
Professional Development

Distrusting Oneself, Befriending Criticism, and Taming the Mind and Breath

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College and university teachers in Japan face obstacles to professional development (PD). In the absence of PD programs, teachers must rely on self-directed practices, including self-reflection, classroom observations, and academic conferences. However, busy schedules and other factors may inhibit these practices. This may be particularly true for teachers employed on temporary or part-time contracts, which often entail a high number of classes, less or no research funding, and frequent job hunting. Furthermore, colleague collaboration and support may be undermined by school policies and hiring practices. In extreme cases, schools knowingly place teachers in direct competition with each other for raises and contract extensions. In addition to institutional challenges, internal factors may stifle PD, namely teachers' attitudes and psychological and behavioral tendencies. Having the proper mind-set and maintaining one's health is key for self-directed PD. This paper will suggest three ways to further one's own professional development: guarding against complacency, seeking criticism, and managing stress effectively.

Guard Against Complacency

Complacency is defined as “uncritical satisfaction with oneself or one's achievements” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Complacency that stems from satisfaction with one's teaching may result in less effort to self-improve. Complacency could even develop in spite of sub-standard teaching. So how can teachers accurately judge their own performance? Feedback from colleagues, Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) surveys, and students' test scores are three possible methods. However, not all teachers participate in classroom observations, and SET surveys may be flawed, as will be shown later. Students' performance,

progress, and test scores may be misleading indicators of the effectiveness of one's teaching because they may be attributable to other courses or to independent study. What is more, teachers may be predisposed to overestimate the effectiveness of their teaching. This latter point merits further attention here.

The degree to which people are capable of deceiving themselves may be underestimated. The origins of self-deception, as with deception of others, can be traced to natural selection. When competing for resources and mates, there is a selection advantage in inflating one's worth (Varki & Brower, 2013). According to evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers (2011), "self-deception evolves in the service of deception – the better to fool others. ...the self-deceived fails to give off the cues that go with consciously mediated deception, thus escaping detection" (p. 4). In other words, it is easier for people to deceive others if they believe the lie themselves. He adds that self-deception is:

a series of biasing procedures that affect every aspect of information acquisition and analysis. It is systematic deformation of the truth at each stage of the psychological process. ...from its biased arrival, to its biased encoding, to organizing it around false logic, to misremembering and then misrepresenting it to others, the mind continually acts to distort information flow in favor of the usual good goal of appearing better than one really is. (p. 139)

Numerous studies have revealed people's tendency towards self-inflation and the Better Than Average (BTA) effect. Most people believe themselves to be more talented, competent, honorable, moral, compassionate, and sympathetic than others (Brown, 2011) and are particularly vulnerable to the BTA effect regarding qualities and abilities that are important to them (Brown & Kobayashi, 2002). Whether self-inflation occurs because it serves an emotional or psychological need or Trivers' evolutionary explanation alone suffices, it is a well-documented phenomenon. People are susceptible and find it very difficult to objectively monitor their own degree of self-deception. Therefore, as teachers we should be humble about our capacity for objective self-assessment, and it may be advisable to assume that every aspect of our teaching is less effective than we are prone to believe. Furthermore, it would be wise to seek outside opinions, from as many sources as possible, including classroom observations, discussions with

colleagues, and student feedback. These practices, accompanied by a healthy dose of humility, might effectively combat unwitting self-deceit and bias.

Seek Criticism

It is normal to want to feel good, and self-deception is useful to this end. Another way would be to avoid criticism. Teachers who shun classroom observations and student feedback are much less likely to encounter criticism. While nobody enjoys criticism, one hallmark of a professional is that they put their craft ahead of personal feelings. As teachers we can depersonalize criticism by keeping in mind that it is usually the idea or pedagogic practice, not ourselves, being critiqued. Moreover, finding ways to improve one's teaching can be professionally and personally rewarding.

Classroom observations normally include three phases: a pre-observation meeting to explain about the upcoming lessons, observation of each other's lessons, and a post-observation meeting to discuss and share opinions (Russell, 2013). Classroom observations can serve many useful purposes. Firstly, observers can acquire lesson ideas and classroom management techniques. Secondly, teachers being observed can receive helpful feedback. Thirdly, teachers can obtain valuable insights by experiencing classes from the students' perspective. Lastly, it promotes self-reflection on one's teaching and even the department-wide curriculum. For teachers not comfortable with being observed, the post-observation discussions could be arranged to focus on what the observer has learned rather than on making critiques (Russell, 2013).

The standard university SET surveys seem to have little, if any, value for teachers (Burden, 2014). One problem with SET surveys is that the five-point Likert scale ratings typically employed lack specificity, leaving teachers unsure how to make positive changes to their classes (Burden, 2014). Another drawback is that teachers who receive positive marks may view the results as a "vote of confidence" in their current practices, perhaps undercutting self-reflection (Burden, 2014). Furthermore, SET survey results are often returned to teachers after it is no longer possible to respond accordingly to the specific needs of those classes (Burden, 2014). Therefore, it would be more useful for teachers

to administer their own surveys, designed to elicit as much specific, qualitative feedback as possible, earlier in the semester. Wording is an important aspect of such surveys. For example, a poorly worded survey question may ask students: Can you think of any ways to improve this course (or activity)? Instead, a better alternative would be: List two or three ideas you have for making this course (or activity) more useful for student learning. I also recommend the Stop, Start, and Continue approach, in which students list four things they want the teacher to stop doing, four things to start doing, and four things to continue doing (Burden, 2014). In my experience, students' remarks often directly lead to changes in my teaching. For example, a student commented that my voice was often difficult to hear from the back of the classroom. I may have never discovered this without surveys, as Japanese students do not always speak up for their needs.

Aside from providing little valuable feedback to teachers, SET survey results should be considered with caution. Firstly, many teachers view SET surveys as being partly a "popularity contest", in which teachers may be rewarded for making classes fun, while those who provide difficult, yet academically beneficial activities, may be punished for being "too hard" (Burden, 2011). Secondly, students may generally be poor at judging the appropriateness of academic activities. For example, many Japanese students have misconceptions about what study abroad content courses will entail, believing that student presentations, debates, and pair and group discussions are commonplace, while long lectures and heavy reading and writing are atypical (Shrader, 2013). Thirdly, due to the halo effect, a predilection to either like or dislike everything about a person (Kahneman, 2011), an arbitrary characteristic, such as a teacher's physical appearance, may bias students' evaluations of their teaching. Lastly, evaluations may be biased by how individual students happen to be feeling that day or about that day's lesson, as well as the comparative effectiveness of other teachers whose classes students attend.

For the above reasons, teachers should not be too discouraged by low marks or overly satisfied with high ones. Instead, it would be better to focus on obtaining detailed feedback that can be used to improve one's classes. My first semester of university-level teaching in Japan was out of touch with my students'

EFL abilities and academic needs and did not adequately challenge them. In spite of my sub-standard teaching, I received excellent evaluations. I attribute this in part to my effort to make the classes fun. I took little comfort in the results and knew that I needed to significantly improve my teaching.

Manage Stress

Teaching involves constant interactions with students of an unpredictable, and at times, antagonistic nature and requires the teacher to juggle various thoughts simultaneously: Is there a way to explain this point more clearly? Do students understand what I just said? How should I respond to those off-task students over there? For these as well as other reasons, including personal circumstances beyond the classroom, teaching can be stressful. Doctor David Lewis, director of the independent research company Mindlab International, says, “When stress arises unexpectedly and is especially overwhelming, rational thinking tends to be replaced by impulsive and often faulty decision making” (quoted in Hunter, 2015). Additionally, chronic stress undermines the immune system and leads to illness (Salleh, 2008), increasing the likelihood of teacher absenteeism and possibly even burnout. Among university teachers in Japan, females and young lecturers are particularly vulnerable to poor mental health due to stress, and a lack of effective coping strategies are a contributing factor (Kataoka, Ozawa, Tomotake, Tanioka, & King, 2014). There are numerous ways to cope with stress, but two techniques that are shown to be effective are proper breathing and meditation.

Doctor James Gordon, founder and director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, points out that “[s]low, deep breathing is probably the single best anti-stress medicine we have”. He adds that “[w]hen you bring air down into the lower portion of the lungs, where oxygen exchange is most efficient, everything changes. Heart rate slows, blood pressure decreases, muscles relax, anxiety eases and the mind calms” (quoted in Krucoff, 2000). To test whether or not one’s breathing is shallow, Gordon advises his patients to take a deep breath and notice if it was the chest or belly that expanded more during inhalation. If it was the chest, the breathing is shallow. Doctor Anthony Komaroff of Harvard Medical School advises taking deep breaths by letting the air come through the nose

into the lower belly until the abdomen fully expands, then breathing out slowly through the mouth or nose (Komaroff, 2014). He also notes that deep breathing does not come naturally and must be practiced. However, there are mobile phone applications that may help. One such, Breathing Zone, utilizes a breath analyzer to measure rate of breathing and includes soothing background sounds and animation features (Breathing Zone, 2014).

The importance of proper breathing has long been appreciated in Eastern philosophical and religious traditions, including Yoga and Zen Buddhism. Zen Master Somei Tsuji advocated slow breathing and instructed Zen practitioners to allow for a minute per breath (Takada, 2009). In Zen meditation, it is common to sit on a cushion with erect posture and count the incoming and outgoing breaths while breathing through the nose (Kapleau, 1989). As random thoughts arise, “do not dally with them and do not try to expel them, but merely concentrate all your energy on counting the inhalations and exhalations of your breath” (Kapleau, 1989, p. 39). Zen meditation helps to train the mind to focus on the present moment rather than to constantly worry about the future or dwell on the past. People may spend nearly half their waking hours lost in thought about something unrelated to what they are presently doing, and this mind-wandering contributes to unhappiness (Bradt, 2010).

For people who are new to meditation, I recommend the free mobile phone application called Headspace, conceived by Andy Puddicombe, a meditation and mindfulness expert who trained as a Buddhist monk in Tibet. Headspace provides ten free sessions of guided meditation, as well as short animations to illuminate salient points. It promotes anxiety and stress management, improved powers of concentration, and creativity, and may even help strengthen interpersonal relationships (Headspace, 2016).

Conclusion

Professional development often requires a deliberate and concerted effort. It is all too easy to become complacent and fall into comfortable habits. Luckily, many teachers find themselves surrounded by colleagues with a wealth of experience and differing educational and social backgrounds, from whom much can be

learned. Actively seek them out. Furthermore, teachers can utilize student feedback to improve pedagogic practice, if aversion to criticism is not allowed to stunt progress before it can begin. Lastly, practicing healthy habits for the body and mind will make it easier to focus on and enjoy one's work and avoid burnout. If teachers have the right mind-set and are proactive, professional development through self-improvement can become a reality.

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