



**'HOW TO CHANGE THINGS WHEN CHANGE IS HARD':  
THE TRIAL OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR  
LIBYAN UNIVERSITY TEACHERS**

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**Abstract:**

In higher education contexts, while much research is conducted towards highlighting the importance of professional development, studies on how to train teachers to implement new methods effectively are few and far between. Such an imbalance needs to be addressed since how to train teachers might have a direct impact on how teachers teach. This paper investigates the implementation of training model that highlights the importance of creating collaborative, college based settings to support teachers. The findings of the study show that the suggested model provides a college based setting that would support teachers' self-reflection and improvement in the teaching practice.

**Keywords:** educational context, teachers' training, professional development

**1. Introduction**

Over the years, many studies identified the problems in higher education in the Arab world. Most of the findings of these studies indicate that graduates lacked mostly the communication skills, English language proficiencies, problem solving skills, and thinking skills (Singh & Singh, 2008). A traditional way of teaching and learning still dominates the teaching practice for many decades in the public universities including the Libyan universities. This traditional teaching method in form of teacher-centered

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learning approach is seen as the most possible reason why knowledge, skills and values fail to be developed satisfactorily in the students (Othman et al 2013). University of Zawia management, the context of this study, had sensed this situation and some steps have been taken to initiate significant changes in the teaching methods that the teachers use. In-service professional development programs have been developed and delivered. These forms mostly require teachers to play new classroom roles. It has become clear however, that many teachers lack the knowledge and skills which are required to implement the new teaching practices and improve the quality of their teaching (Suwaed and Rohouma 2015). What is more, even when teachers implement the new techniques, how the techniques are implemented in classrooms does not always reflect the professional development program's intentions.

Thus, the traditional models of professional development available to teachers are inadequate for supporting the teachers in their implementation of the new instructional methods. These traditional models expose teachers to new methods through a limited number of days of in service training (Fuhrman 1993). Then, the teachers are left to their own to apply what they did learn. Unsurprisingly, the result is that teachers' teaching practices remain unchanged.

## **2. Module Development for Training of teachers in PBL**

The need to use different approaches of professional development inspired us to work together with Western Washington University to develop a model that makes the in service training course more effective. 'in brief, effective professional development setting for teachers have been found to be sustained, ongoing, and site based and allow teachers to talk with peers about change and improvement in their practice'. These settings inspire collaboration and engage teachers as both learners and as teachers.

This study is addressing the importance of the 'community of practice' to achieve the intended training outcomes with truly PBL experiences. Wenger (1998) suggests providing teachers with opportunities to discuss the challenges that they face and to engage in community of practice. Seferoglu (2010:549) adds that 'teachers need opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts'. The module was then used in a training workshop delivered by the second author. The main objective of this study is to identify the effectiveness of the module and to propose the best model for in-service training in the Libyan context.

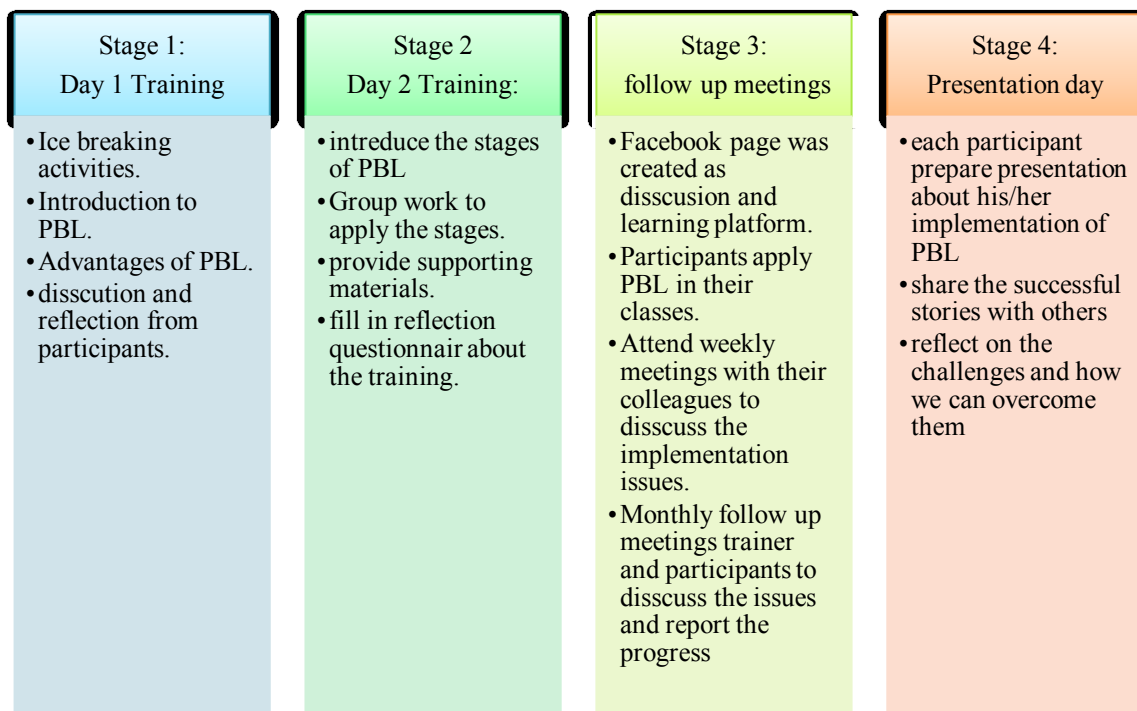
## 2.1. Module Content

One critical way to improve the quality of graduates is to improve the quality of teaching and learning through the use of PBL which requires applying the main principles of a constructivist perspective of learning and student-centered learning approaches (Lehman, George, Buchanan & Rush, 2006). Although many studies were conducted on the implementation of PBL, studies conducted on the training of teachers to implement this method are very rare, (Murray and Savin-Baden, 2000).

Some important aspects were taken into consideration before the module was developed including the important content related to PBL, learning context, prior knowledge and skills and proper activities that enable the participants to gain first-hand knowledge and experience in PBL. Among the main topics included into the module are, introduction to project based learning, the stages of PBL.

Among the outcomes intended to be achieved from this training session are the ability of the participants to;

- 1) implement the PBL,
- 2) identify the advantages and challenges of implementing PBL Learning,
- 3) simulate learning activities using project-based Learning and
- 4) use varieties of assessment in project-based Learning.



**Figure 1:** PBL Training stages

As shown in figure 1, the training session is scheduled for two days. In the first day, participants will explore three topics; introduction to Project based learning, the advantages of PBL and educational process in PBL. Early in the first session, participants will have to go through ice breaking activities enable them to get to know the facilitator, other participants and get use to the PBL training approach up to the formation of a dynamic PBL learning group. Each participant will also be asked to reflect on their past teaching and learning experience. At this point, the facilitator will be able to get overview on the background of the participants including their experience in teaching.

In day two, participants learn about the stages of PBL. The participants then, work in the group to apply the stages. At this level, the teachers will be provided with a number of exercises and handouts.

After the two days of training, stage 3 starts in which the participants will have to apply what they have learned in their classes. The participants start to attend meetings with their colleagues to support each other and to report the result of their implementation and to prepare for the presentation at stage 4. In addition to these small group meetings in their colleges, all the participants will meet monthly with the facilitator. The purpose of these follow up meetings is to engage teachers in collaborative ongoing professional development settings at colleges. These groups are intended to create collegial community in which teachers observe each other's classrooms and share ideas, successes and challenges. These activities are intended to further help teachers become more reflective about their teaching practice and provide them with support to modify their practice.

At stage 4, the participants will have to present how they implemented the content of the course. The presentation can be in many forms. It could be a parallel presentation or a single presentation or a forum discussion.

Finally, there will also be an overall reflection on the course at the end of the session. The participants will have to complete overall reflection of their learning in the course and to answer a questionnaire set. The reflection and questionnaire set would be used by the researchers to identify the effectiveness of the overall learning as well as the module.

### **3. Study Design**

#### **3.1 Methods**

A mixture of data collection tools were used in this study. The data sources included observations of meetings, students work and focus groups with the teachers. The

teachers met as one group once a month for two hours. The small groups met regularly in their colleges for 30m to check and update their knowledge. All the groups mentioned that they missed some meetings due to scheduling problems. Groups on average had approximately 5 members, but ranged from 2-6 members.

The research questions of this study are:

1. How teachers' attitudes were influenced by their participation in these professional development settings?
2. How are teachers' instructional practices and student learning influenced by teachers' participations in these professional development settings?

### **3.2 Background of the Study**

This study is addressing the importance of the 'community of practice' to achieve the intended training outcomes with truly PBL experiences. The module was then used in a training workshop conducted by the second author. The workshop was organized by the International Cooperation Office in Alzawia University. The first workshop was conducted on November 2015. Actual number of participants who attended this workshop is 20 participants.

### **3.3 Participants**

The participants of this study are 9 college teachers. 3 teachers teach in the Engineering college, 4 in the Medical Technology college and 2 in the Science college. Their teaching experience range from 2-18 years of teaching.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

### **4.1 How teachers' attitudes were influenced by their participation in these professional development settings?**

Most of teachers considered their participation in their group to have had a strong influence on their attitudes toward teaching. The importance of trust and positive support in the group was mentioned by almost all of the members as an important context for giving feedback. Most of the discussion was about looking at student work together or engaging in peer observations, sharing ideas about classroom practice and focus on techniques for improving students' skills.

*T1: I was not sure about what I am doing. Then in the meeting, it was a relief when I discovered that the other teachers are struggling with group formation not just me.*

From my observation of their discussions, the teachers showed empathy and support to each other. The teachers who passed the stage of group formation gave ideas and advices to the teachers who were still struggling.

In the planning and implementation phases of PBL, most of the teachers in this study collaborated with other teachers. In addition to facilitating their task, collaboration enabled them to integrate different subjects in one project. T6 and T7 elaborated.

T7: *'We wanted to do something where the students would work on different subjects. I would recommend collaborating with another teacher if you wanted to start to do a PBL'.*

Thus, collaborating with other teachers enhanced the planning of the projects and the integration of several subject matters, and it facilitated the whole task of PBL. T6 use of PBL was in collaboration with other teachers. She said, *"You have to work very closely with your colleagues, and that is what we want our students to learn."*

#### **4.2 How are teachers' instructional practices and student learning influenced by teachers' participations in these follow up meetings?**

5 from the teachers mentioned improving their classroom assessment strategies.

T: *attending the meeting made me think about my way of assessing and what I need them to improve'*

6 teachers reported that the participation in meetings helped them improve their classroom management skills. They learned and refined instructional strategies to take back to the classroom.

T5: *'I've learned how to motivate my students and that improved their level'. It gave them new teaching ideas, helped them to be more self-reflective, also now had students evaluate each other's work'.*

Moreover, T5 emphasized the importance of showcasing her students' work to other teachers to show them models that they can follow. For that purpose, she shared the artifacts with her colleagues and students from other grades at Alzawia Medical Technology College.

#### **4.3 What are the factors that appeared to hinder the effectiveness of the groups?**

The problems mostly mentioned by teachers included difficulties with scheduling and attendance, lack of support from other faculty members, lack of consistent attendance of meeting due to conflicting professional and personal responsibilities. Other problems mentioned by a few teachers included lack of commitment on the part of members or they did not feel comfortable to share their ideas or students' work with others.

Ravitz (2003) posited that, even when teachers show enthusiasm about the constructivist teaching approach after participating in professional development workshops, they might not find it easy to implement it in their classrooms. Similarly, Vratulis, Clarke, Hoban, and Erickson (2011) stated that teachers would not always implement the new instructional models they get exposed to in their training because of challenges they face during the implementation. However, it is worth mentioning that the teachers in this study have exposed to professional development intensive course for two days in PBL and yet did not show any concern over the challenges in implementing it. This brings back the importance of the belief system of the teachers in the learning process. Showing the teachers examples of successful implementation in other colleges and showing them how to deal with the difficulties that they might face, believing in the importance of PBL as a student-centered constructivist model seems to enable the teachers to work around the challenges of its implementation. Consequently, professional development courses can build on this belief system to enhance its implementation. Also, they knew they would have follow up meetings and support that way.

The follow up meetings with the teachers helped them to understand how to shift to more student-centered approaches and how to adopt new instructional activities to evaluate their students' projects. Rogers et al (2010:905) mentioned that the teachers' have different understanding of their roles and teaching and learning. They reported that the teachers' past experience affects the degree to of their implementation of PBL. Therefore, they need guidance and support in their implementation of PBL. Moreover, they need resources to overcome the challenges that they might face.

## **5. Conclusion**

In these University of Zawia in-service courses, the teachers have been charged to use methods of teaching that they themselves did not experience in school and most of them may not have learned them in their teacher education programs. However, the findings of this study suggest a model of professional development that encourages teachers to shift from the traditional methods of teaching to more students centered approaches.

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