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BROKERING MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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In the process of reevaluating job descriptions for faculty at a university-housed intensive English program, one of the performance standards that came under committee scrutiny was professional development (PD). The existing standard read something along the lines of "participates in one PD activity per academic year." On the surface, the standard appears straightforward, and any criticism may seem odd. By digging a little deeper, however, the complexities of the issue become clearer.

Within our program, teachers regularly interact and learn about their colleagues' work. During the annual appraisal process, a few teachers became concerned when they discovered that their colleagues were documenting long lists of professional activities while they themselves took the quantity of one at face value. While originally intended to ease evaluation, having a numerical value in the standard led to a series of unanticipated issues with the interpretation.

The following questions were then posed to management:

- What is the true PD expectation?
- Are all PD activities weighted equally in an evaluation?
- If one person completes one activity and someone else does 15, will that first person be rated lower?
- All of these are valid questions, the answers to which relied on the program developing a shared understanding of the role of PD at the individual and administrative levels.

In response, the program completed an in-service PD inquiry workshop. The workshop asked that our faculty read and discuss selected excerpts

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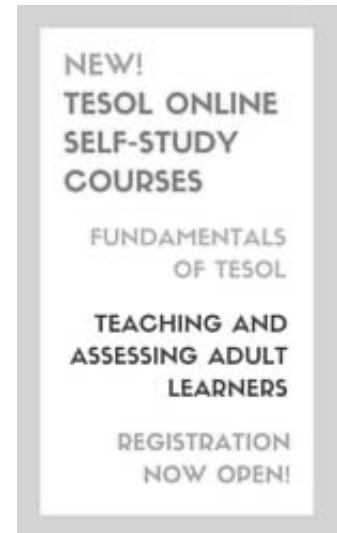


from the current literature on language teacher PD, as well as assess a variety of PD options. Two central takeaways emerged from the dialogue: (1) the onus of identifying and pursuing meaningful PD rests with the individual, but (2) the program administration is responsible for requiring and supporting PD. Below are eight key workshop themes further divided into teacher and program responsibilities, with the discussion linked to current PD literature.

The Teacher

- 1. Self-awareness.** The first step to engaging in meaningful PD is self-awareness of the gap that exists in one's practice, akin to a needs analysis which takes a deliberate and planned look at the current state and the desired end-state (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001). Being aware of one's gap can be challenging for practitioners and requires constant self-reflection and self-observation. A cornerstone to this self-awareness is that the gap cannot be filled as it is not a finite space; rather, it must constantly be nourished throughout the teacher's career (Curtis, 2008).
- 2. Initiative and Evaluation.** From a place of self-awareness, the teacher is now in a position to take the initiative needed to evaluate the PD options available (Mercado, 2012). PD opportunities can present themselves in a myriad of forms, including: self-guided activities (e.g., reading professional literature on a particular topic), training offered by the program or the larger university campus, or even through interaction with the wider profession through conferences and online communities. The range of PD opportunities is vast. Of course, not all of the opportunities are appropriate or necessary for the teacher; rather, this is a highly individual process. At this point, the teacher is responsible for evaluating the options in relation to his or her needs.
- 3. Planning.** Many annual reviews ask teachers to create PD goals for the year and then document their accomplishments. Taking this one step further to viewing PD as a career-long process, this PD plan should include short- and long-range goals, identifying current work, but also envisioning the future and the steps needed to work toward that vision. Anderson (2016) described this process as planting seeds; some seeds germinate and yield a crop quickly, while others take years to nurture before harvest. With this in mind, the teacher is responsible for making a personalized PD plan, well thought out, with steps to accomplish both short- and long-range PD goals.
- 4. Follow-through.** The plan, once made, must have follow-through. One important consideration related to follow-through is that administrators cannot force teachers to develop professionally; the individual must be intrinsically motivated to pursue meaningful PD (Bailey et al., 2001; Mercado, 2012). This reality underscores the importance of the three previous steps and the obligation on the part of the teacher to work through each of these steps when planning and undertaking PD.

The Program



5. **Requiring PD.** The program is charged with requiring and encouraging meaningful PD of every individual. Soppelsa (2012) described professional development plans as a partnership between the administration and the faculty members, where the teachers engage in meaningful PD and the administration acknowledges and rewards those activities. A robust PD program encourages active reflection from its faculty which can impact and enhance their teaching, the classroom experience, and ultimately student learning.
6. **Reasonable workloads.** Program administrators must be cognizant that PD takes time. Reflective inquiry, engagement with the larger professional community, and contributions to the program can only happen if teachers have time available outside of their teaching duties (Soppelsa, 2012). One of the challenges that many programs face is the requirement to do more with less. This often translates into increased teaching and service loads with fewer resources. Added to this situation is the “adjunctification” of the teaching workforce, where teachers may not receive paid compensation to pursue PD. Acknowledging these realities openly with the faculty in relation to the PD standard in their job description helps set reasonable expectations for PD and allows faculty to prioritize their PD plans accordingly. For example, if there is limited time available, a teacher may take on learning a new software program in lieu of an action research project, but still be assured that he or she is meeting the evaluation standard.
7. **Options.** For PD to be meaningful, teachers should be able to approach their PD activities with a sense of choice. Again, teacher growth is highly personal and dependent on the reflective practice of the individual. Administrations that promote a particular PD initiative or methodology run the risk of presenting information that conflicts with the teacher's internal belief system or that is not perceived as being in the individual's best interest (Mercado, 2012). At that point, the program loses buy-in.

By offering a range of PD opportunities, teachers can pursue those activities that they find most meaningful. This approach makes the greatest sense when we consider that teachers have individualized PD plans and a finite amount of time to dedicate to those plans. Flexibility, then, is necessary on the part of the program as to what it deems as satisfactorily meeting a PD requirement.

8. **Promoting reflective practice.** Much has been written on the value of reflective practice in our profession (see Bailey et al., 2001). Reflective practice is a powerful method which allows teachers to think about their craft, identify their gap areas, assess their needs, and gradually modify their teaching. While the responsibility for engaging in reflective practice lies with the teacher, programs can foster an environment where reflective practice is valued.

One way to encourage a community of reflective practice is to promote

opportunities to collaborate and share work (Mercado, 2012). These opportunities can be informal and formal. For instance, shared office space co-locates practitioners who, in the course of their daily activities, then have the chance to talk informally through the many different issues that come up organically, from lesson planning and activity design to classroom management strategies with problematic students. Alternatively, peer mentoring and coteaching require sustained and effortful interactions that are more directed in nature. In recognition that teachers face varying workloads, building opportunities to promote interaction along a spectrum can nurture the organization's reflective culture.

Closing Thoughts

Engaging in meaningful PD requires that both the teacher and the administration have a shared understanding of their respective roles. The teacher brings self-awareness, initiative, planning, and follow-through. The program maintains the expectation of ongoing PD within the scope of the teacher's overall workload, while respecting the individual nature of PD, the range of possibilities, and the reality of competing demands and/or limited resources.

The in-service workshop process allowed us to develop this shared understanding. While the job description still requires completion of one PD activity per year, we collectively recognize that this one activity should be highly individualized and supportive of self-reflection. Regardless of the context, brokering a sustainable path toward ongoing professional development will yield long-term benefits for programs that value learning for both teachers and students—a worthy pursuit indeed in our profession.

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