

Personally-driven professional development for teachers in the state run system in the City of Buenos Aires: Scenarios

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Abstract

In this reflective article, the author intends to consider issues that affect professional performance from an ELT Management perspective. The concept of possible future professional development scenarios within the professional development scheme applied in primary schools in the city of Buenos Aires will be discussed to consider the feasibility of the application of innovative professional development. If the future is something that we can influence, then scenario building may be seen as a tool to support professional choices in everyday practice.

Keywords: Buenos Aires; professional development; scenarios; complex social systems; state schools.

Resumen

El presente artículo de reflexión procura abordar, desde la perspectiva de la gestión de Lenguas Extranjeras, temas que afectan el desempeño profesional. Se discute el concepto de la construcción de posibles escenarios futuros de desarrollo profesional en el marco del esquema aplicado en escuelas primarias en la ciudad de Buenos Aires para evaluar la factibilidad de implementación de un desarrollo profesional innovador. La construcción de este tipo de escenarios pueda aportar solidez en las decisiones profesionales diarias si se considera al futuro como un acto de creación.

Palabras clave: Buenos Aires; desarrollo profesional; escenarios; sistemas sociales complejos; escuelas estatales.

By studying the complex social system, social scientists influence the functioning of the social system. Science itself is adaptive and responsive to the (changing) circumstances mankind has found and will find itself in. Human beings use findings in science. As a result new patterns emerge. These may lead to new research issues. Science itself is an evolutionary process within the complex social system.

(About social complexity, University of Groeningen)

WE LIVE IN a world that is constantly changing. We, as educators, working in state or private sectors at different levels, constitute part of the team of actors that shape the reality we live in, as well as our imminent future. Under such a reading of the world around us, we may support a vision of education as a complex social system that involves exchanging information and a continual adaptation to new information and knowledge. Rules, norms, conventions, ethics and the legal system create a framework in which human beings can act (Hajek, 1964).

In this reflective article, I intend to consider issues that affect our professional performance, seeking to shed some light on the intricate design of the interaction between forces in our educational settings. Nowadays, valuable research is being shared on the implementation of different projects in the state run sector worldwide (Akpan & Ntukidem, 2008; Banegas, 2013; Diaz Maggioli, 2012; Karavas, 2014; Stanley, 2015). Large scale language policies become scenarios where there can be tension and compromise among the different actors, and addressing the needs of said actors can produce renderings of ideas that are sometimes quite different on the surface from the intentions that incited them. The changes experienced by a proposal are undoubtedly due to forces that have had an impact on the project at a specific moment in its development.

Yet often when reference is made to the connection between theory and practice, the response is generally linear. It seeks one to one correspondence between concepts and products. It reads just as if we could explain the nature of the connection by complaining about lack of communication between theory and practice. Researchers sometimes focus on matters that are too abstract, while practitioners aim for more practical insights. A happy medium, which would serve as a bridging point between researchers' and practitioners' views, is difficult to establish, but the search for one supports attempts towards the transformation of the reality of everyday practice. In this reflective article, from an ELT management perspective, I will examine the idea of different possible future professional development scenarios within the professional development scheme used for EFL primary school teachers in the city of Buenos Aires, in order to consider the feasibility of the application of innovative professional development as in Diaz Maggioli's characterization (2012).

To this end, I will briefly develop the concepts of social complexity, introduce a characterization of deductive scenario planning, and relate these two concepts within the frame of innovative professional development.

Conceptual Background

Professional development is a consistent feature in many fields of activity. In education, it has evolved and subdivided through time (Richards & Farrell, 2005). First known as training, it then broke down into pre-service and in-service training, and later on into professional development (PD), thus widening the field. More recently, an expansion of PD introduced Personal Learning Networks (PLN) onto the scene, where Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and self-access online courses are just some of its newest trends. But what are we talking about when we mention professional development in our present reality? What defining traits do we need to characterize professional development?

In order to keep the discussion within a certain frame, I propose to organize the present thinking exercise along Diaz Maggioli's proposed terminology (Díaz Maggioli, 2012, p. 139), and to consider this within the larger framework of professional development in Richards and Farrell's (2005) foundational work.

From this proposed general framework, we can differentiate professional development from training in the nature of its scope. While the former holds a more holistic view of the profession, the latter focuses on the immediate, institutionally created needs and demands of the professional (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p.3). Another important aspect of the distinction is the timespan during which teacher learning occurs. Traditional views have held teaching certificate achievement time as the moment of culmination, though a contradiction can later be perceived as professional development often views teachers as ineffective and focuses on solving these flaws (Diaz Maggioli, 2012, p 138). On the other hand, if teacher learning is perceived from a socioconstructivist point of view, where teachers will undergo a learning process throughout their lives in their specific communities of practice so as to grow personally and professionally, then "collaborative decision making and collective construction of learning opportunities" should be the norm. (Diaz Maggioli, 2012). The difference can be observed in Table 1 below.

<u>Traditional PD</u>	<u>Visionary PD</u>
• Top-down decision making	• Collaborative decision making
• A "fix it" approach	• A growth-driven approach
• Lack of ownership by teachers	• Collaborative construction
• Prescriptive	• Inquiry-based
• One-size-fits-all	• Differentiated offerings

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| • Fixed and untimely delivery methods | • Varied and timely delivery methods |
| • Decontextualized | • Based on the evolution of the community |
| • Little or no follow up | • Proactive assessment |
| • Little or no evaluation | |

Table 1. Characteristics of professional development today (Diaz Maggioli, 2012)

Another element to consider in this general frame is what we consider to be a PD activity. The strongest association is made with workshops, seminars or sessions. It is not specifically the activity that marks whether it is a traditional or innovative attempt, but rather the purpose behind it. A variety of alternatives are available for PD, but when centralized decision making and prescriptiveness prevail, the array of choices diminishes to the ones mentioned above. Reading circles, inquiry groups, mentoring, team teaching, construction of critical incidents, and collaborative action research are options that have been explored already and that embody professional growth experiences within a specific community, but these options will only find their place if new pathways in PD are welcomed.

A socioconstructivist vision of education as portrayed in the proposal of Visionary Professional Development presents us with a complex model. To be more specific, if education is considered as a system constituted by a number of actors with different interests and needs, we could very well say that it fits the definition of a complex social system as defined in the field of sociology.

Moreover, quoting from specialists on complexity and uncertainty from the University of Groningen (2014), we can note that:

Interaction within complex social systems involves exchanging information and a continual adaptation to new information and knowledge. Rules, norms, conventions, ethics and the legal system create a framework in which human beings can act. This model has emerged from the interaction between human beings, and continues to evolve. For example, the government is an institution that results from this interaction. Complex social systems show evolutionary dynamics. They are constantly in a flux, without having objectives of their own and without any knowable endpoint or equilibrium.

The last element to introduce for the exercise proposed is that of scenarios. It is not a common term in teaching, but it is growing in educational planning as we can see in

the *Metas Educativas 2021* [2021 Educational Goals] by UNESCO and OEI, as well as in management and global policies worldwide. Although the term originally referred to a storyline, when the concept of scenario planning was coined, it came to represent “one of a family of foresight processes which capture the dynamic of change by placing today's reality within the context of tomorrow's possibilities.” (Day, 2001)¹.

To develop the concept further, the two definitions of scenario planning below provide us with more characteristics.

1. Process of visualizing (1) which future conditions or events are probable, (2) what their consequences or effects would be like, and (3) how to respond to, or benefit from, them (Businessdictionary.com, 2013)
2. Anchored in creativity and intuition, scenario planning is a strategy tool used to discover potential future environments in order to understand how today's strategic decisions will have an impact on an organization in times to come. The key elements in scenario planning are creative thinking, imagination, an informal methodology and the use of qualitative, subjective information. (University of Technology Sydney, 2009).

Davis & Mackintosh (2013)

There are two main types of scenarios, inductive and deductive. Considering the necessary degree of discussion and variables to build each of the types, I settled for deductive scenarios for the purposes of the present article. Deductive scenarios revolve around few predetermined factors and uncertainties, and apply a logical, non-random structure to the scenario framework. The elements I considered to develop the possible scenarios comply with the following categorization as set in Mercer (1995), which is represented in the graph I developed following Davis & Mackintosh (2013).

- *Drivers of change*: factors which move an organization away from its usual path. They are thought to have major impact on the future.
- *Predetermined factors*: predictable issues that will exist in the short term. *Basic trends* belong to this section and set the context within which an organization operates.
- *Key uncertainties*: factors that will have major impact on organizations but whose result is not known.
- *Rules of the game*: representation of the system within which scenarios will be developed. They assure the plausibility and consistency of

scenarios.

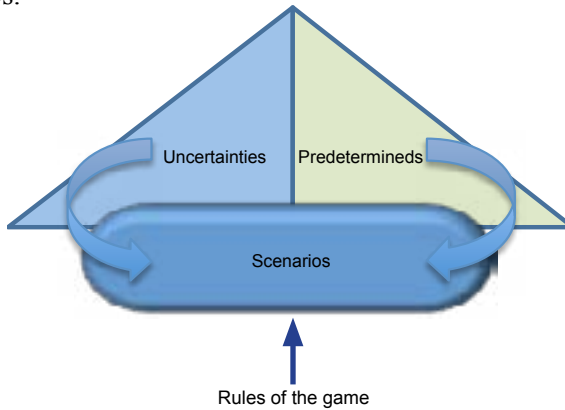


Figure 1. Main forces in a deductive scenario.

Discussion

The educational management system in the city of Buenos Aires does not work in isolation from the rest of the city administration. Thus, professional development for teachers working in state-run primary schools in the city follows a centralized scheme. High-ranking officials within the supervising structure meet with appointed trainers and set the agenda for the year. This would place the present state of things within the traditional practice of Professional Development. If, on the other hand, we wanted to explore Innovative Professional Development, we would need to develop scenarios. In the next few pages, I will characterize a set of three basic deductive scenarios for the present situation by fleshing out the concepts of basic trends and key uncertainties from Figure 1 into those presented in Figure 2. The purpose of drawing them together is to think about which ones are desirable, and to evaluate which measures are necessary to build towards the most desirable scenario.

- *Drivers of change*: Teachers' varying degree of satisfaction with current PD offer. Teachers' experiences in other fields of knowledge. Self access professional development opportunities.
- *Basic trends*: resistance to training offer, lack of real participation, tendencies towards a discourse of dissatisfaction, competitiveness.
- *Key uncertainties*: Teachers' personal search for PD opportunities. Teachers' professional quests.
- *Rules of the game*: Teachers working in different districts and different schools and many times at different levels of education, a team of supervisors in charge of the activity in the districts, a supervisor/

coordinator and an officer of Foreign Language Policy depending upon the the city or the Ministry of Education.

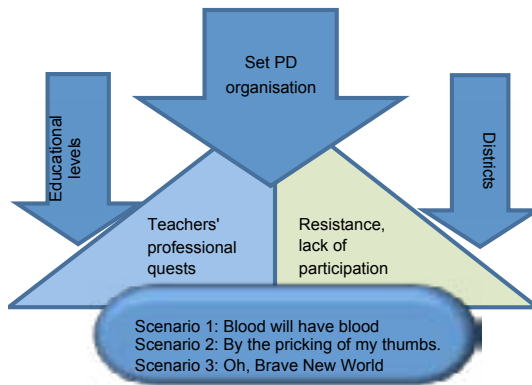


Figure 2: Characterization of items for proposed PD scenarios in the city of Buenos Aires.

Scenario 1: Blood will have blood

Basic trends maintain force according to a centralized power scheme. Thus, a schedule of training sessions is produced for all teachers in their respective districts. Attendance and participation vary depending on the level of urgency and cohesion applied by officials and school principals. Training continues to represent the needs as perceived by ministry officials. Teachers view the system as a *star-system*. Hence, some teachers, schools and /or districts struggle to shine while others may not feel supported, or select an easy way out by not creating trouble or projects. Some interesting offers appear every now and then, like video conferencing, exchanges between schools under programs supported by well recognized international organizations, but the transmission model prevails and certain needs fail to be addressed. Discontent continues due to historical values, and performance weaknesses are considered either as a personal failure on the part of teachers or students, or created by a context that exceeds the powers of the teacher.

Applicable PD options for the scenario: workshops, seminars, show and tell sessions, expert visits.

Scenario 2: By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes

Centralized offers continue to be the norm, but in certain areas, teachers create study groups or interventions that are either allowed and supported by the district or at least not considered inappropriate. Different visions among officials enrich internal discussions and expand the training agenda. As a result, some isolated interesting or effective approaches to local needs are developed. For example, some specific issues are

addressed through the creation of interdisciplinary task groups. Some teachers become natural mentors for a period of time with the risk that, without the necessary support, they will feel defeated or burdened. Some achievements find their way to the general public through district meetings or union publications. There is no overall sense of achievement but sense of belonging in certain communities grows strong.

Applicable PD options: critical incidents, team teaching, and mentoring gain momentum over workshops and seminars.

Scenario 3: Oh, Brave New World

Teachers' quest strengthens. Teachers find ways to associate with peers at the local level and new PD activity begins at school level through self-sought grouping. Professional performance thrives as they are able to find answers to their specific concerns on a local scale, particularly those related to wider educational challenges or paradigm changes. Groups gather to find ways to respond to students' attitudes and needs from a socio-cultural perspective, to develop a sense of community and belonging so that action research can be proposed. Teachers feel empowered and interdisciplinary teams get together to improve the situation at community level. Supervision find a new approach to their roles, and act as liaison officers and provide support. Recognition in quantifiable terms is given to the professionals who engage in such activities.

Applicable PD options: mentoring, reading circles, inquiry groups, team teaching, construction of critical incidents, collaborative action research.

Evaluation

The objective behind the building of the deductive scenarios presented above has been to start considering the future beyond the immediate future. If we agree that the future should not be a repetition of the past, but something that we should actively influence, as shown in the efforts of the UNESCO and the OEI, then working on the scenarios described above and potentially creating a few more, like one considering sustainability at its axe, can support our choices in everyday practice.

Mentoring, for example, is a practice that has grown over the past 10 years in different parts of the world and under different understandings of the meaning of the term. Nevertheless, its implementation was achieved for certain periods of time in the state sector in Uruguay (Diaz Maggioli, 2012), and in the private sector in the city of Buenos Aires, Gonzalez (2009, pp23-24) and both authors provide a picture of its challenges and limitations.

The number of teachers working at primary school level in the city of Buenos Aires has multiplied exponentially in the past seven years due to the implementation of English as a mandatory subject from first form. The multiplicity of the actors at

play calls for a wider vision of professional development to cater for a more satisfying future for all actors involved. In turn, this achievement will define the profile of teacher education standards, as is currently happening in different parts of Latin America, where curriculum design is being analyzed and the pedagogical aspect of teacher training is receiving further boost to meet the needs of our 21st century communities, students and families.

In the case of PD, the fact that graduates belong to different majors in English, mainly teacher training and translation studies, means that it may be time we start considering these not as higher and lower levels of aptitude, but as different approaches to the understanding of English as a subject of study. Different professionals will not thrive in settings where they feel disqualified and are not invited to share their two cents. On the contrary, disqualification of degrees accepted in statutory documents may lead towards more invisibility of possessed knowledge, and a lack of interest in taking part in inquiry groups.

PD opportunities that allow expansion into the specificities of the path not taken during undergraduate studies may pave the way towards better prepared professionals with a wider vision achieved through in-service PD.

Another possible implication relates to teacher training curricula. An important percentage of trainees do not work at schools after graduating. A hypothesis yet to be corroborated within academia links foreign languages and arts applicants motifs to pursue a career in an area that identifies more with the object of study than with the pedagogical implications of the object. Research is necessary to explore this hypothesis; still, it is worth considering it as one of the many potential factors at play in the complex social system of tertiary education in the city of Buenos Aires, and in our country in general so as to generate the necessary spaces or intersections between courses of studies, so that they may create a sounder, more personal search for lifelong paths of professional development that are both community-oriented and directly enriching.

The diversity of needs and realities calls for professionals who can identify themselves within such communities and have the tools to make a meaningful intervention that will be adequately supported.

Note

1. This quote is found at http://wikieducator.org/Introduction_to_scenario_planning/Definitions#cite_ref-1

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