



Academic staff development - a university perspective

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Editor's Note:

This reflection was written by Jane Robertson prior to the conclusion of the T4T4T project, when she found herself unable to continue in the project as a mentor-researcher. This paper does not constitute a formal action-research report as presented by the other mentors, but is a reflection on Jane's involvement in the project to the point of her withdrawal, and as such, provides a valuable perspective.

'Academic staff development' – a university perspective

This paper is written as a reflection on and a response to, the 2004 Ministry-funded Teachers for Teachers for Tertiary (T4T4T) professional development initiative. I am writing as someone who, over a period of 15 years, has taught at the Christchurch College of Education and worked as an academic staff developer¹ at the University of Canterbury – two of the four institutions involved in the T4T4T initiative. From December 2003 until September 2004 I participated in T4T4T as a coordinating mentor-researcher for the University of Canterbury.

My concerns about T4T4T are informed by the professional development (PD) context in which I have worked for the past seven years. Hence the paper is less about T4T4T as such and more about the current and possible future nature of PD in New Zealand universities. In particular I want to address:

- The teaching/learning context of higher education with particular reference to the research/teaching relation
- The profile of professional development across an academic career
- Constraints surrounding professional development in universities
- Developing the developers
- T4T4T - inter-institutional professional development.

The research/teaching/learning context of higher education

New Zealand universities are required by law to maintain a close relationship between disciplinary research and teaching. This relationship between the development of new knowledge and the engagement of students with knowledge and its construction, is a defining and distinguishing feature of higher education. Despite the recent proposal from the Tertiary Education Commission that this relationship might be uncoupled at undergraduate level (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004), there is strong support both within New Zealand and internationally for the relationship between research and teaching to be *strengthened* at all levels of university education (Robertson, 2004). Universities are committed to graduating students who have, amongst other attributes, the skills of scholarly inquiry and the disposition to think and act critically. Thus it is crucial that any professional development initiatives involving universities take account of and build on the dynamic interaction of (disciplinary) research, teaching and learning.

The profile of staff development across an academic career

Unlike teachers in the compulsory education sector, tertiary teachers commonly receive no 'pre-service' teacher 'training'². In universities a research apprenticeship via a postgraduate degree with perhaps some experience in tutoring/demonstrating is still regarded as sufficient to qualify one as a university academic who both researches and teaches.

¹The terminology is slightly confusing. Universities tend to talk about 'academic staff development' to distinguish it from 'general staff development' where the focus is somewhat different. However at UCTL we regularly work with teaching staff who are not 'academic' by designation. For the remainder of this paper I have adopted the generic T4T4T expression 'professional development'.

² I put single inverted commas around the word 'training' to indicate my concern about the word's mechanistic connotations.

Given the changing demographics of the student population, the increase in student numbers coupled with declining resources, and the customer demand created through the 'marketization' of higher education, this traditional approach to the teaching role in universities is no longer appropriate or sustainable. However before launching into inter-institutional professional development initiatives such as T4T4T, it might be wise to a) consider the nature of *current* professional development in universities (its strengths and weaknesses) and b) consider how the professional development needs of academic staff might evolve over time – in other words, consider the whole and not just the parts.

At the University of Canterbury we have a PD programme which, we believe, addresses the professional development needs of both beginning and more experienced teachers. The first stage of the programme³ is based on the premise that those beginning an academic career require an understanding of university teaching and learning that will enable them to engage in the myriad daily practical activities of designing courses, preparing and presenting lectures, facilitating small group interactions, designing appropriate assessments, marking, supervising, interacting with students, evaluating teaching and learning processes – all in the context of current technology. This *Introduction to University Teaching*, as we have named it, is also based on the assumption that, just as peer review underpins university research publication, so too should peer assessment and feedback underpin university teaching. It recognises the need for new academics to be integrated into a community where teaching is held in high esteem.

The second stage of the programme⁴ is designed for university teachers who have some teaching experience and who wish to reflect critically on their practice, understand more about the theory of teaching and learning in higher education, take a research approach to investigating their teaching and develop a coherent, student-centred way of viewing their work with students. The Certificate is inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional, on-line and face-to-face, currently involving students (i.e. teaching staff) from the University of Otago, Lincoln University, University of Canterbury and Otago Polytechnic. From experience we have

found that those who participate in the Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma, undergo a significant transformation in their thinking about teaching and learning and in their subsequent practice. They are likely to publish from their Diploma work. They are also able to take a leading role in their departments with regard to teaching and learning.

Currently we are considering how the knowledge and skills of Diploma graduates as well as recipients of U/C teaching awards might be harnessed productively in a mentoring capacity. The PD needs of later career academics, especially those with a particular interest in teaching, is an area ripe for consideration.

Constraints

At the University of Canterbury there is no formal requirement that academic staff engage in any of these courses. Nor is there any recognition of the time required to come to grips with the complexities of teaching in a modern university. New academics express their willingness and need to engage in teaching-related PD activities but quickly find that the daily demands of research, teaching and administration leave little or no opportunity to focus on their own professional development. The introduction of PBRF has laid a further research imperative over an already stressful career beginning.

For such courses (or for other initiatives like T4T4T) to have any chance of significant success in the university context, an institutional culture of supporting and valuing teaching is required. Indications of value might include:

- active encouragement for new and experienced academics to engage in teaching-related professional development
- time/funding allowances for such activities
- recognition in the promotions process of achievements such as the award of a Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma in Tertiary Teaching (in the UK such a qualification is now mandatory for new academics)
- an understanding and acceptance that pedagogical research is not a poor relation of disciplinary research but an important field of inquiry that spans and supports excellent disciplinary teaching.

³ Introduction to University Teaching (University Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2004, p. 4).

⁴ Postgraduate Certificate and Diploma in Tertiary Teaching (University Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2004, p. 8).



Developing the developers?

While it is not strictly an issue for this paper, my reflections prompt me to raise the question of 'training' for those who make a career in staff development. When I moved from teaching in secondary schools to lecturing in a College of Education, I had no particular understanding of teaching adults to teach. I learnt on the job and drew on my experience of teaching children. When I moved again from secondary teacher education to an academic staff development role at the University of Canterbury, I received no 'training' in the complex role of supporting university academics in their research-led teaching. Instead I drew on my previous teaching experiences, read and researched and worked alongside colleagues who initiated me into the discipline of higher education and the culture of the university. In other words, my experiences of induction into tertiary teaching mirror the situation experienced by the academics I work with. We are all expected to 'pick it up' on the job. Is it time we considered programmes/qualifications for those who wish to specialize in staff development?

T4T4T - inter-institutional professional development

My concern with regard to T4T4T stems from the fact that there appears to have been little or no consultation with those responsible for PD in universities. In supporting an inter-institutional, large scale PD initiative, was the Ministry aware of what was currently happening in universities? Was it aware, for example, of the online, semester-long, professional development initiative mounted in 2002 by the University of Canterbury and Lincoln University, which involved, as participants, teaching staff from both universities and from the Christchurch College of Education? Had the Ministry sought the views of academic staff in terms of their PD needs? Had it consulted with centres such as UCTL (University of Canterbury), HEDC (University of Otago), and their equivalents throughout the country? Was it aware of the constraints outlined above which mean that any form of PD at Canterbury faces an uphill struggle?

A further concern relates to the notion of community/communities. Teachers in universities do not form a 'community' by virtue of the fact

that they teach in the same institution. Their allegiance tends to be to their discipline first and foremost and communities tend to reside nationally and internationally across/within the discipline rather than across/within an institution. This is not to say that cross-disciplinary communities cannot be formed. Our internal PD is all based in cross-disciplinary communities and the shared learning is rich for this very reason. However such communities need time to establish – to develop an identity and participant relationships based on mutual support and trust. In the T4T4T pilot the initial focus was on establishing *inter-institutional* groupings and I think, in our case, this was done at the expense of nurturing a Canterbury community. If T4T4T is to be 'rolled out' it will be important that a) an intra-institutional identity is established early and b) that academics can find disciplinary colleagues in other institutions to talk with.

I acknowledge the fact that T4T4T is both a pilot and a research-based initiative from which much learning and a more coherent and clearly conceptualized programme is emerging. However at this stage in its development the following questions continue to trouble me:

1. Does such an initiative take sufficient account of the university context, in particular the degree of discipline-specificity in university teaching and the importance of the research/teaching relation?
2. Is 'tertiary-teaching' too broad a descriptor for meaningful professional development? Is there a need for greater differentiation (as TEC is currently consulting about) within the tertiary sector?
3. How is it envisaged that T4T4T will relate to already established PD programmes such as the one described in this paper?
4. (And relatedly) where does T4T4T sit in relation to PD over an academic career?
5. What is the relationship between T4T4T and other teaching-related research initiatives funded through, for example, the TLRI?
6. What are the immediate plans in relation to T4T4T and its future? Who makes these decisions on behalf of whom?



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References

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