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Facilitating change in ELT practice: How professional development can be enhanced by understanding change

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The effectiveness of in-service ELT professional development training is affected by trainers’ understanding of the process of change that professional development actually involves for teachers. However, sustained growth in teachers attending professional development is often not observable. Teachers’ ability to implement and sustain positive changes can be adversely affected by a lack of alignment with cultural or institutional philosophies of learning and teaching, lack of time and on-going support, plus intrinsic or motivational factors.

Deficit model of professional development

Professional development (PD) training is a formal means of improving teachers’ effectiveness, and success is usually measured in terms of stakeholder satisfaction and/or student achievement. This type of PD usually develops out of a perception of deficit: teachers need to be doing something different or doing what they do in a ‘better’ or improved way; it always involves change: change to practice, thinking and culture.

What is change?

There are different levels of change. In this context, the difference between first and second-order change is important. First-order change seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of what we already do. It is about doing more or less of what we already do so that we are doing it better. It is reversible: if the changes do not result in the desired improvement, it is possible to go back to what we were doing. Second order change is focused on how we do something, what we do and often who does it. Second-order change is deeper, transformative and often systemic. It involves change to culture – the
shared values, norms, beliefs, and assumptions within a group or organization. Much in-service PD is delivered to support this level of change.

Change is a process with three stages. It begins when a problem or need is identified and a vision of the desired destination or outcome of the process is shared. The longest and most complex phase of change is the transition period. This is the critical period during which people create new meaning out of the loss of what was. It is a time of emotional upheaval, chaos, confusion; it can also be a time of excitement, energetic commitment and creativity. It is during this period that knowledge, skills, attitudes, awarenesses, beliefs, norms, values, assumptions and convictions change. It takes time and necessitates trust, guidance/support, effort and leadership to work through it successfully.

Change Process

After the transition: a new way of being, thinking, doing

When the transition phase is successfully negotiated, individuals and the organization find themselves in a new reality.

When people are aligned to their purpose, when the gap between values and behaviours closes, what people experience is a stream of *ease*, because they are finally in their element. (Lewin and Regine, 2001, p. 332)
There are concrete ways we can use our understanding of change to inform the professional development we offer, including:

- Finding out as much as possible about the teachers, the educational culture they work in, their current practice and the change(s) they are training toward.
- Helping participants identify and articulate their beliefs, motivation and practices at the start of the training.
- Understanding what change involves, especially the transition phase, and helping participants to understand the process they are in.
- Acknowledging their emotions and their resistance to change. It is natural and to be expected.
- Modeling the beliefs, values, approaches and techniques your training aims to help participants develop.
- Helping participants develop reflection skills as a means of processing experiences, making meaning and learning.
- Giving participants opportunities to use and actively experiment with new approaches, techniques, ways of seeing and responding. As much as possible, give non-evaluative feedback.
- Creating community, and leaving participants with a way to continue the community and collaboration if they wish to.
- Being realistic about how much change can happen as a result of the training. Do not be disappointed when you do not see change, and do not be misled into believing that changes you do see are necessarily long-term.

Trainers can facilitate change by understanding what it is and involves, and by being clear about our role in the process. You can’t force commitment, but what you can do is “nudge a little here, inspire a little there, provide a role model. Your primary influence is the environment you create” (Senge 2000: 273).

References