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

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present and discuss the findings of a literature review undertaken by three members of staff based at City University London, 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 the aforementioned programme. Whilst focused in its intentions, the results of the review 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, and 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 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 based project undertaken by three staff at City University London, an established (pre-1992) UK-based university. At City, we, the authors, are all members of a programme team that runs a professional development programme for higher education teachers (such programmes are also referred to as teaching development programmes, abbreviated to *TDPs* hereon). The original purpose of the literature review was to provide a more research-informed mechanism for evaluating and developing the programme, and one focused around areas that we have particular interests in. However, although it was undertaken within a number of parameters, it yielded some interesting 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, it will be argued that TDPs offer genuine educational value but that more research is needed to address the missing pieces in order for such programmes to be enhanced further and as a means of demonstrating their value for participants and institutions. We are now using these results to continue developing our own programme and as a starting point for follow-up research.

The next section will provide a fuller rationale and discussion of the approach used for the literature review, after which we provide a brief contextual background about TDPs. Following this, we offer a themed discussion of the existing research, identifying examples of both common themes and missing pieces. Finally, we develop our argument that it is important to fill the missing pieces with new research, on the basis that the results of such research can 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 12 years, and undertook this literature review as a means of informing its on-going 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 aforementioned themes to inform the search, and used a time span of ten years, that time span 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, whilst, where appropriate, some articles were removed and others added. We do not claim to provide a comprehensive review of the literature, but one which is indicative of the research terrain in this area, and we recognise that this must limit the generalisability of our recommendations and conclusions. 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

¹ Note that we use the term 'participants' to refer to staff, students or learners who undertake such 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 postgraduate certificate, postgraduate diploma, and, at some institutions, MA levels. Our own TDP 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 who have 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). There are questions that might be raised as to what teacher development *is*, although Day (1999, 4) 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 needs to 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) opine that they have an important role to play, and recommendations from the (UK) Browne Report (Browne 2010) suggest that there remains a future for such programmes.

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 is broadly similar across many institutions. TDPs are typically modular in structure, 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 lecturers from academics based in other departments or external institutions (Gibbs and Coffey 2000; Quinn 2003; Bamber 2008; Donnelly 2008; Ginns, Kitay and Prosser 2008; Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008; Cilliers and Herman 2010).

In terms of their learning outcomes, most TDPs set out to develop and improve teaching skills of their participants, often seeking to move them from a teacher-centric to a student-centric approach, increasing confidence and encouraging reflection in and on practice to put ‘...teachers on a trajectory of continuing professional development’ (Gibbs and Coffey 2000, 37). A *practice what you preach* approach is used by some TDP developers, meaning that they purposefully make use of advocated teaching techniques in order to introduce and enhance participants’ familiarity with their use (Cilliers and Herman 2010). Returning to TDP learning outcomes, Knight (2006) found that they were unclear for some participants: this may reflect the challenge that programme developers have in conveying outcomes which are specific to each participant’s needs, needs which often depend on different levels of teaching experience, disciplinary backgrounds and working contexts.

Many TDPs begin with an introductory or foundation module which represents the starting point for participants, and 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 based and some overseas institutions. TDPs also contain modules which focus on assessment design, feedback, curriculum design, and development and evaluation of teaching (Quinn 2003; Stes, Clement and Van Petegem 2007; Ginns, Kitay and Prosser 2008; Kalbinder and Peseta 2009; Cilliers and Herman 2010). Some address overarching higher education issues that impact on the teaching and learning context (e.g. Quinn 2003; Cilliers and Herman 2010), in addition to addressing the use of technology in teaching (e.g. 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 (Stes, Clement and Van Petegem 2007; Ginns, Kitay and Prosser 2008; Butcher and Stoncel 2012). Further, in some cases, a participant cannot pass a TDP if they have failed to meet a minimum attendance requirement (Stes, Clement and Van Petegem 2007).

It has also been suggested that the teaching and learning content and approaches used in TDPs are rarely subject or discipline-specific, focus too heavily on generic skills, and can sometimes lack congruence to teaching practice in participants’ own departments (Trowler and Cooper 2002; Lisewski 2006; Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008; Smith 2011). In responding to these criticisms, some TDP developers have designed their teaching and learning content in a way that encourages participants to actively engage with the teaching nuances distinctive of their differing discipline areas (e.g. 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 in 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 (e.g. Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008; Kalbinder and Pesata 2009; Smith 2011). Consequently, when department heads and line managers help reduce workload, participants find this takes off the pressure and enables them to fully engage in and benefit from the programme (e.g. Donnelly 2008). Such departmental support can, in some institutions, further extend to encouraging completers of TDPs to undertake further teaching-related professional development activities (Gibbs and Coffey 2000; Donnelly 2008; Ginns, Kitay and Prosser 2008). In addition, some institutions financially reward departments whose staff undertake a TDP (Ginns, Kitay and Prosser 2008). However, the literature also suggests that some participants of TDPs find their home departments don't draw on or make use of their newfound teaching skills, and less keen than they might be in their attempts to implement new teaching strategies (Stes, Clement and Van Petegem 2007; Donnelly 2008). Some participants find themselves alone in championing teaching and learning developments, this being difficult in departments where teaching is not promoted (Gibbs and Coffey 2000; Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008). 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 centralized / de-situated practice and decentralized / situated practice and the vertical axis foregrounds disciplinary and interdisciplinary differences.

Studies on 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 in 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, Parry and Becher (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, Parry and Becher (2002) consider areas such as the curriculum, teaching approaches, assessment methods, and feedback, and 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 93 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 (Quinn 2003; Stes, Clement and Van Petegem 2007; Donnelly 2008; Ginns, Kitay and Proser 2008; Cilliers and Herman 2010; Smith 2011; Butcher and Stoncel 2012). 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 Prosser and Trigwell (1999), Gibbs and Coffey (2000), Coffey and Gibbs (2001), Prosser et al (2006) and Bamber (2008).

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 (Coffey and Gibbs 2001; Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008). 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 (Ramsden 1991; Coffey and Gibbs 2001). Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson (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, Rodriguez and Han (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

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

studied (Trigwell, Rodriguez and Han 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, as compared with 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 (Quinn 2003; Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Donnelly 2008), five years (Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008), eight years (Bamber 2008) and ten years (Trigwell, Rodriguez and Han 2012). There have 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 (Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Knight 2006; Prosser et al 2006). 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 needs appropriate planning if findings are to be meaningful and valuable.

Missing pieces

As noted in the introduction, we undertook this literature review as a means to further inform the continued 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 motivations' to undertake programmes; participant experiences; and the inter-professional nature of programmes.

Participant motivation

Most TDPs are aimed towards new academic staff who are teaching across a range of subject disciplines (Gibbs and Coffey 2000; Bamber 2008; Donnelly 2008; Cilliers and Herman 2010). Some of these programmes are now compulsory or include a compulsory component, especially for new staff (Bamber 2008; Donnelly 2008; Cilliers and Herman 2010; Butcher and Stoncel 2012). 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 impacted on participants' teaching. For example, in some studies participants reported that the programme had changed their views so they thought more critically about how they taught and assessed students and were more student focused (Donnelly 2008; Ginns, Kitay and Prosser 2008; Hanbury, Prosser and Rickinson 2008; Cilliers and Herman 2010). Participants also reported an increase in knowledge of topics studied and an increase in their personal job satisfaction (Cilliers and Herman 2010). Yet there is limited discussion of the participants' experiences of taking the programme and whether this helped them develop personally. Did undertaking a TDP provide participants 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 their participants' practice, but also the participants' 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 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 the fact 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 six 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 further 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 which we, as a programme team and authors of this article, will now seek to contribute to. 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 further enhance their own programmes.

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