

# The professional development of modern languages teachers

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## INTRODUCTION

The definition of the modern languages teacher as 'reflective practitioner' (Schön 1983) carries with it an implicit assumption of on-going personal and professional development. The aim of this article is to look at ways in which teachers can benefit from professional development throughout their careers in order not only to enhance their own teaching style but also to improve their career prospects. A central theme is that what is good for the individual teacher is good for the school and vice versa. It will cover notions of career mapping, action research and continuing professional development and in conclusion examine ways in which teachers can enhance their own career prospects.

## CAREER MAPPING

Think for a moment of the most successful modern languages teacher that you have known. It could be a colleague, a former teacher of your own or a friend or relative. How would you attempt to define that success? Would it be in terms of excellent examination results, good class management, friendly rapport with pupils and colleagues, an inquiring mind and innovative approach to teaching, an overall satisfaction with the job that they were trying to perform?

To those on the outside what would be the public and professional markers of success in teaching? A string of qualifications and higher degrees? A notable position in the school hierarchy? An established author of a text book? Is this success perceived by all associated professionally with this teacher?

If you now repeated the exercise with someone whom you regarded as the least successful modern languages teacher you know, would the answers merely be the opposite of those given so far? Little exam success, poor management skills, a cynical disregard of anything new?

However we ourselves define success (or the lack of it) in our careers and in the careers of others, one thing remains fairly constant: promotion is generally regarded as a reward for the successful teacher. Whether that promotion is to second in department, Head of Faculty, Languages Co-ordinator, Senior Teacher, Deputy Head or Headteacher is immaterial. It is therefore worth pausing for a moment to consider how many teachers take time to plan for that promotion which will be an outward and visible sign of their accomplishments in the classroom.

Career mapping is a term used to describe the way in which people plan their careers. In some research carried out in the early 1980s Lyons (1981) gave an illustration of the subjective notion of where teachers felt they were and where they felt they were going. Those he termed 'map never' gained their qualifications as teachers with no clear idea of a career path; they somehow drifted into the profession and assumed that as honest toilers in the classroom rewards would eventually come their way in terms of promotion to Head of Department. They had no clear goals and were more or less content to teach their subject with no thought about future prospects.

Those he termed 'map always' knew precisely where they were and where they were heading. They had planned out where they wanted to be and had calculated how to get there (which courses to go on, which extra qualifications would be useful, which experiences would be helpful). Those termed 'map acquired' often started out with no clear career intentions but discovered after some time in the profession that they were not really achieving all that they wanted to. Maybe as a result of seeing someone promoted over them or maybe upon returning after a career break, maybe after attending a course or specific training programme or as a result of some personal crisis, they decided that it was time to take their career in a particular direction.

What is interesting to note is that Lyons discovered that the proportion of teachers who are at 'map

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never' was significantly higher for those at the bottom of the teaching scale (64%) than for those at the top of the profession (38%). What this seemed to show is that if you have no particular career goal you are less likely to gain promotion than someone who has thought out and planned their next moves.

At this stage you may be thinking that you are very happy teaching in your own way to your own classes and do not regard promotion as very important at all. Different people have very different value systems and for some teachers there are more important things than moving up the career ladder. It may be that extra-curricular activities or even voluntary work in a church or young people's group are far more important at this time than anything else. Satisfaction comes from family, friends or a leisure pursuit and they provide the fulfilment that counterbalances classroom teaching.

However, when there is a little voice of discontent or disquiet that begins to ask awkward questions about why you are teaching in the way you always have or whether you are now ready to take on more responsibility, then it may be time to re-assess your career. Planning at this stage is vital because when the opportunity arises to make a move it is usually necessary to have planned ahead. Think in terms of where you would like to be in one or two years' time and then decide what strategy you need to employ to get there. If it is a question of gaining an extra qualification, then it may take some time to put into operation. If it is a question of gaining more experience of a particular type of teaching or new exam syllabus, then this will also need time to put into effect. When the opportunity arises then the planning can be seen to have been worthwhile and you can be confident that you have covered the angles necessary for the next step. As someone wisely remarked: planning + opportunity = luck.

## ACTION RESEARCH

Just as M Jourdain was speaking prose unwittingly for forty years, so many teachers are engaged in forms of what we might term action research without fully being aware of it themselves. The word research can be daunting and many feel that unless they have a team of researchers and a weighty publication to follow then they are not really involved in anything worthwhile or of substance in research terms.

However 'action research' and 'reflective practice' are exactly those professional activities that good teachers have always undertaken when seeking to improve their performance in the classroom or trying to help their pupils learn more effectively. When teachers ask themselves and their colleagues questions such as: 'Does what I do in the classroom and elsewhere help or hinder the pupils' learning?' 'How do I know just what exactly I have achieved in this lesson?' 'Would less teacher activity and

more pupil involvement help with learning?' then they are engaged in action research and are reflecting upon their practice.

The aim of such reflection is to improve practice directly in the classroom rather than to produce knowledge. It is earthed in the everyday realities of all teachers' lives and it seeks answers to immediate problems. Some of the answers may have resource implications, some may involve the learning of a new skill, some may require adaptation of existing methods and some may indicate a need for further training; however, it is highly likely that changes in approach and attitude will be at the centre of any change to teaching style.

The problem with imposed curricula is that they are not teacher-proof and they contain no room for development. The ends of teaching are defined *in the practice* and not in advance of it. You do not sit down and work out a long plan of how you are going to change and develop things and then simply put it into operation - it is in the midst of activity that things develop. Then it is time to reflect afterwards about how and why and wherefore, which leads directly on to the next stage of activity which leads to further reflection. Our practice as teachers is improved when we have improved our capacity for judgment and reaction in a variety of complex situations. Such expertise leads on to intuition and this in turn is recognised as a form of 'practical wisdom'.

One of the paradoxes that PGCE students are often confronted with is the statement that 'Teachers teach but pupils don't learn'. At first sight this seems a contradiction in terms. How can it be that someone teaches but there is no discernible outcome in terms of learning? What is teaching if there is no learning? Many beginner teachers spend so much time and effort on their own performance in the classroom that they almost forget the audience out in front of them. There is a flurry of flashcards and a torrent of target language. Lesson plans are meticulously constructed and handouts beautifully produced and photocopied. The emphasis is fully upon the lesson to be delivered, the goal to be attained, the tasks to be completed.

However, there comes a point when all teachers begin to realise that for all their activity and hard work, the lesson does not seem to be getting across and the pupils are not gaining in knowledge, skills and understanding. How many times have we heard others and caught ourselves saying: 'I have gone over this n times and you still don't understand. Let's do it again'.

In some cases it is appropriate for the teacher to take a step back and realise that in order to achieve more, it would be better for them to do less. Let the pupils do some of the work for a change. Let the pupils devise handouts and worksheets for each other. Let the pupils design wordsearches and puzzles. Let the pupils edit satellite TV broadcasts and bring in their own three minute clip to present to the class. Let the pupils explain grammatical points

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and mnemonics for vocabulary learning. In other words let the pupils have some control over the processes of learning and in so doing they will learn a good deal themselves. We all know the truism that in order to learn something well it is a good idea to teach it. How many of us as modern languages teachers have sharpened up our own understanding of adjectival endings, the use of the passive or subjunctive, or word order patterns as we have attempted to teach these grammatical concepts in the classroom?

The quality of learning outcomes depends on more than just the quality of teaching. Do I need a new course book? Would more resources help, such as satellite TV or a computer software package? Do I need a fresh approach? Could I do with a little more time?

Such felt needs are often the catalyst for change and a precondition for action research. Needs can be met by extra training. In-service courses may offer the required new skill, technique or knowledge to take you one step further on from where you are now and provide an answer to a pressing need. In terms of personal development it may be more appropriate to study for an extra qualification, a Masters degree or Advanced Diploma or professional recognition as for example Membership of the Institute of Linguists. Although there may be no particular need for such a qualification immediately, in two years time it may be just the thing to have on a CV for the next post.

Not all felt needs can be addressed by training alone or extra qualifications. They may be dealt with by involvement in other school activities (such as initial teacher training, GNVQs or pastoral care). Quite often it is not simply a matter of learning a new technique or even implementing an externally designed curriculum, but rather in moulding and developing such a curriculum in one's own context. Thinking through and planning the implementation of new courses and curricula in a departmental team may in the long run be more fruitful in terms of personal development and job satisfaction. It is the very process of wrestling with changes both planned and unsought in one's own context that often leads to a greater understanding of how to work best in a team and how to get the best out of one's pupils.

## CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development encompasses both the idea of staff development (which focuses on the school itself) and personal development (which focuses on the individual teacher). It also has at its heart the notion that whatever is of benefit to the school will also be of benefit to the staff and whatever is good for the individual teacher will also bring benefits to the school. This virtuous circle is recognised in manuals on management as crucial

to the success of almost all organisations. Enabling or empowering employees to take responsibility and have ownership brings gains both to the individuals concerned and contributes to a healthy working environment which in turn leads to a more productive workforce. Unfortunately, not all management is so enlightened and not all teachers necessarily relish the opportunities for extra responsibility.

It is a fairly well recognised phenomenon that all institutions and organisations are dynamically conservative in that they resist change. They will modify, accommodate, assimilate change, especially when perceived as imposed from outside, but will do everything possible to resist implementation. Compare and contrast the introduction of GCSE modern languages in the mid-80s after over a decade of graded objectives and graded tests with the imposition of the National Curriculum after 1988. The first was an example of bottom-up reform where teachers had been developing and refining syllabuses for years which culminated in reaction from both central government and the exam boards. Although many teachers may have lamented the disappearance of O level, nevertheless many came to see how changes not only to exam formats but also teaching styles had a beneficial effect upon their classrooms. Consider secondly the imposition of the National Curriculum after the Education (Reform) Act of 1988. This was a top-down approach with little consultation and less piloting. Teachers of all subjects resented such an affront to their professionalism. The whole curriculum became top-heavy, a bureaucratic entanglement and an overloaded nightmare. Change on such a massive scale was resisted and the whole edifice was trimmed savagely under the various Dearing reviews after extensive consultations with teachers and others.

When considering change in one's own school, it may not be on such a dramatic scale. Personal development through change involves job satisfaction and a consideration of career prospects, but it is often haphazard and unplanned. An occasional course here, a chance remark there, a life event or crisis, an assessment by peers, all contribute in one form or another to career development. However, such an important aspect of one's job and life cannot really be left to such unplanned happenings. Heads of department and senior management have a professional responsibility not to let their staff stagnate and individual staff have a professional responsibility to make sure that they themselves do not stagnate. As Bell and Day (1991, 21) pointed out:

'Development through learning is central to the purposes of everything that is done in schools in the name of education'.

We know that with our own pupils we cannot do their learning for them. We cannot take their exams and we cannot learn their verb tables. The same is

