Ferman's study identified both networking and professional practice experience as minor themes in CPD. However, his study did identify 'discussions with peers' as distinct from

peer feedback as being a major theme. Working as a team member was ranked third (30.4%) by respondents in this survey and links in with the sixth-ranked development activity, team teaching (24.8%):

'Being part of a teaching team with experienced professionals was invaluable in the early years.'

Knight, Tait and Yorke (2006) contend that, while CPD is often characterised by 'event' delivery methods, non-formal learning is significant, complementing their argument with findings from a study of Open University academics. King's (2004) study of academics in Earth Sciences found that discussions with colleagues was the most frequently cited form of CPD undertaken (180/192 or 94%). As Haigh (2005) points out, because conversation is a constant in both professional and personal lives, it may not be afforded the value it deserves as a context for professional learning and development.

Certainly, while formal opportunities for CPD such as attending workshops and conferences are highlighted by researchers as important, these occasions cannot be organised at the drop of a hat (Power and Handa, 2005; Ming, 1999). However, engaging in informal discussions with colleagues can be equally profitable opportunities for CPD which can be arranged and used more often, especially when they involve colleagues working as part of a team or teaching the same programmes.

Boud (1999) argues that most staff development takes place in professional settings where academic staff spend most of their time. It takes the form of exchanges with colleagues – ranked third in this survey – and interacting with students, ranked fourth (28.8%) and fifth (25%). While none of these activities might be viewed as staff development, Boud believes they often have *'a more profound influence on staff than activities explicitly labelled as such.'* (Boud, 1999, p.3)

Receiving and using feedback from students was rated by one respondent in the survey as being among her own personal top three:

'[One of my top three professional development events would be] use of feedback (particularly from students) and module review.'

Power and Handa have identified not only student feedback but peer feedback, and peer teaching, as affording a rich opportunity for CPD. They point out that it is a relatively rare occurrence to spend intensive periods teaching/facilitating with their colleagues, and team teaching can address the issue of isolation in the profession by providing not only an opportunity for peer feedback, but also insights into peers' teaching strengths.

Team teaching was ranked sixth (24.8%) by respondents, three of whom specifically highlighted team teaching as one of their top CPD activities. Comments included the following:

'I have done team teaching in the past and have found this enormously beneficial...'

Encouraging staff to attend staff development events

It became apparent from the results of the survey that many of the development activities most valued by the staff were the sort of activities identified by Boud which were not conventionally classified as 'staff development'. Alarming! A recent study by Davidovitch and Soen (2006) found that the more extensive an academic's participation in teaching workshops, the lower their score in the student assessments of their teaching performance! Davidovitch and Soen also found that academics with greater seniority received higher scores from their students in terms of their course structure and the organisation and clarity of their lectures and conclude that the best 'workshop' is professional experience.

If we are to offer formal staff development opportunities in the form of workshops, for example, what would most appeal to our academic staff?

When staff were asked about this, relevance was an important factor in influencing attendance at staff development sessions:

'A session that is highly focussed and short and sharp'

'Better focus on my actual teaching (Computer Science) rather than generic material that assumes I am teaching Humanities'

'Relevance to my area – both teaching and interest'.

Impact was another important factor which encouraged staff to attend the sessions:

'I need to be convinced the event will make a significant impact on my ability to do my job more effectively'

'Be clear what impact such sessions can have upon one's CPD, e.g. how such events might enhance one's CV'

'Should invoke critical thinking about my own practice and afford opportunities to gain insight into different ways of working'.

Concluding remarks

At a recent SEDA workshop held by the authors (Gannon-Leary and McCarthy, 2006), participants observed that there was no substitute for learning by experience.

Warhurst (2003) says:

'It is asserted that the provision of a formal teaching development programme...is of far less importance in enabling new lecturers' learning of teaching than learning derived from the experience of teaching, from social mediation in the work context, and from assuming the identity of higher education teacher, that is, from being situated in a knowing context.'

This 'situation in a knowing context' enables academic staff to develop themselves professionally in a number of ways

(Ferman and Page, 2000; King, 2004) both informal and formal. If workshops offered are shown to have relevance and impact that enable participants to assume the 'identity of a higher education teacher', there is a place for both.

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