4 Fostering professional development as a teacher

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Key words

Teacher autonomy

Reflective practitioner

Tools for reflection

Community of Practice (CoP)

Practitioner research

In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What role does teacher autonomy play in the growth and development of a teacher?

Why is reflection essential in a teacher's professional development?

How can teachers foster their own professional development?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

Professional development already begins during pre-service teacher education. In Austria, the year 2015 marked a turning point in pre-service teacher education programmes with the introduction of a new *Lehramt* teaching degree. The new curriculum was designed to provide students with a sound understanding of foreign language methodology as a tool for their future teaching. In the English teacher education courses, students should "gain knowledge of the relevant theoretical basics for differentiated language teaching" and "innovative forms of teaching and learning" (University of Graz, 2019-2021, p. 173). They should further develop "the ability to critically reflect on communicative language teaching" and "to evaluate teaching and learning materials as well as compile new materials themselves" (University of Graz, 2019-2021, p. 173). To achieve these goals, the new curriculum was adjusted to accommodate more methodology classes. In addition, students in the teacher education programme were required to complete more periods of practical training than before.

Although significant changes were made to the teacher education programme, one aspect has remained, namely that future teachers are introduced to Newby et al.'s (2007) European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages/*Europäisches Portfolio für Sprachenlernende in Ausbildung* (EPOSTL/EPOSA) early on in their studies. The EPOSTL is a tool in which students can self-assess a wide range of skills that are

important for effective language teaching and track their progress in said skills over time, thus documenting their professional development. In doing so, pre-service teachers learn to "reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences" that help prepare them for their teaching careers (Newby et al., 2007, p. 5). As continuous professional development is becoming increasingly vital not only for newly qualified but also for well-established teachers, the EPOSTL can support students in pre-service teacher education in acquiring the skills and competences they need in order to see professional development as a lifelong process. Closely related to this, they can acquire and improve the personal development skills they need to stay up to date with innovations in areas such as methodology and materials design as well as tools such as digital media. In this way, teachers gain agency over their professional development as autonomous teachers.

Professional development and teacher autonomy

As has been pointed out in the previous section, it is a widely accepted view that the development and growth of a teacher is a lifelong continuous process, which starts during pre-service teacher education but goes far beyond that. Therefore, just as the notion of learner autonomy can be seen as one way of becoming a successful learner, we can consider the concept of teacher autonomy as a way of becoming a more successful teacher. In this context, Little (1995) makes the following observation:

> Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest degree of affective and cognitive control over the teaching process, and exploring the freedom this confers (p. 179).

The exact meaning of the concept of teacher autonomy has been the subject of much debate in the literature on second language education, and to date no real consensus has been found. However, according to McGrath (2000), it is possible to identify two dimensions of the concept: self-directed professional action or development on the one hand and freedom from control by others on the other. Smith (2003) further elaborates on the two dimensions identified by McGrath (2000) and differentiates between the following sub-concepts:

In relation to professional action:

1. Self-directed professional action, i.e., self-directed teaching

2. Capacity for self-directed professional action, i.e., teacher autonomy (capacity to self-direct one's teaching)

3. Freedom from control over professional action, i.e., teacher autonomy (freedom to self-direct one's teaching)

In relation to professional development:

1. Self-directed professional development, i.e., self-directed teacher-learning

2. Capacity for self-directed professional development, i.e., teacher-learner autonomy (capacity to self-direct one's learning as a teacher)

3. Freedom from control over professional development, i.e., teacher-learner autonomy (freedom to self-direct one's learning as a teacher) (p. 4)

In his discussion of teacher autonomy, Smith (2003) focuses particularly on the role of the teacher as learner, thus coining the term 'teacher-learner autonomy', and bases his definition on one of the most widely recognized understandings of learner autonomy: "[a]n autonomous learner is an active participant in the social processes of classroom learning, but also an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows" (Dam et al., 1990, p. 102).

In line with Dam et al. (1990), Smith (2003) defines teacher-learner autonomy as "the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in co-operation with others" (p. 1). It goes without saying that continuous professional development can only unfold when teachers see themselves as lifelong learners. In other words, teaching in the classroom and activities connected with it should be seen as learning opportunities for one's own growth and development.

Professional development and the reflective practitioner

One fundamental aspect of a teacher's growth and development is, without doubt, the capacity and willingness to critically reflect on their own teaching practice as well as on the beliefs, attitudes and values they hold about teaching.

Professional development, therefore, draws on the teacher's own inner capacity for change:

> It is centred on personal awareness of the possibilities for change, and of what influences the change process. [...] It is a self-reflective process because it is through questioning old habits that alternative ways of being and doing are able to emerge (Head & Taylor, 1997, p. 1).

It has therefore been recognized for decades in the field of teacher education that professional development must be rooted in critical and reflective thinking. In this context, Wallace's (1991) model of the reflective practitioner is arguably one of the most widely known. There are two stages of Wallace's (1991) model, namely, a trainee's existing knowledge and experience in the pre-training phase of their career (Stage 1) and reflection on previous teaching experience and professional education/development with the final goal of working towards professional competence (Stage 2). In stage 2, there is a reciprocal relationship between what he calls received knowledge (i.e., language skills, linguistic theory) and experiential knowledge (i.e., professional knowledge gained through classroom practice). In other words, the pre-service teachers should reflect on received knowledge in the light of experiential knowledge, and experiential knowledge should in turn feed back into their received knowledge through a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Wallace's (1991) model of reflection can easily be applied to teacher education. For example, in stage 1 pre-service teachers are given the opportunity to gather concrete classroom experience by micro-teaching elements. In stage 2, they then describe and reflect on what happened in the classroom and use their received knowledge to find explanations for and solutions to what occurred. They then go back to the classroom with the findings from stage 2.

Tools for practitioner reflection

There are several ways for teachers to critically reflect on their professional actions. One way is keeping a teaching diary or journal in which they document their practice and note down any thoughts and feelings connected with it. According to Bailey (1990), a teacher diary can be used "to reflect, experiment, criticize, doubt, express frustration, and raise questions" (p. 218). Bailey (1990) further recommends that teachers do not only record their practice, and everything related to it, but also review what they have written and look for recurrent themes and patterns. Although Bailey et al. (2001) admit that diary writing is an inherently private endeavour, they also propose that teachers share their writing with colleagues as this does not only promote critical reflection of their thoughts, ideas, and actions but also establishes a critical dialogue between colleagues. It is often this cooperative interaction among colleagues which leads to teacher learning. For example, by sharing good or even bad practice and changed action in the classroom with their colleagues, teachers can consider other perspectives of a given situation and ways of handling it in future.

Another tool for reflection and inquiry to foster professional growth is the observation of other teachers. According to Gebhard and Oprandy (1999), observing others teach helps teachers "to construct and reconstruct [their] own knowledge about teaching and thereby to learn more about [themselves] as teachers" (p. 35). In other words, observing colleagues or teachers from other institutions gives practitioners a better sense of what they are doing in their classrooms and can inspire them to critically reflect on their own teaching practice. Thus, peer observation is not only beneficial to the person being observed but also to the teacher carrying out the observation. In fact, observing colleagues teaching can prompt teachers to reflect on their own approaches to learning, as well as on the methods, techniques and materials they are using.

Team-teaching in various forms (e.g., between two equal partners or between mentor and mentee) is also regarded as an effective tool to raise teachers' awareness of their own attitudes and values. Buckley (2000) suggests the following definition of team teaching:

> Team teaching involves a group of instructors working purposefully, regularly, and cooperatively to help a group of students learn. As a team, the teachers work together in setting goals for a course, designing a syllabus, preparing individual lesson plans, actually teaching students together, and evaluating the results. They share insights, arguing with one another [...] (p. 4).

According to Freeman and Richards (1996), this type of collaboration, which requires shared responsibility inside and outside the classroom, gives teachers an opportunity for heightened reflection. Being required to synchronize teaching acts means that team teachers must negotiate and discuss their thoughts, values, and actions in ways that solo teachers do not encounter because they are working on their own. With regard to professional development, team teaching can foster learning from each other as it encourages critical reflection and dialogue, thus helping teachers to identify new classroom practices and motivating them to pursue life-long learning.

Community of practice

Another way for teachers to enhance their skills is to seek out colleagues or peers with whom a so-called community of practice (CoP) can be formed. A CoP can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular field or area, or it can be created deliberately with the goal of gaining knowledge related to a specific field. Through the process of sharing information and experiences with

the group, members learn from each other and have an opportunity to develop personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This can be done on an informal level through discussions with colleagues and peers or by going to conferences and sharing thoughts and ideas with like-minded people. A CoP can provide teachers with a network, often beyond their immediate professional network, in which they share experiences, explore new ideas, and, most importantly, generate new knowledge, all of which can help them to develop professionally.

Practitioner research

Teachers can also develop professionally by carrying out practitioner research. This can be shared with teachers' CoP. It can also be made public at conferences or in the form of publications. The most common types of practitioner research are action research (see Practical Application at the end of this chapter) and exploratory practice (EP). According to Watts (1985), AR can be defined as the "process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using techniques of research" (p. 118). A common reason for practitioners implementing AR is to bring about some kind of change or improvement to classroom practice. In contrast to this, EP focuses solely on understanding what is happening in the classroom or as Allwright (2005) puts it: "Exploratory Practice (EP) is an indefinitely sustainable way for classroom language teachers and learners, while getting on with their own learning and teaching, to develop their own understandings of life in the language classroom" (p. 361). The main advantage of EP is that it does not take away classroom time as it provides a framework that allows for teaching, learning and research in which both teachers and learners are involved in the process of understanding what is happening in the classroom.

In order to show the importance of professional development in the teaching profession, I would like to share my story of professional growth over decades of working as a language teacher.

My story of professional growth

After I completed my pre-service teacher education at the English and the French Departments of the University of Graz in the mid-eighties, I spent a whole school year teaching a first-year French and a second-year English class at a *HAK*, a secondary school with a business focus. For me as a young teacher, this was a highly valuable experience as I was responsible for my two classes in terms of planning, giving marks and talking to parents on parents' evening. In my daily teaching, I followed the principles of the communicative approach and used both coursebooks

and additional materials of my own to achieve my teaching goals. Due to this approach, I seemed to be seen by my new colleagues as the young and innovative teacher who had brought a breath of fresh air into the daily teaching routine.

After completing my teacher education, I moved on to teaching English and French in adult education and finally at university level. Although I received excellent feedback from my learners at the English Department right from the beginning, I was not satisfied and had the feeling that something was missing in my teaching. However, I could not exactly pinpoint this 'something'. What is more, I felt that I was not developing as a teacher although I regularly attended in-service teacher seminars, which sometimes even lasted a few days. This was the main reason why I then took the decision to delve deeper into the field of EFL methodology by doing a Ph.D.. Little did I know at that moment that this would be the best decision I had ever taken in my whole teaching career as it brought me into contact with the concept of learner autonomy, which for me personally was an eye-opening experience.

It was first and foremost the following quote by Dieter Wolff (1994) which prompted me to rethink my teaching practice and also made me understand most clearly what was missing in my own classroom:

> In lessons designed according to constructivist principles, the classroom becomes a learning workshop, the learners become researchers who independently gather, analyze and process knowledge (p. 422, editors' translation).

I realised that, up to that time, I had never given my learners a say in decisions relating to their learning; instead I, the teacher, had been the one to determine the content, the goals and the methodology, and it had always been me who was entirely responsible for the assessment of the outcome of my learners' learning. I would not exactly say that my learners had been passive receivers of knowledge, but at least there was no genuine interaction and dialogue among them, apart from the traditional pair- or group work activities.

There was another quote from the literature on learner autonomy which influenced me deeply and made me see my learners in a different light:

> For a teacher to commit himself to learner autonomy requires a lot of nerve, not least because it requires him to abandon any lingering notion that he can somehow guarantee the success of his learners by his own effort. Instead, he must dare to trust the learners (Little, 1991, p. 45).

My teaching had always been guided by the conviction that my explanations were the decisive factor for my learners' successful learning progress. I now realized that

I had also often intervened when my learners were grappling for meaning instead of believing in their capacity to arrive at a solution on their own. Eventually, it was the classroom practice described by Leni Dam (1995), the most widely known practitioner of learner autonomy, which set me off on a new and hugely rewarding path on my journey as a teacher.

Some changes that I integrated into my teaching which are informed by learner autonomy include having students sit and work in groups of four, which facilitates a learner-centred teaching/learning situation. I also included activities like learner diaries to foster reflection, evaluation and goal-setting as well as peer-reviewing, peer-teaching and collaborative text writing tasks. All these activities contribute to establishing a continuous dialogue between the learners themselves and between the learners and me, the teacher.

According to Smith (2011, n.p.), "[e]ngaging with and developing learner autonomy, and taking control of one's own professional development as a teacher are inseparable". From my own experience, I can entirely confirm this statement. As soon as I had implemented aspects of a pedagogy for autonomy in my classroom, I started to explore my own teaching practice (see, for example, Burkert, 2011) and over time became a practitioner researcher. My preferred research methods are semi-structured interviews, questionnaires with open and closed questions, and data collection through audio-recordings. I also found my CoP in the Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group (LASIG) of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), in which I have been serving as a committee member since 2008.

I have, in the meantime, published multiple articles in the field of learner autonomy, attended a great number of international conferences, and even organized two conferences in Graz, in 2012 and 2017, respectively. I have also had the privilege of changing and developing as a teacher with three of the leading figures in the field of learner autonomy: Leni Dam, David Little and Lienhard Legenhausen. However, my professional development is by no means complete as is very well expressed in the following statement from the conference report on The Canarian Conference on Developing Autonomy in the Classroom: "This autonomy puzzle will always have missing pieces as it is a never-ending process which forces us to continue to grow as we look for new insights" (Conference Report, La Laguna, Tenerife, 2003).

Conclusion

Both the theoretical input as well as my account of professional development seem to clearly show how important it is for teachers to develop and grow throughout

their careers and to see themselves as lifelong learners. Continually reflecting on one's own teaching practice and staying open for new developments and changes are prerequisites for successful teacher growth. Furthermore, by exploring one's teaching through practitioner research and creating networks with like-minded people in CoPs, a teacher undoubtedly adds another dimension to their own professional development.

Practical Application

Example
Goal: the teacher will reflect on and improve their practice by carrying out action research (AR)

Activity: AR project

Rationale: to explore practitioner research; to promote teachers' professional development

Pre-knowledge: familiarity with the group of learners and their language level

Procedure:
1. An AR project needs to be planned well. This includes identifying a research topic, question or problem that is related to the teacher's challenges in the classroom, e.g., my students are not doing their homework and I want to know why.

2. The teacher develops an AR plan which outlines what to do, when, and how. In the case of students not doing their homework, a teacher may hand out a questionnaire or conduct individual feedback sessions. This can be done at the beginning of the class or at the end, online or in person.

3. The third step is implementing the AR plan and gathering data.

4. The next step is to review the data and develop a possible solution, e.g., a rewards system for doing homework.

5. The final step is applying a possible solution, e.g., a rewards system, and observing the results to see if it can really solve the problem being studied.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Go back and read Anja's story about her professional development. What do you do to develop professionally as a teacher?

2. Try to find out what your own CoP is or could be.

3. Teacher as practitioner researcher: Identify one aspect of your teaching practice that you would like to explore further and plan a small-scale study you could carry out with your students.

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Suggestions for further reading

Burns, A. (2009). *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

This book is a practical guide intended for teachers and teacher educators new to the concept of action research.

Hanks, J. (2017). *Exploratory practice in language teaching: Puzzling about principles and practices*. Palgrave Macmillan.

This book deals with the development of Exploratory Practice since the early 1990s and draws on case studies, vignettes and narratives from teachers and learners engaging in EP around the world.

Richards, J. C., & Farrell, T. S. C. (2005). *Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher learning*. Cambridge University Press.

This book offers a variety of tools for teachers to engage in professional development in language teaching.

Commentary on reflection questions

1. Responses will vary based on teachers' experience, work context, job description, etc.

2. You may have colleagues at your own school or colleagues with whom you did your initial teacher education, or colleagues from other areas or countries who you have met at any teacher education event or conference and with whom you could discuss your teaching practice and any concerns you might have. You could also plan a small-scale research project together.

3. You may want to know what your learners think of materials you are using or activities you are doing in the classroom. You could conduct a small questionnaire study with your students. Alternatively, if you are not satisfied, for example, with

your learners' class participation, you could have your learners conduct short interviews with each other for which they have to devise the questions themselves.