Facilitating effective professional development and change in subject leaders

Professor Roger Murphy, Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, School of Education, University of Nottingham

Introduction

In many areas of professional work there has traditionally been much more emphasis and reflection on the processes of initial training and education than there has been on supporting development and change mid-career. Fortunately in recent times continuing professional development (CPD) is a more accepted part of normal professional work, allowing individuals to develop and change in response to new responsibilities, career ambitions and changing circumstances within their profession. In this paper I want to reflect upon the challenges of facilitating effective professional development and change. The context I have in mind is the Leading from the Middle programme, currently being formulated by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). This programme aims to provide CPD for subject leaders in secondary schools in England and Wales. In particular, I want to concentrate on exploring what we know about adult learning and how this knowledge could inform the design of an effective CPD programme for such professionals.

Human learning is a fascinating topic and it has been the subject of much research and investigation. For those working in secondary schools it is at the heart of what they are involved in everyday. All teachers are used to facilitating learning among diverse groups of students, with complex individual past experiences. They know all about the challenge involved and the mixture of success and failure that follows their efforts. Thus, understanding and supporting human learning is a well recognised challenge, as is the much contested issue of what those same young people should be learning at the various stages of their progress through compulsory schooling.

Those same teachers are, of course, at the same time themselves learning continually about a range of things, including how to cope with new challenges and situations. The challenge for good CPD is how to add value to that learning and to support and enhance it through an approach which is sensitive to adult learning styles and opportunities. Being successful in designing effective CPD is not an easy challenge and sadly there are no simple fail-safe solutions. Good CPD is by its very nature likely to be complex and flexible. This is in order to meet the diverse learning needs and circumstances and learning styles of the huge number of subject leaders which NCSL wants to influence. What I want to do in this paper is to dig deep into the literature on adult learning to make sure that those engaged in this exciting challenge can feed off the insights of those who have researched this area most thoroughly.

What do we know about adult learning?

The field of adult education is a distinguished and complicated one. Much has been written about how adults learn and the conditions under which that learning occurs. A major component of such discussions has been the politics of adult learning, covering issues such as access to learning opportunities and whether such learning is to be used to liberate the individual or to constrain their future beliefs and actions. Linked to those areas has been much reflection upon participation rates in adult learning, and what motivates individuals to join or absent themselves from potential learning opportunities. Within the context of this paper I want to skate past many of those issues and draw upon the major themes that might help us to understand more about how to support the learning of subject leaders in secondary schools.

What is the learning potential of adults?

The first myth to dispose of is that children have a great deal of potential for learning and adults have very little. We are living at a time when adult learning is reaching new heights. There are increasing opportunities for adults to engage in planned learning and much evidence that they are able to make very good use of those learning opportunities. However, in order to harness the considerable learning potential that adults have, those wanting to facilitate that learning have to work hard at engaging them and supporting them in ways which will draw upon their past experience, prejudices, fears and ambitions.

A very positive starting point for CPD is that professionals learn a huge amount on the job. In many cases, good CPD can feed off things that teachers have already experienced and done before. Trainers and coaches working with experienced professionals frequently reflect on the fact that their role can often be as much to get professionals to synthesise and take control of what they already know and can do as to help them to learn entirely new things. Sometimes this is simply a matter of helping the professional to gain in confidence in their ability to cope with particular challenges, and feel differently about themselves and their own competences. In this sense, experienced professionals have great potential to build new learning on top of learning which has already occurred.

Adult learners have multiple roles, responsibilities and experiences

Adult learners bring even more to the learning situation than children do. Subject leaders will be working in very different school contexts; they are likely to have considerable responsibilities and interests outside their work in school; and many will have undertaken other work (whether paid or unpaid) which will prove relevant to any leadership development activities that they undertake. Effective facilitation of their learning will engage the whole person and make good use of their wider interests, enthusiasms, misapprehensions and experiences. It will also recognise the very busy nature of their everyday lives.

One consequence of the busyness of teachers' personal and professional lives is that many will come to learning opportunities feeling exhausted and undervalued. However, CPD is designed to challenge them into further hard work. There is no easy solution to this potential clash of priorities other than to recognise that the CPD experiences need to get individuals into a physical and emotional space where they can engage in effective learning. Those organising face-to-face CPD experiences need to achieve this through their choice of venue, structure of the programme, and other vital features of the experience. In designing distance learning materials the challenges are different, but attention to attractiveness, accessibility and elements of fun will all help to lift the spirits of the learner and help to engage them with the task in hand.

Adults learn best when they are actively involved

One of NCSL's priorities is to promote an active view of learning. This stance echoes one of the strongest messages in adult learning literature. Adults do not generally respond well to being put in the position of 'passive learners'. They do not want to be treated as 'empty vessels' into which knowledge can be poured. The group we are thinking about here are mature professionals with many years of relevant experience, who are used to being highly involved in their own decision-making.

Effective CPD for adults will engage their interests, their needs and their energy in a way that brings them into a highly participatory active process. There are of course many different ways of doing this, but all seek to draw upon the experiences of the participants early in the process to allow them to relate what is being studied to what they already know about and can reflect upon. For such learning to be truly transformational, as one hopes it will be, it needs to:

- fully engage the adult learner as an active participant
- draw on their past experiences and their current energies and interests
- relate directly back to their day-to-day work

The course designer also needs to be continually thinking of ways to integrate bits of learning back into the work experiences of course participants.

Extreme forms of 'experiential learning' can raise fears among those designing CPD programmes. The concern is that all participants will do is share their experiences of subject leadership (in this case) and that there will be no guarantee of effective learning from all of that experience. Here is a key challenge for those designing the programme. They need to both engage the participants and their experiences, but also find ways of doing so which are productive, purposeful and have the potential to transform the participants in fundamental ways. I will say more about ways of doing that in the sections on adult learning styles and adult reflection and change.

Adults learn best when they feel valued

One of the most challenging tasks for those preparing adult learning opportunities is to establish a positive and respectful context within which that learning can occur. We know that learners learn most when they feel valued by themselves, those they are learning alongside and by whoever is facilitating their learning. There needs to be a climate of 'mutual respect' in these situations if effective learning is to occur, and optimising the chance of that occurring is a high priority for those doing the advance planning.

Whatever your age and whatever you are trying to learn, it can be a scary business, and we all have memories of unsuccessful learning in the past. Some of us will have memories of being humiliated either by a teacher or our fellow learners, and those types of experience can leave deep scars and can hugely impede future learning. Thus, the course designer has to invite the learner into the learning experience, sit them down and make them feel very welcome. If they are to learn with others then they need to be introduced to each other and start to build safe, supportive relationships that will be supportive down the track when the big challenges come along. A considerable proportion of the Learning from the Middle programme will involve individual study. The course designer needs to find other ways to help the individual to create a positive 'learning space' so that their frame of mind and their feelings will be suitable to support rather than block their learning.

Engaging in effective CPD or other kinds of personal development activities can be intense and a potentially life-changing experience. In order to learn deep and fundamental things learners need to bring their whole selves into the learning situation and feel safe enough to take a look at who they are, how they appear to others and what they might need to do to change. This is not easy to do with strangers (or in fact sometimes close colleagues from work), nor are they easy to do with people who may be unnecessarily critical and unsupportive. Thus, if the ultimate goal of CPD is to transform individuals we need to help them find a space where they feel comfortable to take the risks that are likely to be involved in a process that could lead to fundamental change.

Adult learning styles

In a recent overview of the literature on adult learning styles, Brookfield (2001) concluded that adults:

exhibit diverse learning styles – strategies for coding information, cognitive procedures, mental sets – and learn in different ways, at different times, for different purposes. As a rule, however, they like their learning activities to be problem centred and to be meaningful to their life situation, and they want the learning outcomes to have some immediacy of application. The past experiences of adults affect their learning, sometimes serving as an enhancement,

sometimes as a hindrance. Effective learning is also linked to the adult's subscription to a self-concept of himself or herself as a learner. Finally, adults exhibit a tendency towards self-directedness in their learning. (p. 31)

Out of this excellent overview of the best thinking about adult learning come the twin themes of 'drawing upon experience' and 'self directedness', which we have already come across under earlier headings. So even though we all learn in different ways, in different context and at different times, clever facilitators will find ways to help us all optimise our own individual learning. One of the ways to do this is to let us draw upon our own experiences and take some personal responsibility for how we are going to organise and progress our own individual learning. In this context, individual learning plans, learning diaries and other ways of supporting individuals to take responsibility for planning and reviewing their own learning can be crucial. Such approaches provide an excellent way of handing over a large measure of authority to individual learners, who hopefully know themselves best and are in the best position to make things happen, if appropriately supported and encouraged. In this context, 'learning sets' and 'learning mentors' are both excellent strategies to use to put in place structures and support that can promote individual learning without leaving individuals isolated and thrown back entirely upon their own resources.

Adult reflection and change

The aim of CPD is usually to move people on from where they are towards a better developed state of knowledge and actions, giving them the competence to perform more effectively and take on new challenges. Thus, effective CPD needs to involve critical reflection on what individuals know, feel, think and do. There needs to be a strong element of challenge, allowing them to envisage very different ways of doing things, and what it would take for them to change in some desired way or direction.

Once again this is a central theme in much writing about adult learning, which Brookfield (2001) overviews as follows:

> explorations of new ideas, skills, or bodies of knowledge do not take place in a vacuum but are set within the context of learners' past, current, and future experiences. In settings where skills are being learned, whether literacy skills, craft skills, or political advocacy techniques, this process is easily observable. Learners become acquainted with skills, apply these in real life settings, reflect with other learners on their experiences in these settings, redefine how these skills might be altered by content, reapply these in other real settings, and so on. This is the familiar mechanism of internships and field experience as used in numerous settings. (p. 15-16)

Such processes can work well when supported by learning sets and/or learning mentors, as both can encourage the individual to engage in critical reflection and to report that back to others in a situation where they can get feedback, encouragement, and further ideas to fuel their reflective processes. Again, all of this can be grounded in the reality of trying things out in their normal place of work, rather than allowing CPD to become a learning process which is divorced from everyday professional life.

Much hinges on the creation of an appropriate 'learning climate'. Those planning this type of adult learning need:

> to assist in the development of a group culture in which adults can feel free to challenge one another and can feel comfortable with being challenged. Without such a climate or culture, teaching – learning encounters run the risk of becoming nothing more than exchanges of entrenched opinions and prejudice, with no element of challenge and no readiness to probe the assumptions underlying beliefs, behaviours, or values. It is useless to run a staff development workshop in which participants compliment each other, repeat the public norms of the organisation, and confirm prejudices but never address fundamental differences in

philosophy or practice. What is valuable however is the honest expression of differences in an atmosphere where challenge and dissent are accepted as part of the educational process. (Brookfield 2001, p. 14)

Conclusions

In this short paper I have dipped into the field of adult learning in an attempt to facilitate the design of effective NCSL learning programmes for subject leaders in secondary schools in England and Wales. One of the challenges to be faced by those preparing these programmes is that much of this CPD will be undertaken remotely by individuals accessing electronic and written learning support materials. However, these will be supported by human interaction with 'learning mentors', 'learning sets', and through attending training days and other meetings and events.

There are some key messages that those commissioned to undertake this process should think carefully about:

- start by focussing upon the overall learning experience of individual participants rather than discrete parts of the educational programme. Be clear about the overall learning objectives for the programme and how these might relate to a diverse group of participants

- design materials that are highly relevant to the programme objectives and that promote the engagement of busy professional educators. Draw upon their experiences, motivations and interests, and treat what they bring to the learning experience as a central resource. Make sure that opportunities are included early on for starting to build robust supportive relationships between everyone involved in the programme. Think about how the participants will be feeling, as well as what you want them to learn

- encourage as much active engagement with the materials as possible. Design real-life exercises, projects and shared learning. Get the participants to learn by doing, and encourage them to bring their own expertise and knowledge with them as a key resource to be worked on by themselves and others. Also continually look for ways to get the participants to apply their learning to everyday situations in their own place of work

- work at a programme that fosters positive learning partnerships between participants, mentors, facilitators and others. There needs to be a climate of mutual respect and a commitment to helping each other through the challenges that effective CPD is likely to present. This positive climate also needs to support periods of individual study as well as the elements of shared and group learning

- allow individuals plenty of scope to manage their own learning. They will know what they want to work on next, and how they want to approach that work. Different individuals will organise their learning in very different ways, and as long as their methods are effective for them, then that is what matters most

- the mutually supportive learning environment needs to lead to an appropriate level of challenge and critical reflection. A good CPD programme will engage individuals in a way that gets them to think critically about how they do things currently, and make them want to experiment with different approaches. In this way a sustainable process of change can be put in place

- build in frequent goal setting, reflection, reviews of progress and constructive feedback. Make sure that successes are celebrated, and as far as possible make the programme enjoyable as well as hard work

Notes

1. This paper was commissioned by NCSL for use primarily by those preparing materials for the NCSL Learning from the Middle programme.

2. The paper has been written deliberately in a style which does not involve frequent references to academic sources. There are three quotes in it from Stephen Brookfield's influential book *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (Open University Press, 2001). Those wanting to delve into a wider literature on adult learning could read Merrian and Caffarella's *Learning in Adulthood* (Jossey Bass, 1999) or Edwards, Hanson and Raggatt's *Boundaries of Adult Learning* (Routledge, 2000).

3. The author would be interested in receiving feedback from those who use it. His email address is Roger.Murphy@nottingham.ac.uk