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Project Report

Understanding higher professional learning and work-based learning

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Introduction

This paper examines the results of a year long research project (2005–2006) based in the Centre for Excellence in Work-Based Learning. The research investigates the benefits and effects of the Doctor in Education (EdD) programme, the processes by which learning takes place, the interconnections between learning on the EdD and workplace learning, and the way in which professional practice transforms through workplace research.

The degree of Doctor in Education of the University of London was established in 1996. The EdD is a professional doctorate designed for experienced professionals in education who wish to extend their professional expertise and training. Its focus is on research in relation to professional practice.

The research aims and methodology

Two important aims of this research are to examine success factors in completing the EdD and to develop further understanding about the ways in which the EdD programme connects with workplace research,

participants' learning and the changes they are introducing to their work context.

The research approach is based on the concept of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). The roots of AI are in organisational change processes: appreciate the best of what is; envision what might be; engage in dialogue to generate new knowledge; innovate (Brighouse & Woods, 1999: 146).

The data were collected in two ways: in face-to-face meetings with participants on occasions when they were visiting the organisation for taught courses and through email questionnaires. This was followed by an analysis of a sample of EdD participants' reflective statements drawn from their coursework. Data were collected from a sample of EdD participants across all the cohorts to gain knowledge about the transformation of professional practice through workplace research. In all, 85 participants responses are analysed.

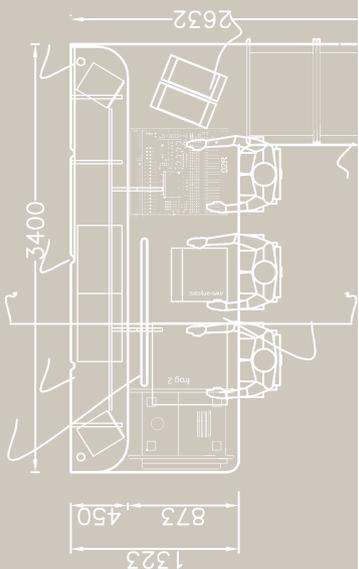
The construction of a model – part one

A model is constructed to makes sense of participants' learning and the connections with change in their workplace. The model identifies three interconnected dimensions: the value of belonging to a community, the development of professional, theoretical and conceptual frameworks and be(com)ing a workplace researcher (see appendix 1).

A note about coding To protect the anonymity of the participants the following codes are used:

For example, '12F 4' = 1: 'international', 2: number in the sample, F: female 4: year of study;

H7M 3 = H: 'home', 7: number in the sample, M: male, 3: year of study.



The value of belonging to a community

It was clear when analysing the data this was the single most important element for students in supporting their learning and in supporting them to complete their course of study. For example, when asked "What's the best thing about the EdD?" some responses specifically mentioned "working with others in a community" (H4F 3). Others mentioned specific hallmarks that we understand to be central in a community. For example: 'agency', 'belongingness', 'cohesion', 'diversity' (Watkins, 2005: 40). The first, 'agency' is illustrated in the following quote:

"I have a great fear of 'presenting' but, in the group I worked with, I found that I was a student who contributed (I7F 3)."

The second, 'belongingness' can be seen in the following response:

"We are fellow travellers on a journey, excited about the destination but realizing the journey itself is what's most valuable (H7M 3)."

The positive feelings generated by belonging to the EdD community were frequently mentioned. As one participant put it: "The excitement of learning, meeting fellow students some evenings to tease out ideas, feeling that I am changing and growing (I8F 3)."

'Cohesion', was often seen in the ways in which participants talked about the reciprocal systems of support:

"The fact that you began with a group of people and had two years in which to develop the building blocks of research through the termly modules (I7F 3)."

Of the four hallmarks, 'diversity', was a theme that appeared most often. For example:

"The diversity of my peer group, perhaps, and the adaptability of IOE staff in supporting that diversity. In retrospect, however, that support for diversity was fundamental – it creates a "can do" atmosphere where people think "well, if s/he can do it, so can I". I suppose I'm saying it's far less intellectually elitist than I was preparing myself for (H10M 3)."

The majority of comments indicate to us a sense of liberation and emancipation. What they describe as their community is inclusive and non-hierarchical.

Particular processes are likely to be present in a community, for example 'action together', 'collaboration', 'dialogue' (Watkins, *ibid*).

In most responses there was an emphasis on the importance of the social experience:

"Having been registered for a PhD in 1969/70 – which was an experience of total isolation – this was a totally different approach that emphasised the social nature of learning (H14 M 4)."

The valuing of peers in social learning situations suggests a co-construction model of learning. It is non-hierarchical and recognises the expertise of peers. Where teachers and students have different views of the teaching/learning process this creates tension (Carnell, 2007) and points to a need for explicit discussion about the learning process.

The hallmarks of a community, suggested by Watkins (2005) are illustrated throughout the participants' responses and emphasise the social process of learning as students participate in a community – a group of experts collaborating to accomplish a common goal (Lave & Wenger, 1991, cited in Evans, *et al* 2006). In the responses from the EdD participants we can identify further connections with Wenger's work (*ibid*: 5): learning is a simultaneous process of belonging (to a community of practice), of becoming (developing an identity as member of this community), of experiencing (the meaning of the common work task).

Developing professional, theoretical and conceptual frameworks

What connects the previous theme to this one is the community's specific purposes. In the case of the EdD these include developing professional, theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

A number of elements emerge that suggest a developmental process allowing participants to develop frameworks. These are: new ways of noticing professional practice

(professional frameworks); an explicit focus on the theorising professional practice (theoretical frameworks); the way in which participants are enabled to communicate difficult concepts (conceptual frameworks).

Participants describe new ways of noticing professional practice by stepping back from it. For example, "It allows me to take a helicopter view" (H11 F1). Another said: "I think more now about my professional practice and my workplace. I am able to distance myself from the minutia and have an overview" (H11 F1). One said the EdD experience: 'probably alters the mind set more than other forms of professional development and is something that evolves from the individual' (I7F 3). Others referred to: 'new learning, viewing through a new perspective providing new insight into research' (H5F 3).

There is a strong sense of the development of professional frameworks when participants get in touch with ideals that often get lost in the daily business of work in the intellectual and physical space provided by the EdD.

Many other participants talked about how the experience encourages a broader vision:

"It (the EdD) is an important vehicle for enhancing professional learning, for opening up a world of up-to-date research and thinking to the regular practitioner and facilitating the development of a broader vision of professionalism and professional practice (H12 F 4)."

An explicit focus on theorising professional practice was appreciated in the development of theoretical frameworks:

"Practitioner focus is theorised – a nice marriage of two different aspects of work. Different from purely skills based CPD such as 'Coaching' or from purely discipline-based CPD (H14 F 2)."

"The application of having to support my practice to help theorise and frame aspects of practice (H5F 3)."

A number of references were made to the close relationship between the EdD

programme and issues of the workplace:
"The course is very closely related to my professional and political experience. This helps me enrich my knowledge, analyse my practice and update it in view of current international practices and research (I3M 3)."

The interrogation of literature was also identified as helpful in critiquing professional practice:

"Developing a deeper understanding of academic literature surrounding my professional role (H3F 3)."

When analysing the data we noticed how participants drew attention to the way in which they were enabled to communicate difficult concepts and developed conceptual frameworks. This process challenges their thinking and consequently affects their practice:

"The opportunities to do things (present, poster conference etc.) that allow a practice at working at communicating what you are doing, when the concepts you want to communicate are often hard and abstracted. So I think I am saying for me there has been an apprenticeship element to the course (I2F 4)."

"It provides the vocabulary to express what you thought about but couldn't say before, challenges your thinking, your beliefs and thus your practice (I8F 3)."

The development of the various frameworks described (professional, theoretical and conceptual) above seem to contribute to the participants' confidence in becoming published:

"I was interested in doing the EdD because I had a real interest in researching; writing about and hopefully articulating concerns I had about the representation and quality of leaders in the Post-16 sector. I realised that the only way to get 'heard' at a policy and strategy level was to engage with this method of communication and discourse that informs the key decision-makers in

this society. This was the initial drive for me to undertake the programme and in many ways – it still is (H9F 4)."

Be(com)ing a workplace researcher

This section has a similar developmental feel also. The stages seem to indicate: an induction into the world of research; a broadened perspective of the different approaches to research; becoming more critical and finally seeing research as a way of being.

It is interesting to note that despite participants' previous qualifications, for example, an MA which involves carrying out research, many suggested that when they started the EdD programme they were often worried about the research element. One said it had become: "less threatening" (I1F 4). Some students in their fourth year reflect on their experience:

"I don't find it scary any more. I think I always thought of research as very far removed from classrooms and teachers and children and generating a knowledge that was unusable. But I have moved far more towards the idea of evidence-based practice (I2F 4)."

These comments seem to suggest that EdD participants appreciate the research focus for professionals as the EdD has been designed for "practising professionals, as opposed to would-be academics or researchers... and accommodates... more practical forms of research" (Lester, 2004: 757).

Many participants remarked that the EdD programme had broadened their perspectives of different research approaches:

"Gaining knowledge of the different types of research and the different schools of research. This is expanding my view of how we can conduct research at work (H4F 3)."

"My competence as a researcher has developed immeasurably. I am much more comfortable with a variety of theoretical perspectives than I used to be (H10M 3)."

Participants described the ways in which they were becoming more critical as a result of the research experiences: "critical and analytical" (I4M 3 and I8F 3) and do not take numbers and statistics for granted (I5M 4). Others added that they were becoming: "Much more critical, not just about methodology but about philosophical stance of researchers and whether this is clear in their descriptions" (I8F 3). "Others agree: I have been more attentive to the epistemology behind arguments and more analytical" (I4M 3).

There was the distinct impression from some participants that research had become part of how they approached professional practice – a way of being:

"I believe that all change should be sustained by research. In fact, personally I kept studying without interruptions at a Masters level and presently at doctorate level immediately after I finished my B.Ed. course (I3M 3)."

"I now see it as important management tool, basis for policy- /decision-making (H7M 3)."

"I think more teachers in classrooms ought to be involved in collaborative projects – examining your own context is so enlightening and I think that despite the rhetoric I often work with teachers and schools that are not critically reflecting on their practice – policy is changing too fast for things to firm enough in their own minds to engage in anything reflective (I2F 4)."

The construction of a model – part two

When analysing the data we noticed that a number of responses 'straddled' the three circles. They seemed to 'fit' the physical spaces between the circles – the interface between one circle and another. On further reflection these spaces suggested particular actions and interactions that we felt indicated important revelations into the change processes that the participants undergo during the experience of the EdD programme.

The three overlapping circles in the model suggest an interface between:

- n themes A and B: belonging to a learning community and developing professional, theoretical and conceptual frameworks. We see evidence of this being expressed in changes in the learner. Participants express a new sense of identity;
- n themes A and C: belonging to a community and be(com)ing a workplace researcher. We see evidence of this being expressed in the enactment of processes and relationships. Participants have spoken about the ways in which they have utilised the way of being on the EdD programme and how they operate in the workplace;
- n themes B and C: developing professional, theoretical and conceptual frameworks and be(com)ing a workplace researcher. We see evidence of this being expressed in the ways in which the practices of the workplace are challenged and transformed. Participants have spoken about the ways in which their workplace practices are questioned and changed as a result of their experiences on the EdD programme (see appendix 2).

Changes in the learner (interface A and B)

While involved in this research a number of participants reflected on their ability to learn about their own learning and note changes in themselves as learners. This meta-level dimension is important as meta-learners are more able to be strategic about their learning and the changes they wish to make. Meta-learning is a concept not widely recognised in HE (Jackson, 2004). It is about helping people connect their thinking about their own learning to actions and behaviours that engage them in learning strategically (ibid: 391).

Here participants are able to describe what they have learned about their own learning: "I am more patient, aware of process, less in 'completer' mode, but not without a lot of effort!" (H12 F 4); "I am becoming more of a reflective practitioner in my professional role" (H3F 3); "Empathy! Gave me greater insight into requirements for student learning from

returning to study myself" (H5F 3); 'Being more critical, questioning sources and interpretations' (H13 F 4); "What I do on the Ed.D. has helped me to learn more about myself and increase my knowledge" (I 6M). "The EdD programme makes me be more reflective about my job (because it's about developing the job as well as myself)... the opportunity to enhance personal and professional learning" (H12 F 4).

In the above comments we see evidence of personal and professional learning as being inextricably linked.

The responses seem to indicate how the participants are more secure as learners as they come to understand their learning. Building meta-learning capacity, Meyer & Norton (2004) argue, is as important as learning about specific subject content, epistemologies and discipline mores.

Many of the participants spoke specifically about how writing for the assessment contributed to their learning.

Learning to write and write well, what a gift – not just for my EdD but for the other part of my life – this supports learning across all dimensions' (I1F 4)."

Connected to the process of writing is the way in which participants learned to find their own voice:

"How quickly one forgets how to write or think for oneself! I have spent many years working for the Department of Education and my own "voice" was lost and I found I was thinking with limited confidence as I have spent so many years suppressing my own point of views and representing the DfES instead (H4F 3).

A distinction is made by Watkins (2005) between a community of learners and a learning community. A 'learning community' learns about itself, so reflection (of a collective sort) and learning about learning (again collectively) are present. Many participants talked about their growing awareness of their own learning but an explicit focus on collective learning was missing in the narratives.

The enactment of processes and relationships (interface A and C)

Another area of change we noticed when analysing the data was to do with the way participants were approaching their professional role differently as a result of being on the EdD programme. For example:

“I debate much more than I ever did, in both settings. So I take what works in one setting for learning and try to utilise it in another”(I2F 4);

“I have used and applied my learning directly in the teaching I do as an academic in my own University (I6M3).”

Some responses suggest a transfer of processes from one context to another, while in other cases there seems to be more of a radical shift. For example, the following quotations demonstrates how, as an effect of a change in conception about how professionals learn, their practices have changed:

“I am becoming far more ‘linguistic’ in my learning patterns as I prepare for teaching. I need to have a conversation to help me test ideas and the language in which I will communicate them. It doesn’t need to be with someone else and sometimes I will write to myself to ‘get it all out there’ and review it. I think I keep quiet much more. My teaching is more contingent as I have changed my view of how professionals learn. What I think and do really doesn’t matter – the point is how do I encourage/ stimulate a change process in others is the point. This was expertly modelled in EdD sessions (I2F 4).”

A theme running through these quotations is the change in the view of the learner. These responses suggest a shift to construction and co-construction models of learning; the role of teacher as provider of information has been challenged.

Others suggest how their relationships have changed. The following responses are typical: “I can now provide greater support to students undertaking research in my own institution” (H5F 3); “The EdD programme has allowed me to become /or have empathy

with other professionals in my workplace” (H6F 3); “Has increased my capacity to engage with colleagues at work on issues of professional practice with confidence” (H10M3).

Challenging and transforming workplace practice (interface B and C)

As we noted in the previous section, since being part of the EdD programme participants report a difference in the way they connect their learning on the EdD with their workplace. The interface suggests a dynamic process, the research element gives rise to new knowledge which in turn informs changes in practice, and so on (Lester, 2004). In this section, we also note different levels of engagement, for example, the use of research activities to extend practices, questioning what is going on in their workplaces, understanding interpersonal and political issues, applying academic rigour and some suggestions about changing the culture of the workplace.

In some responses we note the way in which participants make use of research activities to extend practices:

“I am more likely to engage /conduct research, more likely to seek data to support given issues, more likely to question work/reports/research presented at work (H4F 3).”

“The EdD has given me an added dimension to my own practice. I feel more informed, more confident and more flexible in my approach to my work (H9F 4).”

“When we are tackling an issue at work, I might draw on my gradually growing store of conceptual frameworks from the EdD to help me evaluate the alternatives available to us (H10M 3).”

We notice various ways in which participants are applying academic rigour:

“I am thinking more rigorously about good practice and what it means; I have been able to develop clearer ideas about my own professional development path, and to see how this can best be made to match my

personal development objectives (H10M 3).”

“My knowledge base has changed and I know more about what I’m doing. I am more widely read which has made me more flexible in my professional practice approach and if I really think about it, this has the potential to change the opportunities for me to earn more (although again I haven’t capitalised on this yet). I should also add that at times I have become a little cynical about the post-16 sector, which changes how I view fellow colleagues and professionals. This, I hasten to add, has made me even more ‘professional’ in my own approach (H9F 4).”

The above quotes illustrate the different conceptions that employers may hold in relation to the needs of the employer and the employee. Many of the examples given above suggest a narrow conception of ‘job-related training’ (Evans, et al 2006: 8) skills that may be used immediately, whereas learning on the EdD programme contributes to the participants understanding of their role and function within the wider organisation.

As Evans, et al (2006: 5) suggest the employment relationship is significant to workplace learning because the workplace is a site where workers experience unequal power relations between themselves and the employer. Antagonistic relationships are expressed, but may also involve a degree of cooperation and the establishment of consensus. Their research shows:

“...that attempts to improve workplace learning through a predominantly target-driven approach are often counterproductive. Such approaches can be seen in the proliferation of performance-management schemes and short-term training initiatives and provision. The findings emphasize two weaknesses and one omission with such approaches. They are underpinned by a view of learning as the acquisition of skills and knowledge, rather than a more supportable view

of workplace learning as participation. As a result, they are often short-term in intended impact and overlook learning, which cannot be easily measured. They are undermined because some workers respond through strategic compliance and resistance rather than the enthusiasm intended by managers. They fail to address working practices and conditions of employment as key influences on workplace learning (ibid: 9).

Some of the EdD participants may feel restricted in their attempts to challenge and transform their workplace practices if they do not enjoy the support of a community in their own workplace context.

Closing thoughts

The research recognises that students may have very different professional purposes. For some it may be to increase their knowledge in order to feel competent in a new professional role, for others to develop research expertise to investigate professional practices and for others to develop academic skills required in HE.

The overall feeling from responses from participants is that they are very positive about the different forms of learning and the way in which practices are supporting their studies. The majority of graduates said they were happy with the EdD.

Our initial findings suggest there is general satisfaction with the EdD programme. This may be in part that many students have ‘academic’ purposes (eg teachers in FE/HE) but others seem to suggest that while the output (thesis etc.) is not directly relevant to their work, the process of arriving at it (research skills, academic discipline) has transferred to, and often transformed, their professional work.

Informing policy and practice

The research contributes to the field of academic development by extending understanding of student experiences in

higher education and connections with workplace learning. The findings inform policy and practice. Five suggestions emerge:

- n encourage and make explicit meta-level learning so that learners are more able to be strategic about their learning and the changes they wish to make (Jackson, 2004);
- n develop learning communities so reflection (of a collective sort) and learning about learning (again collectively) are present (Watkins, 2005);
- n use the students more as a resource, allow for more self-directed or 'lightly facilitated' discussions (18F 3), that is engage in co-constructive dialogue. Participants want to contribute and want to be seen as resources in co-constructive learning experiences;
- n encourage more collaborative research, writing and publishing between participants and between participants and staff;
- n challenge and transform our own workplace practices and learn from the experiences of our participants.

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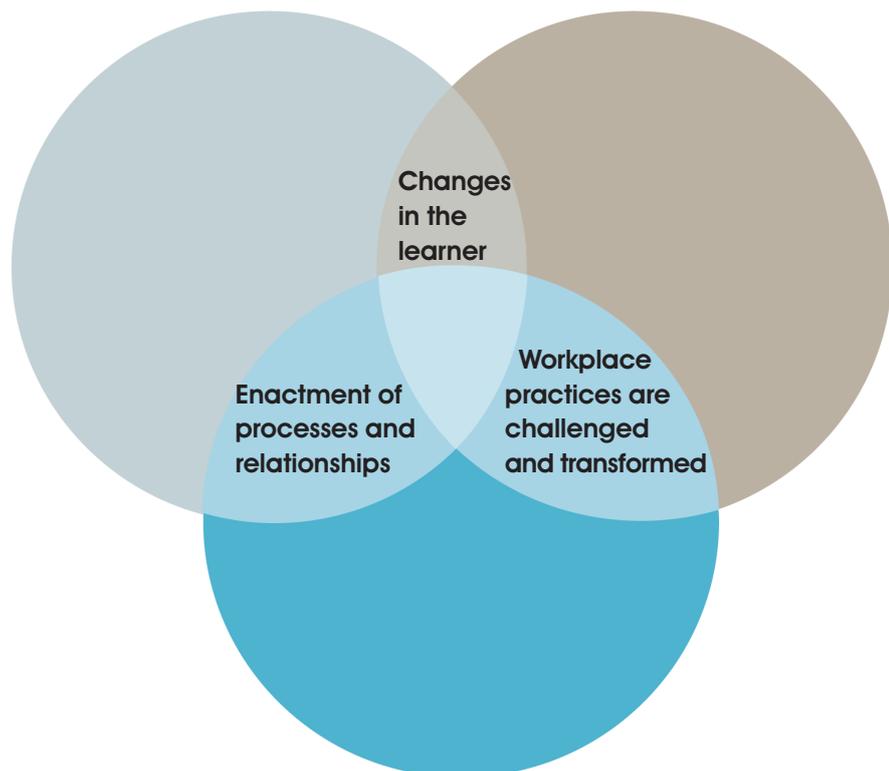
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Appendix 1



Appendix 2