The professional formation of university teachers: 
The contribution of human resource departments

by

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The argument and its outcomes

In this paper I recognise that Human Resource (HR) departments contribute considerably to the professional formation of those who teach and directly support student learning in higher education. This is not a surprise because HR departments do a lot of training work that contributes directly (through courses on using new technologies or on good lecturing styles) or less directly (through courses on leadership or change management) to professional formation.

What interests me more is the contribution that HR departments make through their influence on the whole working environment, as teachers experience it. I shall argue that this influence is considerable, important and insufficiently understood. I shall finish by inviting you to participate in a collaborative, international inquiry designed to spotlight this HR function and to consider how it can be managed to best effect.

Higher education environments and cultures

At this point I want to plant an idea that I shall later develop.

Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) stunning book *How College Affects Students* shows that higher education can affect students, especially where there is: diversity in the student and staff bodies; high levels of student engagement in learning; and a whole experience (in and out of class) of high quality.
This presents some sharp challenges to: module- or course-based approaches; default ‘instructional’ patterns; ‘bedrock cultures’, which are often the cultures that students bring with them from high schools.

The point I am driving at is that making a difference is associated with working on a large-scale – on programmes or the whole curriculum; on the whole university experience; on cultures, assumptions and values. I will suggest that the same is true when it comes to trying to make a difference to teachers in higher education and ask who, in universities, is in a good position to change the architectures within which academic practices take place.

In order to get to that point I need to look at professional knowing and professional learning.

**Professional knowing**

Put simply, professionals have propositional knowledge -- knowledge of facts, formulae, procedures, propositions, and such like – and procedural knowledge – ‘know-how’. They also have learned to bring the two together in order to act well.

I suggest that a lot of this knowledge is implicit or tacit. Sternberg and colleagues (2000), observing the low correlation between scores and grades in college and later career success, argue that success is actually correlated with tacit knowledge. What we know about the rules of the game, about networks, influence, real priorities, people, customers and the like is more important, they say, than being smart.

**Professional learning**

Obvious though this may seem, there are radical implications for the ways in which we think about professional formation; it takes place every day, in the workplace. It is not driven by formal provision. If we want to change formation, we need to look closely at the quality of the working environment.

This can be illustrated by recalling that professionals, such as teachers in higher education, are doing emotional work as they interact with clients and one another. Skilled professionals are skilled at this emotional labour (Hochschild 1993). How do we learn to be skilled at emotional work? And, more generally, how do we learn the rules of the game and the unofficial codes that displace the official stories about what we are doing and why. We learn them by participating – we learn them in the workplace (Gerholm, 1990). Poor workplaces foster dysfunctional formation.

We see some of this in Mark Fenton-O’Creevy and colleagues’ (2005) multi-method study of 118 traders in four City of London investment banks. One of the questions they asked their informants was what it takes to be a high performing trader.

The most common responses concerned ‘flair’, ‘intuition’ and ‘gut feel’. While it was clear that a good level of analytical skill was a basic requirement to trade effectively, it was neither sufficient nor a differentiator in traders’ performance. Typically new traders had a highly numerate background (PhDs in engineering or theoretical physics were common) and engaged in formal classes on markets and financial economics as part of their initial training. However, academic learning was not sufficient to trade well or even competently. To acquire competence, traders go through an apprenticeship process:-
“New traders need a clear understanding [of their role]. So they sit on the desk, learn and repeat what they are hearing. We ask a lot of challenging questions. Most will have come through training with a broad understanding of trading. We challenge them to understand what they are looking at while they still have formal lectures etc. Finally, we let them make mistakes and give them a certain amount of freedom.”

It is through this process of legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger, 1998) that novices begin to construct their identity as traders. It is through engagement with peers and mentors that they gain expertise. For the traders in this study it was clear that while their formal academic learning provided a conceptual scaffolding, expertise as a trader was built through practice.

In other words, tacit or implicit knowledge is acquired non-formally and often non-intentionally. In fact—and to put the point more strongly, some studies of professionals (for example, Becher, 1999) say that they learn much more non-formally than they do formally. Recent work (Eraut et al., 2004) shows that the quality of the learning of novice nurses, accountants and engineers is greatly affected by the context in which they work, which is to say that their learning is very dependent on their working environment. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2005) make a similar point about schoolteachers’ professional learning, which echoes a finding reported by McCulloch and colleagues (2000).

Work done with my colleagues Professor Mantz Yorke and Dr. Jo Tait, to be published in Studies in Higher Education in 2006, confirms this view of professional learning as mainly workplace or practice-based learning. The 2401 respondent part-time teachers in the UK Open University said that non-formal and social learning practices had dominated their general professional formation. Formal educational development provision had been less significant. Respondents were asked to say whether they wished that they had had more engagement with any of these ways of learning. Roughly half of them wished there had been more conferences and workshops; a similar proportion said that they would have liked more social learning in the form of guidance from a mentor; and nearly 40 per cent wished there had been more conversations with subject colleagues.

There was a similar pattern of answers from full-time staff. Their top three responses to the item about general professional formation were:

1. Mainly on-the-job learning - by doing the job. These engagements are make the strongest contribution to professional formation.

2. Their own experiences as students had influenced them strongly.

3. There is also a strong element of learning through conversation with others, complemented by workshops and conferences.

When they were then asked to say whether they wished that they had had more engagement with any of these ways of learning, ‘social learning’ – learning through consulting others – came first, followed by participating in course teams, attending staff development events and reading/using OU printed materials.

These findings do not mean that formal provision was unwanted and ineffective. Another item asked how the part-time teachers learned to do their specific jobs in the OU. We found that more formal and established methods were reported for learning to take on a specific role, whereas social learning and practice were more strongly associated with general formation as a teacher. When asked how they had learnt to take up the specific role of a part-time tutor in the Open University (and a sizeable minority of these people teach or have taught in other universities and colleges), respondents
put more emphasis on formal provision, while still valuing non-formal practices, especially the conversational face of social learning. Eighty-nine per cent of the 2401 part-time respondents had participated in staff development as they learned to do the specific job of teaching in the OU. The highest levels of engagement (involving more than 70% of respondents) were with staff development events and print materials on OU general practices. Social learning (notably the “taking advice” items) also engaged them as they learned to be part-time teachers in the OU. Low ratings for specialised online tutorials and action research reflect, to some degree, the pattern of provision.

This pattern of responses is borne out by qualitative, hypothesis-generating work we have been doing in 2005. We are increasingly seeing professional development as a teacher in higher education as a process of identity change that is strongly related to the context of practice – to the activity system, department or team – and to formal educational professional development provision. Notice that, despite my criticisms of formal provision, I maintain that it has a place.

It hardly needs to be said that professional learning is a long-term pursuit. I have already alluded to professional obsolescence, a force that threatens us all. Only professional learning can hold it at bay.

I have also suggested that professional effectiveness is related to one’s tacit and implicit knowledge and that takes time to form. Indeed, every time we change jobs we, to some degree, disable ourselves because we lack the tacit and implicit knowledge necessary to function effectively in a new context.

Professional learning also extends because, in complex domains – and professional practices are complex domains – learning takes thousands of hours. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) see five stages in the development of expertise:

1. Novice.
2. Advanced beginner.
3. Competence.
4. Proficiency.
5. Expertise.

Now, you might say there is no surprise in this account of professional learning. My question, though, is whether we have in place in our universities arrangements that engage all those who teach and others who support student learning in a trajectory from novice to expertise. The key word is ‘all’.

**Bringing about change**

I want to bring together two lines of research here to the degree of uncertainty that is associated with the project of stimulating the professional formation of those who teach and otherwise support student learning. The first is to do with course design. Commentators such as Goodyear (2002) and Ganesan et al., (2002) argue that our good task design is always at the mercy of students who translate tasks into activities that may have scant resemblance to what we intended. This refers to the well-known gap between the intended curriculum and the enacted curriculum. Mantz Yorke and I (Knight and Yorke, 2004) have used similar reasoning when talking about curricula that favour the development of the complex achievements that employers value, arguing that we can design suitably
rich learning environments but we cannot guarantee that the intended learning will result in all cases. We can improve the odds, but no more. My point here, which echoes my earlier reference to Pascarella and Terenzini’s work, is that if we are to support professional formation and, in so doing, bring about change in pedagogic practices, then we should not take a tight-coupled view of change; we can take the loose-coupled approach of designing whole work environments that are rich in affordances favouring certain types of formation but we cannot expect any particular intervention to yield predictable results.

Secondly, this is similar to the line taken by Michael Fullan in his studies of large-scale educational changes. In Change Forces: the sequel (1999) he uses complexity thinking to argue that we may create conditions for change but we cannot guarantee that the effects will be as we predict or wish and that our chances of ‘successful’ change are greatest when we take a multi-strategy approach to whole environments. There is some consistency here with research into the differences between effective and ‘stuck’ schools and departments. Differences are essentially cultural, interpersonal and attitudinal. In other words, the school learning environments that favour pupil learning and in which teachers seem to be the most developed professionally differ, across the board, from impoverished learning environments; the differences are not attributable to formal professional learning opportunities; on the contrary, they are profound differences in the whole working environment.

A project: the contribution of Human Resource department to the professional formation of university teachers

Let me recap the argument. I have been saying that good professional formation involves attending to the context – the activity system, department or team – in which people work; it is about making the whole environment as favourable as possible to certain formations. Human Resource departments have a pivotal position here, since they have so much responsibility for the workplace environment.

However, the Higher Education Funding Council for England has just (2005) published Evaluation of rewarding and developing staff in HE initiative, 2001-02 to 2003-04. It argues that the initiative has been a success, raising the quality of HR work and improving HR departments’ standing in universities.

Even so, it reports that some see HR departments as ‘very reactive … no large strategic initiatives’ (p. 74). What struck me about the report was that it seemed to assume that HR departments should be in the business of working with individuals. There was little sign of the influence of the revolutions in knowledge management and organisational studies that have emphasised the distributed nature of knowledge and the social nature of work, even in higher education. Nor was there anything about the quality of working environments and systems. The report reinforced my feeling that there has been little scientific work on the relationship between the whole workplace environment and the professional formation of teachers and others who support student learning.

My vision is that HR departments should be leading partners in creating working environments that are rich in affordances for self-actualization through professional learning. There is more for HR departments to achieve than is reported in the HEFCE evaluation document.

I propose that interested colleagues undertake inquiries to:

- Find out more about Human Resource practices and their relation to the professional formation of teachers and others who support student learning.
• Identify, describe and disseminate cases of interesting practice.

• Continue to develop a scientific account of the relationship between Human Resource practices and professional formation.

• Envisage theory-informed and evidence-led ways of helping HR departments to contribute more to the professional formation of teachers in higher education.

I invite you to join this project.

References


