Innovating Professional Development Program for Teachers: From theory-based to a more collaborative, practical, and reflective perspective

Paolo Fabre-Merchán¹, Frans Recalde-García², Ninfa Sofía Guevara-Peñaranda³, Jorge Zambrano Pachay⁴

¹Universidad Estatal de Milagro, pfabrem@unemi.edu.ec
²Universidad Estatal de Milagro, frecaldeg@unemi.edu.ec
³Universidad Estatal de Milagro, nguevarap@unemi.edu.ec
⁴Universidad Estatal de Milagro, jzambranop10@unemi.edu.ec

Abstract
Education and curriculum require a constant revision to attend the needs and assets of an everchanging society. In this sense, efforts to become more competent within the society have historically guided educators to engage in professional development programs that allow them to update and adjust their instructional practices for effective learning. However little improvement has been documented from using traditional theories and uncontextualized programs of professional development, mainly affecting learners’ academic success. The purpose of this study is (1) to explore how novel and experienced faculty members described their experience using Peer-Observation of Teaching as a novel structure to support their professional development; and (2) to discover whether a semester long intervention had an impact in the perception of teacher sense of efficacy of other faculty members and themselves. The study was applied for a semester long in three different higher education institutions across Ecuador. Data was gathered using a mixed method approach. For the qualitative part, a questionnaire with open-ended questions was given, followed by two rounds of focus groups; for the quantitative part, a peer-observation tool adapted from the Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy Scale was applied to measure teachers’ abilities and self-efficacy perspective. The quantitative data was analyzed based on the three variables (student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management) through a two-tails paired sample t-test using SPSS software considering an alpha score of .05. The qualitative data was analyzed utilizing a constant comparative coding method. The results revealed differing degrees of experience based primarily on years of experience. While some experienced faculty members did not see much benefit in being observed from a less
experienced peer, others expressed it was an opportunity to receive a fresh look at their performance. Novice faculty mostly saw benefits in being observed and provided feedback. Novice teachers did better on student engagement and instructional strategies while experienced faculty got higher scores in classroom management. It was concluded that using POT gave faculty members a valuable opportunity for a fresh and wise look at current teaching practices, as well as a space for improvement from two generations that complement each other.

Keywords: peer-observation of teaching, collaboration, critical reflection, professional development, adult learning.

Introduction

Advances in technology and changes in society have created the necessity to revisit and reconfigure the educational systems around the world including the curriculum, the instructional practices, and the assessment procedures. More than focusing on curricular adjustment, (standards, learning outcomes, content), innovating education requires changes in teachers’ practices and perspectives so they can adequately respond to and attend to the needs of all students in their classrooms considering their specific realities and expectations.

Innovating education requires the importance of engaging teachers in professional development programs. Effective teacher PD (T-PD) programs understand, honor, and maximize the educators’ experience and prior knowledge as the fundamental sources for adult learning to situate and contextualize innovative instructional practices focusing teachers’ specific realities. Although direct interaction, previous experiences, and prior knowledge contribute to build rich conditions that effectively support teachers to enhance their professional competencies and perspectives more than reading, attending a lecture, and/or participating in structured teaching simulations, many T-PD programs in Ecuador do not include them as core principles.

In this sense, efforts to become more competent when addressing education and society changes have historically guided Ecuadorian Higher Education (HE) leadership and faculty to explore and engage in theory-based courses and/or training programs to innovate their instructional practices, yet little improvement has been documented. Even when most PD programs for teachers focus on a similar pedagogical principles basis (social constructivism, collaborative learning, critical reflection), they do not reflect the contextual characteristics and needs of each context. Recent trends in Ecuador towards theory-based professional development (PD) programs commonly situated in external or international settings, have resulted in a high number of students underperforming due to the instructional practices not responding to their academic needs.
In this context, the objectives of this research are (1) to explore how novel and experienced faculty members described their experience using Peer-Observation of Teaching as a novel structure to support their professional development; and (2) to discover whether a semester long intervention had an impact in the perception of teacher sense of efficacy of other faculty members and themselves. This study particularly aims at exploring and examining the following research questions: (1) Does POT yield a statistically significant change in faculty' sense of self-efficacy, as measured by TSES? (2) What are faculty' perspectives regarding: (a) innovating instructional practices when observing or being-observed by colleagues, (b) the efficacy of POT as a PD structure?

This study was conducted for a semester long in the college of education of three universities located in coastal cities of Ecuador. Ecuador is a multiethnic country in South America mainly characterized by the cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity of its population. Ecuador is politically organized in 24 provinces distributed across four different regions. The outcomes of the study will be used to engage educational administrators and instructors into POT, considering it as an ongoing collaborative and critical reflective process to enhance and innovative instructional practices in Higher Education contexts.

Trends & Core Principles in Adult Learning

Learning during adulthood requires non-authoritarian, collective, social conditions that support adults to explore, identify, validate, and reroute their knowledge and the perceptions that drive their thoughts and actions. Rather than direct instruction, adults learn through a back-and-forth process of reflection that guides them to find a need to reconstruct their schemas, beliefs, and actions to address a problem or issue (Kelly, 2017; Meijer et., al, 2017; Mezirow, 1991; Zhu et al., 2020). Literature in PD has continually determined that experience (Knowles, 1978; Kelly, 2017; Richmond and Manokore, 2011), inquiry dialogue (Horn & Little, 2010; Merriam, 2017), and critical reflection (Dewey, 1993; Knowles, 1978; Syslová, 2015) are key elements for adult learning.

Experience: Experiences contribute to build our frame of reference which drives our thoughts and actions when addressing a situation. Mezirow (1991) argues that the frame of reference is built upon experiences which support adults to explore, understand, and transform their interpretations, perspectives, and beliefs. More than theory-based instruction, collaborative experience-sharing effectively supports teachers' learning (Richmond & Manokore, 2011).

Novice teachers may benefit from the accumulated histories of experienced teachers, and experienced teachers may have an opportunity to validate their current practices considering fresh perspectives and thoughts. Effective T-PD provides educators with the opportunity to innovate their instructional practices through experience-
sharing focusing reflective dialogue for problem solving (Stoll et al., 2006; Kelly, 2017). In this sense, Herrera (2022) asserts that peoples’ experiences and histories are strong assets to utilize in agency and advocacy across learning and innovation.

Inquiry-Discourse: Adult learning is bolstered through collective-reflective conversations focusing exploring, understanding, validating, and maximizing experiences for more effective routes to problem-solving (Merriam, 2017; Mezirow, 1994). Inquiry-dialogue creates natural and authentic conditions for learning and problem-solving considering the contextual realities of the specific community in which they are conducted. In the same way, Horn and Little (2010) determine that inquiry-dialogue provides educators with opportunities for in-depth analysis of trends in education and instructional problems so more effective pathways can be explored and taken.

Several authors in the literature agree that engaging in collective and reflective conversations emphasizing prior experiences and knowledge creates safe learning ecologies that foster stable relationships and learning (Beck, 2020; Gutierrez, 2008; Herrera, 2022). T-PD that focuses inquiry-dialogue supports lifelong learning by fostering the creation of collaborative professional communities that innovate together.

Critical-Reflection: Critical-Reflection is the pivotal component to support adult learning (Dewey, 1933, Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1982; Syslová, 2015). Critical-reflection guides adults to check, analyze, and examine the effectiveness and accuracy of current assumptions and practices, built upon prior interactions, experiences, and socializations, as they support individuals to address and respond to new diverse and challenging situations.

Individually or collectively reflecting upon current educational conditions and practices (e.g., instructional practices, school structure, learners’ outcomes, curriculum) support educators to better advocate for more effective practices considering learners’ specific realities, expectations, assets, and needs (Affandi et al., 2019; Brookfield, 2010; Mezirow, 1991; Schön, 1982). Critical reflection creates conditions for educators to explore, share, validate, and maximize their experiences through collective collegial dialogue. In such contexts, educators question the effectiveness of their practices while rerouting and transforming them to support all learners to achieve academic success.

Peer-Observation of Teaching

Extensive longitudinal research has evinced that Peer-Observation of Teaching (POT) supports educators to build more responsive and innovative teaching practices to guide all learners in the classroom to achieve academic success (Beaty & McGill, 1995; Martin & Double, 1998; Peel, 2005; Bell, 2005; Adshead et al., 2009; Drew & Klopper, 2014). POT is defined as an ongoing collaborative process of lifelong learning that
focuses on mutual teaching observation sessions, inquiry-dialogue, feedback, and reflection (Bell & Maldenovic, 2008). Considering contextual characteristics and teachers’ socioemotional state of mind, implementing POT requires a well-structured process (Martin & Double, 1998) and an agreed engagement to create an ecology of care, respect, collaboration, and trust. Adshead et al. (2009) claimed that imposing peer-observation creates conflicts on the working and teaching environment.

This research aims to provide evidence to understand the aspects that influence teachers’ perspectives towards teaching observation and to determine whether POT yields a statistically significant change on teachers’ sense of self-efficacy. The findings of this study document and explain the reasons that guide some teachers to be open to engage in classroom observations, while others are reluctant to do so. This study also aims to monitor to what extent teachers’ attitudes and professional practice are influenced during the implementation of POT, based on a phenomenological case study which will support the researcher to identify key features of adult learning built upon faculty members’ voices and discourse.

**Methodology / Methods**

This research was conducted through a mix-method approach focusing faculty members’ perspectives on the effectiveness of a T-PD program contextualized by peer-observation of teaching to maximize and innovate their teaching practices. The quantitative research focused statistically significant changes on faculty’ sense of self-efficacy as measured by the Teachers Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES). Self-efficacy was utilized as the indicator (variables: students’ engagement, instructional strategies, classroom management) to measure, through a descriptive design, the impact of POT considering that educators typically construct meaning, behave, and act upon their frame of beliefs. Educators’ actions are driven by their expectations, assumptions, and beliefs associated with their abilities to effectively conduct a specific activity (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

The qualitative aspects focused on the faculty’ experiences with peer-observation of teaching as analyzed and addressed through an exploratory phenomenological case study design. A qualitative phenomenological case study was adequate because the findings of the study derived from an in-depth analysis and interpretations of participants’ descriptions, lived experiences, and insights of an instructional phenomenon (Hayhow & Stewart, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). DeMarrais (2004) argues that phenomenology provides researchers with a strong foundation to examine every day human
experience in a deeper and more detailed way, which aims to discover how lived experience influences people to construct meaning.

Site and Participants of the Study

The universities selected for the study are public educational institutions primarily serving low and middle socio-economic populations. A higher percent of the students attending those universities come from rural and suburban contexts. A random, non-probabilistic method for participant selection was applied in which a T-PD program contextualized by POT was offered to all faculty members from the college of education of the three universities yet attending was not mandatory. Since the participant selection was conducted randomly, there were not specific inclusion/ exclusion criteria determined.

A total of 50 faculty members from the three universities agree to participated in the T-PD program, and 10 of them agreed to participate in focus group sessions. Participants of the focus group sessions were selected based on their engagement, commitment, and continuous participation, as evidenced throughout the observation and collegial dialogue sessions.

The participant of the research included eighty percent of participants in the focus group were from Ecuador, and ten percent were from Cuba. Forty percent of the participants have from one to five years of teaching experience, forty percent from six and fifteen years of teaching experience, and the remaining twenty percent have more than 15 years of teaching experience. Participants’ main professional areas include tourism, technology, marketing, and education. 60% of the faculty members included in the study have previously experienced teaching-observation processes. A detailed account is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PP</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>YTE</th>
<th>HLE</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>EOC</th>
<th>EBO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Ph.D</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>NONE</td>
<td>NONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: PP= possible participant; A= age; S= sex; N= nationality; YTE= years of teaching experience; HLE= highest level of education; PA=...
The faculty members across the three participating universities were paired considering their years of experiences and professional areas, and they were involved in four peer-observation and follow-up collegial dialogue sessions along the academic school year (four months). These sessions included a one-hour classroom observation and thirty-minutes conversation guided by descriptions and reflections upon the observation field-notes. Observation and collegial dialogue focus instructional practices, classroom management techniques, strategies or activities that bolsters learners’ motivation and engagement; as well as, discussing teaching difficulties encountered during the lesson and experience-sharing.

Data Collection Tools

The data was collected from four different sources. The quantitative data was collected by utilizing the Teacher’s Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES). Participants completed the 24-items version of TSES at the beginning and by the end of the T-PD program. TSES was developed by Tschanan-Mor and Hoy (2001) and have been utilized to examine the impact of several teaching PD programs (e.g., Carter 2017; Cohrs, 2014, Fabre-Merchán, 2021; Zheng et al., 2019). TSES is a Likert-type scale that requires participants to score the items that mostly describe their perceptions in a range from 1 to 9. The 24-items included in TSES focus teachers’ perceptions about their abilities achieving three variables: student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management.

TSES was compared and correlated with other existing scales to construct its validity, obtaining the following scores: “Rand items (r = 0.35 and 0.28; p<0.01) as well as to both the personal teaching efficacy (PTE) factor of the Gibson and Dembo measure (r = 0.48; p<0.01) and the general teacher efficacy (GTE) factor (r=.30, p<0.01)” (Tschanan-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 798). TSES reliability was measured for its three indicators (students’ engagement, instructional strategies, classroom management), yielding score reliabilities of .82, .81, and .72 (Tschanan-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

The qualitative data for this study was collected via peer-observations, a questionnaire, and two focus groups. Faculty members were required to conduct observations during the POT sessions, which were used to guide their follow-up conversations and handed to the researchers by the end of the T-PD program. Insights and themes discussed during the sessions supported faculty members to go through a collective and/or individual reflection process centralizing their current teaching practices and instructional competencies. Bhattacharya (2017) and Spradley (1980) determine that observation is the act of being introduced in a context or
setting to observe the reality of the study and it can be applied in different levels of participation depending on the observer engagement.

To gain a more in-depth exploration and understanding of faculty teachers’ perspectives, a questionnaire with open-ended questions was given to the faculty members participating in the focus groups, followed by two focus groups guided by the researchers. Both, the questionnaires, and the focus groups captured the faculty members’ perspectives associated with the impact on their practice, benefits, strengths, and difficulties of the T-PD program contextualized by POT, and desired next steps for implementation and engagement.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative results of the research, descriptive statistics were used to obtain the means of each faculty members’ scores in the three measurable scores (student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management), and then, the means were analyzed through a two-tails paired sample t-test using SPSS software considering 95% level of confidence, alpha score of .05.

The qualitative data was analyzed utilizing a constant comparative coding method (Kolb, 2012; Saldaña, 2016). Initial coding was conducted via in-vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016) through the lens of adult learning principles. Faculty members’ perspectives shared during the focus group were explored and analyzed according to the strengths and difficulties to engage in experience-sharing, inquiry dialogue, and critical reflection. Initial codes that emerged at this level included: power, improvement, growth as a professional, enough knowledge and strategies.

Subsequent analysis was driven by the initial finding, including a deeper revision of the data as compared to the data collected from the questionnaire and the peer-observation field notes. Attribute and description coding (Saldaña, 2016) supported the researchers to assign specific codes considering triangulation based on common themes across data sources. Triangulation and member checking methods provided the trust value of the analysis considering trustworthiness criteria (Nowell et al., 2017) and credibility. Constant peer examination among the researchers and data debriefing (Anney, 2014) targeted dependability for this study.

Results & Discussion

The quantitative results of this research study yield a statistically significant change in faculty members’ sense of self-efficacy, as measured by TSES. The results obtained from descriptive statistics, displayed in table 2, illustrated a higher mean score when comparing initial faculty members’ perspectives on their teaching abilities with their perspectives after participating in the T-PD program contextualized by
POT: Students Engagement Pre- (M=5.6, SD=1.00) and Post- (M=8.2, SD=.71), Instructional Strategies Pre- (M=5.5, SD=1.01) and Post- (M=8.5, SD=.49), Classroom Management Pre- (M=5.5, SD=1.14) and Post- (M=8.3, SD=.54).

The results from table 3 determine that the two-tailed paired sample t-test was statistically significant for the three teaching self-efficacy indicators: Students Engagement t(49)=15.18, p=<.001, Instructional Strategies t(49)=18.09, p=<.001, Classroom Management t(49)=16.16, p=<.001. These findings indicate that a T-PD program contextualized by POT yields a statistically significant change in Ecuadorian faculty members’ sense of self-efficacy associated with the three factors for effective teaching.

Table 2. Two-Tailed Paired Sample T-Test – Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Pre–Students Engagement</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre–Students Engagement</td>
<td>5.5505</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.00950</td>
<td>.14277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post–Students Engagement</td>
<td>8.1980</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.71160</td>
<td>.10064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pre–Instructional Strategies</td>
<td>5.5445</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.01181</td>
<td>.14309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post–Instructional Strategies</td>
<td>8.5301</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.49713</td>
<td>.07030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pre–Classroom Management</td>
<td>5.5310</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.13657</td>
<td>.16074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Post–Classroom Management</td>
<td>8.3160</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.54182</td>
<td>.07662</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Two-Tailed Paired Sample T-Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Pre–Students Engagement</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pre–Students Engagement</td>
<td>-2.64750</td>
<td>1.25197</td>
<td>.17437</td>
<td>-2.96791 -2.32709</td>
<td>-15.18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pre–Instructional Strategies</td>
<td>-2.98160</td>
<td>1.06692</td>
<td>.16503</td>
<td>-3.31123 -2.65197</td>
<td>-18.09</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pre–Classroom Management</td>
<td>-2.78330</td>
<td>1.21797</td>
<td>.17225</td>
<td>-3.31124 -2.24886</td>
<td>-16.16</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A change in faculty members’ sense of self-efficacy guides them to innovate their instructional practices, being willing to implement new strategies or practical techniques shared during the T-PD program. Bandura (1997) and Tschannen-Moran & McMaster (2009) argue that teachers’ actions and motivation to innovate their instructional practices are driven by their perceptions on how competent they are to perform a specific activity. The results obtained from the quantitative data collection and analysis not only displayed a statistically significant change but supported a range of compelling findings.
Particularly, the statistical results supported by relevant literature confirmed that educators’ sense of self-efficacy is positively influenced when participating in a T-PD program contextualized by peer-observation of teaching and grounded on the principles of adult learning. Similar to the consistent findings previously reported by Peel (2005), Adshead et al. (2009), and Klopper (2014), PD programs contextualized in POT provide educators with effective ways and meaningful insights to innovate their teaching practices.

The qualitative finding strengthens and complements the quantitative findings, offering insights and an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and outcomes associated with the T-PD program contextualized by POT in the context of three public higher education institutions in Ecuador. The themes that emerged from participants' voices were (a) Peer-Observation of Teaching: Enriching vs. traumatic Experience, (b) May I be too Knowledgeable? (c) Innovating teaching: Collective reflection and dialogues with colleagues. The following sections describe these themes built upon faculty members’ discourse as they elaborated from the principles of adult learning concepts.

Peer-Observation of Teaching: Enriching vs Traumatic Experience

The insights that contributed to building this section emerged mostly from the focus groups and the questionnaire. Faculty members’ rational and descriptions regarding POT were mostly associated with their feelings and thoughts while observing peers or being observed. Depending on the conditions and contexts, participating in classroom observations may bridge teachers to innovation and learning or lead to the creation of socioemotional and/or cognitive barriers that guide teachers to be reluctant and scared towards POT. During the focus groups, researchers requested participants to describe their POT experiences focusing on the strengths and difficulties encountered. Most of the faculty members involved described this experience as positive and enriching, yet one of the most prominent responses was provided by a novice teacher:

having a strong sense of confidence about my abilities and knowledge, and having my class previously planned, helped me to have a good experience while being observed... Being observed and asked to reflect upon in my class with a teacher that has been doing it for years was very beneficial [...] you know, experience and wisdom is important... He was able to point out things about my class that I didn't think I could make on my own [...] Talking from the experience [...] The overall experience was great, and I feel more confident and aware of my teaching competences [...] This experience helped me to create empathy among co-workers.

For this faculty member, peer-observation of teaching was a very effective way to innovate their current instructional practice by
examining their lessons collectively with a more experienced educator. He found POT useful considering critical reflection and inquiry dialogue with a more experienced teacher. Also, a trustable and respectful environment guides educators to engage and take full advantage of POT. Experienced and novice faculty members agreed that planning, self-confidence, clear instructions, and expectations provide educators with a sense of confidence to open their classrooms to others, creating conditions that enrich learning:

At first, I was nervous and felt a fear that students would not respond to the activities as planned... while the class continued its course my feelings changed. I began to feel normal... without even noticing the presence of the observer [...] I think it was because I had everything planned and I clearly knew what was happening every minute of my class [...] It was enriching since it is always helpful that someone tell you how you can improve... People do not notice their weaknesses on their own.

In the words of this faculty member, previous planning, clear instructions, and a focus on learning are fundamental factors that support educators to develop positive perspectives towards engaging in POT. Yet, previous experiences with teaching observations focusing assessment or evaluation may lead educators to develop negative perspectives and attitudes towards classroom observations. During the focus groups, one of the experienced faculty members highlighted that classroom observations has commonly been used to measure teachers’ competences to achieve curriculum outcomes, and classroom management skills; as well as, their levels of content understating, so hiring decisions could be made:

While observing my peers I felt that I had power over the other person... It was my time to have the power [...] In my previous schools, people going into your classroom was basically an evaluation... One of my supervisors walked into my classroom once a month, but it was scary because you do not know when. So, you need to be always prepared... After the observation he called me to his office, and he told me all things I did wrong [...] Those experiences helped me to learn that I always need to be prepared [...] I think that teachers who are reluctant to see peer-observation as an opportunity to grow is because they have had a traumatic observation experience [...] Classroom observation is normally used to criticize you mainly.

For this faculty member, classroom observations in Ecuador typically target teachers’ evaluation mostly focusing on deficits and difficulties while totally ignoring the assets that teachers bring to the classroom. Those types of experiences affect educators’ socioemotional state of mind, linking peer-observation to negative emotions including fear and anxiety. Yet, POT effectively creates conditions that lead to innovation and learning when clear expectations and instructions are placed, and it
focuses collective reflection to examine the strengths of the lesson and address difficulties through experience-sharing.

T-PD programs contextualized by POT provide teachers with the opportunity to explore and share their experiences in collaborative spaces, influencing teachers’ socioemotional and/or cognitive barriers that guide them to work in isolation. Engaging in inquiry-collegial dialogue and collective reflection with more experienced colleagues provides enriching opportunities to innovate our instructional practices. Like findings reported by Fabre (2021), innovating teaching requires educators to collaboratively explore and validate their current teaching and assessment practices considering effectiveness when responding and supporting learners to achieve academic and language success.

May I be too knowledgeable?

May I be too knowledgeable? was the second categorized theme that emerged from teachers’ discourse and talks. The descriptions of faculty members’ experiences that follow evinced mostly experienced teachers’ perspectives regarding peer-observation of teaching. Some of the experienced faculty members agreed that it was a nice experience to contribute to the training of novice faculty members, but they do not see too much benefit for their practices when being observed and/or received feedback from a less experienced educator:

I feel like a model... It was nice to know I am helping other teachers to improve [...] I am not saying that I am the best teacher, but I think my experience and knowledge can be very helpful, especially for new teachers [...] I am not here because of nothing, but because I have gone through many classroom situations [...] But, tell me, I am old and I have experienced many issues in education... Education is different now, but new teachers have not experienced what I have experienced [...] The comments she made were not helpful at all [...] For me, I do not see much benefits received to improve my classes.

The insights from this faculty member strengthened the idea from the previous paragraph that experienced teachers do not find much benefit from the comments received from novice teachers, yet they support the idea that they can serve as a figure-to-follow to nurture novice teachers’ competences. Experience provides you with great assets to merge in educational problem-solving considering wide perspectives and routes, but novice teachers may spark your brain to be open to fresh ideas and thoughts. An opinion from another of the experienced faculty members involved in the focus group supports the power that novice teachers may have on renovating and rerouting instructional practices when becoming more responsive to your students:

I was very enthusiastic [...] While observing my peers I realized there are new things I did not learn... She encouraged me to explore new strategies [...] Playing both roles, I mean observing my partner and being
observed, gave me the opportunity to notice new things and I learned them [...] Our conversations made me notice I have been applying the same strategies and materials for years [...] Watching her teaching was nice... Her energy... Her commitment... I thought that I needed that energy in my classroom [...] I want to try some of her strategies to engage my students.

Like other experienced teachers, this educator perceived that teachers are not too knowledgeable, and observation, reflection, and dialogue provide new insights and bring new-fresh perspectives to her classroom. Engaging in inquiry discussion and watching others doing things open our mind to new possibilities and provide us with a sense of confidence when performing new actions (Bandura, 1997). Throughout their academic and life journey, each educator has experienced unique situations that guided them to navigate their perspectives, professional practices, and reactions in a unique way. Peer-observation of teaching has the power to guide educators to notice the continuous learning and adjustment that is required to effectively respond to the needs and expectations of an ever-changing society. The findings described within this research study tend to advocate, as others in the literature (Cohrs, 2014; Fabre, 2021; Priest, 2015), for T-PD programs grounded on collaboration, reflection, dialogue, and experience-sharing.

Innovating teaching: Collective reflection & dialogues with colleagues

The third theme in faculty members’ voices arising from the qualitative analysis was characterized as Innovating teaching: Collective reflection & dialogues with colleagues. The T-PD program focuses inquiry-dialogue, reflection, and experience sharing as the core principles to support teaching innovations that address educational problem-solving. During the focus group sessions, faculty members discussed the highlighted features of the T-PD program as they engaged in peer-observation and dialogue sessions. Most of the faculty members agreed that the most interesting and newest of this experience, as compared to other PD programs, was being involved in natural and meaningful conversations which highly support them to critically reflect on their teaching strengths and difficulties through the lens of another faculty member:

This is the first time I am in a course that does not give me concepts or articles to read so I can learn [...] All courses provided by the university for training typically include reading and listening to an expert talking for hours... You know, those concepts and strategies shared by the expert are good but do not work for my classroom... I never apply them [...] This experience was different and effective because it made me think about the problems in my classroom... I talk with my teacher, I mean my partner for observation, and together we reflect and analyze solutions to address problems and of course I improved [...] He told me the problems in his classes and how he has solved them.
For this educator, POT, as compared to traditional concept-based PD programs, is a more effective, interesting, and novel structure to support educators to innovate their instructional practices. Critical reflection and collegial dialogue upon classroom observation focusing lesson delivery, students’ engagement, and limitations encountered during the lesson is fundamental to innovate instructional practices considering the realities of specific classrooms.

Literature in PD has continually highlighted that critical reflection is the vehicle for adult learning (Brookfield, 2010; Fabre, 2021; Kelly, 2017, Murry et al., 2020). POT creates meaningful and authentic conditions that drive educators to explore and examine the effectiveness of their own instructional practice as they support all learners to achieve academic success. Inquiry dialogue provides faculty members with opportunities to go deeper in their reflection as they receive insights that drive them to deconstruct and construct their ideas, thoughts, and actions.

A second faculty member’s shared story about the effectiveness of POT features to innovate her teaching practices indicate that peer-observation of teaching support the observers to gain a fresh perspective and practical ideas to critically reflect on their own instructional practice, and the educators being observed received some authentic feedback to notice and examine aspects of their teaching, leveraging from another faculty members’ perspective and unique experience:

I actually enjoy observing my partner because I catch out some new ideas for my teaching [...] I like a strategy she used to divide students into groups using their interests... She places pictures of different sports, and asks students to go around the room and see which one likes them the most... the pictures were related to the content [...] I learn many new strategies to engage my students, to teach, and assess, too [...] I also enjoyed when my partner observed me [...] she said things like you did not check if your students understood the instruction, some of them were asking their friends when they joined the group [...] we shared experiences, we laughed, and learned, it was fun and meaningful.

Gains and insights from teachers’ voices contribute to conclude that involving faculty members in peer-observations focusing on experience-sharing and critical reflection through inquiry dialogue provides them with opportunities to innovate their practice. As stated in the literature, experience was the faculty members’ living textbook (Lindeman, 1926), becoming one of the richest sources of learning for experienced and novice teachers throughout the entire T-PD program. Finding confirmed that two generations of educators can complement perfectly and work together to innovate their practices considering their specific classroom realities. As compared to traditional concept-based PD programs, faculty
members argue that POT provides a more effective, meaningful, engaging, and alternative structure for PD.

Conclusion

A focus on PD to support faculty members in innovating their instructional practices remains a fundamental aspect for many universities in Ecuador to explore more about. The findings of this mix-methods research study coincide with other studies that concluded that critical-reflection, inquiry dialogue, and experience are key factors in adult learning, and that peer-observation of teaching creates conditions that effectively support teachers’ professional development.

The quantitative results further suggest that participating in a T-PD program contextualized by POT guides teachers to innovate their current instructional practices considering a statistically significant change in their sense of self-efficacy, as measured by TSES. Experienced faculty members are more willing to explore new pathways in teaching as they become more responsive for their students, and novice teachers benefit from the accumulated histories of experienced teachers to manage their classes more effectively so that all learners in their classroom achieve academic success.

The qualitative findings suggest alternative, engaging, and meaningful structures for T-PD programs that benefit all participants. A T-PD program contextualized by POT contributes to change experienced and novice teachers’ limited schemas and perspectives towards classroom observations, going from a deficit/assessment to an asset/enriching perspective.

Each educator has built their own perspective, professional practices, and reactions upon their unique academic and live experience that help them to navigate current educational trends to address difficulties in their classrooms yet sharing those unique ways to think and act provides colleagues with valuable insights and new routes to innovate teaching. T-PD programs contextualized in POT involve educators in collective critical-reflection and inquiry dialogue focusing the exploration and examination of their current instructional practice, igniting thoughts and ideas that result in learning and innovation while becoming more responsive to their learners’ needs, expectations, and realities.

The overall findings of this research study advocate for innovative, meaningful, and low-cost efficient PD programs grounded on the principles of adult learning. Building upon participants’ discourse, this research provides a rich understanding of the benefits and limitations that further POT implementation may encounter when introducing it in Ecuadorian universities contexts. Faculty members participating in this
study describe POT as an enriching-beneficial experience, and as a novel, engaging and more effective way for PD in teaching.

Bibliography


Instruction. Forum for International Research in Education, 6(2), 103-124. DOI: https://doi.org/10.32865/fire202062203


