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Being a Professional Learner: Reflections on Participation at the Vet Ed Conference 2018 as a Lecturer of Veterinary Education, an Educational Developer and Learner

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CONFERENCE REFLECTION

Being a professional learner: Reflections on participation at the Vet Ed conference 2018 as a lecturer of veterinary education, an educational developer and learner

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Being a professional learner: Reflections on participation at the Vet Ed conference 2018 as a lecturer of veterinary education, an educational developer and learner

This reflection is based on my experience of attending the 2018 Vet Ed conference in Utrecht and the linkages I identified with my doctoral research and relevant literature. I explore what and how I learned through the lens of being a professional learner.

Keywords: discipline specific; collaboration; professional learning.

Background

Vet Ed is an annual conference established by enthusiastic veterinary educators working in veterinary schools in the UK, The Netherlands and Ireland. In July 2018 I presented at Vet Ed 2018 conference in Utrecht (conference details are available at: <http://www.veted2018.nl/>.)

Conference session

While I noted learning points from all conference sessions, the focus for this reflection is “Engagement with a Faculty Development Programme: motivators and participation levels” by Dr Catriona E. Bell, Jill R.D. MacKay, Jessie E. Paterson, Susan M. Rhind. Bell described her work with colleagues on the development of a tailored professional programme for faculty within the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies (R(D)SVS), part of the University of Edinburgh and based on a campus eight miles from the main University campus site in Edinburgh city. The University of Edinburgh’s Institute for Academic Development offers the Edinburgh Teaching Award (EdTA) as a recognised route for faculty to apply for Fellowship of the UK’s Higher Education Academy (HEA). The EdTA comprises of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities based on the participant’s own educational needs, and involves compiling an electronic portfolio which includes documenting how their CPD for teaching and learning has impacted their practice, support from a mentor and assessed by a University panel. Bell outlined how she liaised with the Institute for Academic Development to adapt and tailor the EdTA to facilitate R(D)SVS faculty to combine CPD opportunities offered by the centralised Institute with CPD at their own campus and have a local mentor. Since this tailored programme was launched in June 2015, 21 faculty have completed it and gained HEA accreditation. According to Bell (2018), their programme combines “both veterinary-specific educational training alongside wider

‘generic’ educational training and philosophy, thus making it relevant, practical and convenient for colleagues”.

Bell and colleagues are currently evaluating their programme, and during this conference session preliminary results were shared. These included the importance of the intrinsic motivating factor of “becoming a better teacher” and other factors such as convenience of being on-campus, relevance and the extrinsic factor of gaining an internationally recognised and accredited teaching qualification. Other significant outcomes which Bell noted were that nine R(D)SVS graduates have become EdTA mentors and there is a one-year waiting list to participate in their programme. She concluded that “EdTA engagement levels have far exceeded our expectations, and have helped to create a vibrant community of enthusiastic educators in a relatively short timeframe” (Bell, 2018).

Discussion

Four key learning points are discussed here with reference to relevant literature and insights from my recent doctoral research on learning within and beyond accredited programmes (Hanratty, 2018). These areas have been chosen based on common challenges experienced by educational developers and opportunities identified within my own research.

(i) Mix of discipline specific & wider “generic”

Accredited teaching and learning programmes available within Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) are generally delivered by teaching and learning centres. One discipline-specific programme is the Postgraduate Diploma in Health Professions Education offered by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). All Irish programmes intend that participants apply the learning from “generic” programmes to their own teaching contexts and disciplines. How and what a lecturer teaches is intrinsically related to their discipline with both Land (2013) and Shulman (2005) emphasising this in terms of the lecturer’s identity which informs their signature pedagogy. While Cox and Mond (2008) and Trowler and Knight (2002) advocate that the principal locus of professional development should be situated and within academic departments, they also acknowledge the importance of influences from others such as professional bodies and teaching and learning centres.

Dall’Alba (2009) articulated the value for lecturers from a variety of disciplines participating in a “generic” teaching and learning programme, as it provides an opportunity to come out of

the School environment, and become more reflective and reflexive of who lecturers are in that discipline-specific context. Tobias also advocated that educators experience moving outside their comfort zones and boundaries of their own disciplines to learn from others. This was highlighted by participants within my own research (Hanratty, 2018) with some noting the importance of exploring beyond their own disciplinary areas and becoming a scholar of teaching and learning. This introduced them to the language of teaching and learning and underpinning theories within accredited programmes which also enables them to continue engaging in professional learning. Donnelly and Crehan (2011) highlight that within accredited teaching and learning programmes, it is important to achieve a balance between generic and discipline specific strategies, with the focus maintained on underlying principles of how students learn which can then be applied within a disciplinary context.

(ii) Collaboration with schools and teaching and learning centres

Bell's (2018) example of the successful collaboration between the R(D)SVS and the University of Edinburgh's Institute of Academic Practice is impressive. It may have relied heavily on the existence of her educational role as a lecturer in veterinary education. While there are some such role holders within Irish HEIs at the School level, such as in the SVM in UCD or School of Medicine in Trinity College Dublin, their remits do not usually include customising a teaching and learning programme.

Graduates from programmes often contribute to programmes on discipline-specific topics or teaching strategies that have worked within their disciplines, such as problem-based learning (PBL) or team teaching. However, there may be more potential for strengthening these links between schools and teaching and learning centres. One area for development may be to encourage recipients of the National Forum (NF)'s Disciplinary Excellence in Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) awards to share their experiences more widely within their schools and opportunities organised by the teaching and learning centres.

(iii) Mentoring

The establishment of an EdTA mentoring team to support faculty striving for HEA Fellowships through the EdTA scheme seemed an important factor for success. The presence of a school-based mentor or advocate for teaching was noted within my research (Hanratty, 2018). A number of research participants stated that when they started teaching within their schools, they were looking for a "go to" colleague who could inform and support them in

relation to their teaching development, and some had subsequently become this “go to” person for colleagues. While their roles were not formal, their mentoring manifested in encouraging new colleagues to participate in programmes or workshops, and to apply for teaching fellowships. The importance of supportive colleagues who form the community for lecturers is critical and is emphasised within Engeström’s (2001) Activity Theory model. While a lecturer’s community can be within or beyond their school and discipline, the immediate community within a school is particularly influential.

(iv) Recognition

The final learning point I noted from Bell’s (2018) conference presentation was the significance of the EdTA programme being acknowledged, supported and recognised at school and institutional level. Their experience also highlighted the importance of professional-development experiences being mapped to a national and international accreditation scheme such as the UK’s HEA fellowship. It emphasises that teaching is valued and professional learning is supported by the institution. While most Irish HEIs have institutional-level teaching awards and fellowships, in addition to the national-level awards through the NF, the school-level recognition seems valued by lecturers who are acknowledged by peers and school-level management.

Conclusions

The experience of documenting this conference reflection has highlighted the importance of both school-based engagement with teaching and learning as well as with teaching and learning centres. While it may not always be feasible to offer tailored CPD programmes within a single school setting, the value of having discipline-specific strategies and examples shared within programmes and the need for participants to reflect on their own discipline and context and publish on these could be emphasised further. The success of this tailored programme may also have been supported by the presence of discipline-specific educational resources such as the *Journal of Veterinary Medicine Education* and networks based such as teaching clinical skills. This contextualisation and disciplinary translation of teaching and learning was noted by O’Mahony (2015) as a factor in ensuring maximum effectiveness. I aim to seek out more of these opportunities within my role as an educational developer and encourage more publication and dissemination of discipline specific research.

Attendance at this conference also highlighted how we learn as professionals. The power of sharing knowledge and experiences through presentations was evident, as was networking and other informal and non-accredited learning. It also highlighted the importance of reflecting on one's identity which is captured within the NF's Professional Development Framework in the domain of "Professional Identity, Values and Development in Teaching and Learning" which I shall emphasise more in centralised programmes.

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