

Professional bodies, CPD and informal learning: the case of conservation

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Abstract

Professional bodies in the UK are increasingly adopting formal continuing professional development schemes to encourage and in theory compel members to keep up-to-date and enhance their competence. Many of these schemes are based on a minimum time spent on approved development activities, although subsequent research has indicated that they may be relatively ineffective at generating useful updating while creating a burden of recording and evidencing. More recent developments include drawing on the Kolb / Honey and Mumford learning cycle to encourage individual relevance and planning, and while this is more supportive of informal activities it can downplay the value of serendipitous and intuitive learning. A scheme recently developed for conservators of cultural heritage aims to promote broader reflection on all kinds of learning while minimising unproductive recording.

Introduction

The majority of professional bodies in the UK have introduced, or are introducing, schemes to promote members' continuing professional development (CPD). Many of these schemes have a requirement for hours of study or accrual of points scored for approved activities, although recent research suggests that these are not necessarily effective in encouraging useful learning and updating. An ongoing problem with professional body CPD schemes is that they can be ineffective in ensuring that less proactive practitioners maintain an adequate level of competence, while creating requirements for recording learning and in some cases attending courses which can present an additional and largely superfluous burden for members who are already committed to ongoing development.

In 1998-99 three of the bodies representing conservators of cultural heritage developed a joint scheme to accredit their members, including a requirement for ongoing learning. This development has provided an opportunity to examine issues relating to CPD and practitioner learning in the context of a small and varied profession, and to work towards an approach which emphasises learning rather than recording.

The professional context

There are an estimated 2,000 practitioners in the UK who work to conserve and protect cultural heritage and works of art. These conservators or conservator-restorers are split between museums and galleries, national heritage organisations, and a growing private sector which handles work from public and charitable institutions as well as from private individuals and collections. Conservation is represented by at least eleven professional associations and groupings including Scottish and (pan-)

Irish bodies. There are also international bodies which accommodate individual membership, and a European confederation of conservation and restoration associations (ECCO).

Conservation covers a spectrum of activities which include preventative conservation through controlling the environment in which cultural artefacts are stored and exhibited, intervention to arrest decay, strengthen the object and remove accretions, and restoration to return objects to usable or substantially original condition. Restoration and purely preventative work represent opposite ends of the spectrum, with to an extent different aims and ethics; typically they also draw on different mixes of scientific, artistic and craft skills. The term 'conservation' is used here to cover all these activities.

The history of the professional associations in conservation has essentially been fragmentary until 1993, when eleven bodies agreed to meet under an umbrella which became known as the Conservation Forum, now constituted as the National Council for Conservation-Restoration (NCCR). A growing interest in developing recognisable professional standards and assessment has resulted in a number of individual accreditation schemes, and in 1998 three of the larger bodies - the UK Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (UKIC), the Institute for Paper Conservation (IPC) and the Society of Archivists (SoA) - formed a joint accreditation group under the umbrella of the Forum. The Group's remit was to develop a common accreditation scheme, including a continuing professional development component, which was acceptable to its member bodies and insofar as possible to the remaining Forum members. With additional support from the Museums and Galleries Commission and Historic Scotland, the scheme (now known as the [PACR scheme](#)) was developed and trialled during 1998 and 1999.

Continuing professional development

Continuing (or continuous) professional development has been described as "the maintenance and enhancement of the knowledge, expertise and competence of professionals throughout their careers according to a plan formulated with regard to the need of the professional, the employer, the profession and society" (Madden & Mitchell 1993, p12). Although updating and enhancement has inevitably been a feature of many professional careers for far longer, CPD as a concept was relatively unknown until at least the 1960s (Houle 1980), and only during the last ten to fifteen years of the twentieth century have professional bodies taken systematic steps to ensure their members continue their development on an ongoing basis. By the early 1990s Gear, McIntosh and Squires could comment that "the inadequacy of initial professional education as a preparation for one's entire working life is now well recognised by professional bodies. It is not just that knowledge dates, but that the very conception and interpretation of professional tasks and roles change over time" (1994, p77). Recognition of the need for CPD is now well-established, at least among the majority of professional institutions.

Professional bodies' rationales for CPD tend to focus most strongly on updating and the maintenance of competence. Welsh & Woodward (1989) identify maintaining competence and standards as the primary rationale for CPD, supported by increased public and client expectations of services provided by professionals, rising costs of

professional indemnity insurance, a need to improve competitiveness in world markets, and an increase in the use of formal quality assurance systems. Rising litigation and insurance claims are also a significant factor in creating pressures for verifiable updating (Pepperell 1987, Becher 1999). From a slightly different starting-point Sandelands (1998) suggests that combatting personal obsolescence will become a major theme due to endemic rates of change and because of economic globalisation, with its effect of creating increased competition and breaking down barriers to entry. Madden & Mitchell (1993) also point to occupations which are in the process of professionalisation using CPD schemes as part of their strategy to improve their credibility and status.

In spite of these pressures it is clear that some practitioners fail even to maintain an acceptable level of competence. Rogers & Shoemaker (1971) put forward a model of innovation in which a small minority of people drive innovation and change, a larger minority of 'pacesetters' quickly follow in taking it up, and a middle majority move forward more gradually. Bringing up the rear are the 'laggards' who are either left behind or move only when compelled. Although this is in some respects an oversimplified conception of change (for instance in comparison with Schön's [1973] notion of 'dynamic conservatism'), it provides a pragmatically useful perspective from which to view CPD. Houle (1980) suggested that one of the main objectives of professional bodies in encouraging CPD is to move the 'laggards' and the slower of the middle majority further up the spectrum. This agrees with Madden & Mitchell's findings, where bodies which confer a licence to practice tended to adopt a sanctions approach to promoting CPD which might be expected to cajole laggards more than encourage pacesetters.

While several of the conservation bodies were promoting CPD through a mixture of codes of practice and events such as conferences and seminars, none had a formal scheme by the time the accreditation system was developed. The rationale for developing a scheme was principally based on updating and competence, with some reference to the costs of professional indemnity insurance and trends in other professions. Professionalisation issues also formed part of the agenda for the accreditation scheme, although not for CPD directly; concerns included the lack of public awareness of conservation both as an activity and as a profession, the lower status of many practitioners compared with colleagues such as curators and architects, and a concern that people with minimal training or experience could set up or in some cases gain jobs as conservators. A CPD scheme was therefore seen as a means of promoting learning, development and professionalism among practitioners, as well as a means by which the profession could be seen to be maintaining its standards.

Professional body CPD schemes

Beyond the simple promotion and resourcing of ongoing development, professional bodies' formal CPD schemes currently draw on two main approaches. Older schemes tend to emphasise quantitative inputs expressed either as a number of hours to be spent on courses or other verifiable learning events, or a tally of points to be gained by taking part in approved activities. Although relatively crude - the measure doesn't relate to the quality of learning or its individual relevance (or even whether learning takes place) - it provides the professional body with a means of gauging participation and if necessary taking sanctions against members. This approach is used by among

others the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, which stipulates a minimum of 35 hours per year, the Institute of Environmental Health Officers, where 20 hours are required of which at least half must be formal learning relating to core topics, and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, where 50 hours are stipulated. Typically, informal and work-based learning activities are discounted or at best treated as supplementary.

More recently and influenced by work such as that of Kolb (1984), Honey & Mumford (1986) and Schön (1987), many professional bodies have recognised the importance of the process and results of learning as opposed to quantitative inputs. For instance, the former Institute of Training and Development (ITD) described CPD as "a structured process of (self-managed) learning from experience... based on identifying needs, planning action, implementing and review" (ITD 1993), i.e. a form of learning cycle or action research cycle. This approach has given rise to requirements for members to identify their needs, draw up a development plan, and review their learning, with many bodies providing a proforma for recording the complete process. What might be called the learning cycle approach is in use in bodies as diverse as the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Museums Association, and Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD), the ITD's successor.

The learning cycle model recognises that CPD is about more than updating and maintaining competence. The Museums Association asks for review of the impact of CPD on the member's job and how it has contributed to career plans, while the IPD suggests members consider enhanced career prospects, increased capacity to learn, personal confidence in meeting change, and managerial and organisational benefits as well as improvements to job performance. This model is concerned more with promoting benefits and generating a development culture than with taking sanctions, and it also gives due recognition to informal and individualised learning; as the IPD points out balanced CPD will include a variety of methods of learning. The Landscape Institute goes somewhat further in pragmatically recognising that in the context of a small profession most CPD will take place through individual activities, both because the geographic dispersal of members can make formal events impractical other than in a few large cities, and members "will have topics of personal interest or particular relevance to current work that they prefer to investigate" (Landscape Institute 1991, p2). These issues are also relevant to conservators, particularly outside of the major communities of practice in London and Edinburgh.

Nevertheless, few professional bodies are prepared to abandon input measures completely, and there is some evidence that they serve a useful purpose in providing a minimum benchmark including to assist employed professionals to negotiate release from the workplace. The RICS specifies 20 hours per year for established members, of which no more than two-thirds should be by informal methods, and the IPD recommends a minimum of 35 hours as well as encouraging members to record time for formal events. The Museums Association asks members to log time spent on CPD activities, although a total is only stipulated for the first two years after qualifying.

Issues

Although an increasing number of professional bodies are taking a learning cycle approach to continuing development, there is a degree of inertia in moving from a sanctions and controls model to a benefits or facilitative one. While there is an understandable concern with ensuring basic levels of updating, requirements based on quantifiable inputs are more likely to induce unreflective conformance in 'laggard' practitioners than to stimulate development which is conducive to professionalism and competence. As Fowler comments, "the real test of CPD is not whether you attended a particular course or read a particular book; nor is it to supply evidence to meet your professional institute's membership criteria. It is whether your CPD actually improves your professional competence and adds to the achievement of your personal career objectives" (1996, p56). Gear et al state in their report on informal learning that "whereas the main emphasis for... professional bodies is typically on overt, formal and public means, with any informal learning in the background, for the individual it is the informal which looms largest and the formal inputs which play a supporting role" (1994, p71).

Practitioners in a wide range of fields also recognise, like the Landscape Institute, the central importance of informal learning. One accountant comments "I don't think the emphasis on input measures... is much of an indicator with CPD as to its value or otherwise. ...I think the measurements are meaningless since they record hours spent or points earned on formal activities, not learning gained..." (quoted in Sandelands 1998). Commenting on "points and hours" schemes more widely, Hughes (1995) suggests that these are not effective in ensuring members undertake CPD which is relevant to their practice or their clients. Similarly, in a 1994 study training practitioners "variously thought that (hours or points) inhibited (them) from setting their own agendas and using innovative methods of development, undermined professionalism by diverting responsibility from the individual practitioner to the professional body, and devalued learning by leading to a 'paper chase' to satisfy the... criteria" (Lester 1995, p21). Parallel sentiments were expressed quite widely in the initial consultations for the PACR scheme, and there was concern that too mechanical and time-consuming an approach to CPD would be rejected particularly by private-practice conservators. This parallels the situation in some other professions where there are fears that too rigorous an approach to compliance would lead to resignations, particularly by sole practitioners and members in small firms (Becher 1999).

The need to move beyond so-called formal methods is also reflected in research on practitioner learning such as that of Klemp (1977), Argyris and Schön (1978), and Berry and Broadbent (Berry & Dienes 1992). Briefly, these studies suggest that knowledge gained from formal learning often has surprisingly little effect on enhancing practice unless it is developed alongside experiential, know-how learning and becomes integrated with the practitioner's tacit repertoire of knowledge-in-use. As Houle et al (1987) assert, successful CPD needs to be integrated into practice.

Unplanned and intuitive learning

Although the learning cycle model of CPD takes these complaints substantially into account, it has its own limitations. Honey & Mumford (1989) identify four strategies for learning, which they term intuitive, incidental, retrospective and prospective.

They, along with much conventional CPD wisdom, suggest that the most effective strategy is prospective (i.e. planned, fitting the learning cycle model); according to the IPD "it is the prospective type which is the most powerful - and this is the type which best serves the aim of CPD, though... not to deny the value in some circumstances of the incidental and retrospective types" (IPD, undated, p6). However, to dismiss opportunistic and intuitive learning as less valuable ignores research on how practitioners actually learn to effect. The study of trainers previously referred to indicated that practitioners valued "intuitive learning and... insights gained from unplanned activities" (Lester 1995, p21), while Gear et al found serendipity and exploration played a central part in the way practitioners learned, for instance "...coming across articles and gleaning information which... led along new paths," "keeping... eyes open and becoming aware of possibilities... just following leads," or "a project having a life of its own" (1994, p27). While much of this learning evolves from things outside the person's control, it "also seemed to be the natural, exploratory way of doing things in many cases" (ibid).

A useful perspective on this issue is offered by Megginson, who identifies a planned strategy based on deliberation and forethought, and an emergent one involving "unpremeditated exploration" (1996 p417). He continues with a metaphor for learners who have a well-developed preference for one or other approach, likening them to the foraging strategies of butterflies and bees: "Bees seek out a known source of nourishment and return to base, whereas butterflies are blown hither and thither and chance upon all sorts of goodies which might be out of range of the focused bee. Both strategies have their advantages, and both are clearly successful in terms of allowing the species to perpetuate themselves" (ibid p418).

Intuitive learning is less easy to consider due to its tendency to remain tacit and difficult to articulate, at least in the short term. Honey and Mumford (1989) are largely dismissive of intuitive learning, viewing it as little more than an excuse for not learning in more reflective and proactive ways. Nevertheless, it is apparent that intuitive learning can lead to profound insights and paradigm-shifts, as well as being able to handle information and experiences at a much greater rate and depth than that achievable consciously. Capturing the insights and changes from intuitive learning can require reflection at some remove from the event, for instance through reviewing changes and growth over a year or since the beginning of a job or a career. Many learning-cycle CPD schemes ask for reviews of learning events, but omit any reference to the kind of longer-term review which is more apt to identify learning of developmental benefit. This is a serious omission as it promotes short-term evaluation rather than deeper reflection, emphasises discrete learning events and activities over longer-term development and change, and is less apt to capture insights which would enable practitioners to become more effective learners.

Gear et al identify three kinds of learning in relation to CPD. Specific learning arises from needs relating to particular cases or problems. General learning "arises from broad endeavour to keep up-to-date, in touch or abreast of trends and developments in a profession." Developmental learning is dynamic, progressive and cumulative, typified by "identifiable events, strands or episodes in a person's professional life" (1994, p72). While instrumental CPD schemes, geared to essential updating, could focus on general learning alone (assuming that specific learning will be taken care of by the practitioner), approaches designed to support more than basic competence also

need to encourage developmental learning and prompt enhanced specific learning. It is difficult to envisage how this could be achieved without respecting equally the parts played by planned, emergent and intuitive learning.

Informal learning and professional bodies

While CPD schemes need to be seen as relevant by innovators and pacesetters, and therefore encourage informal and developmental learning, pragmatically a bottom line may be needed to enable sanctions against the laggards. If hours and points are more a means of providing comfort and visibility rather than ensuring useful learning, other methods need to be explored.

One option suggested by work-based higher education practice is to use a learning contract, possibly as a developmental alternative to initial sanctions. A small number of UK universities enable learners to create fully individualised qualification-bearing programmes which draw on work projects and activities rather than taught courses (for instance Foster 1996, Osborne et al 1998). Some of these institutions insist that before a programme is agreed the student must complete a review of previous learning, and negotiate a learning plan or agreement to set the focus and broad objectives of their programme. This approach represents a form of the learning cycle model, but one which encourages deep-level reflection and review of learning which has taken place over a significant period of time, and where planning is concerned with strategic directions and major approaches rather than precise outcomes and learning events. As a model, it has features which could be used to enable developmental (and intuitive) learning to be incorporated into a learning cycle approach.

Another approach which is worthy of further exploration is suggested by Gear et al's definition of a 'learning project' as used in their research: "the equivalent of (at least) one working day... over the last three years spent developing some aspect of your professional knowledge, skills and competence to the point where you could pass some of it on to a colleague" (1994, p8). A requirement which relates to learning projects is likely to be more significant in maintaining the quality of practice than one based on notional learning time, particularly if the practitioner is required to state briefly the nature and results of the project.

Developing the PACR scheme

It was apparent at the beginning of the development process that the PACR scheme needed to take into account (a) that some practitioners would belong to two or more bodies each of which might have its own CPD requirements, and (b) whatever was proposed would need to be acceptable to public and private sector practitioners as well as to conservators working at a distance from the major communities of practice. An initial consultation process identified further concerns, in particular that the scheme should support learning and not impose time-consuming bureaucracy; recognise all types of learning rather than just courses or other 'approved' events or opportunities; enable individuals to match their learning to evolving jobs and aspirations; and allow flexibility in how to plan and record, while offering a proforma to (as one consultee put it) "discourage rambling essays."

The design principles which emerged from the initial consultation and development process were:

- enabling practitioners to retain control of what and how they learn
- ensuring that recording requirements prompted learning and reflection while imposing a minimal administrative burden
- focussing on learning and development rather than learning events or activities.

Some conservators were already using the Museums Association recording system, and while this was longer and more detailed than the approach envisaged for the proposed system it could allow similar outcomes to be achieved. It was therefore decided, like the Institute of Personnel and Development, to provide documentation and guidance but to enable practitioners to use alternative methods of recording if they preferred. The CPD record developed for trialling consisted of a double-sided review sheet and an action plan to identify areas of development to follow up. The review sheet provided one side for reflecting on previous learning and development, with the other side divided into a space for reviewing how the learning would be used and a section for making notes on future development needs and opportunities. The action plan followed a conventional format by prompting users to identify areas they wanted to develop, intended methods, a timescale, and a space for review.

The trial took place between March and May 1999, with 40 conservators initially volunteering to complete the CPD documents. Eleven sets of completed documents were returned with accompanying feedback, and 33 participants attended a feedback conference in mid-June.

Refining the approach

On balance the approach taken was found acceptable to participants. Completing the review and action plan took between two and seven hours, although two participants mentioned that considerably more time had gone into reflection before committing anything to paper. The majority found the exercise useful in encouraging reflection and 'taking stock,' focussing attention on key issues for the future, and putting future objectives in writing. Two expressed some abivalence about the review, and one commented that there was no added benefit in writing down things which were already in her head. Most thought they would follow up at least some of the points identified in their action plans, with pressure of time being cited as the main limiting factor. Participants on short-term or project-based contracts also felt external changes would mean revisiting their action plans, and there was a minority resistance to action planning in the face of quickly changing working environments.

How trial participants actually reviewed their learning varied. Most mentioned specific events or learning episodes, some provided little more than a list with a few general comments, while others took a more global approach concentrating on overall development. The second part of the form, asking how the practitioner intended to use the learning, resulted in a spectrum from project-specific applications to general career and personal development. The action plan spanned a similar spectrum, and

although some participants concentrated on relatively short-term objectives most included a balance between immediate and longer-term plans. Although action planning was seen as useful by most participants, a minority thought it was restrictive, for instance:

"Using a form... reduces the learning process to a number of identifiable events (such as) attending courses or study periods. However learning is generally not clear cut, and is often by informal conversation with colleagues... and learning 'on the hoof' as clients' projects arise..."

(Participant, PACR trials April-May 1999).

On balance, the trial pointed to a need to provide clearer guidance on the level of detail expected in the review, and to move practitioners away from cataloguing day-to-day and project-specific learning. In the feedback conference it was suggested that practitioners should be focussing on

"... cases where there is a significant improvement in ability or knowledge and the learning outcome is identified. It should not include day-to-day actions or investigations."

(Participant focus group, Next Steps conference, Institute of Archaeology 17th June 1999).

This definition can be related to Gear et al's notion of learning projects, as well as to their distinction between specific learning and general and developmental learning. While at this stage it was decided to avoid introducing the idea of learning projects, the revised CPD documentation included guidance based on their three categories:

Specific learning concerns particular cases or problems, typically 'finding out as you go along:' reading up regarding specific objects or problems, asking colleagues about treatments, checking sources of supply, and so on. This kind of learning is important for day-to-day practice but often becomes out of date quickly. It should not normally be included in your CPD review, unless it has a longer-term impact on your work or leads to findings which are of more general interest.

General learning concerns keeping up-to-date and abreast of trends and developments in the profession and affecting it. This kind of learning might involve reading journals and email discussions, networking and discussion with colleagues, and attending courses and conferences. Your CPD review should show that you are keeping up-to-date in your field, without needing to cite every example in detail.

Developmental learning is learning which takes forward your practice, creates new opportunities and develops extended professionalism. It may involve undertaking a major study, an advanced course or a programme of research, be generated through a new job or major project, or stem from becoming involved in activities outside your normal work. Although it is useful to plan developmental activities, the value of developmental learning is often only apparent on reflection."

(National Council for Conservation-Restoration 1999, drawing on Gear et al 1994).

Issues for the future

The National Council's accreditation scheme is due to come into operation in January 2000. Accreditation candidates will need to demonstrate evidence of CPD review and planning immediately, with the records of accredited members being called in for examination from 2002 onwards. The Council intends that the scheme is reviewed periodically; in relation to CPD, key questions will include:

- Whether the scheme works effectively across the profession's different specialisms and practice contexts.
- Its effect on members' learning and development: in particular whether it is effective in ensuring necessary updating and encouraging developmental learning.
- Its success, in conjunction with the assessment and disciplinary components of the accreditation scheme, in preventing complaints of professional incompetence against accredited practitioners.

The scheme is based on the assumption that professionally accredited practitioners are able to plan and review what they need to learn and have sufficient (self-)awareness of practice issues to avoid unethical and incompetent practice. If this proves an insufficient assumption, there is scope to strengthen the scheme either generally (for instance through a requirement to identify specific 'learning projects'), or through providing additional requirements and associated support for individual practitioners who are identified as not maintaining a basic level of updating (for instance through a learning contract approach).

Conclusions

The need for ongoing professional development is now well-established, both from the perspective of service quality and from that of personal career development and marketability. In setting up continuing professional development schemes, professional bodies are typically aiming both to encourage practically relevant updating and development among their members and provide a means of demonstrating that members are maintaining their competence. While these aims should ideally be mutually supportive, an overemphasis on demonstration and policing can promote a culture of conformance rather than one of professional capability and development.

Excepting situations where well-defined external changes impact on whole professions - such as changes to legislation - relevance is primarily an individual matter, both in terms of what needs to be learned and how the practitioner learns. Requirements for demonstration need to reflect the realities of practice and of how practitioners can usefully go about learning, including through means which are informal, exploratory and intuitive.

There is therefore a strong case for professional CPD schemes to move away from recording hours, points or events, as well as becoming less constrained by assumptions about the superiority of planned or prospective learning. Where a more

precise indication of updating is required, there is scope to explore approaches such as learning projects and learning contracts rather than the more traditional quantitative measures. While it can be necessary to have measures to prompt laggards into action and to assure clients that updating is taking place, it is important that these do not become burdens to more responsible practitioners.

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