

## **Continual Professional Development of Teachers: A Smart Strategy for Excellence in the Classroom**

by

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper discusses the need for continual professional development of teachers or in-service teacher education with a research focus on how this is best implemented to effect learning outcomes in the classroom. An in-service teacher education programme, the Cambridge International Diploma for Teachers and Trainers (CIDTT) is analyzed and the learning outcomes of eight teachers who followed the course and the impact in their classrooms are described. The findings indicate that in-service teacher education should be context, rather than content driven, reflective in teaching and learning processes and directed towards best practices in the classroom. These findings point to a need for teachers to be fully engaged experientially and self-directed to benefit in the longer term from in-service teacher education.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Malaysian Development Plan (2006-2020) is focused on driving the nation toward global competitiveness. Central to this plan are ten strategic thrusts. The second thrust aims to raise human capacity, the sixth thrust positions the services sector, education and training included, as a major source of growth, and the eighth thrust refers to the development of an innovative and creative human capital. Reading these thrusts together, teacher education should feature prominently as evident in our recent education blueprint (Malaysia, 2006).

The importance of teacher education is also reflected in its increased budget allocation of 92.3 per cent from RM 300 million in the Eighth Malaysia Plan to RM 577 million in the Ninth Malaysia Plan. It is recognized that pre-service teacher education remains the main focus of this budget and in-service teacher education has somewhat taken a back seat to pre-service teacher education. It may be argued that the cost for initial training of a teacher is much higher than costs for in-service training. While the argument is true, the figures still suggest that in-service teacher education may not be widespread enough for schools to benefit from the practice of continual professional development of teachers

In the broader picture, professional development is also necessary for school principals and administrators or superintendents at the district, state and national levels. To complete the picture, other school support staff such as laboratory assistants should also be beneficiaries of this practice of continual professional development for these efforts at training to have the desired impact on learning outcomes in schools.

While this broader picture is acknowledged, this paper has chosen to focus only on continual teacher education. In this paper, the key question is how continual teacher education is best delivered to achieve an impact on learning outcomes in schools.

## MAJOR POINTS OF RESEARCH ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

***“Today’s peak performance is tomorrow’s good performance, next week’s average performance, and next month’s poor performance.” Jim Tompkins***

The research is clear when it comes to the importance of teacher education as an essential component of school improvement and student achievement. In Darling-Hammond’s report (1997) *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Teacher Quality*, she cites teacher expertise as the most critical factor for improving schools, “Reforms, we have learned over and over again, are rendered effective or ineffective by the knowledge, skills, and commitments of those in schools. Without the know-how and buy-in, innovations do not succeed”. Since good teaching is important, then continual professional development is important.

***“One of the beauties of teaching is that there is no limit to one’s growth as a teacher, just as there is no knowing beforehand how much your students can learn.” Herbert Kohl***

Professional development for teachers or in-service teacher education is defined by Guskey (2000), as “engaging in activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge and skills of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students” (p. 1). For many teachers, professional development has taken the form of occasional sessions planned and provided by the district or state but these sessions often fail to address what teachers are facing with their students in the actual classrooms. These occasional shots in teachers’ arms seem not to have considered that adult learning needs to be well contextualized, reflective of real-life experiences and are most effective when tied into the diverse needs and practices of these teachers (Knowles, 1990). For in-service teacher education to be relevant and pay-off, the course has to manage gaps in teacher knowledge and practice.

In view of this need to bridge knowledge and practice, daily lessons should be viewed as a rich source of learning to drive professional development of teachers. Guskey (2000) has noted that a variety of learning experiences and opportunities lie in every classroom activity observed, assessment administered, professional journal or article read, or curriculum reviewed.

The challenge then is to take advantage of these opportunities, to make them purposeful, and to use them appropriately. Reflection in-, on- and for-action should become a natural part of a teacher’s professional development (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994). Reflection is a form of evaluation and assessment of learning and can take the form of reflective journals, self-assessment based on performance standards or rubrics, group dialogues and participant observation

The latter two modes strongly suggest a need for collaboration among teachers in the professional development cycle from planning to practice through evaluation and back to planning. Collaboration can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including practitioner research (Anderson, 1994), professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), coaching (Crane, 2002) and team teaching with lesson/ case studies as units of question and analysis. These reflections will lead to the posing of better and better questions which in turn lead to a search for better and better teaching practices. Albert Einstein’s reminder is that, *“The important thing is not to stop questioning.”*

However, in teacher education, there is often a concern whether teacher knowledge and practices improve student learning. Several ways have been used to evaluate teachers and the resulting student outcomes, and they include classroom observations, interviews, personal logs or reflective journals and teacher portfolios. Teacher education seems to be viewed as only worthwhile when it results in improved student learning outcomes.

### **Research Question**

How should professional development of teachers be conducted to enable teachers to bring about good student/ learning outcomes?

### **Lessons from the Cambridge International Diploma for Teachers and Trainers (CIDTT)**

The CIDTT (Cambridge International Education, CIE, 2006) is a professional development programme for in-service teachers. The programme consists of four modules, namely, Planning & Design, Practice, Assessment and Professional Development and Evaluation. The aims of the programme are to:

- enhance and update professional teaching skills
- enrich and expand professional knowledge and understanding
- experiment with new and proven teaching and learning techniques
- take new opportunities to meet other professionals
- test against global performance standards
- expand their career horizons

The CIDTT was conducted with a group of eight teachers in a tertiary institute. These teachers have at least two years of teaching experience. While five are teaching subjects related to Information Technology, the other three are teaching Business Marketing, Law and Statistics. All of them do not hold any qualifications in teaching; their education and training thus far have been largely focused on subject matter specialization. The CIDTT can be deemed as these teachers' first systematic training in teacher education.

There are two watchwords in the content and delivery of the CIDTT, namely, balance and variety. The course is very mindful of the varied learning needs of practising teachers. Thus, different training modes and approaches are employed. While there are two self-directed modes, namely, the CIE e-learning platform and pathway CD, teachers are also required to obtain training and support from fellow teachers/ course participants and a group of trainers led by a master trainer in a CIE diploma centre. The teachers were required to participate in eight face-to-face sessions which were conducted on Saturdays, with each session being of six-hour duration.

During these trainer-led sessions, teachers were required to examine their teaching practices through discussions and review of teaching-learning materials such as schemes of work, lesson plans, test blueprints and assessments. Workshops were also conducted for materials production, namely, re-writing schemes of work, re-working examination questions and preparing new teaching-learning aids such as PowerPoint slides.

Teaching practice was also a mainstay of the CIDTT through microteaching sessions, peer teaching/ simulation, and classroom observation of their regular classes by fellow course participants, assigned mentors and course trainers. These practice sessions were followed up with discussion and some decisions on best practices.

Throughout the course of the CIDTT, the teachers kept a journal to record discussions, readings, observations, reflections and personal theories. These records were kept in view of four written assignments, one for each module, which require teachers to record their practices, document evidence of practice and obtain feedback from students, mentor and trainer(s). Teachers' reflections in-, on- and for-action were reported formally as a course requirement complete the four assignments which will be assessed by CIE for purposes of certification.

### **LESSONS FROM TEACHER PARTICIPANTS OF THE CIDTT**

Teachers' journal entries and reflection reports (Sections B for all four assignments) were closely examined. For many of the teachers, the initial jottings resembled log entries in that they were recordings or descriptions of what had been discussed; "...discussed disciplinary management and some good ways to manage the class", "...teacher A spoke clearly and completed her lesson on time", "the PowerPoint slides are very attractive, the pictures and animations are fresh and appealing". As class discussions and observations became more analytical, teachers' journal entries became more insightful with some indications of personal theories, and some tentative decisions on best practices; "...disciplining a young lady is quite different from managing a male student, the former is so sensitive and the guys seem so *laissez-faire*", "teacher is organized but the students do not seem to be able to follow that scheme of organization/ thought, students are struggling, may be good for the teacher to pause to check", "the slides help teaching, but am not so sure they aid learning, more student talk in between slides seem to be needed to link the slides, there seems to be an overkill with slides, I will PowerPoint for only so long...not fun for students after awhile."

For Module 1, teachers were asked to reflect on the schemes of work (SOW) which they had prepared for their respective subjects. With the CIDTT template for SOW in view, teachers were asked to review their schemes or plans of work. It was noted that all the teachers made amendments, if only to record their plans more completely by indicating the activities and resources more explicitly. Many of them re-wrote learning objectives to comply with SMART characteristics to make the learning outcomes more observable and thus more measurable. Three of them included more variety of activities and resources. They were also mindful of keeping this variety in balance, for example, to have lectures of teacher-led sessions interspersed with more student-led activities.

For Module 2, the teachers were asked to reflect on the range of teaching activities they regularly employ. All of them reported having regularly given written exercises and quizzes, many also used case studies and stories as the basis of discussions in class. After some planned and spontaneous CIDTT sessions in conducting games, debates, experiments and role play, many indicated a keenness to carry on with these activities in class. At the end of the course, all but one teacher reported a wider use of the latter range of activities. Indeed, many more variations were noted in their practice. For example, the law teacher now regularly engages students in jigsaw-reading and versus her previous practice of reading through cases. The level of student engagement has improved, and a better student satisfaction is shown in a higher rating for the teacher in the end-of-semester teaching survey.

In Module 3, it was generally agreed that examinations, in terms of the test blueprint, test items, marking and moderation have largely been conducted satisfactorily, and in compliance with partner universities' requirements and standards. However, teachers' understanding and practices in formative assessment needed re-examining as teachers were largely conducting formative assessment in the spirit of summative assessment with wide-scoped assignments requiring integration of many learning outcomes. These practices did not make it easy for teachers to identify students' problems in the subjects and thus little or no remedial efforts or strategies were ever practised. Any student weakness will only be revealed at the end of semester when the student fails the subject. Discussions during CIDTT sessions and journal entries reveal teachers' general discomfort with the formative practice of "fixing the learning" as the course proceeds. The practice is deemed "spoon-feeding" and "giving students an easy and safe route". Many argued that the practice is "not ethical, giving in to student weakness", "unfair to good students" and "condoning poor student performances." At the heart of it, these teachers have a mindset of assessment being a single measurement, held under similar conditions for all students to ascertain achievement. These views did not seem to change too much during the course of the CIDTT.

In the final module, all the teachers expressed a keenness to pursue collaborative modes of professional development such as the CIDTT. Two recorded skepticism about action research while another four have begun to engage in it.

Overall, all eight teachers have recorded a high level of satisfaction with the CIDTT; they feel more competent in teaching their respective subjects. They recorded surprise at "how complicated teaching can be" but the many sessions of discussion in CIDTT classes and the "forced think-through" sessions while recording journal entries and writing the reflections reports for the assignments have helped them to identify good practices. Three of them have reported that they are "able to examine the whys to practices", "recognize the underlying principles to practice" and "make good sense of practice". It seems to suggest that the CIDTT sessions have helped the teachers to identify the principles underlying good practice, and are thus more insightful about teaching and able to make better decisions in class.

Importantly, student performances in their subjects have shown improvement in terms of subject pass rates and percentage of students who have scored grade A. The said students too have also recorded improved levels of satisfaction with their teachers in the teaching surveys and individual interviews, citing more fun in class, innovative/ fresh classroom activities and higher levels of student engagement during lessons. Several students also reported an improved class/ learning environment. They specifically cited that teachers have shown a stronger sense of commitment and purpose in promoting learning. This learner and learning-centredness have made classes more enjoyable and have motivated students to try harder and achieve more. It can be said that the hard and soft evidence point to improved teaching and learning.

### **LESSONS FROM THE CIDTT TRAINER**

Finally, I would report this session of the CIDTT as successful in terms of the teachers' "new hearts, new minds and new hands"; they are more driven to conduct lessons that will motivate students to do well in their subjects. They are obviously more articulate about teaching and learning and engage their colleagues in such this discourse more regularly. This has been achieved in part because of the specificity of the training sessions where discussions have kept very focused to the teachers' students, subjects, class episodes, trials and tribulations. This "close to home" context has helped teachers adopt a trouble-shooting stance which gradually

proceeded towards self improvement and best practices. The focus on concrete matters such as classroom accounts/ stories, past records and classroom observations seem to have provided a good sense of reality which has managed to assure teachers that solutions and good, if not best, practices are within their reach. The reflective approach and the collaborative effort of these teachers in their review of practices and suggestions gave them comfort that they are not alone with problems in teaching, and seem to have made them more self driven to search for better and best practices.

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