TEACHER DEVELOPMENT GROUPS: GROWTH THROUGH COOPERATION

By: Katrina Oliphant. Department of ESL.University of Hawaii, U.S.A.

Introduction

As a student working towards a Master's Degree in ESL, I often ponder the career choices that will be available to me upon completion of the program. Having made the commitment to professional development implicit in my decision to return to university, I hope to find a postion in an EFL setting that will nurture my desire for continued growth as a teacher. But how realistic is that prospect? My experience has shown me that many of the private language schools abroad are indifferent to teacher development; in fact, they often hire teachers with no qualifications. Profit, rather than the quality of teaching guides their decision-making. As long as their students continue to accept unqualified (and thus low-paid) teachers, they will have no motivation to hire professionals who will demand higher salaries. Even many of the more serious teaching institutions provide little or no in-service training.

Considering this rather bleak situation, I believe that the majority of EFL teachers have no choice but to look outside the school environment for opportunities to further their development. While there are many activities that can be done on one's own, such as attending conferences, keeping abreast of ESOL literature and researching one's own class, the typical harried EFL teacher, who may hold down a variety of part-time jobs, may just not make the time for them. I know I had the best of intentions when I left for Europe with a suitcase full of

teaching books and journals, but seven years later most of these books returned to the US, never having been opened.

What then is the answer? I believe joining forces with other like-minded teachers is the solution. The motivation, stimulation and pleasure that can be lacking in a solitary quest for professional growth can be found in the formation of a teacher development group.

In the field of Education, the concept of teachers coming together to foster personal and professional growth is well-documented, yet rare in ESOL literature. Such groups go by many different names, which often reflect the focus of the group, e.g. "collegial support groups" Paquette, 1987), "personal effectiveness groups" (Deming, 1984), "teacher development groups" (Plumb,1988), "teacher study groups (Joyce et al., 1989), (Matlin & Short, 1991), "teacher support groups" or "teams", (Watson & Bixby, 1994), (Kirk & Walter, 1981), (Chalfant & Pysh, 1989), "teacher groups" (Wolff & Vera, 1989), "teachers' learning cooperatives" (Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative, 1984), "Teachers' networks" (Armour, 1985) and "teachers' support networks", (Raider, 1987). For the purposes of this paper, the terms "teachers' groups", "Teacher networks" and "teacher development groups" will be used interchangeably to encompass all groups working towards teachers' growth.

The benefits of teachers exchanging ideas, experiences and knowledge could be of particular interest to the EFL instructor, who may lack resources, such as materials, workshops and conferences, which one takes for granted in an ESL setting. I believe that feeling somehow cut off from "what's happening" in the field can contribute to a certain amount of apathy in teachers working abroad.

In this paper, I will draw upon the studies and reports of teachers' groups to discuss the purposes for which they may be created and the possible logistics, goals, organization and activities of such groups. I will include a list of suggestions given by those who have written about their experiences organizing teachers into networks. Finally, I will outline the problems and issues to bear in mind when forming a group and the positive outcomes one can hope to achieve. Though many of the groups mentioned are school-based, and thus quite different from the teacher-initiated type of group I have in mind, I believe that much can be learned from them. To this discussion, I will add my own ideas and opinions as to how these experiences can be adapted to an EFL setting.

Purposes

The reasons given for organizing teacher networks generally fall into two main categories: emotional support and professional support and growth. As personal and professional issues are very often inter-related, the intent may be to focus on both areas.

For many of the groups which have formed in order to give personal support to their members, an important issue is burnout, which can be defined as "some degree of physical, emotional and attitudinal exhaustion related to occupational stress" (Kirk & Walter, 1981). Factors often influencing burnout are "feelings of isolation, loneliness and lack of support" (Kirk & Walter, 1981). Isolation is a problem inherent in most teaching situations as (t)he combination of the self-contained classroom and a heavy teaching schedule gives teachers few opportunities to share common problems or sustain intellectual life (Boyer, 1983, cited in Armour, 1985). Crookes (in press), in his discussion of teacher development, uses the term "alienation" to describe the situation in which many teachers find themselves. He points to the lack of control of curriculum design, the obligation to perform administrative (as opposed to teaching) duties, the lack of interaction with other teachers, as well as time and economic pressures as contributing to this state of alienation, which he defines as one which "concerns

the relationship between people and their environment, when it is, at minimum, a relationship of undesirable separation."

The feeling of being isolated from other teachers is compounded by the gulf that often exists between teaching staff and school administration. Some teachers hope to diminish the sense of separateness between the two by encouraging administrators to join their groups. In the case of Richmond County, Georgia, the school district formed teacher study groups in which adminstrators were active, with the belief "that the development of shared understandings would develop vertical and horizontal social cohesiveness, thereby reducing adminstrator-teacher divisions while increasing cooperation between classrooms and teams of teachers" (Joyce et al., 1989). However, the problematic nature of the inclusion of administrators will be discussed later in this paper.

The interconnectedness of personal and professional concerns are clear in the feelings of isolation and/or alienation experienced by many teachers. The difficulties encountered in their jobs negatively affect their state of mind. For the EFL teacher, faced with the additional problems related to functioning within a different culture, the feeling of isolation may be even more acute.

Many teachers define their purpose for creating a network as enhancing professional growth or support, which can be manifested in a variety of ways depending upon the needs of the group. For example, a very specific type of professional support is sought by the teachers in the "writing support program for junior faculty women" which Gainen (1993) describes, and the high school English teachers writing group which Flythe (1989) organized: namely to aid the teachers in producing writing for publication. (Once again the line between personal and professional support is hazy. Gainen states that the support the group offers "may serve to quell self-doubts and strengthen hard-won, but sometimes fragile professional identities.") The purpose of some other groups is related to the

study and practice of a certain approach, "whole language" in the case of Watson & Bixby's support group (1994). To others it involves the teaching of a specific skill, which for Armour's network was writing (1985). Recent years have seen the growth of the teacher research movement, in which groups of teachers seek professional growth through their own research (Schecter & Ramírez, 1992).

Logistics

Once an EFL teacher has decided to start a group, there is the question of logistics. Who should join? How can potential members be found? How many members is optimal? Where can meetings be held? How long should they last and how often should they take place? Exploring the answers others have given to these questions can be helpful when faced with the challenge of organizing one's own network.

Member selection

The goals one has in mind when forming the group will help determine the types of members to seek out. Kirk & Walter (1981) distinguish between "topical" groups, which are primarily concerned with a specific topic, and groups formed according to membership criteria, such as teachers of the same grade:

> Membership should be considered a key ingredient in the potential success of the group. The ability to identify with each other enhances the group's productivity potential. If the group is too divergent, the members may need to spend valuable time educating each other in the idiosyncrasies of their divergent tasks and the various organizational structures. On the other hand, an overly homogeneous group may serve to inhibit the breadth and general scope of discussion. For these reasons, it is better to consider both criteria to attempt to include teachers in the organization who have somewhat similar

tasks, yet to include a broad interpersonal base that will enable topical variety. This will then tend to simulate a more interesting and thus more functional group experience.

The advantages and disadvantages of homogeneity should be carefully weighed. Should teachers of other age groups be asked to join? Would it be beneficial, for example, for teachers in an international elementary school to join a group with teachers from private adult language schools? Should school adminstrators be encouraged to join? Even if one would prefer a more homogeneous group, a lack of interested teachers in the same area might make seeking out teachers from diverse backgrounds necessary.

Finding members

Several methods of finding members have been offered in the literature:

–Give a "well-advertised short course with practical sessions offering concrete solutions for classroom problems." At the end, give the teachers who attend a questionnaire regarding interest in further meetings Wolff & Vera, 1989).

–Call two other teachers who share similar values about teaching and have them call others (Watson & Bixby, 1994).

–"Start with a few people and attract new members by word-of-mouth so that the group grows slowly" (Wolff & Vera, 1989).

–Obtain a list of teachers who have attended local workshops or conferences and send them letters soliciting their participation (Armour, 1985).

–Put up notices in staff rooms in local schools.

Group size

How many members should the ideal group have? Kirk & Walter (1981) maintain that the ideal number is between 5 and 8 because "(t)oo many members make it easy for some shy or inhibited members to blend into the background and possibly evolve into dissatisfied and/or angry group members". They believe that smaller groups allow "flexibility of time schedules, greater potential participation for group members and generally, a higher level of group cohesion". Large groups, on the other hand, draw from "a wealthier fund of information and sharing", but, because of their size, "limit the amount of time for individual sharing and the generally more personal quality of discussion".

Before forming a group, one should consider the benefits of a small versus a large group. When the initial group has been formed the members may want to vote on limiting membership. Wolff and Vera (1989) suggest the possibility of a compromise: Teachers can form a large group, which breaks up into subgroups, with the meetings taking place more frequently within the smaller group context.

Meeting place

Watson & Bixby (1994) suggest meeting in "a home, a school, a restaurant, (or) a church". The important point is that it be a safe, comfortable, neutral place, which is relatively convenient for all of the group members. Will there be interruptions from children, phones, etc. if one member's home is chosen? Is rotating homes a possibility? Will meeting in a restaurant allow the kind of activities the group may want to take part in?

Meeting frequency

Teachers groups tend to meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. The decision on how frequently to meet depends on the amount of time the teachers have available and their proximity to one another.

Meeting time

Kirk & Walter (1981) discourage "marathon" meetings, while Armour's group prefers their meetings to last for three or four hours (including dinner). Once again the amount of time to dedicate to a session depends on the time constraints of the individuals in the group. Teachers with small children may not be able to meet for extended periods of time, or they may prefer to have long meetings once a month.

Goals

Once the group has been formed and the meeting time and place have been established, the issue of the group's goals must be addressed. General aims will have been set by the organizers, but these can be renegotiated by the whole group at the first meetings. If the group members do not know each other, they may want to work towards short-term goals that can be achieved within a limited time-frame.(Wolff & Vera (1989) suggest that this can be beneficial, especially at the early stages of a group's existence). At the end of the initial period, the teachers can evaluate the group's progress and set new and perhaps longer-term objectives. Will there be a specific focus, for example, becoming classroom researchers, or learning about a specific teaching approach? Or will the goals be broader, such as "encouraging student autonomy and cooperation" or "breaking away from traditional teacher roles"(Plumb, 1988)?

Organization

Groups can be structured in a variety of ways. In many of the school-based groups, facilitators lead the meetings. The first important question to think of when organizing a teachers' group is whether or not there will be facilitators or leaders. Kirk & Walter (1981) advocate a democratic approach and suggest avoiding groups "if there is a self-appointed leader who attempts to dominate and manipulate the group". Plumb ascribes the success of her group to the fact that it is "organized by teachers, for teachers", all with equal responsibility. How can a group without leaders actually function? Must the organizer be prepared to do more than his or her share of the work during the first year, as Wolff & Vera (1989) warn? The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (1984) found an interesting solution for their group, which is seen as "cooperative with all responsibilities shared". They have an annual chairperson for planning meetings who is responsible for maintaining notes, while each week there is a different chairperson, presenter and note-taker. Even if a network prefers a looser organizational structure, certain tasks must be performed. The group should decide what these tasks will be and who will perform them. Will notes be taken? If so, by whom How will voting take place? How will activities be chosen? What kind of roles will the members play in the group and in the meetings themselves? Many of the first meetings will have to be dedicated to working out these complex issues of group organization.

Activities

After establishing the goals and group structure, the next step is to decide how meeting time will be spent. Will the sessions be focused on one topic or will they be divided into time segments devoted to different activities? Will activity types change from meeting to meeting, or will there be standard

types? Will activities be performed outside of meeting time? Organizing time well, so that there is a feeling of being productive is important. Wolff & Vera (1989) cite a "lack of methodical approach to work" as one of the principal complaints voiced by teachers involved in development groups in Spain.

When choosing the activities that the group will perform, one might want to think in terms of some general types of activities. Some of these are sharing, feedback, personal/professional goal-setting, brainstorming, problem-solving, presentation of new information, discussion, planning, experimentation, research, reading, writing, evaluation, community organizing and socializing. Most activities will incorporate two or more of these features. For example an activity in which one shares experiences in the classroom may be followed by feedback from the group, or presentation of materials could be followed by experimentation with them in the classroom, with experiences shared later in the meeting.

The number of activities a teacher development group can perform is endless. I have chosen several examples of possible activities from the literature on teacher networks. These ideas could be modified to serve the purposes of any individual group:

Armour (1985):

–Record observations of learning and teaching in one's classroom in a "learning log".

–Include dinner as part of the meeting.

Joyce et al. (1989):

–Take part in peer observation.

–Videotape your class and bring the tape to the meeting to be discussed by the group.

Paquette (1987):

–Begin the meeting with refreshments and a time for socializing.

–Create a handbook, divided into different sections, for notes, reflections, articles, etc.

Philadelphia Teachers'Learning Cooperative (1984):

"Staff review": Teacher gives detailed description of one student and brings examples of student's work. Group discusses problems and gives recommendations.

–"Reflection": One word, which relates to an issue important to the group is chosen. The group then brainstorms on paper for five minutes. Each person then shares the feelings and thoughts that were generated.

–Write collaborative articles.

Raider (1987):

–Bring in speakers to discuss a chosen topic.

Schechter & Ramírez (1992):

–Teachers develop the design of research that is to be carried out in the classroom.

Watson & Bixby (1994):

–Make plans to attend language conferences as a group.

–Publish a newsletter discussing the activities of the group.

–Write letters to administrators and policy makers.

–Develop materials as a collaborative effort.

Wolff & Vera (1989):

–Give articles to be read at home, with discussion taking place later at a meeting.

–One person presents a teaching technique, which he or she must have already used in class. Others then try it in their

classes. Later the group members discuss their experiences with the technique.

–Create a mini-library for group members'use.

–Start a magazine which publishes the group's work.

–Spend some of the meeting time in a bar where people can have more informal contact.

Other ideas:

–Organize local workshops or conferences about topics relevant to teaching EFL in the area in which you live.

–Research particular learning difficulties related to your EFL students (for example, comparison of the phonology of their language compared to that of English).

–If there are no native teachers in your group, invite one or more to a meeting to discuss learning strategies and approaches.

–Have all members bring in materials they like and discuss them.

–Individual teachers research topics related to their field and give presentations to the group.

Suggestions

It may be a good idea to establish a set of guidelines that the group agrees to follow. I have drawn up a list of suggestions, based on my understanding of the opinions of the authors cited. They are offered here only as the starting point for discussion, rather than as rules to be observed.

Kirk & Walter (1981):

Don't spend too much time on complaints, particularly those of one person. Focus on "achievements and accomplishments" as well.

–Offer feedback that is supportive.

–Remember the importance of listening.

–Be punctual and if you cannot attend a meeting, let others know.

–Make a serious commitment to the group.

–Come to an agreement with other group members about how you will deal with confidentiality.

–Remember that "the purpose of the group is not to provide therapy for personal problems for which professional assistance might be advisable."

Philadelphia Teachers'Learning Cooperative (1984):

–Talk in meeting should be formal discussion, "not informal, teachers' lounge chat."

Plumb (1988):

–Remember that you shouldn't "expect everything to work every time ... There are good weeks and bad weeks".

–Focus on the practical: "Try new ideas instead of just talking about them".

–Don't forget to have fun !

Raiser (1987):

–Focus on "offer(ing) support and encouragement to each other in solving problems", rather than on complaining.

Wolff & Vera (1989):

–Give all members specific tasks.

–Put all suggestions in writing.

Problems/Issues

The act of coming together as individuals, each one with his or her own values, beliefs and personality in a group setting is bound to bring up a certain number of issues and/or problems. A teachers' group is certainly no exception. Upon creation of a network, members may want to discuss potential problems and decide on strategies for dealing with them. The following is a list of issues to keep in mind:

Irregular attendance:

How will this be dealt with? Should members notify the group if they cannot attend a meeting?

Personal problems:

How will the group limit discussion of personal problems, if at all?

Untrained teachers:

Many may be reluctant to join because of a lack of interest. If untrained teachers do join, they may feel intimidated by the others. How can the group best encourage and support them?

Lack of time:

How can the best use be made of the precious time devoted to group activities?

Sponsorship of the group:

Should a group seek school sponsorship? Deming (1984) says that "sponsorship is a crucial issue and should be considered carefully". She believes that school sponsorship should be avoided if possible, so as to "minimize faculty resistance". On the other hand, some teachers might welcome the opportunity to take part in group activities during paid school time.

Creating trust:

Many of the authors mentioned agree with Deming (1984) about the primacy of creating "a safe, supportive environment". Activities where teachers share their personal experiences or socialize informally may help to foster closeness. Knowing that they will be supported and not criticized when expressing their ideas and feelings will encourage the group members to trust one another. The difficulty of establishing trust is augmented when administrators from the same school are part of the group. The benefits of allowing administration personnel to join must be weighed against the possibility of teachers feeling intimidated by their presence.

Sharing responsibility:

How can the group avoid a situation where a few members are doing most of the work? If some members are contributing more to the discussions, it may be that the others are shy or intimidated. What can be done to change this situation?

Learning to work together:

Different people have different personality styles and ways of working. What can be done to accommodate these different styles?

Dealing with controversy:

Armour (1985) discusses the friction caused by a discussion of standardized testing and the use of basal readers. Although she is "still not sure how to handle controversy at a network meeting", she states that "surviving controversy strengthened our sense of unity". What kind of strategies can be used to deal with controversy?

Positive outcomes:

According to the teachers who have written about their experiences with teacher development groups, the rewards to

be gained are substantial. Here are a few of the benefits of working together with other teachers for personal and professional growth:

Greater awareness:

Teachers may attain an increased understanding of the issues involved in the teaching profession and of the problems they share with their colleagues.

Increased motivation:

Armour (1985) speaks of one member of the group who found the motivation to request a grant, which she was awarded, through her contact with other group members. Matlin & Short (1991) state that some of the teachers who participated in their study groups "have attended courses at the university. Others have presented at national conferences and all have renewed their focus on teaching and learning".

Better teaching:

Teachers studying, exchanging ideas, experimenting with techniques and materials, researching their own classrooms, etc., can only serve to improve their abilities as teachers. Matlin & Short (1991) discuss the "innovative changes" in teaching that took place because of involvement in a teaching group.

Benefits to students:

Improvement in teaching, of course, will directly affect the students. Teachers, according to Matlin & Short (1991), "after seeing how powerful it is to be in charge of their own learning (...), are making the same experience possible for their students". Joyce et al. (1989) discuss the "positive effects on students when teachers in their school districts took part in study groups. Both the students' involvement in their own learning and their achievement showed significant increases.

Joy of sharing:

According to Armour (1985), teachers are "hungry" to discuss their teaching with others, but "talking about teaching (is) almost illegal in some classrooms". She speaks of the initial "exhilaration" and "euphoria" the teachers felt as they shared their feelings and experiences with the group.

Connection to others:

The experience of working together intimately as a group can help teachers overcome their sense of isolation. Personal gratification can come not only from sharing one's experiences, but also from the feeling of having helped others with one's support (Kirk & Walter, 1981). Raiser (1987) says that teachers in her network have become "active advocates", not only of their students, but also of one another.

New ways of thinking:

Matlin & Short (1991) believe that the changes teachers can make go beyond the simple addition of new techniques to their repertoire; they can actually change their way of thinking.

Empowerment:

Membership in a teachers' group can be an empowering experience as teachers begin to question the pronouncements of the "experts" and to have more faith in their own abilities, according to Matlin & Short (1991). They state that teachers in their group no longer passively accept certain conflicts (for example the discrepancy between the new literacy curriculum and the method for evaluating students), and now seek alternative ways of dealing with them. The Philadelphia Teachers' Learning Cooperative (1984) state that they occasionally invite speakers to give talks, but believe that they can learn more from one another.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to elaborate on the issues that are involved in the creation of a teacher development group. Much of the paper takes the form of questions, because I believe that prescriptions are inappropriate, while awareness is fundamental if one is to make use of the potential offered by the group. Much can be learned from those who have already experienced the benefits and difficulties of working together in a network, but each group must choose the form, content and goals best suited to its unique situation.

Involvement in a teacher development group requires much in terms of time, patience and commitment. The benefits we receive as teachers, i.e. "the opportunity to think through (our) own beliefs, share ideas, challenge current institutional practices, blend theory and practice, (and) identify professional and personal needs"(Matlin & Short, 1991), I believe are so important, that the sacrifice is much more than compensated. I agree with Crookes (in press), who says that "the alternative to action is isolation, cynicism, stagnation, a failure to fulfil one's potential as a creative human being, and in very practical terms, poorer quality programs and less successful students". On a personal level, I feel empowered by the knowledge that, no matter where I end up teaching, I can continue to grow both professionally and personally through cooperation with other teachers who share my desire for development.

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