Developing Expertise through Experience: Ideas for Continuing Professional Development

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A Different Kind of Book

In this book, quite unusually, Maley uses "non-academic", or "smart casual" language for an academic subject. Moreover, the book is organised differently as the book is available electronically, with about 260 pages of the main narrative available as a hard copy. The book is built on an idea of N. S. Prabhu, who,through his Bangalore Project, demonstrated that a language is best learnt when it is used to engage in meaningful tasks. The book thus gives "substance to Prabhu's concept of the teacher's sense of plausibility" (p. 8).

Plausibility, according to Prabhu (pp. 3-7), is "...a state of knowledge short of certainty ... an articulation by individuals of their personal perception of plausibility [and] can lead to a shared understanding of it in the profession." The book "explores ways in which teachers develop professionally and personally by building a personal theory of teaching action based upon their own accumulated experience" (p. 8). Maley's book tries to amplify Prabhu's notion of 'the teacher's sense of plausibility' with reference to our own histories in language and language teaching. It includes contributions from 20 practitioners from across the world, who share their own journeys as teachers, keeping in mind Prabhu's concept of plausibility.The contributors trace their

journey of how their understanding of a sense of plausibility (TSOP) developed by taking of a few key themes, namely, (a) how life's experiences influenced current beliefs and practices on language education, teaching and learning, (b) key people who influenced beliefs and practices, (c) key ideas that helped to form or change beliefs and practices, (d) important publications that contributed to personal and professional development, (e) critical incidents/epiphanies in life and work giving new insights ending with brief statements on language education. The book presents how non-native language teaching was done from 1960-2010, as seen through the eyes of these contributors and as influenced by their life's journey. The book offers several insights for teacher education and teacher development.

Developing Expertise through Experience: A Global Document

With contributions from Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, China, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Malaysia, Pakistan, Singapore, South Africa, UK, USA and Vietnam, the book speaks for the world. Many contributors had humble beginnings, but, despite their poverty and lack of facilities, they followed their sense of the plausible and rose to the highest positions in their chosen field of language teaching.

Specific threads that come out in the writings that influence the learning of students and teacher's beliefs and practices are as below:

Luck, and Some Early Experiences
In each of the contributors' journeys, from novice teacher to classroom expert, there

have been many influencers. In their articles, they have thanked their teachers, their families, their professional associations, special interest groups, etc. If you are reasonably intelligent, Maley (p. 11) says, hard work and some luck will get you a long way. Chance does play a role, but history shows that luck smiles only upon those who do not wait for it. "Traveler, there is no road/ you make the road while walking it", says Antonio Machado, a Spanish poet (p. 11)." Mothers seem to have played a particularly important role in shaping the contributors, both as people and as teachers. For example, Mukundan learnt a lot from his mother, who, in spite of running a large household, read to him daily. Similarly, helped by his mother, Medgyes learnt English and hence went places. The story of Anh Le, the seventh child of a shoemaker and a small grocery shop owner in post-war Vietnam is equally inspiring. She began helping her mother with accounts at the age of eight. Again, Shamim's (p. 150) mother was a significant early influence in her life. Papalazarou (p. 137) credits six people who influenced her.

Theories, Beliefs, Sense of Plausibility and More
In each essay, the contributors tell us how their life experiences have shaped their beliefs and value systems and how this has impacted their presence and pedagogy in the classroom. Growing up in communities, working with friends and colleagues, reading, researching and writing, travelling and presenting papers at conferences, running organisations, writing and publishing, experimenting with their time and resources, have all influenced the contributors.

Through their collective experience in the classroom, the contributors provide a

wealth of advice for young teachers. Sciamarelli (p.175) regrets that "most teachers do not encourage creativity because they believe that only special people can be creative". Sometimes teachers have a low opinion and expectations of the class. Disagreeing, Shamim (p. 185) suggests that "teachers need to have high expectations of their learners". Underhill (p. 208) advises teachers not to fear "students' mistakes";they are opportunities for learning and can be turned to their "advantage". Woodward (p. 220) subscribes to the general view that "there are many different ways to learn a language". Presenting the central theme of the book, Wright posits (p. 229), "experiencing and studying language both have their parts to play". He pleads for space for both. Mishan believes motivation to be important. Motivation refers to the preparedness of learners for learning. Teachers cannot directly motivate; they can only offer opportunities for motivation, in the form of experiences and interactions in the L2.

The Importance of Reading Books and Journals
The contributors highlight the importance of the written word in shaping them. For instance, Bellarmine recounts in his article that for him, books made up for the absence of exposure to English at home. Even in teacher training college, he got much from books. Faneslow was influenced by *The Language of the Classroom*. Reading "literature" helped him develop, "both as a professor and as a person" (p. 32). Though raised in a one-room home, Joshua's home was "print-rich". Her four older sisters had convinced the local garbage truck driver to leave some books and magazines at their doorstep whenever he came to collect their garbage. Medgyes adds, bored

teachers generate bored students", (p. 111-112). Adding further he states, "There is no such thing as best method. It all depends upon what suits you and your students."

Importance of Performing Arts, Music and Culture
Highlighting the importance of using theatre, drama, music, etc., in teaching-learning, the contributors discuss their experiences. Bellarmine's understanding of sense of plausibility developed through exposure to language (through radio, films, interesting books). For Papalazarou, art, aesthetic experience, creative thinking, visual literacy, social issues are building blocks for teacher's beliefs and practices. Medgyes declares "Bored teachers generate bored students" (p. 11). He found that children enjoyed listening to a story narrated with all the associated drama such as intonation, conversation, gestures and some music, rather than simply reading it. Mukundan adds that he followed in the footsteps of his primary school teacher, Mrs. Ong, who used to gather children around her and tell them stories, sometimes with music added and with all the drama that could be packed in. Spiro (p. 191), goes to the extent of saying that "Language without meaning, music and imagination is like food without taste or texture". Bellarmine cites a critical incident in which students had gone on total boycott of classes, because the Warden was allegedly adulterating milk. The principal, on the other hand, required teachers to ensure that classes were conducted. Bellarmine said that he would be teaching modal verbs by telling students to write a brief letter on the boycott. The students attended the class and the whole class drafted a letter to the principal. A belief that took roots in Bellarmine's mind was that in order "to achieve effective learning, teaching should have 'compelling content'

connected with learners' lives" (p.22) and use it through task-based approach and not the structural, the language through literature and the dialogical lecture approaches. Farrell believes that "language learning has very little to do with learning through grammar, vocabulary or phonology; instead, it has everything to do with learning about other human beings' ways of life. The pace of how we learn a language will match the pace of how much we want to know about others". (P. 46).

Teacher Education, Teacher Development

The book is based on the belief that retrospective reflection is of immense value as a means of professional development. Malay observes in the introductory section, "I believe that there is an over-emphasis on teacher training as an algorithmic system, and that not enough attention is paid to the human, personal side of learning and teaching. Regular group sharing and discussion of individual 'senses of plausibility' can be highly rewarding as part of a teacher training or development programme." (p. 12). Prabhu observes that most of us begin our teaching career with anxiety to be

right in the class, or useful in the class and we literally copy what we have been told in the teacher training college. He (p. 3) says, "In this way the learner can complete a curriculum and teachers can claim professional experience in due course, but teachers are unlikely to be aware how much is being learned, much less develop a sense of how learning happens or how it can be enhanced".

These views echo the common refrain that one hears in the field of teaching-learning that teacher education needs to change. Perhaps what it needs is more creativity by including people with experience in drama, visual aids, and singing. Goh notes that while documented knowledge is important, it is not adequate. Teachers need opportunities to develop practical knowledge, that is, knowledge co-structured with peers and teaching community. Kuchah also argues for teacher education paying attention to relationship building and creativity. For effective initial teacher education, teachers must be supported not only to be professionals but also to be humans conscious of their role in building other human beings – their students. To sum up, in the words of Underhill, "teaching is a performing art" (p. 209). Professional communities play a vital role in helping teachers grow and studying how these works could be part of the curriculum for initial teacher education.