Professional learning in the ‘grey zone’: a Network approach to professional development.

BOODT, Sarah <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5790-3276> and PULLEN, Charlynne

Professional learning in the ‘grey zone’: a Network approach to professional development

Sarah Boodt and Charlynne Pullen, Sheffield Hallam University

Abstract

Professional development for the further education sector (FE) in England, whether commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), or the Department for Education (DfE), is typically formal learning. There are usually measurable outcomes, and practitioners are asked to identify changes to their practice. This focus on outcomes means informal learning is rarely directly funded. This paper analyses a professional development programme funded by the DfE and cut short. This programme was based on a network model that is neither fully formal nor informal. We argue the model sits in a ‘grey zone’ between formal and informal professional development, and that the specific benefits of this kind of ‘grey zone’ model should be considered for future commissioned professional development.

We find that informal learning in the semi-structured setting created by the Network had the potential to empower and recognise frontline teaching staff, by providing opportunities to present good practices and learn from other Network members. The Network structure enabled responsiveness to practitioners’ needs, by being flexible and adapting to circumstances. However, these adaptations made the Network vulnerable to challenge, and this, alongside concerns about the quality of presentations, and a lack of centralised control, ultimately contributed to its downfall.

In conclusion, whilst there are undoubtedly risks from a funder perspective of operating in the ‘grey zone’ these should be balanced against the potential significant benefits to participants of a network approach to professional development.

Introduction

Becoming a professional teacher is a challenging process that is not always straightforward (Brown and Everson 2019). It not only involves developing the technical skills of an effective teacher, but also constructing and growing into a teacher identity that is compatible with our personal sense of self (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016). This process takes time, and it is not possible for teachers to develop the skills and knowledge they require for their *entire* careers during initial teacher training (Duncombe and Armour 2004). In order to be effective, teachers must remain cognisant of new developments in theories of learning, pedagogical approaches, advances in learning technologies and changes in sector policy (Goldhawk and Waller 2023). This means that they need to engage in ongoing professional development, or continuous professional development (CPD) as it is frequently termed, *throughout* their careers. Furthermore, research indicates that support for teachers’ professional learning can lead to increased job satisfaction (Totterdell et al. 2024) and that CPD plays an important role in teacher retention

(Patrick, Elliot, Hulme, & McPhee, 2010; Shanks, Robson, & Gray, 2012; Tyler, Dymock and Le 2024). In the current times of acute teacher shortages resulting from poor recruitment and retention (DfE 2021 FE workforce analysis; Tyler, Dymock and Le 2024) in the English FE sector, this is important.

The English FE sector

The English FE sector is characterised by the wide diversity of its provision and learners. It bears some resemblance to Vocational Education and Training (VET) in other countries, such as Germany, Australia and the American community colleges, in that the English FE sector provides the majority of vocational education and training, adult and community learning as well as academic courses from the age of 16, and also degree level courses (Orr 2013).

Since August 2014, learners who have failed to achieve a Grade C/4 in GCSE English and/or maths by age 16 must continue studying these subjects post-16 (DfE, 2014). This has created challenges for the FE sector, where learners who leave 11-16 education without good grades in English or maths, and are often demotivated by their experiences in school, are more likely to continue their study (Anderson & Peart 2016). To support teachers of English and maths resit learners, a workforce strategy was developed (DfE, 2014) including a range of bursaries and incentive schemes to encourage maths graduates in particular, to consider teaching in FE. More recently, most approaches to support these teachers have been focused on professional development commissioned firstly by the ETF, and in 2022, by the DfE directly (FE Week, 2022). A DfE grant in June 2022 offered a range of providers the opportunity to deliver professional development for a period until March 2025. The Greater Than Network discussed here, was one such programme.

Towards professionalism

Historically, the FE sector has a poor tradition of establishing and supporting professional learning (Hodgson 2015). In 2007, in a move to professionalise the sector, legislation was introduced requiring FE teachers to complete 30 hours' (pro rata) CPD each year (HMSO, 2007). As part of this legislation, it became mandatory for teachers to join the Institute for Learning (IfL) and to lodge a formal record of their CPD with their employer and the IfL. This brought a new significance to CPD, which had previously been lacking in the sector (Loy 2024), together with an increased focus on 'measurable' forms of CPD activity (Broad 2015, 16). Whilst this legislation was rescinded following publication of the Lingfield Report in 2012, recognition of the importance of CPD for teachers to improve educational outcomes remains (DfE and BIS 2013; BIS 2016; DfE 2021). The adoption of Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills status (QTLS) and the transformation of the IfL into the Society for Education and Training (SET) has led to a situation where FE teachers wanting to maintain QTLS are asked to complete some CPD annually as members of SET (SET, 2024a).

Notably, this CPD is recommended to be a mix of formal and informal professional learning activities (SET, 2024b).

Types of CPD

Coffield (2000) notes that for over two decades, discourses of CPD have been typified by 'conceptual vagueness' (pg. 3) and this is reflected in the various terminology used to describe it, such as professional learning, professional development, professional development and learning (Loy 2024), continuing professional development, and continuous professional development. This lack of consistent terminology to describe it adds to difficulties understanding and assessing its effects (Porritt 2014). In this paper, we are using the term continuous professional development to describe professional learning for teachers that is not part of initial teacher training. CPD can be defined as 'activities that aim to develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher' (OECD 2009:49) in order for them to 'remain continually competent and achieve their true potential'. (CAE n.d.). It differs from initial training in that it is ongoing and can therefore be considered to be a 'long-term investment' (Leaton Gray 2005, 6) in teachers' development.

According to the literature, there are three different types of learning (UNESCO 2009; Rogers 2014): formal, informal and nonformal. Formal learning has a prescribed structure (learning time or support) with measurable outcomes (which may be externally specified). It is provided by a designated trainer, is intentional from the learner's perspective and leads to a qualification or credit (Eraut 2000). In contrast, informal learning results from daily activities within a particular context (Rogers 2014), it is not structured and typically does not lead to certification. Whilst it may be intentional, self-determined and planned, it may also be unconscious and incidental (ibid). Nonformal learning, like formal learning, is structured with measurable outcomes. However, it is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. Unlike informal learning, nonformal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective (UNESC 2009) (see table 1).

Table 1: Types of learning

Type of learning	**Structured with measurable learning outcomes**	**Designated trainer**	**Intentional**	**Leads to certification or credit**
Formal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Informal	No	No	Mostly no	Not usually
Nonformal	Yes	No	Yes	No

In the context of professional learning, Fuller and Unwin (1998) suggest that it is unhelpful to make a distinction between formal and informal learning. Similarly, Rogers (2014) notes that there is ‘a good deal of confusion of concepts and language’ (16) when distinguishing between informal and nonformal learning. Whilst we recognise these different types of learning, there is no space here to join the debate. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we will limit our focus to formal and informal learning in the context of CPD.

Informal learning involves learning from other people as well as from personal experience, often simultaneously (Eraut 2004). Consequently, it cannot be predetermined, since it is a product of negotiation that depends on circumstances and individuals’ dispositions (Billet and Somerville 2004). Most learning in the workplace is informal (Eraut 2004), yet informal learning is not prioritised in the workplace, and its significance for new teachers is not emphasised (Shanks, 2018). This may be because informal learning in the workplace is less visible than formal learning (Eraut 2004; Marsick and Watkins 1987) and may be unmeasurable because it is in the control of the learner (Shanks 2023). This poses problems for how to record, support, recognise and value it without formalising it (Sangra and Wheeler 2013). Perhaps for this reason, formal qualifications are more highly valued (Friedman and Phillips, 2004), as can be seen in post-16 CPD programmes which, whether commissioned by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), or the DfE, are typically formal learning activities. They have measurable outcomes, and following the training, practitioners are asked to identify changes to their practice.

Interestingly, the ETF Professional Standards (ETF, 2022) promote CPD without explicit reference to formal learning, and SET members are encouraged to participate in both formal *and* informal CPD (SET, 2024b). We consider that the Greater Than Network does not fit neatly into either category, which helped make it an effective model of CPD but also made it more difficult for policymakers to understand the value of the programme. Therefore, in this paper we evaluate the Greater Than Network, not as a binary model of formal or informal learning, but rather by mapping Network activities on a continuum of informal-formal professional learning or development (Eraut 2004; Evans 2019) and identifying the benefits (Appendix B).

Characteristics of effective CPD

Research indicates that the quality of teaching is one of the most important factors influencing classroom practice (Collin and Smith n.d.; Rauch and Coe 2019; Slater, Davies and Burgess 2012). Moreover, teaching quality is not fixed but can be changed through effective professional development (Rauch and Coe 2019), highlighting the crucial importance of effective CPD across all education sectors for improving student outcomes (Collin and Smith n.d.; Desimone 2009; Kennedy 2016). Yet what constitutes *effective* professional development is an ‘elusive and inherently

contestable' (Goldhawk and Walker (2023: 486) concept that varies considerably according to the positionality of the stakeholders, including policy makers, Ofsted, FE college management, and lecturers.

Teachers have differing needs, influences and issues at different stages of their professional lives (Day and Gu 2007). Accordingly, CPD activities should build on teachers' prior knowledge, experience and expertise (Booth et al. 2021) and be individually tailored (Goldhawk and Waller 2023) so that teachers feel able to 'connect to them' (Schwille 2016, 155). Teachers regard CPD to be effective when it addresses their professional learning needs (Goodall et al. 2005) and is highly relevant and applicable to the classroom (Hustler et al. 2003). According to Kyndt et al. (2016), personal factors such as motivation, autonomy and self-efficacy, as well as contextual factors in terms of organisational support are crucial to the success of CPD activities. Therefore, CPD is more effective when organisations allow teachers agency to self-identify and engage in activities that relate directly to pedagogical knowledge in their own fields (Lawrence and Hall 2018). Unfortunately, in FE it is more often the case that CPD comprises 'didactic, one-size-fits-all sessions' (Goldhawk and Waller 2026: 487) led by senior leaders or external experts, which teachers perceive to be disconnected from their everyday practices and therefore ineffective (Ingleby 2018; Luneta 2012). Furthermore, decades of funding constraints have led to a situation where the effectiveness of CPD programmes is typically gauged by whether they deliver higher quality learning for students (Borg, 2015), as measured by improved student outcomes (Goldhawk and Waller 2023), rather than by how far they directly benefit teachers.

Networks as CPD

Improving teacher practice as a vital element of raising standards is not new (Day & Sachs, 2004). CPD is an essential part of this process (Guskey, 1994; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). In the current climate of teacher shortages, combined with the financial constraints currently faced by education and other public services, perhaps now more than ever, we need to consider alternative models of CPD that are more flexible, sustainable, and cost-effective, such as partnership-based models of CPD that make the most of a network of opportunities from across the FE landscape (Dalby and Noyes 2022). The concept of a networked community of practice (Wenger-Traynor et al., 2015) such as that offered by the Greater Than Network is one such opportunity.

According to Impedovo (2021), online networks can promote the development of epistemic communities of practice which in turn 'facilitate collaborative professional development and support collective epistemic engagement' (66). Lave and Wenger (1991) define a community of practice as 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (p. 98). An epistemic community is a network of knowledge-based experts who identify solutions to common problems and assess the outcomes

(Haas 1992) with the aim of improving education (Impedovo 2021). Within networks, members co-construct new knowledge and meanings in order to find solutions to real problems within a knowledge-sharing community (Impedovo, Ligorio and Law, 2012). Collaboration between network members enhances professional learning through shared goals and resources, suggesting that networks have potential as a model for effective CPD.

Workplace learning environments are another significant influence on the nature and extent of professional learning (Kyndt et al. 2016). In their study of apprenticeship learning, Fuller and Unwin (2003) conceptualise workplace learning environments on an 'expansive-restrictive' continuum. In the context of education, an expansive learning environment affords opportunities for individuals to participate in multiple different communities of practice within and outside their workplace, thereby increasing opportunities for learning from experiences and people across different contexts and organisations (Fuller & Unwin, 2004). This has significance for a network model of CPD. First of all, learning is an integral dimension of social practice and therefore participation in social practice through networking will facilitate learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Secondly, teachers bring their own perceptions, knowledge, understanding and skills to the workplace (Evans et al. 2006) and an online networked community of practice offers a platform where they can share information, helpful resources, and contribute to their own individual and collective personal and professional growth (Impedovo 2021). A further benefit of a networked community of practice is that participation in the Network may engender in teachers a sense of belonging, or even provide opportunities to 'escape' from the hierarchies of their local community (Impedovo 2021: 70) and gain new perspectives on common professional challenges. Finally, within the Network, teachers not only have opportunities to share their experiences and expertise, but they also have agency as they learn from and with each other. This in turn, may encourage teachers to stay in the profession and help to keep them motivated and interested in teaching (Booth et al. 2021). This is the kind of practice we observed in the Greater Than Network.

The Greater Than Network

The Greater Than Network was developed by Milton Keynes College Group in response to a DfE call for tenders providing professional development for GCSE English and maths resit post-16 teachers, in 2022. The model was based on a network, where colleges could become members, and participate by attending and presenting their own practice. Figure 1: Network structure (Appendix A) illustrates the different aspects of the CPD model. The programme offered by the Greater Than Network included both online and in-person events. The in-person events involved: Network-wide conferences, either full or half day, with a mix of speakers and workshops; or in-house events at member colleges, where the Network Lead would deliver some of the content shared by others, while encouraging staff at the member

college to share practice. Given the location of the Greater Than Network in Milton Keynes, some member colleges were at quite a distance, and so preferred an in-house model, where they would invite the Network lead to facilitate an event mostly for their English and maths teachers, perhaps with a few staff from local colleges, who would share practice. These in-house events only started at the very end of the programme. Only a few in-person events happened, but they were a part of the model that may have evolved to become more important, as there was demand from colleges for this kind of professional development.

The model was different from traditional content-led and formal professional development for two reasons. The first was the membership element, and the second was the moderated nature of the Network which could be both formal and informal in the delivery of different professional development activities. In this way, we argue that the Greater Than Network established a model that sits in-between formal and informal CPD, that is, in a 'grey' zone.

Firstly, the membership element was crucial to the Network. Milton Keynes College Group is the home of the South-Central Institute of Technology, which focuses particularly on digital and has an employer partnership with Microsoft, as well as a range of other employers in digital technology sectors. Relatedly, key members of staff are part of the Microsoft Innovator Educator Expert Community which was part of the inspiration for the Greater Than Network. The Microsoft model asks individuals to participate in regular online events and Teams channels to share resources and ask questions of each other. It is explicitly designed to create a community that are experts in the use of Microsoft technologies for teaching and learning.

The Greater Than Network was based on a similar community dimension, intending for individuals to be part of a named group, where, in this case, other FE Colleges agreed to be members and encourage their staff to participate. Rather than taking specific training to be regarded as experts, as in the Microsoft community, individuals would be encouraged to participate if they were teachers of post-16 English and maths, mostly GCSE resits but also those who taught Functional Skills, thereby forming an epistemic community (Impedovo 2021). In order to facilitate this, and to provide some structure to the Network, each member college would have a College Network lead, usually the Head of English and maths at the college. That individual would then encourage their team to participate, liaise with the overall Network lead at Milton Keynes College Group, and help generate good practice examples that could be shared in the Network.

Member colleges also received a stipend, which was intended to be shared equally between all members, and without requiring receipts. It was in the region of £3000 per college per year. This was designed to actively encourage participation, particularly in annual in-person events, as well as providing some compensation for teachers taking time away from teaching to work on and deliver online presentations to share practice. It was not intended to fully cover all the commitments, but instead

indicate trust and a willingness for all to share. Following changes at the DfE, receipts were required to receive the stipend in the second year, but this was not the original intention.

The focus, then, was on creating a membership community, where individuals would share practice with each other and develop a sense of belonging. English and maths teachers in FE Colleges are often the only staff delivering 'academic' subjects and GCSEs, and very often the only staff delivering to a group of learners who have already taken the qualification once and are deemed to have done less well than required. Colleges also often deliver English and maths GCSE in different ways e.g. by putting learners in cross-vocational sets, or by keeping learners in vocational groups, decided at a senior level. As a result, there is often greater appetite for English and maths teachers to share practice with those from other colleges, and certainly more appetite from government to fund professional development for English and maths post-16 teachers, when compared with vocational teachers.

Secondly, the moderation of the Network was undertaken by the Network Lead at Milton Keynes College Group. This role was crucial to the Network, but following delays with contracts, then finding a teacher to take on this role where long notice periods are common, the Network Lead started 7 months after the Greater Than Network officially began. Once in place, in response to feedback from Network members, they swiftly amended some of the planned activities, notably by increasing the regularity of the online webinars from monthly to weekly, running them as 'Friday Forums' on a Friday lunchtime when most teachers were available.

The Network Lead was also able to pro-actively engage with each member college and help identify both future topics of interest for Friday Forums, and staff who might be willing to share practice. The Network was not designed to deliver most of the professional development based on solely the experiences of staff at Milton Keynes College Group, nor on a series of external speakers, but predominantly designed to create a space for teachers to share their own practice. This was typically about the relevant topic, so for example a half-day in-person ad hoc session on planning asked participants to bring their schemes of work with them and be ready to discuss their approach. These were not formal professional development sessions where specific content was being delivered. Rather, they were structured informal opportunities for cross-organisation collaboration and learning, where in some cases, specific individuals from across the Network would share their practice.

The moderation undertaken by the Network Lead involved some initial discussion with those presenting substantial practice to assure in a light-touch way the quality of presentations and resources shared on the online forums. Moderation also presented opportunities to work with College Network Leads to help identify appropriate practice to share and encourage colleges to enable colleagues to share as part of their own professional development. Roles like advanced practitioners and teaching and learning coaches can be opportunities for promotion for frontline

teachers, and presenting at these events is a way of the college supporting the steps towards progression for their own staff, as well as benefitting from the sharing of others.

As such, the membership aspect of the Network incorporates a structured, formal approach, but encourages informal sharing of practice on an online forum. Appendix B illustrates where Network activities sit on a formal-informal continuum. In this sense, this semi-structured approach sits in a grey zone. This light-touch moderation had the formal element of an individual leading the Network, but also the informal elements of sharing the role of 'trainer' in the professional development. Again, this semi-structured approach sits in a grey zone.

Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based on data collected through post-session feedback, and interviews with members of the Greater Than Network as part of its evaluation process. We developed a Theory of Change (ToC) framework to evaluate the Network's success in terms of its reach, participant satisfaction, learning outcomes, and any resulting changes in practice. We also aimed to identify any additional outcomes or impacts of the Network on participants, their colleagues, and learners in order to recommend potential improvements or changes that could enhance the effectiveness and impact of future programmes.

A ToC is a method that explains how a given intervention, strategy, or actions are expected to lead to specific development change and achieve defined outcomes. ToC draws on causal analysis, based on evidence to explain why particular activities are expected to lead to particular outcomes (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). The theory of change framework we developed clearly set out the inputs that had been designed to produce the required outputs, outcomes, and impacts (see Figure 2: Appendix C). The long-term impacts of the programme from the ToC framework were:

1) Participants acquire new skills
2) Participants improve their ways of working
3) Providers have improved leadership.

Qualitative data were generated from feedback forms completed by maths and English teachers who had engaged with the Network, programme feedback and individual interviews with professional development leads in member colleges. The intention was to replicate the survey and conduct 10 interviews in each year of the programme so that data could be compared between years. Early closure of the programme in its first year meant that data collection was limited to four interviews, a focus group that took place during a workshop session, and analysis of information from feedback forms sent out regularly by the Network Lead. The feedback forms were developed in conjunction with the researchers to ensure they provided useful feedback for the Network Lead, and for the evaluation.

Interview and feedback form questions were based on the long-term outcomes of the programme as stated in the ToC framework. Questions designed to identify changes that could be made to increase the effectiveness and impact of future programmes were also added. Semi-structured interviews with open questions enabled participants to respond in as much or as little detail as they wished and to discuss in greater depth the impact and predicted future impact of the programme in the context of their organisation. As previously stated, the intention was to conduct 10 interviews, but although more than 10 individuals were approached, it was only possible to interview four, leading to the decision to conduct a focus group during one of the seminars.

Analysis & interpretation

Interviews were conducted remotely and transcribed using integrated transcription software. The data were then organised into a spreadsheet by themes and analysed deductively using the themes generated by the Theory of Change (ToC) framework for the evaluation. The initial themes identified were:

1. Relevance of the session to their practice/job role
2. Likelihood of implementing ideas from the session
3. How they would share session content
4. Ideas for future sessions or topics

Data analysis was an iterative process, involving multiple readings of the data to identify the above themes and any additional themes that emerged. One such theme was the benefits of face-to-face events for building networks and nurturing a sense of belonging in what could otherwise feel like a very isolated world.

Operations and feedback: discussion

The evaluation of the programme, much like the programme itself, was short-lived. The full programme ran for less than a year, but we were able to access data on participation, review the results from the feedback forms distributed by the Network Lead after online, and in-person events, and conduct four interviews with college Network leads, alongside a short focus group at one of the online seminars. The findings from these data are presented here. The feedback forms, with fewer than 10 questions, received high levels of response, all anonymous. In these, the feedback was always positive. For example, when asked how likely they were to implement ideas or approaches from the full-day in-person conference, 94% of respondents (46 of 49) reported that they were somewhat or very likely to implement ideas or approaches from the conference. Similarly, considering responses from an in-person event at one member college, 95% of respondents (19 of 20) reported that they were somewhat or very likely to implement ideas or approaches from the event. These forms also asked individuals if they were planning to share any of the ideas or approaches from the event, and almost all participants reported that they would disseminate the approaches in team meetings or share them informally with

colleagues. All online and some in-person sessions were recorded to enable this sharing.

Engaging practitioners in the Network to participate is key to the model, and so naturally the feedback requests also asked individuals to indicate what they would like to see in future sessions. The topics identified were then reviewed by the Network lead, who worked to include them, where possible. For example, both exams and planning the curriculum were identified by participants and were explicitly covered in sessions. The feedback may have confirmed the existing view of the Network lead, or prompted new thoughts, and in all likelihood did both. The fact of being asked and then being able to influence the topic of the professional development, however, highlights the delivery of the model as containing formal and informal elements.

Networking

The Greater Than Network CPD model included several elements of effective CPD, such as relevance, flexibility, the ability to promote autonomy, build on members' knowledge and offer tailored activities that addressed different professional learning needs for teachers at different stages of their career.

A key theme emerging from the data was the benefits derived from being part of a professional network where members could interact and support each other. Ceelan (2023) observes that pedagogic practices are shaped by social invitations of experienced colleagues to participate, observe and listen in every-day work activities. Social interaction is an essential part of workplace learning (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991; Leont'ev 1978; Vygotsky 1986), and member college Network leads actively encouraged staff in their departments to participate and to showcase their practice. The conference and Friday Forums offered an expansive learning environment where Network members could share their every-day work experiences, across organisations with people outside their immediate professional context, fully supported by their employer organisation (Fuller & Unwin, 2004). Participants explained:

> 'it is great to share good practice with other colleges'.
>
> 'I do think that networking is so important. … that's what it's all about. It's networking, isn't it'.

Importantly, members were all maths and/or English teachers, who understood the challenges of teaching resit students and were able to share ideas and resources as part of an epistemic community of practice (Impedovo 2021) thereby developing their own practice. This was seen by participants to be a key strength of the Network CPD model:

> 'Collaborating with other like-minded individuals'
>
> 'Meeting others in the field of English and maths'

> ‘Seeing the approaches to English and maths from other FE colleges.’

> ‘[it was] nice to speak to people who understand it and want to learn’.

As a result, they felt connected to the professional development activities offered by the Network. They perceived them to be relevant and effective, and felt that they promoted learning that related directly to their pedagogical knowledge as maths and English teachers (Lawrence and Hall 2018) and addressed their professional learning needs (Goodall et al. 2005). Network members reported that they not only gained ideas they could apply to their classroom (Hustler et al. 2003), but also clarity about elements of their practice:

> ‘[the conference] approached ideas and perspectives that are relevant to our current collaborative planning [and] helped clear some things up.’

Consistent with Goldhawk and Waller’s (2023) findings, this increased their engagement with the Greater Than Network and the likelihood that they would apply their learning to their practice. Conference attendees explained the benefits of participating:

> ‘Seeing other resit teachers … Research we can actually use in the classroom.’

> ‘Having access to techniques and ideas that will 100% assist in my planning for September.’

Additionally, the combination of formal and informal activity and the expectation that members would suggest topics and lead sessions promoted autonomy and teacher agency (Kyndt et al. 2016) over their professional learning. This was facilitated by the fact that the Network included teachers at different points in their teaching careers, with a range of experience which members were able to draw on according to self-identified need. Thus, the Network provided a model for CPD that was flexible and could be adapted to the emerging needs of its members, helping them develop new knowledge and find solutions to common problems (Impedovo, Ligorio and Law, 2012), such as how to address the sudden influx of English and maths students after the 2023 results were published:

> ’Meeting and discussing maths with people that are already tutoring maths or have been doing so for a long time [was particularly useful]’.

This meant that members could combine learning from others with learning from their own experiences (Eraut 2004). Some found this validating, since it enabled them to feel more confident in their practice as they navigated the process of discovering their teacher selves (Brown and Everson 2019):

> ‘[The] ability to network with colleagues from other colleges and confirm ideas that I have developed.’
>
> ‘Sharing ideas, networking and some confirmation that we are following best industry practice.’

This is particularly important for FE maths teachers, who frequently lack confidence in their ability to teach maths (National Numeracy 2023; TES 2014). Furthermore, it aligns with Booth et al.’s (2021) findings that professional development activities should build on teachers’ prior knowledge, experience and expertise.

Members clearly valued the Network and saw its potential for recognising and empowering maths and English resit teachers:

> ‘[It] would be lovely to empower ordinary teachers doing the job to contribute things over time – [the] Network is the right audience.’

There was also a sense that it offered a much-needed sustainable alternative to more traditional CPD models:

> ‘There’s no money in FE, so we can’t afford to be sending people [on CPD events] – attending and networking is beneficial for teachers’.

There was clearly an appetite to further develop the Greater Than Network, indicating its effectiveness as a model of CPD, since members were motivated to engage in it (Kyndt et al. 2016):

> ‘[I would be] interested to go beyond the existing Network. Within the [college] group, [we use the] same approach but sometimes it is good for teachers to step out and hear how other things work – be exposed to new things.’

It was also apparent that there is a demand for this kind of professional development - as one member summed it up:

> ‘It would be good if something came from this, and if someone decided there is something for English and maths outside of ETF and SET’.

Conclusion

The Network closed in February 2024, despite meeting all its targets for the period in which it ran. It also had many characteristics of effective CPD. The semi-structured setting created by the Network enabled responsiveness to practitioners' needs, by being flexible and adapting to circumstances. As a result, activities were relevant and applicable to the classroom. By bringing together teachers of maths and English from the FE sector, the Network developed an epistemic community of practice whereby members shared their experiences and knowledge to find solutions to common problems. This not only fostered a sense of belonging, but also enabled the teachers to build on their knowledge and expertise, irrespective of their career stage. In time, these factors may have increased their job satisfaction and motivated them to stay in the profession.

However, whilst this had benefits for Network members, the model did not fit the norms of traditional conceptions of CPD. It did not always have measurable outcomes and a designated trainer as in formal CPD, nor was it entirely informal in that it did not need monitoring. Participation was voluntary, but it is not possible to say how far learning was intentional, whether any unintended or unanticipated learning took place or indeed whether teachers joined the Network solely or tangentially for the sense of belonging it engendered. We argue that these factors simultaneously contributed to both its success and its downfall by enabling flexibility and responsiveness, but also making it vulnerable to challenge.

Nevertheless, what is clear, is that the Network was perceived by its members to offer effective CPD. At a time when in the UK education and other public services are facing budgetary pressures, we suggest that it is worthwhile considering alternative approaches to professional learning that may not fit existing monitoring and evaluation processes. Located in the grey zone between formal and informal professional development, the Greater Than Network combined external provision of formal learning with informal learning opportunities that already exist. It was an innovative and sustainable approach to CPD, which we believe has great potential nationally and internationally, and should be considered as a potential model to run future CPD programmes.

References

Anderson, N., and S. Peart. 2016. “Back on Track: Exploring How a Further Education College Re-Motivates Learners to Re-Sit Previously Failed Qualifications at GCSE.” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 21 (3): 196–213.

Billett, S. and Somerville, M. 2004. “Transformations at work: identity and learning” *Studies in Continuing Education* 26 (2): 309-326.

Borg, S. 2015. “Contemporary Perspectives on Continuing Professional Development.” *Teaching for Success*. British Council.

Broad, H. J. 2015. “So Many Worlds, so Much to Do: Identifying Barriers to Engagement with Continued Professional Development in the Further Education and Training Sector.” *London Review of Education* 13 (1): 17–30.

Brown, S., and J. Everson. 2019. “Belonging, Becoming, Owning: The Interplay Between Identity and Self-Esteem in Trainee Teachers in Post-Compulsory Education and Training.” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 24 (2–3): 231–250.

CAE. n.d. *What is CPD?.* Cambridge Association of Entrepreneurs. http://cae-org.co.uk/ cpd/ .

Ceelen, L., A. Khaled, L. Nieuwenhuis, and E. de Bruijn. 2021. “Pedagogic Practices in the Context of students’ Workplace Learning: A Literature Review.” *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 75 (4): 810–842.

Coffield, F. 2000. *Differing Visions of a Learning Society*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Collin, J., and E. Smith. n.d. Effective Professional Development Guidance Report. *Education Endowment Foundation*.

Dalby, D., and A. Noyes. 2022. “Developing the Mathematics Teacher Workforce in England’s FE Colleges: Towards a ‘Communities of Practice Strategy.” *Research in Post Compulsory Education* 27 (3): 413–435.

Day, C., and Q. Gu. 2007. “Teacher’s Resilience: A Necessary Condition for Effectiveness.” *Teaching and Teacher Educations* 23: 302–1316.

Day, C., and J. Sachs. 2004. “Professionalism, Performativity and Empowerment: Discourses in the Politics, Policies and Purposes of Continuing Professional Development.” In *International Handbook on the Continuing Professional Development of Teachers*, edited by C. Day and J. Sachs, 3–32. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Desimone, L. M. 2009. “Improving Impact Studies of teachers’ Professional Development: Towards Better Conceptualizations and Measures”. *Educational Researcher* 38 (3): 181-199.

DfE. 2014. “16 to 19 Study Programmes: Revised English and Maths Condition of Funding.” *Equality analysis*. DfE: London. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ed19ced915d74e33f29cd/16_to_19_study_programmes_revised_English_and_maths_condition_of_funding.pdf

DfE (Department for Education). 2021. *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*. London: DfE.

Duncombe, R., and K. Armour. 2004. “Collaborative Professional Learning: From Theory to Practice.” *Journal of In-Service Education* 30 (1): 141–166.

Education and Training Foundation. 2022. *Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers*. https://www.et-foundation.co.uk/professional-standards/teachers/ .

Eraut, M. 2000. “Non-Formal Learning and Tacit Knowledge in Professional Work.” *The British Journal of Educational Psychology* 70 (1): 113–136.

Eraut, M. 2004. “Informal Learning in the Workplace.” *Studies in Continuing Education* 26 (2): 247–273.

Evans, K., P. Hodkinson, H. Rainbird, and L. Unwin. 2006. *Improving Workplace Learning*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Evans, L. 2019. “Implicit and Informal Professional Development: What it ‘Looks like’, How it Occurs, and Why We Need to Research it.” *Professional Development in Education* 45 (1): 3–16.

Fletcher, M., N. Lucas, N. Crowther, and D. Taubman. 2015. “The further education workforce.” In *The coming of age for FE?,* edited by A. Hodgson. London: Institute of Education Press.

Frawley, W. 1986. “Thought and Language. Lev Vygotsky (A. Kozulin, rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986. Pp. lxi + 287.” *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 11 (3): 331– 332.

Friedman, A., and M. Phillips. 2004. “Continuing Professional Development: Developing a Vision.” *Journal of Education & Work* 17 (3): 361–376.

Fuller, A., and L. Unwin. 2003. “Fostering Workplace Learning: Looking Through the Lens of Apprenticeship.” *European Educational Research Journal* 2 (1): 41–55.

Fuller, A., and L. Unwin. 2004. “Expansive Learning Environments: Integrating Organizational and Personal Development.” In *Workplace Learning in Context*, edited by, H. Rainbird, A. Fuller and A. Munroe, 126–144. London: Routledge.

Goldhawk, A., and R. Waller. 2023. “Voices from the Deck: Lecturers’ and Middle managers’ Perceptions of Effective FE Sector Professional Development.” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 28 (3): 485–504.

Goodall, J., C. Day, G. Lindsay, D. Muijs, and A. Harris. 2005. *Evaluating the Impact of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)*. Nottingham, UK: Department for Education and Skills.

Guskey, T. R. 1994. “Professional Development in Education: In Search of the Optimal Mix.” Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Haas, P. 1992. ““Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination”, Cambridge Journals.” *International Organization* 46 (1): 1–35.

Her Majesty’s Stationery Office (HMSO). 2007. *The Further Education Teachers’ Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) Regulations*. London: HMSO.

Hustler, D., O. McNamara, J. Jarvis, M. Londra, A. Campbell, and J. Howson. 2003. *Teachers’ Perspectives of Continuing Professional Development*. London: DfES.

Impedovo, M. A. 2021. “New Forms of Teacher Professional Development: Developing Epistemic Collaborative Communities via Social Networks.” *Teacher Education Advancement Network Journal* 13 (1): 66–72.

Impedovo, M. A., M. B. A. L. Ligorio, and EHF. 2012. “A Method for the Analysis of Interaction in an Online Learning Community.” *Qwerty 2* (1): 39–59.

Ingleby, E. 2018. “Early Years Educators’ Perceptions of Professional Development in England: An Exploratory Study of Policy and Practice.” *Professional Development in Education* 44 (1): 22–32.

Kennedy, M. M. 2016. “How Does Professional Development Improve Teaching.” *Review of Educational Research* 86 (4): 945–980.

Kyndt, E., D. Gijbels, I. Grosemans, and V. Donche. 2016. “Teachers’ Everyday Professional Development: Mapping Informal Learning Activities, Antecedents, and Learning Outcomes.” *Review of Educational Research* 86 (4): 1111–1150.

Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge University Press.

Lawrence, J., and G. Hall. 2018. “Understanding the Provision and Perceived Value of the Academic and Professional Development Practices of HE Teachers in College-Based Higher Education (CHE).” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 23 (4): 437–462.

Leaton Gray, S. L. 2005. *An Enquiry into Continuing Professional Development for Teachers*. London: Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Leont’ev, A. N. 1978. “Activity, Consciousness, and Personality.”

Loy, L. 2024. “Redefining teachers’ Continuing Professional Development in Further Education Providers in England.” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 29 (3): 520– 540.

Luneta, K. 2012. “Designing Continuous Professional Development Programmes for Teachers: A Literature Review.” *Africa Education Review* 9 (2): 360–379

Marsick, V. J., and K. Watkins. 1987. “Approaches to Studying Learning in the Workplace.” In *Learning in the Workplace*, edited by V. J. Marsick, 171–198. Croom Helm: Beckenham, Kent.

Muller, L. M., J. Booth, M. Coldwell, E. Perry, and J. Zuccollo. 2021. “Continuous Professional Development and Career Progression in Mid-Career Teachers.” *Impact 11.*

National Numeracy. 2023. “Almost Half of Trainee Teachers Lack Maths Confidence or Skills, or Both”. Accessed August 5, 2024

OECD. 2009. *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments*. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.

Orr, K. 2013. “Cultures, Colleges and the Development of Ideas about Teaching in English Further Education.” *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 18 (4): 377–388.

Patrick, F., D. Elliot, M. Hulme, and A. McPhee. 2010. “The Importance of Collegiality and Reciprocal Learning in the Professional Development of Beginning Teachers.” *Journal of Education for Teaching: International Research and Pedagogy* 36:277–289.

Porritt, V. 2014. “Evaluating the Impact of Professional learning.” In *Challenging Professional Learning*, edited by S. Crowley, 75–97. 1st ed. Abingdon: Routledge.

Rauch, C. J., and R. Coe. 2019. Evaluating and Measuring Teaching Quality, Teacher CPD: International Trends, Opportunities and Challenges. *Chartered College of Teaching*:

Reinholz, D., and T. Andrews. 2020. “Change Theory and Theory of Change: What’s the Difference Anyway?.” *International Journal of STEM Education* 7 (2).

Rogers, A. 2014. *The Base of the Iceberg: Informal Learning and its Impact on Formal and Nonformal Learning*. Leverkusen: Verlag Barbara Budrich.

Ruohotie-Lyhty, M., and J. Moate. 2016. “Who and How? Pre-Service Teachers as Active Agents Developing Professional Identities.” *Teaching & Teacher Education* 55:318–327.

Sangra, A., and S. Wheeler. 2013. “New Informal Ways of Learning: Or Are We Formalising The Informal?.” *Revista de Universidad y Sociedad del Conocimiento* 10 (1): 107–115.

Schwille, S. A. 2016. *Never Give Up: An Experienced Teacher Overcomes Obstacles to Change*. IAP.

SET. 2024a. "*Professional Status Register*." Accessed July 25, 2024. https://set.et-foundation. co.uk/your-career/professional-status-register .

SET. 2024b. "*Specifically 'What is CPD and Why is it Important?*'." Accessed July 25, 2024. https://set.et-foundation.co.uk/help/membership-help/membership-faqs .

Shanks, R. 2018. "Vital but Neglected: The Informal Learning of New Teachers in Scotland." In *Informal Learning at Work*, 100–133. Routledge.

Shanks, R. 2023. "Informal Coaching and Mentoring and an "Informal Turn" in Teacher Professional Learning." *International Journal of Mentoring & Coaching in Education* 12 (4): 440–452.

Shanks, R., D. Robson, and D. Gray. 2012. "New Teachers' Individual Learning Dispositions: A Scottish Case Study." *International Journal of Training and Development* 16:183–199.

Slater, H., N. M. Davies, and S. Burgess. 2012. "Do Teachers Matter? Measuring the Variation in Teacher Effectiveness in England." *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 74 (5): 629–645.

TES. 2014. "Maths Teachers Lack Confidence and Qualifications, Report Finds | Tes Magazine."

Totterdell, M., L. Woodroffe, S. Bubb, and K. Hanrahan. 2004. *The Impact of NQT Induction Programmes on the Enhancement of Teacher Expertise, Professional Development, Job Satisfaction or Retention Rates: A Systematic Review of Research Literature on Induction.*

Tyler, M., D. Dymock, and A. H. Le. 2024. "Retaining Teachers and Trainers in Vocational Education and Training (VET): Motivating Career-Changers to Remain as VET Educators." *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 29 (2): 281–301.

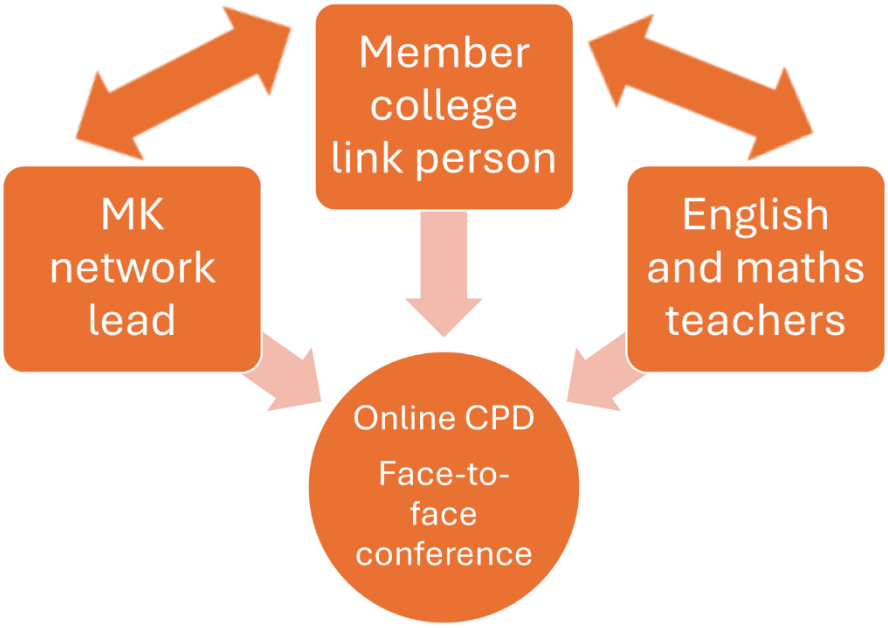
UNESCO. 2009. Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. Hamburg: UILL.

Villegas-Reimers, E. 2003. *Teacher Professional Development: An International Review of the Literature*. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Wenger-Traynor, E., H. S. Fenton-O'Creevy, C. Kubiak, and B. Wenger-Traynor, eds. 2015. *Learning in Landscapes of Practice: Boundaries, Identity and Knowledgeability*. London: Routledge

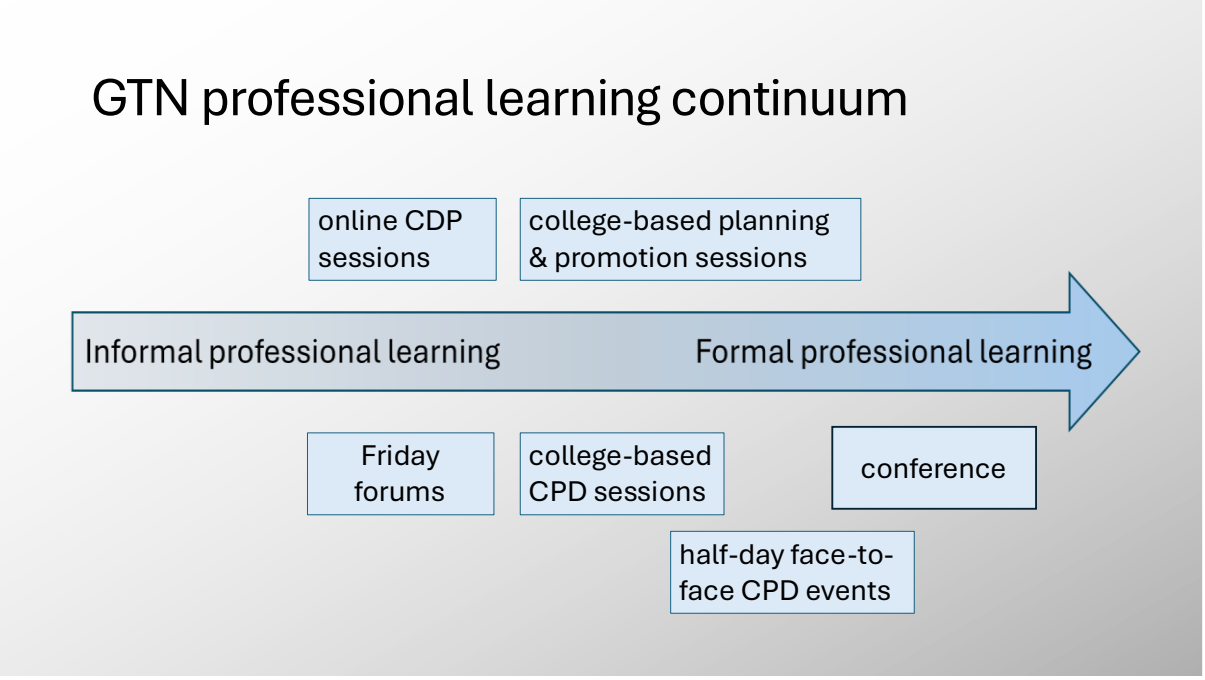
Appendix A

Figure 1: Network structure



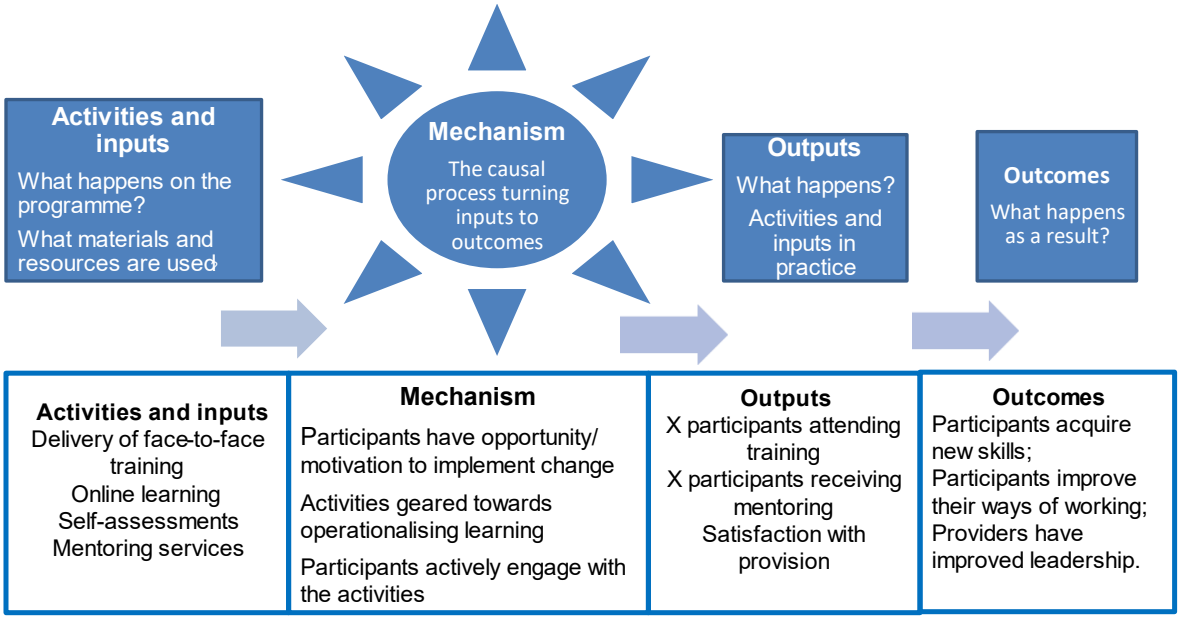
Appendix B

Network activities mapped on an informal-formal continuum



Appendix C

Network of change mechanism



Activities and inputs	Mechanism	Outputs	Outcomes
Delivery of face-to-face training Online learning Self-assessments Mentoring services	Participants have opportunity/ motivation to implement change Activities geared towards operationalising learning Participants actively engage with the activities	X participants attending training X participants receiving mentoring Satisfaction with provision	Participants acquire new skills; Participants improve their ways of working; Providers have improved leadership.