Growing Teachers

SOME IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A unique program at Simon Fraser University reveals principles that should guide every professional development program.

BY SELMA WASSERMANN

It is 40-plus years since the upstart Professional Development Program was initiated at Simon Fraser University. Among its many audacious innovations, the program offered opportunities for practicing teachers to play leading roles in the professional development of student teachers. Seconded (temporarily released) to the university for two-year terms, these "faculty associates" not only supervised student teaching, but also were given responsibilities for directing, organizing, and implementing teaching seminars for students on campus. While the advantages of involving faculty associates in the professional development of students were immediately clear, it was not initially foreseen that such experiences would contribute to the professional development of the faculty associates as well. Forty years later seems, then, a good vantage point from which to examine how the role of faculty associate became a pathway to personal and professional change.

While professional development comes in various shapes and sizes, there is, arguably, no experience comparable to the two years in

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Image: Mario Noche

which practicing teachers are given opportunities to play key roles in the education of future teachers. They are changed in major ways as a result of their experiences — both in terms of their teaching practice and in their personal behavior.

The Professional Development Program

The Professional Development Program, launched in 1965, turned all the rules of teacher education upside down. Students, in teams of two, begin their three-semester experience with a half-semester of student teaching. They observe and participate in such tasks as tutoring individual students, helping the teacher with various instruction-related jobs, and offering instruction to small groups, closely supervised by the mentor teacher. Students working in pairs can support each other. Most important, this initiation into practice disabuses students of any romantic notions they might have about teaching.

In the second half of the first semester, students attend seminars in which they examine and reflect on classroom experiences, read relevant texts, and advance their understandings and skills in key curriculum areas. The second semester includes 16 weeks of student teaching. The third semester consists of coursework.

Given this bold new approach, critics claimed that it would never fly. "We'll give you two years," they said. The rest, as they say, is history. The program has become one of the most highly regarded teacher education programs in Canada.

But this is not a paean to the teacher education program. It is, rather, an examination of the role of the faculty associate — what it actually is and how it not only serves the students in the program, but advances the professional development of the practicing teachers.

Selecting Faculty Associates

Approximately 40 to 50 faculty associates work in the program each year. Each is a practicing teacher who has been released temporarily from his or her school district to join the Simon Fraser faculty. Most come from British Columbia, though a few may come from other provinces and, over the years, some have come from abroad and even from the United States. The selection process is very much like any other job search. Ads are placed in newspapers and education journals, and applications are sought from practicing teachers who have at least five years of teaching experience. Teachers assemble a portfolio that includes a formal application, letters of reference, plus any other relevant materials, including a DVD that shows the teacher's classroom work.

At the first screening level, all applications are reviewed by a selection committee that includes faculty and program coordinators (former faculty associates who have responsibilities for program development).

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Candidates are selected based on several criteria: length and breadth of teaching experiences, nature of teaching experience, reasons for wishing to become a faculty associate, and the relationship between a candidate's area of expertise and program needs for that year. Although it is not a given in the selection criteria, candidates who appear more innovative and creative in their approaches to teaching are viewed more favorably than those who see teaching as "lecturing to a group of silent students." Attitudes and beliefs about the act of teaching are also considered at this first screening. Based on this first assessment, applicants are called for an interview. There may be as many as 50 interviews for 25 positions. Faculty associates are appointed for a two-year term, and only half of the group is hired each year.

The Nature of the Experience

The professional development of new faculty associates begins with a three-week orientation program that starts in mid-August. The program may include some lectures, but most experiences are seminars or workshops, with new and returning faculty associates partnering and working together on issues that address major program concepts, challenges, skills needed, and protocols. Although the sessions are informal, they are intense, information rich, and emphasize not only the "how to" but also the challenges involved in working in schools. Strong emphasis is placed on the development of those skills necessary for the observation of student teachers and for providing evaluative feedback that facilitates professional growth.

The orientation program ends with a 2½-day retreat at a campsite tucked into a pastoral niche in the coast mountain range — where the emphasis is on community building and group collaboration, with some seminars by invited faculty. A large binder of

printed material is distributed with information about anything they might need to know to do their jobs, including the names of their students and their school placements.

It is no secret that such introductory programs, no matter how richly conceived, are only the first steps in preparing new faculty associates for the work ahead. There is no substitute for on-the-job learning with opportunities to reflect on action. For faculty associates, an important ingredient is the ongoing guidance of the program coordinator. Program coordinators meet with their groups of faculty associates regularly during the year and remain in close touch with their work. They are also on hand to consult with faculty associates over the case of a student "in trouble" and where a withdrawal from the program may be required.

On the Road

Many faculty associates have joked about the amount of time spent in their cars. Student teaching placements are spread all over the lower mainland of British Columbia, and even though efforts are made to group school assignments so that driving time is at a minimum, there remains the challenge of getting across the city, facing traffic and road congestion, and being on time.

At the school, a faculty associate would normally spend at least an hour observing and another hour in consultation with a student after the lesson. Meetings with the mentor teacher are frequent. In addition, the faculty associate is expected, as a courtesy, to drop in on the principal. In short, each school visit is a full one; and when the faculty associate is visiting a pair of beginning students, the time spent in that classroom would be doubled.

How does the faculty associate know what to look for when observing a student teacher? This aspect of supervision is addressed during the August orientation and becomes an essential part of continuing training in observation, supervision, consultation, and interpersonal skills. Ongoing two- to three-day programs are held on campus each month for further skill development in critical supervisory areas. In each session, there is a close connect between the skills a faculty associate needs for effective supervision and the specific nature of the professional development experience. Also, through invited lectures from regular faculty, the faculty associate's breadth and depth of knowledge of educational theory is expanded.

For many years now, the "Profiles of Teaching Competency" (Wassermann and Eggert 1973) have been used as a tool to observe and supervise student teachers. These 20 profiles give the faculty associates a lens through which to make their observations and to focus their dialogue during post-observation consultations. The profiles include some of the key competencies that are required of all teachers and are grounded in three areas: the teacher as person, the teacher and the kids, and the teacher, the kids, and the curriculum.

There is reason to believe that using the profiles for supervising student teachers also contributes to the professional development of the faculty associate. It might be the first time that many faculty associates

Profiles of Teaching Competency

THE TEACHER AS PERSON

- Their behavior is thoughtful.
- Their behavior is self-initiating.
- They have a clear idea of what they believe.
- Their beliefs guide their actions.
- They are problem solvers.
- They can put new ideas into practices.
- They are reliable.
- They have a positive outlook.
- They are reflective practitioners.

THE TEACHER AND THE KIDS

- They prize and care about each individual.
- They know how to observe, diagnose, and use effective teaching strategies with pupils with behavioral difficulties.
- They use reflective responses to help pupils think about what they are saying.
- They promote student thinking.
- There's a lot of interaction among students in their classes.
- These teachers are real people to their students.

THE TEACHER, THE KIDS, AND THE CURRICULUM

- They know what they are doing and it makes sense.
- They are knowledgeable in their fields.
- They use evaluation to promote learning.
- Their classrooms are vital, alive, and productive places.
- Their teaching materials are varied, imaginative, and relevant.
- They unify their groups.

Source: Wassermann, Selma, and Wallace Eggert. "Profiles of Teaching Competency."

had made explicit the complex and varied professional tasks that make up the whole of what a teacher does. In fact, the profiles create a lens through which faculty associates are led to reflect on their own classroom work (Wassermann 2004).

Of course, other experiences contribute to the faculty associates' growth during their work on campus. The periodic professional development sessions provide vital inputs for problem-solving strategies and practice tasks in dealing with problems. Lectures from faculty and consultants extend thinking about current education issues. Work with teams offers support and opportunities to share in problem solving. Ongoing meetings with program coordinators provide opportunities for reflection-on-action and for addressing singular needs of individual students.

Principles of Professional Development

Few would argue that learning, in the full meaning of the term, is accompanied by some behavior change. Such change might include a change in perception or thinking, a shift in beliefs and values, new awareness, and new insights. In some instances, there is observable change in behavior: new patterns of operation, new strategies put into practice, new procedures that become part of one's daily actions. If professional development does not result in an observable change in teacher behavior, can we say that professional development has occurred?

There is considerable evidence that there is substantial shift in perceptions, in thinking, in beliefs, and in actual behavior of the faculty associates. Based on observations of the program and on teachers' responses, certain principles may be extracted that might serve others in preparing and organizing professional development experiences.

1. There's no free lunch.

No one would expect that the complex sets of skills that teachers must use can be learned in brief, "one-shot" workshops. For a developing professional, there is no substitute for the essential learning conditions of increased knowledge coupled with application of skills, further combined with reflection-on-action and enabled by critical feedback. One cannot attain mastery in a single stroke. One must work hard for it, and this work is a lengthy process. It takes *time* to grow and learn new ways of teaching, and there's no getting around this first principle.

2. They want to be there.

In most professional development sessions, teachers are a captive audience; they may not want to be there, but they have no choice in the matter. The issue of choice — a professional's prerogative — has been eliminated from the equation. But as we know, learning is more productive when learners choose to be present, when they see what is being offered as relevant to their needs, when they have options. The in-service programs at Simon Fraser University are based on the perceived needs of the faculty associates. They have the option to absent themselves if there is a more pressing matter that needs their attention. These choices are respected and understood. Faculty associates are treated as professionals. They are there because they see what is offered as valid and appropriate for their needs.

Offering theoretical principles is not enough. Theory must be accompanied by practice that allows teachers to develop skills that are outgrowths of the theory.

3. There is a close connection between theory and practice.

A good professional development program needs to be mindful of connecting good theory to classroom practice. Offering theoretical principles is not enough. Theory must be accompanied by practice that allows teachers to develop skills that are outgrowths of the theory. In addition, having a mentor on hand to observe, to guide, and to provide feedback ensures that the growing professional takes the next steps toward increased skill development. Expecting that teachers who have had a good shot of theory to make their own bridges to classroom practice is likely to result in very little change, if any. In the faculty associate experience, theory and practice are studied and applied on the job, with feedback coming from students, from team members, and from program coordinators.

4. It's a program!

The notion of professional development as a coherent program that is conducted over a full school year has rarely been successfully realized. Often, planning for professional development is left to a single teacher, or a group of teachers, with little free time or expertise to design such a program. This ends with the phone call. Whoever is available comes to fill the time slot.

The faculty associate program is conceptualized as

a full-year program. There is an overarching shape to it that addresses the important growth needs of the faculty associates as they work with their student teachers. It is not impossible to conceive that such a program might be developed at the school or district level.

5. They are encouraged to function as autonomous professionals.

Teaching requires the wisdom of Solomon, the problem-solving skills of Feynman, and the artistry of Michelangelo. By and large, it is a problem-solving and decision-making process. And in most situations, a teacher is on his or her own in wrestling with these problems and in observing how well the applied solution works and what to do next. Given such conditions, it would seem reasonable to hope that professional development experiences for teachers would include some work on promoting and increasing personal autonomy in problem solving and in making thoughtful, reasoned decisions based on a clear and articulated set of educational beliefs and values.

Faculty associates are required to make thoughtful and sensitively tuned observations of a student's classroom work and provide critical, yet respectful feedback that is enabling and helpful. The faculty associate must be a teacher, a guide, a mentor, a lay psychologist, a diplomat, a program designer, and, over all, a capital-T teacher. Such job demands require increased personal autonomy, consummate skills, and a clear set of beliefs and values.

6. Their professional competence is respected.

For faculty associates, the condition of respect is obvious from the start. They are welcomed as colleagues in academia, and interpersonal interactions are carried out on a level playing field. They are respected as decision makers and expected to work autonomously in designing and carrying out programs for their students and student teachers. They participate in meetings in which their opinions and perspectives are solicited and their advice is taken seriously. They provide input to faculty on matters of curriculum and teaching strategies. To a very considerable extent, faculty associates make the decisions about what they do and how. An obvious consequence of this is their growing autonomy, clarity of beliefs, and ego strength that, in turn, further benefits their professional and personal growth.

Conclusion

Sometimes, unintended consequences turn out to be for the better. The Professional Development Program at Simon Fraser University chose to second practicing teachers into the program because they were seen to be more "in touch" with current classroom practice and would be more helpful to preservice students in translating theory into classroom practice. The program's founders also believed that educational practitioners *should* play important roles in helping new teachers advance into the profession. In those early days, the role of the faculty associate was not envisioned as a long-term professional development experience. Yet, as it turned out, that has been a vital feature of the program, and also one of the reasons many practicing teachers seek to apply for the position.

We have learned much about professional development in designing and redesigning faculty associate experiences. But can the principles of professional development extracted from our experiences be translated into what individual schools and school districts offer teachers? What does it take to build elements of program structure, respect, a link between theory and practice, the promotion of collegiality, and personal autonomy into inservice programs? Perhaps it starts with the belief that such principles are essential to effective professional development. Perhaps it also means recognizing that if professional days are more like "gumdrops," it may be more advisable to expend those dollars on new acquisitions for the library. K

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