

Empowering curriculum thinkers and transforming curriculum sites: a need for a hand-in-hand approach.

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1.0 The problematics of professional development

All countries in the world, developed and developing, are engaging in some aspects of education reform. While these initiatives all differ in purpose and direction they all have, at heart, an improvement in student learning. Often it is assumed that the reform initiatives need to focus on improvements in teachers and teaching if the outcomes sought by the reform are to be achieved. Considerable professional learning is required by teachers at times of reform and they need considerable support to achieve this learning (Spillane, 1999). The role of professional development in reform was seen to be so important that Hilda Borko focussed her 2004 presidential address to the Annual American Education Research Association Meeting on the need for a new research agenda on the topic.

While it is true that at the end of the day it is teachers who make the difference with students, there are other educators whose role is also significant in determining outcomes. For example, those charged with curriculum development at a system level and who provide teachers with resources that can make or break the reform intentions are significant. In this sense curriculum workers frame the context in which success of reforms can be estimated and development of them is as crucial as that for front line teachers. Curriculum workers at a national level provide a context that frames teachers' potential to construct new pedagogy and implement it.

Thus a central point of this paper is that curriculum workers at all levels need to be incorporated into reforms.

While there is increasing interest in the professional development of all educators there is no one approach that seems to have been outstandingly successfully. In fact Hilda Borko claimed in her address that approaches are generally fragmented, intellectually superficial, and do not take into account what we know about how teachers learn. In support of this she referred to the work of Ball and Cohen (1999) and Putnam and Borko (1997) and claimed that this is one of the “serious unsolved problems of educational research”. If this is the case then it is no wonder that reforms only partially succeed- at best!

Education reform generally speaks in a number of voices and one voice is that of professional development of teachers. However, there are other voices that are heard in the discourses of reform- particularly that of workplace reform. The press for such reform is internal as well as external. There is recognition that students can be inquiring learners only to the extent that the environments in which their teachers work reflects this need. To this extent the education profession has advocated reforms for the workplaces in which teachers interact.

At the same time there have been calls from outside the profession for workplace reforms. Most of these have been swept into the rhetoric of economic transformations and the need for all sectors of the economy to be more productive and of higher quality. The press is full of it!! As governments cope with a wide range of priorities for public spending, amidst increasing demands and shrinking resource bases, the efficiency of public education institutions is an easy target. Therefore, the notion of quality is often interconnected with (some would say confounded by) notions of efficiency.

Thus the challenges presented for professional development for enhanced quality in education are significant. In the absence of any recognised conceptual or curriculum model for undertaking this work we must attend to the variety of needs for educators in the system.

We believe that the challenge in this work needs to be addressed by focussing on professional learning rather than the provision of professional development programs. In other words, the way forward is to build on what we know about the *processes* of professional learning and the *contexts* where it needs to occur, in addition to the content of the reform. Traditionally, professional development has focussed on the what to be learned and paid little attention to *how* professionals learn and has not adopted any philosophical position in response to what we now know about learning. In many cases, it has been the 'transmission of knowledge' philosophy that has dominated our approaches to our own professional development curriculum and pedagogy.

Certainly this has characterised professional development when it has been part of university courses. We have gathered groups together in various settings and talked at them - naming the new ideas and concepts they need to master. We have backed this up by asking them to read about the concepts we have identified, discuss them in tutorials, and to be examined on their mastery of this information. We have asked them to return to school classrooms, sometimes with little more than the faint hope that they will have opportunities to practice what they have been learning.

In universities, many dimensions of organization reinforce these outdated practices- the architecture of the lecture hall, the constraints of timetabling, the demand for examinations, and the need to reduce overall costs of instruction.

This situation is further complicated when educators from a developing country are asked to attend (and generally seek to participate in) courses via scholarship schemes taught in more developed countries. Even within countries, professional development opportunities are generally provided in settings away from the workplace.

Notwithstanding the benefits of travelling to other locations or having uninterrupted periods of time away from the work site, this generally runs against the grain of contemporary ideas of learning and it is to these ideas that we now turn.

What we now know about learning is that it is situated, distributed and social in nature. So the second major point of the paper is based on the belief that professional development needs to build on these perspectives if the outcomes desired in the reform initiatives are to be realised.

2.0 Situatedness of learning

Contemporary cognitive theorists challenge the assumption that learning involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are divorced from where they are learned.. Rather, Greeno et al (1996); Greeno, (1998), Lave & Wegner, (1991) have all taken the position that the context where learning occurs is an integral component of what is learned. The context includes both physical and social elements. Thus, the surrounding elements of where learning occurs are inevitably inbuilt into the actual knowledge created and, as Putnam & Borko, (2000) argue, become “a fundamental part of what is learned” (p. 4). It is with this theoretical background that the whole *authentic* movement (Slavkin, 2004) in education took hold. Authentic curriculum became constituted as a set of experiences and activities that reflected the settings in which it would be expected that the learners would find themselves.

This idea that the situations in which learning occurs are inseparable from the learning itself is highly significant and challenges the whole idea of transferring knowledge from one setting to another. In particular it challenges the whole idea that learners can be taken from one setting to another (be it merely out of a workplace to a nearby setting or more drastically from one country to another) to develop understandings and skills that could be applied in their home setting. While this does not mean that no learning can occur of relevance to another setting, what it does mean is that significant learning needs to occur

in the movement back to the practice context and that workplace learning is absolutely crucial in ensuring a match between study and workplace improvements.

Drawing on ideas from anthropology, sociology and psychology we argue, similar to Cobb (1994), that professional learning should always involve individual constructions of understandings of the settings in which those constructions are to find relevance. Those settings are both physical and social.

We would argue that this contemporary view of cognition and learning significantly challenges the spending of significant amounts of money on scholarships that remove people from their context to undertake coursework elsewhere. New technologies and re-thinking of course offerings and professional development activities are needed that find more resonance with the situated perspective of learning if they are to have lasting impact on workplace performance. We believe this is crucially true for all educators.

For curriculum workers and thinkers (a case to which we refer later in the paper) we believe that professional development needs to occur in such a way that individual constructions about curriculum ideas occur and individuals become more familiar with how these ideas are manifest in the everyday work activities where the curriculum thinking and working occurs. The development of new ideas and the thinking about work applications need to occur simultaneously in the work context

3.0 Social perspective on learning

Historically, learning was accounted for in terms of individual functioning. However, more contemporary ideas hold that what we believe constitutes valid knowledge in a context, who we engage in thinking and the products of that thinking are the result of the social interactions with other individuals and groups across time. Within groups there are discourse communities that not only assist in the development of knowledge but they also place limitations on thinking by determining what is appropriate for the context.

Individuals take on (and appropriate) the ideas of others around them. Thus while it is appropriate to develop specific concepts, skills and understandings, of equal importance are those dispositions and ways of thinking that are shaped by the group.

For the development of curriculum workers it is imperative they develop understandings and skills in the context of those with whom they work where they have the opportunity to shape the discourses that surround their work. There needs to be a dialectical relationship between the development of ideas and the discourses of everyday work. A failure to do this means that new understandings and skills that an individual formulates as part of a context will quickly wither in the work context.

Lave & Wenger (1991) and Cobb (1994) have argued that learning involves an enculturation into a particular community's ways of thinking and the dispositions. For the development of curriculum workers and thinkers this means providing them with access to groups of individuals who themselves are curriculum thinkers with contemporary theories and dispositions. This, however, is complicated when there is an expectation that, as a result of their development, new curriculum workers will influence the broader thinking of their workplace. Often the workplace serves as a conserving function of traditional knowledge and ideas about how work should occur.

Professional development and changes in workplaces need to go hand in hand in the one site.

If there is to be a transformation of workplaces at the same time as a development of individuals then strategies need to be adopted to incorporate the new thinking and ideas into the workplace. To this end the inclusion of those who have the capacity to shape the everyday discourses of the workplace into training groups is desirable- if not imperative. Likewise, other strategies need to be adopted, including:

- Providing opportunities for those undergoing development to shape the work and thinking of the group
- Involving others from the workplace into the tasks that those being developed are undertaking
- A process of recognition for those that provide opportunities to transform the dialogues of the workplace

Thus, while it is easy to recognise that learning is social, it requires the solution of some difficult design issues if we are develop learning programs that address the individual needs of learners and at the same time transform workplaces to create in them sites of learning..

4.0 Distribution perspective on learning

In keeping with those who believe that learning has a situative component and is social in nature, writers such as Lave (1988) and Salomon (1993) have pointed out that cognition is distributed (or “stretched over”) other people and artefacts. Such ideas are really not new, as they find their origins in the 19th century in the writings of Dewey and Vygotsky. While psychologists such as Piaget, who focused on the cognitive functioning of the individual, held centre stage for a long time, social cognitivists such as Vygotsky may now be recognised as more significant. Greeno (1991) was perhaps the first contemporary thinker to build on these early 19th century writings.

What is now accepted is that the thinking required for most contemporary tasks is no longer just within the skin of a particular individual. What is required by more and more complex operations is a set of individuals, each with particular understandings, working with resources (such as computers with data bases each with its own inbuilt logic) all working towards the one end.

In other words, for a curriculum context to be effective it must not be conceived as sets of people all engaged in their individual thinking but actually composed of vital interactions amongst themselves *and* those resources that relate to their work. Thus to think of the development of curriculum understandings as a focus on individual forms of competence and free of the resources in which curriculum thinking needs to occur is to deny the very things we now know about learning.

5.0 A new model

In keeping with these contemporary views about cognition and learning a new approach to professional development- particularly for those engaged in curriculum work is necessary. Traditionally, enrolment in award courses (such as Masters degrees) have been regarded as a way of improving understandings and skills for individuals. In Papua New Guinea this has often occurred by individuals receiving sponsorships to undertake such courses in overseas contexts- and often this is seen as a reward for good performance in the workplace- or sometimes a reward for length of service. While the sponsorship provides the person with an opportunity to experience living in another context, the costs are significant (perhaps well out of proportion to outcomes) and the outcomes doubtful- beyond the individual experience. Certainly, the experiences appear to be out of alignment with the contemporary ideas about learning elaborated above.

If the educational development experiences that individuals are to have are expected to have a multiplier impact beyond the individual then different models are required. Program delivery models need to be found where individuals have the benefit of development (and achieve the award eg Master degree) but that development also addresses the work context. This needs to happen by paying heed to contemporary views of learning.

The Faculty of Education at QUT is currently engaged in developing such a model through engagement with staff in the Curriculum Development Division of NDOE in a

new masters degree. The building block for that model is a new degree called Master of Learning innovation (MLI)

5.1 The MLI building block

As part of the development of this new MLI course, the Faculty has articulated what it means by a master in the field of learning innovation. With a theoretical orientation compatible with the analysis above, such a person would expect to have:

- A. An enhanced level of self awareness and metacognition regarding their own culture, learning and careers to date, their own professional positions and current contributions and a clarity of direction for their own professional futures
- B. An awareness of the widening scope of learning in creating new knowledge and new opportunities in a dynamic global environment
- C. An ability to think strategically and to propose future developments to assist their specific areas of professional endeavour
- D. An understanding of past, present and future imperatives for the learning professions in local, national and international contexts and a commitment to personal and professional integrity in the promotion and enhancement of learning

Such descriptions of MLI outcomes highlight the inter-relationships between individual development and the context in which the individual practices.

The outcomes expected from such a course (such as exercising leadership in the workplace, analysing the particular workplace context in order to apply critically-informed and research based understandings) can only be achieved when the pedagogy to be actioned in the course seeks to relate individual and workplace development. An example of such a pedagogy, recently adopted with a group of curriculum workers in CDD in PNG, is discussed below.

5.2 The CRIP example

Fifteen officers from CDD are enrolled in the QUT Masters of Learning Innovation course- funded by AusAID as part of the CRIP project. The aim of the course is develop curriculum understandings of participants by building on the understandings they have developed in their CRIP work and, where possible, enable them to address issues of their everyday work in the course.

The pedagogy is shaped in such a way that participants receive one week of intensive teaching at the beginning of the semester for each unit of study, a mid semester study school and can access support from local tutors from Divine Word University as they require it. This latter level of support requires initiative and actions that are new and hence perhaps problematic. Participants are required to proactive in seeking out help for learning if they hope to succeed.

Various strategies have been adopted to enable participants to relate their study to their work context. Additionally, other strategies have been adopted to embed their study into their work context and to enable others in their work context to share in their study efforts.

Some details of this are provided in the attachment to this paper.

As noted in the study model, the aim is to develop a corporate culture of learning in CDD and inculcating particular dispositions for learning- including independence, being proactive and balancing personal and corporate responsibilities. Those participants who can do this will be the ones that are at the forefront of moves to realise the reform intentions in Papua New Guinea. It is through such personal growth and workplace transformations that new goals can be achieved.. The strategies by which this is being

attempted, and also the outcomes that are aimed for, are consonant with the contemporary ideas about professional learning noted in the earlier sections of this paper.

6.0 The future

The course is in its early stages of implementation and is not yet evaluated. Not surprisingly, there has been some reaction to the model by those who are seeking to advocate for study, not in their own context but in another context- preferably abroad. Also those who find it difficult to be proactive for their own learning and to take responsibility for a corporate culture will experience difficulty.

There is also some concern by some participants that their work “interferes” with their capacity to study. This is an issue that needs to be addressed as the model is further developed. Given that the model seeks to inter-relate work and study then the reasons that work is perceived to impact on study opportunities need to be unpacked. There could be various reasons for this. For example, the course may not be sufficiently structured in a way that takes everyday work into account. On the other hand there may be reluctance by participants to actively inter-relate work with study. There may be various organisational issues in the workplace that make it difficult to inter-relate work and study.

These issues need to be fully investigated and addressed if the issues of integrating workplace reforms and individual study development are to be addressed.

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Attachment

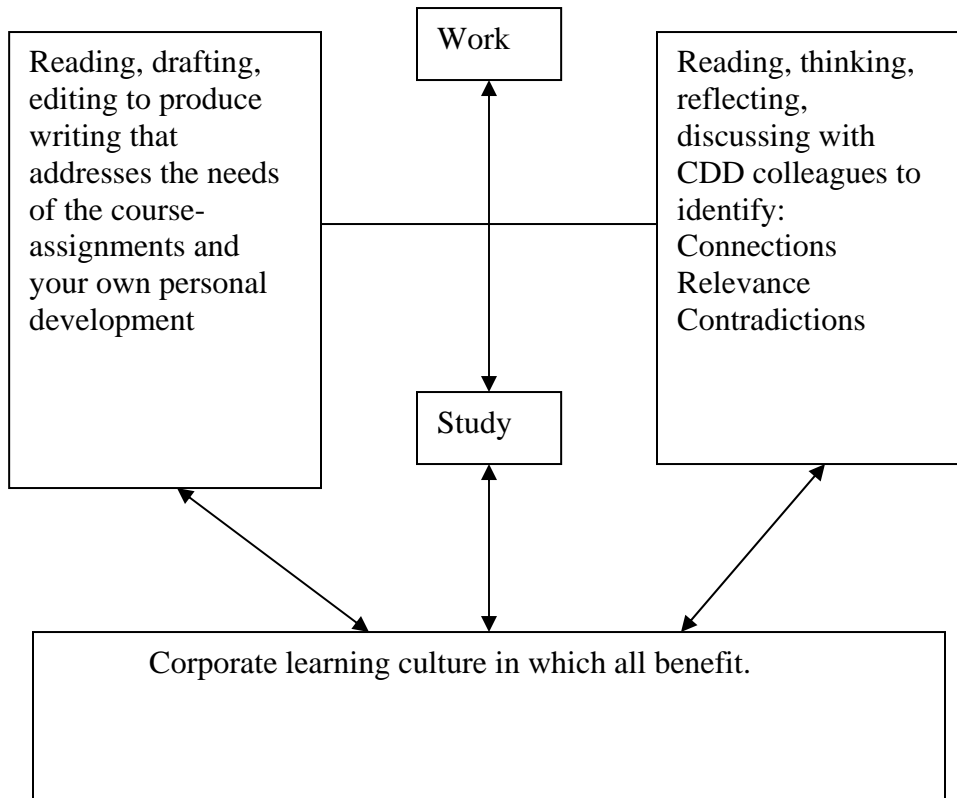
Working and studying: The MLI model for CDD officers.

The Masters course that you are undertaking is one that seeks to:

- A. Assist you in developing understandings, values and capacities that will assist you in your chosen role as curriculum officers to address national priorities;
- B. Integrate your work and study to enhance both the work context to which you belong and your own personal development agendas;
- C. Assist in developing a learning culture in CDD.

This means that your study and work need to go hand and hand. This is a different way for doing a masters and one that focuses on building up the work context as much as yourselves as individuals.

The following model guides this interrelationship between work and study.



Making the model work

In this model you need to consider yourself and how you position yourself both as a student and a corporate member of CDD. To do this you need to reflect on the following questions about you and your work context- and revisit them often. We suggest that you begin with writing some answers to these questions prior to the course.

1. What work practices are significant for me at present
2. What would I like to address in terms of my current work practices
3. What is problematic in regard to my work practices and those in my work context

You have responsibilities in regard to both yourself and your work context at different times. In particular, you need to consider:

- What initiatives you will take to make the program a success for you and the context (as distinct from your success as a student);
- What responsibilities you will take on to ensure success- personally and corporately;
- How you will restructure your work habits- through time- management, delegations etc to enable you to address both work and study

Your study will involve you in both:

1. contact time with lecturers and tutors
2. non contact time where you will need to study independently and with colleagues (others enrolled and other colleagues)

Contact time.

For each of the four semesters there will be:

- A. a one week contact period for each of the 2 units taught that semester. This will be at the beginning of the semester and relevant people will be the unit lecturer, the Study Skills Coordinator , DWU tutor
- B. A one week study week (one week for the two units) in the middle of the semester. Julie and Mark will facilitate that week.

During these times you are expected to attend all session and make any adjustments to your work context so that this is possible.

This project seeks to integrate work and study and so is designed to be conducted entirely in the work context. By spending less in working in the work context we are able to provide better study resources. You will need to be vigilant and well disciplined to make sure that the model works in your favour and the favour of your colleagues. It is not a model where you simply get “time off” to study away from your work, or to do classes away from the work- they have to dovetail together.

During contact time not only are you expected to be present and participate fully and this will mean attending to some issues- such as turning off mobile phones during class time, not rushing out for office work, not scheduling class time for other activities. Being in the work context means that you must be vigilant.

Non contact time.

During these times- perhaps up to six or seven weeks you will need to reflect on the model outlined above and how you should be working- this means attending to both sides of the model above- personal and corporate.

