



## Language school faculty: learning community or community of practice?

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### **Abstract**

This study is intended to be an inquiry of particular interest, and a follow-up research project undertaken after the submission of my dissertation for the M. Ed. In Trainer Development in ELT, in which I explored my personal experience during my five-year tenure as Director of the Tuxtla Language School (LS) of the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH) from July 1999 to August 2004, a period during which the LS underwent many significant changes, and evolved and developed according to government and institutional policies.

The research project I refer to was called “A School Director’s Teacher Trainer Experience”, in which I strongly referred to one of the most significant changes in our school: the requirement for teacher trainers in the B. Ed. programme to at least hold a masters degree; activity I undertook by supporting faculty members in applying for masters programs in the United Kingdom and in bringing an insitu M.Ed. program to our own school. I currently hold myself responsible for being in key figure/being influential in assisting twelve teachers to currently hold a postgraduate degree.

This follow-up project is intended to explore if some teachers from the LS of the UNACH have developed and changed from a Learning Community into a Community of Practice after having completed a period of Continuous professional Development (CPD).

Being this a follow-up paper, for more detailed information please refer to the paper presented in the 2007 3<sup>rd</sup> FONAE meeting.

### **Introduction**

Last year, a briefly addressed issue in the dissertation submitted for the M. Ed. Trainer Development in ELT, was the concept of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses for two main purposes: to unite and foster cooperation among the faculty and to encourage academic development in order to consequently have a more powerful school, because “school reform [is] one of the espoused purposes of professional development” (Lieberman and Miller 2001:23).

The way this issue was addressed was by explaining and exploring the LS faculty’s academic backgrounds and its development through a five-year period and briefly recording the faculty’s opinion regarding the topic by means of a short



questionnaire with open questions of opinion that were specifically designed to not be judgmental but constructive.

The above encouraged me to continue exploring the issue, this time by trying to find out if CPD courses had indeed been successful and had helped the teachers who had completed them to develop professionally, but more importantly for the present investigation is the matter of if by developing personally we are moving towards changing in order to help bridge the gap between evolving from a Learning Community into a Community of Practice.

In order to be able to accurately conduct this research project that is mainly focused on our development as a faculty I will explain the reasons for CPD in the LS and how the former was implemented, carried out and the current outcomes. How the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Globalization influenced higher education and how both the UNCAH and the LS, explain what the difference is between a Learning Community and a Community of Practice, the methodology used for the research study, a sample of the Faculty's Questionnaire and its analysis, and the outcomes. Depending on the analysis results it will be feasible to design a proposal on how to either continue developing as a faculty or start a breaking point to lead us and set us on the right track.

### **1. Why CPD was Implemented in the Language School**

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) of the last decade, the 90's, meant the beginning of an important set of innovations; complex international, economic, technological and cultural changes have occurred, hence, the world is in a state of transition and so is higher education (Graddol 2006). Therefore, this change has cascaded worldwide and its effects have reached higher education. Chiapas has also been dragged into the vortex of change having to keep up with all the innovations and facing a great deal of the challenges they pose. As a result of the above, the LS has had to address this issue in order not to fall behind and be able to foster our students "to compete with graduates from both Canada and the United States at the same level of competence and proficiency" (Serrano 2006:24).

Globalization is a NAFTA outcome that has also influenced higher education as it is a phenomenon that transcends in different aspects of our social lives both as individuals and as social groups, regardless of where we live. As a result, it is not surprising that currently higher education is now facing meaningful changes that pose great challenges.

The Language School faculty was not what it has become. In 1999 most teachers that started working in the B. Ed. in ELT program, which was opened in an attempt to keep up with a changing world, and has had implications in the beginning of each and every change for both the school and the faculty; due to the fact that most trainers did not have the suitable academic background, the training or the experience to become trainers; nor the KAS (Knowledge/skills/Awareness) which were widely needed.

## 2. CPD in the Language School

### 2.1 LS Culture

Thirty one years ago, the LS culture was very different from what it has currently developed into. The following diagrams help to illustrate how greatly things have changed. (Serrano 2006:68)

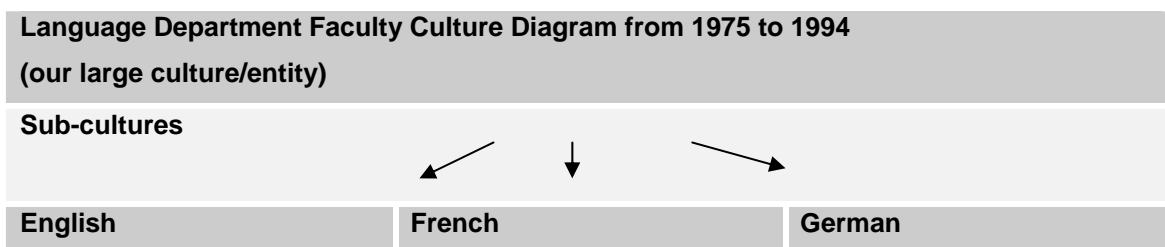
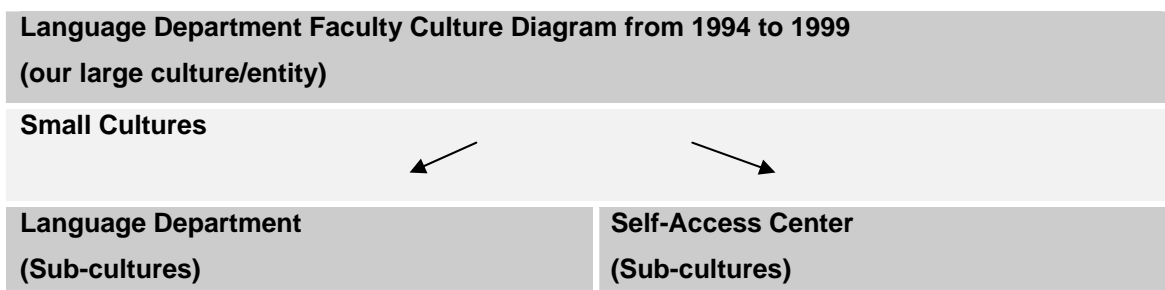


Figure 1: Language Department Faculty Culture Diagram from 1975 to 1994 in Serrano (2006:68)



English	English
French	French
German	German

Figure 2: Language Department Faculty Culture Diagram from 1994 to 1999 in Serrano (2006:68)

Language School Faculty Culture Diagram from 1999 to 2006 (our large culture/entity)					
Small Cultures					
Language Department (Sub-cultures)		Self-Access Center (Sub-cultures)		Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés (Sub-cultures)	
Practices	Characteristics	Practices	Characteristics	Practices	Characteristics
Provides service to UNACH students, teachers, and support staff, as well as to the community	Four different languages: Spanish, French, German, English.	Provides service to UNACH students, teachers, and support staff, as well as to the community	Four different languages: Spanish, French, German, English.	Independent program only for LS trainees.	Four different languages: Spanish, French, German, English.
Teaching English, French and German as a Second language	Different nationalities: Mexican, French, German, English, Canadian, Algerian, American	Teaching English, French and German as a Second language (self-directed learning)	Three nationalities: Mexican, French/German. Currently only Mexican	Teaching English, French and German as a Second language (part of curriculum)	Different nationalities: Mexican, French, German
Teacher-centered	Low expectations	Attempts to foster learner autonomy	Low expectations	Fosters student-centered,	High expectations



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				learner autonomy and learning to learn	
More theory than practice	Different academic backgrounds	Practice	Different academic backgrounds	Attempts to promote practice through task-based. Practicum opportunities	Different academic backgrounds (Appendix 5) in process of homogenization
No research	Limited application to UNACH and other educational institutions	No research	Very limited application with UNACH and other education institutions	Research and Action research	Great linkage with UNACH and other education institutions
No in-house projects design for improvement and development	Isolated	No in-house projects design for improvement and development	Isolated	In-house projects design for improvement and development	Integrated to UNACH processes
No UNACH projects design for development and improvement	Collaborative and participative	No UNACH projects design for development and improvement	Works almost in isolation	UNACH projects design for development and betterment (incorporates LD and SAC)	Collaborative and participative
In-house, UNACH and other institutions' teacher	Potential promise but implies work and taking risks	Low number of in-house and UNACH teacher training	Potential promise but implies work and taking risks	A great number of in-house, UNACH and other teacher	Potential promise but implies work and taking risks

training opportunities		opportunities, great number of teacher training opportunities provided by external institutions (i.e. British Council)		training opportunities provided by external institutions (i.e. British Council)	
	Attempts to undertake		Almost hindered	Trainees training	Enterprising
				Leading	Attempts to foster a feeling of ownership in the LD and SAC.

Figure 1: Language School Faculty Culture Diagram from 1999 to 2006 in Serrano (2006:69-70)

As can be observed, the faculty has developed a great deal and changed due to innovations such as the implementation of the Self-Access Centre (SAC) in 1994, and the opening of the B.Ed. in ELT program in 1999. These two innovations helped us to evolve through different stages and developed our awareness of our problems, needs, lacks, and wants among others.

Holliday (1999:237) points out that large cultures are “prescribed ethnic national and international entities” and small cultures are “small social groupings or activities wherever there are cohesive behaviours, which thus avoid culturist ethnic, national or international stereotypes”. The LS falls into the definition of a large culture because in spite of being composed of different nationalities and backgrounds, we are a group of people who share the same mission: education. I will focus on one of the three small cultures, the LEI one, which is illustrated in



figure 1 because the purpose of this study is to explore if this section of the faculty has evolved from a Learning Community into a Community of Practice.

## 2.2 Reasons for focusing on the LEI Small Culture

As mentioned before, the implementation and opening of the LEI program has been the most challenging issue the LS has had to address and face up to now. The first reason for focusing on this particular small culture is because this particular educational program is the most demanding one, and the LEI represented how we, as new trainers, had to change our entire teaching practice after a period of CPD which meant having had the appropriate training to successfully foster in our trainees the meaning, vision and purpose of becoming English Language Teachers.

The second but certainly not less important reason was that the Federal Ministry of Education's (Secretaría de Educación Pública: SEP) demands and requirements that had to be fulfilled. It is fortunate that most University teachers are regarded as much more than an isolated human standing in a classroom in front of a class, teachers are expected to interact, work and collaborate with peers in their own schools as well as with teachers from their own university and with colleagues at other higher level educational institutions, they are also expected to carry out investigations and publish their outcomes, participate in seminars at academic events, write articles both in national and international magazines, among others. By participating in these processes trainers develop their practice, grow professionally, and foster a new learning culture.

And, finally, the ultimate reason was that despite the fact that the teachers involved in the LEI program were all experienced teachers who had been working in the LD for many years, at that time, only a few of us had actually been trained in ELT (English Language Training and Teaching), or had been involved in CPD courses to become teacher-trainer. We became aware that we needed the theory to back up our practice.



### **2.3 The Beginning of CPD**

For the reasons stated above, it was imperative to provide teachers, who had become trainers, with the opportunity for professional development in order for them to be able to effectively support and train LEI trainees and also to compete and interact with teachers from other UNACH schools and other higher level educational institutions to gradually reach increased levels of competence and proficiency.

It is important to explain that this did not start as a project but more as an important and necessary issue to address because we needed to keep up with the national context of development and with SEP and UNACH requirements and demands, and to homogenize academic backgrounds because we also needed to develop our knowledge, awareness and skills (KAS) in order to create a more powerful school, and to move forward not backwards, building up our vocation-specific motivation, because of our peculiar situation within an organizational framework (Dörnyei 2001:158). Another issue to address was the importance of updating our EFL and ESL methodology practice, because the teacher's task is not simply to teach, but to create powerful contexts for learning (Calhoun and Hopkins in Hopkins 2001).

Even though some of us have been involved in in-service teachers (INSET) initial training courses such as the Regional Diploma and the B.Ed. in ELT program, this proved to be insufficient, thus homogenizing academic backgrounds became a priority.

### **2.4 CPD Outcomes**

What could really be considered as the start of the M. Ed. project was a first block of four teachers who travelled abroad and completed a masters program, a situation that triggered the need to continue with the process concerning the professional development issue with more teachers, and the only way to effectively and rapidly increase the size of our Training Staff with a masters degree was to bring a tailored program into our own school.



As a result, Twenty two teachers enrolled in the tailor made program held in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas. The following figure illustrates the outcome of the M. Ed. program after its completion in 2005.

Tuxtla				
	Enrolled	Graduated	Submitted Dissertation	Hold Degree
Tenured	8	8	4	4
Non-tenured	4	4	1	1
Total	12	12	5	5

Figure 2: M. Ed. in ELT *in situ* Program Outcomes Chart

Thus far, I have briefly explained the faculty’s academic background, CPD courses and professional development strategies, and the importance of CPD for the LS and its impact on its culture and development. Hargreaves and Fullan (2002:1) point out that “in some ways the logic and evidence linking teacher development to successful implementation of innovations is relatively straightforward, although there are a number of subtleties and complexities in the process” and as can be seen, not all of the participants in the master program have been able to submit their dissertations, nonetheless it is very likely the number will increase in a near future. In the following section I shall explain the purpose of the present study.

### 3. The Purpose of the Study

In section 2.1 I explored the concept of school cultures and how different they are from each other which pinpoints the need for collaborative work and the sharing of the same mission and vision, hence, the ultimate goal for CPD was to develop a community of practice, a “group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al 2002:4). By developing this community of practice I also intended to develop a culture of teaching where trainers would be able to share the problems they encounter in their teaching practice, the issues they confront their strategies, and styles of



teaching and how they developed these throughout the years together with the support of colleagues (Hargreaves in Pollard 1996).

When we, I include myself as I also was part of the group of teachers who participated in the masters *in situ* program, started a masters program, we became a learning community because we shared, as Burgoyne (1978, in Jarvis 2002:143) states, “a learning situation where a group of people come together to meet specific and unique learning needs to share resources and skills.” Now, I feel the need to explore if we have developed and finally became a Community of Practice.

The study will include the four teachers who studied abroad sponsored by PROMEP, and the 12 teachers enrolled (see figure: 2) in the M. Ed. in ELT *in situ* Program, also sponsored by PROMEP, no matter if they only completed the program or if they now hold the degree, because either way we all shared and lived the training experience and shared the learning situations, and because we all have participated in the B. Ed. in ELT program in the LS training trainees to become English Language Teachers, hence we share the same practice.

#### **4. Methodology: Action Research and Case Study**

Because of the purpose of the present study I consider this to be an Action Research study as I am conducting real-world research based on our experience as trainers due to the fact we, as a faculty, were involved in a training process. Hence, I am directly concerned with the [LS situation, context and development] being researched (Alticher et al 1993:6). Research frequently depends on who you are, where you are standing, and what you are looking at. People are naturally drawn to what they *can see*, not necessarily to what there *is to see* (Freeman 1998:19). I also decided to approach the main issue of the LS faculty’s development over the years as a Case Study because as Cohen and Manion point out “case studies (...) establish a cause and effect (...) because they observe effects in real contexts, recognizing that context is a powerful determinant of both causes and effects” (2003:181). The alternative chosen to conduct this study was using a questionnaire, because these offer an alternative and have predetermined

questions (Burns 1999), with a mixture of both closed and opened questions and multiple choice ones.

After completing a master's program teacher trainers have certainly developed and grown professionally, as now they have the knowledge and the tools to do so and have gotten involved in more academic and production tasks than they did prior to this experience. Nowadays we all feel that we are more productive because we feel more confident and capable of successfully participating in and getting involved in more challenging work. This is a clear example of our professional development as reflective practitioners.

To sum up, Teachers who hold a masters degree with support from PROMEP or MARJON, who are the target group in this study are not working effectively together as a sole group; instead, they have divided into three subgroups called Academic Bodies that may be viewed as both positive and negative (See figure 3). Negative because they all share the same knowledge and academic backgrounds and it could be said it is a waste of time and resources for them to work separately, and positive because being divided is an opportunity for them to share they knowledge with the other members of their Academic Bodies, that is the faculty or full-time teachers.

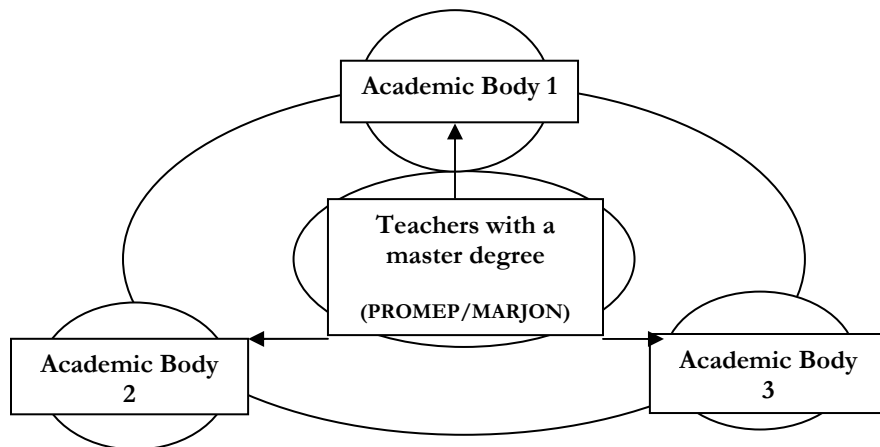


Figure 3: Language School Faculty's Inner-circle



#### 4.1 Pitfalls

As a conclusion of the questionnaire analysis and results I can state I failed in proving my hypothesis because even though teachers' opinions demonstrate that they feel that there has been professional development, this has been more on an individual basis and not as a team effort. Thus, it seems that we are all pulling CPD in different directions and interests, and that our main concern when getting together is school managerial issues that keep us busy and concerned instead of focusing on working on our academic and professional development as a team effort.

Regarding the Community of Practice issue, I also believe that I failed in proving my hypothesis because my colleagues' opinions revealed that we are not one yet and we are still not on the right track towards becoming one. We should stop working so much in small groups – Academic Bodies – and must start closing the circle to foster a culture of team – faculty – work.

#### 5. What we need in order to eventually become a Community of Practice: Action Proposal

Hence, after exploring teachers' opinions I recommend what I believe we need to do in order to become an effective Community of Practice:

- Start sharing academic, that is, classroom experiences, practices and outcomes as well as information, advice, pondering issues, exploring ideas, accumulate knowledge, and acting as sounding boards with each other.
- Reflect upon the value in interactions with peers.
- Find time to start solving problems together more often.
- Avoid being selfish about our work and KAS.
- Foster a sense of ownership among peers.
- Develop a perspective concerning our topics, practices and approaches, as well as developing a sense of identity.
- Find a group leader.
- Foster a sense of development and desire towards helping each other to become more effective practitioners.



## 5.1 Leadership

Leadership is a key issue to address as the lack of it tends to de-motivate. Fullan (2001) refers to a Framework of Leadership, and states that every leader must at least manage to handle one of the leadership styles proposed in his framework if she wants her colleagues and the school to develop and change.

- **Moral Purpose:** To make a positive difference in the lives of the LS community by implementing change in order to improve teachers' work and professional life.
- **Understanding Change:** Leaders should understand the change process and its implications which are linked to the moral purpose; and also be able to properly communicate the change vision even if there is neither openness nor good will from the people to whom the change is focused upon.
- **Relationship Building:** Try to foster an improvement in relationships with the faculty, if these are strong, then the school will improve as well since it is people who ultimately make the difference.
- **Knowledge Creation and Sharing:** The above leads us to learn from each other and to share that learning. The concern of providing teachers with the most appropriate learning and development opportunities to create and expand learning through peer support which will ultimately benefit all the school will result in a stronger school.
- **Coherence Making:** To be coherent when attempting to create equilibrium in the faculty and when new ideas and interactions are born.

Of course there are leaders who are more effective in strengthening relationships or in coherence making, but if they lack moral purpose there will be no end to a means and the leader will find herself alone without any followers. What would be better is for a leader to effectively strive to move from one style to another according to people's needs; this way she will be able to foster a sense of ownership and of team collaboration.



## Conclusion

I have addressed the issue of my belief that the Language School faculty has grown professionally and become a Community of Learners but failed in proving my hypothesis. Many members of the faculty have developed professionally on an individual basis. This is not entirely negative because I think this is the first step towards team development. On the other hand, we have not yet become a Community of Practice. Therefore, it is my belief that and we are a community with the characteristics Guskey and Huberman state as being a Symbolic Interactionism, hence, I consider us a Symbolic Interactional Community. To better understand this concept I will quote from their definition.

Symbolic Interactionism: Teaching is more than a set of technically learnable skills: It is given meaning by teachers' evolving for themselves, within the realistic contexts and contingencies of their work environments. Thus, group reflective practices provide insights into teachers' selves, their meanings and purposes (Nias in Guskey and Huberman 1995:11). It helps us see how less-than-perfect teacher actions may be, in fact, rational, strategies responses to everyday, yet often overwhelming, constraints in teachers' workplaces (Hargreaves in Guskey and Huberman 1995:11). It also points to the importance of shared cultures of teaching, common beliefs and perceptions among subgroups of teachers rooted in different subjects or sectors that develop in response to commonly faced problems and provide ready-made solutions and sources of learning for new entrants to the occupation (A. Hargraves ,1986; D. Hargraves, 1980 in Guskey and Huberman 1995:11). Lastly, Symbolic Interactionism alerts us to patterned human differences among teachers in terms of such things as age and career stage (Becker, 1952; Sikes, Measor, & Woodas, 1985 in Guskey and Huberman 1995:11), gender (Acker, 1992 in Guskey and Huberman 1995:11), and race (Tronya, 1993 in Guskey and Huberman 1995:11). Not all teachers respond to innovation, commit to collaboration, or construe the purpose of education ... in quite the same way. It helps to identify and explain these important differences. .. in short, it helps us to see teaching and teacher development as humanly constructed and constrained processes in all their imperfection and complexity.

Team work is therefore the key. We have not yet learned to work as a team and for a team, and we still care more about our own personal interests and development, like that of working and learning in isolation instead of taking advantage of the fact that learning collaboratively in our every day practice will help us to discover new approaches, share knowledge, and learn more about ourselves and about the group, instead of only focusing on the school community development as a whole. I am hopeful that at the Tuxtla Language School we are



on the right path and have grown both academically as well as personally, it is my belief that perhaps one day we will become a true community of practice.

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### Biodata

Full-time teacher at the Language School Tuxtla from the Autonomous University of Chiapas since 1988. Academic Background: Regional Diploma (1991-1993) from the Autonomous University of Yucatán (UADY), B. Ed. TESOL (1995-1998) from Canterbury Christ Church College, University of Kent, M. Ed. in ELT (2003-2006) from the College of Saint Mark and St. John (MARJON) from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. Former coordinator for the PET and FCE examinations and current Oral Examiner from the University of Cambridge. Has held different positions in the Language School such as Academic Consultant of the Language Departments, Language School Coordinator, Director and President of the "Consejo Técnico" of the Language School, and "Consejera Universitaria Directora". Has also been responsible of the development of the PIFI's (Programa Integral de Fortalecimiento Institucional) 2.0, 3.0, 3.1 and was a former member of the Academic Body "Language Didactics" and current member of the "Applied Linguistics: Second and Foreign Language" one. Has developed research projects and written research articles in Mexican magazines, and attended several courses in ELT.

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