

Common themes and missing pieces: the educational value of postgraduate teaching development programmes

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present and discuss the findings of a literature review undertaken by three City University London members of staff, who are also members of a programme team that runs a professional development programme for higher education teachers. The original purpose of the literature review was to provide a deeper and more research-informed mechanism for evaluating and developing this programme. Whilst the review was focused in its intentions, its results suggest that the existing research terrain about such programmes might be characterised in terms of *common themes* (areas for which there is already a range of published research) and *missing pieces* (areas for which there appears to be a paucity of published material). The authors are now using these results to continue developing their own programme; they also see the results as a starting point for follow-up research. However, it is hoped that the review will be of relevance to a wider audience, encouraging others to undertake research to address the missing pieces and acting as a source for others to enhance their own teaching development programmes.

Key Words: teacher development programmes; postgraduate certificate; motivation; participant experience, participant support.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present and discuss the findings of a small-scale literature review undertaken by three staff at City University London, an established (pre-1992) UK university. We, the authors, are all members of a City programme team that runs a professional development programme for higher education teachers. (Such programmes are also referred to as teaching development programmes, TDPs). The original purpose of the literature review was to provide a more research-informed mechanism for evaluating and developing the programme, with focus upon areas that we have particular interests in. However, although it was undertaken within a number of parameters, it yielded some interesting broader findings, indicating that the existing research terrain about TDPs can be characterised in terms of *common themes* (areas for which there is already a range of published research) and *missing pieces* (areas for which there appears to be a paucity of published material). Consequently, following a more detailed discussion of the common themes and missing pieces, this paper argues that TDPs offer genuine educational value, though more research is needed to address the missing pieces so that such programmes may be enhanced and their value for participants and institutions demonstrated. We are now using these results to continue developing our own programme and to stimulate follow-up research.

The next section will provide a fuller rationale and discussion of the approach used for the literature review, followed by a brief contextual background about TDPs and then a themed

discussion of the existing research, identifying examples of both common themes and missing pieces. Finally, we pursue our argument that it is important to fill the missing pieces with new research, on the basis that the results of this research may serve to enhance such programmes and provide new impetus for their continued development.

Rationale for the review

This review was originally motivated by plans to undertake an evaluative study of a teaching development programme (TDP) at our own institution. We work together as part of a programme team for a TDP that has been running for twelve years and undertook this literature review as a means of informing its continuing development. Whilst conventional evaluations and reviews of the programme have taken place (for example, module feedback, annual programme evaluations, periodic review), it was felt that a project of this type would enable a deeper and more research-informed review to be undertaken. We had already identified some key issues of interest from the programme that have also been explored in the literature, such as learning content and curriculum and support provided for those undertaking programmes. There were, however, additional issues identified in feedback that were of interest to us, these being participants'¹ motivations to undertake the programme in the first place, their experiences of the programme, and the inter-professional (and inter-disciplinary) nature of the programme – issues which have not been addressed sufficiently in previous literature.

We therefore undertook a literature review, drawing on the themes already mentioned to inform the search, and used a time span of ten years, that reflecting approximately the period during which research in this area has become most prevalent. The search yielded a range of material which we then reviewed for the key themes noted above, though we removed some articles and added others where appropriate. We do not claim to provide a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, but one which is indicative of the research terrain in this area, and we therefore recognise that our recommendations and conclusions may not be generally applicable. Indeed, there are pieces which provide broader accounts about aspects of such programmes, such as Knight (2006), Cilliers and Herman (2010) and the more recent review of research about TDPs by Parsons *et al* (2012). For our literature review, we took the view that it might be useful to share findings via a journal article as a means of encouraging additional research and discussion.

Some background about teaching development programmes

Teaching development programmes (TDPs) are provided for new and experienced staff who have a lecturing or teaching role or another role which involves the facilitation of student learning. They tend to attract participants from a range of backgrounds (Butcher and Stoncel, 2012), and are focused on teaching in higher education (as opposed to, for example, secondary or further education). Participants can gain different qualifications through undertaking a TDP, depending on how many modules they undertake and how many credits they earn. For example, qualifications may be awarded at the levels of postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma and, at some institutions, MA. Our own TDP

¹ Note that we use the term 'participants' to refer to staff, students or learners who undertake such programmes.

is a modular programme which enables staff involved in learning and teaching to undertake individual modules for professional development or gain a postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma or MA in Academic Practice. All PhD students involved in teaching and all new staff with no teaching qualification are recommended to attend at least the first module.

Whilst these programmes are now located in institutions around the world (Trigwell, Rodriguez and Han, 2012), many of those in the UK evolved following the Dearing Review (NCIHE, 1997) and most are now accredited by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA). Questions might be raised as to what teacher development *is*, although Day (1999) offers a useful definition as ‘...the process by which... teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purpose of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills, planning and practice... through each phase of their teaching lives’. It should be recognised that different studies have provided varying accounts concerning the educational value of TDPs. Knight (2006) concluded that they represent an ‘untested’ way to improve teaching quality in higher education. Conversely, authors such as Bamber (2002) believe that they have an important role to play and recommendations from the (UK) Browne Report (Browne, 2010) suggest that such programmes have a future.

Having contextualised the issues, we move on to discuss some of the research undertaken about TDPs, beginning with the common themes and, in the section after that, the missing pieces.

Common themes

Learning content and curriculum

The learning content and curriculum of TDPs are broadly similar across many institutions. TDPs are typically modular in structure, are undertaken on a part-time basis and comprise summative assessments, usually leading to certification or accreditation. Many are developed and delivered by academic staff working within a central university department (very few are localised to specific departments) and, in some institutions, teaching is undertaken by guest academic lecturers from other departments or external institutions (Cilliers and Herman 2010; Bamber, 2008; Donnelly, 2008; Ginns *et al*, 2008; Hanbury *et al*, 2008; Quinn, 2003; Gibbs and Coffey, 2000).

In terms of their learning outcomes, most TDPs set out to develop and improve the teaching skills of their participants, often seeking to move them from a teacher-centric to a student-centric approach, increasing confidence and encouraging reflection within and about practice to put ‘...teachers on a trajectory of continuing professional development’ (Gibbs and Coffey, 2000). Some TDP developers adopt a ‘practice what you preach’ approach, deliberately deploying advocated teaching techniques both to introduce participants to these and to familiarise them with their use (Cilliers and Herman, 2010). As for TDP learning outcomes, since Knight (2006) found them unclear for some participants, programme developers may well face challenge in conveying outcomes which are specific to each participant’s needs, these often depending on different levels of teaching experience, disciplinary backgrounds and working contexts.

Many TDPs begin with an introductory or foundation module which tends to cover key concepts such as reflective practice, constructive alignment, student approaches to learning and scholarship of teaching. Our own internet enquiries confirmed that this is the case at many UK and some overseas institutions. TDPs also contain modules which focus on assessment design, feedback, curriculum design, and development and evaluation of teaching (Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Kalbinder and Peseta, 2009; Ginns *et al*, 2008; Stes *et al*, 2007; Quinn, 2003). Some address overarching higher education issues that impact on the teaching and learning context (Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Quinn, 2003), in addition to addressing the use of technology in teaching (Cilliers and Herman, 2010). In terms of assessment, TDPs typically require participants to develop some sort of reflective teaching portfolio or teaching plan to evidence the learning achieved over the duration of the programme (Butcher and Stoncel, 2012; Ginns *et al*, 2008; Stes *et al*, 2007). Furthermore, in some cases, a participant cannot pass a TDP if s/he has failed to meet a minimum attendance requirement (Stes *et al*, 2007).

It has also been suggested that the teaching and learning content and approaches used in TDPs are rarely subject- or discipline-specific: they focus too heavily on generic skills and can sometimes be incompatible with teaching practice in participants' own departments (Smith, 2011; Hanbury *et al*, 2008; Lisewski, 2006; Trowler and Cooper, 2002). In responding to these criticisms, some TDP developers have designed their teaching and learning content so that participants are encouraged to engage actively with the teaching nuances characteristic of their differing discipline areas (Quinn, 2003). Yet some authors take the view that there is much to gain from the interdisciplinary exchanges and knowledge-sharing that occurs when participants of varying disciplinary backgrounds undertake a TDP (See, for example, Lisewski, 2006). This issue will be revisited in the missing pieces discussion, there being a need for more discipline-based studies, a view also advocated by Amundsen and Wilson (2012).

Departmental, faculty or institutional support for participants undertaking TDPs

The literature points to a mixture of experiences in terms of the support, encouragement and time that participants are given by their departments and institutions to undertake TDPs. Many studies indicate that participants find it challenging to manage their time and workload when studying for a TDP (Smith, 2011; Kalbinder and Pesata, 2009; Hanbury *et al*, 2008). Consequently, when department heads and line managers help reduce workload, participants find this reduces pressure and enables them more fully to engage in and benefit from the programme (Donnelly, 2008). Such departmental support can, in some institutions, extend to encouraging those who have completed TDPs to undertake further teaching-related professional development activities (Donnelly, 2008; Ginns *et al*, 2008; Gibbs and Coffey, 2000). In addition, some institutions financially reward departments whose staff undertake a TDP (Ginns *et al*, 2008). However, the literature also suggests that some participants of TDPs find that their home departments don't draw on or make use of their newly-acquired teaching skills and are less keen than they might be in their attempts to implement new teaching strategies (Donnelly, 2008; Stes *et al*, 2007). Some participants find themselves alone in championing teaching and learning developments, this being difficult in departments where teaching is not promoted (Hanbury *et al*, 2008; Gibbs and Coffey, 2000). Gibbs and Coffey (2004) have described TDPs as offering, for some participants, '...a kind of "alternative culture" that counter-balanced the negative influences of the culture of teachers' departments' (Gibbs and Coffey, 2004, 98).

Application of theoretical frameworks

This theme concerns the use of theoretical frameworks that have been used to inform research about TDPs. A number of such studies have been theorised, with Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice theory providing a popular lens for researchers. For instance, Trowler and Knight (2000) examined experiences of new academic staff, finding that they gained substantial learning within communities of practice. Viskovic (2006) researched teacher development in three institutions in New Zealand and concluded that teachers gained considerable teaching knowledge informally and through their engagement with communities of practice. Lisewski (2006) also considered TDPs in relation to a communities of practice framework, and outlined a taxonomy whereby TDPs can be considered in terms of four quadrants depending on their disciplinary / interdisciplinary contexts and whether they allow for centralised and de-situated or decentralised and situated practice. To elaborate, the horizontal part of the taxonomy distinguishes between centralised / de-situated practice and decentralised / situated practice and the vertical axis foregrounds disciplinary and interdisciplinary differences.

Studies of TDPs have been theorised through other approaches as well. Some have drawn on forms of learning and knowledge and, in particular, Eraut's (2000) distinction between formal and non-formal learning. Eraut (2000, 2004) has written widely about non-formal learning, which, he explains, usually occurs through practices and routines that learners are not necessarily aware of. Indeed, in research on the effects of postgraduate certificate courses in teaching and learning (based on eight institutions, and drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data), Knight (2006) found that non-formal and social learning amongst participants took precedence over more formal provision. Other authors have employed a disciplinary context for their analyses. Neumann *et al* (2002, 406) offered a conceptual framework which '...set out to explore different aspects of the domain of teaching and learning, highlighting the contrasts between such aspects within... four disciplinary groupings'. Neumann *et al* (2002) consider areas such as the curriculum, teaching approaches, assessment methods and feedback; they argue that approaches taken to such issues may reflect disciplinary differences. As a final example of theoretical application, Trowler and Cooper (2002) used the conceptual tool of Teaching and Learning Regimes (TLRs) to explore why some university staff appear to benefit more from TDPs than others, where a TLR is '...a constellation of rules, assumptions, practices and relationships related to teaching and learning issues in higher education' (p. 224).

Approaches used to evaluate programmes

We recently began an evaluation of our own TDP, so it was important to review the work of others to inform this evaluation. Until the beginning of 2000, there was relatively limited published literature systematically evaluating TDPs (Bamber, 2008). Bamber herself surveyed ninety-three institutions and found that any evidence of the impact of such programmes was mostly anecdotal (Bamber, 2002). *Self-reporting*² has been undertaken through questionnaires and interviews on completion of such programmes and has been a common method of gaining data for these studies (Butcher and Stoncel, 2012; Smith, 2011; Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Donnelly, 2008; Ginns *et al*, 2008; Stes *et al*, 2007; Quinn, 2003).

² i.e. individuals reflecting on their own experience and any impact on their practice

There continues to be value in the use of self-reporting tools, such as extracts from participants' reflective writing and tools that measure a change in teaching approaches, such as those of Bamber (2008), Prosser *et al* (2006), Coffey and Gibbs (2001), Gibbs and Coffey (2000) and Prosser and Trigwell (1999).

With the increasing financial constraints in higher education and possible reductions in staffing across universities, centres or departments that run TDPs, it becomes more likely that programme teams may be asked to demonstrate impact of their programmes for their respective institutions. Studies that have used a combination of evaluative approaches and tools which look at the impact beyond self-reporting may be seen as providing more credible evidence of the value of these programmes (Hanbury *et al*, 2008; Coffey and Gibbs, 2001). Gibbs and Coffey (2004) included students' views of their teaching and learning experiences through two tools that measured students' perceptions of their teachers' skills and their approach to learning (Coffey and Gibbs, 2001; Ramsden, 1991). Hanbury *et al* (2008) also included data from programme leaders, departmental heads and pro-vice-chancellors so that any perceived impact on departmental and institutional teaching practices could be explored. Trigwell *et al* (2012) added indicators of the scholarship of teaching via applications for teaching development grants and self-nomination for teaching awards (not previously used in the literature) to the questionnaires for student satisfaction and student course experience. Their findings provided evidence of the impact of the TDPs they studied (Trigwell *et al*, 2012). For example, academic staff who successfully undertook a development programme (TDP) were more likely to receive a teaching grant or award from their institution than colleagues who did not complete such a programme.

Many studies have evaluated TDPs using only one or two cohorts of participants, but there are also examples of longitudinal studies encompassing several cohorts – and which are therefore, arguably, of real value to the educational developer. These include studies over three years (Donnelly, 2008; Gibbs and Coffey, 2004; Quinn, 2003), five years (Hanbury *et al*, 2008), eight years (Bamber, 2008) and ten years (Trigwell *et al*, 2012). There has been a range of large-scale studies which provide information about key issues such as how teachers learn from these programmes, whether they lead to changes in practice and what concepts are being taught (Knight, 2006; Prosser *et al*, 2006; Gibbs and Coffey, 2004). Still, although such findings are useful, they are not able to take account of the individual institutional context in the same way as small-scale studies (Bamber, 2008). This suggests that a combination of approaches is required.

Overall, it is clear from this review that planning a systematic and rigorous evaluation is a complex practice, but such planning must be appropriate if findings are to be meaningful and valuable.

Missing pieces

As noted in the introduction, we undertook this literature review as a means of informing the continuing development of our own programme. Having discussed some of the common themes identified as a result of the literature review, the section below identifies additional areas that appeared to be missing or less well-represented in the literature. The areas are: participant motivation to undertake programmes, participant experiences and the inter-professional nature of programmes.

Participant motivation

Most TDPs are aimed at new academic staff who are teaching across a range of subject disciplines (Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Bamber, 2008; Donnelly, 2008; Gibbs and Coffey, 2000). Some of these programmes are now compulsory or include a compulsory component, especially for new staff (Butcher and Stoncel, 2012; Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Bamber, 2008; Donnelly, 2008). However, some remain optional. Consequently, where this is the case and where participants elect to undertake modules themselves, it would be interesting to know more about participants' motivation to undertake modules or programmes of this type in the first place. Those who undertake TDPs have to commit to attending class and undertaking large amounts of independent study, usually in addition to their professional role, and so, in such cases, there is presumably some additional personal motivation for attending – or is there? Very few studies have explored participant motivation in this context, although Cilliers and Herman (2010) found that 20% of the staff who had undertaken a programme believed that it had increased their chances of promotion. Nonetheless, we have found (albeit anecdotally) that participants undertaking the TDP at our institution have several reasons for doing so. For example, some of them want to develop their teaching; others enrol following a recommendation by a colleague, whilst others still believe it is important to have a recognised qualification in higher education teaching. But, whilst these kinds of comments are useful, we are currently seeking to understand participant motivation for undertaking a TDP using a more rigorous research approach.

Participant experiences as a process of personal development

The experiences of participants undertaking TDPs represents another area in which there is some discussion in the literature but where further exploration is warranted. As mentioned in the previous section, there has already been some discussion of participant experiences. There is also discussion in the literature of how the programme may have had impact on participants' teaching. For example, in some studies, participants reported that, as the programme had changed their views, they thought more critically about how they taught and assessed students and were more student-focused (Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Donnelly, 2008; Ginns *et al*, 2008; Hanbury *et al*, 2008). Participants also reported an increase both in knowledge of topics studied and in personal job satisfaction (Cilliers and Herman, 2010). Yet there is limited discussion of participants' experiences of taking the programme and whether this helped them develop personally. Did undertaking a TDP provide them with an opportunity to review their role and how they undertook aspects of this role? How did they feel about engaging in assessment? Reflection is an important component of many TDPs and, in her study, Quinn (2003) found that participants felt reflection was valuable as it contributed to their development. However, the impact of reflective activities promoted by TDPs is not discussed in detail in the literature. We are therefore interested in both the impact the programme has on participants' practice and their experiences of such programmes as a process of development.

Inter-professional nature of postgraduate teaching development programmes

In an earlier section of this article, some discussion was provided about literature which referred to the benefits and drawbacks connected to the inter-professional nature of TDPs. TDPs are inter-professional in that, usually, participants have varied disciplinary backgrounds. However, aside from a brief observation of this, relatively little has been done

to assess the true merits of TDPs' enabling of inter-professional and inter-disciplinary learning, which is arguably important, as it works well in other fields such as health. Anecdotally, we know from the participants on our own TDP that they value hearing about each other's practice, getting to know staff from across the institution and realising that often they share similar challenges. However, we do not know if, or to what extent, this provides any value in terms of sharing good practice and implementing cross-disciplinary practices. It would be a useful area to explore in more detail. This issue of disciplinarity is taken up by Amundsen and Wilson (2012), whose review of educational development yielded a six-cluster framework for 'understanding' areas of educational development practice and for 'investigating the effectiveness' of educational development practice. These clusters, as identified by the authors, are: the skill focus cluster; the method focus cluster; the reflection focus cluster; the institutional focus cluster; the disciplinary focus cluster and the action research or inquiry-focused cluster. The authors conclude that five of these clusters '...have integrity as descriptors of educational development practice and underlying thinking' (p. 111), the possible exception being the discipline focus cluster, for which they located just four articles within the parameters of their own review, again (we would argue) pointing to a need for more work with this focus.

Conclusion

This article has its origins in the development of a teaching development programme at one UK-based university. In order to facilitate a fuller evaluation of that programme, we decided to conduct a literature review about research undertaken about different elements of such programmes *per se*, within a set of pre-determined parameters. The literature review was not intended to be comprehensive because it was initially being undertaken to underpin our own future study and we recognise that this represents a necessary limitation of our review. Following completion of the review, we have presented the argument that the research terrain about such programmes may be characterised by common themes and missing pieces, examples of each of which have been identified above. Of course, it could be argued that many other research areas could be interpreted in the same way; after all, there are areas in most disciplines or fields of study that warrant or need further investigation. However, we would also advocate that our identification of missing areas of research about TDPs is important. There is a need, possibly an urgent need, for more research to be undertaken to address the missing pieces in order for such programmes to be enhanced and to provide a more complete understanding of their value and of their limitations. TDPs do tend to be scrutinised and, at a time of change and challenge in the sector, it is important that those who provide them are equipped to ensure that they are beneficial to those who undertake them and, ultimately, to students whom the participants themselves teach. This is a task to which we, as a programme team and authors of this article, shall now seek to contribute. However, we hope that our literature review will also be of value to others in the sector, as they too may wish to help address or consider the missing pieces and use both this literature review and subsequent studies as a mechanism to enhance their own programmes.

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