Workplace learning in academia: (older) bones of contention?

Dr Sue Gelade, Lecturer Professional Development, Flexible Learning Centre and Research Associate, Centre for Research in Education, Equity & Work
University of South Australia.

Abstract
This paper examines some of the issues confronting older academic staff as they face the necessities of developing new skills in their university workplace, and their concerns with what might constitute real academic work that needs to be developed. The discussion asks how a university’s organisational learning practices might respond more appropriately to such needs than currently seems the case. The paper asks what focussed support might be available for this group of academics and, if there is none, whether there should be. Given the federal government’s new performance funding criteria as well as a more general push to keep individuals working longer, it would seem that managing and assisting the learning in late stages of an academic career is likely to become more critical to universities if the over fifties are to be encouraged to stay within the academic workplace.

Introduction

In this paper, which I see as sitting within broader discussions on the direction of higher education taking place in Australia, I am going to raise a number of questions that relate specifically to mature age academics and their place and needs within a worksite that happens to be a university. As such, this paper does not represent a research study being undertaken, but rather draws together a number of issues within the current higher education environment from my own experience and the literature in relationship to older academics, and the views this group has of work and learning. It should be noted that the type of learning I am discussing here is aside from the personal and knowledge development that occurs during the process of discipline-based research that the academic may carry out. I would also point out that by referring to academics as ‘mature age’ or ‘older’ I have some problem in defining exactly what age that is, although I would suggest that by ‘older’ I generally mean over 55. But in the literature, ‘mature age’ has also been suggested as over 45 (Rolland et al, 2004), while for students, ‘mature-age entry’ into University can also mean the applicant is at least over 21. Findsen (2005, 12) tries to sort the definition out by citing a number of authors on the question, yet also finds a number of answers; with ‘young-old’ being 55 -65, and ‘old-old’ being 75-85, and the generalising term of ‘baby boomers’ for any adult who is ‘older’. The question remains a useful one for discussion among those of us who also might be ‘older’.

The understanding of what constitutes learning for the academic in universities is undergoing change. Teaching staff are increasingly required to learn new administrative functions, to organise and supervise more hourly paid tutors and to become adept at online curriculum writing and its delivery. Additionally, they often need new communication skills for teaching very large and diverse classes – frequently in overseas contexts, and must know how to provide a flexible ‘learner-centred’ environment for their students. The acquisition or updating of requisite skills that relate to such requirements could constitute ‘workplace learning’, although the use of such a term may depend on where or who from the learning occurs. From this author’s observations, mature age academics appear to respond to the learning
inherent in such skills quite differently from the way younger, or early career academics approach their workplace learning requirements.

A recent study (Gelade & Quinn, 2004) undertaken in my University noted that certain groups of academics are relatively resistant to undertaking professional development, and that this resistance manifests itself in many forms and for many reasons. Not the least of these reasons is a burgeoning workload and a consequent disaffection for activities which they see are forced on them through economic rationalism and a rising accountability. Indeed, many academics regard such activities as ‘intellectually deskilling’ because they remove aspects of challenge and debate from the process (Schapper & Mayson, 2002: 167) and the academic approach to their development hence becomes a case of ‘having to’, rather than ‘wanting to’. This study’s findings on resistance are backed by others, (Smith, 2000; Lynch, 2003; Clegg et al, 2004) and a wider Australian study that examines reasons that preclude staff from taking on teaching education opportunities (Dearn et al, 2002). At the same time, with the need to establish themselves within the organisation and having an eye to probation and promotion issues, the study found that younger and early career academics more readily access organised development activities than their more senior and usually older, more established, counterparts. I have concerns though, as to whether promotional aspects tell the whole story about older academics’ resistance to professional development, and hence the following issues will be explored in the discussion that follows:

- The attitudes that older, more senior academics can demonstrate towards professional development
- The type of provision, if any, that universities make, or should make, in regards to supporting the learning of this group

Is professional development a part of ‘real’ academic work?

The previously cited studies of resistance, and subsequent discussions I have had with academic staff during academic development sessions, lead me to suggest that the older academic takes issue with both scholarly teaching development activities and with administrative development activities, often because they do not consider them to constitute ‘real’ academic work. The views about teaching as ‘real’ work are admittedly contested, with some academics seeing real work as being about research and publication, while teaching and administrative tasks are the ‘less valuable’ parts that should be shouldered elsewhere or do not matter so much (Dearn et al, 2002: 36). Others view teaching as part of ‘the totality of the job’ which is a ‘multi-skilled profession’ (Dearn et al, 2002: 35). Others see research as the core academic activity with teaching as a non core, and relatively poor status activity, (Ruth, 2003:15).

The question of what constitutes academic work as a whole has begun to be addressed in funding policy, as evidenced by the Federal government’s discussion papers ‘Higher Education at the Crossroads’ (2002), though the debate there centres more on the separation between research and teaching, and how teaching might be understood in terms of scholarship. As an academic developer I welcome such a debate, as it brings into the open the many concerns raised by academics I work with who have expectations placed on them to look more closely at the scholarly development of their teaching. Not all have come to grips with what this scholarly development might
mean in terms of the professional disciplines in which they are based, and they instead see it as something apart from their academic work – but which they are told they need to acquire. Their disquiet is echoed by other authors who question the predominance of what has become a ‘deficiency model’ (Clegg et al, 2004) approach to professional development. This is a model that assumes the academic is targeted for development because the quality of their teaching and allied scholarship is either lacking, or has deteriorated and needs improvement. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that most of the decline in the capacity of older workers is generally not related to age, but rather of failure to ‘invest in motivation and job design’ (McNair, 2005, 33).

However, the deficiency approach stands, and in light of the Federal government’s new performance funding criteria, the majority of universities now actively support academic development activities in relation to teaching and learning. The promotion of teaching as a scholarship activity has consequently becoming more broadly discussed (among others: Skelton, 2004; McWilliam, 2002; Kreber, 2002). But, as mentioned, academics themselves view the idea of scholarship in teaching as a moot point, and it more often generates ‘them and us’ arguments that have seen academic developers described variously as facilitators, enforcers or wastrels, (Ashworth et al, 2004). Similarly, professional development is viewed as a somewhat evil, top-down method of control evolving largely as a result of the managerialism that has swept though the academic workplace (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2001; Becher & Trowler, 2001). So when senior management might feel the necessity to enforce change through policy, such change is often expected to be implemented via professional development activities that might translate policy to practice. It is unfortunate however, that the views from management may not necessarily concur with the views of those who interact daily with students.

In terms of overall professional development at my University, activities range from induction, workshops, seminars, discipline specific development projects and one to one assistance to support for teaching, scholarship, research, supervision and various skills relating to online delivery. Apart from induction activities and foundations teaching and/or supervision programs for newly arriving academic staff (both continuing and sessional) professional development is not mandated. As a consequence, and despite corporate priorities, most academics make their own, mostly negative, decisions about how much, why and when they will access any of this ‘workplace learning’. Accordingly, support for the development of scholarly teaching activities remains low. This low support brings me back to the question of what teaching staff might view as ‘real’ academic work being worthy of development and support, and why the views of older academics will often differ from their younger counterparts.

Other professional development lecturers at my University note, albeit anecdotally, that take up of development workshop programs and sessions by older and/or more senior academics occurs less frequently than with other age/level groups across faculties. My own experience with older academic staff is similar, and apart from the simple factor of still being able to rustle up good old fashioned enthusiasm, the inference given is that at their stage of career/life, the development of teaching skills is for those who have less experience and perhaps more time and need. One obvious reason for this view is that academics who have been in the system longer will
continue to see research as being the core scholarly academic activity in which they should be engaged, rather than in teaching (Ruth, 2003, Dearn et al, 2002). This age group has grown up in a climate where research gains the rewards, while teaching is something added on but is less extrinsically rewarded. Hence the often voiced view that research constitutes real academic work, while teaching – and the requirement to develop it – does not.

So a question yet to be answered for this group of teaching staff is one also being raised by Clegg et al, who ask about what should constitute academic development. Currently, the authors suggest, development is constrained by external funding issues and must have perceptible outcomes, and such practice does not allow for open and constructive critique through reflection and engagement (2004, 36). It is also the case that university teaching staff can see clearly how they are rewarded for research outcomes but find it more difficult to see tangible rewards for teaching outcomes. How long this view will impact on take up of professional teaching development among older academics may be directly related to the strength and impact of performance funding and/or retirement prospects. I should note here incidentally, that my University has recently introduced a reward system for publications in the area of scholarly teaching which is being enthusiastically embraced, but it remains unclear as to how this will impact on the take up of academic development programs.

The older academics also remember clearly (but possibly through rose-tinted spectacles I suspect) a time when a tutorial consisted of less than twelve students, rather than anything up to thirty, and most of them would turn up regularly because they were not working elsewhere at a job to pay their fees. This higher student/staff ratio demands new and perhaps more fluid, strategies than some teaching staff are prepared to deal with, and they accordingly may deny it a place in their academic working mindset. The older academic (myself included) also views with some concern their diminishing autonomy and how the various organisational changes that are heralding centralised control are attacking their traditional values (Lynch, 2003). A diminishing autonomy hence renders them antagonistic towards development activities over which they do have control.

The need to acquire new functional skills in relation to IT is even less likely to be viewed as real academic work by academics in the older age bracket. Many of this group came originally into their positions at a time when universities could afford a greater number of general and support staff, and there was little expectation that the academic would undertake the day to day administrative and bureaucratic functions now expected of them. They were also largely protected from any close engagement with the vagaries of online systems for answering n emails per day from students, accessing all information via their university website or downloading assignments forwarded across the ether.

Whatever their views, however, the administrative development activities academics are now required to undertake may range across workshops about how to put courses on line, assisting international students to settle in and getting to grips with new student record keeping systems, and so on. As a consequence, their attitudes towards these activities as ‘real’ work tend to be highly negative as they are perceived as intrusions in an already crowded workload. I want to make clear that am not arguing with their concerns about whether these requirements constitute ‘real’ academic work.
or not, as they are often my concerns too. Rather, I am concerned that their view of whose work this might be turns the academic away from professional development in its entirety. However, as Aittola (2002, 3) suggests, older academics have conceptions of university tasks that ‘originate in the Humboldtian idea of university’ which we are being forced to query, as it sits less comfortably in the new political economy of which universities are now part.

**What support is there?**

Given the concerns I have outlined above, my question about what type of provision, if any, do or should universities make in regards to supporting the learning of this group needs consideration. There seem to be, however, several obstacles to overcome if the mature age academic is to be encouraged into staying at the chalk (whiteboard?) face and become involved more enthusiastically in academic development. Not the least of these obstacles being the somewhat stereotypical view of the older person in general. First there is the view of the older person as one who cannot learn or perform work tasks efficiently because of age (Ranzijn, 1999, Bennington and Thorenou, 1997). Then there are the views that older people get sick more, as Tindale (2002) notes when citing a list of myths attaching to older workers. Included in the myths about them being unreliable due to health problems, are those of over-qualification, a lack of flexibility, their being less presentable and less attractive (for what one wonders?), and being more expensive to employ and insure. They are also possibly threatening to younger employees and have physical limitations and are prone to injury (Tindale, 2002, citing Human Resources Magazine, 5.1, 2001:15).

While the above listing relates to a hackneyed view of the ageing person, the literature is in general agreement that such stereotypes indeed exist. Unfortunately for the older academic, there is also agreement that the majority of mature age learners often have different (slower) response times (Ranzijn, 1999) than their younger counterparts. So differences that might be evident cannot be completely discounted. However, no studies cited by Ranzijn or Tindale indicate that the older learners and workers are unable to acquire whatever necessary skills are being taught, just that they might take a little longer, or acquire them in a different way. Accordingly, as Bennington and Thorenou (1997) contend, rather than stereotypical and negative assumptions about older workers not being able to learn new skills, it can be argued that ‘workplace learning’ or ‘training’ or in this case, academic development, would be more successful if re-aligned to fit the needs and makeup of that workforce.

Indeed, research cited in the Productivity Commission Report also goes against the stereotypical view of mature age learners, and instead identifies that while mature workers show a small decline in reaction time and physical strength (2005: 105) the productivity of individual workers is determined more often by other and varied characteristics. These characteristics range across educational level, skills, experience, motivation, personality and inherent intellectual and physical capabilities (109). There are a number of other studies in a variety of workplaces that reach similar conclusions, and these various studies over recent years correspondingly report on older learners and their ability to take on new learning and skills (for example, Hansson et al, 1997; Farr, Tesluk & Klein, 1998; Ball, 2000).
I would argue that it therefore becomes much more relevant to look at what authors say about response and reaction times and the idea of training or development being re-aligned to fit this sector of our workforce when thinking about the uptake of new skills and access to professional development by older academics at this or any other University. In terms of learning new IT skills, my argument is underpinned by observations of online development staff in our learning development unit who note that their ‘older clients’ require more, and differing support than their younger counterparts when moving into the area of online delivery of courses and allied course learning support. Indeed my own interactions with older academic staff undertaking a range of IT updating and development, as well as personal experiences (as one of those ‘older clients’) of trying to grapple with various aspects of IT development, bear out this view.

Academic staff have frequently commented, for example, that the help they receive in using online tools is useful and informative, but lost to them by the time they come later to apply that knowledge. ‘I forgot what I needed to do with so many other things happening in the meantime’ is a common remark. Or, ‘he [or she] went so fast and made it look so simple and straightforward that I felt too much of an idiot to tell them to slow down. Now I’ll need to get them back to go over it again’ has been another. It is acknowledged that IT development staffers have an understandably limited capacity both in time and funding for delivery of training, and so the need to consistently return and reinforce the forgotten or misunderstood parts does not bode well for relationships between developer and developer. The academic’s illustrative comments on feeling like an idiot because they didn’t like to say ‘slow down’ are particularly interesting given they reflect data from an earlier study on what constitutes good practice in the training of mature age learners in other environments (Gelade, Catts, Gerber, 2003). Research from that study found that rather than their learning being affected by age, older learners more readily accessed training and development if, among other factors, they were assured of an emotionally safe learning environment, the opportunity to learn at their own pace and that organisational innovation would account for such needs.

Support for the mature age academic in relation to further development of their teaching may be a different issue, as it takes us back to a consideration of what deficiencies are expected to be addressed by the development programs. There are also some differences in the way academics view their teaching load as opposed to other tasks needed as part of their overall workload. In Ruth’s (2004) study the majority of younger academics thought that teaching and administration tasks should be evenly distributed, but older academics thought that rank and experience should lead to lighter teaching loads (2004:103). But in our new climate of outcomes and student views of their teaching and learning delivery as measurement for reward, academic teaching staff practices across the majority of Australian universities will be subjected to rising scrutiny, regardless of experience or age.

This issue leads me to my questions about whether Universities are currently supporting older academic learning, and if not, whether they should be. Unfortunately, I have only been able to locate one program in a university setting that specifically targets older academics as learners (Spritzer et al, 2003). It is a United States based program which refers, interestingly, to this group as ‘veterans’ and ‘old dogs’, which may in itself prove a negative factor in attracting attendees, (but fits well
with the title of this paper). I certainly welcome further information on other programs if they are available. The apparent paucity of support in Australia would seem to indicate on the one hand, that academics, because of who they are and their educational background, are seen not to need specific attention. On the other hand, there may be the view that no pressing need exists for their workplace learning to be facilitated, perhaps because the older academic will retire shortly anyway. If such a view is indeed widespread, it begs the question of how much intellectual capital can universities afford to lose. If there are no programs aimed specifically at supporting the older academic, can a case be made for the value of that group and its support to the organisation as a whole? Perhaps my final question for discussion forms part of the answer.

**Does it matter whether support is provided to the older academic?**

A lack of enthusiasm and engagement with professional ‘workplace’ development might not be an issue at all were academics deciding *en masse* to take retirement and leave the system as they arrived at a ‘mature-age’ of fifty-five. In terms of whatever views they have towards scholarship and teaching development, new IT skill acquisition and related online development, natural attrition would solve any so called deficiencies in knowledge or resistance concerns, which arose for either the academic or their institutions. However, despite the ‘preservation age’ noted on superannuation printouts, retirement at fifty-five is not really the norm and a high number of academics choose to continue well past that magic number. This is probably a good thing, for as Tindale (2002:4) points out, ‘universities are meant to be the reservoir and well spring of learning, knowledge, new ideas and wisdom’ and much wisdom is lost when the older academic retires. Indeed, the most recent figures out of DEST for 2004 show that in Australian universities there are more than 14,000 full time and fractional time staff with academic classification over the age of fifty. With a total figure of approximately 37,000 academic classified staff, the over fifties therefore, comprise a substantial cohort likely to be actively teaching and researching over the next few years. These figures concur with Ruth’s (2004) findings on the ‘graying’ [sic] of the university workforce across a number of other western countries.

For some of this ‘graying’ workforce though, the ability to take retirement (or of being pensioned off by one’s employer) might not be a suitable or feasible option. It is impossible to say how many would be in this situation, but a number are likely to be women who do not have enough financial alternatives to accept retirement and they will need to continue in their positions whether they want to or not. The type of support any of the over fifty fives can obtain through their university workplace will impact on the way in which they can continue to offer a valuable learning experience for their students. Hirsch and Jackson, (2004) support this argument, suggesting that management of the late stages of a career is likely to become a major challenge for many developed countries as the number of over fifties increases dramatically in the next decade. ‘Motivating and retaining this group will be a key focus for employers’ (9). Within universities, motivation of academics is as necessary as the motivation of our students. Indeed, I would argue that a motivated teaching academic is crucial to the success of how students are motivated to learn.

From a purely economic point of view, the continuation after retirement age is doubtless a positive factor because, as the Productivity Commission Report (2005)
comments, keeping older people in the workforce is becoming an essential component of keeping productivity levels up in Australia. In a similar vein, Winefield (2002: 144) suggests that there is likely to be an increased research interest into mature age employment due to the way that governments are encouraging older workers to remain in the workforce. At the same time, Winefield’s research is noting academic staff reporting much higher levels of stress over the past fifteen years, mainly due to insufficient funding and resources, work overload, job insecurity and insufficient recognition and reward. This stress factor in itself presents a good case for developing targeted support for the learning that occurs in the workplace situation of the older academic. With the falling relative population to younger people meaning greater percentages of older people all round, it would seem that keeping mature age academics and their collective knowledge in our ‘industry’ is as valid here as in any other industry, or perhaps more so.

References


Smith, E. (2000). Dinosaurs or horses to water? Engagement in staff development by teachers in further and higher education. Learning together, working together: 8th annual international conference on post-compulsory education and training. Centre for Learning and Work Research, Griffith University, Gold Coast, 4-6 December. Vol 1, 174-182.


