Professional Development Models and Methods: An Overview

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Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.

— *John Cotton Dana*

ABSTRACT

Professional Development is a standard term that holds value for all teaching professionals, irrespective of their teaching context or experience. While it may be mandatory or voluntary, professional development enhances teachers' skills and makes the teaching-learning process more reflective and transformative. Undertaking a needs-gap analysis is the first step in planned professional development. One may pursue one's professional development physically, in the form of workshops, seminars and mentoring sessions, or virtually using web 2.0 tools such as blogs, social networking sites, micro-sites, etc. These offer opportunities to form both private and public affiliations for formal training as well as for developing peer networks.

Key words: professional, activity, virtual, voluntary, needs-gap analysis, reflective, transformative

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a profession that is characterized by lifelong learning and continuous professional development (CPD). Professional development is a broad term that applies to all teaching professionals irrespective of their age or seniority. It may be understood as-

> …a process by which individuals take control of their own learning and development, by engaging in an on-going process of reflection and action. This process is empowering and exciting and can stimulate people to achieve their aspirations and move towards their dreams.

> *(Megginson & Whitaker, 2004, p. 1)*

Professional development can be categorized as "required" or "voluntary". "Required" development includes activities that are prescribed by the institution and that mandate a requisite number of orientation and/or refresher courses. "Voluntary" professional development includes a gamut of activities such as attending seminars, conferences, courses and workshops etc. Both these types of professional development always overlap with and supplement each other and are successful when participants are able to articulate their own perception of teaching as well as select and justify appropriate modes of practice. Further, by linking their knowledge levels to outcomes such as students' performance, such initiatives become more constructive and impactful.

As professional development of teachers is increasingly becoming an area of interest for both individuals and policy makers, it is necessary to understand the spectrum of professional development models holistically. Shifts in pedagogy, pace and thinking point to an evolutionary ethos in conversations of how professional learning communities can be built for teachers. In this paper, I will recommend a research-based schema to assess the purpose, the capacity for transformative practice and the professional autonomy for various models of professional development. In the first section, I will explore why structured and need-based professional development is effective for both teachers and learners, and the tools that may be used to implement it. In the second section, I will encapsulate the different models of professional development. In the third Section, I will focus on Web 2.0 as a tool for professional development.

NEED-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development can be structured and organized in a number of ways, depending upon the needs of the participants and the contexts they teach in. Eraut (1994, p. 20) identifies three major contexts in which professional knowledge can be acquired—academic context, through institutional discussion on policy and practice, and practice itself. Needs analysis involves inquiring about and analyzing the objective and subjective needs of the participants. Objective needs are needs that are easily measured or quantified by administrators and teachers, while subjective needs are "needs as seen through the eyes of the learners themselves" (Brown, 1995). Objective needs focus on the targets set by the government and/or policy makers. They also take into consideration the educational and socio-cultural contexts of the participants. Subjective needs on the other hand focus on learners' knowledge, purpose, attitudes, interests, expectations, goals, strategies, etc.

TOOLS TO ASSESS THE NEEDS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Scientific methods and tools such as *surveys, interviews, observation* and *focus groups*, etc. may be used to gather information about the objective and subjective needs of the participants. For instance, the following survey is designed to acquire a demographic understanding of participants. An understanding of the diversity of the teaching contexts will allow the administrators to plan the course/training accordingly.

The survey should only take 2-5 minutes, and your responses are completely anonymous.

Thank you for your participation!

INSTRUCTIONS: Please mark your answer with an (X).

1.   What is your current teaching assignment?

☐   Full-time/adhoc/part-time English Teacher

☐   Specialized area

☐   Not currently teaching (skip to question 5)

2.   What classes do you teach?

☐   University (ages 21+)

☐   College(ages 18+)

☐   High School (ages 14+)

3.   What type of college do you work in?

☐   Government college

☐   Government-aided college

☐   Private college

4.   Do you have an administrative role in the place where you teach?

☐   yes

☐   no

5.   How many years of teaching experience do you have?

☐   0 to 2 years

☐   3 to 5 years

☐   6 to 10 years

☐   more than 10 years

6.   What is the highest level of education that you possess?

☐   Master's degree

☐   Doctoral degree

☐   Other: _____

Figure 1. Sample Demographic Survey for the AE E-Teacher Program, sponsored by the U.S. © 2017 by Arizona Board of Regents.

Similarly, a *survey* can be developed to ask participants which skills they would like to improve and how they think they learn best. For example, would they like to focus on learning English for a specific purpose, or linguistics, or world Englishes, or any aspect of literature? Since surveys can include different types of questions (multiple choice, ranking/scales, and open-ended), one must choose the question type that works best for collecting the information. There are advantages and disadvantages to all the types.

Another tool that can be used to ascertain the objective and subjective needs of the participants is an *interview schedule*. Interviews may be conducted in person, by email, or through a video chat service. Interviews help to get an idea about the language proficiency of the participants and therefore enable the trainer to pitch the course/training accordingly. Interview schedules may include open as well as closed ended questions in order to enable the trainer to assess the participants' attitudes, experience, interests, goals, and opinions, in other words their objective and subjective needs. A sample interview has been given as follows:

In preparation for our training session, I would like to know more about your experience, interests, and goals as a teacher. This information will help me to design the training to best meet your needs and interests. The interview should only take 10-20 minutes. Thank you for your participation!

1.   Where are you currently teaching?

2.   Tell me about your teaching position. What type of organization do you teach in?

What level are the students, UG/PG? How many classes do you have per week?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3.   How long have you been teaching (less than 1 year, 3 years, 15 years,…)? _____

4. What is the highest level of education that you possess?

_____

_____

5.   What do you think are some of the biggest challenges to teaching in your context?

_____

_____

6.   Have you attended any professional development seminars, conferences or workshops recently?

7.   What were the topics of the conference sessions or workshops? Which sessions did you like best, and why? Which did you like least, and why?

_____

_____

8.   What professional development topics interest you the most? What is a challenge, skill, or aspect of teaching that you would like to work on?

_____

_____

9.   What other goals do you have for improving your teaching?

_____

_____

Figure 2. Interview schedule developed by the AE E-Teacher Program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, administered by FHI 360, and delivered by ASU.

An *observation schedule* may be used to observe a class and give feedback. The observation form can be created specific to an area/topic so as to facilitate note-taking and documentation for analysis and planning. The form of participation may be participatory or non-participatory. This would work well for individual feedback and progress.

Focus Groups are used to address groups. As guided discussions on probable topics for professional development, they enable collaborative analysis of needs and interests as well as peer-to-peer linkage and learning. Focus Group discussions should not have more than 5-10 participants so as to prevent dominant speakers from drowning diverse opinions. Further, the deliberations may not always be theoretical or conceptual, but could include printed materials, collaborative review of student work, etc. For larger groups group discussions can be used as they are more comprehensive as compared to written responses because they include facial expressions and body language, which also convey meaning. Once the time and target have been set, it is easier to coordinate such a group discussion.

In case, such formal tools are difficult to access or design, there are always informal ways of gathering information about the needs of the participants during tea/coffee breaks, lunch, etc. This kind of *spot survey/interview* may not be structured, but by taking notes one can supplement and add nuances to the points waiting to be addressed in the discussion scheduled for later. The next steps include analysis of the information gathered, and reflection and prioritization of the topics for further planning. All this invokes the core competencies of teaching—setting course goals and objectives, designing activities and materials, and selecting the assessment techniques.

Despite the needs-analysis, conducting a course for professional development of teachers and galvanizing institutional support may not be easy. However, as one analyzes and documents the needs of the learners, it will be easier to build a case using one's knowledge base to pitch the course to the authorities.

MODELS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Some common models for professional development include *cascade, training, workshop, reflective diary entry, teacher forum* and *blog, social networking, mentoring/coaching* programmes, etc. This list is not exhaustive or exclusive, but it illustrates that professional development comprises a diverse range of practices which enable individuals to develop their skills, share their experiences and bring up-to-date their knowledge of innovations in their field. This may happen through seminars or conferences, teacher exchange programmes, in-service training events, etc. Professional development also entails providing or creating the space

and scope for individual evaluation of approaches, experiences and interactions.

In this section, I will give an overview of the means through which professional development can be organized and structured. I will attempt to identify the key characteristics of different types of professional development routes with the aim of getting a deeper understanding of policies and practices.

In the field of education, the *cascade* model involves the participation of key resource persons in training/workshops, so that they can then cascade or disseminate information to their colleagues. Mentioned in all the policy documents in India (from school to tertiary level), it is likely to be useful where resources are limited. However, it is often criticized because there is a lot of dissemination loss in this model. According to Solomon & Tresman (1999), another drawback of this model is that what is passed on in the cascading process is generally skills-focused, sometimes knowledge-focused, but rarely value-focused. This is an argument that is also articulated by Nieto (2003), when she claims that teacher education needs to shift from a focus on questions of 'what' and 'how' to also consider questions of "why".

With regard to the model of *mentoring*, it must be said that there is no single method of going about mentoring. Most scholars and researchers agree that mentoring cannot be defined in absolute terms. This is because the mentor-mentee association depends on various factors such as the institutional culture, time available and the context. However, some common approaches include encouraging mentees to articulate their expectations and goals, and identifying constraints and barriers to innovation with the aim of overall improvement.

A mentor can also take on the roles of teacher, friend, counsellor, motivator, role model, advisor or facilitator. Whatever be the role however, first and foremost, the mentor must understand the needs of the mentee. Once that has been achieved, then he/she can then facilitate analysis, reflection, capacity building and qualitative enhancement in the teaching-learning process. Generally, it is assumed that a mentor is a person who is a senior in the organization/field and has more experience. While this may be true in many cases, there is also scope for mentoring among colleagues where the mentor plays the role of a "critical friend" (Kapur, 2013, p.98). As Murry points out, "peer mentoring has benefits for both the mentor and the mentee. As they are answering questions from their mentees, mentors have an opportunity to reflect on and improve their own lessons through the mentoring process" (2010, p.6).

In peer mentoring, observation of the mentee plays a key role. Both the mentor and the mentee together decide the topic, day and time for the observation. The

mentor must be in the class before it begins so that the class is not disturbed. Also, she/he should ideally not participate in the class activities unless decided beforehand. Most importantly, the mentor must go for observation equipped with a teacher observation form in order to note down constructive discussion points. After the class, both the mentor and the mentee should meet for a feedback. It is imperative for the feedback to be supportive and helpful. Remember, the observer's role is not to judge or evaluate the observed teacher but to encourage him/her to develop himself/herself.

Reflective diaries and *collaborative journals* are effective tools for sharing innovations and success stories between teachers. They also help to identify problematic issues, find solutions to, ask questions about and gather ideas pertaining to individual teaching contexts. The digital era further enables engagement with long distance and diverse stakeholders, thereby encouraging collaborative growth. *Teacher support groups* **or** *study circles***, and** *Teachers' associations* **are some examples of social networking for professional development.** Teachers may form a small group to discuss and share materials, ideas and classroom issues. **Study circle**s that discuss a teaching-related topic or a book can encourage scholarship and sharing of case studies and even undertake panel-based action research. Within such small groups, informal support flows easily even if one person from the group takes the lead.

The model *Communities of practice* works exactly as the name suggests. Teachers form a group and share their work and their CV's. Such groups may be formed across cities or even across countries. However, the efficiency of this model may be limited because of conflicting time zones, and unbalanced participation and access to resources such as the Internet.

Teachers' associations provide opportunities for teachers to meet and participate in local, national, and international seminars and conferences. This allows them to develop professional contacts in the field. Moreover, the teachers can collaborate to present or share ideas, or mentor or coach each other even after the conference is over. However one needs to be clear of one's needs and time constraints before either forming or joining a group.

WEB 2.0 AS MEDIA FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Web 2.0 has opened up a new window of opportunities for professional development of teachers. The read-only Internet has evolved into its read-and-write version, which is commonly referred to as Web 2.0. This advancement has made the Internet interactive and has given users the power to generate and upload content. Many professionals have started exploiting this potential

extensively through blogs, micro blogs, and social networking sites, where they share their ideas and reflections with regard to the teaching profession. It has, in turn, empowered everyone with a world of knowledge.

Today, there is no dearth of opportunities available for community engagement. It can be face-to-face or virtual or a combination of both! Social networking sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest and Twitter, give teachers an opportunity to write about their opinions and ideas, share links to resources, and form connections with other teachers. On some social networking sites, users can even form public or private groups and conduct virtual trainings through the site.

Blogs, i.e. websites or webpages that provide information about a topic, are usually written in a more informal style than a journal article and invite reader comments and inputs. Teachers can create their own blogs to share information about teaching topics they are interested in, or reflections on their lessons. They can also follow or read other teachers' blogs. Participants at training sessions may also be encouraged to write blog posts during the training to share their experiences, teaching tips or lesson plan ideas.

Webinars are web-based seminars. Through webinar platforms, it is possible to transmit video, audio as well as images. A lot of webinar platforms even allow users to share applications and use a whiteboard. The objective of webinar platforms is to facilitate the exchange of information in real-time and in a two-way format. Through webinar platforms, participants are able to experience different levels of online interaction. This is not possible on other online communication platforms such as discussion boards, emails, etc.

Wang and Hsu (2008), list five distinct advantages of using webinar tools:

1. Affordability

2. Synchronous communication

3. Multimedia demonstrations

4. Multi-level interaction

5. Recording and archiving of session

Some important advantages of webinars include immediate feedback and clearing of doubts; an input rich and attractive environment for learners in the form of lectures, real time interaction with audiences across the globe and scope for group-based collaborations and review at leisure.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

Earley and Bubb (2004), view professional development as "all formal and informal learning that enables individuals to improve their own practice" (p.3). Further, they consider professional development to be an integral aspect of personal development and add that, wherever possible, the two should interact and complement each other. They link professional development with occupational role development, and view personal development as the development of the person, often the "whole" person, which almost always involves changes in self-awareness. According to Waters (1998): "It is the development that can occur when teachers are constructed first and foremost as people, and is predicted on the premise that people are always much more than the roles they play" (p.30). Waters therefore places personal development on a higher pedestal than professional development.

According to Saunders (2014), studies of effective CPD reveal that professional development has a transformative impact on teachers. In fact their beliefs, practices and experiences prior to their development undergo a complete change. Finally, any type of professional development provides opportunities for active experiential teacher learning and should be seen by teachers to be relevant to their needs. "Outsiders can help, advise, support and even engage dialogically, but the learning can only come from the active inner life, motivation and resources of the learner" (Dadds, 2006, p. 36).Furthermore, professional development promotes collaborative learning which is inquiry-based. Therefore it is absolutely essential that administrators support teachers in their professional development. By positioning it as an iterative process, they can further empower teachers to plan, receive feedback and improve their practice. This makes professional development a sustainable paradigm rather than a finite event. It also makes it an act of agency.

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