

Robin Moulster, the manager of BASW Cymru, interviews Dr Neil Thompson about his Avenue Professional Development online learning community (www.apdp.org.uk)

November 12th, 2013.

Robin Moulster: *Neil, many of us from the people professions have benefitted from your extensive teachings and writings, so I'm very interested to find out more about your recently launched 'Avenue Professional Development Programme'. You describe it as an 'online learning community'. What exactly is that and why have you developed the Programme?*

Neil Thompson: Thank you Robin; it's good of you to take the time to talk with me. It's clear to everyone that we are living in highly pressurised economic and social times, and inevitably it is the people professions that are on the front line. Stress and time to adapt and learn are real issues and not just in the UK. Not surprisingly, the demands placed upon effective professional development and support have grown, but of course the resources haven't. So, we have to look carefully at practitioners' needs and we need to be innovative – we must do better with what we have.

RM: *So that's why you developed the new programme?*

NT: It has been a major factor, yes. But also it is also an educationally sound long-term approach to professional development for practitioners facing major challenges. Think of it as a safe place, somewhere to take stock, to reflect and to explore ideas, issues and effective ways of tackling real-life problems. It's an online community where you, the professional, are in control of your development; a community where experienced fellow professionals, a respected and experienced tutor, and highly relevant learning resources are available when and where you need them.

RM: *So if I understand you correctly, the idea behind it is that people often have learning opportunities – a training course here, reading a research report there, and so on – but they generally have little chance to pull that learning together and consolidate it – especially when they are constantly challenged on the front line.*

NT: Yes, exactly. Professionalism is at the core of our personal and organisational operation. It's all about people. But the needs of a professional don't fit neatly into planned time slots. They are continuous, and so the support process must be both structured and continuous. That's what the Programme is all about. It's not a course in a traditional sense – the practitioner drives the curriculum and support requirements.

RM: *This design is presumably the result of your experience in the field?*

NT: A lot of planning and preparation have gone into this. I consulted with a number of key professionals in designing the Programme. I listened carefully to what they told me, but I also see for myself these issues on a daily basis. So I specifically designed the Programme to enable staff

and organisations to develop a strong sense of purpose and resilience in managing present and future challenges. This is long-term support and development that adapts to professional needs over time. It's not a static, syllabus-driven conventional course. Basically it's an innovative way of promoting learning by bringing a group of people together, a 'learning club' in a sense, but one under the tutorship and guidance of an experienced educator and with structure and extensive and evolving learning resources that help practitioners draw out the learning from their experiences.

RM: *So this is a real community of practitioners that are not just from one organisation, where the richness of the experience can help broaden and embed effective practice?*

NT: Yes that's a central theme. But this learning process needs guidance and that is where my experience as an educator and tutor comes in. There are many expert practitioners in the people professions; some may not realise what they have to offer and how others would value that experience. But, to make the most of this needs support and structure and maybe further learning. It's my job to help make this happen.

So, members can bring their own issues from their practice or from their reaction to one or more of the learning resources they have access to. They can take those issues to the discussion forums and get the benefit of other people's perspectives or they can put their ideas into their reflective journal – and there's nothing to stop them doing both if they want to.

And, on top of that, they can also record their learning in their e-portfolio which comes as part of the Programme. The e-portfolio can be ideal for professional registration purposes, of course, but it's not just that – recording learning in this way is also a good way of consolidating it, of reinforcing the important lessons learned.

RM *So, let's be clear about this - it's not a course in the conventional sense?*

NT No, it isn't; it's different in a number of ways. First of all, with a conventional course there will be a team of tutors who have designed the course, the timetable or schedule, the order in which topics will be followed, the themes or issues to be emphasised, the learning methods to be used and so on. The learners have a degree of flexibility, of course, but by and large they have to fit in with a structure and framework that has been decided for them. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking conventional courses; they can be extremely effective in the right circumstances. But a flexible programme like mine does a different job.

Let me try and explain. Many years ago I read somewhere that a training course is more like a bus than a taxi. The author was making the point that a course won't take you to your exact destination when it comes to your own specific learning needs. All it can do is take you (and all the other passengers) to the bus stop nearest to where you want to go and leave you to make your own way to wherever it is you need to get to. The idea of a learning community – or 'community of practice' as they're sometimes called – is that there is a basic structure or framework, just enough to give a sense of shape and order to the Programme, but the main focus is on self-directed learning – that is, on each participant setting their own learning pathway and then having the

opportunity to follow it. So, on our programme people are provided with two e-books, one that has been specially designed to help them work out what it is they want to learn, what direction they want to take their professional development in and another that is used to review progress every three to six months.

RM *But isn't it asking a lot of people to be able to work out their own 'learning pathway' as you call it?*

NT Yes, I suppose it is in a way, but members are encouraged to seek support from people they trust if they feel they need it – their line manager, a trusted colleague or whoever. Some may have a mentor provided by their employer. And, of course, people can draw on the help of other members if they have any concerns or uncertainties. It's also important to recognise that they can make their plan for their pathway as simple or as detailed as they want. It doesn't have to be a major job.

Ironically my experience has taught me that working out your learning pathway can in itself prove to be a very rich learning experience – particularly the self-awareness aspects of what's involved.

RM *How long does the Programme last?*

NT As it's a flexible programme of self-directed learning, there is no set timescale. Unlike a conventional course there is no fixed end point – which is what lifelong learning is all about. If it's all about maximising your own learning and tailoring your ongoing development to your own specific needs, then why would you want to bring it to an end? With that in mind subscription costs for the Programme have been set at an affordable level. Basic membership (the Silver pathway) is only £10 a month, and we also have a Corporate Membership scheme which means that organisations making block bookings can get places at even cheaper prices. Organisations can claim the VAT element back and individuals who pay their own fees can count them as a legitimate professional expense for tax purposes.

The contract is for 12 months at a time. That is, although people can pay monthly, they register for a year at a time, so a year is the minimum commitment. That should be long enough to decide whether ongoing self-directed learning is for them.

And, of course, because it is a flexible programme new members can join at any time.

RM *I appreciate that it's not a conventional course, but does it have any sort of syllabus or curriculum or is it totally free flowing?*

NT If it were totally unstructured I expect people would feel too insecure and unfocused to do any real learning. So, after a lot of detailed analysis and planning I came up with a 12-part structure. Those twelve elements are divided into two sections or types. The first type is a set of six learning themes as I like to call them. They spell out Silver: **S** is for self-management skills. If we're not reasonably well organised and focused in our work we will struggle to be effective. And, as well, if other people see us as weak in self-management terms, we are likely to have little credibility in their eyes – and that can make a hard job even harder.

I is for interpersonal skills. I have longed believed that organisational success is achieved through people, so anyone working in the people professions needs to have well-developed interpersonal skills. We learn these basic skills as part of our upbringing, but what worries me is that many people professionals rely on these basics when I really feel that, as professionals, where so much of our success depends on our interpersonal effectiveness, the basics are not enough. We need to be able to take our interpersonal skills to a much more advanced level – as I believe the best and most successful professionals do.

L is for leadership and, contrary to popular belief, leadership is not just for managers. I firmly believe that all professionals need leadership skills, especially self-leadership skills, which fits nicely with the idea of self-management skills.

V is for values-based practice which is about recognising how central a role values play and how dangerous it is to lose sight of our values.

E is for empowerment, a much misused and oversimplified term, but a really important one all the same.

And, last but not least, **R** is for rapport building and networking. Being able to work in partnership is fundamental to effective practice, so this is an area that is worth exploring in detail.

Sorry if I'm being longwinded, but these six learning themes then need to be seen in the context of six learning domains, or areas that the learning themes relate to. Those domains spell out Places:

P for professionalism, **L** for learning and development, **A** for aiming higher (career development in other words), **C** for competent practice, **E** for employee well-being and **S** for spirituality (which, to my mind, is about meaning purpose, identity and other such important issues and not just about religion).

So, I call this the SILVER / PLACES structure, but it's not intended to be rigid. People can dip in and out of different parts at different times, according to their own needs, preferences, circumstances and priorities. But I do believe it is important to have some sort of structure, otherwise people may feel completely at sea.

RM *Thanks, that sounds like a useful way of approaching it. Is there any particular theoretical approach underpinning the Programme?*

NT Yes, very much so. Members are given a very detailed *Programme Handbook* and the philosophy is explained in that. Basically it is rooted in what is known as existential learning.

RM *Existential learning? Is that anything to do with existentialism?*

NT Yes, it is. A key principle of our approach is that people are not fixed entities, that they are, in effect, works in progress, constantly changing and developing. Traditional approaches seem to assume that learning is a process that involves extending our knowledge and skills, but which leaves us fundamentally untouched – with a few more bytes of knowledge added to our hard disk, as I put it in a blog posting on the subject. By contrast, existential learning is concerned with forms

of learning that transform us in some way, that play a part in making us who we are and who we are in the process of becoming. Now, I know that sounds very complicated and technical, but it actually makes a lot of sense once you get your head round it. It's about trying to move away from the idea that learning is just a form of adding to who or what we are and seeing it as something that is part of who or what we are making ourselves into through our choices and actions. That's one of the reasons why self-directed learning is important, with the emphasis on setting out your own personal learning pathway – because what works for one person in terms of learning won't necessarily work for another. Just like a style of work or approach to work that suits one person won't necessarily suit another.

RM *Interesting. So, how do you see people benefitting from the Programme?*

NT Mmm, good question. I suppose it would be in a number of ways. First and foremost, it's about having the opportunity to tailor your learning to suit your own needs. Although you are part of a group, the learning path you follow is your own. Because of this people's learning can be more meaningful, something that members can connect directly with.

Being part of a supportive online community is also an important benefit; it can be really reassuring and empowering to know that you are part of a group of people who have a lot in common and who are going through a similar process of self-directed learning.

I suppose we'd also have to mention the flexibility. As I said before, conventional courses can be very effective in the right circumstances, but they tend to have a set syllabus, a fixed timetable and so on. So, in effect, you're trying to learn on someone else's terms, whereas with the community of learning approach, you study what you want when you want – an important consideration for busy professionals.

And, I'd like to think that having *my* input is something that people would value!

RM *I'm sure they would Neil. So, if someone was considering joining the Programme what should they do?*

NT The first thing would be to go to the website (www.apdp.org.uk). People can download a full-colour brochure from there and also watch a short video that gives an overview of the Programme. That should be enough for people to decide if it is something they would want to be involved in, but if they're still not sure I'm always happy to answer any queries or talk things through. In the same way I'm happy to talk to training officers or anyone wanting to explore making a block booking.

RM *Thank you, Neil, that's been very informative.*

NT Not at all, it's me who should be thanking you.

