What is teacher development and how is it achieved? Ontological and processual models


ABSTRACT

In 2002 I published my ontological model of teacher development (Evans, 2002), identifying as its two constituent elements: attitudinal development and functional development, each of which, I suggested, incorporates two elements of change, or change foci: intellectual change and motivational change, in the case of attitudinal development, and procedural change and productive change in the case of functional development. I ended my article by listing suggested questions to form a research agenda for the field of study. This paper represents an update of my progress in this field. It focuses both on the updated ontological model and on one of the questions posed in the 2002 article: what does the teacher development process involve?

My latest thinking leads me to revise my earlier ontological model by identifying not two, but three, constituent elements of teacher development: functional development, attitudinal development and intellectual development, each of which incorporates specific change foci. I present this, along with my theoretical model of the teacher development process, which identifies the cognitive stages whereby teachers enhance their professionality by adopting changes to their thinking or their practice. This represents work-in-progress. I explain the thinking behind the two models, drawing upon research-based and experientially-based anecdotal examples, and identify some of the problems that, at the time of writing, continue to dog my progress.

INTRODUCTION

1998 saw the publication in the UK of the Green Paper (DfEE, 1998), in which the British Government presented its ‘new vision of the teaching profession’, reflecting its concern to raise standards in education. The by-words at this time were ‘modernisation of the profession’, ‘a new professionalism’ and ‘a first class profession’, and there was reference, too, to ‘performance management’, ‘a career of learning’, and to rewarding ‘excellent teaching’: evidence of this newly elected Labour government’s wish to reflect Prime Minister Blair’s prioritisation of education, by raising and maintaining the highest standards of teacher professionalism. Ten years later statutory performance management procedures for teachers and head teachers have been introduced (in 2007) in England. Referred to officially as The Education (School Teacher Performance Management) (England) Regulations 2006, Statutory Instruments 2006, No. 2661, these are intended as a developmental process (Rewards and Incentives Group, 2006, para. 5.23), whose purpose is to ensure professional standards.

Raising and maintaining teacher professional standards goes hand-in-hand with developing teachers professionally. Yet if we want to know how to get the best out of teachers we need to understand teacher development. Essentially, we need to understand the process involved: what must happen in order for teachers to develop. In recent years professional development, professional learning, or workplace learning – whatever subtly different titles are used – have become key foci of academic study. Much excellent work in this field has been carried out by Dutch academics (e.g. Hoekstra et al. 2007; Simons and Ruijters, 2004; Zwart et al., 2007),
though several authors from other countries have also made outstanding contributions, most notably Michael Eraut in the UK (e.g. Eraut, 2004; 2007).

Notwithstanding this impressive work, there inevitably remain gaps in the professional development-focused knowledge base. In particular, the process whereby individuals develop professionally is far from clear, as is implicit in Russell and Munby’s observation (1991, p.164):

Ask any teacher or professor, ‘How did you learn to teach?’ As likely as not, the response will be ‘by teaching’ or ‘by experience’, and little more will follow, as though the answer were obvious and unproblematic. While there is an implicit acknowledgement that actions and performances can be learned through or by experience, there is little understanding of how this comes about.

It is on uncovering the professional development process that my work has, in part, been focused. This paper outlines my progress to date and, as such, represents work in progress.

**TEACHER DEVELOPMENT: DEFINING TERMS**

In 2002 when I published my ontological analysis of it (Evans, 2002) I defined teacher development as, quite simply and succinctly, the process whereby teachers’ professionality and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced. Since the explanation for and the thinking behind this definition are irrelevant to this current discussion I shall not repeat them here. What is important, though, is that the process of teacher development so defined may quite feasibly be interpreted as incorporating both the catalysts for and the contexts within which development occurs. Since I wish to exclude these, I now need a narrower definition.

Formulating a definition is never a quick and easy process, nor is it usually perfected at the first attempt. For this reason I generally refer to ‘my current definition’, or ‘my current thinking’, aware that, with my propensity for revisiting and revising my work, it is very likely to change. My revised, narrower, definition of teacher development is, if anything, even more provisional than usual because its development is tied up with that of my understanding of the very process that it is intended to define. As so often occurs with the pursuit of definitional precision and theory development, I find myself faced with the perennial chicken and egg conundrum, for I support Freidson’s contention that ‘we cannot develop theory if we are not certain what we are talking about’ (1994, p. 15). Yet which ought to be tackled first: the definition of what one seeks to understand and explain, or the understanding of and explanation for what one needs to define? My response to this dilemma has been – and remains – to develop both in tandem, spiralling along to greater clarity and understanding by interweaving two complementary threads of thought into a single strand of explication meaning, tied together with sufficient firmness for it to be functional, yet loose enough to allow for repeated unravelling and re-working.

My embryonic, revised definition of professional development is undergoing its first interweaving. This is currently a fiddly and tricky process since I am struggling to see clearly the complementary ontological thread: I now have a reasonably good grasp of the nature of what I perceive to be the professional development process (as I interpret it in the context of this paper), yet certain elements of it continue to confound me. I retain my earlier definition of teacher development as the process whereby teachers’ professionalism and/or professionality may be considered to be enhanced, since its breadth and inclusiveness incorporate recognition that professional development may refer not only to individuals’ cognitive
and/or practice-focused development, but also to the quite different sort of status- or role-related development that may occur on a much wider – including a profession-wide – scale: that is, professional development as role- or status-enhancement. My newer definition should be viewed as a sub-definition of this earlier one: a sub-definition that elaborates on and offers greater specificity than, but nevertheless remains within the parameters of, the over-arching one. Within my broad, over-arching definition of ‘teacher development’, then, I define individual teachers’ professional development as: the enhancement of their professionality, resulting from their acquisition, through a consciously or unconsciously applied mental internalisation process, of professional work-related knowledge and/or understanding and/or attitudes and/or skills and/or competences that, on the grounds of what is consciously or unconsciously considered to be its/their superiority, displace(s) and replace(s) previously-held professional work-related knowledge and/or understanding and/or attitudes and/or skills and/or competences.

This definition is intended to convey my current interpretation of professional development in individuals as, essentially, an evaluative process. It is a process that involves the acquisition of ‘new’ (from the perspective of the individual) knowledge and/or understanding and/or skills and/or attitudes and/or competences that are relevant to the individual’s professional practice and which s/he accepts, internalises and assimilates on the basis that, whether consciously or unconsciously, s/he recognises it/them as being in some way, and to some extent, ‘better’ than knowledge and/or understanding and/or skills and/or attitudes and/or competences that s/he previously held. It is a form of personal enlightenment, on a scale that may range in magnitude from being enormous to miniscule, that is relevant to the individual’s professional life and practice. It is a mental, not a practical, process – though it may (and often does) motivate practice. Since it is a mental process it is also an independent, not an interpersonal, process – though its stimulus may be (and often is) found in interaction with others. To explain it more fully I narrow my focus to examination of the ‘consciously or unconsciously applied mental internalisation process’ that I consider integral to professional development.

THE MENTAL INTERNALISATION PROCESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

So what, then, does the professional development process involve? What I have been grappling with for many months is the structure and order of that internalisation process that occurs within someone’s mind: the mental process whereby an individual arrives at the stage of knowing something (in relation to his/her professional work) that s/he did not previously know, or of understanding something that s/he did previously understand, or of knowing how to do something that s/he did not previously know how to do, or of holding attitudes that s/he did not previously hold. For it is quite clearly not enough for someone simply to observe or hear or read something, nor for her/him to be told or shown, or be otherwise exposed to, something; that alone does not constitute professional development, even if what the individual is being exposed to is ‘new’, or even revelatory, to her/him. Exposure to ‘new’ or revelatory ideas or examples of practice is a passive process, no matter how actively the receiving individual has pursued the exposure. Professional development requires the active process of internalisation, assimilation and acceptance.

Let’s take an example from teaching outside the compulsory education sector. In the following transcribed excerpt from a research interview that formed part of my
study of teaching and learning in higher education (Evans and Abbott, 1998), Jenny¹, a senior academic, outlines briefly the circumstances that led her and her teaching partner to revise their delivery of an undergraduate degree module.

We introduced a pattern whereby students read a paper and then presented their views about the paper. We split the large group into three mini groups of eight and saw each of the three groups for one-third of the two hours. So we saw them in rotation and they had the other two-thirds of that session to prepare the paper for the following Thursday session. And we weren't very happy ... we didn't feel there was enough discussion going on ... not enough student participation. So we decided we needed to look again at that. So this current academic year, for the Thursday slot, we explicitly set it up as debates - still with the mini groups ... but we appointed two students from each of the mini groups to speak for a particular motion and two to speak against it, and the others to be witnesses, to interrogate the two sides. And we gave the students the motions for debate at the beginning of the term. They chose which of the ones they wanted to speak to ... . That’s been highly successful and I'm quite surprised how successful it's been this year. A lot of the students have said that's been the highlight of their four years here ... . That has really forced them to think critically and they've enjoyed it very much and got a lot out of it.

What we read here are the barest of outlines of the professional development process at work in individuals, as recounted by one such individual. Two university teachers were dissatisfied with an element of their teaching; they therefore considered what needed to be done to remedy what they perceived as a deficiency or inadequacy; they formulated a remedial plan, executed it, and perceived it to be successful insofar as it represented an improvement on the practice that it replaced. Applying my overarching definition of professional development, each of these teachers would consider her professionality to have been enhanced by this process.

By reductionist analysis of this example and numerous similar ones in order to identify common elements and components (a process of developing theory through analytical induction that I explain and exemplify elsewhere (Evans, 2002, pp. 186-193)) I formulated a theoretical model. Representing my first attempt at identifying the mental internalisation process of individuals’ professional development, I refer to this as model 1, present it below in diagrammatic form and then explain the stages that constitute it.

¹ Pseudonyms are used in all references to my research.
The professional development process in individuals (model 1)

The mental internalisation professional development process, stage by stage (model 1)

It is important to emphasise that this is a subjectively-defined process, whose stages are, in their enactment, underpinned and determined by the subjective opinion of the ‘developee’.

Stage 1: Recognition of deficiency or imperfect situation or conditions
Professional development is dependent upon recognition on the part of the developee of a subjectively perceived imperfect or unsatisfactory situation relating to his or her professional practice. The degree of perceived imperfection may range from being negligible to immense, but without it subjectively acknowledged development would not occur; quite simply, complete satisfaction obviates the perceived need for change, and dissatisfaction – however slight – engenders receptivity to change.

Stage 2: recognition of a perceived potential ‘better way’
Recognition of what is currently perceived as a better way of doing things is essential to the development process. ‘Better’ is a relative term; in this context I intend it to be interpreted as relative to the source of recognised deficiency or inadequacy, identified at stage 1.

Stage 3: motivation to adopt the perceived better way
Adoption\(^2\) of what is perceived as a better way will not occur without the motivation for it, yet for any of a variety of reasons, individuals may lack the motivation to take them to the remedial stage. Motivation will often reflect values and priorities. Teacher

\(^2\) Within my explanation of the model’s stages the terms ‘adoption’ and ‘practice’ are used generically: ‘practice’ should be interpreted as encompassing all of the specific nouns included within my definition of professional development as denoting phenomena with the potential to be developed in individuals; ‘adoption’ should be interpreted as encompassing applicability to all of the nouns with the potential to indicate that any one of these phenomena has been developed (e.g. to indicate ‘acquisition’, in relation to knowledge).
A, who is aware of deficiencies in her approach to teaching decimals to her class of nine-year-olds, may observe a potentially better approach used by her colleague, Teacher B. But if Teacher B’s approach is more demanding of time and effort than is Teacher A’s imperfect one, the latter may lack the motivation to adopt it. Quite simply, weighed against the requisite time and effort to adopt it, the ‘better way’ comes out of the equation as insufficiently important to Teacher A for her to pursue it.

Such ambivalence is illustrated in Gifford, Murphy and Anderson’s (2008) examination of UK pharmacists’ attitudes towards the introduction of a policy of mandatory CPD. Recognition on the part of the majority of the research sample that the policy represented a ‘better way’ insofar as it was ‘necessary in today’s current health climate’ (p. 5) – did not preclude their lack of motivation to carry out what was required:

Despite their positive attitudes to the principle of CPD, a paradox became evident within the interview and focus group data – the pharmacists stated clearly that they understood the purpose of CPD and were, for the most part, in agreement with its aims, BUT such an understanding did not mean that they were actually recording their CPD … [they] admitted to lacking motivation to actually act: they either struggled to complete their records, or did not complete them at all (pp. 5-6, original emphasis).

Stage 4: adoption of what is perceived as a potentially ‘better way’
This is self-explanatory. It is the stage of effecting the potentially ‘better way’ (represented, in the case of the university teacher quoted above, by the introduction of the new approach to stimulating student discussion).

Stage 5: recognition of newly adopted practice as a ‘better way’
Consistent with both my overarching and my more specific definitions, above, individuals’ professional development only occurs if their professionality is enhanced through their acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes, understanding or competences that are considered to be superior to those that have been displaced. Acquisitions of knowledge, skills, attitudes, understanding or competences that are considered to yield no improvement, or to have a deleterious effect upon professionality, do not constitute professional development.

Deficiencies of model 1
I soon realised that model 1, as a theoretical processual model, is flawed. The model lacks universality of application since it is possible to conceive of examples of individuals’ professional development that do not conform to it. One such example is provided by my recollection of my own experience as a primary school teacher: on one occasion I happened to go into a colleague’s classroom to pass on a quick message, and by chance I noticed an aspect of her classroom organisation that struck me as a good idea, as a ‘better way’ of doing things than was represented by my own organisation, and one which, by retrospective, instantaneous and unconscious comparative analysis, revealed my own practice to be deficient, albeit it on a minor scale. My own practice developed as a result of that unplanned observation: not only did I consider my professionality to have been enhanced, but, more specifically - and paraphrasing my definition, presented above - that enhancement resulted from
my acquisition, through what I recollect as an unconsciously applied mental internalisation process, of professional work-related knowledge and skills that, on the grounds of what I considered to be their superiority, displaced and replaced my previously-held professional work-related knowledge and skills.

The mental internalisation process that constitutes that particular example of my professional development does not, however, conform to model 1 because it did not begin with the developee’s – that is, my - recognition of deficiency or imperfect situation or conditions (stage 1); rather, it began with stage 2: recognition of a perceived potential ‘better way’.

Model 2
Since model 1 does not accommodate them, non-conformist cases such as that of my own development as a primary school teacher many years ago necessitate an alternative processual model. I therefore formulated model 2, which is the same as model 1 apart from the reversal of stages 1 and 2. Model 2’s stages, illustrated in figure 2, below, are therefore: stage 1: recognition of a perceived potential ‘better way’; stage 2: recognition of deficiency or imperfect situation or conditions; stage 3: motivation to adopt the perceived better way; stage 4: adoption of what is perceived as a potentially ‘better way’; stage 5: recognition of newly adopted practice as a ‘better way’. This may be diagrammatised as follows:

Two models
But two different models for a single, universally applicable process clearly will not do. Despite reconceptualising and redefining professional development, the development of a single theoretical model continues to elude me. The stage I have now reached in developing a theoretical model is that of examining possible explanations for this apparent mismatch. My reasoning leads me to three possibilities: a single processual model is achievable, but I haven’t managed to find it yet; professional development – as I currently define it – is not, after all, a single process; my two models represent different
professional development processes, or different components of professional development.

What, precisely, I mean by ‘different components’ of professional development is examined in the next section.

COMPONENTS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The 2002 model
At this point I return to my ontological model of teacher development, published in 2002 (Evans 2002). That model identified two constituent elements of teacher development (which are equally applicable to professional development more widely and need not be restricted to teachers): functional development and attitudinal development. At that time I presented each element as reflecting specific foci of change. I defined attitudinal development as: the process whereby teachers’ attitudes to their work are modified and functional development as: the process whereby teachers’ professional performance may be improved.

Within the 2002 model I presented each of the two constituent elements as incorporating two constituent change features, or foci of change. In the case of attitudinal development these were: intellectual and motivational, which respectively referred to development in relation to intellect and motivation. In the case of functional development the two constituent change features, or foci of change were identified as: procedural and productive, which respectively referred to development in relation to procedures utilised, and what and/or how much people ‘produce’ or ‘do’, at work. A teacher who, for example, changes her/his way(s) of carrying out some aspect – no matter how small - of her/his job would be manifesting procedural development, and one who starts to work longer hours and produce more resources – who begins to ‘do’ more – would be manifesting productive development. This model is presented below in diagrammatic form.
These two constituent elements of teacher – or, more widely, professional development were presented as lying within my definition of teacher development, meaning that they, and the foci of change that relate to each of them, must – if they are to constitute teacher development – effect what may be considered to be the enhancement of teachers’ professionalism and/or professionality. Change that may be considered detrimental to teachers’ professionalism and/or professionality would not therefore constitute teacher development. So the teacher who becomes demotivated, for example, or whose output falls, would be manifesting motivational and productive change, but not development. A further point is that my inclusion within my wide, overarchingly definition of teacher development of the words ‘may be considered to be’ is deliberate, to incorporate consideration of subjectivity in relation to views about what actually constitutes development. What the government, for example, may consider to be teacher development may be quite different from teachers’ own views, which may also conflict with parents’ or school governors’ views.

The revised model
I have recently revised my 2002 model. Elevating to the status of a constituent element of professional development the intellectual change focus that I had earlier incorporated within attitudinal change, my current model presents professional development as having not two but three constituent elements or components: attitudinal, functional and intellectual change, each of which I currently conceive of in relation to three constituent change foci, as represented in the diagram below.

These align well with O’Donnell’s and Tobbell’s (2008) three themes of learning that emerged from their research into university teachers’ conceptualizations of learning. Their theme, ‘personal development’ parallels my ‘attitudinal development’; their ‘accumulation of knowledge’ parallels my ‘intellectual development’ and their ‘engagement in academic practices’ parallels my ‘functional development’.

What I mean by the ‘different components’ of professional development, then, are these different elements (or components): attitudinal, intellectual and functional development. Perhaps they hold the key to my failure, so far, to formulate a single theoretical processual model of individuals’ professional development. It is, after all,
quite feasible that the process whereby attitudinal development or intellectual
development are achieved is quite different from that whereby functional
development is achieved, and perhaps I should be turning my attention to formulating
component-specific models, rather than a one-size-fits-all model.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
I believe I have accurately identified the components of the professional development
process in individuals, as I define it above; these are the numbered stages that appear
within each of my models. What I am less certain of – indeed, what represents the
distinction between my two processual models – is the order in which they occur.
This may, indeed, be the furthest that I am able to go in formulating a model: simply
to identify the professional development process in individuals as involving:

- recognition of work-related deficiency or imperfection
- recognition of a perceived ‘better way’
- motivation to adopt the perceived ‘better way’
- adoption of the perceived ‘better way’
- evaluation of the adopted new practice as an improvement on the practice that
  it replaced.

Considered in relation to the rationale for formulating a model of the professional
development process in individuals – which must be to inform practice, such as
leadership and management practice involving the development of others – this is,
after all, adequate.

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