A Framework for Teacher Learning and Development

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In this paper, I am less concerned with making an argument than with outlining a proposal for a framework. The argument, that teachers have a unique professional learning process, which undergirds teacher training and development activities, has been made and supported through research over that last two decades. Increasingly the question now is one of practice: How will that research and theorizing support the design and implementation of teacher training and development activities at both the large, project level and the small, seminar or workshop level? In this paper, I introduce such a framework and the rationale for it. Then I look in detail at one particular aspect, the roles that are designed into teacher training and professional development activities, as a way of applying the framework more specifically.

THE RATIONALE: FIVE KEY IDEAS

We need to recognize that the very notion that teachers have what Herbert Walberg (1977) called “mental lives,” and therefore that thinking is a central part of teaching, is a relatively recent view. Its history goes back only about a quarter century to the then-new concept of teacher thinking (Calderhead, 1987; Clark & Peterson, 1986), which helped to establish that teaching is more than simply behavior or activity, but is rooted in the teacher’s background and beliefs as well as in the knowledge gained through professional training. In the field of language teaching, teacher learning has only become a central part of the work on teacher training and professional development since the mid 1990s. This attention to how teachers think was launched in English language teaching by the publications of Devon Woods (1996) seminal study of teacher decision-making and by the research collection on teacher learning in language teaching, which Jack Richards and I co-edited (Freeman & Richardson, 1996).

This work on teacher thinking, or cognition as it is also known (Borg, 2003), has given rise to a series of key ideas, each grounded in research and theorizing, that can structure how we approach the design and implementation of teacher training and development programs and activities. In this section, I outline five of these key ideas, which provide the rationale for the framework I propose.

1. Teachers have a learning process.

The notion of that teachers engage in a process of professional learning over time is, as I argued earlier, a relatively new one, though it is now well established. In fact, the assertion of learning process itself has not been so controversial, although there is still a great deal to be understood about it; rather, there has been some disagreement about how to characterize the object of that process. In other word, that teachers learn has been fairly easily established; what they learn and how they learn it has generated a wider range of discussion (Freeman, 2002).

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1 In this paper, I use the terms teacher development and professional development interchangeably. In my experience, the former is largely an EFL and ELT term, while the latter is used in U.S. public education contexts. Both refer to a similar vehicle for teacher learning, which contrasts with teacher training.
The object of professional learning—describing what teachers know—has been variously defined: as knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions (Woods, 1996), as personal practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1983), and as pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). While there are key differences in these constructs, principally over how they each reconcile the inner world of teachers’ thoughts with the outer world of their actions, they share many common attributes. They establish that teacher knowledge blends elements that are learned through socialization, like any form of learning, with those that are explicitly taught. So, for example, new teachers may assume (or believe) that correction helps students learn because they have experienced teacher correction in their own schooling. Later they may encounter research on the impact and timing of certain types of correction if they study second language acquisition as part of their professional training. A key question then arises: How does the explicitly learned information, in this case from second language acquisition, influence or reshape the socially formed ideas learned through experience? This is one of the central dilemmas in understanding and orchestrating the professional learning of teaching.

There is a general consensus about the professional learning process. As Karen Johnson and I summarized in 1998, teacher learning is situated socially; it takes place among students, fellow teachers, and other community members. It is temporally organized in and over time, which means that there are common developmental patterns in a broad sense; teachers with certain amounts of experience share common concerns and see certain types of information as helpful in their learning. And most fundamentally, the professional learning process is contingent on an array of factors including background and life experience, and the subject matter.

2. Teachers learn in and from situations of practice.

Understanding teacher learning as situated and contingent refers to the fact that classroom practices themselves are sociocognitive and behavioral undertakings (Johnson, 1999). We recognize that teachers learn in these situations, as they identify and sort out possible courses of action and make decisions (Lampert, 2001), and that teachers also learn from these same situations, as they reflect on and analyze the impact of their actions on students and learning (Schon, 1986). I use the phrase, situations of practice, to bring together place and time in teachers’ professional learning within a single concept.

3. Teachers and students have differing—but interrelated—experiences in classrooms.

In the study of classrooms, we can tend to overlook the simple fact that teachers and students have quite different roles and experiences within the same environment. Much of the work on understanding classrooms as social practices has focused on how teachers and students together construct the work of teaching and learning (e.g., Cazden, 1988; Johnson, 1995). Thus teacher and students are seen as participants in a common activity, and research attempts to understand how that activity unfolds through time. From a teacher-learning standpoint however, we are mainly concerned with the perspective of teachers and how they develop their thinking and understanding of this common enterprise: This involves differentiating between teacher and students in their roles and forms of participation so that we can focus on how these social processes in the classroom shape the development of teachers’ thinking. In other words, in understanding teacher learning our job is to understand what is unique about the classroom from the teacher’s point of view. Caleb Gattegno (1976) captured this basic dilemma of differentiated roles very well when he observed that the teacher’s job is to work with the student while the student works on the language.
4. What teachers know and do influences—but does not cause—students to learn.

At the core of this dilemma is the basic fact that students learn in relation to—and not because of—what their teachers do (or don’t do). Simply put, teaching does not cause learning. Although we organize educational practices on the assumption that it does, the best that the activity of teaching can accomplish is to create opportunities for students to learn (Freeman, 2006). Therefore, as Karen Johnson and I have argued, we need to understand how teaching influences learning, and more crucially from a teacher learning perspective, how teachers develop their understanding of this relation of influence (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, 2004).

5. Teacher training and development are vehicles for teacher learning.

All of which leads us back to the focus of this analysis: teacher training and professional development. In language teacher education we have tended to label—and thus to assume—teacher training and development as processes in and of themselves. Such analyses are no doubt useful (and I do not exclude myself from this criticism because I have written several of them), but they miss a fundamental point: that training and development are vehicles for the process of teacher learning. Training and development are predicated on the assumption that teachers engage in an identifiable professional learning process (Point 1); that their learning grows out of their practice (Point 2); that their practice is socially situated, unfolds through time, and is highly contingent of environment and experience (Point 3); and that the central tension in classroom practice is that the teacher’s work in teaching supports—but cannot make—learning happen (Point 4). Therefore, what exactly are teachers learning to do? What are they trying to make happen?

Thus our challenge is to calibrate what we do in teacher training and development with what we know about how teachers learn. I argue that it is useful to have a schema or framework that can help us to design and to implement training and development programs and activities in keeping with what we know about the professional learning of teachers. I introduce such a framework in the next section of this paper.

FRAMEWORK

With this foundation, I turn now to the framework itself. The intent is to locate the key operational elements in teacher learning and to describe how these elements interact and can be organized and managed. It is important to note that this is a descriptive exercise; in other words, the first task is to understand what the elements are that shape teachers’ professional learning. In this section, I outline in general terms the elements of the framework. Having done that, this description can then be tested using values propositions or statements about what might make such learning more effective and lasting.

Social Practice, Meaningfulness, and Time

The framework draws heavily on Vygotskian sociocultural theory generally and on the work of activity theory (Cole, Engestrom, & Vasquez, 1997) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). It frames teacher learning as a social practice; I see a social practice as having three key attributes. First, it is an activity that makes sense to those who do it (participants) and is recognizable to those who may see or observe it in progress and who know what it is; these we could define as potential
participants. The proceeding statement may seem somewhat circular or tautological; however, it is simply a way of asserting that the meaningfulness of the social practice is defined by (and understood) by those who do it. Others may understand it only partially, if at all. Perhaps the clearest instance of this meaningfulness principle is that of people speaking another language. If you come on a group on the street, in a restaurant, or at an airport, for example, who are speaking a language you don’t know, you will likely recognize the social practice of using language even though you do not actually understand what they are saying. You can distinguish talking from singing, for example. If you speak some of the language, or perhaps there are many cognates and loan words with languages you know, you may be able to glean a general sense of what they are saying without understanding the details.

Second, to be a social practice the activity must take place on a more or less regular basis; in other words, it happens in and over time. This is key because social practices come from somewhere (they have histories) and they are modified through time (they are dynamic). And third, social practices usually frame some sort of tension; attempting to address these tensions is what gives the practice its dynamism (see Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999).

The Elements: Tools, Activity, And Participants
This framework describes social practices in terms of three basic elements: the tools used in the particular practice, the activities that make up the practice, and how the individuals are involved as participants in those activities using those tools. The tools are subdivided into physical and symbolic; participants are referred to in terms of the roles they adopt, which are shaped by how they use the tools in the activity.
KEY PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL PRACTICE THEORY

1. A SOCIAL PRACTICE is described in terms of how its PARTICIPANTS use TOOLS to carry out its ACTIVITY (object; outcome).
2. TOOLS are physical and symbolic. They shape (mediate) ACTIVITY.
3. PARTICIPANTS’ ROLES are shaped and defined (distributed) by how they use the TOOLS.
4. Those who are not taking part in the PRACTICE are able to recognize and know what the practice is even though they may not be to participate in it (social; mutually recognizable).
5. An ACTIVITY happens both in and over TIME, shaped by what precedes it (history) and anticipates what will come (emergent).

For example: if we consider a European football (or U.S. soccer) game as an instance of a social practice, the tools of the game/practice are the ball, which is physical, and the rules, which are symbolic. There are many rules in soccer, but arguably the central one—the rule that “makes soccer, soccer” or that makes the social practice recognizable as a soccer game—is the rule that you cannot touch the ball with your hands, except if you are the goal keeper and even then only in certain parts of the field. Let’s say that you, as an observer, happen on a group of children kicking a ball around. Part of what helps you to recognize the activity as a soccer game is that the players are taking pains to avoid touching the ball with their hands. The activities of the practice are the plays in the game, as players (or participants) attack and defend the goal. The ball as the physical tool shapes the roles of the participants because the player who has the ball is attacking while the players who are trying to get possession of the ball are defending. This back-and-forth between attacking and defending is defined by which player has control of the ball.

This framework, and its attendant theories, could be the subject of much longer and more complex discussions. However, my intent in this paper is to suggest how such a basic blueprint can serve to locate and describe the key operational elements that interact in the design, implementation, and monitoring of teacher training and development projects and specific activities. To do so, we must first define what the social practice is. In the case of teacher training and development, I would argue that there are two overlapping social practices involved. The first practice is classroom language teaching; the second is the social practice of learning to teach. In a sense they interrelate in much the same way as scrimmaging does to the real soccer game in that the second practice is preparation for (and takes its meaning from) the first. Then each of the three key elements—tools, activities, and participant roles—can be unpacked and applied to thinking about the design of teacher learning opportunities. For example, we can look at activities from the perspective of the individual moves of the practice.

PERSPECTIVES EXAMINED

I want to turn now to how the framework can be implemented. As I said in the previous section, the framework itself is descriptive; to make it dynamic, each of the elements needs to be oriented toward action, or doing the work. The propositions need to express the basic commitments of teacher

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2 My apologies to Ludwick Fleck, who in his 1932 book, The Social Construction of Scientific Fact, on the development of disease theory and diagnosis, uses football (or soccer) to explain key concepts. I draw on Fleck’s image here, but the errors in explanation are my own.
learning, which can then be tested through research and practice. Specifically, the framework can be animated by a group of values propositions or statements that slant each element in a particular way. These statements follow a basic calculus that captures commitment to a particular value or orientation. They are expressed as statements of degree, in the form:

\[ \text{To the extent to which } X \text{ is true, then } Y \text{ will (or can be predicted to) be more effective and durable.} \]

These propositions then provide design principles for teacher training and development activities.

I turn now to three exemplars of such values statements. Each statement follows the syntax:

\[ \text{To the extent to which the framework elements—\{tools\} or \{activities\} or \{roles\}—are more \{VALUE\}, they are likely to be more effective and durable.} \]

*Effective* is judged by the influence on the professional learning, or change in professional view, of the teachers involved. *Durable* speaks to the lastingness of that change over time.

A. *To the extent to which \{tools\} or \{activities\} or \{roles\} are more personal, they are likely to be more effective and durable.*

The notion of *personal* is quite straightforward, meaning that the element allows for and encourages participants to invest (in a counseling-learning sense) their own background and experiences.

B. *To the extent to which \{tools\} or \{activities\} or \{roles\} are more generative, they are likely to be more effective and durable.*

*Generative* means that taking part in the specific element enables individuals to extend its logic or reasoning to create analogues that are new to them. In this sense, it generates other applications.

C. *To the extent to which \{tools\} or \{activities\} or \{roles\} involve limited but increasing risk (autotelic), they are likely to be more effective and durable.*

This orientation speaks to how the element instantiates risk. *Risk* can mean many things in teaching and learning. Essentially risk is understood here as the degree of personal revelation and vulnerability to the participants, as well as the degree to which the element leads to what is valued as successful. Again, in language teaching and learning, *success* is hardly a transparent or agreed upon concept. For our purposes, I would suggest that success means for the teacher and for the students a sense of competence and achievement in what each intended in the particular activity and in the overall objective.⁵

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⁵ Earlier versions of this thinking originally appeared in a paper in *Prospect: The Journal of the Australian Migrant Education Program* in 1989 (Freeman, 1989a). I develop them here because I believe they are actually more powerful, in the mathematical sense of explanatory or predictive power, than I had understood at the time.

⁴ As I said in my 1989 *TESOL Quarterly* article on teacher training and development (Freeman, 1989b), change should not be understood simply as acting or doing things in observably different ways. It may just as likely entail a change in thinking or awareness that may not necessarily result in observably different activities.

⁵ I use *objective* here as Engestrom et al. (1999) and other activity theorists do to refer to the espoused purpose of the activity of system. So the objective of the soccer game as a system is for one side to win. Hence the “sudden death” shoot-outs of the goal, which have come to characterize World Cup soccer matches. If it were not crucial that one side actually have won, the game could end in a tie.
A DESIGN DOCUMENT TO BE TESTED IN PRACTICE

The argument—that teachers’ professional learning is central to improving classroom practices, instruction, and thus student learning—has been made in research and policy (see Freeman, 2006) and is widely accepted. The challenge now is how to best organize such learning, whether through training or professional development, so that teachers can benefit optimally from it. In this context, I have proposed a framework for conceptualizing professional learning opportunities. That framework, which is grounded in versions of sociocultural theory, sees practices as social, cultural, and historical; they happen among people, involve meaning-making (and thus valuing) and they occur in time. In a sense, the framework assembles a set of placeholders and proposes relationships among them. It is thus descriptive and so does not suggest what ought to happen or which values might lead to more durable and effective learning.

To reach that level, I have suggested three values statements, which can be applied to each of the framework elements. These values statements are meant as exemplars; there are no doubt others that will also help operationalize the framework. In this way, the framework can serve as a design document, useful in the conceptualization, implementation, and monitoring of teacher learning designs. But it must be tested in practice. We can test the validity of the values statements and the overall efficacy of the framework by documenting the functioning of different teacher training and professional development designs that have been based on it.

I believe that we have to move in this direction of clarity and commensurability in the design and evaluation of teacher-learning initiatives and projects. Currently, we have no common blueprint or shared framework that can serve as a platform for such comparisons. We are thus trapped in a landscape of noncomparable idiosyncratic designs and “accepted” practices. But if we are to move beyond the received wisdom and assumptions that have so often organized what we do in teacher training and development to address the critical needs we are now facing in educating teachers to support student learning, we will have to work from a shared vocabulary and syntax for such designs. Only then will we be able to test out what we do, and discuss, compare, and ultimately improve our practices as teacher educators.

REFERENCES


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