

Lifelong learning for teachers: Rhetoric or reality?

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Abstract

There is little doubt that teachers' work in schools is constantly changing. Because schools represent societies' means of influencing, through the transmission of knowledge, values, skills and attitudes, they need teachers who encourage children to learn, to achieve and treat the world as a land with limitless horizons. This dynamic role requires teachers to develop different teaching skills and professional attributes. In association with this shifting demand, in recent times, the term "lifelong learning" has gained popular acceptance. It frequently appears in policy statements, curriculum documents and even press statements. What is suggested in this paper is that lifelong learning is not simply a term for a policy or mode of provision. As a response for emerging educational demands, particularly social and economic, it alerts us to a way of seeing learning as without boundaries.

This paper, using material gathered during a project related to informal learning, explores several issues relevant to producing teachers who see their own learning as being lifelong. If this trend is to move beyond rhetoric and become a reality, there are implications for education systems and schools as well as teachers themselves. A shift in the role of teachers is proposed and the characteristics of the new role are described.

Introduction

Over recent years, the work of teachers in schools has changed considerably and without doubt, further change is inevitable and its pace is unlikely to diminish. The teaching task has become far more complex and sophisticated as schools reflect contemporary social and economic trends that are contributing to higher expectations of schools and with comparable demands on teachers (Adams, 2001). In such an environment, the quality of teaching and learning is under challenge. Often it seems that teachers are called upon to act as change agents without fully understanding what is involved and where *learning-on-the-run* is the accepted process. In order to offer a quality education to their students, it is essential that both schools and teachers secure an appropriate and feasible response mechanism.

This need was recognised in a recent edition of *Unicorn* that focused on creating new professional cultures for teachers in times of change and uncertainty. A consistent theme was the need for ongoing professional development both as a right and a responsibility (Kennedy, 2001:2), as a means to assist change (Degenhardt, 2001) and to promote a learning culture within the profession (Smith, 2001)). A second theme in several of the articles was a reference to teachers' commitment to lifelong learning.

In recent years the concepts of lifelong learning and lifelong learners have become increasingly commonplace in the literature of education and training (Candy, 2000). From the relevant literature, for example, Irving (1999), Chapman and Aspin (1999), it seems logical that the operationalisation of these concepts to schools and teachers may assist in their response to particular pressures. Longworth and Davies (1996:85) advocate that the adoption of such lifelong learning attributes as adaptability, flexibility and versatility that are so necessary at a time of change will assist in any

transformation. What is evident is that while government and educational policies contain frequent rhetoric about lifelong learning, the reality is less certain. This paper, in focusing on teachers as lifelong learners, examines some of the issues that this trend poses for both schools and teachers in a climate of change. It also attempts to make connections between professional development, lifelong learning and the position of the teacher in relation to both. Data gathered during a small research project on informal learning in relation to Information Technology is used to support various points.

Teachers as lifelong learners

The fact that teachers learn throughout their professional life is beyond argument. As practitioners they are involved in lifelong learning by the very nature of their position and their job (Nicholls, 2000). Once their formal pre-service education is completed, the daily contact with the teaching and learning situation continues to contribute to the ongoing development of pedagogical knowledge and skills. What is proposed is that it is the nature and form of this subsequent learning that identifies teachers as true lifelong learners.

From the debate about teacher professionalism and ongoing professional development, it is clear that teachers have much the same learning needs and learning strategies as other professionals in terms of relevant knowledge and skills. Admittedly, because of their pre-service preparation and ongoing contact with education, they may be more attuned to formal learning. Candy et. al. (1994:43-44) identified key aspects of learning competence that they suggest are applicable to all professional groups who continue to learn throughout their professional career. On the basis of their extensive study, they identified five qualities or characteristics that professionals who are lifelong learners exhibit to some degree (the full list is contained in an appendix):

- An inquiring mind
- Helicopter vision
- Information literacy
- A sense of personal agency
- A repertoire of learning skills

(Candy, et.al., 1994:43-44)

Such a “profile” might serve as a useful reference point in the examination of the discussion of whether teachers can be considered as valid lifelong learners. One strategic area already referred to is the connection between professional development and lifelong learning.

Professional development and/or lifelong learning?

While there is debate over its meaning and implementation, what has emerged is that the concept and provision of lifelong learning is by its very nature highly complex and multifaceted. Mocker and Spear (1982) provide a useful model to help clarify the context of professional development and lifelong learning. They define lifelong learning as a system that is composed of four generic types of learning and propose a

model consisting of a two by two matrix that represents four identified learning situations:

		WHAT (Objectives)	
HOW (Means)	<i>Formal learning</i> (learners have no control over the objectives or means of their learning)	<i>Non-formal learning</i> (learners control the objectives but not the means)	
	<i>Informal learning</i> (learners control the means but not the objectives)	<i>Self-directed learning</i> (learners control both the objectives and the means)	

Figure 1. Lifelong learning model (Mocker & Spear, 1982:4)

In this model, the locus of control in relation to the goals and means of learning provides the operational definition for lifelong learning. One perception that this model helps to challenge is the equation that professional development simply equates to lifelong learning. While the boundaries may be blurred, it is suggested that much of what is considered as professional development for teachers occurs within the upper two frames, whereas lifelong learning is more likely to be reflected in the lower two frames. One teacher¹, in explaining their school's policy offered a supporting comment:

... the only professional development here (present school) that gets support is uni study ... the moment anything comes up ... do a degree! ... or a grad dip ... the schools wants a well qualified staff ... but what you do is not always what you want ...

(Interview #7)

This view is reflected in organisational responses to change. The provision of professional development, that is, the enhancement of the knowledge, skills and understanding of individual or groups in learning contexts, is usually related to that may be identified by themselves or the organisation. Consequently the goals associated with professional development are not necessarily self-determined by those involved (Nicholls, 2000). As well, such provision is often associated with curriculum matters, that is, curriculum content, implementation and assessment rather than learning aspect. While not decrying the value of such activity, it is suggested here that this emphasis is wanting.

Professional development for teachers should be more than formal learning. True professional development is the opportunity for individuals to extend their total knowledge base. For teachers, this means skills for the enhancement of their own

¹ During a small research project on their informal learning in relation to Information Technology, nine teachers were interviewed. The interviews focused on informal and formal learning opportunities within their current school.

learning and teaching need to be included (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). With much of the current practice, it seems that the connection between professional development and teaching (and learning) is not always explicit. As Jarvis (1999:169) stated 'there are profound implications for their (practitioners) continuing learning, since they are learning incidentally and informally in practice all the time'. He goes on to say that formal learning programmes need to be relevant to what they actually do and must contain opportunities for testing ideas and theories. If teachers are to meet the expectation of being change agents through preparing the next generation, the rhetoric must move to provide the support to help them transfer the professional development theory to effective classroom practice.

There are benefits in shifting professional development to less formal forms of learning. Teaching is, by its very nature, a role that can be pedagogically and personally isolating. Yet teaching does not occur in a learning vacuum. For many teachers, their dedication and commitment to the task reflects their already existing preparedness to engage in learning. The challenge from a lifelong learning perspective is to continue to develop and nurture their learning not only for themselves but also their peers and their students. If learning is considered as a core component of a teachers' professionalism then what is needed is professional development to improve and develop personal learning practices associated with "learning-to-learn".

Teachers as learners

If they are to be lifelong learners, teachers need to possess (and hence may require specific personal development) among others, such characteristics as self-knowledge, self-confidence, persistence and a positive view of the value of learning. The effective application of cognitive, meta-cognitive, motivational and affective characteristics which play an important part in lifelong learning and effective professional practice will only occur when teachers themselves have the knowledge, skills and confidence to engage in using them effectively (Cornford, 1990; de la Harpe & Radloff, 2000). To repeat the rhetoric, *teachers must learn to be lifelong learners themselves.*

It is in attempts to operationalise lifelong learning principles for teachers that the real challenge arises. As Huard (2001:14) explained:

Teachers, when they have the time, will say that there are moments [in the classroom] that make everything worthwhile. Often though, there is little time or opportunity to celebrate these moments, to share them with colleagues or even to reflect on the circumstances in which they occur. Teachers are always busy and their work is complex - there is always another class to go to, a duty to supervise, work to correct, or administrative duties to fulfil. Often, in all the rush and complexity this core work of teaching and learning and the reflective work and celebration of teaching, slip further down or off the agenda.

The reality is that by the very nature of the task, teaching provides limited opportunity for the type of professional development associated with lifelong learning. Research on teacher development shows that teachers have not generally taken an active part in

the production of knowledge about their own teaching. Indeed there has been a tension between the theory presented in their pre-service preparation and professional or practical knowledge (practice) produced in the school (Day, 1998). Despite such calls for the essential creation of personal development planning support mechanism, it is quite another to develop strategies for implementation. A case in hand was the notion of the 'reflective practitioner' that became a 'buzz word' in the education of teachers. Reflective practices and collaborative, supportive structures where teachers can honestly discuss their teaching with a view to improving their pedagogy are rarely built into the normal work practices and structures of schools (Huard, 2001). One teacher, in talking about his own teaching commented:

... we never get a chance to talk about our actual teaching or how to make it better ... the closest we get ... is when we discuss a problem student ... and then it is about how to handle the problem .. you know ... keep it under control ... not focus on appropriate learning ... or how to do it better ...

(Interview #2)

Earlier it was suggested that professional development often focuses on teaching rather than learning. This emphasis has partly been compounded in the debate over teacher professionalism, recognition and related industrial issues. What is often clouded over is the means by which an occupational group could claim to be truly professionalism. If teaching is to improve and be valued, there needs to be a relationship between professional development, teaching and learning. As Kennedy (2001:2) notes, *teachers need to be supported to develop their professional skills and knowledge as a life long activity*. The question of support particularly where financial resources are involved, is then critical.

What is more realistic is an approach to bring the rhetoric and reality of professional development and lifelong learning together in order to create the “enabling conditions for quality teaching” (Huard, 2001). One composite approach that has the potential is a mixture of the three learning-to-learn modes suggested by Dempsey (1987:22), that is, either on one's one, in a group (collaborative) or in an institutional mode or guided learning by an expert. Through reference to positive case studies, she demonstrates that collaborative learning in particular, has the potential to change schools and teachers as well as teaching and learning practices.

Together in learning

Opportunities and motivation for considered professional discourse about teaching with colleagues are often limited by the culture within a school. While there may be a willingness to reflect on practice and work collaboratively with colleagues in a strong focus on teaching and learning and student achievement, other factors impinge. As an example, if support is a critical factor, then this is where responsibility should focus.

The challenge for schools is to enact a deliberate, effective learning culture. In some schools, professional development is valued as an ongoing process by all teachers as they seek to develop school-wide commitment to continuous improvement. If an authentic learning culture is to prevail, school communities have to relearn together. As adult learners, there is the potential for teachers to collaborate in problem solving

tasks. Adult learning literature suggests that learning occurs best when the problem is related in a meaningful way to the adult's life situation (Nicholls, 2001). For teachers, the impetus for learning comes from a conflict between personal 'biography' and current experience. This suggests that learning will not take place unless a problem implicates routine practice or taken-for-granted knowledge.

What is particularly applicable to schools is the need to fundamentally change how teachers think and interact so that learning becomes a way of life (Robinson, 1996). While many schools have developed a vision relative to shared goals and values, team learning is an additional mastery that is linked to the notion of a learning community. The nature of teaching and learning suggest interaction between teachers is an important type of learning for professionals. Perhaps what is needed is professional development both to facilitate the desired change and to equip staff in the new (and changed) environment (Leicester, 1996). This suggests a role variation for teachers that has implications both for individuals and the learning process.

Such changes are not without difficulties. To create a learning community takes time and is not always easy (Day, 1998). Current school structures tend to support a standard form of operation. The promulgation of a learning community recognises the important dynamics of each individual's work area but within a shared culture or what Conzemius and Conzemius (1996) refer to as interconnectedness. While a fundamental assumption, very little about current practice lends itself to this principle. As indicated, teachers have little time or opportunity for collegial collaboration and when they do, quite often the thought of it is so threatening that it rarely occurs without significant encouragement from an empowering, insightful colleague or leader. All these strategies rely on reflectivity, the ability of the professional to reflect on their own practice and behaviour critically and develop new ways of understanding their own situations (Rose, 1996).

Making a difference requires people to interact. As Blasé (1999) suggests, schools that are successful in responding to change are more likely to be those where there is a high degree of sharedness. Teachers move towards a collective understanding, not an individual practice of teaching. One teacher, in referring to a previous appointment, revealed the benefits of this approach:

... when I was at S [previous school] ... we were always busy but we had a great Head of Department ... very supportive .. regularly ... like monthly ... we ... there were only four of us ... we'd spend just twenty minutes or so ... talking about improving our teaching ... but then ... we'd also talk about it when we got a chance ... like five secs at assembly ... or waiting for coffee ... and someone would say ... have you thought about this ... we became ... a tight little group ... and it was great ... we talked about how we could improve our teaching ... and that really helped me ... in some of my messes ... being a first year out...

(Interview #6)

Schools are in a unique situation. Given their perennial brief of learning and teaching, it is natural and appropriate that schools gravitate towards the concept of the learning community (Bhindi, 1997). If this is the case, lifelong learning can be considered as being involved with the development of a range of interactions between schools and

their host communities, in this case, other teachers, students and parents. All are, or should be, concerned to develop a learning community where learning is valued, both for the teachers and the students (Nicholls, 2000).

In response, the issue of supportive leadership has received attention (eg Conzemius and Conzemius, 1996; Bhindi, 1997). It is suggested that this attention can be seen as over ambitious, especially within a lifelong learning framework. I would argue that the culture of a school is dynamic and while composed of individuals, is responsive to those individuals. Unfortunately often school leaders are in a difficult position finding themselves in a position between a rock and a hard place! They are required to apply pressure to bring about change and they are also expected to support their staff (Cardno, 1995). At the same time, individuals perpetuate appropriate cultural games or invent further games to hide the games that are being played.

If learning is seen as a social activity, then the individual will experience improved learning as part of a group. Rose (1996) suggests that a focus on the individual is a mistake. Rather a better approach is to see the school as a whole, with its own culture and as much more the sum of its parts. The associated emergence of a “team culture” with an instrumental function of improving teaching and learning becomes a key component of professional growth. It is in this context that the learning of skills, values and attitudes in the context of their application to realistic problems within a culture of learning that is focused and defined by competent practice is involved.

Conclusion

In examining the question of whether teachers are lifelong learners, this paper has attempted to examine the inter-relationship between professional development and lifelong learning and the position of the teacher within. These cannot be separated from the *raison d'être* of schools – the promotion of the learning of their students (Leicester, 1996). The implications of the connections that have been made were used to demonstrate how the development of the teacher and teaching skills relied on professional development but cannot occur without learning and understanding. From this discussion, it is suggested that teachers, as a group, are likely to demonstrate the characteristics of lifelong learners to varying degrees. What is postulated here is that if lifelong learning is a desired and professional trait, changes are warranted.

The necessity for maintenance of knowledge and skill currency is part of the debate over teacher professionalism and professional growth (Cornford, 1990). The association with lifelong learning as part of a focus on developmental learning is clear. For the classroom practitioner, learning becomes the self-renewing mechanism that enables each individual to survive and grow, develop and change.

Finally, the matter of responsibility in this process is critical. Two views are worth reflecting on both of which have implications for the role of the teacher in regards their own learning:

In my opinion, no one can build a profession but the practitioners of that profession, hence teachers must claim their own power and expertise as professionals. I also believe that schools - where most teachers work - much change radically in order to support quality teaching.

(Degenhardt, 2001:7).

and

A critical feature seems to be getting people committed to distinct goals, rather than dealing with change per se. Personalising the issues and the associated professional development activities is essential.

(Tvede and Bingham, 1999:17).

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Appendix

An inquiring mind

- A love of learning;
- A sense of curiosity and questions asking;
- A critical spirit;
- Comprehension-monitoring and self-evaluation;

Helicopter vision

- A sense of the interconnectedness of fields;
- An awareness of how knowledge is created in at least one field of study and an understanding of the methodological and substantive limitations of that field;
- Breadth of vision;
- *Information literacy*
- Knowledge of major current resources available in at least one field of study;
- Ability to frame researchable questions in at least one field of study;
- Ability to locate, evaluate, manage and use information in a range of contexts;
- Ability to retrieve information using a variety of media;
- Ability to decode information in a variety of forms: written, statistical, graphs, charts, diagrams and tables;
- Critical evaluation of information.

A sense of personal agency

- A positive concept of oneself as capable and autonomous;
- Self-organisation skills (time-management, goal setting, etc.);

A repertoire of learning skills

- Knowledge of one's own strengths, weaknesses and preferred learning style;
- Range of strategies for learning in whatever context one finds oneself; and
- An understanding of the differences between surface and deep level learning.

Candy, et. al. (1994:43-44)