

9-1-2014

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## NSUWorks Citation

Ziemke, L. and Ross, David B., "A Professional Growth Plan for Lifelong Learners" (2014). *Fischler College of Education: Faculty Articles*. Paper 175.

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# A professional growth plan for lifelong learners



**It is important that educational leaders foster the climate of continuous professional development, by motivating teachers to engage in meaningful professional development opportunities to better instructional practices, say LYUDMILA ZIEMKE and DAVID ROSS.**

**SINCE** knowledge has become one of the key factors in maintaining a nation's competitive advantage, organisational leaders are faced with a new task of enhancing their employees' lifelong learning abilities. Creating an environment for employees to grow intellectually and become responsible citizens will help an organisation be competitive in a globalised world. Nguyen (2013) stated that: *'think[ing] critically and analytically for their professional lives'* benefits all stakeholders.

In education, empowering students and teachers to become lifelong learners has been the focus of many schools, and is reflected in their vision and mission statements. The importance of fostering the professional growth of teachers, to embody and model the ideals of a lifelong learner,

has become a new key component of the strategic planning of school officials. School leaders must invest in their teachers and staff to have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to create a learning environment.

Teacher evaluations are intended to assist teachers to improve performance and grow professionally. School leaders can obtain information from these evaluations to create training programs for teachers to build on strengths and areas in need of improvement. Prompted by federal incentives, teacher evaluation systems are undergoing significant changes as states and school districts are selecting new observation instruments and implementing new systems in an effort to accomplish the goals of increasing teacher quality. Hill and Grossman (2013) claim that if teacher evaluations *'are to achieve the goal of the reform which is supporting teachers in improving instructional practice, they must be subject-specific, done by content experts in the process of observation, as well as informative, accurate and useful for teachers'*.

Currently, there is a trend in education supporting alignment between professional development and teacher evaluation. According to Hill and Grossman (2013), designing a professional development plan would aim to address a teacher's specific areas for development. In addition, this plan would need to provide them with support systems, such as curriculum materials, observation protocols and teacher learning opportunities. One of the

major benefits of professional growth plans, for both novice and veteran teachers, is the fostering of continuous improvement of teaching practices through lifelong learning. A comprehensive professional growth plan can provide a systematic approach toward remediating areas of development for teachers who are at the beginning stages of their teaching careers, and providing meaningful guidance for experienced teachers to maximise their potential and expertise in the profession by building upon their strengths.

This professional growth plan is developed for a secondary level teacher who has less than three years of teaching experience. The plan will identify a teacher's individual areas in need of improvement or development, set goals and objectives to achieve upon completion of the professional growth plan, offer a comprehensive outline of professional development activities to be completed by the teacher to target the identified specific needs, and identify the system of support a teacher will receive as he or she faces challenges in the process of the professional growth plan implementation. Finally, a comprehensive evaluation plan will conclude the implementation of the plan to determine the effectiveness of the professional growth plan and measure a teacher's progress in accomplishing the goals and objectives set in the plan.

## Identification of individual needs

**Pre-observation conference.** The purpose of the pre-observation conference is to: (a) identify a teacher's objective for student learning; (b) how the objective relates to the curriculum; (c) how a teacher ensures engagement and learning of all students in their class; (d) how student learning will be assessed, whether the lesson contains a homework assignment; and (e) how this lesson will connect with the subsequent lesson.

**Observation.** The observation tool selected for this paper is the *Marzano Protocols, Domain 1, Classroom Strategies and Behaviours*, which is used by selected school districts throughout the State of Florida. Florida's teacher evaluation instrument, a formative and summative observation tool, takes the focus from compliance to teacher long-term improvement, and combines characteristics of performance indicators based on clear measurable goals and research-based strategies.

**Post-observation conference.** If an observation was the actual teacher evaluation, the following strengths and weaknesses would have been discussed at the post-observation conference.

**Strengths of the lesson.** The lesson was well planned and organised with definite measurable objectives set. All activities described in the lesson supported the objectives. The teacher demonstrated the knowledge of subject matter. Group activities were engaging and provided ample teacher-guided practice and independent student activities to master the content. The teacher was knowledgeable and well-prepared, both during the pre-observation conference and observation period.

**Weaknesses of the lesson.** Instructional materials were not developmentally appropriate for all students. Elements of differentiated instruction for English language learner (ELL) students and students with learning disabilities were not evident. Classroom atmosphere was not conducive to learning at all times, due to occasional disruptions from students and

teacher's lack of knowledge of classroom management strategies to address the misbehaviour. Lack of student engagement could also be attributed to insufficient use of technology in the classroom.

**Recommendations.** The following recommendations, to name a few, would be offered to a teacher:

- differentiate instruction for ELL students and students with disabilities
- use effective classroom management skills to establish and maintain classroom rules and procedures
- incorporate technology into the lesson, including the use of computers, video cameras, iPods, social media networks and LCD projectors.

## Comprehensive professional growth plan

In an effort to foster teacher professional development and commitment to lifelong learning, professional growth plans should be tailored to meet specific needs of a teacher, based on a specific focused feedback.

**Adult learning strategies.** To accomplish the key purpose of the professional growth plan, which is a teacher continued professional growth, the suggested actions, activities, and strategies must be rooted into a comprehensive adult learning theoretical framework and research-based methodology (Chinnasamy, 2013). Andragogy is the art and science of adult learning. The word andragogy is derived from the Greek term 'man-leading', whereas, pedagogy means child-leading.

**Metacognition, critical thinking, and resource management.** Metacognition is a learner's

conscious effort to plan, monitor, and adjust his or her own learning process (Conti & McNeil, 2012). To activate a teacher's metacognition, a teacher should be given a choice to plan, monitor, and adjust their professional development opportunities to facilitate individual learning style and personal preferences. A teacher should then be offered a wide selection of professional development activities that encourage a variety of learning strategies to be applied as the targeted content. Next, a selection from an array of activities will include: (a) using collaborative learning through book study activities, (b) employing mentor and peer observations, (c) conducting research on best practices, (d) collaborating in online forums, (e) participating in workshops, (f) completing online trainings, and (g) completing reflections on her learning process and the newly acquired knowledge.

Critical thinking strategies and resource management involve higher order reflective activities: testing assumptions, generating alternatives, and reflecting on successes and areas of improvement (Conti & McNeil, 2012). A teacher will analyse the new knowledge and skills and apply them in his or her classroom. Resource management encompasses a learner's ability to locate and capitalise on available resources to maximise adult learning experiences. A teacher could then contemplate the ways to access various resources for learning, including identifying veteran teachers willing to model the targeted skills and behaviours for the teacher, researching on various school district professional development resources, including online in-service courses, trainings, workshops, and book study meetings, as well as school-based instructional support personnel (i.e. reading and literacy coaches, content area department heads, coordinators and grade level team leaders). At this point, a teacher could consider furthering their educational career by taking online classes at a college or university to advance expertise in the targeted content, and manage their work and study time to pursue professional development opportunities outlined in the plan.

Additionally, assigning of a mentor-veteran teacher, who would support the novice teacher throughout the process of the implementation, is a key to a novice teacher's professional development and success (Chinnasamy, 2013).

**Assigning a mentor teacher.** Knowles (1980) emphasises the self-directed approach to adult learning; the andragogy theory is a supportive framework to assist adult learners in achieving their goals. The culture of self-directedness successfully incorporated into the framework of mentoring is demonstrated in a recent study examining andragogical

assumptions in mentoring programs for aspiring firefighters (Chinnasamy, 2013). The findings of the study revealed the utility and effectiveness of the adult learning process, where a mentor facilitates the learning process for the trainee through a system of supports, encouragement, motivation, and timely constructive feedback.

Similarly, Ihejirika (2013) maintains self-directed learning, combined with an effective mentoring component, will encourage learner involvement and the opportunity to mature. Consequently, assigning a mentor would scaffold the learning process for a novice teacher and ensure they will receive an ongoing formative feedback on progress, as well as guidance and support during the professional growth plan implementation.

**Implementation.** In this stage, the teacher will be able to select professional development activities to target deficiencies in the area of differentiated instruction methodology: (a) participate in a collaborative book study on differentiated instruction, (b) conduct an overview of research literature on effective differentiated instruction strategies, or (c) write a reflection about which differentiated instruction strategies could be used in the classroom after participating in a differentiated instruction workshop and online forum offered by the school district. The above-mentioned learner-centered activities will enable teachers to meaningfully engage in self-directed collaborative learning, conduct research on the best practices of the topic of interest, and reflect on teaching practices and the ways to incorporate the new knowledge into classroom instruction. Finally, a teacher will share challenges with their mentor and engage into collaborative discussions on the ways to overcome those challenges and to improve performance.

Additionally, a teacher will be encouraged to select from the following activities to target any classroom management deficiencies: (a) participate in online professional development training on effective classroom management skills; (b) observe a veteran teacher or mentor modeling effective classroom management strategies; (c) conduct independent research on effective classroom management strategies; (d) videotape the implementation of observed strategies in class, and collaborate with a mentor to interpret and reflect on lessons; (e) generate alternatives to remediate observed weaknesses; and (f) maximise instructional practice by capitalising on observed strengths.

Finally, throughout the course of the plan, a teacher can work closely with an instructional technology

coordinator to familiarise themselves with different types of technology. A teacher could attend a workshop on effective use of technology in the classroom, engage in online blogging and discussions to learn innovative ways to incorporate technology, and collaborate with a mentor to ensure the new knowledge is successfully incorporated into the lessons.

**Evaluation.** Over the course of the plan, a mentor and school administrator should be able to observe a teacher applying the new knowledge, skills and attitudes, and assess improvement in student learning as a result of a teacher's improved performance. The suggested professional development activities would incorporate an evaluation component that would measure a teacher's progress toward each of the learning objectives. Informal observations conducted by the mentor and school administrators will constitute a valuable tool in providing a teacher with timely constructive feedback focused on targeted skills.

## Lifelong learning

To foster teacher commitment to lifelong learning, educational leaders should understand what motivates adults to learn. A study examining motivational factors for adult lifelong learning indicated a strong correlation between lifelong learning and individual motivational dynamics: intensions, expectations, and benefits (Pires, 2009). There are multiple professional, personal, and social motivational factors that motivate adults to engage in lifelong learning activities: recognition, achievement, and growth. Adults are eager to learn if the information is relevant to help them cope with real-life problems, and perform more effectively. Internal motivational factors of increasing job satisfaction and improving self-esteem are significantly stronger than external factors (Popp, 2013). The findings of the study examining the impact of different types of motivation on continued learning suggest that adult motivation to learn lifelong can be improved if connected to structural and institutional conditions. If an educational institution conditions are conducive for a more extensive adult participation in learning and training activities, the employees are likely to engage in meaningful learning experiences throughout their lives.

## Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the professional growth plan is that of improving student achievement through enhanced teacher performance, self-efficacy, and capacity. It is important that educational leaders foster the climate of a continuous professional development by motivating teachers to engage in meaningful professional development opportunities to better instructional

practices. It is imperative to remove obstacles and mobilise resources for teachers, in terms of allotted time, available materials, mentors, access to media of recent research, and various incentives to motivate teachers and facilitate their quality professional learning. By empowering teachers to engage in self-induced studies to meet the needs of all students, one fulfills the most humanistic obligations of education, that of an unparalleled commitment to excellence and the ongoing progress of humankind.

*\*The comprehensive set of references that accompanied this article is available from the authors.*

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Ms Lyudmyla Ziemke who is originally from Ukraine, earned a Master Degree in English as a Second Language (ESOL) and World Literature from Poltava Pedagogical University, Ukraine, a second Master Degree in Educational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University, United States. She is currently pursuing a Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership at Nova Southeastern University, and anticipates graduating the end of 2014. Lyudmyla has extensive elementary and secondary teaching experience in and outside the United States, taught English in Ukraine, and taught Russian and Ukrainian in the United States. After moving to the United States in 2007, she gained employment with the Palm Beach County School District, where she is an ESOL Coordinator and Department Head at Palm Beach Lakes High School. Ms Ziemke can be contacted by email at: lz83@nova.edu.*

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