

CHAPTER 5

Counting and countering the opportunity cost of professional learning: a ‘care-full’ approach

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Introduction

Professional learning of lecturers for their teaching is a field in which Eli Bitzer did important work, specifically during the earlier years of his career in higher education. The hard work to establish the discipline of higher education studies and the related fields of teaching in higher education and professional learning for teaching is described by Eli himself in an autobiographical chapter dedicated to his mentor, Professor Kalie Strydom of the University of the Free State (Bitzer 2009).

The focus of this contribution is on the opportunity cost involved in professional learning for teaching and the creation of ‘care-full’ (Milligan and Wiles 2010) environments to counter these costs. In writing this chapter, I mainly draw from my PhD, for which Professor Bitzer was the main supervisor.

Professional learning for teaching

Academics in higher education institutions have a twofold professionalism as lecturers and disciplinary experts. However, referring to teaching as a profession implies the existence of a career, the availability of professional learning opportunities, the prospect of participating in these opportunities and implementing what was learned. As professionals, lecturers are expected to have specific teaching competence, adhere to specific standards and behaviour and undertake improvement through professional learning.

Professional learning for teaching is defined by Johnston (1998:1) as “the need for professionals to continue learning as they practice and advance in their careers”. The ultimate aim of such professional learning is to bring about change in the

knowledge, teaching practices and behaviour of lecturers to improve the quality of student learning. Based on current challenges, changes and expectations in higher education, professional learning for teaching seems necessary to address the personal and professional learning and development needs of lecturers, to achieve the aims of higher education, and to support the realisation of the national and institutional ideals for teaching and learning.

The Carnegie Foundation (2008:26) encourages institutions to make available professional learning opportunities for lecturers as these are “critical to student success”. In the South African context, Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) have suggested that a focus on lecturers (and their professional learning) would promote student success. The governing bodies of higher education in South Africa have been working towards recognising the value of and need for professional learning for teaching. A Council for Higher Education (CHE) guide on this topic suggested that the development of academic staff should be “at the centre of any attempt to respond to the challenges currently facing higher education professionals” and that professional learning should be integrated within the daily activities of higher education institutions and not be “an isolated, optional activity” (CHE 2004:6).

An initiative from the South African Department of Higher Education and Training was the establishment and subsequent broadening of the Teaching Development Grants. These grants attempted to address the quality of student learning at all higher education institutions through a sustained focus on improving the quality and impact of university lecturers, teaching, and teaching resources. The latest cycle of grants has a focus on lecturer development, establishing tutor and mentor programmes for the next generation of academics, a focus on programmes to enhance the status of teaching at universities, and a focus on research into teaching and learning (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013).

The most recent initiative from the CHE was the Quality Enhancement Project. *Enhancing academics as teachers* was a focus area during its first phase. This included aspects of professional development, reward and recognition, workload, conditions of service, and performance appraisal. The Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) is another national structure supporting the professional learning of lecturers for teaching. As concluded by Van Schalkwyk, Leibowitz, Herman and Farmer (2015:5), the

teaching function and its associated activities seem to be sufficiently regulated, but neither lecturers, nor their teaching or participation in professional learning are perceived as valued.

Counting the opportunity cost of professional learning

According to Knight (2006:32), lecturers often struggle to decide whether they should “accumulate capital valued in teaching systems or capital valued in administrative or research systems”. Any decision involving a choice implies an opportunity cost. Opportunity cost is defined as losing something when choosing something else. At Stellenbosch University, research is what counts and what advances academic careers. In an environment where high workloads prevail and a lack of time is a stark reality, the opportunity cost of spending time on teaching-related activities is perceived as high. In the words of one respondent:

‘The payoffs for specialising in teaching are comparatively low ... I do enjoy teaching, but have very little time available to invest in professional learning for teaching – the opportunity cost in terms of research and management time is just too high.’ (Q)

Compounding this challenge are the feelings of lecturers that they are not cared for and teaching is not valued; mixed messages from colleagues and management in this regard; and lack of recognition and reward for teaching and its related activities. These translate into an opportunity cost potentially constraining choices regarding participation in professional learning. One interviewee explained the situation:

‘In a way one is encouraged implicitly by the institution to disinvest in teaching and invest more in research, because there are more rewards that are attached to research, obvious rewards; more recognition; more status and more money, promotion that teaching per se doesn’t come with rewards except its own rewards.’ (L8)

If lecturers are expected to be supportive of the goals of quality teaching and student success, many authors, including McKinney (2006) and Buller (2015) have indicated that these goals might be better achieved by taking the teaching

function, as well as the professional learning of lecturers, more serious and placing it at the core of what institutions value.

Countering the cost: professional care and ‘care-full’ environments

The way workplaces, including universities, set values and priorities has a bearing on the daily reality of employees (Crawford 2010). Institutional culture plays a powerful role in supporting or hindering the professional learning of lecturers. Knowles, Holton III and Swanson (2005) reminded organisations to value human beings as their most valuable asset and their development as its most productive investment. As universities usually appoint top academics as part of their competitive advantage, it makes good sense to look well after these essential and expensive assets (Frick and Kapp 2009) by creating an environment in which such individuals may flourish. All initiatives implemented to this end should, however, start with recognising the value of those individuals (Harwell 2003).

Structural and cultural factors from our environment influence our feelings and emotions. Incentives and penalties are often utilised by institutions to encourage or penalise behaviour. In the context of a research-intensive university where research capital is valued more than teaching, the opportunity cost when deciding to participate in professional learning for teaching could be high (Herman 2015) and could be experienced as a ‘penalty’ (Leibowitz 2014). A respondent in this research described this dilemma, stating:

‘I feel I can develop my teaching skills and techniques better, and my students will benefit, but I would rather spend the time on publications as I feel this will benefit my career and professional reputation as a researcher.’ (Q)

What lecturers experience, feel and think influence their choices and approaches to teaching and to professional learning. Most humans would be demotivated when they have to pursue a career in an environment that is perceived as non-appreciative of their efforts and indifferent to their aspirations (Tronto 1993). If the workplace further expects excellence in what you do without valuing or supporting your efforts, most humans would become cynical, despondent or disillusioned. To this avail, lecturer interviewees in this research responded:

‘It doesn’t impact negatively on the teaching but it impacts negatively on my feelings towards the job.’ (L13)

Of importance, according to Trigwell (2012:609), is the emotions evoked by our contexts, not emotional dispositions. Given that lecturers at universities often feel overwhelmed and under-valued, the issue of professional care becomes a vital concern. Such care is defined by Barnes (2012) and others as an attitude and a set of values offering ways of thinking about what is necessary for human wellbeing, flourishing and survival. Buller (2015:221) advises that the workplace should “stop feeling like a battlefield ... for ... survival” if we want lecturers to flourish and do well in their jobs. ‘Care-full’ environments could potentially counter the battlefield. Milligan and Wiles (2010:743) argued that a ‘care-full’ environment is characterised by a caring approach in which Tronto (1993) had suggested that the concerns and needs of the other is the basis for the provision of practical or emotional support. ‘Care-full’ and collegial environments should display attributes of support and value, trust and fairness, recognition and clear communication (Tronto 1993; Barnes 2012). In contrast, one senior manager interviewed for this research referred to lecturers as ‘machines’, in a way negating their human needs:

‘what ... we do well is that we manage to teach ... and that would be our strength, that we’ve got a machine that can do that with its own challenges and its own way of doing.’ (SM1)

Tronto (1993) prompts managers to be mindful of the crucial role of professional care for human flourishing, while Buller (2015:217) argues that academic leaders should focus their energy “toward people and processes rather than outcomes and metrics”. Knight and Trowler (2000) pointed out that academics are emotional beings and that the act of caring is central to human lives. Because humans have feelings and emotions, how we perceive being cared for matters to us. Our affective responses often influence our rational thinking and could influence our intrinsic motivation and decision-making. Although Costandius (2012) concludes that our thoughts are influenced by our feelings and that we cannot separate learning from feelings and emotions, we are reminded by Zembylas, Bozalek and Shefer (2014:12) that lecturers are vulnerable and relational beings. One respondent in this research described her perception of the situation as follows:

‘They [the institution] pretend that they give recognition for teaching excellence, but in fact they only want more research publications, i.e. they put good researchers on a pedestal while investment in good teaching is considered a waste of research time.’ (Q)

For lecturers to feel valued as individuals, it is suggested that an enabling environment inclusive of professional care for their wellbeing should be created. Such an enabling environment would exist where peers, and those in power, value the needs and career aspirations of individual lecturers (McKinney 2006; Buller 2015) and where time and workload are structured in a manner that allows participation in professional learning without the burden of high opportunity cost. Excessive workloads including high teaching loads, too many students and too few posts on academic, administrative and support levels all compound the challenging and non-‘care-full’ situation in which lecturers find themselves. A senior manager interviewed in this research highlighted this predicament as follows:

‘It’s incredible how the workload of [lecturers] has increased, and so they really do struggle to find the time to engage in this [professional learning]. This is a luxury, this sort of training in ... education.’ (SM4)

In an attempt to suggest ways of dealing with the workload of lecturers, Eli published an article looking at equitable and fair workload distribution (Bitzer 2007) and co-authored a publication looking into ways of managing postgraduate supervision responsibilities to ease the demand on supervisor time (Bitzer and Albertyn 2011). Both publications seem to have a concern for the wellbeing of lecturers.

Conclusion

This contribution draws on my PhD study (Herman 2015), which formed part of a larger project funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF). The results from the umbrella project are reported elsewhere, but the main findings are:

Support and value, trust and fairness, innovation, recognition and clear communication were mentioned as the attributes of a ‘care-full’ environment. Leibowitz (2014) reports mixed messaging and even contradictions around

the value of teaching and professional learning from respondents at all eight institutions that participated in the larger project.

The powerful role of academic leaders in creating ‘care-full’ environments by inserting teaching and professional learning of lecturers for teaching into the mainstream activities of academia seems non-negotiable. Senior management and lecturers in this research also alluded to these aspects. According to a CHE publication resulting from the larger project (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Garraway, Herman, Jawitz, et al., 2016:54 in press), all eight participating institutions signalled the crucial role of academic leadership in “creating an intellectual space and language to talk about teaching and learning” and for pushing the institutional culture towards valuing teaching and its related activities.

The motivation for participating in professional learning is inextricably linked to workplace environments, and professional learning will be more successful in environments where the wellbeing of lecturers is taken into account. Creating ‘care-full’ environments through the deliberate creation of spaces for professional learning for teaching in work agreements is crucial, especially when taking into consideration the challenges of lack of time and high workload, as alluded to by lecturers as well as senior management across all institutions participating in the larger research project.

The title of this chapter reads *Counting and countering the opportunity cost of professional learning for teaching: a ‘care-full’ approach*. I have tried to suggest a potential way of making ‘countering through care’ a reality. I will close by paraphrasing the words from one of Eli’s publications:

The need for care is within all humans and the responsibility of those in power is to realise that giving such care is not only to the benefit of the individual but also to that of the institution and society as a whole (Bitzer 2007).

Notes

My Ph.D. study formed part of an NRF-funded project involving eight higher education institutions in South Africa (NRF Grant 74003). See <http://interplayofstructure.blogspot.com>.

The quotes included here are from Stellenbosch University staff who participated in the project. (Q) indicates questionnaire responses; (L) represents lecturer interviewees and (SM) refers to senior management interviewees.

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