Lesson Study:

A School-embedded Model of Professional Development for (Language) Teachers

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Abstract

One of the most magnetic words in the topic of teaching and learning is professional development. The word professional development is usually attributed to teachers who pursue or are sent to pursue new knowledge and skills in order to support their job as teaching practitioners. Professional development is believed to possess potential benefits which enable teachers to perform better in class to help students achieve their full potential.

This paper will consider a number of explanations for teacher professional development. Taking the concepts of teacher as agent of change and teacher as learner as two points of departure, the paper reviews the literature on the principles of professional development and proceeds to present the 'lesson study' as a form of professional development for language teachers before finally suggesting some points about the importance of teacher learning in enhancing their professional growth.

Key Words: professional development, lesson study, observation, evaluation.

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Introduction

The topic of professional development for teachers has generated excitement and interest among educational researchers for many years (Hawley & Valli, 1999; American Federation of Teachers, 2002; Peery, 2004; Slepkov, 2008). While school is widely recognised a great asset in public education, many authors believe that teachers play a significant role in providing students with high quality education. In order to achieve the standards of learning for every child, teachers should strive to improve the quality of their performance. In this regard, teachers need to undergo effective professional development. Professional development would enable teachers to offer students the learning opportunities that will prepare them to meet standards in given content areas.

In the educational literature, the term *professional development* is commonly used to describe "a continuous process of individual and collective examination and improvement of practice" (American Federation of Teachers, 2002, p. 4). While professional development is essential for every individual, it is needed by every educational institution to increase the knowledge and skills of their employees and ensure an improvement on the personal and professional front. Professional development should enable teaching professionals to connect theory, practice and student outcomes.

Teacher as agent of change

The literature on education repeatedly mentions the significant role of teachers in making a positive change towards public education. Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 83), for example, maintains that improvement in language teaching and problem-solving in the classroom lie in the hands of a teacher who is willing to learn new concepts, explore current approaches and experiment with different strategies. Along this line, Fullan (1989; as cited in

Peery, 2004, p. 4) describes teachers as "the key to continuous improvement in schools". He goes on to say that teachers who are inquiry-oriented, reflective and collaborative are likely to succeed in leading education reform. Interestingly, Peery (2004, p. 1) suggests that if we are to improve education for our children, we must improve the education of the adults who are involved in student learning process. In the simplest terms, a change in public education is positively correlated with a change in teachers' professional growth.

Teacher as learner

Given that the performance of teacher has a great impact on student achievement, it follows that there is a need for the continuous learning of teachers. The concept of 'teacher as learner' is supported by many adult learning theorists. As far as teacher learning is concerned, the theory of andragogy holds that teachers learn best when the topic is applicable to their personal or professional lives (Knowles, 1984; as cited in Peery, 2004, p. 3). Relatedly, Fenwick and Tennant (2004) posit that while 'learner' and 'educator' are two inseparable elements in teaching-learning processes, teachers should act as collaborators and co-learners rather than supervisors or authorities (p. 55). This means that teachers should be constantly engaged in the process of learning to be able to teach better. The teachers' role is not only concerned with the transfer of knowledge and skills to students, it should also involve the pursuit of new knowledge and skills (Slepkov, 2008, p. 85).

Another important aspect of andragogy in relation to teachers' professional growth is put forward by Schon's (1983). Famous for his ideas of reflection, Schon emphasises the importance of maintaining reflection-in-action, exhibiting reflection-on-action, and regarding error as a source of discovery. Reflection-in-action refers to how people make sense of an experience and connect it with previous learning in order to develop new understandings to utilise in future situations of a similar nature. Language teachers who demonstrate reflection-on-action usually share their successful practice through presentations, journal articles or

discussions with colleagues. As it is natural for people to make errors, Schon goes on to explain that error should be seen as a positive thing to improve learning objectives. When a method fails, language teachers should not stop trying. They should learn to first think on their feet, share ideas with partners, explore new strategies and then construct their own thinking of what might be the most appropriate teaching practice in the future (as cited in Peery, 2004, pp. 5-6).

Principles of professional development

In attempting to understand professional development, education specialists have spent much of their energy studying ways to increase the knowledge and skills of teachers. Again and again their research returns to the question of how professional development for teachers should be best delivered. While many scholars hold different views about the best formula of professional development, they all seem to agree that ineffective professional development is unlikely to result in education reform and improved achievement for all students.

Hawley and Valli (1999), for example, assert that professional development would not be effective unless eight principles are held in view. They are goals and student performance, teacher involvement, school-based, collaborative problem solving, continuous and supported, information rich, theoretical understanding, and part of a comprehensive change. These principles are described in the following paragraphs (pp. 139-144):

The first principle means that professional development should clearly define the goals and standards for student learning and student performance. A professional development which is student-centred would enable language teachers to understand what they really need to learn to address the various challenges faced by students in the school environment.

The second principle holds that when language teachers are actively involved in making the identification of their learning topic, their motivation and commitment to learn are likely to increase because they know that the topic would be meaningful and relevant to their professional contexts. Furthermore, involvement would empower teachers to assume new roles and responsibilities in support of the school improvement efforts.

School-based, as **the third principle**, is defined as the integration of professional development to school daily practice. While providing greater chance for language teachers to learn right from the horse's mouth, school-based approach proves to be powerful in a way it solves the core problems existing within a particular school. This direct connection between learning and application is often referred to as *job-embedded learning*.

Moving now to collaborative problem solving, **this fourth principle** perceives collaboration among colleagues as having a great impact on the identification of both the causes and solutions to school problems. While leading to the sharing of knowledge and expertise, working together creates a sense of belonging and a mutual respect among language teachers.

The fifth principle which Hawley and Valli recommend is concerned with the importance of professional development to be ongoing and well-supported by other professionals outside the school. While external insights would lead to professional competence and innovation, continuous learning would create a deeper understanding of school problems which ultimately results in increased student achievement.

Information rich, which is **the sixth principle**, means that student development is best evaluated when professional development includes sources of information such as teacher's knowledge and experience, research studies and outside experts. This kind of information would enable language teachers to identify current student progress and help them design future learning.

Relatedly, **the seventh principle** suggests that effective professional development should attend to teachers' theoretical understandings of pedagogical knowledge and subject matter knowledge. Helping languae teachers re(build) the required professional knowledge base would enable them to manage and solve classroom problems. At the same time, language teachers increase in motivation when they realise that there is a positive correlation between the expansion of their professional knowledge and their student achievement.

The last principle deals with the notion that professional development, as part of a comprehensive change process, should involve organisational commitment to continuous experimentation and support. Language teachers should be given appropriate time and support to internalise, plan and practice what they learn. Sufficient funding, technical assistance and reflective meetings are some types of support that school could offer to take part in the comprehensive change process.

The significance of professional development effectiveness is also highlighted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Exploring findings from studies of professional development, this peak representative body for the United States teachers has formulated 11 guidelines to ensure the establishment of effective professional development in every school. The AFT's guidelines along with their explanations could be summarised as follows (2002, pp. 4-10):

1. **Professional development should deepen and broaden knowledge of content.** Given that the content knowledge of teachers is essential in affecting student learning in the classroom, it follows that professional development should ensure that language teachers experience different types of learning as an elaboration of their subject matter knowledge.

2. **Professional development should provide a strong foundation in the pedagogy of particular disciplines.** In addition to the knowledge of content, language

teachers should be able to provide students with the most powerful ways of understanding a concept or the ideas of specific disciplines such as the use of illustrations, analogies or types of questions that help to develop understandings.

3. **Professional development should provide knowledge about the teaching and learning processes.** As teachers serve a problem-solving function in the classroom, professional development providers should familiarise language teachers with the concepts of teaching and learning which include classroom management, differentiated instruction and assessment.

4. **Effective professional development should be rooted in and reflect the best available research.** One of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary teaching and learning is that it should be based on principles and practices from effective theory and research rather than tradition or feelings.

5. **The content of professional development should be aligned with the standards and curriculum teachers use.** If language teachers see that what they learn has no relevance to what they teach and should achieve, they would be less-motivated participants of professional development.

6. **Professional development should contribute to measurable improvement in student achievement.** The significant changes in student learning should conform to the measures recognised by the teaching specialists and the society. While student scores indicate a measurable outcome of professional development, teaching practice could also be seen as a predictor of professional development success.

7. **Professional development should be intellectually engaging and address complexity of teaching.** As teachers deal with students from a variety of backgrounds, they need to undergo professional development which engages them

in learning about various pedagogical issues, in peer-coaching, and in using different resources to improve teaching practice.

8. **Professional development should provide sufficient time, support and resources to enable teachers to master new content and pedagogy and to integrate these into their practice.** To better understand the connection between theory and practice, language teachers need sufficient learning time for content internalisation and reflection. In addition, the continuous support of colleagues and school leaders play an important role in helping teachers integrate what they learn into their teaching practice.

9. **Professional development should be designed by teachers in cooperation with experts in the field.** While having outside perspectives broadens the knowledge and skills of teachers, language teachers would become more engaged participants if they could collaborate with other pedagogical experts in formulating their professional development formats.

10. **Professional development should take a variety of forms, including some we have not typically considered.** Considering that adults learn in many different ways, it seems reasonable to design multiple forms of professional development to suit the different needs of language teachers. Along this line, professional development may take the forms of lesson study, assessment work, inquiry groups or any other types of professional development which conform to the student achievement standards.

11. **Professional development should be job-embedded and site specific**. Professional development could be powerful when it is related to the daily practice of teachers and used to address a particular teaching context. Sending language

teachers to many conferences outside the school might be useful for an individual change but not for a school change.

As could be seen from the two descriptions above, Hawley and Valli (1999) and the AFT (2002) share some common ideas about how effective professional development should be conducted. They both put a great emphasis on the importance of student achievement, teacher involvement, school-based learning, core knowledge expansion, peer-coaching, reflection and collaboration. In addition, the above-mentioned principles are consistent with the contemporary literature on professional development. While Peery (2004, p. 3) contends that "good professional development should be the best form of problem-based learning", NSDC (2001) maintains that "effective staff development is that which results in increased learning for students" (as cited in Peery, 2004, p. 2).

Lesson study as a form of professional development

Lesson study is one type of professional development which originated in Japan and has been developed by the United States teachers. It is defined as "a cycle of professional development focused on teacher planning, observing, and revising research lessons" (Hurd & Licciardo-Musso, 2005, p. 388). The topic of lesson study has gained a considerable amount of interest among western professional development specialists. While Easton (2004, p. 4-5) includes lesson study into the twenty strategies needed for advancing teacher professional learning, Cole (2005, p. 7) recommends that school leaders foster lesson study to improve professional growth for teachers.

According to Hurd and Licciardo-Musso (2005), lesson study is carried out through a number of steps which include forming a study group, setting goals, planning the research lesson, teaching the research lesson, debriefing the research lesson, and drawing conclusions. The following paragraphs look how these two professional development practitioners describe a cycle of lesson study (pp. 388-394).

Lesson study usually begins with finding teaching professionals, in this context language teachers, who share similar ideas about lesson study and are interested in similar topics. While there is no fixed size of how many people should be involved, a typical lesson study team usually comprises four to six persons. These members might be active school language teachers from the same or different class levels. It may be useful to invite an outside expert or a 'knowledgeable other' who has expertise in the content knowledge and subject matter to provide a broader view of the issues. In order to keep the members guided and focused, a lesson study group should first establish group norms which include a timeline, meeting schedules and agenda, roles and responsibilities, and professional respect among members.

In the second stage of lesson study, the team members sit together to discuss both student achievement goals and content goals. Student achievement goals are long-term goals which teachers expect students to have in the long run. For example, in a school where the English as a Second Language (ESL) students are silent participants in the classroom; the school teachers might want their students to be active learners who develop their own opinions and ideas in the future. Content goals are usually directed towards improving student skills in a specific academic topic. In setting these short-term goals, language teachers need to understand what makes learning particular concepts easy or difficult.

The planning of the research lesson requires intensive meetings among the team members. During this stage, participants study and share the available curriculum materials. While comparing how various text books teach a particular topic, the group elaborates on some lessons which have been useful and exchanges ideas about how some other lessons could be improved. The discussion should also consider both the anticipation of student responses and teacher answers to various aspects of the lesson. In addition, it is important to make a data collection plan to ensure that everything occurring during the observation is

adequately recorded in written or taped forms. Collaborative planning is not only powerful in selecting the most appropriate research lesson, but also indicates that the chosen lesson is owned by all participants. In other words, the sharing of professional ideas help develop collegiality, trust and cooperation among the lesson study group members.

Once a language lesson is designed, the next thing to do is to conduct the research lesson and select one member of the lesson study team to teach the lesson in the classroom. On the day of the research lesson, other members do the observing to collect data about student learning and behaviour. In order to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere, there needs to be an agreed-upon protocol on how the observing participants should behave during the research lesson. In this regard, observers should not interrupt the instructing teacher, help students, side-talk or block a student's view of the instruction. As the heart of lesson study, research lesson provides great learning opportunities for students and teachers. While students enjoy the extra attention of visiting teachers in their classroom, teachers find many unexpected things when given the time to observe students closely.

Following the research lesson, the group members share what they learn from the instruction and the observation in a debriefing session. In this post-lesson colloquium, all lesson artefacts should be shown to each participant for the purpose of data presentation. The instructing teacher has the first opportunity to comment on whether or not the lesson meets the instructional goals followed by the data presentation of others. As the purpose of this colloquium is not to criticise the teacher, the data sharing may move into a discussion which centres on questions developed in advance by the team. To keep time and move the discussion along, a facilitator is appointed from among the group members.

Based on the collected data and the conclusions reached at the colloquium, the lesson study group might think of modifying the lesson or re-teaching it to students for better improvements. If desired, they could also move on to a new focus of study. Now that one

cycle of lesson study is completed, it is important to write a brief summary of what the team has learned from planning, teaching, observing, and discussing the lesson. For future references and instructional purposes, a copy of the report should be distributed to each participant. .

Having seen the cycle of lesson study, it is clear that this model is consistent with the principles of professional development. In the words of Easton (2004, pp. 3-4), "powerful professional learning is generally collaborative and focuses on what is happening with learners in the classroom". Through collaboration, lesson study allows language teachers to use their collective ideas to enhance student achievement while building deep relationships with other team members (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; as cited in Tate, 2004, p. xxv). The lesson study model provides an opportunity for teachers to have a closer look at each child to meet individual needs (Hawley & Valley, 1999, p. 139). As teachers study the relevant curricula (AFT, 2002, p.7), they increase their content knowledge (AFT, 2002, p.7); and at the same time see clear connections between what they learn and their daily practice (AFT, 2002, p.10).

However, lesson study should not be considered as a quick fix, it is a developed approach which requires teachers to engage collaboratively and willingly in long-term learning to achieve both short and long term goals. To quote Lewis (2002, p. 135), one of the leading American researcher on lesson study, "lesson study provides a way groups can work not just on improving the lesson, but on deepening their own understanding of content, their understanding of students; and their understanding of teaching".

Conclusion

Given the vital role of teacher as an agent of education change, recent decades have reflected a growing number of interests in the area of professional development for teachers. In attempting to understand effective professional development, education researchers have conducted a myriad of studies at various times around the world. Much of the research has

yielded significant findings about useful ways to facilitate teacher learning and powerful strategies to improve teacher professional learning.

Despite the various conceptions of professional development principles, many scholars are in common agreement that effective professional development should be results-driven, job-embedded, standards-based, and school-supported. Based on these principles, education specialists have developed different forms of professional development. One model which stands apart from other professional development practices is lesson study. As an imported practice to the U.S. from Japan, it focuses on what actually occurs between teachers and students in the classroom through a cycle of lesson planning, observation and revision.

Considering that teacher learning is predictive of student learning success, language teachers should experience effective professional development to be able to enhance student achievement in the classroom.

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