

## Impact of Coaching on the Professional Development of University Teachers

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### Abstract

This paper is focused on effective professional development approaches provided to university teachers. The motivation behind this research is the lack of previous studies that examine the impact of coaching approaches on formal professional development training and the characteristics of effective professional development offered to university teachers. The study was guided by three research questions correlated to the characteristics of effective professional development sessions for university teachers, the impact of coaching approaches on the professional development, and teachers' needs and requirements in professional development sessions.

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### Introduction

The world of teaching is changing very fast and the teaching faculty at universities around the world face countless problems and challenges daily (Ciampi et al., 2014; Gerken et al., 2015, Saad, 2017). These challenges are directly linked to what they do in the classroom, what the students do, their level of engagement, curriculum design, workload,

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time management, and institution requirements (Fink et al., 2005). To face such challenges, university teachers need support, direction, career advice, continuous learning and they need to be equipped with the right tools to learn new strategies and methods of teaching (Ciampi et al., 2014; Kolari, 2002; Robinson, 2008; Premnadh, 2019). In addition to this, most of the university teachers although they hold a master's degree or a Ph.D., they might not necessarily have the appropriate pedagogical skills to teach students of the current generation (generation Z) (Robinson, 2008; Elizelle, 2017). The current generation of students requires guidance more than information because a large amount of information is available anytime, anywhere, and can be gathered easily (Muhammed,2019). However, these students need guidance on how to make use of the available information to be able to solve problems, make the right decisions, analyses new information, collaborate, work together and be responsible for their own learning (Ciampi et al. 2014). One way to support university teachers is to provide them guidance through continuous and effective professional development (Gerken et al., 2015; McKee et al. 2013). Before teachers can help their students, they need to be capable of solving their own problems, making accurate decisions, and working together with other teachers in a team spirit. Thus, this paper is focused on the professional development designed specifically to address the needs of university teachers to find out whether coaching approaches help teachers provide guidance and support to their students.

### *Effective Professional Development*

Professional development in education needs to have specific characteristics to be effective, it needs to be constructive, long-term process focused on a particular context, reflective, and collaborative process (King and Newmann,2000; Dadds, 2001; Ancess, 2001; Ganser, 2000; Martín, 2019). Besides, teachers need support to develop their practice so that their students can succeed. Teachers want to have a voice in the setup of the professional development programs, they want to be able to set the goals for themselves and develop professional activities that support those goals rather than attending workshops or seminars unrelated to their work (Nussbaum-Beach, 2017). Moreover, nowadays, social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or online forums plays an important role in the learning process of teachers. As part of teachers' needs, the concept of coaching is very important. Coaching is an effective tool to support teachers and increase their effectiveness (Aguilar,2013). Until today, it is widely used in the industry for more than forty years. However, using coaching in higher education is relatively new. Therefore, this research was conducted to decide whether coaching has a place in the higher education sector and can be an integral part of the university experience. Based on that three research questions were set:

- What characterizes an effective professional development session for university teachers?
- What impact coaching approaches have on the professional development of university teachers?
- What do the teachers want in a professional development session?

### *Methodology of Research*

The methodology used for this study is action research (Robson, 1993). After examining the three research questions of this study, it was indicated that this study requires

action research with a great focus on the evaluation stage. Action research is a very popular method in the field of education because there is always room for improvement when it comes to teaching and educating others (Cohen, 2007). The action research cycle used is the cycle of the research proposed by McNiff and Whitehead (2006) that involves observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification before moving in the new direction. The research started by identifying the problems in the existing professional development through the literature review, the needs analysis, and the direct observation of the current issues in the professional development by the researcher (observation), then proposing a possible plan or change that might help in improving the effectiveness of the professional development sessions after thinking and reflecting about the existing issues (reflection). This led to the implementation of the change through conducting a professional development session using a coaching model (action) and then evaluating the change and studying the effectiveness of using coaching approaches through collecting feedback from the teachers attended the session (evaluation), and finally developing a set of recommendations and proposing a list of modifications and changes for the next professional development sessions to be able to move in a new direction in the future (modification).

The participants of this study were university teachers working in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. The rationale for selecting those teachers was: they had no previous formal training in teaching or coaching, they had previously attended different professional development workshops conducted at the university and they were willing to participate in the study. The process of the sessions is demonstrated in Figure 1.

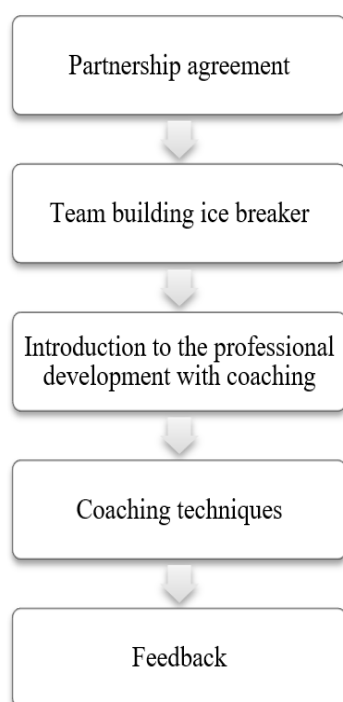


Figure 1: Professional development session process

### *Data Collection Process*

The data (qualitative and quantitative) was collected using three different instruments. A questionnaire, interview, and a written informal feedback. The triangulation

technique was followed in this research study to assure the validity and reliability of the research and furthermore to capture different dimensions of the same topic. Triangulation is considered as a powerful tool that facilitates validation of data through cross verification from two or more sources. At the end of the professional development session, teachers were requested to provide informal feedback using the two stars, and an arrow method. Two positive comments about what went right during the session and one thing that can be developed. Then the questionnaire was shared with the participants and they were requested to fill and send it electronically within one week. The researcher thanked the teachers for agreeing to attend the sessions and for the time that they have given the researchers to ask and discuss desired topics and questions. Four weeks after the session, interviews were conducted to collect more data to ensure the validity and reliability of the previously collected data.

## Results

### *What characterizes an effective professional development session for university teachers?*

Five themes emerged from the collected data concerning the characteristics of effective professional development.

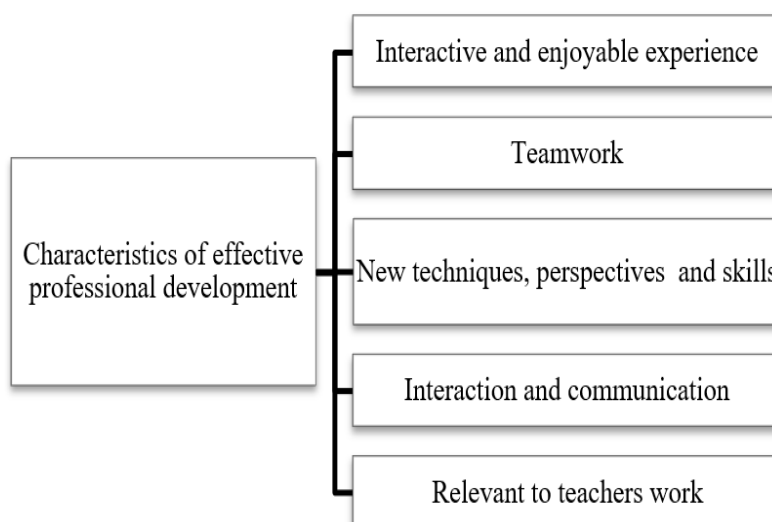


Figure 2: Themes of effective professional development

The quantitative data collected revealed that for professional development to be effective, it needs to have a set of important characteristics of effective professional development. The professional development sessions should be interactive, collaborative, encourages teamwork, is focused on specific topics, based on a coaching model, and must be delivered over sufficient time, relevant to the teachers' needs, and supportive of their commitment to the teaching and learning process. These factors are supported as well by the checklist developed by Hunziker (2010), and the set of characteristics developed by Baker and Smith (1999). Teachers need proper follow-up sessions to be accountable for the steps that they are taking as part of the plan to develop themselves professionally.

*What impact coaching approaches have on the professional development of university teachers?*

Three themes emerged from the collected data. The themes are considered the benefits of using coaching approaches in a professional development context.

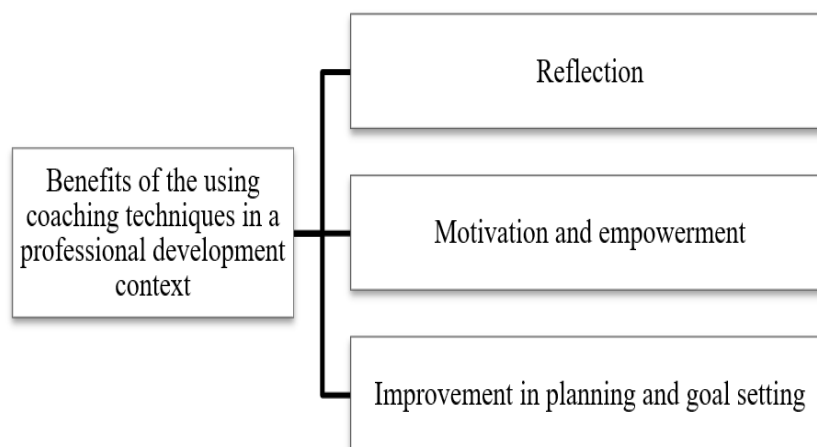


Figure 3: Benefits of using coaching techniques

The collected data indicated that using coaching approaches in a professional development context is useful for teachers because it helped them to reflect, ask effective questions, investigate different options, change lenses, and contribute more effectively. Moreover, it revealed that having a coaching model simplified the process as there was a structured model to help teachers to set a plan that can be placed in action.

*What do the teachers want in a professional development session?*

Five themes emerged from the data concerning the teachers' requirements and recommendations for future professional development workshops. The collected data indicated that participants from different departments are required in a professional development session to enrich the ideas and to learn from each other experiences. One of the interesting findings is that there was an agreement that administrative staff should be attending the professional development sessions along with academics to broaden the aspects of how to approach different challenges. It would be considered a productive process when teaching faculty and administrative staff can sit and think together about the institute's challenges and the impact of their behavior on the students. This helps in reflection and collaborative thinking; this is supported by Johnson (2016).

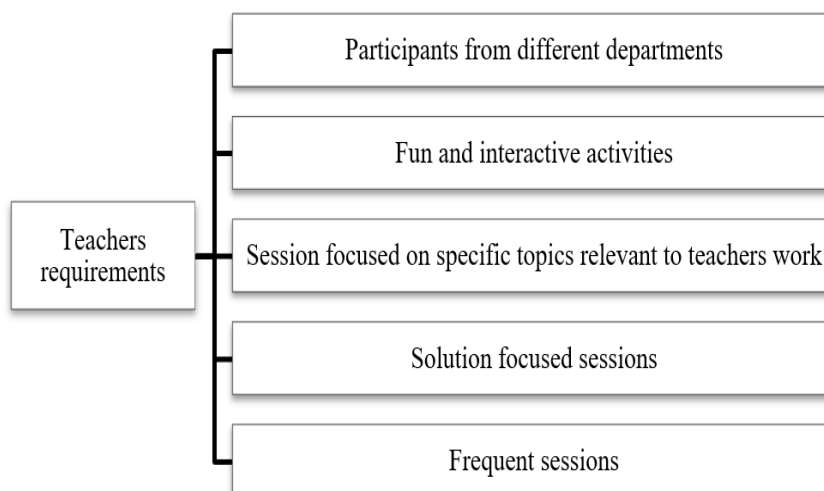


Figure 4: University Teachers requirements

The professional development sessions need to be an interactive session that includes fun activities to engage teachers emotionally, cognitively, and physically. The collected data indicated that the discussion about live examples of the challenge's teachers face in their classrooms is essential. Recognizing the limitation in current professional development, it was mentioned that teachers need sessions to be focused on specific topics relevant to their work. This finding might contradict with coaching concepts as coaching persuades teachers to find their own solutions while many teachers stated that they want to be provided with an ideal solution for their challenges in their upcoming professional development sessions.

## Discussion and Analysis

This section discusses the findings of the study and analyses the results about the research questions.

### *Interactive and Enjoyable Experience*

A professional development session to be effective, it needs to create trust and a comfortable atmosphere where there is no fear of sharing ideas, suggestions, or opinions. This is in line with the findings of Nussbaum-Beach (2015), where teachers need to be engaged, self-directed, or motivated in the learning process. To be engaged, teachers need to enjoy the experience and learn in an environment where they are accepted and acknowledged. This is also supported by the study conducted by Guskey (2003), teachers to be engaged physically, cognitively, and emotionally, they need fun, interactive and challenging activities. Especially when it requires teachers to be actively engaged and physically move around.

### *Teamwork and collaboration*

An effective professional development needs to emphasize active and interactive learning experiences by allowing teachers to participate in various activities. Activities

such as problem-solving, planning, sharing ideas, and reflection. Effective professional development needs to engage teachers informally to share problems, ideas, and opinions, and work together toward one goal. The theoretical and lecturing style sessions where teachers act as passive learners were not advantageous. This criticism of the lecturing style is in line with Johnson and Golombek's (2002) study about the knowledge transmission model in which the teacher's role was only limited to receiving knowledge passively from the trainer or the subject expert. A similar finding was reported in the policy paper No.16 (Buckner et al., 2016) about what teachers want from professional development programs in the United Arab Emirates.

### *New Techniques, Perspectives, and Skills*

When professional development is linked to clear goals and teachers can see the "big picture" they are more likely to observe the new learning experience as a more valuable experience. It will motivate them to change their perspective toward their teaching practice to have a positive effect on student learning. This is in line with the findings of Showers and Joyce back in 1982. Participants stated that they need ongoing professional development to target new challenges faced by teachers' and it should not conflict with their teaching hours and other personal and professional commitments. The more time teachers spend in professional development activities, the more likely their teaching skills is to improve, and they learn new techniques, this is supported by the research conducted by (Ancess, 2001; Cohen, 1990).

### *Interaction and Communication*

One of the studies done in 2009 claims that active engagement and communication helps teachers in remembering 90% of what they learn in professional development sessions (Hunzicker, 2010). The collected data proved that active communication was the reason behind the motivation and engagements of teachers in professional development sessions. This is also in line with the findings of Grace (1999); Clement and Vanderlberghe, (2000), and Wood and McQuarrie (1999) who suggested that the most effective professional development occurs when there are interactive communication and meaningful group activities.

### *Relevant to Teachers Work*

Effective professional development is linked to teachers' work. This echoed the finding of policy report No.16 (Buckner et al., 2016) in which teachers insisted to have professional development events directly related to the curriculum and more specialized training. This is also supported by previous studies where professional development needs to be relevant and fit for teachers' needs and teaching practice (Ancess, Ganser, 2000, Hunzicker, 2010). Teachers require professional development that directly addresses their specific needs and concerns or when they can feel the connection between the learning experience and their daily practice. This is supported by the checklist presented by Hunzicker (2010). The specialized sessions engage teachers in learning through their daily activities and responsibilities. This allows them to connect to their daily responsibilities, try new ideas, reflect and analyze the effectiveness of their actions.



### *Reflection*

The integration of the coaching model in professional development training help teachers to be reflective. Reflection is important for teachers because it's a process that makes them collect, record, and analyze everything that happened in class so that they can create some improvements where necessary. Times change, viewpoints change, and teachers must change to adapt and remain relevant in the changing world of education. This is in line with Fook and Gardner's (2007) description of reflection. Although the coaching questions are effective and the reflection process is useful for teachers, the data collected from the interviews revealed that some teachers found the self-reflection process challenging. The difficulties were in identifying their own challenges and placing them in order of importance, looking into the future, and trying to predict if their plans would work. Moreover, there was a sense of fear of change, fear of trusting others and sharing true opinions, and thinking about obstacles and methods to avoid them. These challenges are all relevant to the findings of Dewey (1910). Teachers are resourceful, whole, and complete and have the answers to their challenges. Effective training sessions help them to speak up and share their challenges with others. The coaching approaches support teachers to improve their capacity to reflect and apply their learning to their work with students and in their work with each other. This finding is supported by Kimsey-House et al. (2011).

### *Motivation and Empowerment*

Coaching gives teachers, the confidence to try new things, change their own life and the life of people around them. Teachers get motivated to “try different techniques”, “try being more interactive”, “make the classes more activity-based rather than lecture-based”. The sense of empowerment is important on “how to interact with a group of people” and “how not to stick to the normal teaching ways, may apply other assessment methods or delivery methods”. In this view, being an empowered teacher, is not only about what teachers are willing to do, it is about having access to resources and being able to use these materials and information in the best possible way to help and support their students. Empowered teachers are supported to take risks and engage in lifelong learning experiences while working with others. This is supported by McLaughlin and Zarrow (2001). Coaching does not only help teachers to implement change, but it also gives them intrinsic motivation to implement the changes happily to move forward as the answers to their problems were suggested by them and they were not asked or told to do it, this is supported by Nussbaum-Beach (2017). However, the teacher responses revealed that their understanding of coaching approaches is more of instruction and plans that can help them in a short period. This agrees with the mentoring definition and contradicts with coaching definitions in education. Yet, coaching in education is more than just a set of instructions, it trains teachers to accept, respect the beliefs, values, motivations, assumptions of others. Teachers also have a space to question, explore, and reflect on their own values, beliefs, and motivations. This is in line with the research conducted by Iordanou et al. (2016).

### *Improvement in Planning and Goal Setting*

Coaching approaches are useful in terms of having a plan to follow. The collected data shows that having a coaching model allows teachers to explore their potential, increased their ability to respond to whatever challenges they are faced with. Some models provide teachers with a clear vision of their goals, help them to prioritize, and look into



options. Typical questions were answered during this phase targets the future and the way forward as follows:

- What do you want to do?
- What's next?
- What's the step you are committed to taking?
- What will you do? When will you do it by? Who will you let know and how?
- How will you hold yourself accountable?
- On a scale of 1-10, how committed are you to taking this action?
- What are you asking yourself by taking this action?
- What's the progress you want to make by taking this step?

These questions were basically to convert the discussion into decisions and goals. This is one of the most important aspects of any coaching model used for personal or professional development such as GROW, OSKAR, TGROW, CLEAR. When teachers are asked to put their own plans for change, it is easier for them to implement the steps as these steps are not enforced on them. These are their own plans that suit their needs for their own development. Furthermore, when teachers are more organized, they have a plan or framework, their delivery will be more interesting and more beneficial for their students. This is supported by (Allison, 2014) and (Graydin, 2019).

### *Participants from Different Departments*

Having participants in a professional development session from different departments enrich the ideas and to learn from other experiences. One of the interesting findings is that teachers want administrative staff to attend the session as well to broaden the aspects of how to approach different challenges. It would be much productive when teaching faculty and administrative staff can sit and think together about the institute's challenges and the impact of their behavior on the students. This helps in the reflection and collaborative thinking process; this is supported by Johnson (2016). This is as well in line with the Gallimore and Tharp (1990) study that one of the main reasons that most of the professional development programs were unsuccessful in the past was because of the isolation of teachers.

### *Session Focused on Specific Topics Relevant to Teachers Work*

To be able to improve thinking skills, communication, and sharing thoughts, ideas with others, this requires teachers to discuss real-life experiences. Recognizing the limitation in current professional development, teachers need to be focused on specific topics relevant to their work. Teachers' input regarding what and how they will learn as well as their choice of the learning pace and direction is important. Teachers need to feel listened to and supported by the senior management staff, administrators, and other colleagues. This is aligned with Nussbaum-Beach's (2017) findings, related to teacher's needs, to have a voice and choice in the professional development offered. Rarely teachers come to the workshops ready to be engaged, self-directed, or motivated in the learning process. This would change if teachers had more choice or voice before they attend.

### *Solution-Focused Session*

Teachers need sessions that target challenges faced by them and provide a conclusive solution for it. This finding might contradict with coaching concepts as coaching persuades teachers to find their solutions while some teachers may want to be provided with an ideal

solution for their challenges in the next professional development sessions. This finding might have come from the fact that some teachers lack experience in teaching and being more comfortable to try methods that have been tried by others. However, coaching approaches are flexible as suggested by Downey (2014). A trainer or a coach can use directive or non-directive approaches from the entire coaching spectrum. Trainers can instruct, give advice, and offer advice based on their judgment on the session requirements. The collected data indicated that teachers prefer experienced teachers from the same institute to conduct the professional development sessions instead of taking an outsider who might be an expert in the field but has never experienced a similar environment and settings before. This makes teachers feel more confident about the practicality and effectiveness of the professional development training provided to them.

### *Frequent Sessions*

One of the main needs that were highlighted is having professional development sessions frequently, this is supported by Cohen's (1990) and Hunzicker's (2010) study that considers ongoing professional development effective in improving teaching practice. This requires time and commitment from both teachers and administrators. Professional development has a positive effect on teaching practice and student learning when teachers are involved in learning experiences over time. Any change in teaching practice requires a recursive and continual process that takes place over time. Teachers need ongoing, short sessions that run over some time during the academic year to target recent challenges faced by teachers' and it should not conflict with their teaching hours and other personal and professional commitments. According to Guskey (1995), any change in teaching practice takes a minimum of three to five years as teachers need time for transition from personal worries about new practice when addressing student needs.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the action research cycle, the professional development session will always require some modifications to move in a new direction. In higher education, there is a need to explore more about directive, and non-directive coaching approaches, and which specific coaching tools or models would be of value for higher education. Teachers prefer professional development opportunities that include interactive activities, focused on topics relevant to their work, focused on offering solutions to their challenges, and conducted frequently throughout the year. Moreover, teachers requested to include participants from different schools and departments (both teaching faculty and administrative staff).

All the findings presented in article are supported by previous research studies conducted on professional development which is a strong evidence that this research valid and reliable. Furthermore, the research tools were very useful in triangulating the data and ensured validity is maintained throughout the study. A summary of the paper is presented in three points:

### *Characteristics of an Effective Professional Development Session*

A clear agreement on the characteristics needed for effective professional development has consistently emerged throughout the research. For professional development to be effective, it needs to be an enjoyable experience, encourages teamwork, includes new techniques and new perspectives, encourages active communication and the content of the session needs to be relevant to teachers' work.

### *Impact of Coaching Approaches on the Professional Development of University Teachers*

Some of the effective characteristics were outcomes of integrating coaching approaches into the professional development of university teachers. The value of including coaching is to help teachers to be more reflective about their teaching practice, motivated, empowered, better in planning, and goal setting. Coaching would also help to address some of the current issues that exist in professional development programs in higher education.

### *What Teachers Want in A Professional Development Session*

The study helped in finding what teachers want in professional development. Teachers prefer professional development opportunities that include interactive activities, focused on topics relevant to their work, focused on offering solutions to their most current challenges, and conducted frequently throughout the year. Moreover, teachers prefer to have other participants from different schools and departments (both teaching faculty and administrative staff). These findings suggest that coaching approaches have a contribution towards the development of effective professional development programs, and this would help the higher education providers to design more effective learning experiences for university teachers in the future.

### *Recommendations for Higher Education Providers*

Higher education providers need effective professional development to improve teaching practice, student learning, and the quality of education provided. Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

- Conducting professional development sessions with participants from different departments including the administrative and management staff within the same institute to improve the aspects of how to approach different challenges.
- Conducting professional development sessions that are interactive and include fun activities to engage teachers emotionally, cognitively, and physically.
- Teachers need ongoing, short sessions that run over some time during the academic year to target recent challenges faced by teachers' and it should not conflict with their teaching hours and other personal and professional commitments.
- Education providers to integrate teachers' input regarding what and how they will learn as well as their choice and direction of the learning pace. This would accommodate teachers' educational needs.
- Experienced and excellent teachers who attended teacher training programs need to be nominated to deliver professional development sessions instead of taking outsiders who might be an expert but has never experienced a similar environment and settings before.
- Teachers can be trained in coaching approaches. They can deliver these skills and train their colleagues to use them. Education providers need to emphasize peer coaching as a practice among teachers, it would result in a better learning experience than traditional professional development programs.

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