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Local Perspectives on Teacher Professional Development: Targeting Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares the experience of professional development that exists at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and examines available policy and practice. Using the example of the Language Centre Professional Development and Research Unit, the paper elaborates on importance of providing a framework for identifying required types and aspects of professional development; planning; designing; implementing; monitoring and promoting professional development programmes for language educators in higher education context. It also involves a discussion on how teachers' interests and motivation are linked to their active engagement in planning, designing and organizing training events as well as to the effective use of the "in-house" professional expertise and bridging it with the best external knowledge, expertise and resources. These specific aspects can provide sustainable continuing professional development in local educational settings and create a noticeable effect towards the attainment of quality teaching practice.

Keywords: Sultan Qaboos University, language centre, professional development and research unit, professional development, English language teachers

INTRODUCTION

Professional development refers to permanent processes and practices that extend, update and improve the job-related knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes of teachers, and lead to their professional growth (Driel et al., 2001; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010). A significant body of research indicates the essential and indispensable role of professional development in global and local educational settings. Borko (2004), Guskey (2000), Kirkpatrick (1998), Bybee & Loucks- Horsley (2000) believe that teachers' professional skills, competence, and teaching practice have a strong influence on learning environment, student achievements and pedagogical philosophy of the teaching community. Carey & Frechtling (1997) argue that professional development programs of different reform type, for example, forums, associations, committees, organizations, projects, teachers' resource centres, can have a huge and visible influence on the educational process and eventually lead to increase of the achievements of the students. Scribner (2003), Al-Seyabi (2013), Garet et al. (2001), Desimone et al. (2002), Elias & Merriam (2005) indicate the operational role of professional development in achieving quality education and high standards of professionalism. According to their studies, professional development can create better opportunities to fashion and construct new methods and techniques, borrow and tailor to teacher needs those approaches that have been successfully implemented in other educational scenarios.

Embracing various formal and informal means, professional development can promote the increased responsibility for excellence in teaching (Frye, 2008); develop new insights into pedagogy and content knowledge (Grant, 1994); help teachers to acquire new skills and provide them with additional opportunities to reflect critically on their own practice and to address the new knowledge and beliefs (Huberman, 1995; Mann, 2005). According to Garet et al. (2001), “high standard” or “high quality” professional development programs can lead to changes in the teacher classroom activities, thus improving teacher capabilities and confidence in implementing certain teaching techniques, increasing self-reported knowledge, abilities and skills, and, consequently, positively affecting teaching - learning practice.

Darling et al. (1995) noted that, allowing teachers to struggle with vagueness, which accompanies their roles in professional development as both educators and learners, effective professional development must first and foremost consider their needs. As reported in Bybee & Loucks - Hosley (2000), teacher needs to achieve high standards in the profession include but are not limited to such needs as need for learning about and developing skills related to teaching; need for deepening content knowledge; need for learning about how to teach and combining content knowledge with what is already known about learning and teaching in a particular setting; need for utilizing tools which are helpful in contributing to acquisition of new knowledge and skills by each individual teacher. Bybee & Loucks- Hosley (2000) emphasize that for teachers to be motivated and to be actively engaged in professional development their also teachers’ perceived need for their personal and professional interests being considered. They also believe in importance of meaningful integration of ground realities of the socio- cultural context in which they teach with general and specific ideas of developmental training. Similarly, Schwille et al. (2007) argue that to formulate policy and design effective programs for teacher professional development, the whole spectrum of teacher learning must be considered. This includes, for example, content of training and type of participation (Garet et al., 2001).

Rapidly growing body of research on the effects of the professional development programs on the teaching - learning process reveals that, depending on their cultural and educational background, pedagogical and content knowledge, previous professional experiences and current teaching practice (Al-Seyabi, 2013), different teachers are affected by professional development programs in different ways. For many in education, as Gabriel Diaz -Maggioli (2003) rightly contends, professional development is “an elusive term” (p.1). Some teachers grab any skill-enrichment opportunities that can substantially deepen their content knowledge in teaching and improve their teaching practice by further incorporating the acquired knowledge in practice (Little, 1993; Porter et al., 2000). Others are not easily engaged in any type of professional development programs; choosing to actively participate in some of them and not to become engaged in the others in spite of the content of the offered opportunities. Therefore, one of the unresolved controversies is over how it is better to design teacher professional development that can become a critical factor in teaching rather than a shoddy and limited issue in educational setting (Scribner, 1999).

To answer this question the authors of the paper pay particular attention to the professional development policy and practice available for the teaching community at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. This focus is supported by the analysis of professional development context, and types and aspects of professional development required and/or wanted by the Language Centre teaching community.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT THE LANGUAGE CENTRE OF SULTAN QABOOS UNIVERSITY

Scribner (1999) argues that professional development may look and be different in diverse settings, and can have a variety of dimensions. The Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University is a large language institution. It provides English language programs and courses that support students in their academic studies and prepare them for their future roles in the workplace. More than 230 teachers from 30 different countries work at the Language Centre. These teachers came to the Language Centre with their individual knowledge, skills, professional experience, linguistic and socio-cultural background to help students in Oman to improve their language skills, better adjust to the English language academic environment and prepare them for English-medium courses in their subject areas.

At the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University assuring quality is a cornerstone of all its developments since it may lead to its improvement and further advancement as a strong, quality conscious and knowledge rich (Heming, 2007 cited in Carroll et al, 2009:23) educational institution. It is a well-known fact that in the field of English language teaching quality is vastly defined. It is often described with regard to improvement in learning and teaching, to enhancement of knowledge, skills, services, opportunities, results, resources or to goal achievement, outcomes, standards, and overall satisfaction, and is described in such general terms as “excellence”, “good practices”, “high students’ outcome” or “professional teachers” (Vroeijenstijn, 1992:6). It is also used parallel to such concepts as “improvement of educational settings and goals”, “excellence in teaching and services”, and “high standards of delivery” or “good teaching” (Stones, 1994:235). It is clear in the literature that to assure quality in language education and to continuously reshape teaching-learning practice, higher education institutions should constantly focus on the issues of reflection (Farrell, 2007). Since very often these institutions represent continuums where “people vary in opportunity, ability, or propensity to reflect” (Copeland, Birmingham, De La Cruz, & Lewin, 1993: 348), it may be unreasonable to expect all teachers to engage in reflection at every moment or stage of their teaching. However, many language educators believe that to achieve quality in teaching, institutions have to showcase that they are able to maintain the high standards set out and to provide its faculty with tools to attain excellence in teaching. These may include induction, evaluation, mentoring, on-going support, and appropriate resources. However, according to White (1998) without providing the space in which to develop teachers’ professional skills and judgments, their teaching will be reduced to the level of craft, which will not provide a sound basis for quality in English language education (p.5).

The “nature” (Desimone, 2009) of the Language Centre has always been very different from other educational contexts because its teachers represent various social, cultural, linguistic and educational settings. This, on the one hand, has allowed for more professional development interactions. On the other hand, it has caused more variations in opinions, views and approaches to teaching and learning, and consequently, certain limitations of professional development programs. In order to cater for the diverse needs of the teaching community, enhance skill-development opportunities and assure high quality of teaching, the Language Centre administration made high quality professional development for these teachers as one of its priorities. One of the important initiatives of the administration related to addressing this issue of professional development and coordinating professional development was the establishment of Professional Development and Research Unit in Spring 2011that would organize events and activities for teachers in the areas of professional development and research in order to improve instruction, curriculum, assessment and evaluation, assure and continuously enhance quality of teaching and learning. Special emphasis was placed on the role of the unit for teachers' successful adjusting to complex academic environment of the Language Centre, achieving quality education and high standards of professionalism (Al-Seyabi, 2013). Other unit's objectives included providing opportunities for effective professional development; enhancing awareness of and access to available professional development and research resources at Sultan Qaboos University; creating an atmosphere conducive to research; facilitating the exchange of ideas and experience amongst Language Centre teachers and other researchers from inside and outside the university; contributing to consistent implementation of Sultan Qaboos University and the Language Centre faculty and staff induction and mentoring policies. The suggested structure of the unit included the Head and three members.

According to the policy document of the Professional Development and Research Unit, the Head of the Unit identifies goals, roles and domains of work. The Head and the members of the Unit are responsible for faculty professional development, research, and induction and mentoring programs for demonstrators and new teachers. Their key responsibilities involve identification of aims and goals; supervision and facilitation of professional development and research programs; identification and evaluation of professional development needs of the faculty and staff; investigation of professional development opportunities that take place in public and private colleges, universities and institutions inside and outside Oman; offering suggestions related to the acquisition of needed resources; representing the Language Centre on forums related to professional development and research; maintaining a database of relevant ESL/EFL conferences, symposia and training workshops that are available in the region and in the world; supervising and maintaining a webpage on professional development and training; creating short-term and long-term plans for professional development events throughout the academic year; providing various professional development strategies and effective options for individuals and groups of teachers; preparing certificates for the teachers who actively participate in professional development sessions; offering "professional development days"; engaging teachers in various types of reflective activities, including professional development programs, on-line professional development groups and action research projects; initiating and conducting projects aimed at enhancing professional development at the Language Centre, etc.

Similar to recent trends in local and global educational settings the Professional Development and Research Unit in the Language Centre designed its activity driven by Omani students' needs and with a clear intention of improving student learning (Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010), and made teacher training and professional development more purposeful and content-based. Clair and Adger (1999) contend that the elements of effective professional development for teachers incorporate the principles of adult learning. These teachers, according to Knowles (1980), need to be self-directed; display readiness to learn when they have a perceived need; and desire for immediate application of new skills and knowledge (cited in Clair and Adger, 1999). He further elaborates that effective professional development fosters critical reflection and meaningful collaboration. Moreover, it is internally coherent and rigorous, and it is sustained over the long term (Little, 1993; Renyi, 1996; Sparks and Hirsch, 1997, citied in Clair and Adger, 1999). Clair and Adger (1999) rightly observe that the above mentioned principles are very important for effective teachers' professional development. Nevertheless they seem to be insufficient in the educational contexts that are non-native or culturally diverse. For example, in Oman many English language teachers now realize the importance of representing the culture of the learners in the curricula and teaching these learners in familiar context that they can relate to (Tuzlukova and Al-Mahrooqi, 2009). As a consequence, there is a challenge that grounds in searching for effective and balanced approaches that would acknowledge both learners and people who help them to learn (Jaaffar, 2002) as essential human elements of the instructional process. This necessitates integration of clear vision of the role of the native language and local culture of the students in learning and teaching (Clair et al., 1998; Gonzalez & Darling-Hammond, 1997, cited in Clair and Adger, 1999) and representation of the culturally diverse background and educational experiences of the teaching community in designing and implementing professional development.

As a rule the events that were offered by Professional Development and Research Unit of the Language Centre attached good participation and positive feedback. Most providers of the professional development sessions were the Language Centre faculty. This allowed for sharing knowledge and experience among peers and improvement of the presenters' own presentation skills. Some sessions were conducted by the speakers from other educational institutions in Oman and by the speakers from outside Oman, who added to the professional discussions on many issues of teaching and learning. Apart from providing various training and professional development opportunities, Professional Development and Research Unit also disseminated information on local and international professional events that were circulated by email or posted on the webpage of the unit. Linguistic and pedagogical content knowledge played the main role in the professional development programs and activities that were aimed at developing new insights into teaching and gaining advanced understanding of the educational context and other essential elements of teaching to high standards. Creativity and novelty both in the initiatives and their implementation were viewed as prerequisites of successful systematic developmental programs that utilized mostly voluntary support of the internal and external experts.

Teachers' Needs and Professional Development

Since its inception, the Professional Development and Research Unit has been working hard to create a system of on-going professional development through initiatives and events that have been different in forms, focus and content and utilized mostly the voluntary support of internal and external experts. These included a variety of presentations, workshops, swap shops and computerized sessions related to classroom teaching and learning process (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Guskey, 1997) and focused, for example, on general pedagogy issues, language programs' management strategies, content knowledge, students' learning strategies, enhancement of job-related skills, etc. Though the unit and its members has followed a very efficient road map in achieving its aims and goals, it has also faced different challenges that included but were not limited to accommodating the best venues and timing of the events since teachers have different teaching schedules and different work locations on the premises of the university; identifying the exact contact hours that teachers would spend in the professional development activity and the span of time over which the activity takes place (Elmore and Burney, 1999; Guskey, 1997); addressing the diverse needs of the teaching community, motivating teachers to engage in professional development activities, budgeting time and resources for the events. To gain a complete scope of the challenges and to capture an overall picture of professional development needs, wants and areas of expertise, the Professional Development and Research Unit has conducted a number of centre-wide surveys that were aligned with the Language Centre specific focus of the professional development (Wayne et al, 2008). The aims of the surveys have also involved soliciting views and opinions of the teachers about the potential areas for developmental training and current professional development initiative. One of the surveys, for example, consisted of nine items that were formulated using integrated research findings by Johnson (2009). The survey was administered to the teachers who most actively participated in the professional development activities at the Language Centre. According to thirty eight participating teachers, professional development is an important part of their professional life and they do their best to attend as many professional development events as possible and be actively involved in their organizing and facilitating. In the response to the invitation to make open comments on the existing professional development, fifty six per cent of them reported that they considered it as adequate. They believed that it met the objectives of the teaching process and helped them to enhance their abilities and skills. One of the teachers, for example wrote that she was "pretty happy with what we had". However she felt that sometimes there was not enough time to attend the sessions that she would really like to. According to fifty eight per cent of the respondents, they have started to do many things differently since they attended professional development sessions. Sixty two percent of the respondents believed that they became more confident in applying new methods than before.

It was evident from the teachers' feedback that success factors of the professional development in the Language Centre can be attributed to task-specific approach based on designing and offering professional development sessions that focused on effective teaching approaches and methodologies; innovative technologies and computer-mediated learning environments. These sessions served both individual professional development and administrative goals and provided teachers with interesting and motivating ideas and insights. They also encouraged them to use what they have learnt in their classrooms in a variety of ways appropriate to their individual situations; gave the opportunity to the faculties not only to participate in the events but also to give stimulating and educational presentations and to share their knowledge, experience, talents as well as proficiency in modeling effective teaching practices.

However, the respondents felt that there was a need in focusing more on classroom practice, peer-learning, observation and co-teaching opportunities. In addition, teachers felt that "more help with technology is needed as our students are "digital natives" and there is a big age gap between them and many of our staff who have to learn how to use the technology on the job". According to them, "if teachers are competent with new technology, students' learning will be enhanced." Other suggestions focused on such issues of teaching and learning as learner autonomy, students' motivation, adjustment of students to university life, culture inclusive language learning, etc.

Quite interestingly, most teachers who participated in surveys believed that to cater for the diverse needs of Language Centre staff and to enhance skill-development opportunities it is important, for example, to conduct leadership seminars, educational project administration and management workshops, invite more visiting specialists/consultants on syllabus design and materials writing (e.g. materials that integrate development ideas with specific classroom context; organize more courses on CALL and educational technologies, sessions on classroom applied research methods and methodology and training for teaching students with special needs; provide higher quality professional development opportunities to new and/or younger less experienced teachers and regularly offer them training model lessons (simulations) to empower them in certain areas. The scope of the challenges, which were identified, included budgeting time and resources for professional development events; addressing the diverse teaching community with various educational, cultural background and teaching experience, including different experience of teaching in Oman; identifying in-house and external professional development opportunities and expertise; ensuring equality of opportunity and access to training and development to all faculties; making professional development high on the faculties' list; developing new insights to motivate teachers and actively engage them in responsive professional development programs and events which were consistent with the priorities of the Language Centre, need and wants of the faculties. The most desired types of training that can enhance teaching and learning, increase students' achievements, and improve and deepen teachers' content knowledge (Birman et al., 2000; Birman et al.,1998; Garet et al., 2001) included leadership seminars, sessions on classroom/applied research methods and procedures, lectures on common health problems and training for teaching students with special needs.

The results of this and other surveys have been summarized to identify challenges and to correlate the ascertained interests, needs, expertise and individual initiatives for customizing future training. It has become clearer that professional development program at the Language Centre implemented by Professional Development and Research Unit should meet internationally recognized minimum conditions: clarity of goals, adequate levels of challenge, capitalization on previous knowledge, sustainability over time, organizational support, alignment of achievement with the goals set (Pontz, 2003), integration in the daily lives of teachers, strong administrative support and use of strategies that are tailored to teachers' specific needs (Sparks, 2002), and include sessions that a) give practical tips for teaching, b) keep teachers in touch with new ways of applying old language teaching theories and methods of teaching and exemplify innovative practical ideas and resources, c) review educational goals and approaches in the light of socio-cultural and educational context and the reality of English language teaching in Oman and in the classrooms teachers deal with; d) facilitate professional advancement. It was also clear that at the time of continuous change and challenge it is important to ensure equality of opportunity and access to training which nurtures their intellectual and professional capacity to help all students achieve high standards of development and learning. To achieve this goal professional development at the Language Centre should not only reflect best developmental practices, but also monitor and accurately assess its impact. Desimone (2009) contends that such features as content focus, active learning, coherence, duration and collaborative participation create "a conceptual framework" that will contribute to offering an effective professional development program. Therefore, continuous monitoring, measurement and ultimate evaluation of the professional development in relation to the impact of this endeavour on teacher effectiveness and student learning can be helpful for institutional and individual improvement. These instruments can also serve as guides for future professional development efforts.

Indeed, the change of professional development policy and practice to cater diverse training needs of the teachers and provide opportunities for those with varied interests and responsibilities cannot occur in one day. According to Sparks (2002) this change is gradual and not radical coming as a result of planning, implementation, follow-up activities and joint efforts. Professional development at the Language Centre can ensure significant improvement if all ideas and initiatives target specific activities and outcomes, are embedded to meet the overall goals of the Language Centre and are integrated with context and realities of teaching-learning practices. Building on this integration, all developmental initiatives would be relevant to the needs and wants of the faculty and staff and to the goal of achieving high standards in the profession.

CONCLUSIONS

Professional development can bring excellence and ensure visible improvements in teaching-learning practice in language institutions. These improvements can be further insured by creating continuing interest and motivation of the teachers as target audience and paying particular attention to quality, to the development of teachers' knowledge and skills, and to the achievements of the students who deserve to be taught by highly qualified teachers. The example of the Professional Development and Research Unit at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University also demonstrates the importance of providing framework for planning; designing; implementing; monitoring and promoting professional development programs because teachers' satisfaction and the impact they make towards the attainment of quality education is grounded in their own control over the professional development, effective use of "in-house" professional expertise, support of events that correlate with everyday needs, typical teaching challenges in local educational environment and help them to build relationships with the broader educational community.

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