Professional qualifications and continuing development: a practitioner perspective

Abstract

Based on interpretive research, this article describes professional qualifications and continuing development from the individual perspectives of a small number of training and development practitioners.   The picture emerging from the research suggests that both qualifications intended for practising professionals and continuing professional development (CPD) schemes need to be sufficiently flexible and rigorous to enable practitioners to develop extended capabilities which accord with their individual areas of practice and career directions. Doing this points to moving beyond both traditional technical-academic and newer competence-based approaches to development, in order to enhance people's abilities as enquiring, creative and independent learners and practitioners.'

Introduction

This paper describes a study undertaken during 1993 [my MEd dissertation] which was concerned with the ongoing professional development and recognition needs of experienced training and development practitioners. My aim in the study was to look at processes of development and qualification starting from the experiences and perspectives of individual professionals, rather than from the perspectives of professional bodies, higher education providers or government departments. Underpinning the research was a thesis that qualifications and development routes should help and empower practitioners rather than categorise or merely certificate them, and an awareness of the perceived inadequacy both of traditional technical-academic approaches to professional development (cf Schön 1991, Bines 1992) and of newer competence-based ones (Elliott 1991, Chown & Last 1993).

Essentially, the study attempted to address three main questions:

- How do experienced practitioners perceive their further development and recognition needs, and how if at all do these relate to their backgrounds, circumstances, development within and prior to entering the profession, and their professional perceptions and aspirations

- To what extent are existing and proposed systems of recognition seen as compatible with these needs, and where are they disempowering or inhibiting

- How might existing methods of recognition be changed or new ones developed which better meet the needs of practitioners

The study had personal relevance in that it reflected on my own postqualifying professional development as an education and training consultant. However, the decision to focus on training and development practitioners was also influenced by the nature of the profession itself, a brief understanding of which will assist in understanding the findings and implications of the research.

Using Schein's (1972) classification in which medicine is seen as the archetypal profession and management the least well-defined, training and development occupies a position much closer to

management than to the formal professions. Firstly, its boundaries are unclear and overlap with related areas such as education, personnel management, counselling and occupational psychology. Secondly, there is no single professional body which can claim to govern it as an occupational area: the Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD) which has recently been formed from the institutes of Training and Development (ITD) and Personnel Management (IPM) has some claim to representing trainers, but many practitioners choose to operate outside of a professional body framework or are affiliated to an organisation representing their technical background or area of expertise. Thirdly, there is no standard professional syllabus or development route, and although at the time of the study the ITD's Diploma in Training Management had fairly wide recognition, many practitioners qualified variously through the IPM route, through teacher education, counselling, various business and management qualifications, or essentially through experience. Finally, like management and frequently unlike education or personnel work, training is often not the initial vocation of the practitioner and for some it does not form part of a conscious career choice

This diversity suggests that practitioners are likely to have widely differing backgrounds and experiences, and lack the common enculturation which is characteristic of the more formal professions. Given that training and development is concerned with learning and change, and is itself subject to many changes - from the rise of competence-based qualifications and the growing emphasis on organisational learning to the gradual overlap between colleges and commercial training providers and the growth of independent professional practice - practitioners are also likely to face pressures to continue their development once established in the profession. The study was therefore less concerned with training and development *per se* than it is with a diverse group of professionals in a loosely defined, changing and change-oriented profession.

The essentially humanist stance of the project was articulated through a methodology centred on unstructured, taped discussions which were designed to allow participants the opportunity to explore factors important to them without being overly constrained by a framework provided by the researcher. This technique drew on interpretive life-history method (see Plummer 1983) and aimed to derive a portrait of each participant in respect of their ongoing development, relating it to factors such as career, educational background and working situation

Participants in the study were drawn from a large network of professional contacts and were initially selected using three criteria: location and accessibility, current involvement in the profession at 'qualified' level or equivalent, and potential interest in the area of the research (and therefore in their own continuing development). From a list of practitioners satisfying these criteria sixteen were selected (in anticipation of half that number finally taking part) to give differing roles in the profession, different working environments, and different development routes and periods from initial qualification. Members of this group were then contacted and helped to make an informed decision about taking part; six declined of whom five gave reasons of time and one pointed to an intended career-change, while another withdrew on realising that the main interviews would take place during her maternity leave.

The research design consisted of a sequence of four discussions with each participant, distributed over the six months of the study. The first of these aimed to set the scene, give participants the opportunity to decline further involvement if they wished, and negotiate ground rules for recording, interpretation and confidentiality, as well as dealing with the practicalities of the study. The second and third meetings were

planned as the main information-gathering stages, with notes sent to participants for verification after each, and the fourth was set aside to discuss interpretation and as an opportunity for more general dialogue

In practice the study followed this plan except that the fourth series of discussions were in some cases carried out by post and telephone. The main interviews quickly became open and to some extent reciprocal (cf Oakley 1981), and allowed participants a high degree of freedom to explore areas which they felt to be of importance to them. A gentle focussing process was gradually introduced into the discussions, and questions arising from the second series meetings were raised in the third series, when participants also had the opportunity to comment on summaries of the previous interview. Combined summaries were circulated following the third series, and a draft of the overall findings was also sent to all participants for validation.1

Continuing development and recognition: the practitioner's perspective

The participants consisted of four organisational trainers or training managers with differing roles, a co-ordinator of trainer training, a lecturer in training and management, two consultants, and a Training & Enterprise Council adviser. They worked in engineering, local government, private practice, business services, education and the financial / insurance sector, and qualified through the IPM (two), ITD (three), a Certificate in Education and a psychology degree, while two had graduate or Higher National qualifications and substantial experience in the training and development field. Participants were aged between 29 and 52, and had completed their initial professional qualifications up to 11 years ago, with one engaged in the final stage of a Diploma in Education Management at the time of the study; these qualifications were taken at varying stages in their careers, for instance one completing her IPM qualification as a graduate personnel trainee while the Education Management student already had substantial experience in the education and training field

None of the participants had intended to go into training as an early career, although three had considered or been advised to go into teaching, and two others had become involved in training early in their careers: one after working as a graduate personnel trainee, and the other on "secondment" from a graduate management trainee post. Other backgrounds included law and then marketing, pensions administration, childcare, finance, the Civil Service, secretarial work, and research.

Contrary to original intentions seven participants were female and two male, from an initial ratio for those invited to take part of nine to seven. There were no obvious gender-related reasons for not wanting to participate, and without further investigation it is difficult to comment either on the reasons for the imbalance or its effect on the study. The most obvious difference between the male and female participants was the tendency of the former to see themselves regardless of actual job role as managers, backed up in both cases by an interest in MBA-type development; although this correlates with the male-female perceptions found by Schein & Davidson (1993) it may be more related to the respective participants' career history than to gender.

The motivations behind participants' desire to learn and develop varied quite considerably and to some extent reflected their self-perceptions and general outlook. There was a mixture of intrinsic and instrumental reasons for learning, often interlinked: several participants commented that they found it difficult to separate qualification-led or expedient reasons for learning from more intrinsic ones. Related to this were differences in emphasis as to whether learning was seen as a means to achieving ends that participants had already identified, or viewed as a vehicle for opening up new possibilities and directions.

A distinction was made by most participants between longer-term development and the shorter term learning needed for immediate work purposes. Directly work-related learning included updating to take account of new developments, responding to experienced or anticipated inadequacies of skill or knowledge, adapting to changed circumstances such as a new job role, and licence-to-practice accreditation such as becoming a National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) assessor. Longer-term learning was typically less focussed on any particular work issue and although often connected with career aims or with the desire to increase professionalism in a current role, it also had a high intrinsic value to the participant. The two areas were however not always distinct, and for instance one participant was using a master's programme both to assist his development and to engage with current work issues, while another was interested in a counselling course partly to assist with her role as an NVQ mentor and partly for general personal development

Why pursue qualifications?

As with the motivation to learn, reasons for pursuing qualifications tended to range from the instrumental (credentials for a particular purpose) to the intrinsic (a means of structuring development and gaining support for it). There was also an element of self-worth, for instance one participant enrolled on a psychology degree in her thirties partly to become involved in research publication, but also to gain intellectual confidence and self-esteem

At initial professional level credentials were felt to be relatively important. Two participants commented on getting recognition as a "proper professional" in their organisations, one seeing "having a professional qualification" as important in her company culture. The two IPM graduates worked through what they saw as not a particularly motivating course to obtain credentials, and others saw professional qualifications as validating their level of competence and expertise (although in all cases also supporting new learning and having a degree of intrinsic interest). Other reasons for undertaking qualification courses included "as a response to feeling stuck and having nothing to show for what I'm doing", and "because it was a route to promotion... (out of) a boring job".

At the time of the study three participants were working towards qualifications at master's level (an MEd, an MBA and an MSc in psychology), two were aiming to start within a year or two, and of the remainder only one was uninterested in pursuing something similar. Most participants saw further qualifications as being more intrinsically motivating, and stressed the support they offered for continuing personal and professional development somewhat more than their credential value. Credentials at this level were seen as having value and contributing to career development, but the pressure to gain the qualification was less than at the initial stage: a typical comment was "if it wasn't intrinsically interesting I don't think I would do it". The overall picture is therefore of the balance shifting from a desire for credentials at the level of initial professional qualifications to more intrinsic reasons for embarking on 'long' courses at 'postqualifying' level.

Approaches to learning and developing

All the participants were proactive in continuing their development, which was sometimes in their own time and at personal expense, and regarded it as important; they tended to be 'innovators' or 'pacesetters' in terms of responsiveness to new ideas (cf Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). This might be expected considering they had chosen to take part in the study, and it was generally recognised that not everyone in the profession shared the same degree of commitment or enthusiasm.

A major theme emerging from the study was the incompatibility between these active practitioners and traditional methods of teaching. Participants were unhappy with methods which simply attempted to impart knowledge, and even those who favoured lectures needed to be able to discuss, challenge or apply the subject matter to gain significantly from it. Although participants expressed differing preferences for methods of learning, several needing quiet, reflective stages in their learning and one positively disliking group-based situations, there was general agreement about needing an active stage in any learning process which enabled the learner to at least reconceptualise ideas if not try them out in application. This stage appeared to take different forms in different situations and for different participants, and could include discussion, application to practice, and incorporation with other ideas to synthesise new conceptions and approaches. Several participants commented about the most valuable learning coming from challenges which led them to significantly reframe their ways of thinking; 'engagement', 'intellectual stimulation' and 'the lights going on' were descriptions participants used which are all suggestive of reframing and of involvement in learning.

Although most participants felt the need for some form of structure or support to assist their development, all were essentially self-directed in terms of what they wanted to learn and to a more limited extent the vehicles they wished to use to facilitate the learning. Participants were knowledgeable and competent in their area of practice and appeared to be adequately capable of exploring, defining and undertaking the learning they need to maintain proficiency, move into new areas or develop further, without having a need for predefined syllabi, competence frameworks or imposed methods of learning. In fact the diversity of needs expressed by participants directly (and which were apparent from their working situations and career directions) would make it impossible to provide a predictive agenda for meaningful continuing development.

While competence in self-directed learning appeared to be a characteristic which all participants shared, in some cases it had clearly involved considerable adjustment from what was familiar through initial professional development and earlier educational experiences; one participant in particular still espoused views which sat better with 'being taught' than with active learning, despite demonstrating obvious capability in the latter.

Practitioner views of qualification programmes

All nine participants had experience of some form of professional qualifications, and although there were different preferences several main themes emerged. On the list of positive factors were challenge and stimulation, a practical focus which wasn't just about academic criticism, room for discussion and constructive argument, and (with one disagreement) learning from others in the group. Several participants also mentioned engagement with the focus of the learning and as one put it "the opportunity to challenge, debate and get involved

The main criticisms were of poor standards of teaching, out-of-date material and out-of-touch or unknowledgeable lecturers, exam-led courses, and approaches which were just about "learning facts and using them to criticise" rather than developing ideas and applying them in a more constructive manner. Other negative points made by participants included minimal interest from their work organisations, lack of information with which to choose courses or modules, and the absence of credit for prior learning or of any initial review of learning needs. Overall, some participants were highly critical of their initial professional qualification programmes, for instance commenting that they were too content-oriented and didn't allow

enough room to question and challenge. One saw "no reason why qualifications (at initial professional level) couldn't be process (rather than content-) oriented, but in my experience they're not".

Participants generally favoured a project or assignment approach to assessment, with comments that they should allow the learner a degree of choice and control, and aim to be constructive in leading to positive outcomes rather than to purely academic criticism. Exams were almost universally disapproved of including by people who were good at them, although some justification was offered in terms of ensuring breadth of coverage and avoiding plagiarism. However, they were seen as leading to wasteful short-term memorising and other comments included that they simply "prove you can do exams", they are unfair and of little value, and they are based on "regurgitation and analysis of set situations... puzzles instead of problem-solving".

The NVQ approach of producing evidence of competence against known standards was seen as appropriate by two participants, who viewed it as ensuring coverage, application and depth while avoiding dictating the method of learning. Others were less enthused and commented for instance that it was demotivating, involved backtracking and "collecting paper", was too limited conceptually and unable to reflect the individual needs of experienced practitioners. However, the idea of 'knowing what's expected" in assessment, i.e. having some form of criteria or guidelines to work to, was seen as useful if not essential, as was constructive and timely feedback.

Qualification programmes for ongoing development

In terms of qualifications at master's (or in one case doctoral) level, participants were generally looking for something more challenging and stimulating than had been the case with their initial development, while supporting their growth in the directions they had chosen. Several expressed the idea of a higher, "more exciting" level where "the lights go on", seeing this as being "academically and intellectually challenging" as well as professional and rigorous; two of those who were involved in postgraduate programmes expressed some disappointment in this direction.   In terms of structure, some favoured a modular "pick and mix" approach and saw it as allowing them to put together a developmental programme that also met immediate needs, but there were also concerns about the lack of coherence of this pattern and its opportunity for allowing students to stay with familiar areas rather than explore new ones, as well as questions about its ability to result in a progressive learning curve.

Although some participants wanted to identify areas of content which were generally applicable at a senior level in the profession, reference to co-participants' work roles suggested that this was more difficult to do than was first thought. Most participants saw the function of a postqualifying professional programme as either to provide sufficient substantive choice to enable their individual needs to be met, or to provide a framework which enabled them to work on their own 'content' through processes such as discussion or reading and reflection, enquiry and action learning. The degree of structure and support which was desired from the programme varied from seeing a need for imposed structure and discipline to having little interest in external frameworks (the possible PhD candidate commented "I like to pursue... activities on my own, so a qualification course as a formal structure has very little significance"). Others didn't mention structure or discipline but valued aspects of qualification programmes such as the tutor contact and interaction with colleagues who would also be learning within the same framework. Distance learning approaches of the Open University type which tended to supply structure and focus but limited contact were variously favoured and enjoyed, seen as convenient but not ideal, or criticised as being too prescriptive.

Access and credit for prior learning

Some final issues raised by participants related to access and credit for prior learning. Not all participants were graduates, and there was some concern about professional master's degrees not being open to people on the basis of professional qualifications alone. However, in practice the evidence pointed towards a flexible approach being taken by institutions and the three non- graduates who applied for or enquired about places were accepted on the basis of professional qualifications (or in one case a Higher National Certificate) and appropriate experience. The benefits of crediting prior learning into programmes were seen as variable; for instance, although one participant was frustrated at the lack of individual flexibility on her MEd programme ("having to sit through all six modules when I have some work which can be used for the assignments..."), another criticised the tendency to "take APL (accrediting prior learning) at its face value, believing it is reflective and leads to learning, without evaluating it", and commented that "it's easy to sell the destination of APL as the primary benefit... (but) I'd like to see more exposure of the journey". The MEd student suggested using an assessment matrix at the beginning of the programme to determine students' strengths and weaknesses and then arrange their pathway through it accordingly. A summary of the preferences and needs expressed in relation to qualification programmes is given in Table 1.

Implications for qualification programmes

Because many practitioners see further qualifications as important and desirable both as vehicles of further learning and as a means of recognition to enhance career opportunities or validate a level of professionalism, qualification programmes have an important role to play in continuing professional development. Advanced development programmes have the opportunity, as was expected by several participants, to lift practitioners' level of thinking and provide them with a more lasting tool than immediately applicable skills and knowledge. As they are often the last major structured learning experience which practitioners encounter, they perhaps also have some obligation to do this and to ensure the development of the independent, self-directed learning abilities which support effective lifelong learning from practice.

While this suggests that CPD qualifications might have in common a focus on the process of aiding their students' development as intelligent, self-directed professionals, the study points towards a need for diversity in the degree and type of support and structure offered to individuals. Some participants were clearly less advanced than others in their development as autonomous learners, and in any case there were differences in the type of supporting structures needed; and although superficially the preferences in Table 1 point to programmes which participants can construct to meet their needs, that flexibility needs to include different approaches to learning as well as allowing for individualised foci.

Coherence and choice, rigour and relevance

Some of the needs expressed by participants highlight traditional educational conflicts such as coherence against choice and academic level and rigour versus flexibility and relevance. Rather than representing separate academic and vocational or market-driven traditions these are concerns felt by individuals who perceive the need for coherent choices and relevance at an intellectually demanding level, without reference to the dogmas which imply that they are incompatible aims. Traditionally, the choice-coherence argument has revolved around a structural definition of coherence, while academic level is often conceptualised in terms of particular curricula and therefore becomes content-driven. However, if coherence is viewed in the way implied by participants, so that a coherent programme is one which makes thematic sense to the

individual, the problem disappears and considered choice (of both process and substantive focus) becomes a necessary part of maintaining individual coherence. Incidentally, this also provides a solution to the perceived problem of prior learning, in that it can be extended to enable thematically relevant prior learning to contribute to and accelerate an individual's development; it may be useful not to think of APL in the conventional sense of giving exemption from part of a course or set of assessment requirements, but as accelerated progression through a development programme which is facilitated by the possession of relevant pre-existing knowledge, abilities or resources (such as case-study or research material).

Academic level

The somewhat more challenging problem of academic level can be approached through considering the level of process (e.g. enquiry, reflection, theorising and creative activity) being used in a given situation, removing the link between level and curriculum. Combined with the value which participants placed on known standards of assessment, this suggests that it is appropriate for programmes to have assessment criteria which are based on the level of process activity rather than being related to substantive focus.

However, the study also indicated that academic level cannot be wholly defined by assessment standards. Participants made a pragmatic distinction between 'low-level' information-oriented approaches based on relatively uncritical learning and application, and 'higher-level' ones which question underlying assumptions, require reflection and critical rigour, and lead to reframing and creative insights. Although it is notoriously difficult to define level in a way that is both unambiguous and meaningful (Winter 1993, 1994), these notions of conceptual or academic level at least provide an approximation of what is expected from master's degree work. The experiences of those participants undertaking master's programmes suggests that these expectations need to be embedded in the entire programme, from initial guidance through learning processes to assessment, rather than be limited to assessment criteria alone.

Comparing with existing provision

A brief comparison was made with current provision (professional programmes and master's degrees in the field of training and development and management learning) as part of the study, and the results indicated that existing programmes tended to be strong in some areas but have weaknesses in others. Apart from the more traditional structured courses, there were several programmes based on action learning or action research which provided some opportunity for members to decide their own substantive focus; however, these had limitations in terms of the learning process which could be chosen, and were often also restricted in terms of structural flexibility, for instance in duration, attendance pattern and the possibility of transferring across institutions or breaking up the period of study.   The greatest scope appeared to be offered by the type of modular programmes used in some education faculties, some of which enabled choices of both content and method (such as action learning or independent study as well as 'tutor-led' modules), and also provided structural flexibility. Despite this, the degree of choice available in these programmes was often at the expense of coherence, and a repeated criticism heard from students was that the programme only came together at the stage of the dissertation or the preparation leading up to it.

The factors discussed previously suggest that while a modular approach provides the essential flexibility required by experienced practitioners, it needs to do much more than offer a selection of predefined units to choose from.   An element which is missing from many modular programmes is an initial process of induction, guidance and negotiation, backed up by ongoing access to support and renegotiation where

necessary. Such an element would help maintain congruence between the learner's aims, experience and situation and his or her programme, and ensure that s/he chooses a route which is thematically coherent, promises a learning curve rather than a series of disjunct experiences, and builds independence and self-direction through attention to the learning experiences followed. By running longitudinally through the programme this element would not only enable students to reassess their progress and if necessary change emphasis, but also support dialogue between learning and practice and provide a forum in which to step back and reflect on the learning processes themselves.

Implications for continuing professional development schemes

Professional bodies are increasingly adopting various continuing (or continuous) professional development (CPD) schemes in order to encourage, cajole and in theory compel practitioners to update, if not always to extend their professionalism or develop more intelligent, insightful practice. Various models are used for these schemes (cf Madden & Mitchell 1993), including the requirement to attend a certain number of training days per year, accumulation of credit points through par- ticipation in approved activities, or preparing and following an annual personal development plan.

The ITD and IPM policies on continuing development were based on the latter type of process, which of the three approaches is more in accordance with the findings of the study.   Participants variously thought that the other methods inhibited practitioners 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 necessary criteria. However, the development plan approach was also seen as having weaknesses in failing to recognise the value of opportunistic and intuitive learning and of insights gained from unplanned activities.

While there is a perceived need through professional body CPD schemes to encourage less conscientious members of the profession to update at least to a minimum level, a prescriptive approach would run the risk of alienating practitioners who take their ongoing development more seriously. Creative, intelligent practice is unlikely to be fostered by compulsion or by the promise of upgraded institute membership (cf Kohn 1993), and comparing professional body CPD policies with the needs of the research participants points to overconcentration on the mechanics of updating and to some extent on definable learning events of one kind or another. More congruent with the needs expressed through the study is an emphasis on the ethos of continuing development and expression of a philosophy of extended professionalism, validated through its ability to help and empower the practitioner towards self-realisation and increased professional effectiveness. Such an ethos might have as a core agenda similar factors to those advocated above for development programmes, and seek to further develop independent thought, critical enquiry, reflective practice and creative synthesis.

The purpose of this paper has been to report, reflect on and theorise from an interpretive study of a small number of training and development practitioners, rather than to seek firm conclusions about how continuing development should be constructed. If qualifications and development routes are to 'help and empower... rather than categorise or merely certificate', the nearest to a conclusion which can be drawn from the study is that continuing development frameworks (whether academic or led by a professional body) need to enable practitioners to follow routes and focus on areas which are relevant to them individually, rather than imposing curricula or predefined methods of learning. If there is a core agenda at 'postqualifying' level, it is concerned with capability: with depth, awareness and intelligent practice, and with   abilities of learning

which transcend immediate situations and facilitate development, choice and intelligent action. Updating of the more immediate kind is still an essential part of continuing professional development, but (apart from instances when legal or policy changes directly affect entire professions) the nature of what individual practitioners will need, and when, is not predictable; it is more appropriate, effective and professional to concentrate on enabling and supporting practitioners to decide for themselves how and in what form they will take forward their development

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Table 1

Qualification programmes: a summary of participant preferences and needs

Area	Wanted	Not wanted
Flexibility	Allows choice while being coherent	Inflexible formats Lack of coherence, 'bittiness'
Process	Group-based (several) Self-led	Lecture focus (except two) Pace dictated by group
Content / Substantive focus (differs widely between participants)	Practical, relevant to own situation Process focus (four) Research (three)	Irrelevant or out-of-date information Imposed substantive focus 'Dry' theory
Degree of support	Varies from wanting some imposed structure & discipline through interaction with tutor / group to virtually completely self-structured	
'Level'	Challenging, stimulating Opportunity to get involved Room to debate and challenge	Backtracking Purely information oriented
Assessment	Relevant, 'applied' Project-based Know assessor expectations Feedback from assessment	Exams 'Just criticising', not usable Plagiarism NVQ approach (except two)
Access	Accept professional qualifications	Insufficient (or misleading) information Restrictive entry barriers
Assessing needs, APL	Recognises appropriate prior learning Takes account of learner's strengths & weaknesses	But not to detriment of development
Timing	Allows interaction with others (some)	Too much time off work