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Staff Development in a Climate of Retrenchment

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The Crisis Facing Higher Education

Following a period of rapid expansion during the 1960s, the past decade has witnessed a period of increasing financial and political difficulties for universities in Western Europe, North America, and Australasia. Although the precise causes of these problems are still a matter of debate, the symptoms involve reduced income, leveling or declining student enrollments, attrition of teaching and support positions, an increasing public disillusionment with the contribution of higher education to the quality of life, and greater political pressure on institutions of higher learning to make themselves in some sense "accountable" for public expenditures.

Reactions to this pessimistic scenario among the academic community have been varied. In some instances there have been vigorous denials that any problem exists that cannot be solved by the injection of more money into higher education. Others have called for a return to the "traditional" values of the university, which is often seen as involving the provision of a high quality, non-vocationally based education for a small, but elite, group of the most able students. Somewhat in contrast are those educators who see retrenchment as a challenge to higher education and an opportunity for universities to re-think their role in the light of changing societal needs.

The ultimate criterion of any university's success is its ability to

promote effective learning, and hence it is of particular concern to examine how a climate of constraint can affect the quality of teaching or learning for better or worse. The present paper attempts to explore this question, focusing on three interrelated issues. First, what has been the success of formal attempts to improve the standard of teaching and learning through staff development centers, and how have such centers coped with the recent financial retrenchment? Second, how have developments in educational technology been used to change the practice of teaching and the effectiveness of learning? And third, to what extent have universities been successful in equipping students with appropriate lifelong learning skills in a time of rapid social and technological change? Exploration of these questions is based, in part, upon two study tours carried out by the author in 1973-74 and 1981-82, which involved discussions with educators in a number of English speaking, developed nations in Australasia, Europe, and North America.

The Impact of Staff Development

The growth of formal centers to improve teaching and learning effectiveness is a relatively new phenomenon in Australasian, North American and European universities. It might be expected that the staff at such centers would be particularly sensitive to the learning climate in universities, and would be well placed to change teaching and learning methods and to encourage new attitudes to university education in general. In practice, it is probable that a great amount of staff development activity is directed to far more mundane ends. The most common activities for many staff development units include running short workshops, providing individual consultations with faculty, and publication of a newsletter or brochures on various aspects of teaching. In some institutions there is also a modest small grant program to encourage innovative approaches to education. Given the extent and type of these activities, it is hardly surprising that the staff development movement has probably had very little general impact on university teaching and learning. Reasons for this have been discussed at length elsewhere (see, for example, *Improving University Teaching*, 1980; Rhodes and Hounsell, 1980).

In many institutions—especially in the current economic climate—staff development units are presently embattled, and under pressure to demonstrate their usefulness. Hence the temptation to devote considerable effort to the organization of public activities (workshops, newsletters) that may influence only a tiny group of loyal enthusiasts within the institution, and fail to affect the wider community. Perhaps even more important, however, is the fact that broader conceptual and philosophical issues relating to university education are often ignored. For example, to judge by the content of many unit publications, it might be thought that the way to solve the universities' current problems is primarily a matter of tinkering with existing teaching methods, using appropriate visual aids, and experimenting with the occasional modest innovation.

While there are of course some notable exceptions, many staff developers have unfortunately concentrated far more on the minutiae of improving teaching and learning, and have ignored broader conceptual issues. This tendency is probably reinforced by the "service agency" role adopted by many staff development units, and their general lack of status of prestige within the organizational hierarchy of the institution. In Ontario, for example, although nearly all the universities maintain some type of instructional development activity, some with grandiose-sounding titles, the number of senior-level academics centrally involved in staff development is very small. This is doubly unfortunate, since if staff development is to have any influence on the major philosophy of the university, it will need spokespersons who speak with authority and who are capable of affecting policy. Of course the cynic may argue that the forces of conservatism will see to it that staff development never does more than serve a cosmetic, political function aimed at persuading the public that the university is concerned about teaching—but only as long as there are no fundamental changes in university structures and priorities.

The Promise of Instructional Technology

Staff development has traditionally had close links with educational technology, and some instructional development units have actively promoted technological innovations as the key to more effec-

tive learning. On the face of it this seems an extremely promising idea, since the society of the future is likely to be increasingly technology based, and it seems plausible that the ability to comprehend, use, and make appropriate decisions about technological innovations are important lifelong learning skills for students to acquire. Although successive instructional technologies have been expected by their developers to revolutionize teaching, in practice the expected wholesale changes have largely failed to materialize, so that university level instruction remains generally traditional. While only time will tell whether this fate will befall computer based learning, to date it is true to say that although computers have had a fairly major influence on teaching technological skills (e.g. computer programming taught by computer), their impact on other forms of learning has been minimal.

There are almost as many reasons for this state of affairs as commentators to explain them—ranging from arguments concerning costs to speculation about faculty resistance (for a more complete review see Knapper, 1980). A very important point about the use of instructional technology, however, is the recognition that any effective teaching method must not only involve an efficient system for providing information but also needs to pay due respect to the learning process experienced by the student. Just as a great deal of lecturing takes place in ignorance of how students are learning in the course, so sophisticated computer hardware is often confused with a sophisticated learning system. When critics talk about the problems of adequate software in computer based instructional systems, they are referring not only to the unavailability of a broad range of course material, but also to the importance of designing learning materials that respond to learner needs and exploit the instructional system to its maximum potential. In this sense those writers are correct who define instructional technology as a systematic approach to learning, which can theoretically exist in the absence of “technology” as that term is usually understood by the layperson. At the same time, to bring most university teachers to this type of understanding is probably as difficult in the case of technology based learning as it is for any other teaching system. Indeed, it may be the case that instructional technology is resisted not because it is seen as a threat to job security among university teachers (where it has yet to make any significant inroads)

but as a threat to professional competence in teaching for faculty who are reluctant to emerge from the protective cocoon of familiar teaching methods.

The Concept of Lifelong Education

Among those who regard the constraints affecting higher education not as a cause for despair, but as an impetus for change, many have drawn attention to the educational opportunities provided by new student populations and the changing needs of learners. In particular, considerable interest has been generated by the concept of lifelong learning and its relevance for the contemporary university. Although the underlying notion of learning throughout life is far from new, lifelong learning was more recently restored to prominence by the publication of the Faure report in the early seventies and the subsequent adoption by UNESCO of "l'education permanente" as its guiding principle for education (Faure, 1972).

In the United States the passing by Congress of the Lifelong Learning Act in 1976 similarly drew the attention of colleges and universities to the fact that learning need not be confined to the traditional population of 18-21 year old students. Of course many institutions of higher education already had heavy involvement in extension (extramural) programs. What appeared to be new was the notion that this type of instruction need no longer be considered as a "fringe" activity but could indeed be justified as the major goal of the university.

There is some evidence that in the eagerness to develop a new *raison d'être* (and income) for the university and discover new sources of students, the notion of lifelong learning was embraced without a true comprehension of the meanings and implications of the concept. In North America, lifelong education is often seen as a synonym for adult education or continuing education. It is of course encouraging to see universities recognize that learning is not a process confined to the period between infancy and early twenties, and admit that they have a responsibility to provide learning opportunities for adults, for part-time students, and in off-campus locations. However, this conception of lifelong education seems unduly restrictive. In the first

place, courses offered outside the traditional university programs are all too often carbon copies of regular on-campus offerings, and frequently may disregard the special learning needs, prior experience, and learning styles of non-traditional students. Second, even when continuing education is organized with greater sensitivity and innovation, there is still the danger that, as Cropley (1977) has pointed out, lifelong education is regarded as the equivalent of lifelong schooling. Tough's (1971) well-known study showed quite clearly that very large proportions of Canadian adults are regularly engaged in self-directed independent learning, without any assistance from formal educational institutions. And one of the foremost commentators on lifelong learning in the United States, Patricia Cross, has argued forcefully against the total institutionalization of this type of informal learning, however much universities may be in need of new groups of students to swell their enrollment statistics.

This is not to argue that universities should ignore the needs of adult students, and indeed the increasing trend to providing a wider range of opportunities for part-time studies, continuing education, and recurrent education for professional upgrading is to be applauded. At the same time, this is only a partial solution to the facilitation of lifelong learning as envisaged by Faure. In particular, the lifelong learner is presumably someone who neither wants nor needs to spend a lifetime attending courses, but who has the skills to direct his or her own learning on the basis of a variety of available resources, including libraries, museums, the experience of colleagues in the workplace, and so on.

Learning to Learn

Not only are people capable of learning throughout their lives (Lovel, 1980), but it is essential for most of us that we do so. Among the more obvious reasons for this is the so-called knowledge explosion, which means that in the formal years of schooling it is possible to present only a small fraction of the information available on a given subject, and that in very many cases even this information rapidly becomes obsolete. In addition to the exponential expansion of known facts about the world is a rapid evolution of job-related skills, so that

new abilities are suddenly in great demand, while other traditional crafts may no longer be needed. The most obvious contemporary example of this is probably represented by the world-wide shortage of people with computing skills, whereas—to cite an unrelated example—the ability to take shorthand dictation is probably becoming an increasingly redundant skill, except for a few fairly specialized applications. (On the other hand, at the University of Waterloo, it is estimated that at least a third of secretarial employees operate computer-based word processing equipment as part of their normal daily duties.)

Given this scenario of rapidly changing skills and knowledge, it is not surprising that proponents of lifelong learning, such as Cropley (1977, 1978), have argued not just for a system of continuing or recurrent education, but have equally emphasized the importance of students in the traditional school system being able to “learn how to learn”. In other words, there is a need to equip students *during the conventional school years* with independent learning skills that will enable them to adapt to a changing world and allow them to be effective learners of new information and skills throughout their adult lives. Acceptance of the central importance of learning how to learn has, of course, profound implications for the organization of instruction in schools and universities.

Universities typically work at the “leading edge” of knowledge, and hence their curriculum and teaching methods might be expected to be especially susceptible to rapid change. While it is not an easy matter to assess how far university curricula in different subject matters and different countries truly reflect the most recent thinking in the discipline, the ways in which students learn in many universities are often not at all conducive to the provision of lifelong learning skills as envisaged by Faure, Cropley, and others. In North America, for example, the principal teaching devices are still the formal lecture and laboratory, despite doubts that these methods are the most effective ways of teaching conceptual thinking or problem solving skills (Bligh, 1972).

It is argued, then, that a major task of the university is to promote learning abilities that will enable students to do more than master specific skills and information, and instead embody skills and attitudes

that will allow learning throughout life's frequently changing circumstances. At the same time there exist doubts that universities are presently achieving this type of education, or even completely understand this conception of lifelong learning. If this is so, then what can be done to remedy the situation? In particular, is there a role to be played by staff developers in alerting the university community to the changing learning needs of students?

Some Possible Solutions

It has been argued so far that the current crisis in higher education requires a fundamental re-thinking of the teaching role of the university. In particular there is a need to de-emphasize the teaching of a circumscribed body of information and instead to develop means of promoting lifelong learning skills. While the staff development movement and innovations educational technology offer promise for improving student learning effectiveness, so far that promise has not been fully realized. The problems of making fundamental changes in the light of firmly entrenched attitudes and teaching behaviors are admittedly formidable, but the following are suggested as possibly fruitful lines of action for professional staff developers as well as those teachers who are committed to changing the type and quality of student learning in higher education.

1. Take every opportunity to stress the importance of the learning process as opposed to teaching techniques. This point has been elaborated above with respect to instructional technology, but it is equally crucial for any educational innovation. Since staff developers are frequently called upon as consultants when innovations are being tried, they are often in an excellent position to draw attention away from the razzmatazz of a novel presentation device and instead ask some hard questions about exactly what type of learning takes place as a result.
2. Forge links with those areas of the university that are likely to expand rapidly in the near future, and which may welcome advice and be receptive to innovative ideas. Some likely candidates were discussed earlier in this paper and include the whole field of distance education, adult and recurrent education. Since these

approaches all involve teaching in an unfamiliar context where tried and true methods cannot readily be used, they present special opportunities and challenges for instructional developers.

3. Use every opportunity to relate university learning to real life situations in which knowledge and skills will actually be used. Depending upon the particular national and institutional context, this might involve the encouragement of cooperative education (sandwich courses), the development of project-based learning, simulations, student-directed learning and assessment, exploration of the value of a much wider range of field placements than is traditional (i.e. perhaps in political science and chemistry as well as psychology and social work). It will be noted that all the approaches listed above emphasize a good deal of student initiative in the learning situation as opposed to teacher-centered or expert-directed instruction. This recognizes the fairly obvious truism that, regardless of the instructional method, learning is largely in the hands of the student, although the effectiveness of such learning can be aided immeasurably by the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher. It seems likely that a good many university instructors are uncomfortable in roles outside those of the traditional didactic lecturer/expert. And yet there is a good deal of cumulative experience about, for example, the teacher as "resource person/facilitator". Exposing instructors to alternative teaching/learning roles, and providing appropriate training—or, better still, learning opportunities—for instructors seems an extremely relevant task for staff development centers. It might do much to encourage effective lifelong learning skills for students by providing models of the learning process itself that are far more appropriate than those suggested by many traditional teaching approaches.
4. Encourage research on basic processes underlying teaching and learning, and help disseminate the results of such research. Research has a very special place in universities because of the high priority it is accorded by the institution itself and by many staff members. Hence it is often possible to use research findings as a focus of interest and a source of persuasion. Some staff development units in North America and Europe devote a large part of

their effort to research on university teaching and learning, and in some cases (though probably a minority) this research has provided major theoretical insights into our understanding of the learning process. It is probably not necessary that most staff developers become researchers, and indeed this may be undesirable in that it diverts attention and resources away from the development role itself. At the same time, however, it is incumbent upon those actively involved in staff development work to be familiar with the relevant research and—more importantly—to advise their colleagues on the relative merits of research relating to the discipline concerned.

A great deal more could be done to disseminate research findings on university-level instruction among the academic community. Furthermore, staff developers could do a lot to encourage colleagues within the disciplines to undertake their own research into learning processes as they relate to different subject fields. To a certain extent, this is already done through the mechanism of small grants programs operated by some staff development centers. However, the modest sums available necessarily limit the scope of such research efforts. One possibility would be to lobby more aggressively for cooperative research efforts sponsored by research councils or government agencies, which would attract not only staff developers and educational researchers but also distinguished scholars from a range of disciplines. Interesting initiatives of this sort have been taken recently by the British Society for Research into Higher Education in its involvement with the National Enquiry into the Future of Higher Education, but a good deal more could be done. Although staff developers may seem a relatively small and uninfluential group, they can on occasion form an effective lobby through the mechanism of professional associations related to teaching and learning as indeed has been done recently by HERDSA in its reaction to the Williams Report and its submission to the AVCC Working Party on staff development. In practice, such associations—at least in North America—have often been reluctant to see themselves as sources of political influence, but the present time of financial constraint may be an appropriate moment develop new roles of this type.

A further role for staff developers in relation to research might be

to serve as a link between researchers in learning and teaching and practitioners—not only through the dissemination of relevant research findings, but also by suggesting appropriate settings for research on learning processes. Staff developers' unique range of contact within their institution often places them in an excellent position to identify receptive settings for research. The term "practitioner" as used above is primarily intended to refer to university teachers; however, cooperation with interested groups of students is by no means out of the question. At the University of Waterloo, for example, the Federation of Students has consulted with the Teaching Resource Office in connection with some small scale research projects. The Office has also cooperated with graduate students in various applied programs on dissertation projects that involve an investigation of some aspect of the learning process.

The range of possible subjects for research is obviously very large, but some promising areas appear to be the function of individual differences in learning, the concept of androgogy (especially the question of whether adults learn differently from younger university students and, if so, in what ways), the sociological climate in universities and its effects on learning (to cite one small example, whether or not the presence of adults in a learning situation alters the learning climate), interrelationships between instructional approaches and learning styles (following the work of Entwistle, Marton, Pask, etc.), and studies of the long-term effects of learning experiences—concentrating especially on the effectiveness of instructional strategies to encourage life-long learning skills.

To a certain extent it might be argued that staff development units already perform most or all of these functions. True, but often in an uncoordinated manner which seriously reduces any impact upon the university community at large. What is being argued here is that there is an urgent need for the staff development movement to arrive at a set of priorities—both for the work within individual institutions and for efforts at a national and international level. Failure to do this will result in the very valuable work done by many individuals being overwhelmed by the concerns of their colleagues merely to survive in the present economic climate. This would be unfortunate and ironical, since the purpose for which staff development units were created was

to help improve the central function of the university—the promotion of learning—without which long term institutional survival will be impossible.

Notes

1. An earlier, unpublished version of this paper was presented at the Fifth International Conference on Higher Education, held at the University of Lancaster in September 1981.
2. There is a good deal of evidence concerning learning from lectures, summarized well by Bligh (1972). The efficacy of traditional laboratory instruction has been the subject of considerable debate in both Europe and North America—see, for example, Pickering, 1980, and the extensive correspondence that ensued in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. J.V. McConnell, in his 1980 presidential address to the Division on Teaching Psychology of the American Psychological Association, presents a wry but disturbing account of his experience as a distinguished professor who went back to study medicine at the University of Michigan and encountered at first hand the problems of learning from lectures and labs (McConnell, 1980)

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