

## A Democratic View of Professional Development in HE

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### *Background*

I have worked in education for the past 13 years. My career began as a Teaching Assistant in a SEN school before training as an Art and Design teacher focused on 14-19 education. I worked secondary schools until 2014 when I moved to higher education to focus on work supporting access to higher education. More recently I have worked supporting the use of digital learning before moving into my current role as a Staff Tutor at The Open University. I have also undertaken consultancy work across the sector facilitating training for Universities, UniConnect consortia and NEON. My research focuses primarily upon the tensions between policy and practice in widening participation and how we can better support historically underserved groups in higher education. I have been published in journals such as *Perspectives*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Power and Education*, and *Educational Review*. I recently co-authored *The business of widening participation: Policy, practice and culture* with Colin McCaig and Ruth Squire.

This chapter reflects on a range of professional development activities I have facilitated with academic and professional services staff across the higher education sector. In doing so I will address the following key questions:

### *Key Questions*

What role does staff development play in developing professional identity?  
How can staff development be meaningfully co-constructed?

### [The purpose of professional development](#)

Developing skills and competence can play an important role in developing professional identity. Whilst staff development can ensure the HE workforce is adaptable to current issues and technological advances, it is often something that is done to as opposed to with staff. Even in a sector which is driven by the importance of transformational learning experiences, rarely is professional development treated in this way and is often framed as training that is 'delivered' to staff to meet a specific need. Whilst there are alternative models which afford increased agency through co-construction of learning, often these can be more challenging to implement. Furthermore, for these to work well, they require active participation. This chapter uses a case study approach to explore how staff development can constrain or alternatively promote professional identity.

In the process of becoming a professional and taking on a professional identity, staff development can play a key role. In particular confidence and competence can be provided by these activities (van Lankveld *et al.*, 2017). Working with other professionals in a learning environment can facilitate understanding of how professional identities are enacted, in particular creating spaces for developing shared visions for what learning should look like can help individuals reflect upon their own professional identity (McCune, 2021). For example, whilst a development activity might be focused on the functionality of a new piece of software, professional identity development can take

place through shared conversation as to how this new knowledge or skills can be integrated into their practices. However, professional development and its purpose is often contested and a complex issue. The managerialist approach to ensuring staff are appropriately 'trained' and professional development is 'delivered' to them is often in tension with the need for transformative learning experiences that are valued by staff. In light of this it could be framed as a 'wicked' problem- that is one where there is not a single solution and include several competing agendas (Peters, 2017). This chapter will first outline some of the relevant competing agendas that impact upon professional development activities before using three case studies to explore these in practice.

Education professionals participating in staff development activities come with a wealth of expertise and are not empty vessels to be filled but active, engaged professionals who need the opportunity to explore how the development activity can support the development of their own professional practices. Yet many professional development activities are often framed primarily in terms of procedural training or knowledge dissemination and fail to acknowledge or engage with the expertise of these professionals. As such they often add to workload and pressure (McCune, 2021). The three case studies of professional development that follow consciously sought to resist a 'delivery' model and attempted to co-construct them with staff in a meaningful way. The reflections that follow explore the challenges and opportunities this created and how three different audiences of education professionals valued or resisted this co-constructed approach. In doing so, the chapter offers thoughts on the challenges this poses for meaningful co-constructed development that can have a positive impact upon professional identities.

### Who am I, what have I been and what do I believe?

The case studies draw from autoethnographic reflections on my own practice. Autoethnography allows us to take our experiences and use them as an object of study for making sense of the world around us (Holman-Jones, 2005). As I have argued previously (Rainford, 2016), whilst autoethnography is a valuable tool, it is important to remember Tedlock's (2005, p. 4676) warning that autoethnography requires us to balance the gaze inwards (the autobiography part) and the gaze outwards (the ethnographic part). I will therefore take a moment to shift the focus to an internal gaze to situate myself as a facilitator of professional development and to explore my own identity as an education professional.

My professional identity at the core is as an educator. Whilst my role has drifted between being classroom teaching focused, strategic, and now a more holistic role of academic roles, at the core the desire to educate has been a constant. Central to my identity as an educator is the belief in the transformative potential of educational interactions. My pedagogical approach is underpinned by the importance of learner agency and making classrooms (both physical and digital) into transformative spaces (hooks, 1994). This is important to acknowledge as it directly impacts my style and form of facilitation. My development activities are participatory by default, however I have been in positions where I have been required to 'deliver' institutionally developed development activities which are often more didactic in nature and leave me feeling unsettled. Reflection and reflective practice have also been central to my own identity development. This has required a conscious carving out time and space for both reflection in and on action, to use Schön's (2003) differentiation and to date I have been fortunate that in all my roles I have been afforded the time and space to do this, something which is not always the case for other education professionals. My background as a social scientist also shapes my approach to reflection. I see evidence as key to reflection; both from my own practical experiences and formalised feedback mechanisms and data. Additionally, I am aware that my background and identity may be different from the staff engaging with professional

development. Education professionals may be subject experts but may lack formal pedagogical training. This is more common in further and higher education and for educators working in spaces outside of the classroom. For participation and outreach work or those in non-academic roles it can be rare to have had formal pedagogical training. Through my experiences of facilitation, this absence of formal training can often correlate with a belief that the primary focus of professional development should be on being given knowledge or a skill by the trainer. This contrasts with my own belief that we need to first develop an understanding of why we do something before we focus upon the how and can be the cause of some of the tensions that the following case studies reveal.

It is also important to reflect upon and acknowledge that the education professionals I have facilitated training for have an extremely wide range of professional expertise. For some, much of their development has been focused on informal forms of professional and on the job development. Others have extensive practical experience underpinned by formal academic professional development. This is an important point of reflection as there is something inherently different about working with professionals who understand how and why learning takes place versus those who want to just know how to do something for a particular purpose in the classroom.

This positionality potentially creates tensions in practice. My own perspective here is that everyone in a classroom should be an active participant (hooks, 1994) and that education professionals should first understand why something is valuable to them, which often might be different to the expectation of my participants. Therefore, if education professionals arrived at my development sessions wanting to passively consume instruction, this may result in disengagement or frustration on both parts, possibly impacting the potential effectiveness of the professional development.

### From staff development to professional development

To examine the role of professional development, it is important to offer a conceptualisation of this in the context of this chapter. A useful starting point is Stefani's (2003) definition of staff development which focuses upon improving capabilities and practice of educators. De Rijdt *et al.* (2013) in their review of staff development studies used a working definition that also included coherence, and focused upon knowledge, skills, and conceptual ideas as key aspects. Whilst the literature often uses staff and professional development interchangeably, I argue that professional development suggests something more focused upon supporting the development of an individual's professional identity or expertise.

Delineating exactly what an educational professional in higher education is can be challenging to grapple with. Whilst many individuals work within a role involving teaching and learning, some will identify as professionals but others may not. Whitchurch (2019) has previously deconstructed the idea of what it means to be a professional in higher education and highlighted the challenge of fitting traditional notions of professionalism (defined by pre-defined codes, knowledge, and professional bodies) to a sector diverse both within and across roles. This is amplified by the tensions between generalist and specialist staff who may have differing views on their identities even when employed in comparable roles. What is needed for this professionalism is expertise and it often through professional development activities that this can be developed. Yet being a professional and inhabiting that professional identity goes beyond gaining expertise and involves a shift in identity to viewing oneself as a professional.

Despite this central role professional development can play in identity formation, associated activities are often seen as something that needs to be done over and above the role an individual is

employed to do. As Van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2015) highlighted in their research in South Africa, there can be discordance between the provision and encouragement to participate in activities. They found professional development was not within the culture of departments and often fell to individual choice, a choice often driven by activities with immediate, measurable impact upon practice.

Professional development is also challenging to define when it is not neatly packaged within formal boundaries. De Rijdt *et al.* (2013) conducted a review of literature on staff development in higher education which examined literature across management, HR, psychology, and education. In this review they included both formal and informal forms of staff development. The importance of more informal forms of development should not be understated, however the case studies focus on formal professional development. This is because I can reflect upon what takes place in my formal workshops whereas the informal elements that are often outside of my purview though none the less important.

### Tensions in professional development design and facilitation

The three case studies reflect upon a range of activities related to teaching and learning with a variety of education professionals working in higher education providers (HEPs). These professionals include staff on academic contracts who are more likely to formally identify as education professionals, through to professional services staff who may have some of their role devoted to teaching or facilitating learning but may in some cases not formally identify themselves as education professionals. This overlap between the academic and professional in higher education has previously been termed the 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2019). Some of the professionals likely to inhabit this space involved in the three cases include academic skills staff, library staff, and widening participation outreach staff. The use of the term education professional therefore is cast widely and has been placed upon them by me as opposed to self-defined.

Reflecting upon my role in professional development in these three cases, I do so from three different positions: For case study one, I was working as the widening participation co-ordinator in a shared services team supporting a number of HE providers; case study two, a freelance academic expert working with a national organisation; and case study three I was employed as a Digital Learning Development Officer within that institution. In each of these positions there are different power relationships and levels of tacit knowledge about the context in which the educators are working. These factors therefore may have also impacted the way in which education professionals engaged with the professional development activities.

There are often tensions within professional development. These tensions are between the wants and needs of education professionals, the wants and needs of institutions, and the understandings of the most transformative way to support those aims by those designing and conducting professional development. This can result in tensions between the institution and educator, institution and facilitator, the facilitator and educator (fig.1).

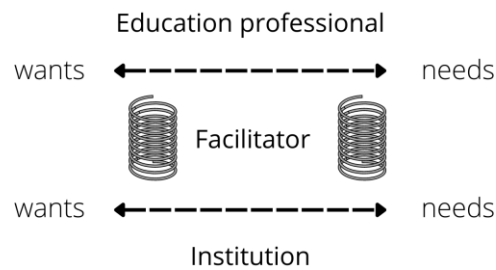


Fig.1 – Tensions in the focus of professional development

### Institutional tensions

To support national or institutional policy change, professional development is often required. This can be in terms of developing new knowledge, ways of being or understanding of a new process or technology. As will be reflected upon in case study one, the introduction of a new Virtual Learning Environment is one example of this. To ensure that new technologies can be effectively used by staff or that new policies can be enacted, some level of professional development activity is needed. However, this need is often in tension with the wants of the education professionals. They may feel they have limited time or workload capacity to engage with these activities. Alternatively, they may feel this change is unnecessary, unwanted, or a challenge to their sense of professional identity. This can lead to resistance in the way such top-down professional development initiatives are engaged with due to the tension between institutional directives and professional autonomy. Likewise, there can be tensions between the best way to support professional development and the constraints or resources afforded to the facilitator. Again, this tension is often a limitation placed on the professional agency of the facilitator planning and facilitating the professional development.

### Facilitator-participant tensions

At the practical delivery of professional development there can be tensions at a conceptual level between expectations of education professionals as to what a facilitator conceptualises as the need and the best way to address this. These tensions are likely to be based on preconceptions from both sides on the value and anticipated impact of the professional development. Whitchurch (2019) also highlights how the location of development activities can have an impact upon perceptions and engagement. Here this also encapsulates the issue of agency. If the individual has actively chosen to engage with a development activity, then the depth of engagement is likely to be greater.

### Educational professional's agency

There is also the potential for internal tensions within professionals' minds when they are required to engage in development activities between what that individual may need in terms of development and what they believe they need. This can be particularly noticeable in both very experienced and very inexperienced staff. For the most experienced, when new regulations or guidelines are brought in, this may require engaging in professional development that they may feel is unnecessary or undermines their professional expertise. Therefore, especially if these staff are time poor, it also then means they are having to deprioritise activities they feel would be a more beneficial use of their time. This can result in feeling their professional agency is challenged whilst potentially having their time wasted. For less experienced professionals, there may be similar concerns from not having enough time to focus on their immediate concerns. Whilst professional development activities might be essential to their long-term development and thus their identity as a professional, this may be seen as detracting from what they feel they need to secure their emerging professional identity.

## Professional development in practice

Through three different yet complementary case studies, I will demonstrate how some of the issues highlighted above play out in practice and what can be learnt from that. The first two case studies focus on education professionals who can be broadly described as “academic related staff” who deliver primarily pre-entry widening participation work. In contrast, case study three focuses primarily on academic staff teaching on higher education courses. Whilst on the surface these may seem to be distinct groups, I would argue that all these educational professionals have pedagogical approaches as central to their professional role and thus each case study has something to offer related to how different approaches to professional development may differently impact educational professionals’ identities when they may not self-define as professionals.

### Case Study 1: Developing evaluation skills

The first reflection draws upon training facilitated in 2016-7 to develop the evaluation skills of non-evaluators. That is staff without formal training in research or evaluation methods. Whilst on the surface evaluation may not seem central to pedagogic practice, developing methods to track and measure the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities when they do not lead to formal assessment is important to enable critical reflection.

Whilst conducting the training, I was employed within a Small Specialist Higher Education Institution as a Widening Participation co-ordinator. The staff I worked with were all extremely experienced dance, drama and circus practitioners but had limited skills in evaluating their work (Rainford and Baptista, 2022). Working as an education professional without the benchmarks of formal assessment means that different mechanisms are needed to ensure its effectiveness. There is of course a tacit reflection in action and on action, but this is often not systematic or easy to evidence. To counter this within widening participation, there has been an increased focus upon formal evaluation mechanisms. Whilst evaluation has increasingly become a central part of pre-entry widening participation work over the past decade (Crockford, 2022), in large Higher Education Providers, it is most commonly delegated to staff in evaluation roles or to external evaluators. In small specialist providers, there is often no available resource to facilitate this and thus evaluation also becomes part of the role of the educator. This does offer some distinct advantages in that embedding evaluation within practice can enable the education professional to have greater awareness of the effectiveness of what they are doing and to better develop their practice over time. This is therefore likely to have a positive impact on their professional identity. However, to do this in a robust and systematic way, these educators need professional development and support to enable them to evaluate their practice effectively.

As might be anticipated, some staff undertaking this development activity saw the value of this whereas others saw attendance as an act of compliance, something the institution had mandated but not central to their professional needs. This aligns with my own research into widening participation practices (Rainford, 2019) which highlighted that often staff working in outreach role consider evaluation to be outside of their remit.

Within this case study I was positioned as both a facilitator but also in a position of institutional authority as the widening participation co-ordinator, therefore there were sometimes tensions between me as a representative of the institution and the participants. In others, a tension between myself as the facilitator and the participant. To mitigate these tensions and to gain buy-in from these staff, this required adopting an approach to professional development that constructed the development in a way that was mutually beneficial. This was done through a conscious concern to maximise the value of the workshop to ensure that they left with tangible progress towards being



able to evaluate their practices in a way that was likely to work alongside their existing professional identities as opposed to being in tension with it.

Traditional approaches to evaluation training might have focused heavily on the theoretical basis for evaluation or on practical training on how to use specific tools but in a way disengaged from practice. Whilst this type of training can be valuable, doing so assumes the time and space for educators to be able to reflect upon and put this training into practice. In this context, a different approach was needed. The training adopted a project-based learning approach over the one-day intensive session with each stage of the training being applied to an activity the educators already delivered. This enabled the learning to be immediately used in a very practical way and for myself as the facilitator to work with the professionals in working through how to select methods of evaluation that could be embedded in their existing professional work. For example, one educator focused upon an intervention to improve boys' engagement in dance and developed both a theory of change and a specific survey tool to evaluate it within the professional development session. Therefore, the development enabled the professionals to not only gain knowledge and skills but in a way that was integrative to their practice. By adopting this co-constructed and practice-focused approach which focusing on the values and benefits for the education professionals, it enabled them to see how this could genuinely benefit their practice.

#### Case Study 2: Moving widening participation outreach online

This second reflection similarly involves staff who deliver university outreach work. In early 2020, many educators working within pre-entry outreach roles were required to consider how they could transform their programmes of primarily face to face teaching into online provision. As such I was approached to design and develop a programme of professional development. The course ran three times over the year and involved nearly 200 participants in total.

This professional development was also designed to engage the participants in using the knowledge and skills actively within the training. This was accomplished though creating spaces for developing resources and plans for activities they could use in their own teaching. Whilst there was structure provided, they were allowed to focus on content that fitted within their own professional context. For the first cohort, this ran for five days spread over a period of seven weeks. Two intensive days in week one and three and then a final day in week seven. The training was also developed around a community of practice approach (Wenger, 2010). Running on a TEAMS platform, the participants were encouraged to share and discuss ideas with other participants between sessions.

Across the three iterations of the course, the feedback was very positive with most participants feeling it was beneficial and valuable. The impact upon the work in the sector was also positive through the translation of what was developed in the training into their own settings. Yet in feedback, the time and space for this collaborative working as a community was less well valued. Some participants offered feedback that they would have preferred being given more knowledge and information as opposed to time to apply that knowledge. This was also reflected in the uptake and engagement as a group outside of the synchronous sessions.

During the three cohorts of the professional development course, we tried several different variations upon the practice tasks with varying levels of individual and group work, however in most cases, it was the sessions devoted to this where participation dropped. During the seven weeks, we set several homework tasks and again, these were engaged with to varying levels. From the course feedback, it was clear that more value was attributed to the taught sessions over the group work. Therefore, I would argue there was a tension between what I and the other facilitator felt were important and what the participants had placed the importance on. By offering space for co-constructed and participant led activities, some felt that they were not gaining the expertise they

wanted 'delivered' to them in a 'ready to go' package. The more limited engagement outside of the formally timetabled sessions could also be attributed to tensions in the time available to the participants to engage in this with it being placed at a lower level of priority than immediate operational concerns.

### Case Study 3: Not just Changing VLEs but changing pedagogies

The final case study forms part of a project I was involved in leading to equip staff with the skills and knowledge to use a new virtual learning environment effectively. There were many issues raised within this process, especially as it took place during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic which I have covered more extensively elsewhere (Pike and Rainford, 2022). However, this reflection will focus more narrowly on the staff development aspect of the project. Like case study 2, we wanted to not only provide knowledge of tools and techniques to the participants, but we wanted to offer a structure to enable those education professionals to use the skills and knowledge directly to inform their practices in a supported way where they could have individual support and feedback as needed. Thus, we developed an asynchronous online self-directed training which was to be supplemented by live question and answer sessions in which we could help those professionals work through the challenges they might have faced in using that training within their professional practice.

What we quickly found though was that the engagement with the self-directed material was limited and that staff were coming to the live sessions expecting to have content 'delivered' to them. They saw that hour as their 'training session' as opposed to being there to support and enhance the asynchronous element. In exploring these issues with staff, we found that one of the big tensions was in our focus as facilitators on how to think about the new VLE pedagogically versus the educators needs to know what 'tools' there were and what the new VLE could do in practical terms. This tension suggested that they wanted to work out how to fit their existing practices within the new space rather than engaging with the development to reconsider how they might enact their professional identity within this new environment. One of the most interesting observations from focus groups we did following this change was the comment from staff that they didn't know what they didn't know. Therefore in this interaction they might have been minimising their expertise as educational professionals and expecting us as technological experts to tell them what they needed to know, thus making a co-constructed learning environment in tension with their expectations.

### The ghosts in the machine: A barrier of mindset?

In this final section I will draw together some of the key issues from the three case studies with the potential tensions highlighted earlier in the chapter. These tensions can often be seen to related to a mismatch between expectation and the reality of the professional development activity. Yet, these expectations are rarely ones that as a facilitator I had set.

My position as a facilitator keen to co-construct learning clearly created some facilitator-educator tensions. Whilst my goal across all three cases was to fuse the educator's role as experts in their own practice and with my role to develop their practices in a specific area, the relative success of this was variable. In all three cases, there were some educators who valued this approach and found it beneficial. However, in case study three there was several vocal participants who felt this approach was unhelpful. In framing the educators as experts in their own professional practice, this seemed to create tensions with their perceived lack of knowledge and the need for the facilitator to be the expert, disseminating knowledge to them. This led to a particular tension in their desire for a technocentric knowledge-based training as opposed to something that was far more pedagogical in



nature that we provided. This could be in part down to their limited beliefs in their own expertise in an unfamiliar context and thus a deferral to the facilitator as expert to 'deliver' knowledge to them.

The resistance to co-constructed professional development was also evident to some extent in case study two, where content focused sessions were valued more highly than the spaces for using the knowledge in the context of their own professional practice. Again, to some extent the lack of acknowledgement of their expertise may have been an issue. Compared to case study two, this group had far fewer staff who had had previous pedagogic training so developing online courses of learning may have felt significantly outside of their existing professional identities, again meaning a deferral to the facilitator as expert and placing a value in that.

Only in case study one was a facilitator-educator tension less clearly present. Here, in contrast, not only were the educators informed of the project-based approach, but time and care were taken to explain why this was being used and how it was beneficial to them. This likely led to better initial commitment. Whilst case study two and three both had elements of this, they were informed of this retrospectively, after they had signed up to the workshops and thus the participants already had some form of expectations. In case study two, the participants also came with a much stronger professional identity. All the participants were experts in arts outreach and knew I was not. This meant the power dynamic was much more decentralised and generally focused on how we could use our skills and knowledge together to reach the best outcome. In contrast, for the other two workshops, generally the participants came wanting to take knowledge from an expert facilitator which meant there was likely to be more emphasis on the distance between their expectations and the reality of the development activity as they were framing professional development as something 'delivered' to them, not an activity they had equal ownership of.

The focus in all three case studies of a desire to be trained to use tools again created tensions, some explicit, some less so. Whilst institutions often acknowledge the need for professional development, especially to accompany policy or strategic change, this is often focused on discreet training 'sessions'. This attendance-based approach to professional development can both lend itself to knowledge dissemination approaches but also lead to the mindset that development activities are something to attend or tick off. This also means that the time set aside for them can be restricted to that attendance time. As in case study two, it can be seen how this removed the space for educators to engage between the session activities that were designed to provide the space for them to develop and embed their learning into their professional work, thus shaping their professional identities. This issue is not unique to formal professional development activities.

### [The limitation of professional development's ability to shape professional identity](#)

These reflections point towards the fact that professional development can be framed in different ways. It is these different framings that can limit its effectiveness despite facilitators designing training intended to be meaningfully co-constructed with time and space to not only acquire knowledge but to use this in a professional context in hope that it will positively impact professional identity. This can, as has been seen above fall short for several reasons. Firstly, if formal professional development is reduced to hours of attendance at an organisational level, it can create the mentality that professional development is something to be completed as opposed to a transformative experience intended to impact professional identity. Secondly, when facilitators try to offer something more suited to shaping professional identities and thus is not what is expected, it can lead to a mismatch of expectations between the facilitator and educator which might potentially create frustration or disengagement. And thirdly, even when the importance of reflective practice in

education is considered, rarely are professionals given the time and space to do this, with timetabled activities also focused on student contact over self-reflection.

## Conclusion

As I began, some of the issues raised in this chapter are 'wicked' problems, in that there is not a single solution and include several competing agendas (Peters, 2017). Whilst calling this a wicked problem might be challenged as conceptual overreach, the complexity of the interaction between the wants and needs of education professionals, institutions and the professional knowledge and understanding of facilitators of professional development is clearly complex and not solvable in one way.

The focus on learning design to encourage and support meaningful co-constructed development approaches for example can be seen to fall short, even with the best intentions of a facilitator as it requires the institutional conditions in terms of time, space, and value to allow education professionals to fully embrace this approach. Therefore, this places significant limits upon professional development's ability to shape professional identity. If it is seen as something to do rather than something that can shape a professional, it is more likely to be completed and ticked off as opposed to being engaged with in a way that has the potential for professional transformation. The institutional agendas and individual education professional needs are in my mind linked and this requires structural change that would provide the impetus for individuals to have the capacity to rethink their expectations of professional development. In providing space and valuing reflection as a key element of workload could change how professionals value this key skill. I would also question if this were something that can be addressed from the ground up or if we need to think systemically about how we value this.

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