

# Teachers' Professional Life Cycles

By Ron White

## 1 Introduction

The idea of teachers' life cycles isn't new. I first became familiar with it when reading Amy Tsui's book on expertise in teaching. The notion that teachers pass through a career cycle matched my own experience, and it helped to provide a useful way of thinking about supervising teachers, since my particular concern was with this really important aspect of managing a language teaching organization (LTO). So, while this article is mostly about teachers' professional life cycles, it also touches on the separate, but related notions of excellence and expertise in teaching, and on some implications for academic management.

## 2 Teachers Professional Life Cycles

For some years I've been training participants on the course leading to the International Diploma in Language Teaching Management (IDLTM). Most of them are at a mid-career stage, often working as an ADOS or DOS, in some cases as school directors, and a significant part of their present and future work involves the supervision of other people, in particular, of teachers. In our discussions, it soon becomes clear that managing the work of teachers involves a range of concerns well outside the remit of 'academic management', including motivation and reward systems. In short, managing teachers is a human resource management (HRM) issue, as well as a professional one.

It is also clear that there is an important link between HRM and professional concerns on the one hand, and teachers' life cycles on the other. The life cycle concept itself is not, of course, a new one, the biological life cycle having already been extended to organizational and product life cycles – and to teachers. In all cases, the cycles involve notions of conception, growth and development, maturity and eventual decline or withdrawal. Such a cycle is obvious in Fessler's career cycle within a model for teachers' professional growth and development (Fessler, 1985):

- Pre-Service
- Induction
- Competency building
- Enthusiastic & Growing
- Career Frustration
- Stable & Stagnant
- Career Wind-down
- Career Exit

There are two other components within this model, each of which influences the career cycle. These are:

1. Personal Environment (which includes such factors as life stages, avocational outlets and crises)
2. Organizational Environment (which includes management style, professional organisations and public trust).

More recently, Steffy (2001) has identified six distinct phases in a developmental continuum. These she labels as follows:

- Novice Teacher
- Apprentice Teacher
- Professional Teacher
- Expert Teacher
- Distinguished Teacher
- Emeritus Teacher (Active retired teacher)

Steffy points out that as teachers progress throughout their careers, they can engage in transformational processes including critical reflection on practice, redefinition of assumptions and beliefs, and enhanced self-worth. Or they can disengage from the work environment as a source of stimulation for new learning and begin the gradual decline into professional withdrawal. One essential role for educational administrators should be to promote transformative learning among all staff, especially classroom teachers. In short, she has identified one of the issues that usually arise in IDLTM discussions: disengagement and professional withdrawal, features of late career teachers in Huberman's scheme.

### **3 Huberman's teachers life cycle**

Huberman (1989, 2001) has defined three main phases in teachers' life cycles:

1. Novice 2. Mid-career 3. Late-career

#### **1. Novice**

##### **Student Teaching/ Early Novice Stage**

Primary Concern: surviving

Thought/Worry: "I'm not sure I can do this teaching thing! Does everybody else see me as incompetent?"

##### **Middle Novice Stage**

Primary Concern: the task of teaching

Thought/Worry: "Just let me teach! I'm working as hard as I can, but how am I supposed to teach all of these kids with so few materials and so many extra duties?"

##### **Late Novice Stage**

Primary Concern: impact on students

Thought/Worry: "I think I've almost mastered this teaching thing! Now how do I make sure every student learns in my class?"

#### **2. Mid-Career Teachers**

*Stabilization* – Experienced teachers in this stage usually feel confident about their professional skills and knowledge and settle into a comfortable and predictable pattern of teaching.

*Experimentation* – Seasoned teachers often look for ways to spice up their teaching, experimenting with new approaches and activities in their classrooms.

*Taking Stock* – Teachers with a decade or more of experience may reflect on their careers, contemplating both the worth of their past work and their plans for continued

work in coming years. Some, in the midst of a mid-career crisis, look back over their careers with distaste and find nothing to look forward to but “more of the same.”

### **3. Late-Career Teachers**

*Serenity* – Teachers with many years of experience are usually comfortable with classroom life and their role in it.

*Disengagement* – As they approach retirement, some older teachers start focusing on their lives beyond the classroom, and they begin to distance themselves emotionally from their students.

It's important to note that these phases are not, in fact, linear, and Steffy points out that ‘the lines are blurred between the life-cycle phases of a career teacher’. Indeed, Huberman goes further, emphasizing that attempts to delineate teacher development as a discernible sequence of phases is problematic because they tend to ignore the factors such as personal experiences, social environment as well as organizational influences which shape teachers’ development, influences also incorporated in Fessler’s model. In fact, researchers have found that teachers move in and out of the various phases so that, for example, even a late career teacher can return to being a novice if faced with a totally new and exotic teaching assignment. This is one reason why introducing new courses, textbooks, methods or technology can be so ‘de-skilling’ even for experienced teachers.

### **4 Career satisfaction**

Career satisfaction provides a link between career life cycle and expertise. In studying the factors predictive of career satisfaction, Huberman (1993) found that teachers who engaged in classroom-level experimentation were more likely to be satisfied with their career later on than those who were heavily involved in structural reforms. He identified two factors predictive of career satisfaction.

1. Teachers who sought diversity in classroom teaching or a shift in roles usually attain a higher level of satisfaction. Without recurring episodes in which the demands of the situation are slightly beyond one’s existing repertoire, whether for children or adults, there is no development. This finding is confirmed by the research of Bereiter & Scardamalia (1993) on developing expertise, which occurs when individuals are working at the edge of their competence.
2. When teachers were asked to describe their ‘best years’, they typically mentioned specific classes which they enjoyed teaching, where apathetic students became enthusiastic about learning, and where the class was engaged in purposeful activities.

Huberman concludes that what contributes to teachers’ job satisfaction is significant improvement in students’ learning because of one’s efforts.

### **5 Expert teachers**

This finding segues nicely with the work of educationist, John Hattie (2003), whose massive research surveys have identified five major dimensions of expert teachers, who

- Can identify essential representations of their subject,
- Can guide learning through classroom interactions,
- Can monitor learning and provide feedback

- Can attend to affective attributes, and
- Can influence student outcomes

Hattie and his colleagues have found that three dimensions emerged in distinguishing expert from experienced teachers:

- Challenge
- Deep Representation
- Monitoring and Feedback

Expert teachers are more likely to set challenging rather than “do your best” goals. In class, they set challenging and not merely time-consuming activities. Deep learning is about understanding (relating and extending ideas, and an intention to understand and impose meaning). Monitoring and feedback are particularly significant in enhancing achievement. Expert teachers are better able to filter relevant from irrelevant information, and are able to monitor, understand, and interpret events in more detail and with more insight than experienced teachers. As a consequence, they seek and provide more and better feedback in light of this monitoring.

**Clearly, expertise and experience do go hand in hand, but it is also clear that expertise doesn't always accompany experience.**

An expert teacher is one who challenges herself, as well as her students, and who derives satisfaction from seeing her students successfully meet the challenges she puts in their way. A teacher may be very competent, but still fall short of such expertise.

## **6 Implications for the LTO manager**

Is it possible to benefit from such expertise and to mitigate the fatigue and withdrawal which can occur at both mid and late career stages? The answer is a carefully hedged 'yes'. The hedging concerns such issues as organizational culture and reward systems, aspects of the organizational environment in Fessler's model. Firstly, let's consider the culture of the LTO. An organizational culture which encourages the development of expertise is one characterized by collegiality and a positive attitude towards experimentation. We know that learning is a highly social process, and an LTO in which there is a lively community of practice, which helps induct newcomers and which encourages the sharing of good practice among its members, will be one in which teachers are positive about participating in and contributing to the resources of the community. Such contributions will be encouraged by supporting, encouraging and resourcing continuing professional development (Richards & Farrell, 2005), which in turn will be linked to the HRM systems of the LTO, notably through such practices as performance management.

Secondly, reward systems. Hattie (2003) points out that whereas in other professions, excellence is esteemed and rewarded,... in teaching we reward primarily by experience irrespective of excellence, we promote the best out of the classroom, and we have few goalposts to aim for in professional development, instead allowing others to define what latest fad, what new gimmick, what new policy will underline the content of professional development.

The expertise which mid and late career teachers possess, if it is unacknowledged and untapped, will remain an under-used resource as far as the LTO is concerned. A reward system which removes such teachers from the classroom won't necessarily benefit either the teachers or the LTO, so it's important to find ways of acknowledging and tapping such expertise for the benefit of all. Indeed, mid career disenchantment can be the outcome of both lack of recognition of expertise and of opportunity to share it, through, for example, mentoring novices in ways which will help them through the challenging novice phase of their careers.

## **7 Conclusion**

None of the above is achieved by flicking a switch. Implementing change in the culture of an LTO can take years, and a great deal of careful management. Which brings us back to where we started: the IDLTM. What IDLTM participants acquire is a new or improved set of skills, but most importantly, a new perspective on managing the complex systems, resources and people of an LTO, at the heart of which is the experience and expertise of its teachers, at whatever stage of their professional life cycle they are located.

## **8 References & Further Reading**

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