
Zen and the art of staff development

by Pip Hardy (*Published in Open Praxis, Autumn 1995*).

Introduction

Staff development has become the great battle cry of both workers and their managers. Millions of pounds are spent on it, time is taken away from work and complaints are made that both time and money are wasted. Having been 'developed' at workshops, conferences, seminars and lectures, staff may return to work with little discernable difference in their skills or knowledge. Managers wonder what has happened to their investment, why the telephones are still not being answered more politely, the computer system continues to crash and the photocopier is still jamming.

There appear to be several fallacies relating to staff development.

Firstly, we are first and foremost staff rather than human beings.

Secondly, we are objects to be developed, with the emphasis on our passive role.

Thirdly, this process can happen rapidly, in response to a need from the institution.

Staff or people?

Most of us do not consider ourselves staff first and foremost. Generally we regard ourselves as human beings, men and women, members of families and of communities. The notion of staff development implies a split - only that part of ourselves which relates to our work needs to be developed.

Learning is active

As open learning practitioners, it may be salutary to remind ourselves of what we consider necessary for learning to take place:

- motivation
- practice
- feedback
- time.

On how many courses are these elements present in sufficient measure? The fourth dimension, time, is perhaps the most important of all. People do not learn overnight, nor, as the saying goes, do old dogs learn new tricks easily. People need time to consolidate new skills and knowledge and regular opportunities to use them.

It takes time to learn

Anyone who has ever watched a baby learn to walk is aware both of the intense concentration, continuous practice and length of time it takes for the child to accomplish this new skill with any degree of competence (and confidence!) This process could perhaps be taken as a model for our later learning. Development is not something that can be imposed from the outside or happen to us, but, if it is to be effective, is rather a self-imposed discipline, working from the inside out.

Learning only happens in the body

As practitioners of open learning we also know that learning does not occur simply by reading about something, or by attending a workshop. These activities can certainly stimulate interest, but real learning only occurs when we learn with our bodies.

For a moment, just think about riding a bicycle. If the knowledge of this precarious activity could be transferred by means of textbooks, seminars or lectures, you would be able to describe the process – you would know how to ride a bicycle without ever having to put foot to pedal. But try telling a friend or colleague how to ride a bicycle, starting at the beginning.

You may have begun by telling your friend to hold the cycle steady, placing one foot on one pedal and swinging the other leg over the seat so that the second foot comes to rest on the far pedal. At that point, you may pause, trying to find words to describe the next part of the process. 'Balance', you might say. 'Push the pedals up and down and balance'. This, however, is only part of the story. The fact is that we cannot learn to ride bicycles without plenty of practice and a few skinned knees.

Even with more cerebral activities, such as, say, analysing literature, although less obvious, the learning here too begins with a physical response. We hear or see the words with ears or eyes, and an emotional reaction occurs. This may be so subtle as to be hardly noticeable, but does occur nevertheless and can, with practice, be felt somewhere in the body. It is this response which should inform our analysis, using the tools acquired from various sources.

We do not learn – really learn – by talking to colleagues, by taking evening classes, or by attending staff development courses or workshops. (We may well learn something from running the workshops however!) We learn by repeated practice.

Why develop staff?

Staff development is concerned with training people to perform their jobs more efficiently. It is generally more concerned with what is required by the job or the organisation than by the person. However, once indoctrinated into the ways of the organisation, most people would find it difficult to disentangle what might be best for them as opposed to what is best for the job. In order to gain recognition, higher pay, promotion, it may be necessary to learn to operate the new computer system, lead teams, write open learning materials, appraise colleagues.

The skills we use at work do not always touch our human core and so are unlikely to be absorbed in the way that something that is dear to our hearts (perhaps learning to parachute or paint with water colours or speak French) might be.

As a freelance consultant, working on all aspects of open learning materials development, nobody pays to develop my skills or myself. Time and money are generally available in directly inverse proportions: when there is plenty of work and therefore plenty of money, there is no time; during the quieter spells when it would be possible to be away for a few days, there is always the anxiety that money spent on a conference now might be needed for a child's school trip or new shoes in the near future. However, at least I am completely free to choose whatever area I might wish, however theoretically, in which to be developed!

Unfortunately for my career perhaps, my inclinations, were money and time no objects, would run to learning to fly a glider, play the flute, communicate in sign language. Although these are hardly the sorts of skills which are likely to bring in work, they might well be just the kind of things which expand the mind and enhance experience in such a way as to make it more possible to imagine the wide variety of people who come to open learning, and therefore, to write materials which will be appropriate for them. 'It's knowing what to do with things that counts.' (Robert Frost)

People learn what they really want to learn

People learn best those things that they truly want to learn. Keen gardeners learn the names of plants, musicians discover about harmonies and rhythms, dancers learn the steps of the dance, travellers learn to speak the language of the country they most love to visit. Few would dispute this notion and yet little heed is paid when contemplating staff development. Undoubtedly people need to learn to perform their jobs adequately and there are certain skills to be acquired in any position. People who are interested in their jobs and whose superiors take some interest

in them, will almost certainly learn the necessary skills, but probably not from formal staff development activities. They are more likely to learn by attempting new things, making mistakes, discussing the problems and trying things differently next time. While there would need to be some form of damage limitation so that the results of mistakes are not too costly, the amount of money spent in helping people to learn in this way probably would not exceed that spent on the already vast and still growing industry of staff development.

Motivation and expectations

Expecting staff to do well and taking the time to let them know this will also go a long way towards bringing out the best in people. The Expectancy or 'Pygmalion' effect illustrates the power of high expectations on staff performance. So, perhaps, rather than developing staff, we need to develop interpersonal skills which would enable us to communicate our expectations, our hopes and fears and our personal needs for development with high expectations becoming the norm rather than the exception.

Some enlightened organisations offer staff training on a highly individual basis, providing a budget which may be spent in any way each individual member of staff chooses. So, learning to stop smoking or design gardens or identify wild flowers are all within the bounds of possibility. Arguably those who have been enabled to develop themselves as people will be better, more productive staff, contributing a richness to the organisation which might otherwise be missing.

This approach is a far cry from the by now common phenomenon of trying to teach already overworked and over-committed teaching staff the skill of writing open learning materials. Experience suggests that this is something imposed by the institution on academics with a variety of backgrounds, experience, interests and inclinations, but always with heavy constraints on their time. With the best will in the world, people with full teaching loads are unlikely to take kindly to being asked to whip off a couple of open learning modules even with the promise of training and support in the mysteries of open learning writing.

This kind of staff development seems to be grounded in the institution's desire to save money yet is couched in terms of helping staff to develop their skills. Few people are fooled by such disingenuousness. Those who are inclined towards the writing of open learning materials, perhaps because it reflects their teaching or learning style, or because they are motivated by the thought of coping in a different way with increasing numbers of students, will probably try writing a few sections and

sending these off to someone more experienced in the development of open learning materials for comment and suggestions for improvement. Further attempts based on constructive comments along with regular practice over a reasonable period of time. are likely to result in improvement.

Teaching and learning

It is common for people to prefer to talk about things rather than to do them. This may explain the large number of teachers and the proliferation of higher education institutions in this country. There is plenty of opportunity for talking about how things might be done, with less interest in actually getting down to doing them. It would be interesting to have figures about the number of conferences reflecting on staff development as opposed to the number of people sitting down with staff, helping and encouraging them to learn new things through regular practice.

Nothing is truly learned until, having been practiced daily and absorbed through the conscious mind, it becomes almost unconscious once again. As long as we attempt to swim with only our conscious mind, we are likely to sink. Only when we forget the fear of the water and allow ourselves to float can we even begin to learn to swim. Concentrating so hard on not falling off a bicycle is when we forget to be

aware of what else is happening and we hit the stone in the middle of the road. Trying to speak English with the conscious mind usually results in thoughts being expressed in a peculiar, stilted manner. None of these things can be learned from books or by talking about them. Touch typing and driving are other good examples. Only by trial and error and continuous practice will the skills be learned – and once learned, beware trying to type or drive consciously! It is still crucial to be aware of what we are doing at all times – but the trick is to give oneself into whatever is being done, rather than using one part of the mind to force another part of the body to do its bidding.

And so it is with all learning. Not until it becomes a part of us, not until it is learned with the body, can we really claim to have learned. There is an old Zen saying ‘Better than learning it, get used to it.’ These words could usefully hang over every desk and every office in the country, along with the accompanying injunction to concentrate on what is now being done. Completing the one thing now before going on to the next and without worrying about all the hundreds of other things awaiting attention, will go a long way towards ensuring that work flows smoothly with each task being accomplished in its own time.