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# Multiple Realities of Professional Development

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## Introduction

To provide effective learning experiences for their students, teachers must continue to develop as professionals. Sparks (2004) believes that career development stimulates both the intellectual capacity and the professional judgment of teachers. In Zimmer-Loew's (2000) description of the results of an 800-teacher survey conducted by the National Education Association (NEA), teachers reported that "their major reason for participating in professional development was to improve student achievement by improving their teaching skills" (p. 185). But while many teachers regularly attend professional conferences at the state, regional or national level, the daily pressures after such conferences soon sap the energy of participants so that genuinely good ideas often go unimplemented. Still other teachers say that they do not have the time or money for conferences. Thus one group might benefit from access to job-embedded ongoing conversations surrounding standards-based practice while the other could profit from professional development opportunities brought to them locally in a variety of formats. Hirsch et al (2001) found that 80% of public school teachers receive their professional development from school- or district-sponsored workshops or in-services. Zimmer-Loew (2000) describes a 1996 Joint National Committee for Languages / National Committee for Languages and International Studies (JNCL/ NCLIS) "nation-wide survey of the leadership of language organizations and educational institutions at the local, state, regional and national level" (p. 189). Teachers responded that they had an opportunity for professional development approximately once a year, that it was not sufficient for their needs, and that they had no input into its format.

The Annenberg Video Library of Effective Foreign Language Teaching Practices, which provides a variety of videotaped lessons from diverse, real classrooms and supplemental materials in a flexible format that encourages teachers to examine best

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practices and to determine how to integrate them into their own teaching, might address these issues. These lessons are available on streaming video and videotape, and ancillary materials can be downloaded from the web at no charge. This article examines the experiences of a school system that used this series over the course of a year and a half in three different classes, allowing a community of scholars and informed, reflective foreign-language practitioners to develop and flourish through an innovative approach to professional development.

## Definition of Professional Development

The various definitions of “professional development” often include similar elements. Hall (2001) states that “professional development is a broad, comprehensive term that refers to activities and experiences geared to supporting the lifelong development of teacher expertise” (p. 230). The document *Program standards for the preparation of foreign language teachers (2002)* indicates that “professional development is a life-long endeavor and an indispensable asset to becoming a contributing member of the profession” by which teachers “develop the ability to reflect on the outcomes of their involvement in these professional communities and on how their continued participation will strengthen their own learning and cultural competence and refine their pedagogical practices” (p. 53). Zimmer-Loew (2000) says that professional development “fosters a deepening of subject-matter knowledge, a greater understanding of learning, and a greater appreciation for students’ needs” (p. 186) while Diaz-Maggioli (2003) defines professional development as the “on-going learning practice in which teachers engage voluntarily to learn how best to adjust their teaching to the learning needs of their students.” Many others identify the positive link between the professional development of teachers and increased gains in student learning. Over the course of the last twenty years, Schulman (1986), Crookes (1997), Zimmer-Loew (2000), Allen (2002), Lozano et al. (2002), and Diaz-Maggioli (2003) have all stressed the importance of providing professional development opportunities that will allow teachers to make the sorts of critical pedagogical decisions that will directly benefit student achievement.

## Characteristics of Quality Professional Development

Professional development for in-service teachers, both new and experienced, needs to respond to the diverse backgrounds of teachers, including their preparation and training. In *Methods for teaching foreign languages: Creating a community of learners in the classroom*, Hall (2001) notes that any professional development activity should be part of a coherent plan that focuses on authentic issues related to the local needs and concerns of teachers who would provide a context for the activity. She believes that professional development opportunities should be voluntary, with teachers having a voice in the selection of topics and activities in which they will participate. Professional development activities should challenge teachers to be innovative; they should encourage risk-taking change. They should also allow teachers to develop partnerships and networks that will support them in their ongoing growth. Velez-Rendón (2002) argues that “in order to be effective, professional development needs to be intentional, sustained and integrated into the life of the teacher, and it requires participation and reflection on the part of the edu-

cator” (p. 126). Hirsch et al (2001) state that “the emerging research demonstrates that the quality and duration of professional development programs is an important determinant of their ability to improve teacher practice and impact student achievement” (p. 10).

Many other authors support the notion of collaboration between and among teachers as a critical element of professional development. Hall (2001) remarks that professional development should “provide opportunities for teachers to share their expertise and ideas with other teachers, exchange information and materials, collaborate on curricula, and, more generally, to sustain ongoing dialogue with their colleagues” (p. 231). These “communities of practice” (Diaz-Maggioli, 2003) are also endorsed by Tedick and Walker (1994), Schulz (2000), Zimmer-Loew (2000), Velez-Rendón (2002), and Sparks (2004), who believe that formal and informal interactions and networks provide support for effective professional development. Mentoring also plays an important role in this collaboration with experienced teachers sharing their ideas and beliefs with less experienced teachers in the informal discussions that these professional development activities elicit.

According to Diaz-Maggioli (2003), the minimum conditions for quality professional development include: clarity of goals; adequate levels of challenge; the ability to capitalize on previous knowledge; the ability to sustain long term professional development, organized support, and an alignment with the goals that have been set. In a more generic and clinical vein, Tillema (1994) states that new knowledge which is usually presented during professional development activities “only becomes meaningful in so far as it complements already existing structures or confirms existing scripts of knowing-how” (p. 60). Those who develop and provide professional development opportunities must be aware of teachers’ prior knowledge and must determine how best to restructure or fine tune this knowledge such that teachers can work with newly acquired information in their own classroom settings. He recommends an “experience-based approach” which gives explicit attention to what participants bring with them into the course. It relies on explication and exchange of beliefs, prior experiences and preconceptions, together with greater emphasis on trainee-controlled presentation of subject matter. In experience-based training, the focus is on sharing of ideas, often originated in practice and learning to reflect on one’s behavior. The sessions are structured through discussions and time for self-reflection of learning experiences. (pp. 602-603).

Tedick and Walker (1994) also support this idea as they see that it is “the responsibility of individuals working as a collective network to confront their beliefs and to be willing to embrace the challenges and begin to work toward substantive, lasting change” (p. 309). Hall (2001) concurs:

professional development. . . is based on a coherent plan that is fully integrated into school policies; it is considered a social process, facilitated through joint activity; it is located in the experiences and skills of participants, with issues of interest emerging from the local concerns and needs of teachers in a particular schooling context; teachers play an active role in designing professional development activities; the activities are incorporated into the normal working day of teachers; and it is supported by a schooling community that encourages risk-taking, change and innovation. (p. 238).

## The Wicomico District Plan

Wicomico County is located in Salisbury, Maryland with a school system comprised of twenty-four schools K-12. Among those schools, four middle schools and four high schools offer foreign languages, including French, Latin, and Spanish from level one through advanced placement, with a foreign language exploratory program for students in middle school. The district sets, on average, four days of *in-service* training within the school calendar and offers a complementary series of continuing education credit classes scheduled during evenings and weekends. Prior to the creation of this project, no focused *course* specific to foreign language instruction existed. Participating instructors included the supervisor of foreign languages and a modern language professor from Salisbury University, both of whom were frequent presenters in the district and well known to the foreign language teachers in particular.

The Annenberg session at the 2003 conference of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages provided the inspiration for this project. This session involved the introduction of the then-new Annenberg Foreign Language video library, consisting of twenty-eight lessons at every instructional level in a diverse number of languages. The library also included one tape devoted to national standards and another to assessment. Even with the brief introduction of a single conference session, it was clear that this tool could be a powerful component in crafting a high-quality, ongoing professional development program for district teachers. Velez-Redón (2002) talks about “an apprenticeship of observation,” which allows teachers to connect theory to practice, and acknowledges that teachers can become keen observers, working on meaningful, focused tasks that will enable them to interpret the data they find. Allen (2002) suggests that teachers need opportunities to examine standards-based models and compare them to their own teaching situations. The Annenberg library seemed the perfect vehicle by which to put that research into practice.

With the initial thought of utilizing videos within the structure of the designated in-service days, the Annenberg library was purchased. Though the entire library is available online through streaming video, purchasing the tapes provided flexibility in planning and in adjusting the lessons with the specific teachers in mind. After viewing the entire library, project developers realized that utilizing the tapes in the sole context of the few designated in-service days would not capitalize on the entire experience that the tapes provide; employing the structure of a continuing professional development course with credit was clearly a more promising and better choice. The overarching goals were to provide opportunities for classroom foreign language teachers to access examples of quality, standards-based instruction and to establish an ongoing professional learning community around the experience.

Foreign language teachers were surveyed to determine that sufficient teacher interest in multiple courses existed. The survey also assisted in demonstrating teacher priorities with regard to scheduling and structure (i.e. summer courses, during the school year, at night, on the weekends, etc.). Blending the survey results with the knowledge gained from watching the entire video library, project developers decided to create three distinct theme-based courses. Each course would consist of thirty hours of instruction via ten three-hour classes, meeting once a week. In gaining

approval to offer continuing education credits for the coursework, project developers established that all of the courses would conform to the Maryland State Professional Development Standards.

The three courses each included eight video lessons, a guest speaker, and a gallery walk of some kind to demonstrate learning. As the specific video lessons were selected, particular attention was paid to ensuring that each course had a variety of languages and a variety of grade levels demonstrating effective instruction. Utilizing the accompanying facilitator resource guide, a structure was created that would provide the foundation for the experience. Each lesson included a warm-up activity which linked to a previous video or set up the topic of that evening, a review of the previous lesson via recurrent themes, a video guide that included specific standards and key teaching strategies to focus the viewing of the lesson, a post viewing discussion, and an assignment in the form of a journal entry linked to the participants' classroom planning and instruction. A door prize at the conclusion of each session provided an added bonus. The giveaway item, related in some way to the session's video, encouraged immediate implementation of new strategies and stimulated thinking among all participants. Items included such things as noisemakers for games, magnetic tape and magazines with pictures for manipulatives, and copies of a children's book featured in a particular video. Resources provided in the appendices of the facilitator's guide were also given to the participants. Though the activities in each class varied greatly, the structure was consistent throughout the courses. In fall 2004, "Seeing is Believing: Effective Instructional Foreign Language Teaching Strategies" came to life.

The theme of the first course was centered on national standards and taking them from paper to practice, and it included a guest speaker, Ms. Martha Abbott, a nationally recognized spokesperson and a past president of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Teachers enrolled in the class had widely divergent experience levels: some had more than twenty years of teaching experience, others were in the five-to ten-year range, and still others had not yet completed their first year. All participants had some familiarity with the national standards, but all agreed that the standards were not fully operationalized and, in many instances, that they were uncertain how a particular standard might look or sound in practice.

The first lesson was a high school Japanese class and provided an essential point from the very start of the course; understanding the language was not a requirement for critical viewing. Instead, participants focused solely on planning techniques and instructional strategies of implementation. This lesson set the stage for future videos at all levels (including kindergarten) and for a variety of languages. Early in process of using the Annenberg video library, participants realized that they could rely upon the laser-like focus of instructors featured on the videos to design instruction that promoted active communication among students in the target language. The discussions following each viewing pointed to a growing realization among participants that their classrooms did not currently look or sound like those featured on the videos but that they definitely could. The gallery walk during the final class allowed participants the opportunity to display changes that they were making in either a unit or group of lessons based on the learning and experiences gained in the class.

Evaluation of the first course used the standard form for the district. Results were overwhelmingly positive, with all participants reporting a high degree of satisfaction with the helpfulness, usefulness, and relevance of content. Comments clearly demonstrated that the class had met a need and that participants had had a positive experience: "I feel this class has made me more aware of what I need to do to reach all students," and "each class I learned at least one new thing that I could use in my classes the following day or at least in the near future." This satisfaction level was also apparent when the second class was announced and enrollment increased, with almost all of the previous participants electing to continue and additional colleagues joining thanks to word of mouth praise for the program.

The second class, "Seeing is Believing II: More Effective Foreign Language Teaching Strategies" was centered on the theme of assessment. It included videos in which formal assessment occurred and provided examples of how instructors conducted formative assessments throughout the lesson. The overarching question throughout the second course was "How are students demonstrating that they understand?" There were extended discussions on and examples of such concepts as the use of graphic organizers and rubrics, along with examinations of all sorts of formative and summative assessments in the target language. Emerging from this class as well were the recurrent themes of standards in practice, effective instructional strategies, specific strategies to remain in and encourage the use of a target language, and use of multiple intelligences to meet diverse student needs. Though these same categories had been identified as themes during the first course, they were not captured in a systematic way, and their recurrent nature was lost. During this second course they were emphasized through a "rolling themes" segment in which participants charted elements from each video and addressed them during the opening segment of the subsequent class. The discussions and recollections were often remarkable in their level of detail and in the motivation they provided for changes in practice. The charts simply listed the strategy at the top and left space to note the title of the lesson along with a description of that specific strategy in practice. Each participant had a copy of the charts and kept it over the entire course of the class; thus they then had small reminders of particular strategies or techniques that could help to improve effectiveness.

A guest speaker, Mr. Pablo Muirhead, an instructor featured in one of the videos used during the first course, was invited to speak to teachers in the second course. In addition to watching that lesson again with instructor commentary, participants had the opportunity to ask Mr. Muirhead questions about the actual taping experience: "Were the students hand picked to appear?" and "Did having the cameras in the room change their behaviors?" These questions helped to persuade participants that similar results could be achieved in their own classrooms. Additionally, Mr. Muirhead agreed to teach two master classes, working with Spanish students from one of the district's high schools as the teachers observed. Participants in this activity included both teachers who were taking the course and those who were not. Immediately following the master classes, he also conducted a session on Total Physical Response Storytelling. All the activities were extremely well received. Such guest speaker activities led to even greater enthusiasm for and motivation to join what was becoming a vibrant professional learning community.

By the midpoint of the second course, as the critical viewing skills of the participants grew, small-group discussion with debriefing increasingly replaced the whole-group discussions that had been the hallmark of the first class. This evolution in approach allowed for an increased level of participation and greater generation of ideas. A community of learners who supported and encouraged change began to emerge. Over the span of the two courses and throughout the remainder of that school year, classroom observations also pointed to a growing change in instructional behavior among those taking part in the classes. This change took the form of significantly greater target language production overall and far more use of the target language by both teachers and students. Lessons were more clearly and deliberately aligned to the standards, and the focus moved away from discrete grammatical concepts and skills through worksheets.

The participants' understanding of the standards in practice also became apparent during a summer workshop on middle to high school articulation in which teachers (some who had taken the class and some who hadn't) worked on a draft copy of Maryland's state standards for foreign language. The Maryland standards were drawn from and organized much like the national standards. The task facing the summer workshop participants was to decide after what year of instruction foreign language students should be able to master a particular indicator and objective. Those who had taken part in the class had a much easier time deciding since they had a clearer image of what the mastery evidence would look and sound like in practice.

Again evaluations for the second class indicated a very high level of satisfaction among the participants: "It encouraged me to keep my students engaged and find authentic materials for them," and "I like having to do assignments where we create an activity and then swap ideas." There was significant motivation to continue the change process. As part of that process, participants shared, via the gallery walk, a previously developed assessment as well as the changes that they had incorporated because of the course. Assessments went from being traditional paper/pencil items of discrete knowledge to varying degrees of performance-based tasks with accompanying rubrics.

By the third class, participants represented every school offering foreign language instruction in the district, as well as participants from other disciplines. Moreover, there was a waiting list for enrollment. To ensure that the learning and experiences would be fresh for the teachers returning for the third time, a small design change was instituted and a subsequent title change was made. Because many participants had now acquired new skills and techniques, encouragement for implementing them became a priority. The course shifted its focus from observation to implementation and was entitled "Trying is Believing: Effective Foreign Language Strategies in Practice." Instead of a final gallery walk, participants were given specific targeted assignments with each session to encourage continuously improved language production in their classrooms. These assignments then became the subjects of journal entries that could be supported by evidence from, for example, student work samples and lesson designs.

Considerable attention had been given to the concept of diverse student needs throughout the two prior courses, but it became the essential theme for the third course. To encourage deliberate planning with both standards and multiple intelli-

gences, teachers utilized a chart created by the instructors called “The National Standards and Multiple Intelligences” so that they could see if they were emphasizing one intelligence over others. Charting was combined with an activity during the first class meeting that asked teachers to design activities targeting specific grammar skills, typical areas of culture, and vocabulary. As the groups reported, each activity was charted for both standard and multiple intelligences. Not surprisingly, some areas were over-represented while others were under-represented, a result that demonstrated the need to examine the standards with multiple intelligences in mind. Sharing resources for completing multiple intelligence inventories with students encouraged teachers to determine the ones favored by their particular classes. Throughout this course, teachers were asked to consider “The National Standards and Multiple Intelligences” chart to design instructional activities with diversity in mind. Subsequently, the activities created by the instructors for each individual lesson also mirrored that goal to reinforce the concept.

The standard elements and structures from the other two courses—rolling themes, warm up activities, viewing guides, small-group discussions, door prizes, and a guest speaker—were all continued in this final segment of the experience. Repeating the format from the previous class, Mr. John Pedini made a presentation as the guest speaker. Again, the class watched the lesson while he provided running commentary. Following the presentation, participants engaged in a lively conversation about ways to encourage target language use from the first days in beginning level classes.

The discussions during this course centered less on how the standards were addressed and more on instructional strategies utilized to achieve goals. Participants’ critical viewing abilities had grown to such a point that questions now often focused on how to develop lessons or on suggestions for making lessons even more effective.

Evaluations at the end of this final installment continued to confirm the powerful nature of the experience. The comments of one participant perfectly summarized what the class had become: “I feel a lot more confident in what I need to know as a teacher, but more importantly, I’ve seen so many techniques put into practice that it gives me something to reach for as I get better at teaching. It was also a great networking experience to meet other teachers and talk about actual classroom practices that I could implement in mine.” By the end of the course, participants were also displaying anxiety about the prospect of disbanding the learning community suggested that teachers within the district create videos to continue the course structure; many wanted to continue to meet, just to discuss items of interest. Ultimately, the decision was to continue the program with the community through a series of workshops, each focused on a particular theme. This activity is currently underway with all of the course attendees and continues to attract participants.

The three courses, which were approved as continuing professional development credits by the Maryland State Department of Education, have been replicated in three other districts in the state. The structure of the courses has been shared with educators in North Carolina and South Carolina. The design of the experience provided powerful confirmation that high quality and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers can lead to substantive changes in instructional behavior.

## Conclusions

Professional development should allow teachers to integrate their professional learning with their pedagogical practices in the classroom. In order for the substantive, lasting change that Tedick and Walker (1994) mention, to occur, professional development needs to involve coherent, innovative, challenging, ongoing, collegial activities that relate to the daily lives of teachers. Velez-Redón (2002) emphasizes the “importance of pedagogical reasoning which is the ability of translating subject matter into instruction that is appropriate to the various levels of abilities and backgrounds brought by students” (p. 462). She also thinks that teaching is very much a decision-making process, ongoing and complex, which can allow teachers to “rethink their roles and renew their practices” (p. 464) in order to become more self-aware of their professionalism. Lozano et al state that “the success of a professional development program lies inherently in teachers implementing new skills and knowledge and students benefiting positively from this exposure” (p. 169). Sparks (2004) takes that one step further by saying that “students’ abilities to craft creative, innovative solutions to problems are linked to the opportunities that teachers have to approach their work in the same way” (p. 305). The experience of this project provided powerful confirmation of these ideas. Indeed, “Seeing is Believing” stands not only as a metaphor for the experience of teacher-learning but also relates directly to the power of high quality, ongoing professional development that encourages and nurtures change. Ideally this experience is what we would like to have in all of our foreign language classrooms, regardless of the multiple realities in which our teachers and students find themselves.

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