Models of Personal Development Planning: practice and processes

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This article presents an analysis of case study data from a project evaluating Personal Development Planning (PDP) at a large post-1992 university in England. The study was undertaken as part of a strategy of encouraging schools to build on existing experience while at the same time ensuring consistency with new national guidelines for the implementation of PDP across the whole sector. The aim of the research was to understand the models already available for supporting and developing PDP, and the views of different stakeholders about the place of PDP in the curriculum. The research was designed to engage with teacher beliefs in order to provide models of practice that could inform innovation. The study was based on interviews with staff and data were analysed on the basis of clusters of features to create models of different practices and approaches. Three ideal types of PDP emerged: professional, employment and academic. Each of the modes was associated with particular disciplinary domains, although none of them existed in pure form. The data suggest that pedagogic identities based on introjection and strong boundary maintenance displayed greater tension in relation to PDP than those areas already constructed on projection. UK moves towards PDP are part of an international trend. The great advantage of case study data, however, is that they allow insight into the dynamics of implementation at the local level and in this case the potential of generic initiatives based on projection to destabilise aspects of academic identity. New initiatives are more likely to succeed if they engage positively with teacher beliefs rather than being posed in contra-distinction to them; the first step, however, is to understand and theorise them.

Introduction

Progress Files and their constituent parts: Personal Development Planning (PDP) and Academic Transcript, are high on the higher education agenda within the UK (Department of Educational and Skills, 2003), with the deadline for implementation of the PDP element during the academic year 2004/2005. These moves represent...
one strand in the broader employability agenda and global shifts, which according to Edwards and Usher (2000), are replacing the dominant identity of the ‘enlightened student’ with that of ‘autonomous/self-directed/flexible lifelong learners’ (p. 55). Barnett (2003) makes a similar point, arguing that we are experiencing ‘a pedagogical displacement in which the weight of the pedagogical challenge is shifted from the presentation of disciplinary culture to an interest in the self-generational capacities of students’ (p. 148). PDP can thus be conceptualised as one of the technologies through which these changes are being effected (Clegg, 2004), and similar patterns are emerging across Europe and in other advanced higher education systems (Hudson et al., 2004).

This article presents the analysis of qualitative case study data from a project exploring existing experience and practice. The context for the study was that the institution wished to build on existing practice by acknowledging the diversity of disciplinary and professional traditions, while at the same time ensuring practice was consistent with Quality Assurance Agency Guidelines (QAA, 2001). The Quality Assurance Agency, which is the UK organisation responsible for defining and making explicit standards for higher education institutions, defines progress files as containing:

- the transcript: a record of an individual’s learning and achievement, provided by the institution;
- an individual’s personal records of learning and achievements, progress reviews and plans that are used to clarify personal goals and can provide a resource from which material is selected to produce personal statements (e.g. CVs) etc. for employers, admissions tutors and others;
- structured and supported processes to develop the capacity of individuals to reflect on their own learning and achievement, and to plan for their own personal educational and career development. The term Personal Development Planning (PDP) is used to denote this process (QAA, 2001, p. 2).

The QAA expects transcripts to be used from 2002/2003, and for Progress Files to be in place for all higher education students by 2006. The policy and practice setting is, therefore, specific but the aim of the research was to understand the models already available for supporting and developing PDP and the views of different stakeholders about the place of PDP in the curriculum. The underlying philosophy informing our approach involves a commitment to grounding implementation and practice in research (Clegg et al., 2004).

We have structured the article in a way that introduces relevant literature which we used to inform the interpretation of the data. It should be stressed, however, that the research itself was formative and was not driven by a particular hypothesis. The design was flexible to allow for inductions in the field, and the sampling strategy was designed with the aims of sufficiency and saturation in mind. The models we describe were inductively derived. However, in structuring the article we have felt it useful to comment briefly on the relevant literature before giving a detailed description of the study and reporting our findings. Accordingly we have presented
the literature in two parts: firstly, a brief introduction to some of the themes in the PDP literature, and secondly, an overview of general issues relating to professional expertise, employability and disciplinarity. We conclude the latter section by drawing on Bernstein’s work on identities as this allowed us to think about how the cognate areas covered by study were clustered together, as our findings did not correspond with traditional arts/science or pure/applied dualisms, or other more sophisticated models of disciplinary practices (Neumann et al., 2002). Rather, Bernstein’s (2000) concepts of introjection and projection appeared to offer more productive insight. These sections are followed by a description of the case study and its rationale, and by the analysis presented under the themes of professional, employment, and academic. Our conclusions take the form of a series of reflections about the relationship between common national policy and local disciplinary and institutional cultures, and about the tensions between the production of the self presumed by the discourse of PDP and older, more traditional understandings of higher education (Clegg, 2004).

**Personal Development Planning**

We already know from the existing literature that understandings and practices of PDP vary quite widely. The recent EPPI-Centre review of PDP (Gough et al., 2003) located over 14,000 references as part of its systematic review of PDP. This is echoed in the practical advice given to practising teachers. Clegg (2004) has analysed the Generic Centre (now the Higher Education Academy) ‘Guides for Busy Academics’ and found that a wide range of arguments is being adopted and that the scope of practices described is broad. Advocates of Progress Files would of course argue that it is precisely the holistic nature of the concept that gives it its pedagogic power, but it means that when we describe higher education institutions implementing PDP, the reality is of a variety of distinct practices. The official voice of UK higher education, Universities UK, has argued that their institutional focus is on emphasising the academic and professional development of the individual student, through a process to support and enhance learning and development (Floud, 2002).

Personal development planning is not a new concept; it has had various incarnations within the higher education sector (Assiter & Shaw, 1993; Ashcroft & Foreman-Peck, 1994). Nor is it solely a UK phenomenon (West & Hore 1989; Hudson, 2003), although the focus, language and the pedagogy behind the use of portfolios varies widely, including the development of portfolio assessment as a diagnostic tool (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002) and the development of self-reflection and target setting (Schroeder, 1996). Within secondary schools, Records of Achievement (RoAs) have been in extensive use for at least 15 years (Bullock & Jamieson, 1998), and younger students entering higher education already have experience of completing an evidence-based portfolio (Hargreaves, 1986; Kingdom, 1997). The development of PDP goes beyond evidence collection; it aspires to form an intermediary stage leading to **continuing professional development** (CDP) and
lifelong learning (Slusarchuk, 1998; Pickles, 2000). PDP also aspires to provide the opportunity for students to develop skills which will be relevant in the workplace (Kneale, 2002).

In the face of such diversity, Fry et al. (2002) remark that the PDP literature is characterised by ‘several concepts that are ill-defined, are often used with multiple meanings, are under-researched, poorly problematised and very often dependent on context’ (p. 108). It seems unlikely that these problems are capable of any simple conceptual resolution (Clegg, 2004). Rather, in this research we focused on an empirical study of the diversity of such understandings. The research therefore took in academics’ understandings of a range of activities involving reflection, personal target setting and planning, monitoring, evaluation, decision-making and career management. We did not explore the issues associated with the production of the transcript, or consider in any detail the development of a ‘product’ (Somervell, 1998), except where staff themselves felt this was an issue.

Professional expertise, employability and disciplinarity

There is extensive literature from the professional and disciplinary areas of education, health, and social care (Sandford & Rollin, 1989; Martin, 1999; Densten & Grey, 2001; Pololi et al., 2001; Baker, 2002), which have a rich tradition of incorporating reflection into the curriculum. Indeed, such has been the dominance of reflective practice in these areas that Eccelstone as long ago as 1996 identified it as a mantra. Areas with these strong traditions of reflective practice and PDP as part of continuing professional practice were well represented in our study, and, as might have been expected, practitioners in these areas had ready-made discursive frameworks within which to articulate their views. In these areas particular ways of thinking and practising (Entwistle, 2003) in relation to PDP appeared well established and reinforced by professional bodies, as well as by ongoing professional practice on the part of academics who are themselves personally committed to the value of reflection. In this area at least the existing literature suggests a strong elective affinity between local discourses on the ground and national policy. The identification of such a grouping might therefore have been anticipated on theoretical grounds alone.

The newer discourses of employability are more complex. They constitute an organising framework for thinking about the purposes of higher education, as opposed to the most obvious extent to which higher education has always prepared its members for particular class-based employment opportunities. To some extent, employability relates to the professional, but the emphasis is more towards the generic production of an employable subject, rather than particular professionally defined capacities. All those with a major stake in higher education, from Universities UK, LTSN Generic and Subject Centres (Learning and Teaching Subject Network, now the Higher Education Academy), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and the Government (particularly the Treasury) have expressed an interest in employability, and indeed it is one of the
major foci for PDP. The whole PDP agenda is nested within the employability framework. However, there is considerable debate about employability and whether its focus is purely on the development of skills required by employers from graduates, and the extent to which it fits within the broader lifelong learning agenda, which in turn relates to broader conceptions of social and human capital (Coffield, 1999a, b). Moreover, empirical research does not reveal consistent patterns in terms of what employers want. In general, employability is not restricted to specific competencies, but includes generic skills required in the workplace: transferable skills such as working with others and problem solving, as suggested by Edwards (2001). Moreover, as Knight and Yorke (2003) argue, employability has been undertheorised, including in relation to PDP. They call for a much fuller understanding of employability based on what they describe as USEM models of curriculum development involving: Understanding, Skills, Efficacy beliefs (self theories) and Metacognition. This has profound implications for higher education and involves thinking about employability as a process rather than a goal which staff are expected to deliver judged on the basis of first destination statistics. Given the general complexity of the implications from the available empirical data, and the conceptual confusion of much policy thinking, it is unsurprising that the range of views of staff in relation to employability is varied, with staff in some areas effectively discounting its relevance entirely (HEFCE, 2003).

Unlike the relative newness of the employability agenda, conceptualised as a framing discourse for higher education, disciplinary loyalties run deep and are entrenched in tradition. Henkel (2000) argued that academic identities are formed in relation to both discipline and organisational location. Any new initiatives are likely to be filtered through these beliefs. However, ‘discipline’ is not a static concept that can simply be read off the title of a course. Concepts being developed as part of the Enhancing University Teaching–Learning Environments project (Entwistle, 2003) have alerted us to the contextual nature of discipline as understood in the specific course context and within a particular institutional environment. The idea of ways of thinking and practising (Entwistle, 2003) captures these nuances more clearly than a simple description of discipline as such. For example, in some institutions computer science may be a highly singular introverted discipline concerned with formal proof and located alongside mathematics and science. In other institutions it may be almost entirely applied, and projected outwards towards industry (Clegg, 2001). It is these local ways of thinking that are important in understanding theories in use. Thus, in addition to the extensive literature about the importance of disciplinarity (e.g. Neumann et al., 2002), it is important to analyse what actual conceptions are being evoked in the discourse of course teams and individuals.

We have found the model developed by Bernstein (2000) extremely useful to think with, and have drawn on his ideas of introjection and projection as ways of characterising the broader issue of identity. Bernstein (2000) highlights the importance of understanding the underlying organisation of discourse and practice, whether outwards towards the broader political economy, or inward towards the academy. Moore (2001), for example, has used these ideas in his analysis of shifts
within the South African higher education system where higher education is being reformed as a means of helping to integrate South Africa into the global economy and in rebalancing the social and economic inequities of the apartheid era. Moore (2001) argues that there has been a shift from a position of ‘introjection’, where curricula emerged largely as a result of academic influence, to one of ‘projection’, where curricula are subject to external influence (Barnett, 2000; Moore, 2001). Newer forms of description of curricula, involving learning outcomes, for example, are part of this trend (Clegg & Ashworth, 2004), and the project of PDP itself can be interpreted as part of this general secular trend towards projection. Why the theoretical resources Bernstein offers us are fruitful is that they allowed us to think about the complexity of orientations we found in our data, and model our ideal types within a broader theoretical framework, and thus consider what the implications of PDP might be in disturbing pedagogic practices in some areas.

The study

The ideas underpinning PDP are not new, and our case study university took a flexible approach to PDP, allowing schools to build on their past experience and knowledge of student needs within their own subject discipline. In common with many other institutions in the sector, many courses had remnants of a PDP structure from the early 1990s. Our research strategy, therefore, was developed in the context of an institutional commitment to building on existing practice and thus reducing the need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ by working with existing beliefs and practices, rather than counterposing them to national policy. This approach is characteristic of a more general institutional commitment to the utilising of research in the formulation and implementation of policy (Clegg et al., 2004), which has in turn been influenced by the general debates about the scholarship of learning and teaching (Boyer, 1990; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Andresen, 2000; Healey, 2000; Trigwell et al., 2000). This approach involves putting ideas into the public arena through collaborative activity and dissemination. In this instance our research has fed into the policy process as well as being reported here. The process of dialogue, which informs the research process, is in turn part of a wider set of discussions about learning, teaching and assessment. The case study itself was, therefore, designed in close collaboration with a steering group who advised us throughout. The study focused on practice and involved the use of a theoretical sample. Theoretical samples are particularly useful in case studies where the researchers have access to sufficient background knowledge to identify likely significant informants. Working on the assumption that discipline differences and school cultures were likely to be important, we sampled across the institution. We used a snowball technique whereby interviewees were progressively identified based on respondents’ knowledge of areas of development. Participants included key policy and strategy makers, staff involved with academic development and implementation of policy, together with staff charged with coordinating the strategy within the individual schools. From these interviews, individuals within schools were suggested who had direct experience in dealing with PDP. The sample covered all the schools,
and where possible these included different disciplines within schools. Thirty two semi-structured interviews were undertaken over a nine-week period during the second semester of 2002/03. Open questions were used in a guided approach to establish the background within the school and perceptions of the current practice. The interviews were of an exploratory nature, probing to establish perception of the PDP process, and this produced a wealth of rich data. The researchers did not approach the interviews with a preconceived idea of what models might be present; rather, the models emerged from the complexity of the interview data. This involved bracketing (Ashworth, 1999) assumptions during the data collection and initial analysis phase. This process was facilitated by the critical distance that both researchers had from the implementation process and their lack of previous engagement with PDP practices in the institution.

In interpreting practice, particular care was taken to cross-check the meaning of terms such as ‘reflection’ as used by tutors, as the same terms could be being used in different disciplinary and course contexts to denote different activities. Moreover, we were aware of the need be cautious about the nature of claims about practice for, as Kane et al. (2002) remind us, much higher education research has looked at espoused theories without distinguishing these from theories in use. We, therefore, attempted to triangulate individual transcripts with the interviews from other staff members within the same school, and a detailed reading of course documentation. Our intention is to follow up this study by looking at students’ perceptions and the texts that students are themselves producing.

From a detailed reading and rereading of the data, and moving from detailed codings to grouping codes together into more analytical categories, clusters of common preoccupations began to emerge across different courses. These clusters formed the basis for the models of practice we identified. The clusters were multidimensional; involving the approach adopted (for example, how reflection is understood), the implementation strategy (for example, whether part of a core module, across all aspects of the curriculum etc.), how student support is organised, and whether or how it is assessed. In order to make sense of the complexity and diversity within the structure of PDP, we have abstracted from the detail to create ‘ideal types’ (Clegg et al., 2003) or models which highlight the key features of the approach. These are constructions and therefore cannot be found in any individual school in a pure form, but hybrids can be seen. The advantage of using ‘ideal types’ is that it allowed us to look at key features and compare contrasting approaches. There is inevitably some overlap between the models, but by highlighting the dominant features we have been able to focus on the distinctiveness of different contexts. The models are based on working with the meanings used by the interviewees, so, for instance, reflection was a term in common use, but the interpretation varied and highlighted different aspects of learning within the overall student experience. Three dominant first-order models emerged: professional, employment and academic. We then engaged in further second-order theoretical work by interrogating the nature of these categories, drawing on the work of Bernstein (2000) as a way of understanding what the salient characteristics of our ideal types were at an analytical level.
The first ideal type, the professional, was strongly influenced by the requirements stipulated by professional and statutory bodies, for instance the Teacher Training Agency and the specific health care professional bodies such as the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy. The second, employment, includes both a general orientation to graduate employment and also specific work placement during study. This model was associated with areas such as management and business, sport and leisure, and those areas of applied science and engineering where the course focus was primarily towards employment rather than discipline. The final model, academic, was focused on the academic development of the student, incorporating metacognitive skills and those of the specific subject discipline. Humanities and social sciences predominated in the academic. The model also included some areas of pure science where the emphasis was more on subject understanding. The association of subject domains with particular models reflected the state of thinking of those engaged in developing pedagogic practices on the ground, not an imposed set of categories. In other institutions subject areas may have developed different orientations, so, for example, in our study computing fell largely within employment, but in other contexts it could equally well have focused on professional standards and veered towards the professional, or in more research-focused areas towards the academic.

In mapping the models we have adapted Bernstein’s categories to further understand why some disciplines appeared to fall within the academic, while other seemingly more closely related disciplines did not. Our resulting table was based on dichotomising singulars which involve strong boundary maintenance and generic modes where, according to Bernstein, ‘the performances to which they give rise are directly linked to instrumentalities of the market, to the construction of what are considered to be flexible performances … From this point of view their identity is constructed by the procedures of projection’ (Bernstein, 2000, p. 55). Our model is a simplification of Bernstein’s but it allows us to map the three key orientations we identified, and the inclusion of examples of subject area in Figure 1 gives some indication of where in our data these ideal types predominated. We would not claim this model is definitive, but it does appear to map into some of the underlying mechanisms at work in modern higher education systems and which Bernstein (2000), among many other writers, have been attempting to theorise.

In presenting our data we have used numbers to identify respondents in order to protect anonymity. We recognise that by doing this we have sacrificed some of the specificity of subject areas. However, because of the near association of tutors with subjects we felt that, except in more general terms, it would not be ethical to identify subjects or courses as such, particularly as this article was preceded by an internal report, increasing the likelihood that specific individuals might be identified.

Professional

The professional model focused on the development of specific professional competencies associated with employability in the specified field. This orientation
exhibited strong boundary maintenance and a predominantly projectional identity. Our examples of the professional were from within the fields of education, including initial teacher training, and health care (e.g. Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, undated; TTA, undated). These individual professions have the continuous development of reflective practice and professional competencies embedded through CPD. In these areas, lifelong learning in the form of CPD is a part of a professional career, and graduation is only the start of this development process. The elements that make up the competencies are dependent on the specific discipline or profession within the sectors. In some instances there is a requirement for PDP to include physical evidence demonstrating subject knowledge as well as skills-based activities; for example, a Design and Technology Teacher Portfolio. The descriptions of practice from within this area were strongly orientated towards the type of evidence that could be used to support applications for employment and placement within that specific professional domain:

that’s very much portfolio type work, I think really, and the students can take that along the path as their level three competence, to say to employers ‘this is the kind of thing I’m capable of doing’. (Interview 28)

The types of portfolio and evidence staff described matched the process of PDP to the needs of the various professions and the student’s overall personal development, the requirements being different within individual subjects. So although the term portfolio was used by all the respondents, we have identified as typifying the professional approach the constituent parts of the portfolio, the sorts of artefacts and writing, and the name attached to it, e.g. ‘personal’ or ‘professional’ had specific meaning to the particular profession, suggesting that strong boundary conditions are important in maintaining specific professional identities. All the staff in this model, however, felt that PDP provided a tool for summarising a student’s development and learning experience; for example:

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Figure 1. Mapping the ideal types
the purpose of the PDP or professional development portfolio is for them to bring together their achievements during the three years, or one year, and also to set targets, create an action plan and reflect on their progress towards those targets. (Interview 19)

Engagement with PDP was frequently included in a specific professional skills module. In some instances this was delivered as a taught, interdisciplinary module which focused on professionality, especially where practitioners work in interdisciplinary teams in the workplace. From the descriptions, however, we interpreted this as involving the distinctiveness of professional identity rather than a generic notion of professionalism, as the aim was to enhance the contribution to the team of the individual practitioners.

In this model reflection and reflective practice form an integral part of undergraduate study and CPD, and many statutory and professional bodies provide additional material to support students through this staged process. This provides both the rationale for reflection and the benefits for continuing practice. PDP provides a staged process of development from reflection on personal strengths drawn from knowledge, understanding and experience prior to training, through to individual learning as a practitioner. This philosophy is embedded in course programmes and covers all aspects of the course rather than being restricted to one individual module:

... builds on the skills from level one, level two, level three, reflective practices etc. and so that's in each of the programmes and that's what will feed into the portfolios so to speak. (Interview 22)

What is distinctive, therefore, is not the mode of delivery as such, but the orientation towards specific modes of reflection and their centrality in professional life. In addition to reflection on subject knowledge and progress, PDP in these areas also includes reflection on the personal attributes required within the particular profession. Reflection is embedded in the culture of the staff supporting the students through their own experience of CPD. The academics supporting these professional students had a clear understanding of both value and benefits of reflection. Many of the personal qualities staff identified included features of key skills, such as communication, problem solving, and working with others, but they were felt to be secondary to the personal attributes necessary for the specific profession:

its [PDP] secondary focus is development of skills, be they academic or learning or professional. (Interview 25)

Staff argue that students need to recognise these attributes within themselves, and the PDP process provides the opportunity to record, reflect and plan their personal progress and development. There is also an acknowledgement that learning is a continuous process, which requires review and planning. Staff in these areas appeared to feel very comfortable with PDP, which forms part of their own experience and resonates with core professional beliefs about the importance of reflection. For these staff the PDP aspect of Progress Files is integral to their own pedagogic practice, and has been developed over many years with a large and identifiable practice literature supporting the use of reflection.
Staff in these professional areas are so profoundly committed to the idea of reflection that they find it difficult to understand why other colleagues might have any difficulties:

I mean, having sort of grown up in health and social care I find it difficult to understand the problems people have got with this. You know, the questions about reflection and learning and all that, I do find difficult to see, well, why is it a problem? (Interview 22)

Reflection as ‘something you grow up with’ suggests that these are absolutely core processes in professional identity. Indeed, any worries expressed by these staff in relation to the idea of a national initiative are about whether it will impinge on their own distinctiveness. Although there are variations in how support is organised, the strong, singular self-definitional boundary of PDP activities anchored firmly in professional identities, sustained in the external world, and anchored in a body of theoretical literature on reflection means that this model is likely to be extremely robust. Senior staff centrally recognise the strength of these commitments and have made the policy decision not to interfere in professional self-defined by imposing any form of uniform system for recording. In these areas, even where use is being made of common resources, they are customised and tailored to specific need.

Employment

This model was found in courses which do not necessarily lead to specific professional careers, such as sport and leisure management and business studies. All the courses included in this ideal type are strongly projectional: however, they are largely generic in terms of having much looser boundaries than the professional. In some instances, graduate employment can be directly related to the degree undertaken; for instance computer science, planning and environmental development: but the role of the reflective practitioner as part of the maintenance of strong identity boundaries was absent. Our analysis revealed two distinct sub groups: ‘job rich’ areas, where there was a focus on longer term career management and employability; and, more narrowly, ‘placement’, concentrating on the shorter-term needs of student placement within the course curriculum. Staff, in both these subgroups, were extremely sensitive to the external economic environment and their students’ likely fate in terms of employment.

In the ‘job rich’ environment, the dominant model used PDP to develop a holistic view of experience and personal development during the student’s undergraduate education; examples were found in areas of leisure management and business studies. Development was conceptualised as a continuous process, with each level building on the previous. For example:

... so the first year can be on the personal and the academic, the second year can start to gear into professional and work-based learning and off-campus study and so on and the third year I think is cumulative and it's about having a vision of leaving with all of this information and using it in interviews. (Interview 12)
PDP is also used to generate recognition of the transferable skills and experience students gain through part-time and voluntary work:

They got the students to fill a mock application form, for their ideal future job. And encouraged them to think about what areas of their personal development were missing that would help them fill in application forms so they’re thinking less about academic skills and more about any work that they’re involved in: Student Union, charity work, volunteer work, that sort of thing. (Interview 30)

These sorts of skills were at the centre of their thinking about employability and many staff felt that PDP was not just another add-on to the course; rather, that there are benefits to engagement with the process which complement the skills and competencies developed throughout the course.

[PDP] ought to be because there’s a lot in there that is underwriting their employability and doing so with some power really when you look at the—both course specific and generic competencies which are built into all our programs. From that point of view you’d have to say students ought to engage with it. (Interview 9)

Whilst reflection is not the main feature of this model, in order to achieve an individualised curriculum vitae (CV) there is a requirement for reflection on learning in its broadest sense. This, however, is not necessarily spontaneous and staff have to work to encourage reflection. Reflexivity is being produced through pedagogic practice rather than assumed; one metaphor staff used was of having to ‘sell’ it to students. They also pointed to the difficulties of an orientation towards the future which they diagnosed in their students:

… but it’s a bit like talking to youngsters about healthy activity and exercise and stuff, and the possibility of dying if you don’t, you might as well speak in Greek. Because youngsters are never going to die and you’re talking about concepts that they just have no experience of and don’t relate to and therefore they will not take your message. And I sometimes wonder if a first year student is on message in terms of competencies that they’re building that they will use when they apply for a job in two and a half years time, although it’s no time at all, we know that, I just wonder sometimes whether they do. (Interview 12)

The idea of the CV as a document, which develops beyond the undergraduate experience into CPD and lifelong learning, is a concept which staff believe may be difficult for younger students to grasp. Moreover, while our overall characterisation of staff understanding as falling under the generic, projectional, there were clearly tensions, not only in relation to the students’ lack of external orientation, but also in staff’s perceptions that students were operating with a much more singular understanding of discipline. They reported, for example, that for some students what counted as legitimate for ‘engineering’ was only the technical. Staff felt students (and some of their colleagues), therefore, struggled with the relevance of PDP for their own identity. This suggests that, within the broad framework we have provided, there are nuances and tensions, and that there may be subcultural practices even within courses which fall outside our modelling.

The ‘placement’ model on many courses has a much shorter-term focus; the emphasis being on the importance of the student’s CV, application form and the
accompanying letter. In many instances these are assessed and feedback given. This begins in the first year and is fostered in the second year:

the other thing that goes into the PDP is they complete an application form for a job which also forms part of an assessment because we do a job selection exercise which is assessed. ... So they fill in an application form. And it’s assessed by other students. ... [Peers] Give them feedback on what they’d need to do to improve it, so that’s there for them to use in the second year as well. (Interview 31)

PDP is frequently delivered within a skills module, and assessed as part of the learning outcomes along with information and communications technology skills. But CV development is left as a creative exercise to ensure that students produce an individual resumé.

The need for a good CV is understood as part of an environment in which the placement jobs market is becoming progressively more competitive; some schools are finding that employers who would have previously taken placement students from a particular university are now using online applications. Students now find themselves in direct competition for places with students nationwide, and it was clear that staff attempted to adapt to these changes in the external environment. Application form completion and interview skills were seen as becoming increasingly important:

[In the past] they used to only approach a certain number of universities, so certain employers would only go to two or three universities and then they get twenty from us, twenty from somewhere else, choose students from those. Now that they put it online, any student from any university in the country could apply. (Interview 15)

Identification of the student’s needs, through the use of skills audit and reflection on personal skills, is designed to support preparation for the placement interview questions. Encouragement in the development of an action plan and target setting is then used to develop skills and confidence in weaker areas.

In summary, the employment model as an ideal type focuses attention on generic, transferable skills which relate to employment. The process recognises that students face a competitive jobs market, preparing and developing skills required to gain the initial job interviews and handle interview type of questions such as ‘what are your personal strengths?’ Within this model staff are acutely aware of the position of their course within the employment market, some working in areas where employment is plentiful (the ‘job rich’ environment), others facing intense pressure on placement requirements in the immediate circumstances. The sorts of PDP produced in these contexts reflect their general reading of the market, not in the sense of a particular professional set of values, but through a more focused concentration on employability. The language used to describe PDP in this context is much more utilitarian, and staff in these areas feel they face greater difficulties in convincing students of its value. Rather than a shared set of well-understood principles based on the shared value of reflection in PDP, as in the professional model, the employment model throws up a series of dilemmas for the staff in motivating students to participate, as the rewards are perceived by staff to be extrinsic rather than central to disciplinary values. This suggests that there remains a tension between the singular and the
generic. Although we have characterised our respondents as belonging predominantly to the projectional and generic, there is some suggestion in our data that this identity shift is incomplete, particularly among students. Moreover, unlike in the professional model there was little evidence that staff related to a broader literature, for example, the work on connectivity (Guile & Griffiths, 2001) or Eraut’s (2000) work on non-formal learning which relates the formal curriculum to work experience and provides a basis for theorisations of reflection in work-related contexts. Rather like their characterisations of their students, they appeared to approach PDP in a more utilitarian mode. The potential for strain with discipline orientations, even in these strongly projectional areas, therefore remains a source of instability in the ways the commitment to PDP is expressed. In our data most engineering courses fell into employment, but other courses in the same school were clearly in the academic, reinforcing our argument that ways of thinking and practising are complex on the ground, and that positions cannot be read off broad discipline categories.

**Academic**

In this model the emphasis is on academic development, metacognitive skills, and the subject discipline-specific skills: progression from the school leaver/novice student to autonomous learner. These areas were singular in their maintenance of strong subject boundaries with introjected identities focused on the needs of the discipline. The model was found in disciplines such as humanities and social science, and in some areas in science and parts of engineering where the focus is on socialising the students into the language and procedures of the discipline. Skills development focuses on those relevant to the degree/discipline; for instance, progress from basic grammar and literacy towards the higher-level skills of academic reasoning and the vocabulary of the subject:

At level two there’s a unit [name of module] which is really preparation for final year independent study or dissertation. (Interview 16)

In some cases the PDP process is used to identify requirements for further development and understanding within key skills, although it covers all modules across the year:

how they use that information for working in groups when they’re doing things like presentations. Because our students end up doing quite a lot of group work and some of them struggle with that. And I think what we find is that having this kind of in-depth knowledge about what’s going on can actually stop some of the problems with the progress. It doesn’t sort them all out but it gives them a greater understanding of the dynamics and different tools to work—a different language to use. (Interview 26)

Key skills, including essay writing, report writing and presentation skills, are all included in the academic model, and in some instances involve a key skills audit as part of the assessment process:

They have a meeting with the Personal Tutor within the first 3 weeks, when they have to submit their first assessment; it contributes 20%—essentially a Key Skills audit, reflection on their personal and academic achievements to date. (Interview 5)
This emphasis on key skills might be seen as relevant to employability and a more projectional orientation, but in the ways of thinking of the staff they are firmly tied to discipline needs. Thus we have the paradox that some areas where identities were most firmly introjected and singular, such as History, might in fact be producing some of the most ‘employable’ graduates.

As would be expected, the range of skills varied with discipline. Some subject disciplines incorporate laboratory and workshop competencies appropriate to the subject area; such as art and design, and science. In some disciplines, information and communications technology skills are used to enhance the learning in relation to the subject discipline; for example, through the use of spreadsheets for quantitative data analysis. Within this model, however, staff do not see employment and employability as the focus for students, as they follow varied career paths after graduation, and the generic orientation towards employability described in the employment model is downplayed in favour of the sorts of academic competencies required in the mastery of the discipline. Student support is primarily focused on the academic development as opposed to the pastoral support role. There are clear boundaries of the support offered by the university, tutor and individual personal responsibility. The language used by staff relating to the academic model relates to creating a ‘graduate’ rather than a professional with a structured career path. Their concerns are with the metacognitive aspects of learning; with students developing an understanding of the process of learning, the development of thinking skills which underpin learning, and an awareness in the students of how they as individuals learn. This forms a fundamental part of the academic learning process, from reading and understanding course material to the development of higher level critical thinking and analysis.

Within the academic model, this sort of development is often implicit in the learning outcomes of the individual modules and therefore already embedded in the learning process, and often sustained by specific disciplinary literatures. However, this is not something that students necessarily consciously recognise or are aware of. The role of the PDP tutor, and a function of the PDP process, is to get the students to recognise their own learning processes and to capture these through reflection.

in the first semester, it’s more a kind of skills study based course but made relevant to the degree. And in the second semester it’s kind of a group based project that develops the stuff they do in semester one. So within that they already do portfolios and they already look at work so I mean it’s there integrated within Level One already so I don’t think that’s a particular problem. (Interview 12)

However, this degree of integration also creates problems for some academic staff in terms of thinking about PDP as an identifiable process. Many of their existing practices coincide with the requirements of PDP and are deeply embedded within disciplinary practices. Staff, nevertheless, find it difficult to identify specific metacognitive skills—‘learning about learning’—which are distinct from the discipline. The language of progress files, as a seemingly separate process, therefore creates some tensions. Staff in these areas were most sceptical about having to identify PDP as distinct processes, yet arguably, they were already successfully
achieving the sorts of qualities in their students the PDP literature identifies as important.

In summary, the academic model focuses on the academic development of students and the skills required to fulfil the academic needs of the subject discipline. The format of the PDP process is adapted to the needs of the students within the subject group. For some this may begin with the development of the subject vocabulary and language of the subject, creating the foundation for further academic development in the subject area. In other instances they may be laboratory or workshop skills which are fundamental to further study within the field. The orientation, however, is internal to the requirements of the discipline, and in those instances where staff appear to be most at ease with the requirements of PDP, it is because they do not distinguish PDP from the essence of good learning and teaching practice in their disciplinary domain.

Conclusion

This article provides one example of how a flexible approach to PDP has allowed staff in schools to focus on the needs of their own students and develop PDP to support them accordingly. The models which emerged from the project were embedded within particular disciplinary and professional traditions. The professional model represents the development of a specific set of competencies required for a predetermined career path on graduation, and where reflection is already established as a dominant mode of professional practice. The employment model provides a generic skills set, focusing on employability at both graduation and work placement. The attention of the academic model is on student learning, the development of metacognitive skills and the attributes required within the subject discipline. By their very nature, ideal types do not exist in pure forms and the models are not entirely unconnected, and we have highlighted the ways in which PDP processes are already incorporated within many courses. The research identified where the focus of PDP support was within the schools and subject disciplines, and was often based on experience from earlier initiatives. Student-focused support is embedded within all the models, and provides for the needs of individual student groups. From our data there is evidence of established practice; however, this is not always recognised as relating to the PDP, especially where current practice coincides with PDP and is already embedded within disciplinary practices.

The overall findings of our research mirror the findings from elsewhere, that where the new initiatives coincide with, and build on, teacher beliefs, changes can be built into ongoing practice. Overall in the data we had evidence of suspicions towards top–down change or the imposition of policy from above (Clegg, 2003). As we have reported, however, it appears that staff are making sense of their own practice of PDP through developing models which fit with their own disciplinary and professional orientations, and their assessment of the external environments in which they find themselves. The model of change adopted by the university to build on existing experience, rather than impose a unified model, thus seems to resonate with
experience on the ground. This research itself is part of that process; providing colleagues with an opportunity to debate the models we have identified, and no doubt in the process generate hybrids and new combinations which will extend our own understanding as we track through the implementation phases. The models we have suggested are not static, but represent a snapshot of progress at a particular point in time. They have utility in so far as they point to the ways in which staff are conceptualising practice, and to the extent that by holding them up for debate they help the process of reflecting on and possibly reconceptualising practice in the future.

We hope that there will be more case studies of higher education institutions with different histories and approaches. In particular, we would welcome work that might extend our suggestion that whether the predominant orientation is projectional or introjected, and whether identities are predominantly singular or generic impacts on the ways initiatives like PDP are understood. We have tentatively suggested that the delineation of a specific part of the curriculum as PDP is most problematic for those areas characterised by singularity and introjection. This might suggest that staff in areas where the orientation on traditional notions of discipline is strong will be most uncomfortable with the moves that require the identification of the skills associated with PDP. We would hope that policy makers and national agencies are sensitive to these issues. Our research indicates that in some areas skills are deeply embedded in core academic practices, and to tear them from context for quality audit purposes would be counterproductive. At a theoretical level we are also intrigued by the seeming paradox of the introjected generic, our empty cell. We say paradox, since it might seem that there is a prima facie case why the two exist in tension. However, in growing interdisciplinary areas, it might be possible to imagine highly introjected subject areas whose boundaries are nonetheless loose and generic. This may strain the concepts too far, and we are of course aware that we have simplified Bernstein’s model. As a heuristic, however, and a way of bringing together rich empirical data with the tendencies Barnett (2003) and others identify, we think it is fruitful. PDP is not the only initiative which has in recent years disturbed previous pedagogic understandings (Clegg & Ashworth, 2004), and increasing the sophistication of our thinking in these areas can contribute to the development of policies that are more in tune with teacher beliefs, rather than running counter to them.

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