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Continuing Professional Development: What do award-winning academics do?

Helen King, University of the West of England

Introduction: Self-determined learning and development – A characteristic of expertise

Throughout its history, a key purpose for educational development has been to support continuing professional development (CPD) for higher education practitioners. Reflective Practice, in particular, is utilised as a model for developing teaching (Saroyan and Trigwell, 2015) and might be considered a tenet of the profession. Reflective Practice as a concept has been considered in different ways by a range of theorists (Schön, 1982; Moon, 2001). However, there is less in the literature in terms of an empirically-based framework for how teachers in higher education actually learn from and in their practice.

An interest in 'Ways of Thinking and Practising' (WTP) in the disciplines (e.g. McCune and Hounsell, 2005) led me to explore the literature on expertise and expert performance (e.g. Ericsson *et al.*, 2006). Using these concepts within educational development sessions to support academics in thinking deeply about the nature of their disciplines (King, 2013), I began to consider what might be the WTP or characteristics of expert performance in teaching in higher education. If we can better understand these WTP and expertise characteristics this may then help inform the enhancement of educational development activities (Kreber *et al.*, 2005; Saroyan and Trigwell, 2015).

A key characteristic of expert performance is self-determined, continuous learning and development through a process of 'Deliberate Practice' (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993) or 'Progressive Problem Solving' (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993), which are similar in concept to Reflective Practice (see Table 1). These concepts have been explored empirically to identify how they are expressed in a broad range of professions, including athletics, music, the arts and business (van de Wiel *et al.*, 2004). It has been suggested that if these processes can be specified for a particular field, then professional development activities which align to them are likely to lead to improvements in performance (Ericsson, 2017). In this sense, therefore, expertise might be considered a continuous process which begins early on in one's career, rather than just a peak of performance to be attained at a later stage. Indeed Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993, pp. 18-19) talk about 'expert careers' rather than expert performance. This notion of expertise, as a continuous process of learning and development in order to better one's own practice, sits more comfortably with the values of educational development than that of excellence which implies a static point that is reached by surpassing others (King, 2017).

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Researching 'expert' teachers in higher education

In 2004, I published an article in this magazine, entitled 'Continuing Professional Development in Higher Education: what do academics do?', based on 192 responses to a questionnaire sent to Earth Science academics across the UK (King, 2004). Whilst this and other similar research has explored what academics do in relation to professional development, the lived experience of enhancing practice is less well documented. Information on CPD tends to be a list of activities to be engaged with rather than perspectives on how development is integrated into professional practice. In my experience, colleagues who are required to articulate their CPD in applications for National Teaching Fellowships or Fellowships of the Higher Education Academy, for example, sometimes struggle to move beyond this description of activities in order to consider how they are integrated with and inform their practice.

In 2018, I received a SEDA Small Grant to explore the professional learning of expert teachers in higher education and, hence, to begin to articulate real-life examples of CPD in action. As the characteristics of expertise in teaching in higher education are yet to be defined, I used holding a National Teaching Fellowship (NTF) as a proxy and a starting point for developing such a definition. Following approval from the University of the West of England's Research Ethics Committee, I interviewed nine self-selected NTFs from the 2015-17 cohorts in order to hear their experiences and approaches to learning how to teach and continuing to develop their teaching practice. The interviewees came from a range of disciplines – physics, computing science, psychology, phonetics, pharmacology, academic skills, biosciences and nursing – with between 15 and 43 years' experience of teaching in higher education.

Self-determined learning and development: The lived experience of NTF holders

I took three different approaches in the interviews in order to explore the three models of learning and development: 1) asking the interviewee to tell their story of learning to teach and developing their teaching (to see if an approach reminiscent of Progressive Problem Solving was present); 2) asking what Reflective Practice meant to them; and 3) describing the features of Deliberate Practice and inviting comment. Drawing from these interviews, Table 1 suggests how each of the theoretical models might be applied to an approach to developing teaching in higher education. Text in *italics* are direct quotes or paraphrases from the interview transcripts.

The concept of 'practice' explicitly features in two of the models. Practice in the sense of 'rehearsal' can happen when trying out a new technology, running through a session plan or practising explaining a concept, but unlike sports or music, mostly the rehearsal is the performance. This is what we do as practitioners. As Schön noted (1982, p. 60):

'The word "practice" is ambiguous. When we speak of a lawyer's practice, we mean the kinds of things [they do]...When we speak of someone practicing the piano, however, we mean the repetitive or experimental activity by which [they try] to increase their proficiency...But professional practice also includes an element of repetition. A professional practitioner is a specialist who encounters certain types of situations again and again... As a practitioner experiences many variations of a small number of types of cases, he is able to "practice" his practice.'

Similarly, Stigler and Miller (2018, pp. 447-448) suggest that, for a teacher, 'daily experiences in the classroom can become a site for deliberate practice'.

Individuals who adopt these models or versions of them do not necessarily do so in a conscious or structured way. Rather the models provide a convenient means of illustrating what professional development looks like for teaching in higher education, which can be useful for colleagues to consider and plan their CPD and for educational developers to consider and plan their strategies for supporting it.

	<i>Progressive problem solving</i>	<i>Reflective practice</i>	<i>Deliberate practice</i>
<i>Theoretical model</i>	<p><i>'What makes it an expert career is that it is pursued [through] addressing and re-addressing, with cumulative skills and wisdom, the constructive problems of the job, rather than reducing the dimensions of the job to what one is already accustomed to doing.'</i> (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993, p. 18). Characteristics of progressive problem solving include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solving problems at increasingly more complex levels • Incorporating already mastered skills into advanced procedures • Working at the edge of competence with, potentially, an element of risk 	<p>Reflective practice explains how professionals meet the challenges of their work with a kind of improvisation that is improved through practice.</p> <p><i>'When someone reflects-in-action, [they become] a researcher in the practice context'</i> (Schön, 1982, p. 68).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In action: intuition, reading the room, improvisation • On action: critically thinking about teaching • As action: effectively preparing for teaching 	<p>This is purposeful and systematic. While regular practice might include mindless repetitions, deliberate practice requires focused attention, it builds on pre-existing knowledge and skills and is conducted with the specific goal of improving performance. Conditions for optimal learning and improvement include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time: many hours of practice • Focus: repetition of the same or similar tasks, with a particular emphasis on difficult aspects • Feedback on performance • Motivation to attend to the task and exert effort to improve performance
<i>Applied process in Teaching in HE</i>	<p>Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) suggest that the opposite of expertise is problem reduction: attempting to solve problems using accustomed processes. In HE we might see this as a lecturer teaching a class in the same way for years, being unable or unwilling to try an alternative approach, and blaming the students when they perform badly in assessment or provide negative feedback.</p> <p>Progressive problem solving is the continuous evolution of our teaching approaches. It might be the small but regular tweaking of individual sessions, and/or a larger-scale shift to a new pedagogy. Looking back over time, a significant change is seen, often starting from a transactional, didactic, notes- and structure-based approach and moving towards one that is more transformative, facilitated, improvised and dialogic.</p>	<p>Reflective practice is the purposeful and deliberate (Rogers, 2001) process of thinking about teaching and making adjustments to improve. Sometimes it is a slow process that happens over months or even years, other times it can be an almost instantaneous improvisation.</p> <p><i>'Reflective practice is a kind of metacognition: it's thinking about your own thinking, and you're thinking about the thinking of your students, and you're trying to pull that together. Reflection on practice is about the planning beforehand, it's thinking about the pedagogy and what is appropriate for the content, it's the evaluation that comes after, and the tweaking and evolution that happens over years. I think a lot of reflection happens in the shower and when I'm driving. It's not always a formalised thing. But also, reflective practice is being forgiving of yourself and knowing that it's not always going to be perfect. Sometimes you have a bad day, sometimes you can't make your teaching better, and sometimes you just have to be good enough.'</i></p>	<p>Developing one's teaching practice takes time: it evolves through small or large adjustments over many years of experience, and development needs to be prioritised as an integral part of one's role.</p> <p><i>'In deliberate purposeful practice of teaching I'm looking constantly for feedback from the students. I'll plan in to ask questions about that, I'll set this activity, how will I know that they're with me? If it's problem-based learning you can walk round them and know, but what is that going to tell me, how will I know that this is good practice and that I'm not hitting the wrong notes all the time?'</i></p>
<p>Common and integral to each of these models, as they are applied to teaching in HE, are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong purpose and motivation: initially to feel more confident and not look foolish, and later with the goal of enhancing all students' learning and the desire not to stagnate or be bored • The need for a strong evidence base and rationale for any changes made. Evidence comes from student feedback, self-reflection, peer observations, literature, conference and workshop participation, opportunities for sharing practice, conversations about teaching, pedagogic research and many other sources and activities. 			

Table 1 Suggestions for how the theoretical models might be manifest as applied processes for developing teaching expertise in higher education

So, CPD, what do award-winning academics do?

These three models provide ways of conceptualising CPD and legitimising it as an integral part of professional/expert practice. By using these as a starting point and asking the interviewees about how they learned to teach and developed their teaching, I was able to understand how development activities were integrated into their practice. This led to much more interesting and powerful insights into the CPD process than my 2004 questionnaire asking just about activities. The many different formal and informal activities that colleagues engage with are not surprising: formal courses, conferences, workshops, reading, reflecting, enquiry (evaluation and research), external examining, and so on. The most popular types of activities in my original questionnaire – talking about teaching, and learning from others – are also clearly featured in the interviews.

The NTF winners in my research all demonstrated CPD as a process of change informed by various formal and informal development activities. Hence, I suggest a reframing of the definition of CPD away from a list of activities, as follows:

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for higher education practitioners is a self-determined and purposeful process of evolution of teaching and learning approaches, informed by evidence gathered from a range of activities.

Recommendations

Revisiting the recommendations I suggested 15 years ago, I would argue that all of these points still hold and are affirmed and reinforced by this new research and from my experience over the last decade or so:

- 1) ‘Professional development for all elements of the academic role (including teaching and research) should be considered as an integral part of professional life and, as such, professional development for teaching should be part of institutional structures and reward policies in parity with that for research
- 2) Professional development should be self-directed and planned within the relevant context, and staff should be supported in enhancing their understanding of their own preferred approaches to learning and needs in order to make the most of available opportunities for developing their practice
- 3) There should be recognition of and support for the complex nature of professional development which occurs in a variety of learning settings and is informed by evidence gathered through many different formal and informal activities
- 4) The collaborative nature of professional development should be enhanced, allowing for and supporting interactions between colleagues within departments, between different disciplines, and across different institutions, and between all those who teach and support learning.’ (Adapted from King, 2004: 4-5)

Next steps: Educational development and the characteristics of expertise in teaching in HE

I have begun to use summaries of my research interviews within our PGCAPP programme to introduce discussions on CPD, and as part of a workshop for more experienced staff on developing expertise in teaching in HE. The notion of self-directed, professional learning being an integrated part of the process of expertise has been well received and this, together with the different approach to conceptualising CPD, has been useful to aid professional development planning and thinking about how to go about making improvements in teaching and learning.

A self-determined and purposeful approach to learning and development, whether it is considered as Deliberate Practice, Progressive Problem Solving, Reflective Practice or something else, is just one dimension of the characteristics of expertise. Emerging from my research is also a view of two other dimensions which I set out below (Table 2) mapped to the generic characteristics of expertise. These three dimensions interact and integrate dynamically with each other embodied within the teacher to differing extents depending on their experience and approach to their profession.

Characteristics of expertise in teaching in HE	Generic characteristics of expertise
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pedagogic content knowledge: curriculum content and how to teach it (Shulman, 1986)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge and skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Artistry of teaching: authentic, improvisatory and creative (Schön, 1982)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Problem solving: addressing increasingly complex problems• Bigger picture view: enhanced organisation and mental representations of knowledge• Pattern recognition: perceptions of relevant information in the environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-determined and purposeful approaches to learning and development: e.g. deliberate practice, progressive problem solving or reflective practice	

Table 2 Two other dimensions

The next steps for my work are to develop more resources and guidance, for teachers and educational developers in higher education, around these concepts of self-determined and purposeful approaches to learning and development, and to begin to explore the notion of Artistry and what this looks like in teaching in higher education.

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Summary case studies of each interview, for use under a Creative Commons licence, are available on my website: <https://drhelenking.wordpress.com/expertise-workshop-resources/>

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A day in the life of a programme leader — The game

Steve Outram, Higher Education Consultant

Background

In April 2018, while sorting through some old files, I came across an old copy of 'The Dean's Dilemma'. This is a board game developed by the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at the CASS Business School (2005-2010). Playing the game entails one person assuming the role of a dean and the other players assuming the different roles that a dean might encounter such as a finance director or head of quality

assurance. Each of these 'roles' present the putative dean with an issue which they have to resolve. At the end of the issues being raised the dean has to declare what decisions they have taken. One of the players has the role of observer and at the end of the round gives feedback, as do all the players, on how well the dean performed and how they might have done it differently.

This rediscovery coincided with a couple of SEDA Jiscmail emails focusing on the role of the programme leader, so I suggested to the list that there was a potential for adapting