

Research on Status and Problems of Learning Community Construction of English Teachers

Hao Jingjing

Qilu Normal University

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Abstract: In recent years, community construction has become a focus of institutions of higher learning to improve the connotation construction. It plays an important role in improving the ability to adapt to market changes, enhancing the school's operation revenue, and upgrading the school's core competitiveness. However, with passage of time, community construction has raised higher requirements of professionalism and development of teachers. These requirements pose huge challenges to English teachers. To build a professional learning community with sharing and cooperation as the core spirit, enhancement of students' learning and teachers' development as the objective and under the prerequisite of free teachers can prospectively provide a new approach to teachers' professional development.

Under the traditional teaching model, teachers' development is mainly realized through one-off training. However, such training effects are far from being satisfactory. So far, professional requirements of teachers have been dramatically changed from knowledge development to skill development, orientation towards practice to orientation towards reflection. Currently, teachers' professional development attaches greater importance to an ecological orientation. The theory of ecological orientation of teachers' development holds the idea that teachers' professional development relies not only on teachers' self-learning and reflection on teaching practices. More importantly, a professional development culture and model featuring mutual cooperation in the teachers' community should be built. The formation of a teachers' community with sustainable and interactive professional development is an essential way to achieve joint cooperation among teachers, which has also aroused wide concern from the educational circles.

1. Theoretical Basis of English Teachers' Learning Community

Community has three connotations. First, a community can refer to a group formed by humans under shared conditions. Second, a community can be a collective organization, such as EU, composed of several countries and committed to development of certain aspect. Third, a community can also mean a family constituted because of love. In this paper, the community is the community with the first connotation. It is a community that a group of people gather together to become more powerful. Of course, there are also some people achieving success by fighting alone. However, the one-man fight is not a prevailing way to solve the contemporary social problems. Nor is it a mainstream direction of social ideology. The human society cannot be developed well without exchange of ideas. "Community" is a concept closely related to communication, the latter of which is also the fundamental factor for formation of the former.

Community construction is committed to building a group where people can complete each other's strengths and work for the shared goal. The group is a formal group made up of individuals mutually cooperating with each other and heading towards the same objective. Only a formal group can make up a community. Sharing is a striking characteristic of a community, such as shared goals, complementation of members' strengths, and member cooperation. The social aspect of the teaching profession decides that a teacher cannot conduct teaching activities alone. Communication and cooperation are a critical part of teaching. Therefore, community construction has been introduced to institutions of higher learning as a major way to promote course teaching and strengthen teaching quality. The best-selling coordination mechanism is referential to teachers' community construction.

The former can hopefully boost teaching and scientific research as well as experience sharing. Teachers are closely connected with each other under the guidance of a shared teaching goal. In the community, teachers can share experience and knowledge with each other for joint growth.

The professional learning community originates from the phrase, "learning organization". In 1997, the concept of "professional learning community" was first put forward by Hord, and a corresponding theoretical system was also built. Hord defined a "professional learning community" as a team made up teachers or managers sharing one concept. These teammates work with each other, explore and research together, continuously improve their teaching practice and try their best to jointly enhance students' learning ability. Hord also pointed out five characteristics of a successful professional learning community, namely a leader who can share with his teammates and support them, a shared value and concept, joint learning, application and sharing of practice and experience, and supporting conditions. It is obvious that learning is at the core of a professional learning community. In a professional learning community, teachers integrate their learning into their work. The learning approach is cooperation. The learning outcome is sustainable professional development of the teaching team. Nowadays, influence of the English teachers' learning community on the teaching team development has gradually gained increasing attention. Construction of a professional learning community has been a vigorous means to reinforce the teaching team development, and boost school reform. Construction of a professional learning community coincides with the personal development goal of teachers. If a teacher wants to realize self-development, a lifelong learning environment is indispensable. Besides, cooperation and sharing between colleagues are also important. Last but not least, strengthening of the whole teaching team can be the best support for teachers' individual development. The theory of professional learning community has created a platform for cooperation and exchange among teachers. Additionally, problems with the organizational chart and functions of the teaching team are actually golden opportunities for reform of the teaching team construction. Therefore, learning community construction measures are referential to construction of the English teachers' community in institutions of higher learning. Building of an effective and complete teachers' community operation mechanism can contribute to joint growth and development of community members.

2. Status of English Teachers' Learning Community Construction

First, English is a highly comprehensive subject clearly oriented to application. English teaching in institutions of higher learning means not only language teaching, but also teaching of English skills. This requires teachers to be well-grounded in English. More importantly, the teachers should be able to skillfully deliver what they know to students in English. Also, a good understanding of business English and skill, such as international marketing, customs transaction negotiation, customs declaration, international economics and international business law, is expected from teachers. Nevertheless, for the time being, most English teachers in Chinese institutions of higher learning graduated from English Language and Literature. Neither have they undergone systematic training of professional business knowledge and skills. Nor have they had any working experience in relevant enterprises or industries. As a result, they fail to provide favorable demonstration and clear guidance for students. Some English teachers just focus on theoretical knowledge, because they have no confidence in teaching students about how to put the theoretical knowledge into practice. Some even avoid relevant professional knowledge. After realizing the problem, some institutions of higher learning have employed teachers with an economic academic background. Their knowledge of business is beyond doubts, but their English teaching skills are lacking. Hence, the two kinds of teachers have respective advantages. If the respective advantages are not effectively combined, students will be unable to organization integrate their knowledge of business with knowledge of English. Then, the meaning of business English teaching in institutions of higher learning will lose be lost, thus seriously impeding adjustment of students' English knowledge to social development.

Second, English teachers have a heavy teaching workload. Undoubtedly, business English

teaching has made great strides since establishment of the business English program was approved by the Ministry of Education in 2007. The huge demand for professional business English talents has driven rapid growth of students learning business English. Though the number of English teachers has been increased, the ratio of teachers to students has been far behind the required standard of the Ministry of Education. Due to an inadequate number of English teachers, many English teachers have to teach several core courses. The workload has made English teaching a stressful task for teachers. English teachers have also been deprived of the time to seek career development and focus on scientific research. With passage of time, their enthusiasm for English teaching will be gradually dampened, causing the so-called “job burnout”. A direct consequence of the phenomenon is that students cannot obtain quality English teaching in class. The ambiguously oriented teaching content cannot effectively spark students’ interest in English learning, let alone stimulate them to accumulate English knowledge and put it into practice.

Third, the incentive and training mechanism in institutions of higher learning calls for further improvement. Many Chinese institutions of higher learning ignore the importance of campus training for on-the-job teachers. In fact, some English teachers are also aware of their lack of industrial experience. The increasing burden of English teaching makes them eager to seek occupational development. Pitifully, the development demand of teachers has not yet drawn adequate attention from institutions of higher learning. Though the domestic and international trade has been faced with brand-new situations, institutions of higher learning are still unaware of providing teachers with more systematic English teaching skill training. Because of ignorance of the importance to improve English teachers’ practical abilities, some institutions of higher learning even refuse to communicate or cooperate with foreign trade enterprises. This is not beneficial to gear students to enterprises’ requirements of English talents, and makes it impossible for English teachers to lift their teaching abilities to a new height. It is necessary for English teachers to combine their specialization with their interest for the sake of clarifying their career development direction. Purposeful strengthening of their occupational development abilities can also enhance students’ overall English skills.

3. Problems and Countermeasures of Teachers’ Learning Community Construction

Concerning problems confronting the English teachers’ learning community construction, this paper proposes building a long-term effective mechanism through the following countermeasures:

First, institutions of higher learning can provide a platform for diverse teachers’ community cooperation. Through curriculum construction and certain project, institutions of higher learning can set up a cooperation team among teachers. In the team, teachers can share their teaching content and scientific research with each other. In a teachers’ community based on teaching content, teachers can exchange teaching resources and ideas. They can discuss teaching plans together, study problems arising from teaching activities together, explore improvement of teaching strategies together, and evaluate teaching plans together. Such cooperation and communication can create favorable conditions for teachers’ joint innovation and reform of teaching practices as well as their development and improvement of teaching resources. This is also helpful to strengthening of teachers’ professional qualities and teaching abilities. In a teachers’ cooperation team oriented towards projects, teachers regard realization of project goals as shared goals. Through mutual cooperation and help, they shape their shared research interest. Besides, teachers can re-evaluate and develop their research abilities in relevant research activities. In order to ensure effects of teachers’ cooperation platform, a mechanism of certain scale should be built to promote communication between scientific research teams and teaching teams. Teaching can guide scientific research, while scientific research can drive development of teaching. The two should be integrated into a whole to be a complementary part to each other.

Second, institutions of higher learning should provide training for actively self-organized teachers’ practice group. In the practice group, English teachers can reinforce their development in a way suitable for them according to their interest, hobby, current knowledge and abilities. Teachers’ community construction of the kind is not a response to the top-down administrative instruction.

Instead, it is motivated by the like-minded, who are willing to learn together or have such learning needs. Therefore, activeness and cohesion of the teammates should not be ignored. Based on independent participation, English teachers should have the right to decide their own development. They are also willing to explore more teaching methods, and apply new teaching concepts and methods to teaching practices. Meanwhile, joint exploration and a shared goal can give teachers a strong sense of belonging. They can trust each other, give a hand to each other, and form a positive learning atmosphere. Pitifully, most self-developed teachers' teams are small in scale. They lack effective organization, thus might be easily decomposed. Therefore, countermeasures such as drawing up a systematic action plan, rationally coordinating cooperation among teachers, and seeking financial and policy support can motivate teachers maximally, create opportunities for teammates, and promote steady development of the team.

Third, the multimedia technology can be used to expand the scope of team cooperation. Along with wide applications of computer and network technologies to the teaching field, the online teachers' community has demonstrated overwhelming advantages in terms of information sharing and teamwork. Relying on the openness of the Internet, the community has expanded the scope of communication, making it possible for teachers and experts at home and abroad to jointly engage in the community. The network learning community can thus have access to diverse ideas, and maximally realize resource and idea sharing. The mutual learning and encouragement system allows teachers to enjoy convenience brought by the multimedia network, and strengthens their awareness of cooperation. By improving efficiency of community learning and emphasizing multimedia skills, teachers' cooperation culture community construction can create necessary conditions for building a more effective mutually-helping teachers' professional community.

4. Conclusion

With deepening of English teaching reform in Chinese institutions of higher learning, construction and effective application of teachers' professional learning community will be a mainstream model for teachers' professional development. The goal of bringing up better English teaching talents and realizing sustainable development of college English teaching relies, to a large extent, on building a high-quality English teachers' community. This issue is worth deeper exploration by all English teachers. Only when English teachers become more powerful and structurally reasonable can they bring up more English talents oriented to requirements of social development. Only in this way can the English talents get adapted to the ever-changing market and social environment.

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