

The Professional Development of a Facilitator through a Study Group

Desarrollo profesional de un facilitador a través de un estudio de grupo

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This article presents part of the results of a study that was conducted to observe the professional development of a group of foreign language teacher educators and preservice teachers. The study focused on the knowledge, skills and attitudes these teachers developed through their participation in a study group. This article reports specifically on the skills and attitudes the facilitator of the study group developed due to her role in it.

Key words: Professional development, facilitator's role, study group, skills, attitudes, foreign language teacher education

Este artículo presenta parte de los resultados de una investigación que se realizó para mirar el desarrollo profesional de un grupo de formadores de profesores y futuros profesores en el área de las lenguas extranjeras. El estudio indagó particularmente qué conocimientos, habilidades y actitudes desarrollaron los profesores a través de su participación en un grupo de estudio. En este artículo se reportan específicamente las habilidades y actitudes que la facilitadora del grupo de estudio desarrolló debido a su papel en éste.

Palabras clave: Desarrollo profesional, papel de la facilitadora, grupo de estudio, habilidades, actitudes, formación de docentes en lenguas extranjeras

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This article was received on March 31st, 2007 and accepted on June 17th, 2007.

Introduction

My interest in teacher professional development throughout my teaching career has led me to create two study groups. I created the first one when I participated in a collaborative action research project in 2001 that aimed at fostering teacher and student autonomy. I created this group with teachers at the English teaching program where I worked to promote teacher autonomy since I saw it as a good strategy to foster professional development and curriculum improvement. Later, in 2003, when I became a teacher educator, I created another study group with some foreign language teacher educators and preservice teachers who were interested in developing a proposal of curriculum improvement related to the language performance standards for students in the program and to study research techniques.

During the time I facilitated these two study groups, I observed that teachers appeared to develop some knowledge, skills and attitudes that are essential for their development as professionals and good performance as teachers. Because of time constraints, I could never systematically study the professional development of these teachers through their participation in these two groups. I had to leave the coordination of the second study group in order to carry out my master's studies in the U.S. and for my master's thesis I wanted to study the professional development of some of the teachers of the second study group since it was still functioning.

I also wanted to carry out this study because the idea of study groups in Colombia is relatively new and rarely used in institutions as a form of professional development for

teachers; so, I wanted to know how effective it could be. In addition, in the area of foreign language teaching, most of the few professional development experiences of teachers who participate in study groups in Colombia have not been systematically studied in order to understand what teachers gain in these professional communities.

The purpose of this study was to understand the knowledge, attitudes and skills that foreign language teacher educators and preservice teachers develop when they participate in a study group. Knowledge is related to the "collective term for concepts, principles and practices in a particular field or professional specialty and the general data, information and experience that are essential to effective performance in learning and applying what has been taught" (The Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003, p. 197). Skills are related to the things "one knows how to do" and that are "attained by practice" (The Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003, p. 325). Attitudes have to do with the "disposition to behave favorably or unfavorably toward some object, person, event or idea" (The Cyclopedic Education Dictionary, 1998, p. 21) and what guides "a person's aspirations and ambitions" (The Greenwood Dictionary of Education, 2003, p. 32). These aspects of teachers' professional development are essential for them to carry out acceptable practice as teachers and professionals. The research question for this study was What knowledge, attitudes and skills, if any, do inservice and preservice teachers develop through their participation in a study group? Though the purpose of my study was not to look at the skills and attitudes the facilitator of the group had developed due to her role in the

group, the research findings do show some specific skills and attitudes the facilitator developed due to her role in the study group. I present these results in this article. The results concerning the knowledge, skills and attitudes the members of the study group developed are reported somewhere else (Sierra, forthcoming).

A study group is an organization in which teachers, instead of an outside expert, negotiate and decide their own agenda, objectives and the activities to be carried out. They suggest the topics they want to discuss and decide how to address them. Teachers' questions, interests and concerns are a priority for their work and there is always time and opportunity for collaborative dialogue among teachers. It is also a democratic organization where teachers participate voluntarily, work collaboratively and share responsibilities and roles (Hudelson, 2001; Birchak et al., 1998). In addition, a study group is an organization in which teachers share their points of views and experiences about education and teaching and promote curriculum improvement and individual as well as professional development. A study group also promotes teachers' reflection making their practice a reflective process that leads to curriculum improvement (Birchak, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1990) define professional development as the "processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills and attitudes of school employees" (pp. 234-235). Little (1997 cited in Peixotto & Fager, 1998) notes that the "test of effective professional development is whether

teachers and other educators come to know more about their subjects, their students and their practice and to make informed use of what they know" (p. 6). Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989 cited in Peixotto & Fager, 1998), when referring to the characteristics of effective professional development practice, specify that activities are carried out in school contexts and are connected to other school improvement endeavors. Teachers set goals, plan and select activities; there is an emphasis on self-instruction and an array of training opportunities is available; continuous assistance and resources are made available; and training is concrete and involves continuous feedback, directed attempts and support when requested. This definition of professional development, the way its effectiveness is measured and its characteristics, implies that there are professional development activities that are more appropriate than those that have been traditionally offered to teachers. The literature about staff development indicates that inservice teachers do not learn much from workshops, so they need to get involved in professional learning that is experiential (Randi & Zeichner, 2004).

In his discussion on professional development for teachers, Fullan (2001) states that professional development is not about workshops and courses; instead, it is about developing more powerful ways of learning that occur day after day. He also states that new professionalism requires teachers' own learning. This learning cannot stop because demands continuously change and because after teachers' preservice training, they probably work for more than 30 years. Thus, teachers need to learn more on the job where they can continuously assess, refine and get

feedback on their improvement. Moreover, they need to be in contact with their colleagues in order to learn from them. Finally, he states that since the teaching profession must become a better learning profession, teachers need to work in professional learning communities if educational change is to be achieved. Besides, when teachers have opportunities to talk substantively with their colleagues, this helps them to find a way of dealing with isolation and to form communities of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001).

Along the same line, when discussing learning through continuous professional development, Roberts & Pruitt (2003) note that learning is not a fragmented approach but that it requires constant inquiry, experimentation and assessment as teachers try to increase their effectiveness. Moreover, they indicate that study groups as a professional development strategy have the potential to help to build communities of professional practice and are a job-embedded approach for teachers' professional growth. Furthermore, opportunities for teachers' professional development such as workshops and seminars are often based on externally perceived needs and although those perceptions can be right, they are not the perceptions of educators and, as a consequence, they are not as likely to be meaningful to them (Schwarz, 2001). One of the big limitations of traditional models of professional development is that teachers are put into a passive role. They find it difficult to put ideas into practice because they do not fit them into their teaching practice and do not have the opportunity to work collaboratively with other teachers (Burbank & Kauchak, 2003). When teachers engage in

professional development activities that are more meaningful to them, they are more willing to engage in them and collaborate with other educators. At the same time, this type of collaborative work helps teachers feel empowered to make decisions about schools and students. Thus, it is clear that when designing professional development opportunities for teachers, we need to move from top-down models of professional development in order to facilitate teacher learning and, as a result, student achievement (Lefever-Davis, Wilson, Moore, Kent, & Hopkins, 2003).

My view is that of all the many options teachers have to enhance professional development, study groups are some of the most effective ones since they normally take place during the regular school day. In addition, study groups allow activities of longer duration than traditional professional development activities and make it easier to encourage the collective participation of groups of teachers in the same school or department (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Kwang, 2001). Teachers who work together are more likely to have the opportunity to discuss concepts, problems, etc., that emerge during their professional development activities. Finally, study groups are needed because they help teachers carry out curricular and teaching innovations, plan school improvement collaboratively and study research on teaching and learning (Murphy, 1992).

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were six inservice and preservice teachers of the

nine who comprised the study group that I mentioned before. Four teachers were women and all were Colombian. They were between the ages of 22 to 42. Three were full-time teachers, one was an hourly teacher and two were preservice teachers.

The full-time teachers had between 14 and 16 years of teaching experience in formal and informal language teaching institutions and at the university level. They held master's degrees in FFL, EFL, TESOL and Applied Linguistics from well-known universities nationally and internationally. The hourly teacher held a foreign language teaching degree from the program the study group belonged to. She had taught English and French for 9 years in the program she graduated from, other informal language teaching institutions and at a school. One of the preservice teachers was in the last semester of the Foreign Language Teaching Program the study group belonged to. She had two years of teaching experience and had taught English and French in an informal institution and at a high school. The other preservice teacher was in the 9th semester of the same teaching program. He had taught French for a year and a half in a language program at the university level.

Data Sources and Analysis

I collected data from five different sources. I used 27 minutes of the meetings of the study group, two observations of the meetings, two audio-taped meetings, eight self-assessment forms in which participants had assessed their individual and group process and I audio-taped participants' interviews; one for each participant, which I transcribed for analysis.

To analyze the data I carried out an inductive analysis following Burnaford's et al. (2001) & Anderson's et al. (1994) procedures for data analysis. I read all sources of data many times and highlighted the excerpts that I thought were important to my research question. Those excerpts were related to the themes of my research question which were knowledge, skills and attitudes.

To some extent, I had some pre-established categories for this analysis, with their definitions, because my experience as coordinator of the two study groups helped me to see some of the knowledge, skills and attitudes teachers in a study group may develop such as critical thinking, collaborative work, initiative and commitment. I also created new categories with their respective definitions such as knowledge of theory, knowledge of research, positive attitude towards research and risk taking. I coded those excerpts that represented the pre-established and new categories.

I also coded excerpts that, though not related to the themes of my research question, appeared to be significant for participants or that might be related to the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes in teachers such as positive relationships among inservice and preservice teachers, relaxing atmosphere, teachers' lack of time, teachers' heavy workload and teachers' lack of participation.

As I analyzed the data, I wrote notes about things that called my attention concerning the three main themes of my research question and I utilized those notes to discuss my findings. I organized the coded excerpts from the various sources of data under pre-established and new categories. After that, I compared and contrasted categories to see how related or unrelated they were. Then,

I looked for relationships among these categories and formulated some preliminary interpretations. These categories changed into subtopics that I organized under the three main themes.

I triangulated the various sources of data in order to ensure the validity or trustworthiness of my interpretations. That is to say, I compared my findings from the various sources of data and judged as valid those categories that appeared three or more times in at least three of the sources. Later, I showed these preliminary findings to the members of the study group to make sure that my interpretations were accurate for them and that they felt identified with my description of their situation. Moreover, I showed them the excerpts of the different sources of data that I would be using as evidence to support my findings in order for them to see what I would be using from their discourses. In general, teachers replied saying that they agreed with my interpretations. Only one of the teachers recommended a little correction.

Findings

In this section, I discuss the skills and attitudes the coordinator of the study group has developed due to her role in the group which include leadership skills, initiative and a democratic attitude.

Facilitator's Skills

Data indicate that the coordinator of the study group has developed certain skills related to her role in the group. These are leadership skills such as capacity to motivate people and capacity to promote roles and

discussion in the group. Although in her interview Marcela talks about her leadership skills as separate from her motivational and organizational skills, they all can be grouped under leadership skills which are needed in a facilitator in order to be able to guide a group properly. As Marcela recognizes that she has developed some skills that are characteristic of her role, she also recognizes that there are some aspects of her role that she still needs to improve in order to do a good job as coordinator.

Leadership Skills

When discussing the skills she has developed in the study group, Marcela reported some related to her role as coordinator such as leadership and motivational skills. She also commented that her organizational skills were developed in other groups, but she has put them into practice a lot in this study group.

The only thing I see different is the role I have in other research groups and in this one. Here I have the role of coordinator which requires me to develop leadership skills, coordination, (and) organization. I have always had the organization ones, but not much the leadership ones. Then, I think that I had to develop that part here in this group. But I think that here the leadership ones more, the (skills) to motivate people to participate, to help the other feel confident... I had to do this more in this group and I have developed this more here, which has helped me to do it in other groups (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06).

The organizational skills that the coordinator has put into practice in the study group, which are observed through her planning of the agenda for the meetings and the activities that the group needs to carry out to achieve its goals, have had a positive impact

on some of the teachers. One of the inservice teachers, for instance, mentioned how the coordinator has been an example for her in terms of organization and has motivated her to work in a more organized way.

I believe that something to highlight a lot in this group is that organization part. I don't know if it is something that is influencing me a lot, then I see it more. I think it is very important. I highlight a lot Marcela's role in that coordination because she gives a lot of herself. I believe that sometimes she dedicates too much of her time to this work and that motivates you a lot, so you feel bad if you are not responding in the same way because it is a very serious and organized work. She has very clear where we are going, we have this timetable, we have these activities, then let's accomplish it, always being flexible, but trying to accomplish it. (Interview, Lina, 01/30/06).

However, by coordinating the study group Marcela has overcome her personal and professional weaknesses such as her leadership capacity.

What you see in the group are... like weaknesses that you have in that (in being a leader), when you have to do it because I don't think I am, as people say, a natural leader. I am (a leader) more depending on the circumstances. I mean, if I have to do it, I do it, but not because I say I am going to lead this, let's do this, no, I am not that type of person. Then it is more the circumstances which force me to do things. Then, I react to those circumstances, but not because I say let's change this, never (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06).

She thinks that the study group is going to help her to develop her role as coordinator. In other words, it is going to help her to develop her facilitator skills.

There is another thing which is the coordinator role that I have to perform and that is one of the benefits I am going to get from this project because it is the first time I perform this coordinator role with a group. I have done it,

but not officially named and that is different. I mean, the coordinator role has been much more balanced because it has been shared, but here I feel it is not (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06).

One of the things she considers she has to learn to do as coordinator is to confront members when they are not being responsible with what they committed themselves to do.

The problem I see I have to learn (to deal with) here and that I have to make a reality is to confront the other in the positive terms. But this is something that is very difficult for me because I consider everybody as an adult. Then to have to tell another person: What's up with you? Look at this! I don't see myself in that role. I don't need people all the time telling me what to do. I see almost unacceptable to have to tell another person what to do. You see? Because there are things, that although I understand the situation, I consider unacceptable, that a professional who committed himself to a thing like this (the project) doesn't do it. You see? But it is going to have to be like this. I mean, there will be a time in which (I will have to say). Well, what's up with you? Are you here or not? But I don't like that. I think that at this level, in these things... it shouldn't be like this (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06).

On the other hand, data indicate that Marcela has developed other leadership skills such as her capacity to promote the different roles needed in a group and that are important for the group's dynamism. An example from one of the tape-recorded meetings illustrates this

Marcela: Well, let's get started. Who wants to moderate? (the meeting) Who is going to write the minutes? Today's meeting is quite heavy (Observation, 01/17/06).

She not only promotes varied roles among teachers but is also willing to help them to perform them. The following dialogue from one of the tape-recorded meetings

shows how she guides one of the preservice teachers to perform his role as moderator of the meeting.

Marcela: Who wants to moderate today?

David: I (want to) moderate.

Marcela: OK David. Then, let's give an order to the meeting. The minutes, what else?

David: Do I have to say it?

Marcela: Of course. I am going to read to you. (We have) minutes, assignments, action plan, and Cecilia's message.

David: Minutes, assignments, action plan and Cecilia's message. Let's begin with assignments.

Marcela: Assignments?

David: Then, with Cecilia's (message) and then... action plan.

Lucia: But Cecilia's message is related to assignments, isn't it?

David: Then, action plan and Cecilia.

Marcela: Well, then, three action plan and four Cecilia's message.

David: And the last (thing) the party.

Marcela: And the last (thing) in others, (is) the party.

Gabriela: Oh yeah!

David: Ok. Let's begin with the minutes. Eh! The assignments.

Marcela: The assignments (Meeting, 12/06/05).

Marcela has also developed her ability to promote discussion in the meetings. She normally does this by telling teachers that there are things they need to discuss so that they start to express their points of view or by asking teachers questions on how to proceed with certain things.

Marcela: And here in the part about writing of past events, could we write present, future, and past events? (Observation, 01/17/06).

The skills Marcela has developed or has put into practice have definitely helped her to perform her role as proper facilitator to the extent that she has been able to motivate other teachers to develop certain skills as well. This shows how crucial it is for a study group to be able to count on a good facilitator who helps them achieve their goals. Besides, it demonstrates that a good facilitator can be a motivator for teachers' professional growth as they learn from a good example and start to apply what they learn. It is clear that for the facilitator of this group all teachers have the capacity, responsibility and right to become facilitators or leaders, and she is able to create situations that stimulate leadership in teachers in the group (Lambert, 2003).

Facilitator's Attitudes

Marcela has also developed two important attitudes which are fundamental in a facilitator as they allow her to keep the group working to accomplish its goals and help teachers to perceive the group as a professional community where power relationships do not exist. These attitudes are initiative and a democratic attitude.

Initiative

When discussing the attitudes she has developed in the study group, Marcela argued that she has developed her initiative. She gives an example to illustrate how on one occasion her initiative helped the group to get back together in a time when it was stuck.

I have developed here (in the group) the initiative. It is impressive the (initiative) I had developed here. There were moments in which people were very disperse and if there wasn't anyone to say:

come on let's do this...the presentation in Cali helps the group to get back together. Otherwise, the groups had stayed stuck. Then, when I took the initiative (to tell members) look there is this event and we have to say something, it helped the study group to get together again. That initiative that I have not always had to take in other groups, I have developed it more here (in the study group) (Interview, Marcela, 01/31/06).

The actions Marcela has had to take within the group have offered her the opportunity to develop her initiative within her role as facilitator. As a result, she will be more capable of working with other colleagues during her professional life. Teachers can perform leadership roles to support their colleagues' learning. Acting as facilitators of professional development experiences such as study groups is one way of doing so. Thus, teachers' capacity to guide these efforts is paramount (Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry & Hewson, 2003).

Democratic Attitude

Marcela has also developed a democratic attitude, which is manifested through her negotiation capacity. For instance, in one of the observations, it is possible to see how she negotiates the agenda for the meeting with the rest of the teachers.

Marcela: So, how do you want us to work? We have the assignments, the action plan and Cecilia's message. In what order?

Sandra: The assignments.

Marcela: Or if you have any other topic, if you want to talk about something... and in others, how are we going to celebrate the project (approval)? (Meeting, 12/06/05).

Her democratic attitude is not only represented by her capacity to negotiate

things with the teachers, but also by her willingness to inform them about every single thing that affects the group. She informs teachers orally or through documents she shares with them.

Marcela informs that the letter about the standards has already been sent to the teaching committee with which we start the validation process. On May 12, the format with standards will be handed in to that committee (Minutes, 05/04/05).

Moreover, Marcela is always very willing to consider teachers' points of view before making any decision or moving on with the activities the group is carrying out, as illustrated in the following extract from one of the observations.

Then, here are the questions, the proposal. We are also going to read this next. I am going to read question by question to see if you agree with these questions, or, if they are clear or not, or if you have any other type of questions, or what question you consider is not necessary here because this is not about imposing on you to assess like this but to have you participate in the formulation of the self-assessment criteria (Observation, 01/10/06).

Being democratic is essential in a facilitator since it shows teachers that they are taken into account due to all the decisions that affect them and affect the group's work. Moreover, teachers feel that they are really part of a democratic community and that they all are responsible for the direction and the accomplishments of the group.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although it is thought that the facilitator of a group should be someone who is very experienced so that she or he is capable of giving direction to the work of the group in order for it to achieve its goals, I would argue

that a good facilitator can also be someone who learns on the job and assumes her or his role as facilitator seriously. When a facilitator commits to her/his job, she/he is able to push him/herself to perform her/his role the best she/he can, as the coordinator of this study group has demonstrated. As Marcela works with teachers, she learns how to effectuate her role better as a facilitator, which certainly will help her to continue developing other skills and attitudes and to continue putting into practice those she has already developed inside and outside the study group.

The findings of this study concerning the facilitator's role indicate that for any group to succeed, it is necessary to count on a facilitator who possesses specific leadership skills and attitudes or is willing to develop the leadership skills and attitudes that are necessary to be able promote other teachers' professional growth. The way the coordinator handles this study group makes it a democratic organization where teachers participate voluntarily, work collaboratively and share responsibilities and roles, all of which aligns with what Hudelson (2001) and Birchak et al. (1998) have suggested for study groups. In other words, a facilitator is someone who is able to empower teachers.

Five things that good leaders do are to look for possibilities to change the status quo and ways to improve; to envision the future and help others construct a vision of what a group can be; to promote collaboration and involve others; to create criteria of excellence and lead by being a model; to appreciate the contributions that others make, share the compensation of efforts, and celebrate achievements (Kouzes & Posner, 2001, cited in Loucks-Horsley, Love, Stiles, Mundry & Hewson, 2003). The coordinator of this

group has definitely put into practice the last three items of the practices of a good leader presented above as the data in this study illustrate. Certainly teachers in this study group will be more prepared to be facilitators in their own group and in others that they become part of or form in their future professional life due to the leadership skills they have been encouraged to develop by the facilitator in this group.

The results of this study related to the facilitator's role enable me to state that study groups can be an effective strategy for teachers' professional development. The benefits that this professional community offers to those teachers who become facilitators, in terms of skills and attitudes, make it a good strategy to implement in educational institutions. Not only those who play the role of facilitators in a group grow professionally, but also other teachers who participate when they are guided by colleagues who are able to share responsibilities and roles, work collaboratively and promote democratic work. Furthermore, when we can count on teachers who experience these kinds of professional development, it is very likely that they promote the same practices in their students which leads to the improvement of students' learning. For all the benefits study groups can offer teachers and as a consequence to students, administrators should consider encouraging teachers to create study groups in their institutions. However, they would need to give teachers time as well as reduce their workload so that they feel more motivated to participate in these types of learning communities.

I hope that the results of this study concerning the facilitator's role provide teachers, administrators and policy makers

with ideas about the kind of facilitators that are needed in educational institutions in order to foster other teachers' professional development through study groups or other similar professional development programs.

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