Need for Professional Development and Educational Planning in a Challenging Context

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Putting the first foot ahead to take a small step forward can lead to a giant leap in future.

Learning is a continuous process, particularly in a noble profession like teaching. Knowledge is free and vast like an ocean but unfortunately the practice of limiting knowledge to lecture schedules makes teaching stagnant and monotonous. Teachers have to devise constantly new ways of teaching and imparting the latest updated knowledge in every field to the students. It is indeed unfortunate that teachers are so busy with their tight schedules that they hardly find the time for any additional activities to enhance their professional competence which will help to widen the horizon of the students' mind.

Professional development for teachers has become a vital part of teaching and educational policymakers the world over are making it mandatory for teachers to attend professional development programs continuously in their teaching careers. These programs are time consuming and expensive. In most cases makingup lost time and arranging part-time substitutes for teachers who attend these programs turn out to be burning, unsolved issues. While a lot of debate is going on everywhere on this issue of finding time to accommodate teachers to attend seminars, workshops, faculty improvement programs and higher educational courses, in strife-torn Libya, the educational system that had been in a state of flux since 1951, owing to recurrent and turbulent political instabilities in the country and has been a gradually deteriorating, is currently in a moribund state! When there is an acute shortage of qualified teachers and extreme lack of basic facilities like books, libraries, laboratories and infrastructure, attending faculty improvement programs becomes a far-fetched dream. So the authors, expatriate Indians, made a brief survey on the steps taken in the country for conducting Teacher Developments programs to improve the quality of education in Libya in general, so that they could be introduced and adopted in the University of Ajadabia, a new University established in March 2015. This survey aims to present an overall view of the situation from the perspectives of an administrator and an expatriate teacher.

We started with a search for the existing faculty improvement programs in Libya. To our dismay we found that there is hardly any concrete program or plan for teacher training or development at all levels of education, i.e., primary, secondary and tertiary levels here. There is a scholarship scheme in which a very small percentage of students, i.e. around three thousand brilliant students from all over the country

are selected and after serving in their Universities as Teaching Assistants for a few years, are allotted scholarships by the Higher education Department to go abroad for pursuing PhD and Masters degree courses. So we decided to focus our survey on this new University, in this small town, Ajadabia and take small strides in this direction with the available resources in the current tempestuous situation in the country. In the next few paragraphs that follow, the administrator will express and share his views about the challenges in Higher education in Libya, and the plans that he has envisaged to cope with them, which will be followed by a description of the methods adopted by the expatriate teacher to address the challenges.

As an administrator, policy maker and head, I feel that it is vital to have a concrete planning of how to use the available resources in the best way so as to make it beneficial not only to the academics but to the society as a whole. At the outset I would give a brief description of the educational development and planning schemes that existed in Libya before the revolution but were not fully utilized and then go on to describe my plans for the new University. Firstly, what is the most ideal and the most efficient educational system? According to the guidelines of the UNESCO:

"An educational system is considered to be efficient if it produces at a minimum cost the desired output in terms maximum number of young people who have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills prescribed by society. Stated differently, an education system is considered efficient if for a given input of resources (human. financial and material) it maximises the desired output, both in quantity and quality." (UNESCO, 2005).

Educational inputs comprise the facilities, teachers, number of students and other resources, and outputs can be measured in terms of the number of successful candidates, which contributes to the addition of human resources and their utility value in the society and the country. In the form of input, a reasonably good number of universities and higher institutes have been established in the country, to prepare, train and qualify successive generations of public officers and experts who would run the country in modern Libyan society. Higher education in Libya comprises three major sectors, i.e. university education, university vocational and technical education, and advanced postgraduate and PhD studies in humanities and physical sciences as well as various other professional diplomas. It also aims to train a large number of people to work in administrative posts and public enterprises. There were a number of schemes and institutes for management training and development in Libyan development, but researchers found that most of these programs were not accomplished due to certain impediments in the programmes, "The education system lacked facilities and infrastructure to practically establish these schemes. There was no proper coordination between these programs and many issues such as manpower planning, and the country's

culture, and this influenced the degree of success in educational development" (Farley, 1971, p.35).

Even though the government did put in place many programs and plans that aimed at correcting the defects and flaws in the education system, little progress had been made owing to a number of hurdles and inconsistencies in the system and the social fabric. Hence, "the education system paid more attention to the theoretical aspect of education than to the practical aspects" (Deeb and Deeb, 1982, p. 45). Despite all the accomplishments and elaborate planning, the development of higher education in Libya remained inadequate and insignificant. To this day, it follows an obsolete system and is unable to move with the time and pace of the modern society. It requires a thorough face lift and revamping to make it efficient enough to cope with modern roles and functions, and the changes that are happening in today's world. There are several challenges that come in its way to progress and the biggest challenges are the social and economic challenges and these get accentuated with the crumbling social fabric which is the result of the strife and unrest that is happening these days.

In the face of harsh realities of the current strife-torn condition and the challenges that accompany it, the universities are still managing to function and conduct classes with the available resources. As the country is going through a rough patch, it is not possible to introduce any major schemes till it becomes financially more substantial.

Therefore, it was decided to convert the Department of Education into an Educational Planning Department in which Teacher training was one of the courses offered. Students are given practical training to teach in schools in this course. Educational Planning is a major course in this department and it is being conducted in a systematic way so that we prepare to introduce major schemes in future to develop faculty improvement programs in a great way. We have made several plans and some include collaboration with various Western universities to import teaching courses in future. At present, we have taken a few small steps in this direction by planning elaborately and efficiently to establish a strong education system in this University. In order to achieve success in our plans, the first step is to search for the factors that are required to make a modern system for the new University. It was decided to follow the pattern of studies/ research given by El. Hawat, which is as follows:

• Studies of internal and external efficiency of higher educational systems

• Review and evaluation programs carried out in university faculties and departments concerning the university's appropriateness, size, location and development in future

• Research to establish new departments and faculties (El.Hawat, 2003).

Alongside the above theoretical inquiry, El Hawat also suggests there is a need to establish mechanisms for the following

aspects of higher education management:

- Continuous evaluation of the quality of higher education;

- Gradual transformation of the higher education system from a traditional to a more modern system;

- Continuous support of higher education and the development of forms of partnership with the private sector without affecting the principle of equal opportunity for education;

- Development of training programs for newly appointed teaching staff, particularly in the areas of teaching method, educational technology and evaluation of students' achievements (El-Hawat, 2003).

There are several challenges that impede the establishment of the plans listed by El-Hawat that have been adopted as a model for Ajadabia University and these hurdles need to be addressed. Firstly, there is an obvious imbalance in specialization in various disciplines that can result in alarmingly grotesque figures of outputs that will end up in a great degree of dissipation of human resources. Hence careful planning to develop a comprehensive and complete educational curriculum comprising science, arts and technical disciplines is mandatory. The most glaring challenge is the problem of funding and once the funds start flowing, the need to establish a correlation between educational plans and the economy. The problems listed below, need to be tackled efficiently:

- Inadequate educational statistics and data;

- Insufficient information about labour force needs;

- Lack of understanding between economists and financial experts; and

- Insufficient legislation that promotes a reciprocal relationship between educational and economic planning.

As the University is in it sinfant stage, there is a need for meticulous planning which can be approved and applied once the situation in the country becomes stable and life returns to normalcy. The first step is to have a concrete plan and we hope to adhere to the plans and make great progress in this direction in future.

The plans for educational development given by Fadhel would benefit the students, the teaching community, and the society as a whole in future, but the harsh reality of the current situation is quite grim and difficult. Yet it can be said with conviction that nothing is impossible if there is enough determination and solid application of mind in teachers to make the best use of all the available resources and achieve commendable results. I shall describe how I, as a teacher, managed to keep myself updated with the latest developments in the field of English language. Language teaching is a learner-centred process and there is a great need for introducing continuous novel programs and activities to motivate students to participate and study. How could I get the best resources and bring the world to

my classroom without spending much time, money and energy? I can say with great pride that my membership with the IATEFL and ELTAI stood me in good stead during the most difficult and unusual situations in Libya. The IATEFL membership offers online participation in webinars, seminars and conferences. I vividly remember arranging smart boards for my students and colleagues to attend and participate in the first webinar of David Crystal. They gained a lot of insights from his erudite talk and through interaction with language professionals from all over the world. We always participate in groups in the webinars and web conferences and gain knowledge from them to improve our teaching strategies.

The journals *IATEFL Voices* and *JELT (India) can* be called handbooks for teacher development. I could publish my articles in them. The knowledge gained from various articles in them enabled me to brush up and update my teaching skills. These journals are placed in the English Department's office and the teachers benefit a great deal from them. The discussion forums help us to discuss various topics with global colleagues and use the insights and resources gained from the interaction to improve our teaching strategies. I would like to tell teachers who are in a similar situation as mine and are unable to attend extensive faculty development programmes that a membership with IATEFL and ELTAI, if properly utilized, is worth more than all the faculty improvement programs in the world. The facilities that these memberships

offer form a complete package of professional development. Being a member of IATEFL and its Associates is a very enjoyable and exciting experience. They enable English teachers to become accomplished and versatile professionals in a natural and spontaneous manner without ever having to worry about strategies for effective time management for professional development.

Further, I would like to give a few useful tips to teachers who work in unusual situations such as mine, on how to enhance their professional competence, update their knowledge and upgrade their teaching skills. First of all, I would like to state that there is no substitute for regular and extensive reading for expanding, updating, and upgrading knowledge not only in our area of specialization but also in the current developments and happenings in the world. Reading improves language, enriches vocabulary and enlightens one with the latest knowledge. Lectures can be made very interesting through insights gained through browsing the net, by using them creatively, in the class.

I would like to give some examples to illustrate how insights gained through reading and surfing the net can be used creatively. Recently, I came across a link on web–conference *which showed a video on the flaws in video conferencing. This video can be used in the class to give learners an idea about video-conferencing and it can be used as a topic for discussion, for creating their own videos or for presenting role-plays in conducting a video–conference. Then there is another link about

a sound story. ** This story can be played or given as a text and students can be asked to describe the advantages of listening to a video recording or watching a video of the stories/novels that they have read. Though audio stories take more time than story-books, they can help to sharpen the students' listening and speaking skills. Listening to sound stories also helps to brush up their pronunciation, accent and intonation, but students in a mixed ability class have different levels of achievement and comprehension. So audio-visual learning combined with reading is the best combination and can be made available to learners with the guidance of the teacher.

A vast store house of teaching resources is available online that can be explored. If exploited with ingenuity and creativity, these resources can be utilized for introducing innovative techniques in teaching without attending formal courses and programs. Attending regular teacher development and faculty improvement programs, attending and participating in international/national conferences and seminars., conducting seminars and other active programs do have great advantages in normal circumstances and there is absolutely no doubt about it, but, in my case, I would say that it is indeed a big boon and a challenging experience to work in a war–ridden atmosphere and yet stay updated and equipped with the latest development in my field. I could achieve a great deal of success by abundant professional networking online and converting the insights gained from these online activities into innovative and creative teaching resources with a little effort.

Then another interesting and surprising point that I would like make is, what are generally considered a daily routine /leisure activities like interacting with friends and followers through Facebook, twitter and other social networking sights by people living in normal circumstances become full-fledged professional development programs for people in unusual situations like mine. Pooling in of resources and interacting with colleagues through social and professional networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Research Gate, Twitter, and so on can help a great deal to gain new ideas in the respective fields and they help you to stay tuned and be in touch with the global society. Exploring the web is a great way of learning and enhancing one's knowledge.

Writing and publishing articles on the innovative classroom activities and teaching strategies that one has created help to brush up one's writing skills and also paves way for a sharing of similar ideas by others in the field through feedback and discussions. Some of these networks encourage members to publish posts, share updates and give a lot of links to publishing websites and other academically useful sites some of which are given at the end of this article.

To sum up our observations in our respective perspectives, we come to the conclusion that both effective educational planning by the administrators and high level of motivation and enthusiasm shown by the teacher to use his/her creativity and

ingenuity to teach in an interesting manner are essential factors for the progress of any institution. In our case, the administrator makes great efforts to plan concretely to realize his vision for the University in future in the bleakest of situations and the teacher attempts to make the best use of the available resources to update and upgrade her knowledge continuously despite the challenging atmosphere. A positive attitude, an untiring will, and optimistic hope can help to overcome the toughest of challenges under any kind circumstance in the academic world.

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READERS WRITE

Dear Sir

Only this evening went through the Journal of Nov-Dec issue. Quite a good one. Thanks for all articles with Editorial. Articles like 'English as Lingua Franca: A Brief Review', 'The Official Status of English in India', 'Being Creative in the Teaching of English', '2B or not 2B', and all other ideas will help us a lot in our classroom teaching. Thanks again for such a nice issue.

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