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info.eltireland@gmail.com   @ELTIreland

elt-ireland.com

Considerations in Teacher Development

by Christohper Farrell (Centre of English Studies)

The area of best practice in Teacher Development has become quite a pressing topic in the ELT industry in Ireland in the past decade or so, with a multitude of different accreditation bodies, conference topics, journal articles, and publications addressing it in one form or another. But at the heart of all considerations into best practice in TD is what initially appears to be a very simple questions: 'how do we 'do' teacher development?' Further to this, who actually 'does' teacher development?

It seems to me that these questions lie at the heart of any institutional ethos on teacher development and therefore they must require a careful evaluation. The question of what a 'teacher development event' is will not be delved into in this article, instead we will focus on the 'who' of the teacher development process. We will look at the key stakeholders involved in the process of Teacher Development and some of the key decisions which must be made for and by each of them.

A web of possibilities in professional development.

Pic by Pixabay

Key Stakeholders:

The Institution:

Having the best interests of the school as a business at heart. The institution will support teacher development as long as it adds value to the product which it is delivering, namely language teaching. In the nuanced balance between investing in increasing the quantity of students in the school, and investing in the long term quality of the education on offer, the institution will tend to favour the former, especially in peak business times. The implications for Teacher Development in this balance is that it is often neglected, put on the long finger, superficially attended to, or perhaps even completely ignored. This can create an environment of 'getting it done as best we can' with no focus on the progression of the teacher's career and no specific attention paid to the strengths or weaknesses of an individual teacher: basically the antithesis of the strive for academic quality inherent in teacher development.

However, even in institutions which are ruled primarily by this 'short-termism' there are some positives which can't be discounted. The academic department of a Language Teaching Organisation (LTO) must work in tandem with the marketing and sales departments and within this cooperation, find mutual benefits. Within this balance between quality and quantity, academic management can often be forced to think to streamline their approach to teacher development and focus on what is essential, rather than just on what is interesting. From an individual teacher's perspective, 'difficult' teaching conditions as created from a focus on quantity and keeping agents happy can also help to provide challenges within which a good teacher will find ways to grow. Adversity in this case can help to forge flexible and adaptable teachers, provided they are already self-motivated and willing to 'develop' themselves.

Management:

"In terms of 'teacher development', what does an average teacher want?"

In this category, I include any number of positions within the sphere of academic management whether it is a Director of Studies, an Academic Manager, or an Assistant Director of Studies. The roles and titles may change depending on the size and type of organisation in question but with regards teacher development, most will have the same type of agenda. They will want their teaching staff to be as 'developed', as motivated, as flexible, as innovative, as reliable and as committed to their profession as possible. They will have an idea of best practice in terms of their own teaching experience (usually) and in terms of what they have heard in feedback from students, what they understand of the requirements of accreditation bodies, and what they have garnered from the observation and appraisal process. So, as they have the opportunity to look at the bigger picture and interpret data from a variety of sources, they are typically best placed to implement a top down teacher development programme which will shape the teaching staff into models of best practice according to the needs as they see them. It must be considered, however, that they are not only involved in the process of managing down, to the teaching staff, but they must also manage up, and across, and deal with budgetary considerations, marketing strategies, administration, and sundry other duties which too often eat up valuable time

which could be spent on the academic quality of an organisation. This can often mean that their good intentions in the area of TD come to naught.

Teachers:

In terms of 'teacher development', what does an average teacher want? Perhaps one teacher will want to feel as though the job that they are doing has serious academic merit, and be supported as such. Maybe they will want to be provided with models of best practice to show them how they can provide in the best way for their learners. They could want to expand their roles and move into another area of ELT like materials development, for example. Or, alternatively, all of the above, whatever is on the shelf. I think we can agree that most teachers will want to see that there is some commitment from the LTO to 'further' them, to aid their development in whatever way is possible. Additionally, a lot of teachers may appreciate being aided in their development towards their own bespoke model of best practice rather than just being told what to do. This too often lies at the heart of the conflict between teachers and management in the realm of teacher development at a number of organisations.

It is often easier for management to organise a top down approach to professional development which is designed and delivered by experts, and guides teachers towards what is required of them by the institution, than it is to allow teachers to experiment and research and find their own voice as teachers. Some institutions will view it as a far safer investment for TD to be institution-led, to be top down, and to be closely controlled by the management, who are, after all, the ones who know what the institution needs, and what the learners want. With this, is there room for teacher input in the process, can the direction of teacher development in an institution and the type and structuring of TD events be a negotiated process?

Issues to consider

There are a couple of issues at play here which seem fairly irreconcilable. The first being the fact that there is no clear definition on what is the role of the teacher. Or rather there are too many definitions on what the teacher's role is. Harmer (2007) gives a succinct list of teacher roles including assessor, observer, and controller; Harrison and Killion (2007) include curriculum specialist and school leader among theirs. Perhaps Richards (1990) hits the nail on the head by declaring that "we are all complex amalgams of a range of teacher roles" (pp 138). The institution will see the teachers in a range of roles, the management will see a different set of roles, and the teachers themselves, perhaps, another list entirely. What you are left with is a Venn diagram of confusion with most LTOs unwilling or unable to pick apart the roles and responsibilities from it all.

The second issue is the fact that each teaching context exists within certain constraints created by its own very nature. For example, within a private language teaching organisation the focus must always be on keeping the students happy, keeping the agents happy, and keeping the doors open. However, with a university, there may a results and progress focus, and often very little time to achieve these. With secondary or primary school there is not only a paucity of time and support, but there is also the fact that you are competing with so many other subjects and, frequently, intercultural issues, which you are not equipped to deal with. For those of us working in private language centres we must once again attempt to find an acceptable and workable balance somewhere between quality and quantity and ask ourselves what our minimum threshold of acceptability in terms of the standard of teaching that we will accept will be, and where are we willing to lose ground? Along with this a number of institutions will ask 'when is a teacher developed enough', and what type of TD events seem most visible for agents and accreditation bodies?

> **"Teacher development is a shared responsibility, but the teacher must come first, and the teacher often, must act first."**

Teacher ownership of professional development

Having considered some of the primary stakeholders, it comes back to the teacher. Being both the primary actor and the acted upon in any move towards the establishment of best practice in Teacher Development it seems to me that teachers are left with a number of options. When there is the perception of institutional indifference to their development, they can refuse to engage with their profession on the basis that they are not valued as teachers and in turn attach no value to their own profession. Or they can seek to better themselves, study and enquire, look at how to enact classroom research, use their staffroom as a sounding board for ideas, and in that process, seek to better their own lot. In an ideal world, there would be the perfect balance and blend of exciting and cutting edge top down development 'events' created by the management and institution, and guidance and facilitation of bottom up development from the teacher's perspective, research, experimentation, materials for self-study, a mentor programme, support for individual research projects, for example. Teacher development is a shared responsibility, but the teacher must come first, and the teacher, often, must act first.

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