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## **The Forms that Professional Development Can Take For All Staff in a Language School or Institute**

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### **Introduction**

We spend long hours at work. Long years too! So the idea of learning something from the experience makes sense personally, as well as being a form of investment for the organisations we work in. The investment pays off for the school in terms of greater depth and efficiency at work as well as in a general atmosphere of interest and well-being. One of my jobs as Professional Development Co-ordinator for Hilderstone College in Broadstairs, Kent, UK, has been to think about how professional development can be initiated or fostered. The ideas that follow may echo or add to your own, if you are thinking about ways for you and/or your colleagues in all departments in your school to stay interested in your school.

### **Building a picture of professional development and learning in your institution**

#### ***At the level of the institution***

Your institution will probably already be doing quite a bit to ensure professional development for the staff. The sorts of things I would include here are:

- having a Professional Development aims document
- issuing clear job descriptions, giving specific job training, inducting new staff and informing staff on health and safety issues
- conducting regular staff development interviews with all staff
- encouraging and supporting attendance at professional seminars, conferences and courses and links with professional bodies
- maintaining a member of staff part-time as a Professional Development Coordinator in order to arrange events and support individuals and groups on issues of professional interest
- running a full programme of in-service or PD events
- encouraging staff teams and networks within and between departments and clear communication throughout the college

If these things are not happening, then it might be a good idea to get relevant people together to discuss the possibility of gradually implementing them.

#### ***At the level of the individual***

Many people on the staff will already be going to evening classes and conferences, doing correspondence courses, going on activity learning holidays or taking part in other learning experiences. The learning may not be directly relevant to their work but additional confidence or poise in ANY area, in my view, will enhance a person's work indirectly. So one idea is for staff to tell each other, in a supportive, non-judgemental atmosphere, the things they are learning in parallel or unconnected fields. The "telling" can be at a friendly staff meeting (where some food and drink is provided) or by questionnaire, mini-poster or other means. This sharing will help staff to perceive each other as both interesting and capable of learning and new behaviour.

### **One-off, as hoc even**

People can travel to one-off events such as lectures, films, workshops, conferences. The advantages are the "away-day" feeling and the meeting of people not normally encountered. The disadvantage is the difficulty of remembering to adapt/transfer the ideas gained to the home setting on return. Staff who do go away can be encouraged to share ideas on their return. This works better if all staff know the person is going and all staff are encouraged to negotiate what can be brought back both in terms of photos, postcards and real objects to enliven a talk and also the topics or headings structuring the talk. Headings can be: "The thing I liked best was. . .," " I couldn't understand why. . .," "One thing I think we do better here is. . . ." There is likely to be more interest on return if this pre- work is done.

### **Staying Home**

Rather than individual staff travelling away to events, one-off or series events can be run for all staff or for sections of the staff on work premises. This saves travelling costs, except those for a visiting speaker, and means more people can benefit. Sometimes events on work premises force people too to be more realistic and relevant in the ideas raised. To prevent the "same old personalities, same old blockages" syndrome of events involving people who know each other a little TOO well, a number of strategies can be considered. For example:

- All staff can change roles. The people who normally make tea, say little or serve others are invited to chair and run the meeting while normal superiors make the tea and serve others.
- Outsiders with no knowledge of " local politics" can be brought in to facilitate.
- Conversation ground rules can be discussed and implemented?ground rules can deal with issues such as giving people equal air time, allowing clarification only questions and disallowing praise and blame.

Longer term ideas can include:

- doing an action research or classroom/office based cycle or two with colleagues helping out as observers and sounding boards
- working on some critical incident analyses (see Tripp, 1993)
- keeping routine and risk logs followed up by newslettering and conferencing (see Murphy, 1993)
- starting up a series of lightly- structured professional conversations with colleagues

### **Cross-fertilising**

The time, money and energy normally spent on development meetings can be channelled into allowing people to learn from each other in pairs or small groups. This can be done by allowing people to swap tasks for a while, to watch people who do the same or a different job, share tasks, meet counterparts in other branches, departments or schools,

job shadow, or to form mentoring pairs. The idea can be to learn more about your own job or to find out who else makes your organisation tick,- whether this be someone in the marketing, janitor's or managerial department,- or, to learn totally new skills.

## School Focus

Schools can decide to raise its energy in certain areas. For example, they might:

- Try to get a couple of new teachers in print.
- Encourage three people to give peer presentations on things they have read recently in publications coming into the school.
- Effect a twinning or swapping programme with a school abroad.
- Enable individuals to do research on the school (for example, into how students spend their free time outside school).
- Allow roles within the school to rotate for a while (teachers take on some administrative functions, administrators take on some social functions, etc.).

A school may decide to initiate a school-wide debate on an issue/topic. Someone could find some interesting related reading; a speaker could be brought in, staff given a little time to make notes on their feelings and then discuss the topic, walls and notice boards made available so that people can talk to each other on the subject.

## Conclusion

Language schools, departments and institutes exist to aid learning in students as well as to make money. If the institutions staffed with people who are learning too, whether alone, in pairs or in groups, and if all staff see each other as capable of learning, then this, I feel, can only enhance the energy of the whole institution.

## References

Murphy, T (1993). Why don't teachers learn what learners learn? Taking the guess work out with action logging. *English Teaching Forum* 21 (2), 6-10.

Tripp, D. (1993). *Critical Incidents in teaching*. Routledge.

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## About the Author

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