



HOW CAN STAFF DEVELOPMENT BECOME STRATEGIC?

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BACKGROUND

Higher education institutions are under greater pressure to respond to many inter-related changes in their environment, including those prompted by government policy, and to be more productive than ever before. The increased demands made on staff have been widely noted, and felt by the staff themselves. It follows that it is more important than ever to support staff in their work.

In the UK, central government has been convinced of the importance of staff development and has provided very substantial funding. For a number of years this has been concentrated in educational development – support for teaching. There have been many funding initiatives since the late 1980s, and support bodies have been established, most recently the Higher Education Academy. The record of government investment is impressive when compared with other systems in Europe, Australia, the US or Canada.

Institutions themselves have responded to the availability of funding, and there is now substantial educational development support provision within most institutions. All HEIs now have learning and teaching strategies. Interestingly, this has come about through the offer of Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding, receipt of which was conditional upon production of a strategy.

The history of other aspects of staff development is in some ways similar. In the main, pre-1992 UK institutions had very small and peripheral staff development functions until recent years. The situation in post-1992 institutions was a little different, since they were in part influenced by their location within local government before 1992. In the last few years there has been substantial growth in staff development provision, funded largely by central government human resources initiatives. Again, strategic plans have been required as a condition of funding. The establishment of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and of a Leadership, Governance and Management Fund provide a national focus for staff development in relation to leadership and management.

It may be argued that institutions always wanted to do more to develop their staff, and that it was the availability of external funding that enabled it. However, there is no evidence that the richer institutions were more active in staff development than others before central government began to provide earmarked funding. This leads one to the conclusion that much staff development activity is in effect externally driven and funded, and that institutions do not 'naturally' see staff development as a high priority. Institutions themselves have been slow to see the importance of staff development in helping them meet their strategic aims.

PROBLEMS AND DEFINITIONS

So how can staff development be used more strategically; what are the problems and solutions; and what are the messages for institutions, for academic departments and for staff developers?

Attempting to define strategic staff development reveals the problematic nature of the concept, and suggests some difficulties in making progress in this field. To begin with, 'staff development' has no settled and agreed meaning, and there are other, often overlapping, terms. I use it here as a very broad term, meaning development for all groups and categories of staff in all their work roles, throughout their working lives.

It thus subsumes:

- 'educational development', to do with teaching and learning
- 'academic development', to do with the whole role of faculty
- 'organisational development' to do with the working practices of the organisation as a whole, and of units within it

Staff development has been defined as "... the institutional policies, programmes and procedures which facilitate and

support staff so that they may fully serve their own and their institution's needs" (Webb, 1996). This seems a usefully inclusive definition, which draws attention to the tensions between individual and institutional needs.

The term 'development' is not without problems. Webb roots it in positivist notions of advancement, through the application of scientific rationality, to some improved state. Thus a rational organisation works in an organised way to better its practice. It also has patronising overtones. In its customary interpretation, it is the staff who are developed through the institution's provision. Many developers are themselves uncomfortable with the term, as a recent survey shows (Fraser, 2001). Behind these surface problems of terminology, therefore, are more substantial matters concerning the nature and purposes of higher education – how we conceptualise organisations and the ways they work, and how we view processes of change. There is also an ethical dimension, as has been pointed out: "Who develops whom, in what ways and on what authority?" (Harvey and Knight, 1996). One might also add "and for what purpose?"

APPROACHES TO ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

Further complexity arises from the range of approaches to organisational learning. Four are summarised below, together with comment on their strengths and limitations.

There is an extensive literature on strategic human resource development (SHRD), an approach focusing on creating a learning culture through a close and two-way relationship between staff development and corporate strategy. The 'ideal' position is one where staff development:

- is about organisational change and is closely tied to organisational goals
- is supported by senior managers
- has developed strategies and plans
- is in strategic partnership with human resource management (HRM)
- is influential in developing organisational culture and engages in evaluation for cost-effectiveness

There are obvious problems with such a rationalist view. First of all, development is assumed to be definable, with an end-point, rather than emergent (Lee, 2001; McGoldrick et al, 2001). There is still a degree of ambivalence in academics' relationships with senior managers and with line managers in higher education, and this is a significant factor in the political 'placing' of staff development (Blackmore and Wilson, 2004). Finally, a recent international study of chief executives in HE suggested that they were more concerned with vision, broad values and goals than with traditional corporate planning and control. All of this suggests that a conventional SHRD model is a useful way of viewing organisational development, but one with significant limitations.

The relationship between staff development and HRM (or the personnel function) is problematic, because of the traditional low status of HR (Elton, 1995), the unattractiveness of a close link with 'management' (D'Andrea and Gosling, 2001), and differences in academic and administrative cultures (McInnis, 1998). The difficulty of the relationship is indicated by the immense diversity in the ways universities organise themselves. In some, staff development is increasingly integrated into the personnel function, a trend supported by the availability of HR funding, which has encouraged a more 'strategic' HR approach. This has been seen in some institutions as a reason for subsuming staff development within personnel, and in others for reviewing and improving a 'loose-coupled' relationship.

In other institutions, some very significant aspects of staff development, particularly educational development, are distant from personnel, and have become academicised. Nevertheless, even those staff developers who deal only with academic staff can no longer afford to be unaware of HR issues. Motivating staff to take teaching seriously requires that attention be paid to recognition and reward. Casualisation and the use of contract staff means that many teaching staff will relate differently to their work and to their department. The increasing emphasis on organisational development which, in practical terms, may mean the encouragement of teamwork, suggests that all staff need to be taken into account, not only academic staff.

Whilst an SHRD model is concerned to create a strong learning culture, it does so in a rational and planned way. However, knowledge-based organisations have been claimed to be characterised by "non-standardisation; creativity; high dependence on individuals; and complex problem-solving" (Sveiby, 1992). The extensive literature on learning organisations sees learning as being much more complex and unpredictable. The organisation "facilitates the learning of its individual members and continually transforms itself" (Tann, 1995). It moves beyond 'single loop learning', which is concerned with improvements within an existing paradigm, and into 'double loop learning', where the assumptions of the paradigm are questioned. It may even be appropriate to engage in 'triple loop learning', which might involve a radical questioning of the principles of the organisation.

Duke has applied these learning organisation ideas to universities. He portrays staff development that "will support learning on the job and in teams through work. It will provide mentoring, formal training, and reflective evaluative review and planning" (awayday-type activities) which allow learning and tacit knowledge to be identified, shared and extended in pursuit of the university's objectives (Duke, 2002). James has outlined a grassroots approach to staff development, focusing on the expertise embedded in local 'theories-in-use', and finding ways of facilitating inquiry-based collaborative examination by staff (James, 1997). The advantages of such a 'grounded' approach include relevance to individuals' concerns and the development of staff members' capacity to develop themselves. There are potential disadvantages: it is not always clear how individual learning will lead to organisational learning; and uncomfortable issues may be avoided. It may be difficult to admit failure in an organisation that is not prepared to acknowledge it as an opportunity for learning rather than for

criticism, particularly in an audit culture, promoted by extensive external inspection, where failure may be driven underground.

Some have argued that the most effective form of learning in a context takes place as a result of 'legitimate peripheral participation' in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The focus is upon groups with shared values and ways of working. Knowledge is tacit and widely distributed. This situated learning fits well with faculty identification with discipline (Henkel, 2000), with disciplinary cultures (Becher and Trowler, 2003) and with the expressed preference for informal learning (Becher, 1999).

There are problems with the approach. It cannot be assumed that 'the way we do things here' is the right or best way. It also assumes that entry to a community is possible. However, often an academic community excludes many of those non-academic staff who need to work in close conjunction with academic colleagues, but who are not formally seen as members of the university or of the department. A counter-argument may be that the deliberate fostering of inclusive communities of practice may be a means of encouraging teams to develop across traditional divides.

MESSAGES FOR SENIOR STAFF

Staff development can make an important contribution to organisational development and learning at institutional, departmental and individual levels. However, this is unlikely to happen without clear senior staff support. It is also important to appoint able staff developers, and to give them access to senior levels of discussion and decision-making. Staff developers who are unaware of strategic aims are unlikely to be able to work strategically. Those who are unaware of how decisions are discussed and made are unlikely to be able to contribute effectively to the organisation's thinking.

Staff development is likely to be most effective if it is defined broadly, including both formal and informal approaches, and working at institutional, departmental and individual levels.

There is a wide range of possible structures and roles. They are usually products of history, institutional politics or sometimes a response to external pressures, such as concern over teaching quality in the UK. In practice a wide range of arrangements seem to work. One key decision is whether to deal with all staff together or separately. In some institutions a 'whole staff' approach is favoured. Unified approaches fit well with a 'lifelong learning' movement that suggests staff need to be flexible, capable of learning, self-directed and continually developing. It is also helpful when financial and other pressures require greater reliance on teamwork to deliver more with limited resources. It reflects the fact that other categories of staff are increasingly doing 'academic' work and boundaries are blurring. However, development for academic staff is often dealt with separately. Such provision may focus on all roles or it may focus entirely on teaching.

In loosely coupled systems, organisational positioning may not matter as much as one might assume, and there will be space for some of the tensions inherent in staff development to be managed, through individuals and groups shaping their roles in relation to

their context. However, in tightly coupled systems where staff development is seen as being an agent for top-down change, there are likely to be tensions. One area of difficulty will be in the relationship between staff in general and staff developers. Another will be in the difficulty that some staff developers may find in uncritically implementing such an agenda. The factors that are most likely to encourage an effective staff development function include: offering sufficient autonomy so that developers are able to act and be seen to act independently of the host; offering visible and sustained support from academic leadership; and having a head of staff development in place who is trusted and respected.

MESSAGES FOR HEADS OF DEPARTMENT

The community-of-practice literature draws attention to the situated, informal learning that is part of everyday life. The head therefore has a particular responsibility to create opportunities for learning, and to support communities of practice, since the main site of learning is in the department. This is an attractive message. It means that staff development can take forms that are more acceptable to staff than the traditional one of sending them away on an external course. Instead, awaydays and other methods of exploring current and possible practice are used. Relatively simple devices can ensure that some of the departments' processes lead to the sharing of best ideas. At the same time it is important to beware of the notion that communities of practice always know best. A willingness to consider ideas from elsewhere is important, and this implies effective networking with other departments in the institution and beyond.

MESSAGES FOR PROFESSIONAL STAFF DEVELOPERS

There is evidence that some staff development is being taken more seriously, but that there is not enough, it is often not as effective as it might be, and it needs to be done better. Therefore staff developers must engage with academic leaders' priorities. This identification with management might be uncomfortable, but there is no other way to have influence. It does not mean slavish obedience, for although there is certainly a more managerial culture and a more 'tightly coupled' view of management, management is highly political, often with a soft focus. There is plenty of scope to be influential in shaping policy, although the extent will depend on the nature of the organisation. Organisational change will be a key and continuous theme for strategic staff development in future. Staff developers must understand change, since development requires change and is fundamental to the activity. The staff development function must have the ability to operate at this level if it is to engage with a leadership agenda.

The approach to change that is taken will be shaped by the way the organisation is conceptualised. Organisations are often viewed as machines, and development is rooted in a positivist, rationalist tradition. We are seeing an increase in this approach to management in higher education, driven to an extent by central government policy. When staff development fails it may be because it has accepted this inadequate model of organisation and change. In fact, organisational life is highly complex, change is difficult, results uncertain. We must therefore guard against hyper-rationality, and linear or classic project management approaches are not likely to be successful. So being strategic does not mean that one must adopt a

mechanistic model of organisation or a simplistic conception of change. More contextual approaches may be more appropriate, although for some audiences change may have to be represented in a more positivist form.

Staff developers need to work at a number of levels and to use a range of approaches – top down, bottom up and middle out. Historically, staff development has concentrated on supporting individual staff. However, when the site for learning shifts to the department, the role for staff developers is one of consultancy and support for internal learning activities. It may also be one of challenging received wisdom, to prompt 'double loop' learning. Staff developers need to develop close relationships with heads of department, since the latter have a key role in facilitating learning. Staff developers may also seek to bring communities of practice into being, by bringing together groups of people whose interests coincide, or should do so. They may also help to ensure the lateral spread of good practice across the institution.

Academic work is increasingly professionalised, in the sense of requiring formal preparation and accreditation. Teaching and learning is already well on the way to being professionalised, and leadership and management will make a similar journey over the next few years. Inevitably, attention will focus on staff developers' own credentials, particularly if more is to be required of them. It is in staff developers' own interests to establish a secure base for their own professionalism.

(This article draws on Rethinking Strategic Staff Development, in Blackwell, R and Blackmore, P (2003) *Towards Strategic Staff Development in Higher Education*, Buckingham: SRHE/OUP. It represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the organisations for which they currently work or have previously worked).

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