Exploring the Development of Learning to Facilitate in Community of Practice

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Contribution

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Recently, the need for more learning opportunities to improve teacher quality continues to be a pervasive research theme in the teacher education literature. Community of practice (CoP) has been accepted as an effective form of teachers’ professional development (PD) by many scholars and practitioners (Lieberman and Mace, 2009; Wenger, 1998; Armour and Yelling, 2007).

Thoughtful facilitation is one of the feature of effective CoP (Poekert, 2011). Current research examining facilitators has focused on the role of the facilitator in CoP success (Nachielli, 2011; Patton, Parker, and Neutzling, 2012), the actual process of facilitation (Jenlink and Kinnucan-Welsch, 2001; Molle, 2013) and the pedagogy of facilitation that takes place in quality PD opportunities (Patton, Parker and Pratt, 2013; Poekert, 2011). Research, in both general education and physical education, examining facilitators’ roles in PD report that facilitators’ give different descriptions about their role in terms of their common beliefs about teacher learning related to their thinking and self-identified actions (Patton, Parker and Neutzling, 2012). Therefore, in this study, to educate the teacher as a facilitator, four interactive skills/behaviors that are acknowledged in the facilitation and pedagogical literature have been chosen to help the teacher-facilitator to work effectively with teacher-participants. These skills/behaviors are: (a) active listening: It is stated in the literature that asking questions and listening are the primary functions of an effective facilitator (Killion and Simmons, 2004), (b) Understanding group dynamics: In small group conversations informal interactions and spaces can be informative; encourage contributions that are on point (Patton, et al., 2012), (c) guiding interactions: The role of the facilitator is to create and maintain a
supportive climate that promotes conditions necessary for learning to take place (Zachary, 2011) and (d) encouraging participation by all: In order to develop trust and respect in a CoP, the facilitator should let teachers have an equal voice during meetings, with the facilitator’s role decreasing over time (Hunuk, et al., 2013).

**Constructivist pedagogies and teacher learning**

The design of the current study employs a constructivist perspective on teacher learning. Constructivist perspectives focus on learning in relation to the social environment. Learning also involves interaction and collaboration with learning peers, as well as interaction with more knowledgeable individuals in society (Biggs, 1996). Therefore, in this study, the teacher-facilitator engages in a process that reflects Patton, Parker and Pratt’s (2013) pedagogical strategies of learning as doing, trying and sharing; activity, reflection and conversation with an experienced facilitator to discover new knowledge.

Constructivism also suggests that learning is experiential in that people create knowledge through their own experiences and ideas (Kolb, 1984). Basically, Kolb argues that learning is experiential when experiences are being transformed into knowledge. According to Kolb’s model, the most effective learning takes place in four different stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. In this study Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (ELC) is used to describe a physical education teacher’s journey as she learns to extend her professional role to include that of a facilitator in a newly constructed and co-facilitated CoP.

Despite the frequent recognition in both the USA and Europe, that CoP is an effective form of PD, there is dearth of knowledge on how to educate a teacher, or other professional to be a facilitator. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine if engaging in facilitation through the use of expert modeling and the experiential learning cycle is effective in developing a teacher as a PD facilitator.

**Method**

The teacher-facilitator and the context

This longitudinal case study examines a physical education teacher on her professional development journey to become a PD facilitator in a newly constructed and co-facilitated CoP. This CoP consisted of seven physical education teachers, one male and six female, representing the same school district in Ankara, Turkey. Teacher-facilitator was a 41 year old woman who had been working as a physical educator for 20 years at the time of the study. She had been working as a part-time district coordinator of physical education PD for 4 years. As a researcher, my role was to represent the university as a member of the CoP. In this study I shared the CoP facilitation with teacher-facilitator.

Applying Kolb’s ELC Theory to Develop Teacher as a Facilitator

In this study, Kolb’s experiential learning cycle approach was used to describe a physical education teacher’s journey as she learns to extend her professional role to include that of a PD facilitator in a newly constructed and co-facilitated CoP. Different strategies in each stage were specifically applied in a cyclical way to educate the teacher as a facilitator (Petkus, 2000). In this study, the researcher utilized this ELC monthly in a cyclical way to move the teacher-facilitator through the process of becoming a facilitator. The teacher-facilitator went through the ELC several times as the study progressed, best thought of as a spiral of cycles. In this way the experience was informed by learning from the past and from the experience of reflection, conceptualization and planning both on her own and in conjunction with the researcher.

Data Sources

Multiple sources of data collection were employed such as journal entries, audio-recorded collective reflections, field notes, transcribed audio of meetings, interview and e-mail communications.

Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview with teacher-facilitator, reflective journals and field notes, audio-taped transcriptions of CoP and audio-recorded collective reflections and e-mail communications between the teacher-facilitator and the researcher were analysed using the constant comparison approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2012).

Trustworthiness of the data was established and maintained through the triangulation of data triangulation and researcher’s journal in addition to member checks (Creswell, 2008).

**Expected Outcomes**

As noted in the methodology, before this CoP started, the teacher-facilitator had been working as the district coordinator of physical educator PD. Following her participation in this CoP, her facilitation skills/behaviors improved and her professional role changed and was extended through engagement in a co-facilitated CoP using ELC as a learning framework.

In this study, developing a teacher as a facilitator by using/modeling Kolb’s ELC, four facilitation skills/behaviors of the teacher were the focus: (a) active listening, (b) understanding group dynamics, (c) guiding interactions, and (d) encouraging participation by all.

Different constructivist pedagogical strategies were used in each stage of Kolb’s ELC by the researcher to model facilitation for the teacher-facilitator. Those constructivist pedagogical strategies, which help to improve teacher’s skills/behaviors as a
facilitator, utilized effectively by researcher in each stage of Kolb’s ELC will be shared, with the inclusion of excerpts from interview transcripts and journal entries to enrich the discussion. The results of this study contribute to the existing literature on facilitation in two ways: Firstly, properly applying constructivist pedagogical strategies in monthly cycles was a useful way to improve the teacher-facilitator’s skills/behaviors in facilitating a CoP. Secondly, changing a teacher’s professional role to include that of facilitator in a co-facilitated learning environment allowed sharing responsibilities and roles.

References


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