



Extending experiential learning in teacher professional development



Carina Girvan^{a, b, *, 1}, Claire Conneely^a, Brendan Tangney^a

^a Centre for Research in IT in Education, School of Education and School Computer Science and Statistics, Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin, Dublin, D2, Ireland

^b School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3WT, UK

HIGHLIGHTS

- We developed a three phase programme of teacher professional development founded on experiential learning.
- Teachers' shared reflections demonstrate how the programme influenced their beliefs.
- Positive outcomes for students were observed by teachers from the very start of the programme.
- Directly observable changes in student behaviour and outcomes were biggest motivators to maintain changes.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 August 2015

Received in revised form

24 April 2016

Accepted 29 April 2016

Keywords:

Teacher education

Professional development

Experiential learning

Teacher beliefs

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the use of experiential learning during the early stages of teacher professional development. Teachers observe student outcomes from the very beginning of the process and experience new pedagogical approaches as learners themselves before adapting and implementing them in their own classrooms. This research explores the implementation of this approach with teachers in Irish second level schools who are being asked to make significant pedagogic changes as part of a major curriculum reform. Teachers' self-reflections, observations and interviews demonstrate how the process and outcomes influenced their beliefs, resulting in meaningful changes in classroom practice.

© 2016 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Experiential learning in teacher professional development is not a novel concept and its reported use has focused on the experience of teachers developing their practice whilst in the classroom: experimenting, reflecting and adapting new theories, practices and content they have been introduced to in their own professional context. This process can be individual with reflection used as a tool for self-direction (Minott, 2010) or shared through professional development activities such as lesson study (Fernandez, 2002) and participation in professional learning communities. However these types of professional development activities cannot fully address

the demands of initial professional development in the context of radical national curriculum reform.

The study reported in this paper occurs during a time of just such a reform in Irish second level (secondary, ages 12–18) education. The reforms introduce 21st Century Skills, Assessment for Learning, a flexible curriculum and a new focus on Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to a system which is characterised by instructivist approaches to teaching and learning and an inflexible, overcrowded and overly exam focused curriculum (NCCA, 2010). As part of the piloting of these reforms the Bridge21 model [blinded for peer review] for 21st Century teaching and learning was adapted and trialled in several schools. This pedagogic model provided an approach which was compatible with the aims of the reform but was radically different to many teachers' existing practices and beliefs.

Almost every country in the world has undertaken some form of curriculum reform over the past two decades, yet there are often insufficient supports provided for teachers to adjust and develop new practices to their own contexts (Camburn & Han, 2015). The

* Corresponding author. School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3WT, UK.

E-mail addresses: girvanc@cardiff.ac.uk (C. Girvan), conneecm@tcd.ie (C. Conneely), tangney@tcd.ie (B. Tangney).

¹ The contribution of this author began at 'Trinity College, University of Dublin' and continued at 'Cardiff University'.

importance of professional development which involves active learning and reflection is well established (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Desimone, 2011), yet the initial introduction of new ideas and practices are still presented to teachers using traditional approaches such as transmission of information and observation of 'expert teachers' with experienced classes, which does not attend to the personal nature of professional development. Additionally there is often an assumption that having engaged in professional development activities teachers will be able to simply replicate the practices that they have been exposed to (Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan, 2002). The expectation is that change will be rapid and universal, whilst there is substantial evidence to show that professional development is an ongoing process in which teachers adapt what they know to their specific context.

To address these issues, this paper presents a three phase approach to teacher professional development for the introduction and adoption of innovative pedagogic practices, which is theoretically underpinned by experiential learning. These experiences need to be real. That is, they cannot be artificially constructed or controlled to produce a desired outcome (Roberts, 2012). Thus they are inherently messy and their potential impact can be lost if they are sanitised and 'dropped in' as part of a professional development programme. This highlights an issue for out-of-school professional development activities which involve experiential learning and are designed for any teacher. As Blair notes, "simply inserting experiential activities into teaching without providing a consistent experiential pedagogical framework diminishes success for learners" (2016, p5). The approach presented in this paper coherently spans both in and out-of-school contexts, providing authentic and personally meaningful experiential learning activities through which teachers can attend to both intellectual and personal development needs.

This paper aims to explore the experiences and outcomes of teachers who participated in the first full year of the programme, through their own reflective accounts. Open interviews with teachers constitute the primary data source which were analysed using the constant comparative approach to develop a thematic analysis of their experience. Documentary evidence and interviews with students provided a secondary data to further explore aspects of the findings. The resulting changes in professional practice are demonstrated through the main themes emerging from the study which highlight the role of the teacher, challenges to change and the support structures needed to foster changes as teachers engage in professional development. We also discuss the emotional impact of the professional development experience on one particular teacher which highlights the pressure to maintain the status quo during a time of uncertain reform.

2. Background

For teachers, professional development is both an intellectual and personal endeavour which requires not only engagement with new and differing ideas about education, trying out new activities and developing classroom practice, but also an emotional response as personal beliefs are challenged (Bell & Gilbert, 1994; Day & Sachs, 2004; Stoll, Harris, & Handscomb, 2012). Traditional models of teacher professional development have been characterised as teacher-centred, focusing on the transmission of information to teachers with an assumption that the learning which occurs for teachers is an individual process that leads to an immediate change in their practice and the ability to apply the new approach in a variety of contexts (e.g. Bausmith & Barry, 2011). However, research has shown that this does not happen in practice (Guskey, 2002; Pickering, 2007).

Guskey (2000) questions the effectiveness of traditional

approaches to professional development, such as one off events, increases in salaries for those who gain graduate qualifications and time-off in lieu, all of which have been features of teacher professional development in Ireland in the recent past. While these approaches can motivate teachers to attend, and through attendance teachers awareness of issues and development of their knowledge and skills do occur, they can also perpetuate out-dated forms of professional development (Monahan, 1996) which are "insufficient to foster learning which fundamentally alters what teachers teach or how they teach" (Boyle, While, & Boyle, 2004, p47). It can also be argued that there is insufficient opportunity to develop and respond to feelings in relation to accepting that aspects of their teaching may be problematic, dealing with restraints and feeling empowered; the stages of personal development which Bell and Gilbert (1994) identify as necessary for holistic teacher development. Yet this makes an assumption that the starting point is a deficit within the teacher. Luneta (2012) suggests that instead it is more valuable to recognise the knowledge and experience which the teacher brings to professional development experiences and build upon this with teachers involved in the design. While in a period of national reform the former may provide a better starting point for professional development, without denying the importance of past experiences, assuming that the existing practices of most teachers do not correspond to the planned reforms. However this risks the alienation of teachers from the very start of the professional development process which will negatively impact any reform attempts.

2.1. Experiential professional development

Personal development, as part of professional development, is most often attended to and demonstrated through reflective activities (Avalos, 1998). As traditional models of teacher development have waned internationally, there has been a new focus on teachers as active participants in their own learning encouraged through reflective practice (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). This focus on reflection and active participation has seen a growth in professional development theoretically underpinned by experiential learning. Rooted in the work of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Hahn, experiential learning is an overarching term used to classify several different forms of learning approaches, including problem and inquiry-based learning. Yet at the centre of each is a focus on a lived experience upon which learners can reflect, think and act. The nature of experiential learning is fairly well understood and agreed upon. Although notions of cycles and steps popularised by the work of Kolb amongst others have been thoroughly critiqued, the concepts within these perspectives remain the foundation of experiential learning design: action that results in experience, reflection on action and experience, abstraction drawn from reflection and action resulting from this reflection. It is worth remembering that Dewey (1933) stated that not all experience results in learning. Experiential learning, much like professional development, is a process of change within the individual. For each learner it is unique as they draw upon their own past experiences as a foundation to engage with the new. In teacher professional development it is suggested that this approach can motivate teachers to try new practices and make desired changes to the curriculum a practical reality (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011).

Reflection on action as a key tool for professional development has seen substantial growth in recent years, whether used as a tool for self-direction (Minott, 2010), or developing understanding and practice through sharing experiences. For teachers within a single school, lesson study is one such collaborative approach on which there is a growing international literature (e.g. Ono & Ferreira, 2010; Norwich & Ylonen, 2015). This approach allows the teacher

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6850714>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6850714>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)