5.6

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE FOR CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Chee-Kit Looi
Learning Sciences Lab, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Wei-Ying Lim
Learning Sciences Lab, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Wenli Chen
Learning Sciences Lab, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Challenges that Teacher Professional Development Face

With rapid technological advancements in the past two decades, children today are characterized as the technologically savvy “generation Y” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Y), who are comfortable with multitasking, working simultaneously with multiple sources of information communication technologies such as wireless devices, portable digital assistants (PDAs), search engines, blogging, instant messaging, network games, video conferencing, and others. From such experiences, they unconsciously but inevitably develop sophisticated ways of managing and using information in their decision-making, often involving a rich interplay of heuristics appropriated from everyday life and formal education.

It becomes apparent that teachers can no longer engage their sophisticated students with simplistic strategies and pedagogy. Spurred by the rapid advancement of technologies in the new knowledge economy, teachers are pressured to prepare their students for a future that is quite different from the present, one that “involves teams and collaboration, based on the idea that in a fast-changing environment, where knowledge goes out of date rapidly and technological innovation is common, a team can behave smarter that any individual in it by pooling and distributing knowledge” (Gee, 2004, p. 284). Faced with these arduous yet inevitable pressure and challenges, there
Looi et al.

is a strong impetus for teacher professional development to help teachers remain current and relevant in their practice to address the dynamic and emergent needs in educating the generation of tomorrow.

Despite decades of research about education reform, there is yet to be significant changes in teachers’ practice in the classroom. Classroom talk and practices are still predominantly characterized by a transmission–acquisition efficiency-driven type of pedagogy. Such a phenomenon could in part be attributed to the perennial waves of educational reform that aim to improve various aspects of education and learning such that teachers who have been in the service long enough realize that the only enduring aspect of the educational system is to rely on the pedagogy (often of a transmission nature) they know best so that that their students will perform in flying colors in the standardized examinations.

The ways in which teacher professional development is traditionally being conducted are problematic. Traditional teacher professional development programs have been criticized for being ineffective because they are often organized as fragmented and intellectually superficial workshops or seminars (Borko, 2004). These are typically in the form of prepackaged training courses conducted by an external agency outside school curriculum time. Such training is usually initiated by external agencies that presuppose the needs of teachers, and thus, may lack relevancy. We do not even mention the alternative: Huge one-off reform efforts that never reach most teachers and never take root in the prevailing culture.

In some cases, even when training has been successful and teachers are willing to experiment with innovative practices, they are repeatedly dampened by the lack of localized support during implementation. As such, novel curricula or pedagogies are not often sustained and teachers are left to fall back on what they know best, the transmission–acquisition mode of teaching (Cuban et al., 2001). On the whole, traditional professional development in the form of external training is yet to prove its effectiveness and teachers’ feedback and inputs to the kinds of development they require are often muted and consequently their needs are not met.

Since Lave and Wenger's (1991) exposition of the construct of communities of practice (CoPs), one strategy that is deemed promising is professional development through the fostering of CoPs, which provides a valuable platform for teachers to connect and interact among themselves, to share and support each other on their specific problems, experiences, and lessons learned, and to do so at their own time and pace. Problem-solving in this context is not an academic exercise but a means toward finding a practical and informed resolution in matters that have implications to society and others. CoPs thus reflect a constructivist, in-situ social approach to learning that is rather different from the current practices adopted in traditional professional development and consistent with professional learning in other professions (Brown and Duguid, 2000).

**Community of Practice as an Effective Professional Development Strategy**

Our thesis is that the connections between the vision of CoPs and the vision of reform-minded professional development for teachers are in concordance. Explicating the importance of CoPs, Schlager, Fusco, and Schank (2002) states that “research