

Continuous Professional Development through Interaction and Collaborative Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Though language is a form of interaction, but ironically language teachers do not seem to interact with one another. In fact one of the reasons why professionalism in its true sense lacks in teaching profession is the absence of interaction among teachers and the vacuum in turn caused by this self withdrawal. Definitely interaction does help to enhance professionalism in a field. The models of professional development viz. craft model, applied science model and reflective model propounded by Michael Wallace are effective ways of promoting interaction.

Paradoxically, although teachers spend their lives in the company of others (sometimes a very large company, if we think of the size of certain classes), it is in many ways a lonely profession. This professional isolation is ultimately a barrier to professional development. Collaborative action research can be a helpful means to break down the professional isolation of the teacher and helps in tapping the experience of the wider language teaching community.

My attempt in this paper would be to talk about various strategies useful for collaborative action research and interaction which ultimately facilitates continuous professional development of a teacher.

Key Words: Interaction, Self-Withdrawal, Action Research, Craft Model, Scientific Experimental Model.

1. Introduction

The globalised scenario of ELT especially in ESL context has made continuous professional development (CPD) for the teachers of English, a priority. The need for CPD has become urgent

particularly for teachers of English influenced by traditional methods of ELT. The increased emphasis on the role of social nature of learning (rather than learners as decontextualized individuals), learner diversity as a resource (rather than an impediment), learning as a lifelong process (rather than examination oriented), assessment for learning (rather than of learning) etc.(Jacobs & Farrell, 2001) has made CPD of English teachers inevitable.

Although we teachers of English face a large number of students in our classes, still teaching in many ways is a lonely profession. Team teaching, which only affects a few teachers and usually for brief periods, most of us face our classes alone. The weaknesses and strengths of a teacher quite often go unnoticed and therefore are ignored by colleagues. This kind of professional isolation is ultimately a barrier to professional development.

2. Action Research

Action research can be an important tool to break down this professional isolation. Action research is nothing but systematically collecting data on one's everyday teaching and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what our future course of action should be. It is likely that the attitude of the majority of teachers varies between indifference and downright hostility. As Wright (1992) has noted, "teachers may sense that they are being asked to take on yet more duties in addition to those which already burden them". Though Action research has always been proposed as an empowering pedagogical strategy, but, as Widdowson (1993) has pointed out, "if it becomes another top-down requirement, it turns into the reverse; not only is it an additional burden upon teachers, but it also creates a new kind of dependency on experts (non teaching)". Action research could be collaborative or team-based, sharing of the process and results of the investigation in some way. The same stringent requirements of validity, reliability and verification desirable for conventional research should apply to action research too.

Since the action research is primarily an approach relating to individual professional development, the generalization of the findings to other contexts is not of primary importance. The significant point is that the processes involved should facilitate the practicing teacher's reflection. Consequently, action research overlaps the areas of professional development and conventional research, and acts as a bridge between the two.

2. Professional Development

The strategies that we consider for professional development should help us to turn the problems we face in our teaching career into positive rather than negative experiences. In fact, most of us use a wide variety of strategies both formal (programmed action research) and informal (individual action research) for our professional development. E.g. Discussions with our colleagues about classroom experiences or problems relating to specific students can help us on accessing useful background information, articulating possible solutions to everyday classroom problems, improving self-esteem, relieving tension, and so on. Reading professional journals for ideas and membership of a professional association has an advantage of informal discussion with colleagues, and a wider scope for social interaction. Departmental meetings and membership of working parties can also be very positive or very frustrating experience, depending on one's relationship with the colleagues involved. Evening/weekend classes can also vary on their effectiveness. Taking up new challenges, for example by career moves from one post to another, is another way in which many people improve their professional expertise.

4. Areas for Development

Some teachers tend to be self-critical which is better than being totally complacent, since self-development does not take place without the perceived need for it. Self-awareness of potential areas of improvement is therefore helpful. Continuous professional development is a rational and intrinsic part of one's career. The motivation for this development is often an interest in, or perhaps even an anxiety about, some aspect of our professional performance.

If all our professional development were of private nature, we would surely be depriving ourselves of a lot of stimulus and interest. Being aware of other colleagues' ideas can give us a fresh perspective on problems and ideas for our own action research. The feedback from colleagues can be motivating and rewarding, as well as providing the basis for further reflection.

The amount of sharing of ideas that takes place among language teachers is probably far less than it could and should be. The reasons could be pressure of work, lack of motivation or reward for professional development, natural diffidence, professional insecurity etc. Some of the inhibiting factors are organizational and some are personal. The responsibility for improving this situation lies with both institution and individual teacher. The initiative on part of an individual could be in terms of collaborative action research.

5. Collaborative Action Research

One of the most effective ways of exercising our individual initiative in the context of action research is through collaboration, which can be with our students, colleagues in the same department/school/institution, colleagues outside our own dept./ school/institution, colleagues with a different area of expertise, colleagues in other disciplines (e.g. foreign language teacher/mother tongue teacher), colleagues in other countries.

5.1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Collaborative Action Research

5.1.1 Advantages

1. **Depth and Coverage:** the more people are in an action research project, the more data can be gathered, either in depth (e.g. a single case study) or in coverage (e.g. several complementary case studies; a bigger population), or in both.
2. **Validity and Reliability:** involving others makes it easier to investigate an issue from different angles, perhaps using different research techniques (i.e. triangulation) making our findings more reliable & valid.
3. **Motivation:** the most important aspect, if the 'vibes' are right (i.e. if the group dynamic is positive), working as a member of a team is much more motivating than working on our own.

5.1.2 Disadvantages

There are of course, potential disadvantages in collaborative action research. You must have heard stories of colleagues who have never spoken to one another after going on a holiday

together. The same thing is possible in an activity like action research which can make unusual demands of a professional relationship. This is something you have to consider when deciding on whether to seek collaborators within, say, your own department or field. The potential problem of status when professionals with different kinds of expertise come together must be taken into account. Perhaps the solution is to spend time discussing the ground rules by asking questions like What are we trying to do?, Why are we doing this? (Do we share the same motivation, or do we have different motivation?), How are we going to do it? (Who does what and when?), How much time are we prepared to spend on this?, how often do we meet, where and when?, What is the end product going to be?

6. Finding a Collaborator

The next suggested step would be to find a collaborator and begin negotiations. In fact, we all know that collaboration rarely comes about in a logical, calculating way. It is much more likely to arise from discovering a shared concern or enthusiasm in the course of a conversation, or while participating, say, in an in-service workshop. Even close colleagues working together can have totally different expectations and level of commitment. It is better to have a frank discussion of what is involved before investing time and resources.

7. Sources of Ideas

The most congenial way of getting ideas about teaching methods and materials is probably through informal conversation with colleagues. First hand recommendations from colleagues are highly relevant because they come from our immediate environment and teaching context. Another popular way of getting ideas is from talks or workshops. In a workshop setting we might even have a chance to try out teaching materials, or put ideas into action. There is often an opportunity to ask questions or discuss problems.

One of the best ways of getting involved in talks and workshops is through membership of teachers' organizations such as International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), *Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages* (TESOL), English Language Teachers' Association of India (ELTAI), special interest groups (SIGs) for computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) or Teacher Development etc. Another source of ideas can

come from teachers' programmes on radio or television, especially if we can record them for repeated playback. The most readily accessible supply of new ideas is probably to be found in written sources such as books, magazines, and journals. Magazines like Modern English Teacher (MET), English Teaching Professional (ETP) may be a rich source of ideas for practicing teachers who might not think of themselves as researchers, but open to new techniques and approaches.

8. Literature Research

Literature research is used to tap into other people's ideas in a much more directed and purposeful fashion. Literature research actually means a search for the books, articles and other writings which may have a bearing on the research area that you are interested in. Very often the starting point for a literature research is a bibliography or list of references attached to an article.

9. Inquiry

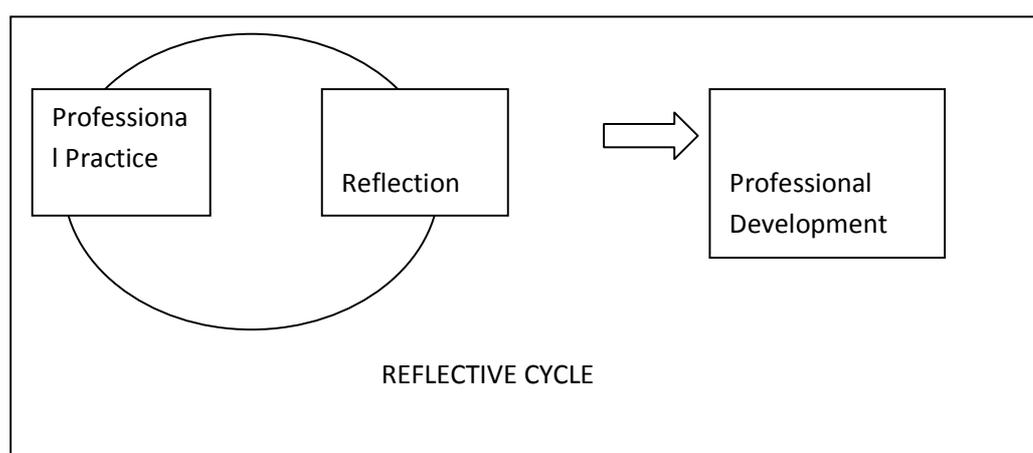
According to Cohen and Manion (1994) inquiry means the act or process of seeking the answer to a question. E.g.

- What makes a good ESP syllabus?
- How do you design good materials to develop listening skills?
- How should I teach the present perfect tense?
- What are the relative advantages of teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness?
- Is teaching English as a foreign language a form of linguistic imperialism?
- What are the processes by which someone learns a foreign language?
- How effective is task-based learning?
- What happens when people try to learn a language without the help of a teacher?

This process of data collection, setting up of a database, and the subsequent analysis of the data constitutes action research which is nothing but a special kind of inquiry.

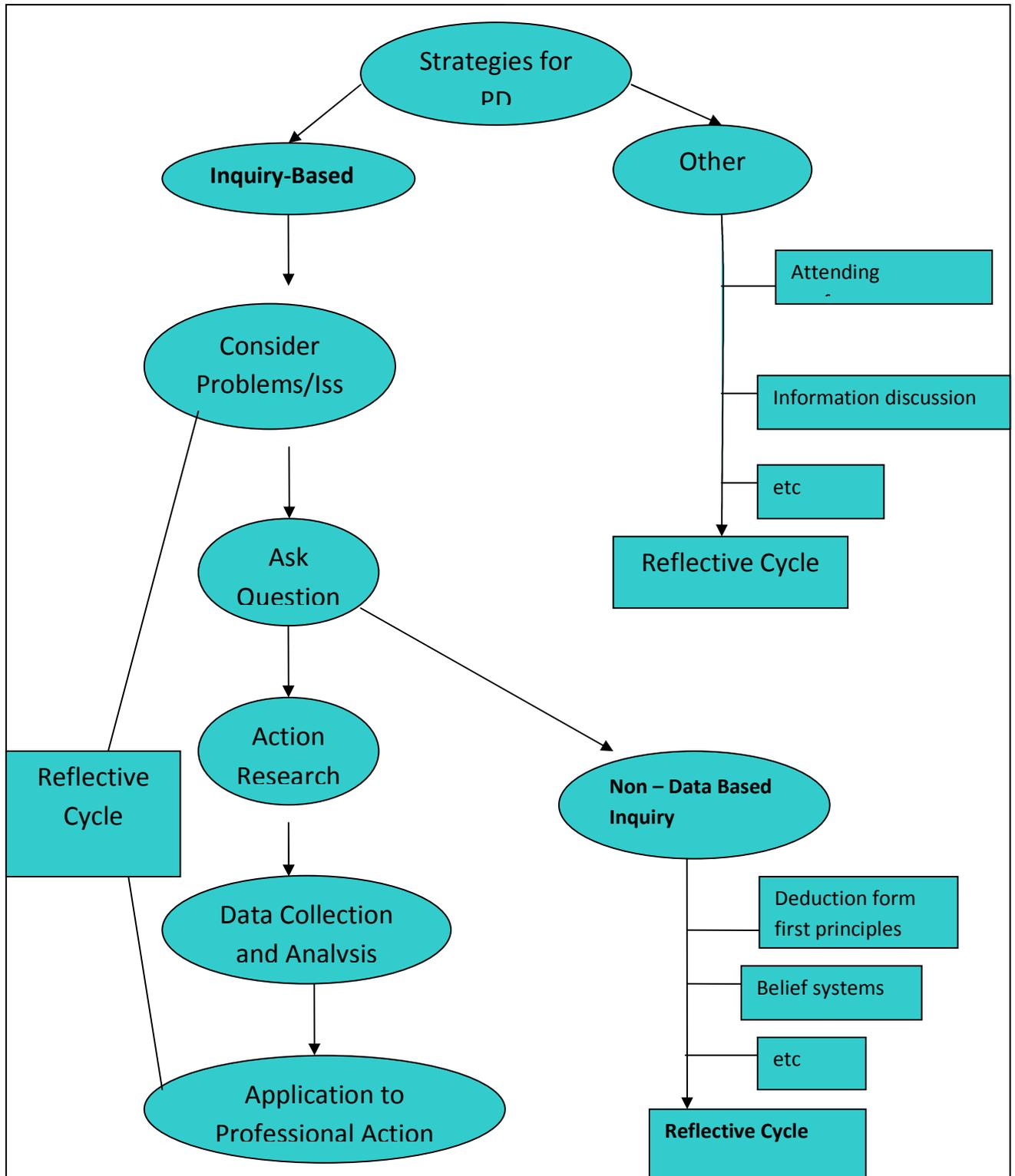
10. Reflective Cycle

The process called reflective cycle provides the momentum for increased professional competence and is concerned with providing tools for reflection.



Since the process of professional development varies from one person to another, there are many ways of reflective cycle. We all have our own kinds of professional experience, knowledge, background and expertise. Strengths and weaknesses may vary from one individual to another. What may be of great importance to me may be totally irrelevant to you.

11. Professional Development Strategies



12. Structured Reflection

It would be extremely naïve, to imply that all our professional problems are capable of solution. Some can only be investigated; some we might have to walk away from; others we might have to live with. However, most problems benefit from being discussed in some controlled or structured way. Action research is a form of structured reflection.

13. Action Research is Problem Focused

Some of our professional development is open-ended and relatively unfocused. We sometimes skim through professional journals just to see if there is anything interesting. We occasionally even enroll on training programmes without a very clear idea of what the criteria will be in terms of our professional development. Action research is different from this in that it nearly always arises from some specific problem or issue arising out of our professional practice. It is therefore problem-focused in its approach and very practical in its intended outcomes.

14. Action Research and Inquiry

Action research is a sub-area of inquiry, which simply means the process of answering questions by using various kinds of evidence in a reasonable manner. The questions can be answered by a process of data collection and analysis (action research), or by other means (by arguing from general principles or by coming to certain conclusions according to certain things we believe-belief systems).

The conclusions or ideas we derive from data based inquiry can feed back into the reflective cycle. For example when faced with a particular problem (How should I teach the present perfect tense?), one may go to a more experienced teacher and ask his or her advice. I may reflect on the advice, and then decide to follow it implicitly, modify it, or do one of these viz. checking in a teacher's book on methodology, observing various teaching methods (a form of data collection), trying out various approaches and seeing how they work, may be guided by certain principles, / belief systems (e.g. 'I don't believe in the formal teaching of grammar, so this question really doesn't make much sense to me') etc.

15. Action Research and the Reflective Cycle

Action research involves the collection and analysis of data related to some aspect of our professional practice. This is done so that we can reflect on what we have discovered and apply it to our professional action. This is where it differs from other more traditional kinds of research, which are much more concerned with what is universally true. Action research is a loop process, in the sense that the process can be repeated (reframing the problem, collecting fresh data, rethinking our analysis, etc.) until we have found a solution that satisfies us.

16. Models of Professional Development

Michael Wallace (1991) talks about three models of professional development: the craft model, the applied science model and the reflective model. In the craft model, the master practitioner demonstrates to the trainee teacher how things should be done. In the applied science model, the findings of scientific knowledge and experimentation are conveyed to trainees by experts. In the reflective model, trainees combine received knowledge with their own experiential knowledge of the classroom.

17. Reflective Model for Facilitators

The training for facilitators will fall largely within the reflective model. It will consist of a one or two week face to face training, followed by an on-line course of several months. Participants will be able to use the video machine, which will later be used in teacher training, at their local teacher's centre. Since cybercafés are now widespread, it should be possible for participants to read the email tasks of all the members of their group and make follow-up comments without leaving their normal place of work.

18. Craft Model for Teachers

The training for teachers will fall largely into the craft model. It will consist of a single week-long training, probably in a class of fifty teachers. There will be little time for assimilation of new ideas or reflection. A video machine and audio-cassette player will be provided at the teacher's centre so that the videos can be discussed and the songs practiced. However, the on-line

element is not practicable for primary teachers, partly because it would be very expensive to conduct with the thousands of teachers who need training. In addition they will not have the English skills to frame their thoughts over the email and many live in villages where there is no access to computers or video machines.

19. Conclusion

CPD is basically an issue of teacher motivation which is an ignored area in ELT. Teacher motivation is fundamentally an intrinsic issue which needs to be addressed in an informal mode. Action research is different from conventional or traditional types of research in that it is focused on individual and is not concerned with making general statements. It is therefore more user friendly in that it may make little or no use of statistical techniques. The main function of action research is to facilitate the reflective cycle, and provide an effective method for professional development through collaboration and interaction.

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