British Educational Research Association


Creating a culture of professional learning: the role of metaphor, teacher narrative and improvisation in school-based CPD.

Authors:  
Nick Sorensen  
Senior Lecturer in CPD  
School of Education  
Bath Spa University  
n.sorensen@bathspa.ac.uk

Dr Steven Coombs  
Head of Continuing Professional Development  
School of Education  
Bath Spa University  
s.coombs@bathspa.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper is a work in progress, an exploration of some common interests, concerns and obsessions, grounded in Capra’s concept of emergence. The design structures are our individual and shared interests in critical and reflective thinking tools, the nature of teacher development and the role of improvisation in the process of learning; ideas and concepts that we have explored in previous papers. In this paper we improvise around these themes connecting our theoretical interests with case studies of current practice as teacher educators.

One of the desirable outcomes of teacher development is the creation of a “learning culture” within the classroom; invitational conditions whereby students are actively engaged in the motivational process of learning and where there is an explicit and intentional attempt to develop their capabilities as independent learners (Claxton, 2002). The learner-centred classroom demands a different approach and range of behaviours from teachers. It requires a pedagogy that is very different from the default transmission model. A four phase model of teacher development has been researched and developed by Coombs and Sorensen (2007) that enables the transformational journey from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred classroom via university supervised and supported accredited continuing professional development (CPD).
In this paper we explore three case studies and evaluate a range of creative and practical approaches to CPD that are designed to bring about the necessary “shift of mind” required by schools aspiring to become learning organisations (Senge, 2006) and that will support teacher development within phase four of our model.

We argue for an approach to CPD programme design that legitimises the experience of teachers through self reflection and the creation of their own narratives as professional knowledge. The jazz ensemble has often been cited as an appropriate metaphor for a learning organisation (Stoll et al, 2003). We consider the appropriateness of this metaphor and how the use of metaphors can represent a qualitative research methodology and operate as a valuable research tool for deepening personal and professional understanding. In a rapidly changing and uncertain world “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” is a vital and complex higher order skill that can help teachers to manage and make sense of the chaotic and uncertain professional challenges that they face working in the 21st century school. Claxton’s view of learning (1999) leads us to consider the importance of improvisation as a valid pedagogical approach. We would also argue that developing CPD through an improvisation pedagogical research framework serves to lever schools as situated learning organisations within the Senge (2006) systems thinking paradigm.

Introduction
One of our principle concerns as teacher educators within a Higher Education Institution is to ask questions relating to the purposes and outcomes of teachers’ continual professional development (CPD) (Sorensen and Coombs, 2009). We recognise that one of the desirable outcomes of teacher development is the design and creation of a “learning culture” within the classroom; invitational conditions whereby students are actively engaged in the motivational processes of learning and where there is an explicit and intentional attempt to develop their capabilities as independent learners (Claxton 2002).

Why is the development of a learner-centred culture in the classroom so desirable? Most obviously it is particularly relevant and fortunate following the introduction of the revised Qualifications and Curriculum Authority’s (QCA) Key Stage 3 National Curriculum in England with its focus on Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (skills that will ultimately be applicable to all young people from 11 to 19). In addition to the national agenda of governmental directed change there is also the wider and profoundly significant impact of globalisation and the implications that this is having on all aspects of life, culture and future societal needs; especially the agenda for education and the professional role of teachers. Indeed, the learning skills agenda, and the importance of the capacity to be able to learn how to learn is an important response towards preparing people to live and work effectively in a rapidly changing society and world (Coffield 2008). It is therefore fortunate that UK government policy is responding to the changes implied from the new globalised consensus around developing new constructivist pedagogy linked to initiatives in critical and creative thinking, e.g. Singapore’s ‘Thinking Schools, Learning Nation’ educational policy.
The learning-centred classroom demands a different approach and range of behaviours from teachers and requires a pedagogical strategy that is very different from the default transmission model and all its variants. All teachers involved in this initiative face the challenge of developing teaching skills that are appropriate to the new QCA National Curriculum. Whilst the government have indicated the direction that this new curriculum initiative will follow (with a greater emphasis on project based cross-curricular leaning), they have not yet given sufficient attention to the pedagogical skills and CPD approaches necessary to successfully implement this educational policy. What is the appropriate pedagogy for a learner-centred culture and how significant is the change demanded of teachers? Are they being asked to do things differently or to do different things? Are we talking about an adaptation of existing practice or are we concerned with developing new attitudes, concepts of learning and behaviours in the classroom? The authors’ experience of supporting the CPD of teachers and the empirical evidence of observing classroom practice suggests the latter.

The transformational journey from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred classroom has been researched and developed by Sorensen and Coombs (2007) and builds upon the work of many critical theorists from Dewey to Claxton; but also others such as Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985). Their seminal work on self-organised learning recognised the need to develop individual learners with both a capacity and disposition to learn. This is achieved through developing a pedagogical strategy of critical and reflective thinking tools that build upon a constructivist and systems thinking psychological approach towards human learning supported via learning coaches. We have also noted the significant impact that university supervised and supported accredited CPD has had on the professional development of teachers and consider this as both a form of on-the-job as well as off-the-job learner coaching. Such field accredited CPD has its locus centred on leveraging change in the classroom via professional reflective practice tasks that are usually scaffolded through master’s level critical thinking skills applied to the context of some meaningful work-based project.

Our four phase model of teacher development outlines the skills and competencies required by teachers in order to engage and work with progressively more complex modes of teaching and relating to pupils. The model (see figure 1 below) identifies four stages, the first phase being a teacher-centred classroom and the fourth phase a learner-centred classroom. The first phase has been constructed around the criteria for a satisfactory lesson according to the existing Ofsted framework. Subsequent phases move the teacher progressively towards becoming a facilitator of learning in a learner-centric classroom. At each level there are appropriate skills and competencies that support and enable professional development.

Bruner (in Leach and Moon 1999 p10) describes four dominant models, descriptions of the four different ways in which teachers view the minds of learners. These can be linked to the four phases of teacher development and emphasise the changes in attitude that are required in order to establish learner-centred practice.
**Figure 1**  
**The four-stage model of teacher development.**  
(Sorensen and Coombs 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Teacher perception of learners:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Classroom management – including behaviour management  
• Lesson planning – preparing a 3 part lesson  
• Creating effective learning objectives  
• Starting your lesson - the first ten minutes  
• Partnerships in practice – working with LSAs  
• Creating the learning environment – room layout, seating plans, displays to support learning, displaying students’ work | Students seen as imitative learners |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Teacher perception of learners:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Using questions to develop thinking skills  
• Assessment for learning  
• Using data to identify individual learning needs  
• Differentiation  
• The self reflective teacher | Students seen as learning from didactic exposure: the acquisition of propositional knowledge |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Teacher perception of learners:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Using active learning strategies and group work  
• Using ‘learning to learn’ strategies  
• Coaching in the classroom | Students seen as thinkers: the development of intersubjective interchange and focus on students perspective on learning |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 4</th>
<th>Teacher perception of learners:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • The learner centred classroom  
• Teaching creatively and teaching creativity  
• Developing creativity in students  
• Teaching “outstanding” lessons | Students as knowledgable: the management of “objective” knowledge  
Teachers help students to grasp the distinction between personal knowledge and “what is to taken to be known” by the culture |

The fourth phase of this model is concerned with the learner-centred classroom and is the focus of our attention in this paper. From the teachers perspective this is concerned with teaching creatively as well as developing creativity in their pupils. The teachers’ perception of pupils in the learner-centred classroom recognises them as knowledgeable and able to operate as independent learners. The role of the teacher is to help students grasp the distinction between personal knowledge and “what is taken to be known” by the inherent culture. This is a complex and sophisticated role concerned with the facilitation of learning.

In this paper we describe and evaluate a range of creative and practical approaches to CPD that will bring about the necessary “shift of mind” required by schools aspiring to
become learning organisations (Senge, 2006). Furthermore these practices will enable teachers to establish themselves within our proposed fourth phase of teacher development (Sorensen and Coombs, 2007). In selecting our case studies we bear in mind the principle that good learning is good learning wherever it takes place.

*If we accept that what is good pedagogy in the teacher-learner setting of a school or college leads to good learning and good performance, then surely this must apply in the teachers’ CPD context.*

Pickering (2005, p5)

**Three case studies**

Our applied research and our practice as teacher educators has identified three creative approaches to CPD. These examples come from different and unconnected programmes of teacher development yet they share a common philosophy. We acknowledge the potential for bringing these ideas together in a coherent, designed programme of teacher development.

We firstly look to teachers’ narrative as a means of articulating and exploring personal values, attitudes and beliefs in order to develop conceptual understanding and the knowledge of learners that is expressed through pedagogy. We describe the way in which a reflective case study of self is used within the postgraduate professional development programme at Bath Spa University. This approach is guided by the metaphor of the iceberg as described by Spencer and Spencer (1993) and modified by Malderez and Bodoczky (1999).

The challenge of the learner-centred classroom is not solely concerned with the development of individual and independent learners’ but with nurturing the capacity for teachers and pupils to learn together: to generate knowledge collectively. This is based on a perception of the world that sees us not as separate individuals, but as connected to the world and those around us.

*At the heart of a learning organization is a shift of mind – from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world, from seeing problems as caused by someone or something “out there” to seeing how our actions create the problems that we experience.*

Senge (2006, p12)

The concept of collective learning is a complex and new phenomenon. Metaphors provide a particularly useful and creative way to recognize and understand the essence of a given phenomenon (Hatch, 1997). The jazz ensemble has often been cited as an appropriate metaphor for a learning organisation (Stoll et al 2003) and also relates to the notion of team work. We consider the appropriateness of this metaphor and how the use of metaphors can represent a qualitative research methodology and operate as a valuable tool for deepening personal and professional understanding. Our second case study looks at an example of collective team-based learning, as espoused in the metaphor of the jazz ensemble; and as evidenced in the advanced skills teachers
programme in England and to then find empirical evidence for the practicability of this approach.

One of the direct consequences of globalisation is that we live in a rapidly changing, complex and uncertain world where “knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do” is a vital and complex higher order skill that can help teachers to manage and make sense of the chaotic and uncertain professional challenges that they face working in the 21st century school. Our third case study explores how Claxton’s view of learning (1999) leads us to consider the importance of improvisation as a valid pedagogical approach and how an improvisation-based pedagogy might be developed.

Finally, we would argue that a CPD programme that is grounded in the generation of teacher narrative, the use of metaphor and an improvisation-based pedagogy provides a research framework that serves to lever schools as situated learning organisations within the Senge (2006) systems thinking paradigm.

**The problems facing CPD design**

There are two contradictory forces that are influencing the nature of professional learning. One is a government driven approach that is grounded in competitive league tables and involves continual testing and inspection. This has encouraged both a managerialist and individualistic approach, where education is viewed as a commodity that is measured in terms of grades and examination certificates as the valued output.

A second and alternative perspective has arisen though the encouragement given to teachers, schools and colleges to work in collaboration with each other (Clark, 2007). This approach places an emphasis on pedagogy and personalisation that is embedded within learning communities (Ibbotson, 2008). The problem for teacher educators is twofold: which pathway do they see they are on and what methods are they using to develop teachers? Finally, we ask: is it possible to synthesise these political and professional development goals into a common CPD approach that reduces the pressure and conflict upon teachers?

The methodology that explicitly underpins all three of our case studies is concerned with generating critical professional learning. This notion is promoted by the Critical Advisory Support Partnership (CASP), an organisation formed in England to offer a unified response and critical engagement with government proposals and consultations. Membership of CASP comprised representatives from SCETT (the Standing Committee for the Education and Training of Teachers), IPDA (the International Professional Development Association) and the UK’s UCET (the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers) (Clark, 2007).

From the perspective of these teacher education support organisations critical professional learning is a prerequisite for a democratic and critical engagement with policy and the problems it aims to solve. Teachers, supported by teacher educators, are
therefore encouraged to maximise and make sense of the learning that can come from experimenting and evaluating their own practice.

_i_t provides an opportunity for teachers to understand their professional values, attitudes and beliefs and make sense of how they impact upon their conceptual understanding and knowledge of learners and pedagogy. It also enables teachers to research and validate their practice so that development is informed and so that the rationale for practice can be clearly articulated to a range of stakeholder audiences._

(Clark, 2007, p8)

This approach counters a centrally ‘top-down’ controlled view of teaching and offers instead an alternative perspective of professionals to be empowered through their own ‘bottom-up’ actions. This desired outcome of teacher empowerment matches the intentions of the learning-to-learn agenda; that is concerned with empowering pupils as independent learners.

_A culture of learning_

We see that the principle purpose of CPD is to create a culture of professional learning. Our definition of a culture of learning can be summarised as follows:

- To see the main concern of teachers as explicitly encouraging pupils to learn how to learn;
- To encourage the shift of mind, and change in teaching behaviours, that enables a learner-centred culture in the classroom to develop;
- To enable teachers to develop a pedagogy that allows pupils to learn collectively;
- To encourage schools to develop as learning organisations;
- To encourage teachers to understand and develop their personal values and beliefs and to connect them with their professional roles;
- To empower teachers through researching and validating their own practice;
- To support teachers to critically engage with educational policy and practice.

What sort of CPD encourages such a culture of learning? What approaches are appropriate for developing teachers within phase four of our model of teacher development? The following three case study summaries explore creative approaches to CPD that are in keeping with our desire to encourage a culture of learning within individual teachers, teams and schools.

_Case study 1 – exploring teacher narrative_

The case for using teacher narrative as a mode of continuous professional development may not seem obvious; indeed, it could be argued that that such “naive gazing” is both inappropriate and inessential in the current climate of policy implementation, external inspections and the achievement of targets. However, an engagement with teachers cognitive and emotional ‘selves’ is essential to all those with an interest in raising and
sustaining standards of teaching, particularly in a centralist reform context which threatens to destabilise long-held beliefs and practices. (Day et al, 2006). Arguments in favour of teacher narrative as an important aspect of professional development are supported by a humanistic approach to personal development:

*I have come to feel that the only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered self-appropriated learning.*

Rogers (1967, p276)

Covey, in his Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, acknowledges personal victories as the necessary precursor to public victories,

*...until we take how we see ourselves (and how we see others) into account, we will be unable to understand how others see and feel about themselves and their world.*

Covey (1989, p67)

Goleman’s model of emotional intelligence identifies a range of competencies that are clustered into groups, each one of which is based on a common underlying emotional capacity (Goleman,1998). The four capacities, and associated competencies, are shown in figure 1.

Figure 1 Goleman’s model of emotional intelligence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self-Awareness</strong></th>
<th><strong>Social Awareness</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional self awareness</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accurate self-assessment</td>
<td>Organizational awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self confidence</td>
<td>Service orientation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Self-Management</strong></th>
<th><strong>Social skills</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>Developing others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement orientation</td>
<td>Change catalyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Conflict management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Goleman makes the point that the four capacities are hierarchical. Self-awareness is crucial in order to develop self-management skills and social awareness. Social awareness and self-management are essential in order to develop social skills.

This case study describes the approach to using teacher narrative within the postgraduate professional development programme at Bath Spa University. This module
is used across all courses, but the example under discussion is part of the Leadership and Management development Programme.

The aim of the assignment is to ask teachers to write a narrative of their professional career and to relate it to the context of the school they are currently working in. This writing is developed through the critical reading of a range of a choice of chapters from key texts and relevant articles or papers. These include Dalton and Dunnett (1992) “How do we come to be as we are?”, Fink (2005) on values and the importance of invitational leadership, Fullan (2001) on moral purpose and Goleman (1998) on the importance of emotional intelligence in successful leadership. Teachers are also welcome to select their own readings to provide a critical context in which to evaluate their own experience.

The process of writing the narrative is an interesting one because it contains many challenges. Many teachers express some degree of anxiety when they undertake Master’s accredited professional development because they are unused to having to produce assignments that will be subject to critical scrutiny. For some tutors the teacher’s narrative is used as the final assignment in the first phase of an MA (the first 60 credits). This allows the teacher an opportunity to offer a summative account of the critical ideas that they have engaged with within the context of their personal experience. Other tutors use this assignment as a way into the Masters programme by getting teachers to write about their career so far. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages.

The handbook provided to support the teacher in her work contains a scaffold to assist them to write about themselves in a structured fashion. This begins with getting them to write about the context of the school they are working in, to describe their role in the school and to articulate the reasons for wanting to write the narrative. There follows a series of prompt questions that helps them to explore why they became a teacher, their influences, identifying significant moments in their narrative and expressing their beliefs and values. Finally, there are questions designed to explore whether their beliefs and values have changed since they began their career and the extent to which their beliefs and values are in accord with those expressed by the school and / or by the current role that they hold.

We encourage teachers to undertake their personal writing first, based on some or all the questions within the scaffold, before they begin to undertake any reading. The readings thereby become a framework through which they can identify aspects of their narrative. This provides teachers with a validation of their experience, beliefs and values that helps them to articulate themselves as professionals.

Case study 2 – the use of metaphor

The second case study looks at the role that metaphor can play in creating a culture of professional learning. It has long been acknowledged that metaphors offer a powerful way to gain insights in the way that an organization works (Morgan 1986). For
organization theorists metaphors provide a way to recognise and understand the essence of a given phenomenon and to articulate ideas and concepts that may be difficult to put into words (Hatch, 1997a).

Metaphor allows you to understand one kind of experience in terms of another by assuming an identity between two things that you might not consider to be equivalent. By understanding one part of the metaphor you can learn something about the other. For example, an important metaphor that is used in the previous case study is that of the iceberg. An iceberg has about a tenth of its total size visible and above the waterline, nine-tenths is submerged and hidden from view. This metaphor is used to convey the considerable “depths” of conscious and unconscious thought that influence our behaviours. This metaphor was initially used by Freud to describe the topography of the mind with the conscious mind “above the surface” and the pre-conscious and the subconscious mind “below the surface” (Stafford-Clark, 1967). This idea has been adapted for the business world (Spencer & Spencer 1993) and further modified for training trainers (Malderez and Bodoczky 1999). In both cases they are using the metaphor to describe and give importance to the deeper aspects of the individual’s personality (their social role, self image, traits and social motives) that impact upon their behaviours and the way they respond to other people.

One of the key issues that we return to when supporting a culture of professional learning is facilitating a shift of mind in order to generate behaviours appropriate to a learning organisation (or learner-centred classroom). Metaphors have a valuable part to play in encouraging this change and in particular the shift in understanding towards comprehending a learning community. Stoll et al (2003) promote the concept of the ‘jazz ensemble’ as the metaphor that most accurately describes a learning community. This metaphor has also been used to provide insights into organizational leadership (Hatch 1997b) and even to illuminate the ultimate of questions, the meaning of life (Eagleton, 2002).

The insights that this metaphor gives on the learning centred classroom include the following:

- Each person (pupil) is individually respected.
- In turn, individual talents are featured.
- Experimentation and improvisation are encouraged as part of the learning process.
- Outline plans (musical scores) exist and guide the learning.
- Participants are not limited by the outline plans.
- The teacher (band leader) creates an environment of safety, encouragement and trust.

This metaphor is equally valid for a learning organisation, a learning community of teachers as well as the classroom. We recognise the potential for using this metaphor as the starting point for articulating the concept of a community of learners which could lead teachers to developing their own metaphors.
Case study 3 – an improvisation based pedagogy

The third case study is concerned with encouraging an improvisation-based pedagogy. This can be seen as the logical conclusion and consequence of the conceptual understanding gained from the “jazz ensemble” metaphor. We view pedagogy as the empirical evidence of a teacher’s values, beliefs and conceptual understanding of learning. An improvisation-based pedagogy is at the opposite end of a continuum that has a transmission-based pedagogy at the other end. However, there is further justification for an improvisation-based pedagogy if we consider the full implications of the learning-to-learn agenda.

Intelligence has been defined as “what you use when you don’t know what to do” (Piaget 1990) and this powerful idea has influenced Claxton’s view of what learning might be (Claxton 1999, p11). Such a view of learning invites the exploration of “getting stuck” and problem solving as places where learning takes place. Such an idea invites a pedagogy that is open-ended and employs critical thinking skills and explorative project based learning. What might the role of the teacher be in such circumstances? Here are four possibilities:

1. Defining the starting point for learning journeys.
2. Not providing answers, but designing problems that encourage the asking of higher-order questions.
3. Commentating on the learning process, identifying and developing the skills of pupils as independent learners.
4. Working alongside pupils as a partner in the construction of knowledge and understanding, i.e. developing the role of the learning coach.

The development of such a pedagogical strategy will not be achieved through “training sessions” or a programme aimed at the transmission of “hints and tips”. We believe that such a pedagogical approach can only be achieved through direct personal experimentation in the classroom, the evaluation of practice through peer observation and coaching, and the development of situated action research projects.

Giving teachers’ permission and professional authority to consider and practice an improvisation-based pedagogy is an underlying assumption of our work on teacher development. Through non-judgemental lesson observation, coaching and peer mentoring teachers are encouraged to view lesson plans as a guiding template rather than as a restricting structure. Through interacting with pupils as learners, using higher order questioning skills, generating opportunities for pupils to develop their learning skills “within the moment” teachers become action learning facilitators rather than agents for the transmission of knowledge and facts.

Conclusions

What conclusions can be gained from our three case studies?
If we want to develop creative teachers then we need to develop creative approaches to CPD. These approaches need to be recognised as having a significant value in the process of teacher development and perceived as being tangential to the purpose of school improvement and raising the quality of teaching.

For teachers to have the confidence to become creative agents in the classroom, to give themselves permission to become improvisers of learning, they need to be able to have a clear understanding of their beliefs and values and to be able to conceptualise the nature of collective learning.

Keltcherman’s 1996 study (in Day et al, 2006) of 10 experienced Belgian primary school teachers found that there was a correlation between the vulnerability that teachers felt (to the judgements of colleagues, the headteacher, parents and inspectors) and the degree of passivity and conservatism in their teaching (cited in Day et al 2006). This suggests that as teachers become more confident of their own judgements, grounded in their values and beliefs, so they will become more proactive and disposed to experiment and be creative in the classroom.

This suggests that there is an important connection to be made between our three case studies and that they all have a mutually supportive role to play within a coherent programme of teacher development. We suggest that collectively these three approaches are essential to achieving the desired shift of mind that significantly influences behaviour. Further research could be undertaken into exploring how these three approaches could be brought together in a more explicit and connected way.

Through the approaches described in these case studies we can hope to create a culture of professional learning. This sees culture not as an imposed set of values, beliefs and actions, but as the consequence of being engaged in the activities we have described and thereby embracing a newly discovered form of teacher empowerment. Through collectively working and learning together and through sharing narratives, exploring metaphors and developing improvisation-based pedagogies, we can create a new way of being that generates a sustainable professional leaning culture.

References

Hatch, M.J. (1997b) Jazzing up the theory of organizational improvisation Advances in Strategic Management 14: p181-191