**Research Article**

# A study of personal learning profiles of managers and the potential effect on professional development of teaching staff

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## Abstract

A set of predefined meetings during a college year, including planning, evaluation and reward meetings between line management and staff, is one step to formally discuss the development and qualities of teaching staff. It can be difficult for both managers and staff to get a grip on professional development. Key issues, for example, need to be addressed for agreement to be reached on performance and development. This paper addresses managers' personal learning profile and the extent to which this affects professional development of teaching staff. A semi-structured interview was used to create a portrait of each manager: their own personal development, turning points in life, education and career, and the interventions they choose to support professional development of their team members. This learning profile was then examined to see if this related to the interventions taken by managers to develop their team. A questionnaire was used to collect data on managers preferred learning habits and learning environment (the learning profile). The questionnaire data was analysed and conclusions and further discussions have been shared among participants. Factors influencing professional development like organisational standards and policy, organisational culture, and financial or technical facilities were not part of this research, because all participants worked at the same organisation. Findings indicate that managers at a university prefer two orientations to learning, *discover* and *participate,* and that they prefer the standard possibilities available to them, and that this is influenced by the institution.

**Keywords**: *professional development; teacher; learning; higher education; management*

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## Introduction

Learning and development of people are subjects containing a lot of complexity. To face this complexity a *multidisciplinary* approach is appropriate. With a multidisciplinary approach, a possible problem arises that to facilitate (continuing) professional development in an organisation requires several experts, ranging from human resource managers, trainers and job coaches, and team managers, and last but not least teaching professionals themselves.  Professional development has not always been very effective. Our concept of education has its roots in the industrial age. By training and developing a group of people together at a certain time we assume every participant has the same learning needs and learning preferences. This can result in disappointing engagements in learning that might suggest a certain weakness in our current system of organising learning and development of people.

By formalising roles and responsibilities some aspects of teaching are described. But teaching could be considered more than just skills and competences. As Coldron and Smith (1999) argue this could be a risk, not only impoverishing the real source of good teaching, in which the individual is a member of a vital professional community, but also causing a decline in the quality of education. With the increase of management in higher education the tide of centralized control, management surveillance of teachers work and the stipulation of itemized standards of competence could be seen as a risk for teachers as professionals who are critical-thinking researchers of their own teaching practice. Winter (2009) argues a schism between management and staff when discussing professional development, due to the value incongruence (organisational versus individual) that might occur. Furthermore managers own preferred learning styles might relate to interventions on professional development of teaching staff. Managers might have a preferred focus on their tasks, and this may be organisational / managerial or personal / individual.

## Learning landscape and learning

The metaphor of the 'learning landscape' was initiated by a Dutch researcher, Manon Ruijters (2006), in order to describe learning of people and learning in organisations. Using this metaphor is helpful in describing an abstract and complex subject as learning, and help to create a livelier image of the topic that involves complex concepts. Learning can also have different perspectives. According to Argyris (1994) most people tend to define learning too simply. Many experts have tried to define learning: Claxton et al (1996), defined 'learning as a journey which starts in the

zone of the unknown, and attempts via a whole variety of activities, mental and physical, to discover comprehension and expertise'. It is the mixture of mental and physical aspects, in which a person tries to discover his learning needs and match them with a set of activities trying to meet these needs. From this definition several domains are related to learning; mental and physical state of learners (personal), discover learning needs (motivation), learning activities (facilities). According to Claxton (Ibid) one's learning leads to better steering of the learning process.

**Concepts of learning**

It was Säljö (1979) who described images one has of learning and the effect it can have on one's learning. It depends on peoples' belief or understanding of learning. For some learning involves reflecting, while for others learning is just taken 'for-granted'. He distinguishes three situations:

- Consciousness about one's learning context: teachers, tests and setting influences learning;
- Distinction between learning at school and lifelong learning. Education becomes a special form of learning for some of us;
- Learning and 'real learning'. The first referring to gaining knowledge and the second to assigning meanings.

When the context is an organisation where learning is the core business it becomes interesting. Convictions about learning held by a learning professional can make it challenging to be aware of other types of learning. Langer (1990) describes this in his book *Mindfulness* as premature cognitive commitments. Consciousness about personal learning preferences can help overcome problems in learning (Säljö, 1979; Claxton et al, 1996).

Where learning is related to achieving goals, development is more related to the processes involved. The role of a manager in a team of professionals is interesting to research: to what extent are managers capable of motivating and facilitating the professional? The degree to which managers are aware of one's preferred interventions and whether these are supportive or disruptive in relation to learning requires research. The focus of a manager on either end results (goals) or development (process) might be seen to affect interventions on development of staff.

**Organisational learning**

Aside from the learning of individuals, there is also the concept of organisational learning. According to Ruijters (2006) organisational learning involves both intentional and non-intentional forms of learning and learning architecture (intentional use of learning processes). Organisational learning can have two perspectives: firstly organisational learning happens by creating possibilities for learning from an organisational perspective, meeting individual learning needs in the form of *organisational development*; secondly, a loose set of learning interventions, coming from individual learning, meeting organisational learning  is shaped as *human resource development*. Focus on organisational learning develops a new vision of learning. Action-reflection learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990), project based learning (Van der Krogt & Warmerdam, 1996), action learning (Revans, 1980) and large group interventions and community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are forms of organisational learning.

**Metaphors of learning**

In organisations a mismatch often occurs when manager and employee try to make agreements on learning and development. Because learning is an abstract topic, it can be of help to find a shared vocabulary on this topic. To find such a vocabulary Simons and Ruijters (2008) suggested developing a 'language for learning', especially to support organisations in creating more effective development programs for employees. Through the use of metaphors we might understand certain learning situations at an earlier stage. The use of metaphors can help to create a more imaginary, colourful picture of the abstract learning situations we try to reach agreement on. To some this might make it more confusing, because of the extra words needed to describe situations. To others it can help in communicating about learning situations. According to Simons and Ruijters five metaphors for learning on the job, could be described. They used previous research on learning theories to create these metaphors on learning environments. These metaphors are used to create a learning profile, as shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: The five metaphors characterized in keywords*

| Learning by | Keywords |
|---|---|
| Apperception | Role models, best-practice, real-life, pressure, implicit learning, imitation, observation |
| Participation | Dialogue, with others, collaboration, discourse, trust, enculturation, communities of practice. |
| Acquisition | Objective facts, transmission, knowledge, from experts, theories |
| Exercising | Safe environment, practicing, skills, attitudes, simulations, explicit learning, role playing |
| Discovery | Meaning, deep understanding, inspiration, self-regulation, knowledge creation, productive, designing |

These metaphors are used by Ruijters in a questionnaire (Situgram) in order to help create a learning profile of individuals, teams and organisations. Using these types of metaphors might help overcome miscommunication in organising development of employees. Recent studies by Ruijters show these metaphors are useful but not always clear enough to avoid misconception of learning.

**Professional development**

The context in which we work might influence our professional development: learning (behaviouristic view) and 'real' learning (holistic view) are considered two distinct concepts of learning. Our own preferred learning styles, and the effect it might have on our work and development as a professional is of interest in this research. According to Claxton et al (1996) insight in our own learning could lead to more effective learning. But being a teaching professional, often seen as a professional on a certain subject, it might be extra challenging to step into the unknown, and to keep learning and developing.

Somewhere along the learning journey one could feel some resistance towards learning styles, because they are not one's preferred styles. According to Säljö (1979) and Claxton et al (1996) awareness of one's own preferred learning styles might help find effective professional development. Conceptions of learning might also influence our own learning. According to Shulman (2005) we develop our own *professional identity* through education, nursery and social

environment. Being aware of this professional identity might help us find effective professional development for both ourselves, and for our colleagues / students. If managers are aware of their own professional identity, are they able to reflect on this identity in relation to their support of professional development?

**Professional identity**

In order to describe professional identity (Shulman, 2005) one has to grasp the concept of identity. According to Gee (2001) identity can be categorized in four sections: nature-identity (state one's in), institution-identity (derived from position and authority), discourse-identity (resulting from discourse of others and oneself) and affinity-identity (ones practice related to external groups). All these sections are related to professional identity, some more than others. The interest of researchers on *reflection* as part of professional development has increased last decades. HBTE, humanistic based teacher education, is one of the visions in teacher education becoming more and more accepted by researchers.

The self-concept, an organised summary of information, based on facts about oneself, including personal characteristics, values, social roles, physical facts and personal history, can be split into personal functioning and professional functioning. Tension between those two types of functioning might help development of people. Kelchtermans et al (1994: 47) described professional identity as a 'complex, multidimensional and dynamic system of representations and meanings, which develops over time as the result of interactions between the person and an environment'. MacLure (1993: 312) stated it as not a static aspect one would have, but a dynamically constant changing aspect of our personal human being.

**Reflection**

The process of reflection is often described by using a spiral model. Korthagen (1998) used this spiral model to match professional development of teaching professionals (see figure 1). The four stages within this model are quite distinct. What makes this model interesting is that it suggests the steps are performed in one order. Whether people are able to undertake all the different steps is interesting to research. Often the second step is quite difficult to execute. It demands an awareness of the individual's acting. Without this awareness, or consciousness, people will not be able to become conscious about essential aspects of this acting. Let alone, develop alternatives to choose

from. Although the model is a logical model, its use in a professional's everyday practice might be less logical.
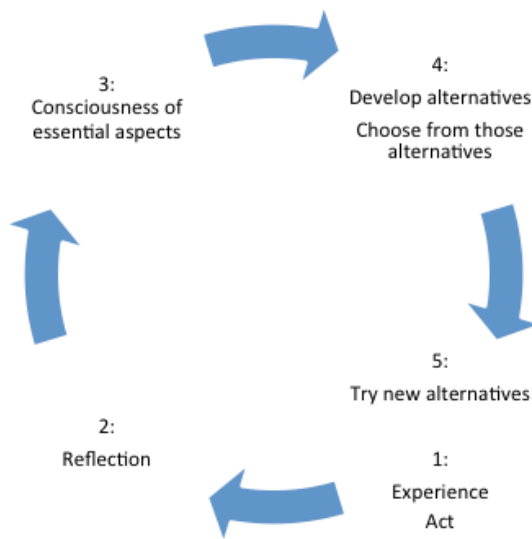


*Figure 1:Spiral model of reflection (Kortenhagen, 1998)*

**Value incongruence**

Professional identity of managers in a higher education institute may be difficult to categorise in certain typologies. But it was Winter (2009) who argued at universities, with the introduction of a managerial approach, that value incongruence between manager and teaching professional arises. With this introduction a change in organisational culture developed, where independent academics felt a confrontation with a more entrepreneurial approach from line managers. An identity schism in the academic world was a fact. Academic managers, whose values are *congruent* with the managerial discourse, often-former academics, introduced new values to the organisation reflecting the imperatives of a corporate management system: strong hierarchy, budgetary control, income maximisation, and commercialisation and performance management. On the other hand, managed academics, whose values are *incongruent* with the managerial discourse, have defended and promoted their own professional identity, invoking self-regulation, collegial practice and educational standards. It is this schism that might paralyse professional development. Hierarchy and budgetary controls often push professionals into a mode of production instead of innovation and development. It is not always safe to make mistake, to some this is a crucial aspect of learning. Lack of trust within the organisation due to hierarchical behaviour might disrupt professionals defining learning objectives.

**Formal versus informal learning**

With the rise of management in educational institutes the call for figures and numbers increased. By formalising professional development, for example in a professional development plan and a portfolio, the intrinsic motivation to develop decreased. This extrinsic motivation could make learning less fun. This is known as 'reward reversal effect' (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

The discussion on formal versus informal learning is often a difficult one. Owing to management perspectives it is difficult to facilitate informal learning, because hard facts often leak. Informal learning often takes place unaware of the fact that one is learning. Discussions on needs for communities of practices to further develop organisations are caught in the management trap. According to Koopmans (2006), higher educated professionals develop their skills and knowledge mostly through informal learning. Although this informal learning is valued by most of us, it is underestimated as professional development in a professional organisation. Managers who are able to facilitate informal learning might integrate it with the formal evaluation cycle in their organisation. Whether managers are able to formalise informal learning in a way it leaves the characteristics of informal learning intact is subject of research.

**Research Questions**

The central question in this project was:

> *Is there a relationship between the managers own learning profile and professional development of teaching staff and chosen interventions to support the professional development of teaching staff?*

With the central question a set of three sub questions were formulated:

> *What are the preferred learning habits (LH) and learning environments (LE) of managers at a higher educational institute in the Netherlands?*

> *What interventions on professional development of teaching staff do managers in a higher education institute mostly use?*

> *Are there similarities between interventions on professional development of teaching staff and the personal learning profile of the manager?*

**Methodology**

Research in the area of social science that examines education and professional development often relates to socially constructed worlds. Professional development can be seen as a multi layered

topic, difficult to research through quantitative research methods. In this project a specific local situation will be analysed and interpreted, in order to understand the complexity and dynamics of the situation. Within a research topic with lots of abstract topics, misconceptions and misunderstandings are constantly nearby. Preconceptions and meanings have to be avoided during this research. It requires a constant reflective mode of the researcher, while being part of a learning community (personal management development program), in order to minimize the bias problem.

*Case study*

The issues related to this research, learning and development supported by a specific group of employees, and how their own learning profile might influence this support, asked for a case study approach. By portraying this specific group of people at a local situation in a higher education institute, insights were collected in the complexity of development of professionals in a higher education institute. Exploration of the current situation at Rotterdam University, particularly the use of professional development tools chosen by different course managers, related to their own professional identity was done by a mixed method research design. The use of a questionnaire (explanatory) combined with a semi-structured interview (descriptive) helped to portray a series of managers at Rotterdam University.

*Questionnaire*

A questionnaire was developed by Ruijters (2006) to create a learning profile to support people in their own professional development, or help organisations to find effective development possibilities. This two part questionnaire can be used to develop a personal learning profile, or, when used in a team of professionals, create a team learning profile.  The questionnaire is divided into two parts:

- *Cognigram*: a questionnaire to create the *learning habits* of the researched object
- *Situgram*: a questionnaire to create the *learning environment* of the researched object

The Cognigram consists of 26 assertions which relate to the three learning habits: construction, interaction and reflection. Each assertion can be marked by a three point scale: never (=0), sometimes (=1) and often (=2). Nine of the assertions relate positively to the different learning habits, the other half relate negatively to the learning habit. The scores of each assertion are mapped with the learning styles. When the sum of the scores for a particular learning habit is

negative the outcome will be zero. The Situgram consists of 15 questions, each with 4 to 5 assertions. An assertion is scored between 1 (not), 2 (less than average), 3 (average), 4 (more than average) and 5 (total). Each assertion is related to one of the five learning environments: *apperception, discovering, participating, acquire knowledge,* and *practicing*. After 15 questions each learning environment could score a maximum of 75 (15 * 5). Subtract 45 of the total score and the results will be between -30 and 30.

*Semi-structured interview*

The choice of a semi-structured interview enabled there to be a guide to collect input on several topics, but with the freedom to let each participant give as much personal input necessary to create a view on each manager's professional identity. Semi-structured interviews with this group helped to create a view on aspects related to professional development of different teaching teams. Each of the managers participated in a semi-structured interview (30-60 minutes). The interview questions related to four main areas. Participants were invited to comment on: (1) their *personal school career,* (2) their *professional career,* (3) crucial *turning points* in their school and professional career they felt of *influence on* how they act as *a manager*, (4) what *interventions* they choose to develop their staff members. The questions were open-ended questions. The outcome of their learning profile has been used to reflect on during the interview.

*Participants*

The sample consists of eight course managers from three different faculties from the same university of applied sciences in the Netherlands. They were interviewed to uncover some of the preferences they had in professional development of their teaching staff, and how these preferences might relate to their own learning profile. The three faculties, Commercial Studies (C), Media Studies (M) and Engineering Studies (E), were chosen because they are associated with different academic cultures (Becher and Trowler 2001) and different learning and teaching challenges (Donald, 2002).  Four out of eight managers were women.

*Data analysis*

Data analysis is inevitably interpretative by the researcher. There is a tension to maintain the holism of the interview and the tendency for analysis to atomise and fragment data, and thereby lose synergy of the whole. Researchers own preferences influence the way the data will be read and interpreted. This should be considered a weakness of this research. Interviews were

audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. All transcripts were subjected to a content analysis, where quotes were mapped with the categories from the learning profile. The mapping of the quotes with the categories of the learning profile was used to identify similarities and differences across the sample and the learning profile of managers. This helped exploring connections and possible contradictions.

**Results and findings**

The first research question was:

> *What are the preferred learning habits (LH) and learning environments (LE) of managers at a higher educational institute in the Netherlands?*

Analysis of the data of the group of eight managers (see figure 2) suggests that managers at a university prefer to learn in the following two learning environments: *discover* and *participate*. Due to the fact the researched group is only eight people this is too limited to draw conclusions from. If we compare the different faculties managers operate slight differences occur: business orientates more towards gaining knowledge and apperception, as where media courses tend to have preferences towards discover and participate. Future research could focus on the differences in learning environments and professional backgrounds. Within this group three types were available but the numbers of subjects were too limited to draw conclusions from. When it comes to learning habits, there are no preferences among managers. The average outcome of the scan (cognigram) shows an equal score on all three learning habits.
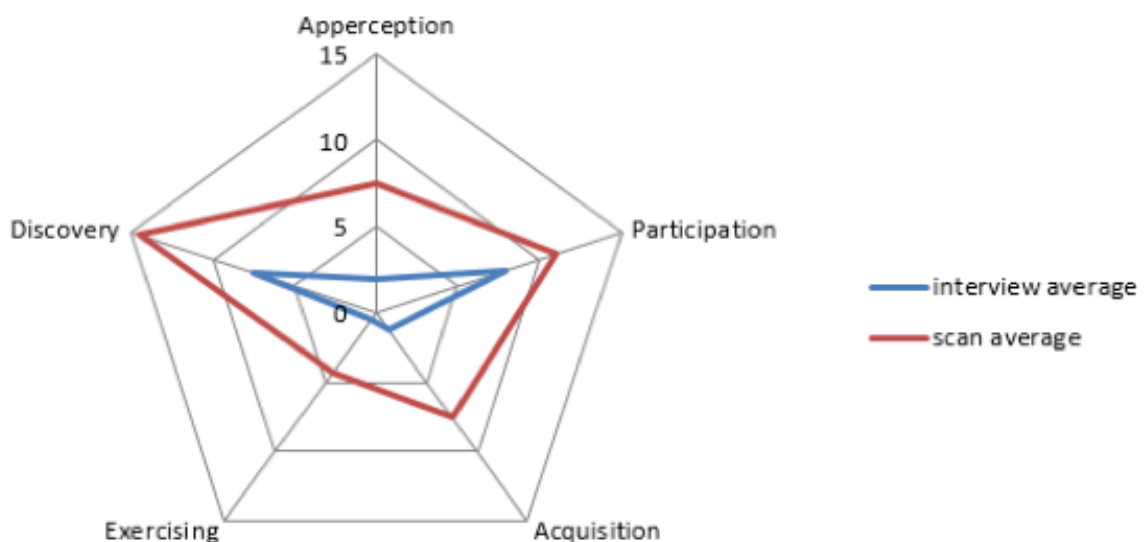


*Figure 2: Situgram (learning environment), average score among managers*

**Conclusion 1**: there is no clear learning profile of managers in a higher educational institute. Only a preference in learning environment like discovery and participation seems to occur among managers. Learning habits of managers show no preferences.

The second research question was:

> *What interventions on professional development of teaching staff do managers in a higher education institute mostly use?*

The answer to this question had to be found in the interviews. From all the interviews managers often mentioned the standard interventions that the university offers on training and development; quarterly training and development days, master courses, individual formal meetings. Only some of the managers mention their own interventions to develop their team. As it comes to interventions the managers tend to implement the university policy on professional development. Most of them complain about the lack of diversity in training and development, but seem to be unable to fill this gap with their own ideas. A few of them extend the development of teachers by informal meetings, being interested in the development of teaching staff members.

**Conclusion 2:** Managers in an educational institute most often use the standard possibilities in training and development of staff: master course, development days, and individual formal meetings.

The third research question was:

> *Are there similarities between interventions on professional development of teaching staff and the personal learning profile of the manager?*

Without a clear view on learning profiles of managers, the answer to the third question is not available. If the research group had consisted of a larger number of managers, a profile may have been more explicit. Next to the amount of research objects, a better research set up of the questionnaire could have led to another, maybe more distinct profile of managers. Because the questionnaire was semi-structured a lot of freedom was available for managers to answer questions. This was done to be able to catch a richness of data. The interviews did not lead to what was hoped for: a rich and useful data set. Although one would have expected to hear all kinds of answers, this was not the case. Most of the managers used interventions that are regularly available to develop their team. No preferences on chosen interventions, but implementing policy standards on professional development, using a standard set of interventions. The answers to first two research questions were not useful to answer the third research question.

**Conclusion 3**: With the lack of a clear learning profile of managers, and without specific interventions on development chosen by managers, this question is difficult to answer. University policy seems to lead managers in developing professionals. In exploring different development needs managers support informal meeting of professionals.

## Reflection

One of the tools used before interviewing was a questionnaire consisting of two tests by Manon Ruijters: Cognigram (learning habits) and Situgram (learning environment). The tests starts from an individual perspective, but can be used to create a learning profile of a team in an organisation. The tests can support development of individuals and organisations. The use of the questionnaire in order to create a personal learning profile is a good opportunity to use as a start of the discussion on learning and development. Reflecting on the outcome of the tests will help participants to create and think about their preferences. It does help to sharpen their thoughts and ideas on professional development. In this sense the tests are useful for both individual use and use between managers and team members.

It was the test related to learning environment, the Situgram, which showed more often similarities with the outcome of the interviews. Is this an indication people are more able to talk about the learning aspects on the outside: settings, work forms? Talking about behavioural aspects of learning seems more complicated, which makes the other test, the Cognigram, less powerful in addressing learning needs.

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