Raising standards of teaching and learning through effective professional development

Report of the project piloting SKEIN in the further education and skills sector
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Context

In recent months, attention has been sharply focused on the quality of teaching and learning in the Further Education and Skills sector. We accept that ensuring a consistently high quality experience for all learners within an FE context is a crucial part of all our work. Attention therefore must focus on the continuing professional development and learning (CPDL) of teachers within the sector. The 157 Group, along with IfL, have held a series of seminars exploring issues around professionalism, where practitioners have emphasised approaches to managing staff development best summed up in the title of one of the ensuing reports, *Leading Learning and Letting Go*[1].

Evidence from international research and from the schools' system in the UK has confirmed that substantial and sustainable improvements in the quality of teaching and learning can only be achieved by improving the knowledge and skills (both subject/vocational and pedagogical) of the teacher/trainer workforce. The means for effecting this improvement is continuing professional development and learning and, unusually in the normally contentious field of education research and practice, there is a settled body of knowledge of what effective CPDL looks like. For the SKEIN model, CUREE has taken this evidence and created from it a non-bureaucratic, systematic and rigorous process which evaluates the college's effectiveness as a CPDL environment; effectiveness here meaning the extent to which staff are developed and supported in ways which improve student learning.

CUREE, in partnership with 157 Group and supported by LSIS, tested the model over 6 months in three pilot colleges and through focus groups and other interactions with college leaders.

Summary

Key process messages

The key messages emerging from the pilot about the relevance and usefulness of the SKEIN model were, in summary:
- The SKEIN evaluation model was rooted in a solid international evidence base and had been extensively tested in the school system. The evidence and the concepts were not confined to schools so the prospects of a successful transfer to the FE were good
- In practice the concepts and processes transferred quite smoothly to the FE context with some adaptation for context of language and terminology
- The SKEIN model was tested successfully in large, complex, urban, rural, single and multi-site colleges. It was not tested in small colleges (but had been in large schools, which are similar in size and, often, context)
- The concepts, methods and tasks all proved meaningful (after adaptation) to college leaders and practitioners

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[1]   Available at http://www.157group.co.uk/files/leading_learning_and_letting_go.pdf

- The pilot sites valued both the process and the evaluation reports and , in two cases, have begun to implement the recommendations;
- on average, the pilot colleges sat just above the middle of the range of the SKEIN benchmarks (average score = 2.22/4) with variation above and below for different colleges and, to a lesser extent, in individual benchmark areas;
- staff survey data (from 220 returns) revealed some interesting comparisons between the kinds and amounts of professional development offered and the value placed on them by staff (but to be interpreted with caution given the small number of colleges involved);
- the most substantial practical challenge was overcoming the logistical problems of collective data collection (e.g. via focus groups) from non-management staff. The response rate to the survey was lower than the equivalent exercise in schools;
- there was no correlation between factors such as size or number of sites and data collection problems/staff involvement. It is possible that a more significant factor was the degree of internal cohesiveness (or lack of it) of the different parts of the college.

Project level findings

A pilot in three colleges is too small to support generalisable findings about colleges as CPDL environments though some data (for instance, the staff survey) could be aggregated to support conclusions at the project level. The pilot did, however, generate some interesting questions which a larger field trial might attempt to answer. These are very briefly summarised here and set out in a little more detail on page 12 below.

- 'Collaboration' and the 'use of specialist expertise' were areas where the pilot colleges' work was strongest and 'leadership' was the weakest although the variation between *benchmark areas* (see next section for an explanation) was rather smaller (+/- 0.4) than variations between *colleges*.
- The most frequently reported forms of CPDL were collaborative planning, appraisal/performance review meetings and whole college training sessions
- Staff feedback on the usefulness of CPDL ranked collaborative planning highest, appraisal meetings fourth and whole college sessions third from last (out of 15)
- Examples of CPDL practices that colleagues experiences as being effective included:
  - o Structured opportunities for staff to work with others outside their division
  - o Updates via placement / visiting expert
  - o Trying out T&L approaches using before and after student impact evidence
  - o Senior leaders as learners in CPD
  - o CPD planning a central part of strategic planning
  - o T&L data used to judge value of CPD
  - o Range of 'tools' used to structure/sustain PL
- Examples of practices colleagues felt were less effective included:
  - o Over use of observations seen as a managerial tool
  - o a lack of opportunities to observe others for PDL purposes –Overdependence on cascade
  - o Overdependence of undifferentiated , whole college sessions
  - o An emphasis on teaching and learning techniques divorced of a rationale or working theory or chance to contextualise them in different vocational contexts –which lead to them being seen as superficial 'tips and tricks'

- o Leaders representing their own learning as systems/processes for others to follow rather than using it as an opportunity for modelling
- o Weak CPD to corporate objectives linkages
- o Evaluation via satisfaction questionnaires

System level questions

The findings of this small scale study flagged up a number of areas worthy of further investigation:

- What is the value of whole college training (days or weeks)?
- Is there a disconnect between pedagogy development and vocational skills? development resulting in a 'tips and tricks' culture about teaching and learning?
- Is lesson observation just a management process or can it support CPDL?
- Is doing stuff together really 'collaboration'?
- Where is coaching for T&L development?

The evidence base

The underpinning concepts for SKEIN

CUREE has analysed, synthesised and refined the evidence from around the world on the characteristics of professional development interventions which can be shown to impact positively on student learning outcomes. The core of this evidence was pulled together in a series of systematic, technical research reviews using the very rigorous EPPI review methodology. That evidence is summarised at http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=274. Other work[2], more directly located in FE and vocational education, has emphasised the similarities rather than the differences between sectors when the focus is on teaching and learning.

The evidence emphasised the role of the organisation and its leadership in setting up the conditions, systems and processes for effective CPDL. From this base, CUREE has derived criteria, evidence collection instruments and benchmark levels through which the organisation's effectiveness as a sponsor of CPDL can be assessed. These are (highly summarised):

- **leadership** of professional learning;
- **use of collaboration** as professional learning strategy;
- use of **specialist expertise**;
- use of **evidence** to support the learning process and link staff and student learning;
- summative and formative approaches to **needs analysis**.

The model assesses the provider's effectiveness against four benchmark levels of maturity – each with evidence-based, assessable, fine grained descriptors of practice at that level. The levels are:
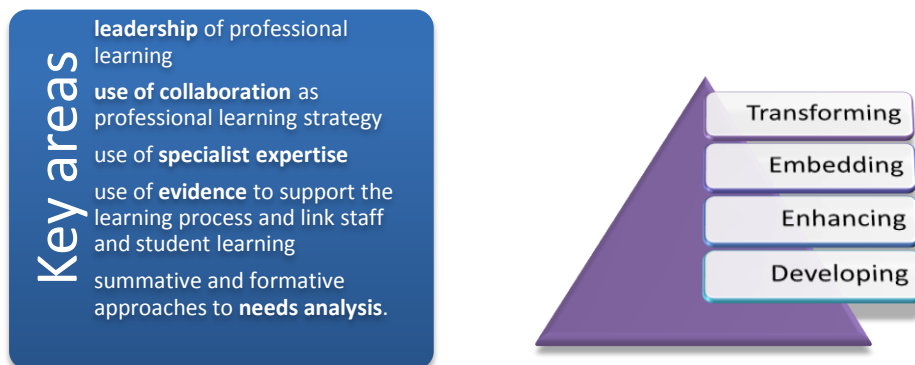
- ⚓ **Developing'** – the college offers its staff an opportunity to engage in a number of

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[2] For instance, the guide to coaching published by City & Guilds' Centre for Skills Development referenced above, the CSD/LSN review of effective teaching and learning in vocational education and the IfL/CUREE routemap 'Supporting CPD Priorities'.

external and internal CPD opportunities, in accordance with either the college priorities or staff needs and interests;

- ⚓ 'Enhancing' – a significant proportion of the college staff participate in a range of good quality CPD, including long-term work-based learning opportunities and access to specialist expertise; many of the opportunities are well tailored to staff and their students' needs and are also linked to college development priorities;

- ⚓ 'Embedding' – most of the college staff, including the leadership team, behave as professional learners on an ongoing basis and are aware of, and explicit about, their learning; they are engaged in iterative development of practice and collaborative enquiries with colleagues; the college has tools and mechanisms in place which aim to create coherence and depth of professional learning across the college and tightly link it with student learning and outcomes; and

- ⚓ Transforming' – the college is a highly successful, transparent and coherent learning environment to which all staff make a positive contribution. Learning processes and support are characterised by the presence of all of the features internationally recognised to be required and significant for truly effective staff learning and development.

The whole assessment process is illustrated graphically as follows:

The pilot process

The 157 Group recruited pilot colleges through its networks, which extended beyond its own membership, and three were selected as the pilots. The first acted as a trailblazer. Staff there looked at the schools-based framework and materials and advised on adjustments necessary to fit them to an FE context. They then went through the full SKEIN process 'for real'. Some additional data were provided and meetings (or telephone calls) held to fill in gaps. A draft report was produced and provided to the college leadership. They commented on the report and convened a meeting at which the CUREE personnel could clarify the findings and college staff could provide feedback. From this a final, confidential report was produced and supplied to the college.

The other two pilot colleges undertook the full SKEIN process (overlapping slightly with some of the later stages of the preliminary cycle at the trailblazer).

The SKEIN process

This is simply summarised as follows:

- After a short (usually by telephone) discussion of the approach, the college supplies a range of documents which provide a picture of its approach to professional development and learning. This evidence is selected to give a broad picture of the college, ranging from strategy documents (e.g. strategic plan, self evaluation documentation) through to examples of the products of standard systems (e.g. completed –but anonymised – performance review documentation, staff development programmes and content, evaluations);

- These are analysed by a CUREE researcher against the SKEIN criteria and benchmarks and a preliminary grid is populated. This also serves to focus the areas of questioning at later stages;

- Staff are asked to complete an on-line questionnaire (also focused on the key benchmarks);

- One to three CUREE researchers visit the college (normally in one day) during which time they conduct:
  o a collective interview with members of the executive team;
  o one or more collective interviews with faculty/divisional leaders;
  o short individual interviews with 12 – 20 staff members agreed with the college in advance to be broadly representative of the staff community;
  o one or two focus groups with a cross-section of staff (different ones from those interviewed) who take part in a short series of activities designed and tested to give insights into the use in the college of known high-impact professional development and learning approaches.

- These diverse data are then analysed by the CUREE team. Any significant gaps in the evidence are identified and, where possible filled by follow-up activity (usually by telephone or email);

- A detailed, draft report is prepared and sent to the college for review. The report sets out the findings against each of the five benchmark areas, assesses practice against the benchmarks and identifies strengths and areas for improvement. It also makes practical recommendations for action to address, in particular, areas for improvement drawing on known effective practice from other colleges and schools or international research evidence

- Any errors of fact or possible misinterpretations are resolved and a final draft report is sent to the college together with an executive summary and/or a presentation. If requested (and it usually is) a senior researcher attends a meeting of senior college staff to present the report's findings;

- The complete process (as practised only in schools so far) includes a lighter touch follow up review, usually around 12 months later, to help the college monitor progress.

The findings

The purpose of the pilot was to 'prove the concept' of SKEIN in the FE context and we report our findings in this area in the first three sections below. In the school system,

there is now a sufficient quantity and range of evidence from the SKEIN process to begin to report on system level phenomena. With evidence from just three colleges, we don't have enough data at college level to support conclusions at that level. However, we collected data from dozens of interviewees and focus group participants and survey responses from over 200 staff so there is the basis of a substantial, albeit localised data set. The project was not funded to analyse these data but we have illustrated some of the forms of analysis potentially available later on along with some examples of the range of practice against each benchmark area from our three pilot colleges.

The usefulness of the process within FE

The utility and quality of the experience

Colleges' response to the process and the resulting report was generally very positive. These positive evaluations included:
- o   immediate written responses;
- o   enthusiastic oral reports to a 157 Group members' meeting;
- o   follow-up action from both colleges beginning to implement the recommendations (including recruiting for a new 2nd tier post embodying SKEIN recommendations in the job specification).

Engagement with the process

The following specific points emerged from the pilot:

- The concepts underpinning SKEIN were well understood and staff at all levels saw the point of the process and engaged with it thoughtfully and actively. Some adaptation was required to fit names, acronyms, role titles, assessment structures etc to the FE context

- College engagement with the process was mostly facilitated by a 2nd or 3rd tier leader with responsibility for CPD and/or teaching and learning. Other members of the executive management team actively participated, usually via a collective interview

- Size and number of sites did not impact negatively on the process to any significant degree, rather to our surprise (but see comment in the 'logistics' section below). However, the 'span of control' of senior leaders in colleges distanced most of them from the direction and knowledge of the detail of professional development practices. For this reason we introduced an additional division/faculty head collective interview (not included in the schools version of the process);

- The density of the full 'technical' report (generally around 18 pages long) was inappropriate for the executive team so we produced a summary report and PowerPoint presentation for this purpose in which we could highlight the strategic issues succinctly.

Logistical issues

The only significant problems in the pilot were in the logistics of data collection:

- Although participants found assembling the documentation (explicitly limited to existing to minimise the collection burden) a bit of a chore, it was completed without difficulty

- Negotiating dates and organising the logistics for on-site interviews was challenging for co-ordinators but all happened as planned

- Collective interviews with senior and middle managers ran smoothly, collected valuable data and, we were told, provided the participants with an unusual opportunity to discuss teaching and learning issues prompted by questions from a knowledgeable outsider;

- Scheduling the focus groups (involving a cross-section of 'non-managerial' staff) was a challenge – particularly where the group crossed divisional/departmental boundaries. This revealed a practical difference between schools' and colleges' operation. In the former, many staff are used to joint activity at fixed times (lunchtime or late afternoon) so focus groups could be scheduled in those timeslots without much disruption. In our pilot colleges, no such arrangements were common so gathering staff together at any time was a challenge and strongly contrasted between colleges. In one college, an open invitation to staff resulted in focus groups being unattended. In another, we successfully ran focus groups across remote sites using video and/or audio conferencing

- The on-line survey element of data gathering (designed to capture 'shallow but wide' information from a large proportion of the staff) regularly gets response rates above 70% in schools. In colleges, this could be below 20%..

Findings at project level

As stated, the evidence base is not large enough to support conclusions generalisable to the FE system but we can report some emerging issues across our three pilots.

Skein Pilot Colleges: Results compared with latest Ofsted

	OfSTED (invert)	SKEIN Overall
College A	2	2.2
College B	3	2.5
College C	3	2.0

Chart 1

In the school sector SKEIN gradings have proved to be a quite accurate predictor of Ofsted gradings under the new inspection regime. Chart 1 above shows the overall SKEIN grade (averaged across all benchmark areas) for each college against its most recent Ofsted grading. The Ofsted grade has been inverted to aid comparison (i.e. a Grade 1, Outstanding, = 4 on the chart; KKEIN grading system goes up to 4 for Transforming). It is worth noting that none of the pilot colleges has been inspected under the new Framework but College A had had the most recent inspection.

Chart 2 below shows each of the benchmark areas separately – plus the overall aggregate grading. This suggests that the pilot colleges collectively were functioning, on average a little above the second, 'enhancing' level of the SKEIN model with both 'Collaboration' and Use of Specialist Expertise' sitting above that average and 'Leadership' a little below it.

Average SKEIN Grades - all pilots

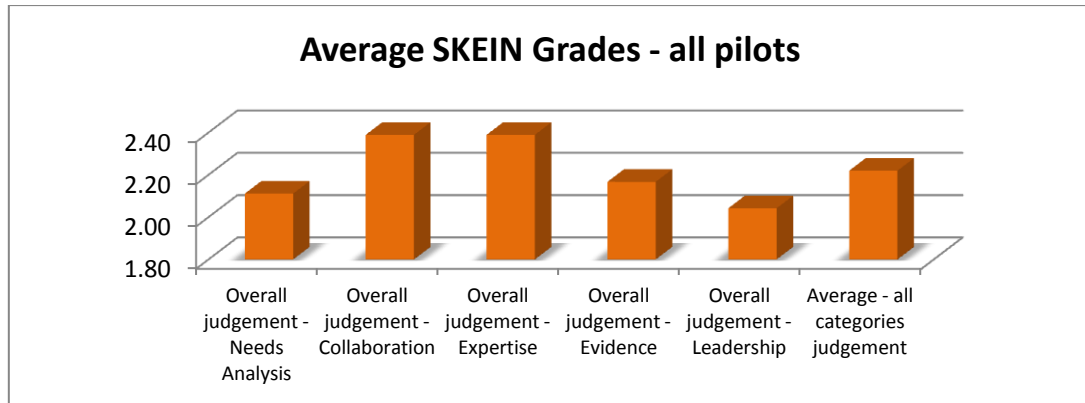A 3D bar chart showing values ranging from 1.80 to 2.40 for the following categories: Overall judgement - Needs Analysis; Overall judgement - Collaboration; Overall judgement - Expertise; Overall judgement - Evidence; Overall judgement - Leadership; Average - all categories judgement.

Chart 2

The next chart (chart 3) draws on the aggregated survey evidence and shows who responded

Distribution of survey responses by role of respondent

A horizontal bar chart with a scale from 0 to 70, showing responses by role including: Other; Finance/admini assistant/officer; Technician; Lecturer (sessional/PT); Advanced practitioner/teaching mentor; senior manager.

Chart 3

Chart 4 shows the kinds of CPDL experienced by our survey respondents and the frequency of them. The ordering of the columns is weighted by intensity of occurrence with most intense (happens more often) to the left and least to the right. The height of each block shows the frequency of respondents reporting this type of CPDL. So the most common forms overall were performance review meetings and whole college training sessions but these were organised termly or annually. Action research/enquiry was the activity most likely to happen often (weekly); collaborative planning was also quite intense and, as reported in our pilot colleges, happened in greater volume than other activities.

Frequency of CPD experienced in the pilot colleges

[ordered left->right by weighted intensity]

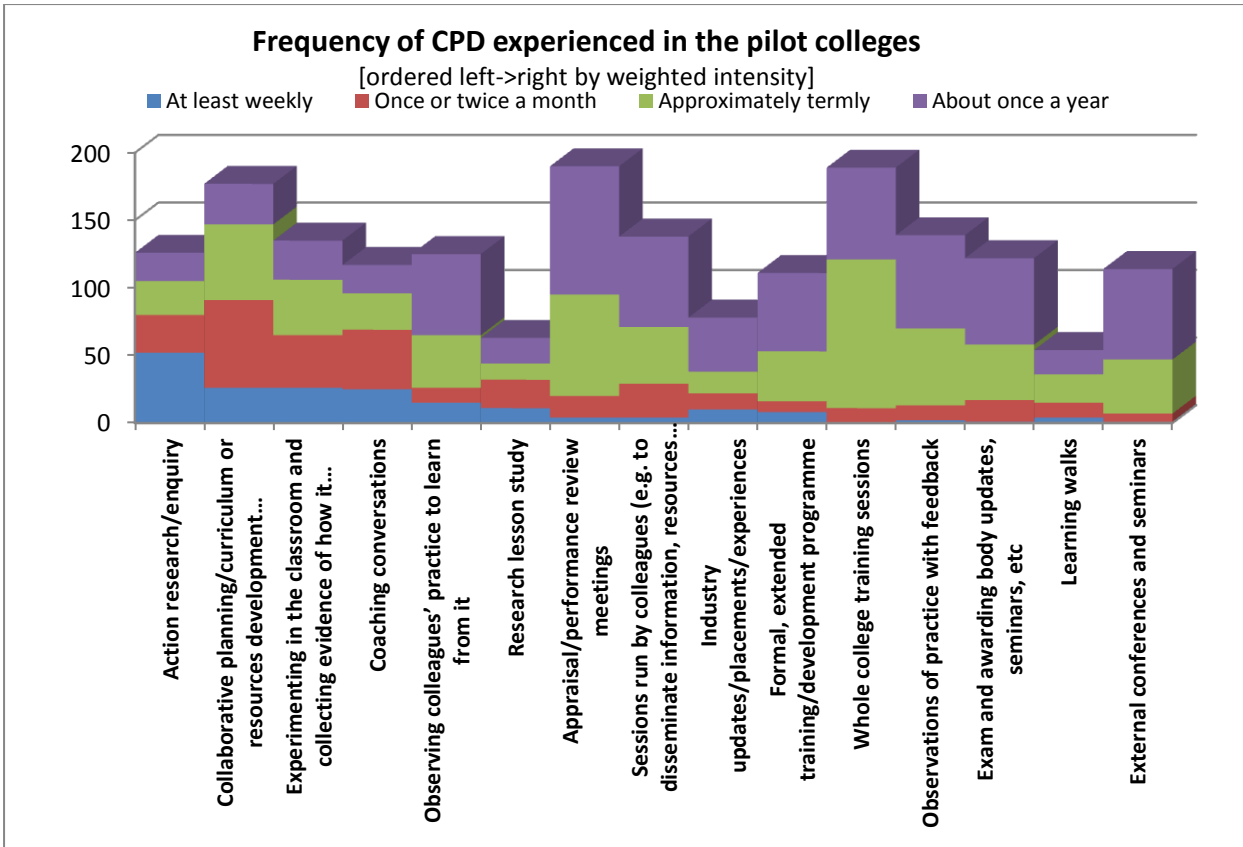■ At least weekly   ■ Once or twice a month   ■ Approximately termly   ■ About once a year

Chart categories (left to right):
- Action research/enquiry
- Collaborative planning/curriculum or resources development…
- Experimenting in the classroom and collecting evidence of how it…
- Coaching conversations
- Observing colleagues' practice to learn from it
- Research lesson study
- Appraisal/performance review meetings
- Sessions run by colleagues (e.g. to disseminate information, resources…
- Industry updates/placements/experiences
- Formal, extended training/development programme
- Whole college training sessions
- Observations of practice with feedback
- Exam and awarding body updates, seminars, etc
- Learning walks
- External conferences and seminars

Chart 4

Chart 5 compares frequency with the respondent's perceptions of the usefulness, in terms of the impact on students, of the various CPDL activities.
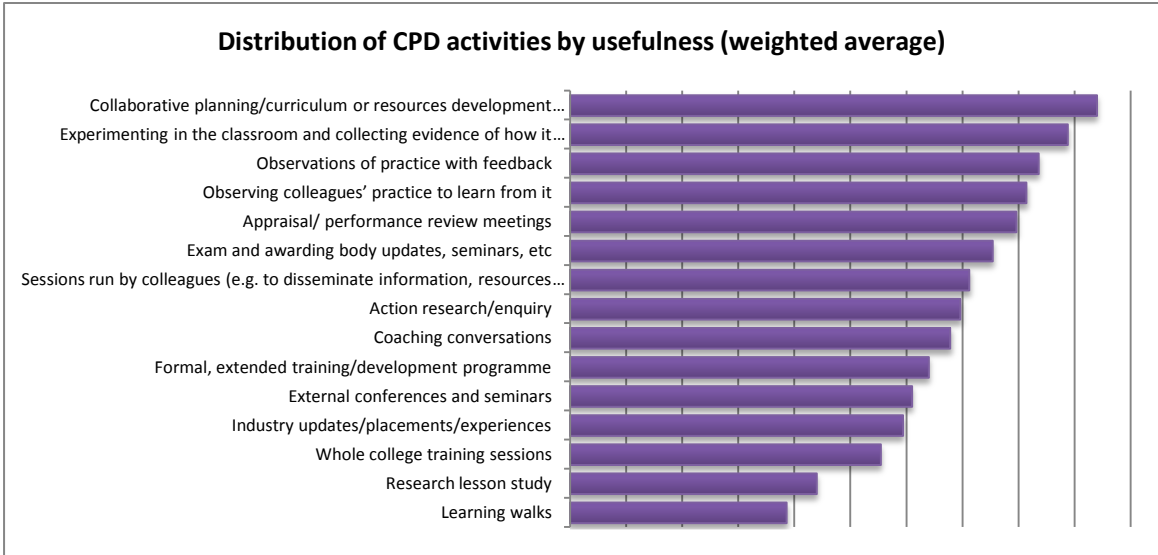
Distribution of CPD activities by usefulness (weighted average)

- Collaborative planning/curriculum or resources development…
- Experimenting in the classroom and collecting evidence of how it…
- Observations of practice with feedback
- Observing colleagues' practice to learn from it
- Appraisal/ performance review meetings
- Exam and awarding body updates, seminars, etc
- Sessions run by colleagues (e.g. to disseminate information, resources…
- Action research/enquiry
- Coaching conversations
- Formal, extended training/development programme
- External conferences and seminars
- Industry updates/placements/experiences
- Whole college training sessions
- Research lesson study
- Learning walks

Chart 5

Collaborative planning comes top of their list followed by experimenting in the classroom and observation of feedback. Collaborative planning and classroom experimentation are also both reported as an intense CPDL activity and both appear at or near the top of both lists. By contrast, whole college training sessions comes third from last.

Examples of practice

As mentioned above, the data at college level are insufficient to support an analysis generalisable to the wider system but we can illustrate the range of practice we uncovered in our three pilot colleges. On the journey to Transforming we did not find examples of practice at that level (yet) but nor did we find much at the most basic level (Developing). The table below shows some of the range against each of the benchmark areas.

Strong	Less so
Needs analysis	
Extensive pattern of lesson observation informing performance review/appraisal	Overconcentration on underperforming staff
Good use of student performance data/feedback in appraisal	Weak understanding of how a CPD recommendation would benefit student learning
Collaboration	
Effective use of team meetings for professional dialogue and development activity (and not just 'business')	Coaching and peer-coaching processes fallen into disuse
Structured opportunities for staff to work with others outside their division (e.g. through *professional learning communities)*	No opportunities to observe others (except for grading purposes
Use of specialist expertise	
Updating of vocational expertise via placement or visiting expert (especially when used in joint planning)	Overdependence on 'cascade' approach to sharing expert knowledge around the team
In-house team of 'leaders of learning' working in integrated way with teaching staff	Expertise in the form of 'tips and tricks' with insufficient grasp of why different strategies matter and the relevant concepts or working theory
Evidence for professional learning	
Trying out new T&L approaches using 'before and after' student impact evidence	Teaching observations understood to have a mainly managerial function, i.e. a grading
Use of self-generated personal review processes (e.g. learning journal, post-training action plan)	Student feedback data not accessible or applied at course and individual staff level
Leadership	
• **Modelling**	
Senior staff are engaged as learners in the CPD activities and take opportunity to share their learning experiences face-to-face and through house newsletters etc	Leaders represent their learning only as systems and processes for others to follow
• **Strategic prioritising**	

Strong	Less so
CPD planning is seen as central to overall strategic plan. Objectives are linked to staff expertise	CPD is well planned but as an activity in its own right with weak linkages to corporate objectives

- **Evaluation of CPD**

The value of CPD is judged through its impact on learners using data collected as part of the normal teaching and learning processes	Formal 'courses' are evaluated via satisfaction questionnaires

- **Use of tools to ensure sustainability**

CPD is supported by a battery of 'tools' that structure/sustain professional learning (e.g. teaching observation guides, appraisal templates, CPD planning framework)	College publish an online internal CPD programme

System level questions arising from the SKEIN in FE process

From our evidence, we can begin to outline some relevant questions.

Do you get value from whole college training days/weeks?

It is a widespread practice in colleges to dedicate large infrequent blocks of time to training and administration. In our sample, a common arrangement was to give over a block of several days at the end of the summer term to this. This is an approach which is very hard to make work; seems to be held in very low regard by the participants; requires but does not deliver effective differentiation; inevitably fails one of the key tests of 'good' CPD ('sustained over time') and is poorly evaluated. This density and volume of CPD provision is often very burdensome on its designers and organisers so often ends up being (or perceived as) predominantly managerially oriented.

Is dual professionalism in fact a du**e**l?

It is a reality of FE, and one of its potential strengths, that it requires of most of its practitioners both a deep and current grasp of vocational/professional knowledge and practice, and command of the concepts and techniques of teaching and learning (aka pedagogy). Furthermore, generic 'good' pedagogic practice, to be effective, has to be adapted to the particularities of a subject or vocational area. Our evidence suggests that vocational and pedagogic domains are rarely brought effectively together in college CPDL support. Vocationally related CPDL seems to be held in higher regard by many practitioners and its delivery is often embedded in local (i.e. faculty) systems. Teaching and learning development, by contrast, it often a 'corporate' initiative centrally delivered and too many of the participants (and, it has to be said, some of their leaders) are willing to settle for a directive approach focussed on behaviours which staff experience as 'tips and tricks' superficiality.

Are we using observation effectively for development?

Although our survey respondents saw the development potential of teaching and learning observation, our evidence suggests that many staff view observation as wholly the tool of management for performance review. A more sophisticated usage constructs a protective disconnection between the two functions through approaches such as peer-to-peer observations, professional learning communities and/or the creation of structured opportunities to learn from looking at teaching and learning exchanges rather than simply being "looked at". Other innovative and high yield observational practices include using video to even up the power disparities that inevitably arise between observers and those they observe; introducing a strong student presence into professional learning; and to overcome some of the concerns about logistics, impact on students etc.

Are staff really learning collaboratively or just doing stuff together?

A key factor in effective CPDL is that it involves meaningful collaboration between staff. Our evidence showed that staff believe they use collaborative planning extensively for professional development. Other evidence challenges this belief. Staff working together developing a curriculum, designing resources and even jointly delivering a programme do not provide, of themselves, learning opportunities. For professional development (which changes practice and improves student learning outcomes), that joint activity has to be supported by experiments with new approaches to disturb the status quo and enable deeper analysis, examination of evidence of learning, reflection on its significance and adaptation of practice in the light of that reflection. Without this, the programme design might move on but the staff development potential of the situation will remain unexploited.

What happened to coaching for teaching and learning?

The international evidence, and research in our school system, shows that a combination of the judicious use of specialist coaching and extensive peer or co-coaching is one of the most effective methods of securing lasting improvement in teaching and learning practice. The FE system had the benefit of extensive investment in coaching. But we were surprised to find little evidence, in our pilot colleges, of the widespread use of coaching for professional development of teaching and learning. It is, of course, possible that coaching is happening but is called something else. Several of the approaches adopted by our pilot colleges would be much more effective, efficient and sustained if supported by a structured, organisational approach to coaching.

Conclusions

The principal lever of change available to colleges to raise teaching and learning quality is the professional development of the staff. Research evidence helped identify the small set of essential characteristics of professional development which actually improved learner outcomes (and a lot of CPD doesn't). These were distilled by CUREE, into a set of standards and benchmarks called SKEIN. Deployed successfully in schools, the

purpose of the project reported here was to test the robustness of the model when adapted for use in the further education context. Conducted over a six month period in three colleges, we are careful to limit the claims we make about the system as a whole on the back of this small scale pilot. Nevertheless, we think the evidence does show that:

- the model is effective in the FE context as well as the schools one;

- the standards and benchmarks are completely relevant to FE once adaptations for language and structures have been made;

- the challenges were practical and logistical not conceptual;

- the ways colleges operate on a day to day basis pose (solvable) problems around collecting data of the right kind and from the right people;

- a comparison of evidence from staff about what CPDL they found useful with the CPDL they were most often offered showed some good correlations (e.g. performance review meetings) and some weak ones (e.g. whole college training days)

The small size of the pilot means that we cannot form conclusions about FE colleges more widely, let alone about the sector as a whole. Nevertheless, we can see some interesting questions emerging such as:

a) are whole college training days a waste of money?

b) are the development of subject/vocational knowledge and skills and the development of teaching and learning in practice divorced from each other?

c) has coaching for teaching and learning (known to be a very effective, cost efficient CPDL technique) fallen into disuse?

SKEIN is now available in the FE sector as an individually purchased full cost service – and a number of colleges are interested in using it on that basis. CUREE and the 157 Group continue to explore ways of moving forward a more systematic approach to using SKEIN to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the sector as a whole.

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