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# The 'cruel optimism' of professional development

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**ABSTRACT**

The starting point for this critical exploration of the inner logic of professional learning and development is an orientalist reading of *The Great Wave*, the iconic woodblock print by the Japanese artist Katushika Hokusai. How might 'seeing double by 'reading' the woodblock from right to left as well as from left to right in the conventional Western manner help us to think about professional development? We draw upon the notion of 'cruel optimism' to navigate between the Scylla of accepted notions of professional learning and the Charybdis of personal responsibility for learning. 'cruel optimism' is the term used by the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant to describe the conditions under which particular achievements that initially promise to be meaningful turn out not to be so, but still hold us in their grip. Drawing also upon the historian Timothy Snyder's masterful book *On Freedom*, this article is intended to stimulate discussion around policy and practice in the area of professional development; and to champion the hope, sovereignty and solidarity that develop in and through interpersonal relations over the cruel or facile optimism associated with impersonal models and frameworks.

## Introduction

This co-authored article presents 'variations on the theme' arising from a keynote address at the annual conference of the International Professional Development Association (IPDA) in November 2024. It is also informed by a chance encounter across lines of difference of the type that makes such events so enriching. It is no coincidence that we begin by alluding briefly to the musical origins of the term keynote. In music, the keynote is the first and fundamental tone of a scale, that is to say the note around which a composition modulates. However, it is important to recognise that music arises in and through modulation and attunement. There would be no music – and, we suggest, no professional development – if it were not for continuous processes of adjustment, tempering, toning down, giving voice to a certain pitch or key – and finding space for new voices.

The theme of the 2024 IPDA conference was *Here Be Dragons. I am not a Robot.* According to the conference website, the theme referred to the medieval practice

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whereby 'illustrations of sea monsters or other mythological creatures were placed on maps to signpost unexplored territory'. This suggests an underlying assumption that large tracts of the sea of professional development are navigable, and indeed that they have already been mapped. Any pockets of difficulty that remain, that is to say any areas in the vast sea of professional learning that are as yet uncharted, are presumed to be dangerous. These turbulent tracts of water, signalled by the presence of monsters and dragons, are discursively recast as challenges to be overcome or opportunities to be embraced. The implication is that all that is necessary in order to achieve this desired outcome is skilled and competent mariners who are equipped with navigational aids that are fit for purpose. What is unpredictable is *de facto* regarded as dangerous.

As co-authors we embrace a broader conceptualisation of professional development, one that offers greater scope for the inherent unpredictability of the social dimension and takes account of the particular case of work-based learning. As we hope will already be evident, we are committed to a form of creative-relational inquiry (see Pirrie and Fang 2020) that privileges venturing 'from home on the thread of a tune' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 344). We shall take our cue from that keynote.

## The dragon and the Phoenix

The keynote address began with a rather subversive admission. The speaker confided to the audience that she feared she might be regarded as a dragon – an actual dragon, not a cartographic icon used to indicate dangerous territory or uncharted waters. She also explained that she was an avowedly mythological creature, in the sense that she intended to harness the power of stories (and images) in order to breathe some fire into taken-for-granted terms in the discourse around professional learning and development. With the bravado of an inexperienced mariner, and buoyed up by the unexpected arrival of a mighty companion and rare bird, she suggested that it might be the *sea* that was the problem rather than any monsters or dragons lurking within. She was acutely aware that this allegorical approach was in marked contrast to the focus on models and frameworks that characterised the dominant discourse of professional learning and development. Emboldened by the organisers' invitation to contemplate dragons and sea monsters, she opted for a decidedly theatrical approach.

Readers will shortly be invited to close their eyes and to exercise their (ethical) imagination as we welcome them into our very own Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, our revised map of the world of professional learning and development. This will involve a short exercise in seeing double and entertaining a shift in perspective of the same order of magnitude as the one outlined above. The ensuing dance of gazes is emblematic of the form of inter-cultural understanding that lies at the heart of this joint exploration of the cruel sea of professional development.

## Under the Wave off Kanagawa

Readers are no doubt familiar with 'The Great Wave', the iconic woodblock print by the Japanese artist Katushika Hokusai (1760–1849). It is part of a series entitled *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* and is striking in the sheer dynamism of its bold outlines. It is also remarkable for its fully saturated blues, a combination of exotic Prussian blue and indigo

that yielded a dark gunmetal blue. As Marco Leona, a scientist at The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art goes on to explain, 'the transition – from the deep blue, produced by the double printing to the bright and saturated pure Prussian blue – animates the surface of the wave, adding visual depth and movement' (Leona n.d.). But we would like to draw attention to another dimension of the woodcut. To the Western eye, which is accustomed to reading from left to right, the first thing that strikes the observer is the sheer scale of the wave. The surging breakers seem to possess a demonic energy, to the extent that they threaten to engulf Mount Fiji. To the Japanese eye, which is accustomed to reading from right to left, the first thing that the viewer's attention registers is the eighteen (or so) desperate individuals who are being tossed around in their slim boats. The Japanese title (*Kanagawa oki nami ura*) ('Under the Wave off Kanagawa') reflects the fact that in its original cultural setting, the focus is on the sailors who risk being engulfed by the great wave. We offer this analogy as a way of suggesting that it is all too easy to become fixated on the dangers posed by uncharted waters. This can mean losing sight of alternative possibilities. For if we come at the image from a different angle, then it is the sea that is the problem. By dwelling upon this example, we may 'run the risk of being accused of fixating on an object, stifling the development of a clear line of argument, championing obliquity rather than aiming for narrative coherence' (Pirrie 2023, p. 162). But we were simply unable to resist the metaphorical force of such a potent icon, in the literal and metaphorical senses. Moreover, we shall argue that it is precisely this form of attentiveness – in all its joyful vividness and unpredictability – that is a hallmark of a particular form of professionalism.

Let us return to the 'peculiar internal rhythm' of the conventional academic argument without abandoning metaphor altogether. We have suggested that the vast sea of professional development poses an existential threat to valiant sailors in their flimsy craft. When one is struggling to stay afloat (literally and metaphorically), when one is being battered by wave upon wave of policy innovation, new workplace procedures and the like, it is all too easy to lose sight of the ocean. Perhaps a necessary first step is to relinquish any ambitions of comprehensive mapping and circumnavigation and to embrace the unpredictable as a particular form of freedom (Snyder 2024). Perhaps we need to dive deeper into these churning waters and take a closer look at terminology. This will enable us to break the normativity of the discourse around professional development and consider the implications of the fact that the term 'professional' has gained such enormous traction in recent years. We shall attempt to make the case for the exercise of *attention* (in all its unpredictability) in a professional learning environment where the focus has primarily been on the fulfilment of *intentions* (in all their predictability). Last but not least, in and through a creative-relational inquiry that emerged through the joy of encounter we champion freedom and hope over (cruel) optimism.

## Cruel optimism

Let us begin by exploring the key term in our title and consider how the notion of 'cruel optimism' might relate to professional learning and development. We use this term to refer both to the phenomenon that 'professionals' engage in, and to a specific field of inquiry in the academy, with its associated journals and conferences. We then turn our attention to how the discourse of professional development is framed before considering

the effect that this can have on individuals. In respect of the latter, we draw on examples from the lived experience of two individuals who were engaged in various forms of professional development – as well as to the chance encounter that informed the development of this article.

*Cruel Optimism* is the title of a book by a former Professor of English at the University of Chicago, the late Lauren Berlant. Berlant offers the following definition of 'cruel optimism':

> A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing . . . These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. *They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially*. (Berlant 2011, p. 1) (our emphasis)

The implication here is that engaging in the type of professional development that has gained traction in recent years may foster the type of professionalism outlined by Edward Said in his seminal text *Representations of the Intellectual*.

> Professionalism means thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, with one eye on the clock, and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behaviour – not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigms or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable. (Said 1994, p. 74)

The kind of things that Berlant considered were particularly susceptible to the operations of cruel optimism were food, a kind of love, a fantasy of that 'moral-intimate-economic thing called the good life' (Berlant 2011, p. 2). Readers may consider that this is a far cry from professional development. However, it is important to note that Berlant also takes cruel optimism to refer to a political project, to 'a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being' (Berlant 2011, p. 1). Professional development might be considered to come into this latter category. From a systemic perspective, professional development can certainly be regarded as a political project, and, if the term continuing professional development (CPD) is anything to go by, a political project of long duration.

Continuing professional development is, by definition, something that goes on and on, with the result that those who engage with it are discursively positioned as 'not quite there yet'. The illocutionary force of appeals to 'continuousness' also opens up a field of inquiry that can be mined indefinitely. Furthermore, it is far from clear who determines what, if anything, is in need of 'development' and the extent of that process. From a personal perspective, it might be argued that professional development promises personal advancement and an enhanced sense of belonging, along with a fleeting sense of having 'made it' – at least until we are broadsided by another great wave. In short, engaging in professional development might be regarded as part of what Berlant regards as a good-life fantasy, especially in an era in which the logic of the corporate has trumped the logic of the corporeal. By the former we are referring to the business of meeting professional standards or institutional performance indicators; by the latter, we mean turning towards the other in the spirit of genuine encounter.

We shall return to the theme of the personal and the corporeal in the examples considered below. In the meantime, we suggest that it is possible to regard being professional, or being a professional, as proxy indicators for living the 'good life'. Professionalism, or indeed engaging in professional development, carries with it

notions of achievement and success. Belonging, trying to better oneself, demonstrating ambition, finding meaning in one's work, being deserving, complying with institutional imperatives, being an entrepreneurial subject, and so on, are manifestations of personal and institutional investment in 'a collectively invested form of life, the good life' (Berlant 2011, p. 11). We might substitute 'institutionally invested' in order to strengthen the argument. The trouble with all this, as Berlant (2011, p. 3) explains, is that the blueprint for the good life has faded, due at least in part to 'the retraction ... of the social-democratic promise of the post-Second World War period'. It seems no coincidence that the focus on professional development has become ever more intense at a time when notions of 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality' are becoming increasingly frayed (Berlant 2011, p. 3). The second issue to which we would like to draw readers' attention, through brief reference to an individual case, is the intersection between notions of professional learning and development in formal educational settings such as schools and universities and work-based learning in sectors other than education.

There is not scope here to do full justice to the theme of cruel optimism and professional development. For now, it will suffice to suggest that the latter might be regarded as one scenario 'for living on in the ordinary, where subjectivity is depicted as overwhelmed, forced to change, and yet also stuck' (Berlant 2011, p. 21). Let us move on in the ordinary, keeping those embattled sailors in their flimsy craft in our mind's eye. We are only as good as our word, and we promised readers a deep dive into that turbulent sea of professional development.

## Breaking the normativity of professional development

In the title of a highly-cited article on professional development, Mitchell (2013) raises a number of questions that appear to be highly significant in the field. What is professional development? How does it occur in individuals? How may it be used by educational leaders and managers for the purposes of school improvement? Professional development emerges as a contested force field where there are various underlying factors and laudable intentions at play: the desire to enhance students' learning experiences; to alter practices in response to curriculum changes; to improve standards; to contribute to school effectiveness; to respond to the challenges of globalisation, and so on. As is evident from the title of the article, the main focus is on 'how [professional learning] occurs in individuals'. That said, the role of social learning theories is also recognised, alongside considerations of how these are manifested in practice, for instance through reified notions such as 'communities of practice' or 'professional learning communities'. We note that the final question posed in the title indicates a strong instrumental focus: 'how may [professional development] be used by educational leaders and managers for the purpose of school improvement'? It is striking that there seems to be little scope for professionals to embody a democratic culture of accountability, not to mention a degree of self-determination. Rather, the emphasis appears to be on compliance with the requirements of a bureaucratic form of accountability.

The distinction between 'democratic accountability' and 'bureaucratic accountability' invoked by Biesta (2015) is worth reprising in relation to professional development. As Biesta explains

> If democratic accountability focuses on what makes education good, bureaucratic accountability has transformed the practice of providing data in order to show how education meets certain pre-defined standards into an aim in itself, where questions about whether the standards that are being applied are accurate and meaningful expressions of what good education is supposed to be are no longer at the centre of the process. (Biesta 2015, p. 83)

It is perhaps not surprising that Mitchell quickly extricates himself from the quagmire of defining professional development. Indeed, it is perhaps convenient that the term appears to resist definition. After all, this is grist to the mill of the current conceptualisation of professional development, which is, not to put too fine a point on it, continuing.

Drawing on seminal work in the field (Day and Sachs 2004), and in language that prefigures the distinction drawn by Biesta in 2015, Mitchell (2013, p. 388) draws attention to the 'two discourses of professionalism: managerial and democratic'. The managerialist discourse is associated with what have been described as 'reform initiatives, compliance, and economic efficiency' (Day and Sachs 2004, p. 7). The latter, the democratic variety, is 'more activist in nature', emphasising 'collaborative, cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders' (Day and Sachs 2004, p. 7). It is significant, however, that this latter dimension is not offered house room in the capacious title of the article. This is not to overlook the fact that the collaborative dimension has been the focus of the various activities, models and frameworks upon which there is not scope to elaborate here. It is merely to suggest that bureaucratic accountability seems to be alive and well.

Invocations of activism, collaboration and cooperation form the bedrock of the feel-good notion of community, invoked in notions such as communities of practice or inquiry. Yet it remains the case that the 'componential structure of professional development' outlined by Mitchell (2013, p. 391), namely 'behavioural, attitudinal and intellectual', appears to be highly individualistic in character. The roots of this unresolved tension between bureaucratic and democratic accountability (Biesta 2015) and managerial and democratic discourses of professionalism (Day and Sachs 2004) may reside in the way that teacher education has evolved in recent decades, and the extent to which performativity has further increased the burden of bureaucratic accountability still further. As Harðarson (2019) points out, one of the consequences of the establishment of teacher education as a university discipline was greater emphasis on psychology, sociology, history and philosophy as the foundational disciplines of education. This has been paralleled by 'an increasing emphasis on technical know-how, practical training, and the ability to work towards ends that are defined by authorities'. Achieving a degree of 'mastery' in the foundation disciplines of education might be regarded as a badge of professionalism in the normative sense (measuring up to high standards, being trusted to work autonomously). As such, it is one of the preconditions for the exercise of the form of freedom that the historian Timothy Snyder defines as sovereignty. 'A sovereign person', according to Snyder 'knows themselves and the world sufficiently to make judgements about values and to realize those judgements' (Snyder 2024, p. 21).

We want to suggest two things. First, that there is a real danger that the debate on professional development takes place in a silo that obscures the view of the larger structural forces that are driving it, from the retraction of the social-democratic promise that has accelerated in recent decades to the marketisation of education and the inexorable rise of managerialism in all sectors of education. Second, despite superficial

rhetorical flourishes, there is clear evidence of a regressive normalisation of the bureaucratic forms of professional accountability identified by Biesta. The former tendency is exacerbated by the fact that it appears that much of the discourse around professional development draws on theories of organisational learning and hegemonic notions such as reflective practice that have been around since the late 1970s. It may be time to flush out this silo, if not to dispense with it altogether. We shall now consider the implications of the liberal use of the words professional and professionalism.

## Professionalism or professionalisation?

In *On Tyranny. Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, a masterful short book published in the wake of the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the historian Timothy Snyder exhorts us to 'be kind to our language' (Snyder 2016, p. 59). This involves being alert to how we use particular words – and to to *how words use us*. Professional(ism) is a case in point. Consider, for example, another highly-cited article by a leading exponent in the field, namely 'Understanding professional development: the need for theory to impact on policy and practice' (Kennedy 2014). This is in some respects a sequel to a 2004 article that by 2014 was the most downloaded article in the 40-year history of the journal *Professional Development in Education*. Its salience in the annals of IPDA is the reason we have chosen to focus on this specific example as being broadly illustrative of some of the phenomena that we address here. The article is a testament to an enduring 'need to theorise [or synthesise] models of continuing professional development'. The salience of models and frameworks in the contemporary debate on professional development is a further indication that it is the logic of the corporate that is in the ascendancy, with a concomitant reduction in scope for the exercise of sovereignty, in the sense outlined above.

It is striking how many times the notion of professionalism is invoked in the article referred to above. The word 'professional' appears 76 times in the 2014 text, closely followed by CPD (74 times); and, at some distance, development (56 times). There is not scope here fully to examine the implications of this. It will suffice to observe that the untrammelled use of the word 'professional' as an attributive adjective indicates that the term has become 'publicly intertwined with fixed and calculable measures of success, often at the expense of how teachers *feel*, and to some extent act' (McKee and Breslin 2022, p. 56, emphasis in the original). Notions such as expertise, efficacy, competence, effectiveness and improvement are frequently invoked in relation to professionalism and educational leadership. But where is the rub? Is there no room for doubt, hesitancy, uncertainty, and not-knowing in relation to professional development? What scope is there for corporeal politics, for the trust and companionship that can ensue when one is able fully to encounter the other and to give voice to doubt and uncertainty? This is not to suggest that we deliberately throw a spanner in the works in order to bring about these states. It is merely to point out that doubt and uncertainty are part of the human condition. As Pirrie and Ainslie (forthcoming) suggest in their picaresque account of amateurism, professionalism and matters of the heart, the traditional view of professionalism, one that is informed by the sovereignty of the individual and has mutuality at its heart, has become debased in an education policy climate that privileges *professionalisation* over professionalism. The hallmark of *professionalisation* as opposed to professionalism in the traditional sense is the

emphasis on increasing training, raising the required level of qualification or mandating compliance with professional standards. The emphasis on individualised, functionalist perspectives brings us back to the previous observation that the logic of the corporate has trumped the logic of the corporeal.

It was the internationalisation of the corporate agenda that first piqued the interest of the second author of the article referred to above while she was working on her Masters dissertation. Sixteen years of working in a remote corner of Pakistan had convinced her that the discourse of models and frameworks and meeting professional standards that had been forged in the West and exported to the East in an undercover colonialist enterprise did not touch the reality on the ground. Her lived experience has made her acutely aware that such notions had no meaning in the 'fragile' environment in which she worked. And as the second author of the current article pointed out after the keynote, and in a manner that was a testament to the art of encounter, the German word *Beruf* (literally a calling) encompasses the English terms 'profession', 'occupation', 'vocation', and 'calling'.

In sum, we suggest that the specialisation and formalism (and in the cases explored briefly above, the emphasis on models and frameworks) that are increasingly associated with contemporary visions of professionalism (a Trojan horse for professionalisation) can make us lose sight of what Edward Said described

> the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge [with the result that] you can't view knowledge and art as choices and decisions, commitments and alignments, *but only in terms of impersonal theories and methodologies* (Said 1994, p. 77, our emphasis).

As we intimated above, it is precisely these 'impersonal theories and methodologies' that have tended to attract the attention of those with an interest in professional learning and development. This means that there is insufficient attention to the messy reality of practice and the 'raw effort' of lived experience. As we indicated above, we were brought together through the music of chance. We thus recognise the value of practising corporeal politics; engaging in small talk; making new friends; venturing out on the thread of a tune; engaging in *mobility* by exercising the capacity to 'move through space and time following values' (Snyder 2024, p. xvii); demonstrating *sovereignty*; and, last but not least, embracing *unpredictability*. As Snyder suggests, the latter is premised upon the exercise of a form of freedom that is based on acting according to one's values rather than complying with institutional directives:

> Free people are predictable to themselves and unpredictable to authorities and machines. Unfree people are unpredictable to themselves and predictable to rulers. (Snyder 2024, p. 68)

We have one further linguistic point to address before we turn our flimsy craft towards the shore. It transpired from reading an admittedly very restricted sample of the literature on professional development (i.e. the papers referred to above) that the word 'teacher' appears far more frequently than 'teachers' (46 and 25 respectively). This is largely because the word 'teacher' is often used attributively. This may seem like a minor cavil, but the illocutionary force of the attributive is significant. It appeals to the notion of the teacher as a reified category rather than to teachers as 'heterogeneous and calculative but mutually susceptible individuals engaged in continuous interaction' (Rafanell and Gorringe 2010, p. 604).

## Making the case for attention

Let us attempt to add a little leavening to this relentless sociology-speak by referring to a recent exchange with a colleague in another university. This too was the product of a chance encounter. The episode recounted below is yet another potent illustration of the value of *solidarity*, another of the forms of freedom identified by Timothy Snyder, and one that has a direct bearing on the issue of professional learning and development. As Snyder (2024, p. 195) observes, 'we need the salve of solidarity in the hard logic of life'. By the same token, we need to apply the salve of solidarity to the field of professional development and learning, with its hard logic of models and frameworks. The salve of solidarity is enriching in itself. But it is also necessary if we are to avoid falling victim to the logic of individualism and conformism that dictates that we comply blindly to the dictates of particular frameworks or institutionalised sets of expectations. Snyder again:

> If what is normal is what everyone else does, then conformism can collapse to a single, meaningless, dark point. But if normal is what one *should* do, then an aperture opens instead, into a realm of dreams, aspirations, and judgements (Snyder 2024, p. 66). (our emphasis)

Piotr (not his real name) is a lecturer in outdoor education in another university in the UK. An ardent sea-canoeist, he often finds himself paddling furiously under a great wave, both in the day-to-day course of his work, and when he is at leisure. Recently appointed as a lecturer in a UK higher education institution, he also finds himself under the great wave of professional development, particularly in relation to his university role.

He and Author A first met online at a series of seminars held during the pandemic, during the time when he was a Masters student. He subsequently approached Author A via email in relation to some work she had done on the notion of reflective practice. He asked her about something she had said during a seminar they had both attended. To the Author A's chagrin, her recollection was poor and she could not recall what she had said. But Piotr and she began to correspond, and they soon began to meet occasionally online, and once in person. (Note that is a form of 'professional' development that is personal and reciprocal, with the result that it goes under the accountability radar.) On one occasion, Piotr asked Author A for her advice in relation to a paper he was developing for publication. This she duly offered. Piotr then emailed Author A while she was preparing her keynote, prefacing the main body of his text by thanking her for her time and attention. He told her that this had meant a lot to him and expressed his gratitude. This is important, in view of what came next. There follows an extract from his email (used with his permission).

> 'I have been considering my efforts in this area carefully and I think I am going to pull out of submitting this. I am happy to accept I have a lot to learn and I am not against doing the work. But I don't see a personal or professional benefit to this endeavour at the moment. My plate is incredibly full and I know my disjointed and rushed approach is harmful to my efforts, and apparent in my writing. My functional approach to this goal is not helping me and I need to create space and time to approach my development in a way which works for me. There are many other things which bring me more benefit, and joy and I'd rather direct my limited spare time to them'.

Piotr concluded his email by reassuring Author A that what he wrote was no reflection on her, or on the nature of her advice or the manner in which it had been given. Author

A considered it a great compliment that he had written to her in such terms. She told him that she applauded his attitude, that she couldn't agree with him more. 'Meaningful personal and professional development inheres in focusing on the things that bring you joy', she said.

Let's take a closer look at what this email exchange was telling us. Piotr was clearly aware of the 'raw effort' required to craft an article for publication, and made it clear that he was 'not against doing the work'. However, what is striking about his response, thinking back to the quotation from Said, is the manner in which he is exercising choice and his capacity to make decisions, to go find the joy. By deciding to pursue matters that were more clearly and immediately aligned with his interests and innate curiosity, he was also demonstrating sovereignty, that is to say 'the learned capacity to make choices', to know oneself and the world sufficiently 'to make judgements about values and to realise those judgements (Snyder 2024, p. xvii and 21). *I need to create space and time to approach my development in a way that works for me'*, concluded Piotr. He acknowledged that his approach to academic writing was 'disjointed and rushed'. It was clear from his email that part of the reason he was not fully committed to the process was because 'the functional approach to this goal' was not helping him. Another reason that has a bearing on the discourse of professional learning and development was that he was straddling two distinct modes of learning: the forms of professional development and learning that early career academics are expected to engage in; and the more informal, work-based learning involved in his practice as a freelance outdoor educator with a particular interest in sea kayaking and hiking. The latter were ways of moving through the world that enabled him more adequately to exercise his preference for 'self-sufficiency, simplicity and situated-ness' (personal communication). By paddling across uncharted waters and hiking across uneven terrain as only he knows how, Piotr skims across troubled waters and uneven territory, effortlessly demonstrating how it is possible to move beyond the cruel optimism of professional development.

## The triumph of freedom over cruel optimism

As we draw this article to a close, we would like to end on the playful note upon which we began. After all, as free people, we are predictable to ourselves and unpredictable to everyone else. We shall therefore continue in the story-telling mode we embraced at the beginning of the article.

We would like to introduce you to three potential mentors, a trio of cool cats from Frigiliana in southern Spain. Daisy, and her daughters Dora and Manchita, achieved a degree of notoriety that has extended far beyond their native Andalucia (The Guardian, 24 July 2024). Moreover, the exploits of this intrepid trio have drawn the attention of members of the scientific community from across Europe. Biologists with an interest in animal behaviour have been trying to work out what motivates the intrepid trio to indulge in 'cat burglary' on such an epic scale. For Daisy, Dora and Manchita roam freely in the neighbourhood before returning home with a large haul of random objects, sometimes as many as 100 items per month, much to the annoyance of local residents. Recent items include socks, underpants, a baby's cardigan, yet more socks, and a little stuffed bear. Their behaviour is not without precedent. Charlie from Bristol, no relation, brought home plastic toys, clothes pegs, a rubber duck, glasses and cutlery. Behavioural

biologists have been conferring on possible reasons for such behaviour. In relation to our exploration of professional development, the conclusion drawn by a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex struck a chord. '*When it comes to cats, normally the explanation is they're doing it for themselves*'. Scientists are puzzled by this mysterious behaviour, as it is clearly different from the more familiar feline practice of laying tributes (often in the form of dead mice or birds) at the feet of their owners.

There are, we suggest, valuable lessons to be drawn from these feline manifestations of sovereignty, mobility and unpredictability. At the very least this trio of cool cats demonstrates an eclectic approach to 'data gathering'. As a self-styled Dragon and Phoenix, we make no apologies for following their lead in that respect. For the purposes of argument, the cats' conduct hints at a joyfully anarchic rather than a cruelly-optimistic version of a good life. Daisy, Dora and Manchita are not content to pay homage to their masters by fulfiling normative expectations.

We are aware that the above observations may appear facetious. They may also give the unfortunate impression that we are endorsing an egotistical, anything-goes approach to professional development. Nothing could be further from the case. There is a place for frameworks for analysis and models of professional learning and development. But they are not the whole story. After all, freedom is neither the lack nor the acceptance of constraints but in learning how to use them.

Like the cool cats of Frigiliana, human beings are by nature endowed with the capacity to make choices; 'to adapt physical regularities to personal purposes'; 'to move through space and time following values'; to have 'the grip on the world that allows us to change it'; and, last but not least, to recognise that 'freedom is for everyone', that we are only free to the extent that everyone else is free (Snyder 2024, p. xvii). However, in the case of human beings, it is important to recognise that we only develop these capabilities 'with the support of and in the company of others' (Snyder 2024, p. xvii).

The evidence from Andalucia and beyond suggests that cats may by their very nature be more thoroughly aligned to objects that ignite their curiosity. Just as cats are no strangers to rawness, so must we be no strangers to raw effort. If we can conceive of a type of professional learning and development that offers ample scope for 'choices and decisions, commitments and alignments' (Said 1994, p. 77), then we can avoid collapsing into the 'single, meaningless, dark point' of conformism (Snyder 2024, p. 66). If we give ourselves over entirely to impersonal theories and methodologies, then we run the risk that 'life becomes an echo chamber of all the things we never dare to say' (Snyder 2024, p. 65).

Let us conclude with a few simple suggestions that exemplify the forms of freedom that Snyder suggests constitute 'the logical, moral, and political links between common action and the formation of free individuals' (Snyder 2024, p. xvii). First, perhaps we should take inspiration from the Frigiliana Three and look askance at traditional role models when it comes to determining the conditions for our flourishing. Second, we suggest that demonstrating attunement and embracing attention is more enriching and sustaining than obediently fulfiling (learning) intentions determined for us by others. Third, our experience as co-authors suggests that working together, with all the joyful unpredictability that that entails, is preferable to working within a framework governed mainly by impersonal theories and methodologies. Last but not least, it is vital that we do not let what we desire become an obstacle to our flourishing.

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## Disclosure statement

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