

The OU Education Conference 2024

What Counts As Professional Learning

Speakers:

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CAROLYN COOKE: And we're going to start today by talking about where this session has come from, why we've got this session. But before I do, I know that some of you may have been in the previous session with Sylvia and colleagues talking about professional learning and collaborating for professional learning. And we're aware that there are some similarities across our presentations because we're all very interested in the same sort of thing. So if you were in that previous session, what we're really excited about is the opportunity to kind of fertilise that discussion across into ours.

So please bring back some of the same conversations, some of the same ideas. Please don't be afraid to repeat yourself because there are new people in this session as well and we can continue those discussions. But ours starts from a slightly different place. Excellent. I can see a range of geographies as well as sectors appearing in the chat. That's lovely. OK. So this session is based on a report that Lore and I with others wrote in 2022.

After COVID we were aware that there had been a significant shift in the professional learning in Scotland and how it was delivered, how it was facilitated. A lot had gone online at very short notice and we were aware that actually that had created huge opportunities for the sector to reconsider professional learning and how it works in Scotland. So we've always sort of thought about this project in terms of two phases and this is only phase one which is a survey but we're hoping to follow it up phase two which would be much more qualitative.

But the survey reached 183 participants across all sectors, ages, local authorities and career stages in Scotland. We were really pleased with the response and we felt that in itself spoke to people's passion about this subject post COVID. And the aim of the survey and the report was specifically to explore Scottish education practitioners, their experiences and perceptions of online and I'll come back to why it's in brackets, professional learning.

The reason that the online is in brackets is because the survey was much more exploratory of professional learning in the whole. Clearly as an online institution we were particularly interested in online but we were aware that that needed to fit within the full range and the full set of modes of professional learning in Scotland. So that's the background as to why we're talking about this today from that survey. We're not going to go through all of the findings, but what we're going to do is share the five key questions that emerged from that survey and I'll flesh each one out very briefly.

So the first key question that came out of the survey was what is the role of online professional learning for equity of access and efficiency of time and resource across education sectors. Where we heard from practitioners who felt that the shift to online professional learning during COVID had really opened up for them huge opportunities for them to engage in broader expert and peer led professional learning. And many of them were passionate that they didn't want to lose their access to that breadth and experience because it was so valuable to them.

The second question that emerged from the report was about social media and emerging technologies, where social media was much more than communication, about professional learning opportunities, but it was actually a resource in itself. The conversations, the spaces it created for collaborations, cut across those existing boundaries and allowed for that kind of breadth and ongoing, asynchronous when people liked it access to developmental and reflective conversation about their own practise.

Question three that came from the report was a real kind of question about do we actually know what counts as professional learning? Do we acknowledge the informal, the accidental, the in practise critical moments that shape how we think and act.

And the the shift in the report is very much about professional learning moving beyond that idea of professional learning as events. I realise the irony of saying that when we're at a professional learning event. So please forgive me but the idea that actually out there in the education sector we need to broaden out how we perceive professional learning far, far beyond attending something, signing up for something and taking key things away from something.

The 4th question was around how practitioners know about professional learning and how can we facilitate them to lead their own professional learning interests and I find this particularly fascinating. Now obviously the context here of the report with Scotland, so it very much fits in with Scottish systems priorities practises which will be different in different places.

But our findings were that the role of the line manager was absolutely critical in practitioners knowing what opportunities were available to them and because it was the line manager that shared opportunities that steered the direction of the professional learning. So it really did raise questions about practitioners that wanted to aspire to learning about different practises or different aspects of roles that weren't the priority for the line manager. And the final outcome and a really, really critical one was about professional learning spaces as sites for connectivity and belonging.

And where we found that there was a really increased importance post COVID of professional learning for well-being for that personal belonging and connectedness. And particularly, I mean we've always known, haven't we, that there are some educational practitioners that work in very small units, maybe they're the only person with their expertise in their setting and that connectivity that online professional learning allowed for them to feel a sense of being with others that experienced and have those same problems.

Yeah, it's very messy because I've been doing it while listening. So apologies this is a bit of a ramble, but it's a starting point for the next slide, which is what are the next steps we're going to take. OK, so I went back to the padlet, the initial padlet really interesting. There was still a clear emphasis on professional learning as event. That synchronous event, whether it was online or in person was really clearly there. I find it really interesting about the communication about professional learning opportunities.

There was really interesting kind of divide between personal forms of communication, recommendations, word of mouth, professional networks, those kind of spaces which goes back to that systems thinking. David was just talking about the newsletters and the emails are there and that's actually quite reassuring because crikey, we spent a lot of time pushing events out via emails and newsletters. So that's really interesting. But also that role of the institution in shaping the opportunities you have was clearly there as well and that goes back to who decides how do we enable broader interests to develop etc?

The the what element of professional learning. You could see that distinct difference between the training, the specific skills, the upskilling, the focus on role orientated sort of events and broader education. And something that we haven't mentioned which came out in our report was the absolute need for continual digital skill upskilling amongst the education sector workforce to be able to actively and effectively engage in online professional learning came through really strongly. We all feel like we've been through COVID and therefore everyone must be able to cope with the kinds of things we're doing today.

But actually our survey kind of and our report kind of shed light that we shouldn't make that assumption even still and still emphasis on the event. And what was really interesting to me across all of the discussions we've had is in terms of content is that the words inquiry, self-led inquiry, scholarship, investigation haven't appeared in the conversations that actually that may be the way we frame the questions today.

I imagine it's all there, especially because there were a number of comments about doing masters and doing courses and those kind of events, but actually that's self generated

professional learning and David you mentioned about this as well, that kind of grassroots up learning. It's very easy for that not to be part of the narrative when we talk about professional learning even though it is so evident that it goes on and I'm thinking particularly there in Scotland that inquiry is actually embedded in every level of professional standards for teachers and lecturers now.

So it's really important that that enquiring stance is constantly there and then really interesting in terms of the things that were emailed. Sorry, I will be one minute really interesting to think about. When we're doing face to face, why are we doing it? When we're doing online and we're using breakout rooms, why are we doing it? So some of the discussions in those slides were around justifications, you know, face to face if hands on is needed. And I love the idea of hands on professional learning of actually physically making stuff that appeals to me greatly.

But that kind of whole thing about starting from the content and then deciding what modes are the most appropriate. And taking Claire's point about the fact that there isn't, there doesn't need to be that dichotomy between this one or this one. It can be that blended approach to meet different needs at different times and increasingly that asynchronous and synchronous so that it allows colleagues to engage at times that fits around their particular needs. I thought it was really interesting.

There was discussion about trusted sources and that whole kind of who counts as a trusted source? How do we know the credibility of the people that are facilitating professional learning? And again there were mentions about areas of passion. Self-led one finishing comment. The role of being present to each other within professional learning spaces, I thought was really intriguing.