

Disseminating professional learning

Some encouragement and a little guidance for professional educators wishing and willing to share learning

I am prompted to write this because I see so much work submitted for examination at under and postgraduate levels by teachers from schools and colleges. Very little of it is seen by fellow professionals. In my experience it is not just the work that achieves the highest grades that is worthy of dissemination; significance can be found anywhere; and, in some cases, disagreement with what is said by Professional A can lead to Professional B having a good idea. I hope we can move away from the belief that a piece of work should be judged only on its capacity to pass a narrowly focussed examination. Most universities working in the field of professional learning in education now include in their assessment criteria or intended learning outcomes the capacity to explore and make critical sense of professional life; and I believe that the sense-making process is cut short and diminished if others are not drawn into it.

The kinds of work I am talking about include traditional essays, a variety of assignments, presentations, research proposals and reports, dissertations and theses. It is not an exhaustive list.

I am NOT, by the way, suggesting that large numbers of words should be shoved under the noses of unwilling and busy fellow professionals. Mediation is important.

Let me ask some questions and provide some prompts and responses for your consideration.

1. What is it that you wish to tell others and why would they listen?

Even if what you have explored/researched is confined to a very contextualised case study from which it would be unwise to generalise it is possible that colleagues in similar situations may find value in reading an account of it.

Beware the phrase 'good practice' because professional contexts can differ greatly and one person's 'good practice' may not be so good for another. So be careful to convey a sense of the circumstances in which you carried out your research and of its limitations.

Imagine a reader who has had their fill of government circulars, consultants selling snake oil and inspection reports. Try to combine professional empathy with respect. Your work will not be read if it patronises or appears to belittle the concerns of others. At the same time it will be discarded if it is not seen to be professionally useful and serious.

2. Maybe they need to hear you but don't know that they do. How do you sell a better mousetrap?

It is simply not true that people will beat a path to your door if you build a better mousetrap. You may have a story to tell that could bring huge benefits to colleagues but that will be of no use if they do not know this.

You will not even begin to deal with this question if you have a poor understanding of the significance of your own work so we need to address the next question.

3. In what way do you know your own work?

Do you know your work through the lens of an examiner?

Do you know your work from more than one perspective?

Four useful perspectives from which to view your own work are i) the academic/theoretical perspective, ii) the practical/professional perspective, iii) the regulatory/inspectorial perspective and iv) the social/political perspective.

4. Reviewing your own work.

Might your work have unearthed new knowledge?

Is your work professionally useful to you and/or to others?

To what changes, if any, has your work led?

Might they be changes to how you perceive things?

Might they be changes to how you do things?

Sometimes such change(s) can be 'confined' to the classroom and sometimes go further. It can be worth thinking about this.

Remember, reviewing is not the same as scoring and that we can learn a lot if we are prepared to share our professional cock ups.

Also remember that good old (overused perhaps) phrase: 'There are no such things as mistakes, only learning opportunities'.

I have provided a few sub-headings above. I am sure you can provide some of your own!

5. Have you talked to anyone about disseminating?

If you have talked to someone was it formal or informal?

Might it have been part of an official process of appraisal?

If you did have such a talk to where did it lead?

Was dissemination of some sort planned from the outset?

6. Are you on your own?

If you are on your own while engaged in professional learning perhaps you need some means of connection.

There are many groups and organisations that today are easily accessible via the Internet. Among the many is <http://ipda.org.uk/>. That is the International Professional Development Association. I am biased perhaps because I used to be its Chair. Look around. What about your union, for example?

7. You will need to summarise so what are your key points/ideas/recommendations?

A list of more than six can be difficult to take in. A list fewer than three may mean that you have over simplified. There is no hard and fast rule here so just use your professional instincts that, I am sure, include knowing when you have undercooked or overcooked a lesson.

If your work includes an abstract it can be a good basis for a summary. Sometimes abstracts are written to please an examiner so try to keep in mind an audience of fellow professionals.

The word 'recommendations' above was chosen deliberately. Is there anything that emerges from your work that you might recommend to others?

That might, of course, be a recommendation to avoid doing what you did!

8. Style of writing?

I don't think we need a list here.

'Accessible' is the word.

9. Pinching ideas.

You may recall a song by Tom Lehrer that contains the line, 'plagiarise, let no one else's work evade your eyes but always remember to call it....research'.

When you registered to participate on a programme leading to academic credit you will have been made aware of policies about and attitudes towards plagiarism so a key word here is 'acknowledgement'.

A light hearted way of thinking about dissemination and sharing both of what you might think of as 'successes' and 'failures' (twin impostors) is that if you pinch ideas then you must be willing to have yours pinched in turn.

The alternative is to become a professional ox-bow lake; and they are stagnant.

10. Choosing a means and an outlet.

I touched on this at 6 above but, a thought, can there really be a school or a college these days that does not have a website? It might be an idea to post something interesting there. It would make a change from all those repetitions of the words 'excellence' and 'outstanding'.

Lastly, don't be shy.

Cliff Jones July 2015