Helping good ideas to become good practice: Enhancing your professional practice through Joint Practice Development (JPD)

By Maggie Gregson, Patricia Spedding and Lawrence Nixon

This reading draws upon five years of empirical research at the University of Sunderland's Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (SUNCETT). This work engages practitioners from across the further adult vocational education (FAVE) sector in HE-supported practitioner research, which aims to improve practice.

It offers insights into the practicalities of using a collaborative approach to improving teaching, learning and assessment, described as Joint Practice Development (JPD).

Focusing upon a six-stage cycle, it illustrates different stages in using JPD as an approach to improving the improvement of teaching and learning. It also points to the importance of measuring the impact of JPD through both hard and soft indicators of change and improvement.


Why should education leaders and teachers use the JPD approach to CPD?

It is customary for leaders of education to use continuing professional development (CPD) budgets to update the subject and pedagogical knowledge of their staff. Usually this involves attending time consuming, often expensive, courses, conferences or other events where someone who is considered (or considers themselves) to be 'an expert' tells everyone else in attendance what to do.

While such CPD events and networks might be helpful in raising awareness of new developments, exchanging ideas and sharing resources – arguably a necessary first step in improving practice, it is not enough to guarantee it. This is because a lot more ‘new learning’ (Eraut, 2004) has to take place before knowledge is ‘transferred’ well enough to bring about real changes in practice. Eraut uses the metaphor of an iceberg to explain how practice really changes. He argues that abstract, theoretical knowledge and information about a ‘good practice’ constitutes only one eighth of the knowledge needed to put a ‘good idea’ into practice and that the remaining seven eighths represents the amount of new learning needed to bring about real changes in practice. In view of this, education leaders need to think carefully about the extent to which existing, taken-for-granted approaches to CPD can be justified in terms of value for money.

Central to Joint Practice Development (JPD) is the recognition that changing and improving practice involves more than the simple transfer of information. The JPD approach to CPD acknowledges that change takes time. It recognises that the reality of putting ideas into practice places greater demands upon the relationships of those involved in the processes of change and those responsible for the practices of improvement (Fielding et al., 2005).

How can JPD be organised and used to improve teaching, learning and assessment?

This reading deals with the practical issues of how to go about improving teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) in straightforward, cost-effective and sustainable ways using JPD as an integral part of an organisation’s CPD strategy. We describe a sequenced series of six workshops each with a distinct aim. We summarise the sequence in the six-step cycle diagram below. This outline has been developed to help leaders of education and teachers get a further sense of what JPD could look like in practice. It is designed to stimulate and focus the discussions required to put JPD into practice. As such it is not a template or a ‘recipe’ but a stimulus and focus for discussion which can and should be adapted to suit particular circumstances.

Figure 1: The six-step cycle for putting JPD into action

(Each step should be supported by a workshop)

Workshop one: Creating conditions for CPD

This first workshop will enable you to explain the need to take a new approach to CPD and help you to introduce ideas about JPD to colleagues in your organisation. This is why it’s a good idea to think about how you can use existing collaborative relationships to lay the foundations for new ones and decide who might be responsible for the introduction, development and co-ordination of the project.

Workshop two: Sharing experience of practice and making room for argument and improvement

This workshop can help participants to begin to talk about aspects of practice they would
like to improve and to identify possible strategies that might be used to bring this about.

Workshop three: Identifying improvement priorities
This workshop invites participants to discuss area(s) for improvement from the previous workshop in order to agree which priorities are the most important and need to be addressed first. The workshop then encourages teachers and learners to work together to identify possible interventions which could be used to address these.

Workshop four: Developing and implementing improvement priorities
This workshop encourages teachers to work together to plan how the interventions selected should best be put into practice and how, their impact should be evaluated. This should include the identification of ‘hard’ and ‘softer’ measures of impact and how evidence of that impact can be collected, analysed and used to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention(s) at different stages.

Workshop five: Interim evaluation of impact and adaptation
This workshop focuses upon the collaborative analysis of evidence of the impact of the interventions selected for implementation at an interim stage of the process. Participants are given opportunities to consider if or how well the intervention is working and if it needs to be developed, adapted or even abandoned in the light of emerging evidence.

Workshop six: Final evaluation of impact and identification of next priorities for improvement
Workshop six brings together evidence of the impact and experiences of implementing the JPD interventions. Reviewing this evidence will help participants to evaluate the success of the intervention(s) in improving TLA and enable them to decide if the intervention is worthy of further development. This will include consideration of if/how the JPD community could be extended and what the next priorities should be.

Measuring impact: Hard and soft indicators of JPD
When you are setting up your JPD project it is really important that you take some time to agree upon some indicators of impact. These indicators need to play two closely related roles. First, to help you with your interim reflections and a final review of what is happening and what you need to adapt. Second, to help provide evidence of the positive or negative impact that the intervention is having upon TLA. It will therefore be well worth agreeing soft and hard indicators of impact that you understand and are happy to use. Remember to make time for this at the beginning of your JPD work and to review this together as you go along.

The questions below could help you to structure your discussion of which soft and hard indicators of impact to select:
- What positive outcomes do we expect this intervention to bring about?
- What hard indicators of impact could you use to demonstrate this impact? For example improvements in:
  - grade profile of a cohort for a specific assignment
  - retention rates
  - attendance rates
  - achievement rates
  - course reviews
  - inspection grades
  - staff motivation/morale
  - student motivation/morale
  - staff attitudes and interest in CPD
- Other types of hard impacts could include:
  - robust research evidence and more convincing arguments for the use of one pedagogical intervention over another
  - greater cross-curriculum/departmental working
  - beneficial links and collaboration with other providers/agencies
  - robust evidence for subsequent funding applications
  - establishment of a community of research and practice within your organisation
  - FAVE staff active in the education research community
  - closer links with HE colleagues
  - students themselves being more “research active”

- What soft indicators of impact could you use to demonstrate this impact? For example,
  - classroom atmosphere has changed; more settled, more questioning etc.
  - students are more willing to collaborate
  - teachers’ being more creative in their approaches to TLA and prepared to experiment
  - self-reported or observed autonomy of students
  - staff willing and able to challenge taken-for-granted practices
  - senior managers and other education managers more aware of the importance of practitioner research
  - senior managers and other education managers working collaboratively on joint practitioner research projects
  - practitioner research projects within and across different departments/whole organisation.

Conclusion
In this reading we have described a cycle of six JPD workshops that you can use to develop teaching, learning and assessment within your organisation and across organisations.

The research we have conducted with practitioners across the sector over the last five years demonstrates the potential of the JPD model to ensure the focus of activity remains squarely upon teaching and learning. This cycle of JPD workshops could therefore be a significant factor in extending an organisation’s repertoire of strategies to improve TLA through CPD.

The key assumption underpinning this reading is that most people want to do a good job and want to get better at what they do. We have described how this model of JPD can provide a forum where teachers, education leaders and learners can work together to improve TLA. Many teachers in the sector are highly skilled artisans, artists, scientists, engineers, mathematicians, linguists, poets, dramatists, dancers, musicians, entrepreneurs etc., with much experience and highly qualified in their vocational or subject specialism.

This model allows teachers and education leaders to devote or share power to improve the experience and achievements of learners. We want to emphasise the significant role research plays in helping practitioners extend their thinking about improving TLA both in terms of the strategies they use and the quality of their reflections. Our experience also suggests that practitioners benefit greatly from being supported to explore the framing of their research, identifying its implications for practice and to use their experiences of research to effectively reflect upon what has happened. For these reasons, it is well worth considering using specialist support from HE colleagues at particular stages of the JPD cycle.

Finally, we hope this reading will encourage you to think seriously about trying out the JPD model with a colleague or colleagues within your team or across your organisation.