

Teaching Practice Communities in Higher Education: Roles and Strategies

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In view of the problem of lacking peer coaching among college teachers, taking teachers in local universities in Hangzhou as the research subject, the paper analyzes the relationship between peer coaching and teachers' professional development. The paper then proposes to establish teaching practice communities in higher education, which is of great significance to improve the teaching quality and promote the professional development of university teachers. Strategies for constructing teaching practice communities are also discussed.

Keywords: teachers' professional development, peer coaching, teaching practice communities, constructing strategies

The Connotation of University Teachers' Professional Development

The research on teachers' professional development began in the 1960s. Its ultimate goal is to improve teachers' scientific research and teaching quality, so they can define their professional ideals and develop themselves professionally. Scholars at home and abroad have given different definitions of teachers' professional development from different perspectives. Perry defined teachers' professional development as

Teachers' personal growth in their professional lives, including enhanced confidence, improved skills, a continuous update, a broadening and deepening of their knowledge of the disciplines they teach, and a strengthening of their classroom practices. (Xu, 2020, p. 61)

Teachers' professional development is also viewed by some scholars as a continuous process of learning, practicing, and improving. In recent years, many new features of higher education (such as MOOC, flipped classrooms, online and offline hybrid teaching, etc.) have challenged the traditional role of university teachers. Therefore, university teachers must be able to deal with new phenomena and problems that require sustainable professional development.

The Significance of Peer Coaching in Teachers' Professional Development

In addition to self-learning and exploration, peer coaching is also a method of professional development. By sharing their professional knowledge and providing feedback and support, teachers help other teachers improve their skills or learn new skills. However, this kind of mutual assistance is not paid much attention in higher education. In a study by Gu Ying (2018) on how college teachers deal with their teaching problems, self-reflection

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(39%) is higher than peer communication (18%) or student feedback (27%). Teachers' self-solving (66%) was more common than "discussing with peers" (37%) or "consulting with veteran teachers" (15%). When asked about the implementation of teaching research activities at colleges, some teachers stated that the majority of those activities are formal and superficial. Ultimately, teaching is primarily based on preparation of lessons on their own (Zhang, 2017). Compared to other forms of teachers' professional development, peer coaching plays a relatively minor role in higher education.

Research on Peer Coaching Among University Teachers

Research Questions and Participants

In order to assess the level of peer coaching among university teachers, both questionnaires and interviews were collected from five local universities in Hangzhou. The survey focuses on the following questions. What teaching-related topics do you usually discuss with other teachers? How often? In what way? (Online or offline, on campus or off campus, formally or informally?) What is the influence of peer coaching on your professional development? At what stage of your teaching life do you think you are most motivated to participate in peer assistance activities? What problems do you think exist in mutual aid and cooperation among university teachers? And why?

A total of 90 questionnaires were distributed, 80 were recovered and 70 were valid. The effective rate was about 87.5%. Based on a wide range of questionnaires, 10 interviewees with different titles and teaching experiences ranging from 3-20 years were interviewed.

Data Collection and Analysis

There are two types of peer communication contents: task-oriented and problem-oriented. Task-orientation refers to communication and cooperation with peers which is driven by tasks, projects, or unified arrangements. Problem orientation refers to communication and cooperation with peers based on personal interests.

Teachers, who are passionate about teaching, have common puzzles in teaching, or wish to improve their teaching often communicate and share their ideas with each other. They tend to exchange more "knowledge points" with colleagues of the same major, while discussing more with colleagues of different majors about general teaching problems, such as how to treat all students equally etc.

Teachers' peer coaching can take place on various occasions, by attending teaching research activities or national academic conferences, observing others' classroom teaching, guiding trainee students, interacting with enterprise personnel, applying for major teaching projects across departments and disciplines, etc.

The formal and superficial teaching and research activities implemented at universities are generally viewed negatively by teachers, while those more in-depth activities are viewed positively. "It depends on how group leaders organize them. Some groups perform well and discuss some teaching issues in depth. Some groups just sit together for more than ten or twenty minutes and then go back to their own classrooms" (Teacher A). "By observing other teachers' classes, I can easily notice some problems with their teaching methods. These problems cannot be felt in my own class" (Teacher B). Teacher C mentioned that the activities he usually participates in to promote professional development are visiting other universities, studying abroad, as well as taking further academic education. His university provides training for new teachers, but little training for elderly teachers. At the same time, he mentioned the mutual assistance of teachers in their daily work. There are many informal exchanges between teachers, most of which are problems encountered in a project or teaching. "We will discuss

them together. However, there are few formal organized academic salons and forums. They have been held before, but haven't lasted long" (Teacher C). Having taught at another university before, Teacher D mentioned that her previous university organized teachers to prepare lessons collectively, but there is no such form in her current university, which could be influenced by the discipline's characteristics. They seldom communicate with teachers from other universities, unless they are working on the same project, teaching the same subject, or they are basically WeChat friends.

The interview also collected information on how teachers hope to enhance their professional development. For example, Teacher C wanted to be guided by experts and scholars in scientific research, whereas Teacher D preferred to join an academic team to improve peer communication and professional learning.

Major Findings

It has been found that teachers can maximize their professional development by communicating and interacting with each other, so that they may acquire knowledge, ideas, and practices that they can internalize and improve. It is also found that there exist numerous problems in university teachers' professional development, including a lack of clear planning, a single teaching method, a need for improvement in professional knowledge, a lack of scientific research, and a lack of social services. Many university teachers lack awareness of peer assistance, and there is no evaluation system, incentive system, guarantee system, and no corresponding campus culture or organization to support peer assistance.

Roles of Teaching Practice Communities in Promoting Peer Coaching

Enlightenment From Community of Practice

Community of practice was first proposed by anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.

It aims to emphasize the importance of activities in legitimizing individual practice and the community, and pay attention to the key role of communication in learners' participation in the community of practice. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35)

In 1988, Wenger systematically expounded it in *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. She believed that community of practice refers to

A group of people who share common interests and enthusiasm for a certain matter. They trust each other, and exchange, develop, and form knowledge around specific issues. (Wenger, 1998, p. 90)

The following elements are important here: specific communication contents, such as issues of mutual interest, topics, or tasks; specific communication methods, such as joint participation, information sharing, and mutual assistance.

Types and Effects of Teaching Practice Communities in Higher Education

There are three types of teaching practice communities in higher education according to their formality. Formally recognized organizations include teaching and research offices, teachers' development centers, etc. The second type is well-designed project-based programs formed through cultivation. The third type is mobile network platforms formed spontaneously and based on personal interests and relationships. In an American survey, teachers who participated in various communities of practice generally improved their teaching awareness, attitude, teaching methods, and evaluation methods (Tsai, 2017).

Strategies for Constructing Teaching Practice Communities

Changing Teachers' Mentality and Behavior of Teaching

Teacher E maintained the lowest level of peer communication. He attributed his lack of communication to his heavy work: "I want to develop teaching when I have time. There are so many things that I have to deal with, so the time is far from enough to allow me to discuss teaching issues in depth". A teacher's mentality and behavior of teaching have to be changed, because cooperative learning is essential to improve the efficiency of their teaching practice. Teachers' positive attitudes, efforts, and investment in community building are indispensable prerequisites for improving their teaching ability.

Creating an Atmosphere of Cooperative Learning

Community development depends on organizational culture. It is possible to create a culture of ecological community by using the "formal platform" in a university. For example, the teachers' development center can introduce a standardized small meeting room for teachers to prepare lessons and communicate, as well as an "online teacher learning community" to address different development needs. It should also identify and cultivate "leaders" of the teaching practice community. The teaching and research center in a university can encourage and subsidize teachers who are willing to communicate and share certain teaching achievements by creating a variety of teacher learning teams.

Developing Rules and Regulations for Community Activities

By establishing basic organization regulations, members can break their self-defense psychological patterns, build mutual trust, and create an intangible platform for knowledge sharing. The rules and regulations of these community activities are the guarantee for the development of the community. Once, we join the community, the corresponding responsibilities and rights will arise. There are times when teachers do not share knowledge, and it is not because they are reluctant or unable to share, but because they have some concerns about sharing knowledge. In order to stimulate teachers' enthusiasm for knowledge sharing, teachers must be rewarded for the extent and effect of knowledge sharing.

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