* Forum *

The Shared Responsibility for Professional Development

M.E. Sokolik
<**editor@tesl-ej.org**>
Summer ESL Workshop
College Writing Programs
University of California, Berkeley

In a typical interview conducted with prospective teachers for our summer ESL program, we explain our commitment to professional development, including the opportunities we offer in addition to the expectations we have of instructors. The typical response we get from prospective instructors is, "That's wonderful. I really wish my year-round program had something like that."

This is not intended as an advertisement or a boast about our program's commitment to professional development, but rather to underscore the need for administrators and instructors to rethink their responsibilities in creating communities of professional growth.

Too often professional development is relegated to attendance at professional conferences, shifting the burden of development entirely onto the instructor. While professional conferences are a rich source of information on pedagogy and theory, as the sole site of professional development, they are problematic. First and foremost, funding for attending conferences is usually limited, so instructors might attend only one or two annually, if that many. In these days of financial restrictions, it is a lucky teacher who is funded, even in part, for conference participation. Most teachers' salaries and schedules do not allow for a lot of conference participation over the year.

On the other hand, many instructors view professional development as a tool useful only for new teachers, or as a burden that adds to already long hours, without addressing issues seen to be of immediate classroom relevance. Professional development is too frequently seen as being useful primarily for salary enhancements or professional advancement.

In spite of the fact that school administrations too often don't fund or offer adequate development opportunities, they understand its importance for improving the quality of instruction in their programs. Additionally, in spite of the fact that teachers often use development opportunities as ways merely to increase their salaries or achieve promotions (or skip these learning opportunities altogether), they similarly know that their own engagement with their work as well as student involvement in the classroom benefit from ongoing

professional development. Of course, there are many other ways in which professional development can be an integral part of any ESL/EFL program, whether small or large, whether staffed by experienced instructors or those new to the field.

The Goals of Professional Development

While there are many different individual and program goals, depending upon the teaching context (public, private, for-profit, community-based, etc.), most would agree that the main goal of professional development is to improve classroom instruction and student achievement. However, there are many roads one can take to reach that objective-from very practical, hands-on training with specific classroom practices or standards, to theoretical grounding in language acquisition theory, to creative activities aimed at enhancing personal growth, thus increasing self-awareness in a way that will carry over into the classroom.

It is important, however, for administrators to decide more specifically the goals of professional development within their own contexts, and the best avenues towards those goals. Similarly, instructors need to ask themselves what kind of professional development would best fill any gaps they feel in their own professional lives, and how those goals address learning needs in the classroom.

What Administrators Can (and Should) Do

Regardless of the funding situation, there are many things that administrators can do to enhance professional development and make it a valuable part of the institutional community:

1. **Assess the current state of professional development in your program.**
   Questions to ask might include:
   a. What opportunities are instructors availing themselves of? Who provides these opportunities?
   b. What funding is available for instructors?
   c. Is the burden of funding professional development falling mainly on the administration, or on the individual instructor?
   d. What physical resources (libraries, websites, etc.) are easily accessible to instructors for professional development?
2. **Provide on-site development activities.** Even if instructors in your program attend professional conferences, local on-site activities may be better at addressing the needs of your own program, teachers, and students.
   a. Lunchtime discussion groups. Instructors can lead discussion on topics of interest to your program, or present information they've learned from reading, teaching, or conference attendance.
   b. Guest speakers. Invite guest speakers from your school or community to talk to teachers about topics of interest.
   c. Book fairs. Textbook publishers are happy to visit and discuss new textbooks they have published. Invite one or more publishers to set up a display of their texts, and to be available to answer instructors' questions.
   d. Peer-observations. Instructors can visit each other's classes to get new ideas for teaching. (These observations are undertaken to inform the observer, not evaluate the instructor.)

3. **Invest in materials.** Whether or not you have a good institutional library, it is useful to have a local collection of teaching-related materials. Ask instructors for recommendations of titles to include. Be sure your collection holds a comprehensive pedagogical grammar (such as Marianne Celce-Murcia's The Grammar Book, 2nd Edition, Heinle/Thomson Publishing), a good dictionary, manuals for any computer programs installed on departmental computers, and copies of any textbooks used in your program. If you administer a program in a developing country, or in an area with poor economic resources, announce your need for textbooks through professional channels. Many larger institutions have excess books and are happy to contribute them to educational organizations without adequate resources. [Please contact me at editor@tesl-ej.org if your organization needs books or you have books to donate to a worthy institution.]

4. **Recognize and reward.** Notice the efforts that instructors in your program are undertaking to improve their teaching and reward it. If you are not able to provide financial rewards, consider other means, including letters of commendation, public acknowledgement, and so forth.

5. **Use instructors' experience and knowledge.** Bring instructors' expertise to bear on all aspects of professional development. Avoid as much "top-down training" as possible. Ask instructors to help plan faculty meetings, seminars, orientations, and other professional events.

6. **Respect the power of food.** While this may seem a frivolous suggestion, it is, in fact, quite serious. It is widely accepted that sharing food breaks down communication barriers, increases sociability, and improves attitudes towards events. Provide a few chocolates for a faculty meeting or some fresh fruit after a discussion group. Participants will want to stay longer, talk more, and in general, be happier. (Do not place the burden of providing food on faculty unless they freely volunteer. The administration should pay for and supply food, if only a bag of chips or plate of pastries.)

What Instructors Can (and Should) Do

Whether or not the administration makes a commitment to development, instructors have a responsibility to their students to be the best teachers they possibly can be. There are many ways to accomplish this:

1. **Assess your commitment to professional development.** Questions to ask yourself might include:
   a. Do I take advantage of the professional development opportunities that are offered? If not, why not?
   b. What is my motivation for professional development?
   c. What improvements have I actively undertaken in my teaching recently?
   d. In what ways do I try to update my understanding of language acquisition or classroom practices?

2. **Seek out opportunity.** Professional development opportunities extend far beyond the annual conference.
   a. Check journals and websites for smaller workshops, speakers, or regional meetings that might advance your understanding of the profession.
   b. Find books and journal articles that introduce you to new teaching theories or techniques.

c. Talk to other instructors in your program. Ask to visit their classes, and go with an open mind to new teaching ideas.

3. **Voice your concerns and opinions.** If you are unhappy with the commitment to professional development in your program, voice this concern with administrators. Many administrators worry about burdening instructors with too many "outside demands," without realizing that instructors would welcome additional development opportunities.

4. **Contribute to a community of teachers.** In spite of the fact that teachers are often in the midst of people all day, most would admit that it can be a very isolating profession. Work with teachers in your program to fight the tendency towards isolation and to create activities and events that will bring teachers together both professionally and socially.

5. **Listen to student concerns.** While student evaluations of courses and instructors can often seem less than constructive, or even wrong-headed, take time while class is in session (not just at the end of the term) to find out if students are learning what they had hoped to learn, and if they are happy with their own progress. Ask for anonymous responses. If you find they have serious concerns, look into ways that furthering your own professional development might address these concerns, and ultimately help students to improve their achievement in class.

6. **Be a student again (or still).** Learn a new skill-music appreciation, computer programming, another language-it doesn't really matter. Be a reflective learner, and think about what your own student experience has taught you about learning. Learning new things may also help you bring more creativity into your classroom.

Conclusion

In the job interview scenario I mentioned in the first paragraph, after describing our professional development program, we typically ask, "Outside of teaching, what would you contribute as a member of our community of teachers?" The answers to this question often play a significant role in our final hiring decision; the instructor who shows sincere and clear enthusiasm for the idea has a great advantage. As an administration, we are committed to matching that enthusiasm. I hope that other instructors and administrators will make this commitment as well.