

Continuing Professional Development for Teachers

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Abstract

Teachers are the disseminators of knowledge endowed with the power to change lives by virtue of their position. They are the facilitators in the endless continuum of learning and teaching. But the crux of this entire process is the imperative need for an ongoing programme of knowledge acquisition for the teacher as well. In a world where change is the only constant, the role of the teacher can be fully justified only by a regular upgradation of his/her skills. This is the buzzword currently and goes by the nomenclature of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). I believe that this works both ways as self-enrichment has multiple benefits for the teacher and learner. When the teacher is well-informed about the latest developments, the knowledge imparted will be characterized by a high degree of relevance, thereby resulting in achieving the highest level of effectiveness.

In my research paper I will document the manner in which Continuing Professional Development can be a manageable goal for the teachers, given the restraint of the responsibility of teaching. CPD is the magical tool that paves the way for teachers to enjoy the twin roles of students and teachers. The take-away of this seemingly rigorous process is a supreme sense of self-satisfaction leading to enhanced credibility of the role of a teacher.

“The term CPD is said to have been coined by Richard Gardner, who was in charge of professional development for the building professions at York University in the mid-1970s. It was chosen because it did not differentiate between learning from courses, and learning 'on the job'.” (Gray, 5)

“CPD stands for Continuing Professional Development. It refers to the process of tracking and documenting the skills, knowledge and experience that you gain both formally and informally as you work, beyond any initial training. It's a record of what you experience, learn and then apply. The term is generally used to mean a physical folder or portfolio documenting your development as a professional. This is about CPD as a process of recording and reflecting on learning and development. The CPD process helps you manage your own development on an ongoing basis. It's function is to help you record, review and reflect on what you learn.” (Wikipedia)

English Language tutors must always be cautious against slipping into the mode of complacency. The ability to teach the language must never be construed as the end of the journey as it were. Considered in the true perspective it is in fact the

beginning of a challenging journey I believe. CPD can be made operational at different levels by employing a multi-pronged approach.

The first step towards this self-improvement is the implementation of the reflective teaching practice by identifying lacunae and finding means to improve one's performance in the classroom. Instructors must necessarily keep abreast with the latest innovations in the field, be it new technologies or novel teaching methodologies hitherto unheard of. This provides a model for students to emulate. The teachers show the way and the students follow suit, always trying to remain updated. This boosts the confidence of both thereby carving out a learning path tailor-made to cater to their individual learning needs and resulting in desirable learning outcomes.

For the language instructors, Faculty Development Programmes (FDPs) organized by various academic institutions offer a convenient means to achieve this end. During such programmes, experts share their views on the progressive techniques which can be used effectively in the classroom by the teachers. There also exists the possibility of knowledge sharing and mutual learning from the peers. This networking leads to the formation of informal collaborative learning groups. They provide a non-threatening atmosphere in which the teachers can work on bettering themselves unhesitatingly. This networking works wonders, fostering a spirit of group learning as well as inculcating a sense of a healthy competition.

Technology has invaded every field and instructors must be tech-savvy atleast to a minimal extent in order to use it for language teaching. But more often than not, teachers are wary of using technology and end up being "technologically challenged". Group learning in such cases can help to dispel the apprehensions that are faced by the lecturers. They can better understand that by keeping pace with the current developments, they can successfully employ new innovations to introduce new concepts and make the classroom learner-centric. The present generation is more impressed by a digital classroom that brings the world to them. Such technological interventions not only help to generate the learners' interest but also sustain it. A professor who is adept at this will find teaching rewarding and can also use technology for his/her professional advancement.

Technical know-how enables one to connect up more easily with the world. The latest updates are available at your fingertips providing the confidence to address a generation that is over-dependent on gadgets. The world of teaching is no longer confined to the printed book, but other media can be used. Songs, movies, video clips aid in bringing a fresh new element to the realm of teaching-learning. Students relate better to them and they will be more than willing to bring in their own contributions. The audio-visual factors give a heightened appeal and the learning is not easily forgotten but remembered for long. Faculty members now have a wider area to think, explore and utilize for their own learning and research, thereby leading to Continuing Professional Development.

In their immediate surroundings, the faculty members can take constructive feedback from their colleagues, about their teaching, and work towards a

betterment. The students' responses/ feedback can be solicited, which offers a more realistic critique of the educator's role thereby opening up the scope for improvement. When the lecturer takes on board the suggestions of the learners, it helps to establish a better rapport with them. Such confidence-building measures go a long way in building a vibrant learning environment. This process has been given the nomenclature of "Action Research" by ELT theorists.

"Action research is either research initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams or as part of a "community of practice" to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. There are two types of action research: participatory action research and practical action research. Action research involves actively participating in a change situation, often via an existing organization, whilst simultaneously conducting research. Kurt Lewin, then a professor at MIT, first coined the term "action research" in 1944." (Wikipedia)

The learning process can never come to a standstill, it is an ongoing one. When teachers realize the importance of this, they can successfully switch to the role of learners and imbibe new learning continuously. The ability to reconcile these two personas is the hallmark of a well-informed tutor. Reading-learning must become a habit for the instructors to enable them to pursue an ongoing widening of their horizons of their command on the subject. Complacency on the part of the faculty members can be severely restricting, blocking all forays of expanding their knowledge base. The classroom atmosphere of a well-read and updated teacher is definitely more vibrant, interactive, interesting, stimulating and fruitful. Teachers must make a conscientious effort towards this. The consequences of this effort are inclusive intellectual growth for all the participants involved.

In addition to these, language mentors must have a regular interaction with the industry. Given the extraordinary importance of communication skills for placements in organizations of repute, the tutors must have clarity of how to go about training the students in order to enhance their employability skills. It is not effective communication skills alone that are an essential prerequisite for career opportunities, but the scope has been extended to include soft skills as well. A superficial awareness of this does not yield desirable results. Language educators must feel the pulse of the industry, understand its requirements and prepare the learners accordingly. This helps to bridge the chasm between the employers and the prospective employees, thereby bringing good tidings for the academic institutions and the organizations. This marks a transformation in the lives of the students and gives a boost to the economy. It also helps to create a harmonious working relationship between the various elements of this cyclical process leading to mutually beneficial outcomes.

If tutors wish that the learners have an insatiable hunger for knowledge, then they themselves must set an exemplary ideal for this. Notwithstanding the onerous job of teaching, they must nurture their dreams of pursuing higher education. This moves them into the realm of higher thinking and also sets a role model for the students. The added incentive for in-service teachers is that their designation and

the remuneration are linked to their qualifications. Therefore, going in for higher studies has tangible rewards for the faculty members.

Language mentors can also go in for additional qualifications, training, certifications that will definitely add value to their profile. Instead of confining themselves to the classroom and the text-books, tutors must explore newer avenues in order to impart holistic learning.

Research publications constitute an integral part of CPD. Language professors must regularly attend conferences, seminars and workshops and present papers. This helps them retrospect and introspect about their performance in the classroom. When they share their professional experience by way of research papers, their peers can benefit from this. Likewise they can also take advantage of the experiences of their colleagues by reading the articles.

In India, the central governing body for academic institutions, The University Grants Commission, has assigned points or score for each kind of publication. The consolidated score is the API (Academic Performance Indicator) score of an individual. This is the deciding criterion for selection into universities as also for promotions and other benefits. There has to be an ongoing effort to continually improve the API score, in order to remain professionally active.

But this continual self-improvement cannot be achieved by merely thinking about it or making a mental note of it. Every language instructor must document the process by writing it down. The first step is to make an honest assessment of your skill sets and the areas that call for improvement. The next vital move is to decide upon where you want to be. Once there is clarity on this, the learning path has to be carved out. This is best done by spelling out the target clearly by working out the finer details. Now that the planning has been completed, the execution fetches the true outcomes. The most important factor is the setting of timelines for every step and trying to complete the task within this framework. This assists in quantification of the achievable and also sets a time frame that actually drives the entire process. Maintaining such a record presents a comprehensive picture and also helps to focus on those aspects that may have been ignored or neglected. Yet another benefit of this is that not only macro-level planning and implementation, but also micro-planning and delivery is feasible through documenting one's efforts towards CPD. Short-term objectives can be set that help to simplify the long-term seemingly impossible or difficult targets.

Regular review of one's progress helps to gauge the pace and the quality of the work completed. Accordingly modifications can be made to accomplish the task. But merely glossing over the work does not help. A critical review has to be undertaken. As discussed above, the twin roles of a teacher and a learner have to be analyzed. Periodic reviews provide the possibility of nipping problems in the bud without allowing them to escalate into major issues that may severely hamper progress.

Continuing Professional Development is an online process. To reap the true benefits of this magical weapon as it were, tutors must first of all demystify the concept. A methodical approach as detailed above, helps to break up the apparently Herculean task into a simplistic one. With the right amount of meticulousness, discipline and perseverance; rapid strides can be made in the path of continuous learning. There ought to be a judicious balance between the entity of a student and a mentor. Only then, can we truly experience the joy of learning.

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