

“ONLY “REAL” TEACHERS ATTEND”: SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR PRE-SERVICE ENGAGEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Preparing pre-service teachers for the variety of classes, students and experiences they encounter at the outset of their careers is an exercise in approximation and estimation. United States teacher educators attempt to simulate authentic teaching experiences through an array of activities, such as micro-teaching, student teaching, observations and case studies and other practically-oriented experiences; yet, beginning teachers still report feeling unprepared or lacking “real” or practical ESL/EFL/ELT knowledge and experiences. Typically, at least in the United States, teacher educators may suggest, but do not *expect*, involvement in ‘in-service’ professional development activities until after the initial licensing or training program. This article outlines a philosophy of *pre-service* professional development because it is overlooked within United States teacher training programs. Reasons why pre-service teachers should be actively involved in ‘in-service’ professional development experiences while they are still in their undergraduate licensing programs will be delineated. More specifically, we suggest that there is a need to more strongly encourage and perhaps facilitate undergraduate future-teachers’ attendance and involvement at educational conferences.

Articulating the importance of professional development for everyone

In the United States, ‘professional development’ is a concept frequently and unthinkingly bandied about by many educators. We all seem to know the importance of professional development, many of us engage in taking and/or providing professional development opportunities, and yet it remains an expectation for beginning educational professionals without an articulated justification. It is simply assumed that beginning teachers would just *know* the importance of professional development too. An example of this sentiment unexpectedly materialized in a post-conference article from a current undergraduate TESOL student. Liz wrote,

Before attending the WI TESOL conference, I had always thought of conferences as things that only “real” teachers attend and as something that I would do when I started my career. However, attending the conference as an undergraduate was extremely beneficial. I was able to converse with numerous individuals who are currently teaching ESL, attend several interesting sessions, and receive free materials from publishers to use in the future... Part of continuing on the journey of learning is working to develop as a professional. I found that attending conferences is a great way to network, acquire new knowledge, and examine different perspectives on issues in the field. After attending the WI TESOL conference, I decided that I want and need to go to the International TESOL conference this spring!

In order to engage in the continual learning that is essential to high quality teaching, it is vital for beginning teachers to understand the importance of their connection to the field, and to the ever-developing knowledge base. Professional development activities which can accomplish this include conference attendance, listserv participation, research and dissemination of knowledge and practice and sharing information through writing for publication.

Many university professors require their graduate students to become involved in professional organizations and conferencing. The rationale behind their involvement is associated with the long standing academic practice of sharing research findings and the related theoretical concepts. This territory is usually reserved for scholars and graduate students, at least in American institutions. Because undergraduate students receive little encouragement in this area, a push for greater involvement is essential. This is not a radical or groundbreaking idea *per se* but its rarity, at least on American campuses, creates the need for a renewed call to include professional development in undergraduate formation.

A brief summary of the usual licensing process in the United States is necessary in order to understand how participation in professional development has been overlooked (however, teacher licensing among states may vary widely). A student with an education major/minor takes a foundation of liberal arts courses to provide a broad knowledge base as well as courses specific to a content area. Progressing through the program, students normally take fewer general courses and proportionately more education courses. In their content and educational courses, a professor may announce a conference. The student is required to complete the PRAXIS I and II, several hours of observation, service working with children, and

then he/she “student teaches” under the observation and guidance of faculty and a cooperating teacher. Finally, after completing a portfolio or other documentation of the teaching experience, the student receives a baccalaureate degree and a teaching license issued by the state. Essentially, satisfactory coursework and practical experiences within the school system are the main components of earning a license. This process has been modified significantly over the last twenty years so as to make the experience more practical and to weed out those who should not teach.

Another change in teacher licensing and expectations is that all practicing teachers must now continue their professional development throughout their careers to maintain licensure. Although some undergraduates may hear about opportunities, they do not necessarily act on them, because they do not see the direct application to their later work. Newly graduated teachers only realize the significance of the professional community and the expectations for their involvement once they have established themselves in their careers. The source of this, we believe, is the lack of discussion of professional development and lack of expectation for involvement within teacher education programs. Many teacher preparation programs simply do not require future teachers (i.e., pre-service teachers) to become part of the professional community. This void does these future teachers a disservice.

Furthermore, this void is not perpetuated only by the university personnel. When pre-service teachers themselves are first asked to participate in professional development experiences while undergraduates, they frequently do not grasp how they apply to them. It is only after attending conferences, eavesdropping on a listserv, collaborating in research or writing (like the co-author of this article), and/or presenting or volunteering for a professional organization that they begin to see the value in practice.

Preparing pre-service teachers for “reality”

Kate works with a variety of learners, both pre- and in-service professionals, who are obtaining a state add-on license, masters in TESOL, or a TEFL certificate. The TESOL students have an initial license in a content area ranging from foreign languages, to core content areas, to more specialized content areas (home economics, physics, etc). Most will teach throughout the states of Wisconsin and Minnesota in urban or rural school districts. They may be the only ESL-trained educator in their

school, and, for some, in their district. The TEFL students generally have only an undergraduate major/minor combination without any education coursework. These students may work anywhere in the ELT world. Kate's main objective with these teachers is to give them instructional skills and tools to make them competent, confident and successful in any context they choose.

Every year, Kate manages to obtain a modest amount of funds to allow some of the pre-service student teachers in the TESOL/TEFL program from our home institution to attend the International TESOL convention. Kate has been successful in supplementing their funding only, and they invariably must contribute substantially to the endeavor. Interestingly, every year, they comment that participants at the conference were pleasantly surprised to see undergraduate, pre-service teachers in attendance. These specific pre-service teachers are equally surprised by this response; due to course requirements, expectations, and the frequency of opportunities offered, they think this is common practice in all teacher education programs. They do not understand that this is atypical and due to a relatively uncommon philosophy of involvement at the earliest stages of preparation.

Why, then, do we adopt this philosophy in our own practice? U.S. Government statistics show that 25% of new teachers, and up to 50% of new teachers in high poverty areas, do not remain in the field past five years (NCREL n.d.). What factors will keep new, fresh teachers in our schools? New teachers need a support system. A system not tied to evaluations, hiring, promotions, and salary increases. They need peers and networks for sharing practices, problems and solutions. They need mentors who have had similar experiences and can share ideas, materials, provide guidance and (occasionally) commiserate. This is particularly true for rural educators or expatriates who find themselves in isolated circumstances. This is one area in which professional networks and experiences generated before entry into the workforce, such as conferencing, help the new teacher.

Another area in which a solid immersion in professional development organizations and activities can assist the new teacher is keeping their knowledge base up to date with current research and instructional practices as well as offering differing insights into knowledge and practice that were not necessarily presented to them in their teacher education programs. There is simply no way for any teacher preparation program to teach all perspectives and information available. Nor can

teacher preparation program personnel be certain that the learners have indeed learned what was taught. With all the best intentions, programs do the most they can with limited resources and personnel, but it is simply unrealistic to think that any program can prepare every teacher for all the possibilities, issues, and challenges they will experience. Continued learning through professional involvement can help fill in gaps in knowledge, can provide alternative perspectives, skills, strategies, and belief systems, and can extend the pre-service teacher's understanding of previously learned concepts.

While standard for experienced teachers, a less commonly considered challenge for new teachers is 1) knowing what educational materials and resources are available in the field, and 2) finding and obtaining them. Their students deserve a well-equipped teacher who has numerous engaging ideas at his/her disposal. Although schools provide textbooks and supplies, teachers need samples of textbooks to evaluate. When these resources are not available, teachers tend to employ one text or published program of study as the curriculum without analysis of its merits and drawbacks. Furthermore, beginning teachers need technique resource books and idea books, for instance, excellent resources like Klippel's *Keep Talking* and Linstromberg's *The Standby Book*. They need manipulatives, posters, non-fiction and fiction texts, and big books for reading, among other items. They need a professional library specific to their specialization or content area. At professional conferences, they can have person to person interaction with publisher representatives and learn about various resources. They can peruse books and purchase materials. This is not merely about consuming either; they ought to know the whole range of available items so they can appropriately select them and advise their colleagues and districts about the available resources.

Professional organizations also help the pre-service teacher to learn about job openings and land their first positions. The networks established while undergraduates serve them amply when they exit college with their diplomas and licenses in search of that first teaching position. Within professional organizations, members share job openings and ask for recommendations. Professional organizations post jobs, train members for interviewing or resume writing, and offer interviewing at conferences. For the new teacher, this is one important feature of professional involvement that is very practical and meaningful right away. Many pre-service teachers involved in

professional organizations are even recruited just prior to graduation. Kate has witnessed countless students become involved during their undergraduate years who were recruited before finishing their degrees and many who had multiple offers. The essential factor was accessibility and surprisingly few American students are made aware of this invaluable tool.

The “Ivory Tower” concept is prevalent in society and higher education is regularly criticized for bloated beliefs involving an egotistical sense of superiority and a matching lack of familiarity with practical, real-life issues. Likewise teacher education courses are habitually criticized for being inauthentic and/or failing to address the real issues that future teachers will encounter. Professional engagement directly with other members of the discipline can provide insights into the issues and realities of the classroom like few other experiences (with the exceptions being observations, student teaching and volunteering). When we treat these future teachers like the *peers* they will be and include them in complex issues and problem-solving conversations, we are in fact providing them with mentoring and strategies for coping with an array of problems that new teachers (and veteran teachers) experience. By being frank and direct, we are not leading them down the garden path by making the daily existence of the classroom teacher appear easier or rosier. This openness will directly help them cope and remain as teachers.

Other constructive reasons for pre-service teachers’ inclusion into the professional teaching community and organizations included the following needs:

1. to see authors and researchers as real people, so that the information they provide is more real and approachable. Also, to reinforce the concepts read and discussed in class in an oral, informal format, which will allow for further questioning and connections. The information becomes more meaningful as it becomes more personal and experiential.
2. to learn from diverse perspectives. There is also a need to bring these diverse perspectives back into the teacher education classes, because this process furthers the professional conversations and learners’ depth of understanding.
3. to understand their own roles in the development of the profession’s body of knowledge, so that they will engage in action research and share their ideas with the educational community. As TESOL teachers, they will also be

connected to a network beyond borders and will be able to contribute to greater dialogues with colleagues worldwide.

4. to comprehend their role as a member of their field. Treating them as peers and expecting them to behave as such sets standards of maturity and professionalism.

Concluding comments

The philosophy underlying these ideas is the furtherance of knowledge construction inside and outside the classroom while deepening understandings and facilitating professional connections. Although this is not a new idea, it is nonetheless necessary to create a further push for professional development among undergraduates because it is simply not yet an expectation. This is in part because it may be difficult for students to see how much the benefits outweigh the costs, since there are costs of money and time, thus it is incumbent upon teacher educators to share what exactly the rationale is so that the learners are fully informed. They can then make choices and seek funding opportunities, for example. Moreover, students need to consider the difficulties of obtaining conferencing opportunities once they are established in their teaching careers because of less free time and family responsibilities.

Another highly favorable outcome is that when this level of expectation and mentoring starts even before they start their careers, teachers may be more likely to serve professional organizations later. This is how professional organizations continue to reenergize and venture in new directions. For example, we can offer the anecdote of one undergraduate who is now a peer. Among many former students who have done well and exceeded Kate's expectations, one student clearly stands out. "Molly" began attending regional Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conferences in Fall 2001 as a requirement for her TESOL Methods course. Immediately afterward, she approached Kate to assist with her research. Molly and Kate engaged in research on interlanguage development in writing, and she went on to present variations on this topic at several conferences regionally, nationally and internationally where she continued to learn about the field and develop her knowledge and skills. Molly was hired within two months of her graduation, and she now teaches ESL in a Madison, Wisconsin elementary school. At the most recent TESOL Convention in Tampa, she presented with other colleagues from the network

she has continued to develop in Wisconsin. We receive emails from her nowadays. They are sometimes personal, but most often it is because she serves on the Board of Wisconsin TESOL. She is now the colleague Kate prepared her to be. She and others like her are the future educational leaders the field needs.

References

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