PROBATION TRAINING: THE EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

Qualifying training in probation is under review. This article draws on a small study of current training arrangements designed to explore the views of trainee probation officers, practice development assessors and university tutors regarding which elements of the current Diploma in Probation Studies framework most support learning. Their comments focus on the organisational ownership of training, time and learning, the teacher-learner relationship, teaching methods and equality of access .It is argued that probation training is best supported by a series of linked qualifications across grades, integrating practice-based and academic learning delivered through a 'blended learning' model.

Keywords: *Learning environment, teaching methods, time, blended-learning, learning team,*

Introduction

The management and delivery of probation services has fundamentally changed since the establishment of the Diploma in Probation Studies (DipPS) in 1998. The National Probation Service was created in 2001, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and the prospect it brings of greater private sector involvement has been developing since 2004. At the probation 'front line', evidence-based practice and associated developments, such as standardised assessment tools and accredited programmes, have led to wide-ranging changes in roles and practice methods (Raynor 2003). Increased central control is manifested both in these developments and in the emergence of a performance management framework incorporating cash-linked targets (Knott 2004). Meanwhile, an increased focus on risk assessment and risk

management has coincided with the allocation of probationers to 'tiers' according to the risk they are assessed as presenting. (NOMS, 2006). Whilst the highest tiers are managed through multi-agency practices, the lower tiers are increasingly supervised by an expanding group of less trained 'probation service officers'(PSOs).

There has been a simultaneous development in teaching and learning. In particular, on-line learning has grown (Madoc-Jones et al 2003) and there has been a longer-term shift in adult teaching, away from a 'banking' (Friere 1972) model - whereby an 'expert' teacher imparts knowledge to passive learners – towards the facilitation of learning through dialogue (Brockbank and McGill 1998, Jarvis et al 2003).

For these reasons, a review of the DipPS seems timely and this article aims to contribute to the process by drawing on the views of those most closely involved with the qualification: practice developments assessors (PDAs), university tutors and, crucially, trainee probation officers (TPOs) themselves. Indeed, the voice of 'service users,' in this case, most directly, the TPOs, should be integral to the development of training and there is scope for further work incorporating the perspective of probationers themselves (Mantle and Moore, 2004).

The idea of a 'learning environment' is central to the study. The word 'learning' emphasises the governing purpose of training activity, namely that it enhances learning. The term 'environment', with its ecological associations, indicates the complex and inter-related set of factors which support learning (opportunities, boundaries, appropriate pace, feedback, safety, challenge, interest, teaching, etc.). It also implies the potential threats to and fragility of a learning environment, the

dangers of pollution and for depletion, as well as its dynamism and adaptability. Before the study and its findings are presented and the implications for practice explored, the discussion is placed in the context of literature relating to the development and implementation of the DipPS.

The DipPS as a Learning Environment

The genesis of the new training

The DipPS is a two year programme combining studies for a degree in higher education with practice learning assessed through a level 4 National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). Universities are selected through competitive tendering to provide opportunities for academic learning. Nine geographically organised training consortia coordinate university and work-based learning and in some areas a Higher Certificate programme is offered separately for staff at PSO grade. At present, five universities provide the academic component to the nine consortia, basing their programmes on a common regulatory framework. The DipPS aims to create an environment in which academic and work-based learning are integrated. TPOs are employees of the probation service and divide their time between practice learning under the supervision of PDAs in the workplace and academic learning through face to face teaching, private study and e-learning or distance learning depending on the HE provider involved.

The qualification emerged in 1998 following the controversial separation of probation from social work training. Despite the expression of overwhelming opposition in the consultation phase, the Dews Report (1994), commissioned by the then Home Secretary Michael Howard, led to the development of separate probation training arrangements and, for a time, the suspension of any form of training pending the development of a new qualification. This divorce from social work reflected a changed understanding of the probation service which was now conceptualised as a criminal justice agency concerned explicitly with risk management and public protection, less with rehabilitation and not at all with social welfare (Faulkner, 2007).

Some commentators were supportive of related shifts in training; for example, Nellis (2001) argued persuasively that:

> *'In clinging unreflectively to a conception of probation that put the welfare of the offender – consistent with the social work emphasis on the welfare of the client – above all other relevant principles, probation training grew unduly generic, distant from new thinking in the penal reform movement and in criminology, and less and less equipped to respond creatively to penal policy.'* P381

The election of a Labour Government in 1997 did not alter the decision to remove probation officer training from the social work sphere, but gave impetus to the development of new arrangements. There was, however, one crucial difference in the approach taken by the new government: it was accepted that the training should include a Higher Education element, reinforcing the notion that probation practice

requires a robust theoretical foundation. The incorporation of both the NVQ framework and higher education (HE) ensured strong elements of external validation. Schofield (1999: 258) also pointed out that, with trainees henceforth being employees of the service rather than students of an HE institution on placement, there was a new sense of ownership of the training within the probation service.

Critical evaluations

However, there was also some apprehension. Nellis (2001) recognised the dangers of the practice environment overshadowing the value of academic input when he argued for the importance of high quality, 'overarching' (P385) theoretical teaching:

> *'Thus a good degree – 'graduateness' – should broaden the horizons, stimulate curiosity and imagination, foster intellectual confidence and a capacity for self-directed learning, facilitate spoken and verbal expression, and inspire a reasonable love of reading and a strong ethical sense.' P384*

In fact, much of the criticism of the new training was centred on the fear of losing the theoretical and educative foundations of probation officer training. Elliot (1997) argued that the NVQ competence-based assessment might contribute to a 'fragmentation' of knowledge, and warned that 'highly bureaucratised' systems of evidencing skills could hinder reflective learning. He also expressed misgivings about the NVQ being seen as a means of educating trainees when it had been designed primarily to be an assessment tool for evidencing knowledge and skills already held.

These concerns have subsequently been echoed by practitioners and academics. Echoing Elliot's (1997) misgivings, McGowan, a former PDA (2002) regarded the NVQ as tending to cultivate a mechanical, skills-based approach to learning as opposed to a more integrated and professional one. Treadwell (2006), an academic who had also been a TPO, criticised the potential of the NVQ to reinforce a managerialist approach to practice. He raised the issue of the academic independence of HE providers in a purchaser-provider relationship with the service, and warned against what Nellis (2001) had termed 'instructionalist' styles of teaching.

McGowan (2002) also highlighted the effect that compressing a degree into two years had on TPOs who had not previously studied at degree level and who may not have studied at all for many years. She was also critical of a curriculum which she regarded as 'too narrow and limited' (P36) and failing to prioritise sufficiently the teaching of anti-discriminatory practice.

In more positive vein, Knight and White (2001) have stressed the potential for PDAs to contribute to university-based teaching and to integrate theoretical and practice-based learning. They argue that, as work-based learning is allocated, supervised and assessed by the PDA, it is her task to cultivate and defend the work-based space for learning. Madoc-Jones et al (2003) examine the potential of e-learning (on-line learning) and blended-learning (a combination of face to face and on-line methods) in probation training. Their study of TPOs using a blended learning approach, highlights the value for adult learners, often situated over a wide geographical area, of the accessibility of e-learning in terms of time and place. However, in a fascinating discussion of virtuality, physicality and isolation, they conclude that face to face

contact between teachers and learners is an important means of motivation, dialogue and support. In the light of their findings, Madoc-Jones et al (2003) argue for blended-learning and emphasise the potential of this approach for meeting a range of student learning styles. Gregory (2007), also closely involved in the delivery of the DipPS, agrees with Madoc-Jones et al (2003), Schofield (1999) and Knight and White (2001) on the basic relevance and usefulness of the training, whilst warning of the dangers of 'marketisation' and a slide into 'institutional socialisation' as distinct from 'education' (P54). Commenting on her research into how effectively the DipPS has prepared newly qualified officers for practice, Gregory emphasises the importance for training of its full integration into the priorities of the agency:

> 'The context for continuing professional development is the organisation. A key question is whether it is a 'learning organisation' in which learning is located not only in formal educational structures but is integrated into the organisational processes at every level.' (P 66)

It is worth noting here, especially in the light of critical comments referred to earlier, that many of the newly qualified officers whom Gregory interviewed reported finding the NVQ framework helpful in pulling together their learning.

An issue that requires much attention alongside that of the DipPS is the training offered to probation service officers. The number of PSOs working within the service has increased dramatically from 1,881 in 1992 to 4,083 ten years later. (Annison 2007) At the same time, the range of tasks undertaken by PSOs has increased

dramatically and now includes the assessment and supervision of all but tier 4 probationers. (Bailey, Knight and Williams 2007). A Higher Certificate Programme including an NVQ qualification at Level 3 and university-based studies at first year degree level is available to PSOs in some parts of England and Wales but not others. Despite the development of an in-service PSO Induction Programme, qualifying training continues to focus heavily on probation officers. With this in mind, there is growing discussion of the need for 'a single qualification framework' (Knight 2005 P 3) that could integrate provision for staff at all grades. This would potentially iron out anomalies in the current arrangements whereby PSOs who wish to train as probation officers have to accept a drop in salary on becoming TPOs. It might also begin to address the training needs of a sector in which management and interventions are more sharply distinguished and in which a spectrum of providers are now operating.

Having outlined some of the major issues surrounding the development of the DipPS programme, we now turn to the study itself.

Methodology

A variant of the Nominal Group Technique (Delbecq et al, 1975) was used as a way of gathering the views of TPOs, PDAs and university tutors. This technique adopts a structured interview approach which incorporates both individual reflection and group discussion elements. At the beginning of the session either 2 or 3 very open questions are asked of participants with an instruction to consider their responses without conferring with other group members. These are then systematically collected and written up verbatim on a flip chart after which discussion of the questions raised is

encouraged. Items that result from this discussion are then added to the flipchart in the participants' own words. By recording responses verbatim this approach seeks to promote 'an increased perception of equality and member importance… (and) a lack of feeling that the leader-recorder is manipulating the group' (Debecq et al, 1975, p.51).

In this study participants were initially asked to note down individually, 3 elements of the learning environment that help students/TPOs to learn; 3 elements in the current learning environment that were not conducive to student learning; and 3 elements that needed to be introduced in order to facilitate student learning. Towards the end of the session the number of participants agreeing with each view is recorded. This approach, therefore, generates both a pool of views and a weighting as to which are most widely held.

Four group interviews took place between October 2005 and January 2006, two with TPOs and one each with PDAs and Tutors. The TPOs responded to an email request. Group one comprised 13 TPOs eighteen months into the training whilst group two consisted of 5 TPOs who had completed eight months. There were 13 in the PDA group and 5 in the tutor group. All groups were facilitated by staff from the research department of the local probation area, including the second author. As a person known to the participants in various capacities, the first author was not present at the group meetings to avoid influencing either the attendance or the nature of the contributions. Ethical approval was obtained both from the University of Hertfordshire and the Probation Area involved.

The authors and two other research staff subsequently grouped the responses into categories on the basis of common themes. These were then compared for commonalities and differences both within each group of respondents and between the groups of TPOs, PDAs and tutors. The involvement of four people at this stage added to the validity of the exercise by minimising the influence of any one individual over interpretation of the data.

The TPOs in this study experienced a 'blended-learning' approach to university-based study. The TPO, PDA and tutor profile of the area concerned shows a predominance of women and marginally more white than black and Asian personnel; this was reflected in the make-up of the groups. The study was undertaken in an urban area where distances between TPOs and PDAs, as well as between TPOs and the University, were short compared to those in other consortia. This, clearly, affected the learning environment under review and should be taken into account when considering the applicability of indications for practice across the consortia.

Findings

After analysis, it was possible to divide participants' comments into five broad categories:

- Learners within the organisation
- Learning and time
- The teacher-learner relationship
- Teaching methods
- Equal access

Learners Within the Organisation

All groups highlighted the value for learning of demonstrable organisational support for TPOs. For example, PDAs pointed out the importance to learning of:

'feeling valued and having a place',

Tutors stated that,

'it's important to have a sense of belonging'

Participants described this sense of belonging as deriving from a range of sources including allocated desk and computer space, an available PDA, inclusion in team meetings and access to the advice of managers and experienced staff. TPOs particularly highlighted the importance to their learning of:

"direct observation of experienced staff"

and

'shadowing experienced practitioners'

It was clear from the discussion that TPOs also derived a significant amount of learning and support from each other and the pairing or grouping of TPOs together in offices was reported as helpful.

A significant number of participants in the study were critical of organisational resource commitment. PDAs referred to their struggle to foster and defend a learning environment in an organisation with other urgent priorities, which meant they had to "constantly sell the PDA role." They referred to:

'staff feeling that working with TPOs is doing the PDA a favour.'

They also identified as an obstacle to learning, the tendency of the organisation to view TPOs as an operational *resource* rather than as *learners* and suggested that the main cause of this situation was the performance management arrangements and the imperative to meet cash linked targets. Whilst PDAs highlighted the benefits of managers engaging with TPOs, they felt senior probation officers were often too busy in the high pressure world of modern probation work to contribute substantially to their learning environment.

TPOs echoed some of these concerns regarding their status as resources or learners:

'It's as if you're a nuisance until you've qualified.'

They placed a high value on feeling part of the probation team and the sense of legitimacy which that brings. However, some had difficulties with working arrangements such as back-up when they were ill, and in finding colleagues willing to stay late to allow them to safely interview offenders during evening reporting. They linked this to their lack of status within the organisation and felt that it hindered their learning:

‘TPOs are isolated within teams in comparison to other staff.’

Although many TPOs enjoyed a range of essential facilities others commented that:

> ‘No desk space causes tensions between team members. I would like my own space. Without it there is no stability and competition to get a desk. This disturbs people’s work routines.’

Group members commented on the impact of change and public scrutiny on the ability of the organisation to maintain a learning culture. Whilst PDAs acknowledged an “environment that is positive in the face of a lot of changes” they also expressed concern about the effects on learning of “constant change,” and “uncertainty.” The PDA group also referred to the potential damage to learning of a “blaming culture” and a potential clash between an agency under severe pressure to ‘get it right’ and a learner needing permission, subject to supervision, to sometimes get it only partly right as part of their development.

In line with the foregoing discussion, suggestions for improvements included identified desk and computer space, access to the internet in the work-place, better arrangements for getting to know staff in the office, a system for shadowing an experienced officer over time and increased salaries reflecting the commitments of a mature student group.

Learning and Time

Time was an aspect of the learning environment which participants spoke of a good deal and, although PDAs and Tutors made some positive comments about the present arrangements TPOs, by contrast, characterised the amount of time available for learning as an obstacle to that learning.

Both Tutors and PDAs stressed the importance for learning of,

‘time to discuss issues’

and

‘time and space to absorb learning’

In discussing this aspect of the learning environment, participants tended to use imagery associated with nourishment (‘absorb’, ‘digest’), dialogue (‘discuss’, ‘reflect’) and rest or recovery (‘breather’). TPOs reported that e-learning gave them flexibility in relation to when they chose to study and described having whole rather than fragmented study days as supportive of their learning.

However, referring to the pace of learning in both practice and academic settings, TPOs experience a programme that,

‘requires a lot in a short space of time’

For example, co-leading a group programme whilst simultaneously working as a case manager and undertaking academic study was cited as a source of pressure. Others described the challenge of fitting both the agency-based training necessary for practice and practice itself into half a week. Similarly PDAs felt that there was,

"not enough time in the office."

With regard to academic study, TPOs commented on there being

'no gaps between modules'

In such a time-poor environment, TPOs felt their learning was often assessment-driven and hence narrower than it might otherwise be,

'The focus of work has to be doing the essay rather than actual learning'

TPOs reported that it was difficult to maintain boundaries around the learning tasks as work spilt over into evenings and weekends and even that,

'it can be difficult to find time to take leave'

Unsurprisingly then, TPO suggestions for improvements included a three year period for the training as opposed to two and a gap between finishing one academic module and starting another to create a "breather." Tutors suggested that less focus on

assessment within the learning environment would support learning and this point will be revisited in the discussion below.

The Teacher-Learner Relationship

TPOs were clear about how their relationship with their PDAs worked to support their learning:

> '(my) PDA is very good and helps me to reflect on my learning'

and

> 'can select the type of case you need to further your own learning'

There was appreciation of "experienced and knowledgeable PDAs" who could reassure TPOs that they were "on the right track" and authoritative, validating feedback emerged clearly as related to confidence and learning.

However, some PDAs were criticised for expecting

> 'such high standards that people just give up'

In this connection PDAs themselves spoke of the need for

‘giving permission to make mistakes and to learn from them’

and identified a “fear of failure” as an impediment to learning. However, they pinpointed the areas of risk assessment and of enforcement and compliance as challenging ones when creating a learning schedule that would allow for the gradual development of confidence and competence.

Regarding accessibility in the teacher-learner relationship, the groups were unanimous in stressing the damage to learning where there is no PDA in place. PDAs, for their part, mentioned the impact on learning of there being,

‘too many trainees for each PDA’

“Continuous access to university tutors” though telephone or e-mail was mentioned by TPOs as helpful in learning and a suggestion for improvement was monthly individual, face to face contact between TPO and Tutor.

Teaching Methods

TPOs identified a number of teaching activities that they found to be supportive of learning. Amongst these were structured face to face practice workshops led by PDAs and university seminars both being most helpful when involving relatively small numbers of TPOs. Face to face university teaching was also noted as helpful. Visiting speakers with specialist knowledge were commented on positively as were

prison visits and other opportunities to develop a broad understanding of the criminal justice and allied fields.

Obstacles to learning identified by TPOs included inconsistency in marking practices between Tutors, and slow or unconstructive feedback following assessments.

E-learning attracted comments from each group. TPOs reported e-learning as helpful in reconciling the requirements of the programme with the demands of their lives by offering the "ability to plan learning when it suits you." One helpful arrangement concerned:

> 'Having the same study day every week. It means I can study at home which is best for me'

Other TPO comments related to what Madoc-Jones et al (2003) have referred to as the spectrum of 'affordances' made available by e-learning. For example, the:

> 'wide range of resources on StudyNet (1)– the variety caters for different styles of learning'

and,

> 'quizzes built into StudyNet are good – they allow you to check your understanding'

By contrast, others referred to the drawbacks of e-learning,

‘I can’t learn from it and need to print it off. It’s about learning styles’

pointing out the,

‘lack of real discussions, debate, exchange of ideas – isolated learning.’

Improvements suggested by both TPOs and tutors included an increase in the amount of face to face teaching and greater use of small-scale discussion groups.

Equal Access

Although there were individual calls for greater support for those with dyslexia (TPO), an expansion of the study skills programme (TPO) and training in IT skills (Tutor), the majority of comments under this heading related to differences in the treatment of TPOs on the basis of geographical area or previous educational experience.

Both TPOs and PDAs noted inequalities between learning opportunities offered to TPOs in different locations within the probation area, for example access to PDAs or the absence of allocated desk space quoted above. Those joining the TPO group for ‘Phase Two’, having completed the Foundation Phase as PSOs via the Higher Certificate route, were felt by all to have different learning needs. The same view was expressed in relation to those without a first degree although in neither case was it felt that these differing needs were fully met. These two groups of students felt themselves as “playing catch-up” in their learning in relation to others.

Discussion

Although individuals in situ have a powerful influence on the learning environment, the overall 'climate' is determined at an organisational level. The supply of teachers, desks, computers, experienced staff and the other 'nutrients' necessary for learning can potentially be siphoned off in other directions when competition for resources is fierce. Where this happens, TPOs experience the organisation as ambivalent about their status and usefulness. They are granted neither the support due to learners nor the status that accrues to being a full staff member. Their own motivation can diminish if it appears that there is a lack of commitment to them. Although the DipPS arrangements support a rich learning environment, there is a battle to be fought to defend it.

One way in which pressure on the learning environment is keenly experienced is in the availability of time and most participants in the study indicated that too little time or too fast a pace were in some way inimical to learning. These views are reflected in the literature relating to adult learning as, for example, when Biggs (1999) discusses Marton and Salo's concepts of 'surface' and 'deep' approaches to learning. When adopting a surface approach students seek to fill themselves with pieces of information for recall at later points. By contrast, a deep approach brings the learner into a personal relationship with the material as she seeks to understand it as a whole and to relate it to her own view. Whilst it is recognised that both these approaches

have value in appropriate contexts, the learning experience associated with them is quite different.

> 'Students obliged to use a surface approach to a task, or to an entire course, describe their feelings of resentment, depression and anxiety. In contrast, deep approaches are almost universally associated with a sense of involvement, challenge and achievement, together with feelings of personal fulfilment and pleasure.' (Ramsden, 1992:58).

To what extent is deep learning required in probation training? It has been forcefully argued that core practice skills such as relationship building and the critical evaluation of complex evidence in risk assessment, require a knowledgeable, self-aware or 'reflexive' approach over and above the application of set procedures (Tuddenham 2000, Burnett, Baker and Roberts 2007). If it is accepted that these and other aspects of effective work with offenders require significant levels of knowledge and skill, then the pace of training and the messages it gives learners regarding their approach to learning should reflect that view . Either an increase in the length of training or a decrease in the assessment schedule (or both) would support deeper learning.

Furthermore, one of McGowan's concerns regarding the DipPS (2002) is that anti-discriminatory practice, a set of understandings, skills and values which, she argues convincingly, require deep reflective learning, is given insufficient time and emphasis during training. Bhui makes a similar point,

> ‘Anti-racist practice that aims to bridge the gap between instinctive action (including prejudice) and effective action, with knowledge, cannot be learned by rote, and does not allow for complacency or unthinking, uncritical implementation.’ (2006:181)

Following on from these points, it is arguable that close contact with compassionate and stimulating teachers provides learners with the reflective opportunities and stimulus needed to adopt deep approaches even when the pace of learning is challenging. Commenting on the learner-teacher relationship participants closely reflected research findings more generally:

> ‘When students are asked to identify the important characteristics of a good teacher, they identify the same ones that lecturers themselves do: organisation, stimulation of interest, understandable explanations, empathy with students’ needs, feedback on work, clear goals, encouraging independent thought.’ (Ramsden 1992 p. 90)

Conversely, concerning the relationship itself Ramsden comments that,

> ‘In fact, truly awful teaching in higher education is most often revealed by a sheer lack of interest in and compassion for students and student learning.’ (Ramsden 1992 p.98)

Under the DipPS arrangements, responsibility for teaching and learning has been taken more fully into the organisational structure. With this responsibility has come a

need to recognise teaching as a discreet organisational activity requiring dedicated training and supervision structures. University Tutors are required to complete teaching qualifications and have access to further teacher training within their institutions. By contrast, initial and ongoing training for PDAs *as teachers* can be patchy. This might be related, in part, to their primary role within the NVQ framework as assessors and to the nature of the NVQ tool as an evidence-gathering and assessment tool as opposed to a teaching tool per se. The comments of participants in the study support the case for enhanced and continuous training for University Tutors and PDAs.

Participants suggested that a degree of physical as opposed to virtual contact between teachers and learners, and between learners themselves is supportive of learning. This may be related to the particular immediacy of direct human contact which, when warm and conducive to the exchange of ideas, can support and inspire. It is currently unclear whether or not technically advanced e-learning will be able fully to replicate such dynamics. Madoc-Jones et al (2003) rightly point out that the affordances of e-learning are still being learnt by educationalists and the current probation training may not exploit their full potential for interactivity. A 'blended-learning' approach allows students and teachers to meet periodically to discuss ideas and offer support whilst also exploiting the advantages of e-learning. This sort of learning environment has advantages for a geographically widespread student group and also for mature students who often need to schedule study around family commitments.

When dealing with large numbers of TPOs across wide geographical areas it is to be expected that learning will be supported in different ways in different places. The key

is, perhaps, that learning experiences be equivalent if not identical. A more fundamental question is raised by students accessing the DipPS in Phase Two via the Higher Certificate Programme and those entering the Programme without a previous degree or recent educational experience. The disadvantage felt by the former group may be best addressed by the creation of a flexible and graduated training framework embracing the spectrum of probation staff. Regarding those students accessing the DipPS in Phase Two via the Higher Certificate Programme, the good record which the DipPS has in widening participation in HE brings with it responsibilities to support non traditional students. Over and above an emphasis on the importance of supporting the study skills of probation trainees, Gregory (2006) suggests a structural way forward.

> 'Given that the DipPS is attracting a high number of graduates, a solution for these candidates would be to provide a postgraduate course, which would fit more readily into the two-year time span. The possibility of providing a three-year undergraduate course, in keeping with social work and nursing training, for the remainder of entrants, might then be real.' P 66

The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has published a model of offender management (2006) which organises the supervision of offenders according to risk classifications or tiers. The model includes PSO grade staff in the supervision of a majority of offenders and therefore offers an opportunity to extend the type of training historically reserved for POs. NOMS also brings with it the promise of contestability, commissioning and the likelihood of mobility of staff between

agencies. Consistency and quality needs to be maintained in this more fluid situation and this in turn relies on a consistent and high-quality learning framework. These developments could create a real opportunity to extend training to administrative, PSO, senior practitioner and management staff. (Bailey, Knight and Williams 2007) In academic terms, a continuous framework of training might be supported at its various points by certificate, foundation degree, honours degree and masters level studies. Appropriate practice learning would accompany each 'stage' and, drawing on the foregoing discussion, time, resources, teaching methods and teacher-learner relationships would be incorporated, building on knowledge derived from the delivery of the DipPS.

Conclusion

Conclusions drawn from a small scale study must necessarily be tentative. However, some important themes emerge, which should be considered in any review of probation training. Firstly, the role of the organisation in owning and creating space for learning is crucial and there must be a robust championing of learning at the highest organisational levels. The value of motivated and well supported TPOs to wider organisational objectives, such as achievement of performance targets and good risk management, should be explicitly recognised.

Secondly, a learning organisation is one that recognises that time invested in learning is time well spent. The findings indicate that undue hurry obstructs learning and restricts the discussion and reflection which supports understanding. In the

context of staff shortages and the associated organisational distress, learning time must be robustly defended. Furthermore, there is a strong argument that a less crowded assessment schedule would result in more rather than less learning.

Thirdly, the findings suggest the importance for learning of the availability of compassionate, well trained teachers who will uphold the learning environment. In a complex learning environment, teachers or facilitators may be drawn from a wide circle of staff and form what might be thought of as a 'teaching team' which crucially includes the contribution of experienced colleagues. Creating such a learning environment and co-ordinating the facilitating team is a complex educational task requiring a real understanding of teaching and learning. Therefore, As Bailey, Knight and Williams indicate (2007), PDAs require:

> 'a learning and development programme linked to academic credits at post-qualifying level.' P 122

Fourthly, regarding teaching methods, there is a strong argument for a blended-learning approach in probation training which retains the qualities of direct interaction but also maximises the use of e-learning which offers important time- flexibility, accessibility and responsivity to different learning styles.

Finally, in all this it is important to maximise equality of access to learning opportunities for learners with diverse learning histories, support needs and practice locations. A real opportunity now exists to extend a high quality and inclusive training framework to all probation staff. It can be seized by building on the rich

learning environment represented by the DipPS and by incorporating into new arrangements the learning achieved through reflections on its implementation.

Notes

1 StudyNet is the Managed Virtual Learning Environment developed by the University of Hertfordshire.

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