

From Action to Insight: A Professional Learning Community's Experiences with the European Language Portfolio

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Abstract

This paper focuses on an action research project set in the context of one professional learning community's (PLC's) exploration of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP). Teachers of second and foreign languages in a large urban high school examined the potential of principles and tools related to the CEFR and ELP and shared their experiences during PLC meetings. This study examines data collected as part of the PLC discussions and deliberations and presents two particular pedagogical results emerging from this work: the development of a philosophical stance and an action plan. The paper concludes with a discussion of the process in which teachers engaged as they co-constructed understanding and explored pedagogical implications of their professional dialogue.

Résumé

Cet article traite d'un projet de recherche action mené dans le contexte d'une communauté d'apprentissage professionnelle (CAP) qui a exploré le Cadre européen commun de référence (CECR) et le Portfolio européen des langues (PEL) et comment la CAP les a mis en œuvre dans des classes de langue. Les enseignants des langues secondes et étrangères situés à une école secondaire urbaine ont partagé leurs expériences lors des réunions de CAP. Cette étude analyse les données recueillies lors des discussions et des délibérations de la CAP et elle présente deux résultats pédagogiques particuliers émergeant de ce travail— le développement d'une approche philosophique et un plan d'action. L'article se termine sur une discussion des processus vécus par les enseignants en co-construisant leurs connaissances pédagogiques par l'entremise du dialogue professionnel.

From Action to Insight: A Professional Learning Community's Experiences with the European Language Portfolio

Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can potentially be the backbone of successful educational initiatives (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Durrant & Holden, 2006; Fullan, 2005). Implementing new ideas and approaches in high school language classes can be a daunting task, but it is one made more positive and feasible when PLC members, in this case teachers and researchers, work together toward a common vision.

In this study, PLCs were operationalized following the guidelines described in New Brunswick (NB) Department of Education policy documents, informed primarily by the work of DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2008). According to the NB Department of Education policy document entitled, *When Kids Come First*, “we need to promote the growth of the professional learning communities concept, whereby teachers work in teams to improve learning” (NB Department of Education, Anglophone Sector, 2007, p. 13). Furthermore, a more recent provincial plan outlining an educational model for *21st Century Learning* supports PLCs as an approach “driven by three big ideas: a focus on learning, a culture of collaboration and a focus on results” (NB Department of Education, Anglophone Sector, 2010, p. 7). Within this PLC framework, teachers from a local high school along with researchers from the University of New Brunswick worked together to explore the pedagogical possibilities of a European Language Portfolio (ELP) based on the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for their second and foreign language classes.

In this paper we will explore literature pertinent to the CEFR, ELP, and PLCs that forms the theoretical backdrop for the study. Next, the research questions and research methodology will be presented. Then, we will share two particular results that represent action taken by the PLC as part of the action research cycle: the philosophical stance and the action plan. Finally, in the discussion we will elaborate on the results by exploring the process in which teachers engaged as they co-constructed understanding of the CEFR and the ELP and the implications for classroom practice.

Background Literature

The European Language Portfolio

The CEFR was developed by the Council of Europe to serve as a framework to describe language proficiency across five skills—reading, writing, listening, spoken interaction, and spoken production—at six levels of proficiency ranging from minimal competence to near-mastery (Council of Europe, 2001). Using the CEFR as a guiding framework, many member countries of the Council of Europe have designed ELPs that allow learners to reflect on and document their language learning (Little, 2007).

The ELP, officially launched in 2001, contains three components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The language passport serves as a summary of the learner's linguistic identity, language learning, and intercultural experiences, and as a record of self-assessed proficiency using the CEFR. The biography allows learners to reflect on and assess their on-going language learning by using “Can Do” statements. The dossier is a collection of evidence of the learner's proficiency and intercultural experiences (Little, 2007).

Central to all of the more than 80 models of the ELP is a set of common principles that include, among others, valuing intercultural experiences, encouraging learner autonomy, and promoting democratic learning (Council of Europe, 2006); principles that also became important to the teachers participating in the present study. According to the Council of Europe (2001, p. 103), intercultural awareness comes from students' self-awareness, that is, their understanding of their "world of origin", of the "world of the target community", and of the similarities and differences between these two worlds. The effect of the language teacher as facilitator of this intercultural awareness bears consideration. Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey (2002) have stated that the "intercultural dimension in language teaching aims to develop learners as intercultural speakers or mediators who are able to engage with complexity and multiple identities" (p. 9).

Connected to the development of language learner self-awareness is the notion of learner autonomy. This term has been broadly defined as, "the ability to take charge of one's learning," (Holec, 1979, p. 3) or more specifically as the learners' ability, "...to critically reflect on their learning process and develop a personally meaningful relation to it" (Schwienhorst, 2008, p.11). With regard to the ELP, Little (2009) has said "it encourages... frequent goal-setting, monitoring and self-assessment; so it is connected in various ways with the concept of learner autonomy" (p. 225). As is the case with intercultural awareness, the pedagogical implications of learner autonomy are also important to the present study.

One final principle of the ELP that connects to the present research is the potential that the CEFR holds "to 'democratize' L2 [second language] education"(Little, 2011, p. 381). In fact, "the Council of Europe's L2 education projects have always aimed to make the process of language learning more democratic" (Trim, as cited in Little, 2011, p. 382). In this view, the language educator's role is to organize and deliver language courses in a way that directly involves the learner in his/her own language learning. When practiced within the context of school life, this concept can be referred to as "democratic pedagogy" and may include, among other things, students "having escalating degrees of choices, both as individuals and as groups, within the parameters provided by the teacher" (Glickman, 1998, p. 50).

The place of the CEFR and the ELP in the classroom context is not without controversy and challenges. Little (2009) identified four challenges that are faced by teachers who try to find ways to integrate the CEFR and the ELP in their schools and classrooms: challenges to pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and evaluation, and educational policy. One of these, the challenge to pedagogy, is linked closely to this study and will be explored in the discussion section of this paper. Because many see the CEFR and the ELP exclusively as learner tools, the role of the teacher and the school is sometimes confusing (Little, 2009; Perclová, 2006; Splendido, 2009). Despite potential pedagogical issues, in a report commissioned by the government of Canada, Rehorick (2004) recommended that the ELP "can be applied fruitfully to the Canadian situation" (p. 13). After the CEFR and ELP were introduced to Canada at a national workshop in 2005, stakeholders concluded that the CEFR had potential as a proficiency framework for Canadian language learners and that further examination of the pedagogical potential was warranted (Vandergrift, 2006). Motivated by these recommendations and by projects currently happening in Canada (e.g., Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers [CASLT], 2009), this particular study aims to better understand the ways in which teachers explored how the CEFR and the ELP could guide both learning and teaching in high school

language classes. In order to help construct their pedagogical knowledge, teachers used the PLC as a venue for dialogue and meaning making.

Professional Learning Communities

The underlying basis for PLCs is collaboration among educators in order to improve students' learning (Fullan, 2005; Schmoker, 2005). In PLCs like the one in this study, teachers share a common vision and specific goals that guide the sharing of personal practices (Harris & Muijs, 2005). Although PLCs are often viewed as a milieu for effective and meaningful professional development (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005), they can also be a venue for collaborative mentorship (Mullen, 2000) and action research (Durrant & Holden, 2006; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Williams & Brien, 2010). Mullen (2000) described a PLC's potential as a way for schools and universities to come together in meaningful ways to encourage teacher-focused research and reflection. Others have also proposed a PLC model that goes beyond the practitioner-led, idea-generating sessions to a dynamic model of knowledge co-construction and capacity building (Chi-kin, Zhang, & Yin, 2011; Durrant & Holden, 2006; Maloney & Konza, 2011; Sandholdz, 2002; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). On this point, it is important to note that, "co-constructing knowledge of learning and teaching within a professional learning community requires staff to have a high level of motivation to learn, to be confident in expressing personal view and to be receptive to change and innovation" (Maloney & Konza, 2011, p.84).

Stoll et al. (2006) explained that, "PLCs are fluid, rather than fixed entities, perennially evolving with accumulating collective experience" (p. 228) and that, "if the community is to be intellectually vigorous, members need a solid basis of expert knowledge and skills" (p. 232). As in the context of the present study, teachers and researchers working together in order to explore the CEFR and ELP provided a foundation for both the PLC and for pedagogical research. Furthermore, Sandholtz (2002) supports the premise that professional growth happens when "teachers act as reflective practitioners, constantly evaluating their values and practices and developing and using new ideas with their students" (p. 817).

The PLC that participated in this study aimed to uphold tenets of the PLC such as reflection, democracy, and collegiality. However, these ideals, although supported by theory, are sometimes hard to achieve in reality. Levine (2010) concluded that it can be difficult to create ideal parameters for collaboration. Nonetheless, Cranston (2009) believes that "the kind of community that is required to shape teachers' beliefs to support students' opportunities to learn should allow and provide occasions for the kind of disagreement and disequilibrium that comes with critical questioning and debates of best practices" (p.18). To this end, Servage (2009) promotes a PLC that is founded on Nel Noddings' notion of "ethic of care" and posits that PLCs should place a "high priority on democratic discourse, and on positive, nurturing relationships within the PLC itself..." (p. 158).

The following research questions, posed by teachers and researchers and grounded in PLC literature, stemmed from a desire on the part of the research team to examine ways in which teachers worked in a PLC to explore a common vision. Teachers and researchers also wanted to better understand this process as it contributes to the ways in which teachers build capacity with respect to the CEFR and the ELP.

Research Questions

This particular project focused on two elements of pedagogy: the understandings that underpin practice and how these understandings can be enacted in the classroom. Thus, we asked the following questions:

1. How do language teachers working in a PLC build their understanding of the ELP and the CEFR?
2. How do language teachers working in a PLC transform their understanding of the ELP and the CEFR into pedagogical action?

Because the PLC's vision was to explore ways that the CEFR and the ELP could guide and inform their practice, the research methodology was framed by action research, an approach that complemented the aims of the PLC.

Research Methodology

In conducting this project, we subscribed to an action research philosophy described by Greenwood and Levin (2005) and underpinned by two foci: "knowledge generation through action and experimentation in context and participative democracy as both method and goal" (p. 53). At the heart of this kind of action research are principles of democratic dialogue in which a balance exists between reflection and action, and work experience is viewed as a starting point for dialogue (Gustavsen, 2006). Researchers have underscored the importance of this kind of collaborative research "with", rather than "on", participants due to its potential for encouraging reflection and empowerment (Burns 2011; Heron & Reason, 2006). Because collaboration and dialogue are also tenets described in PLC literature, this methodological orientation fit well with both the research questions and the practical context in which the research was embedded. The PLC involved in this study was a collaborative team with a common vision that sought out the opportunity to work with researchers. The nature of the group and their goals created an ideal environment for action research.

Participants: The PLC

Participants in the project were all teachers at a large urban high school in New Brunswick. They all taught second/additional languages and were members of a PLC whose vision was to understand the ways that the CEFR and the ELP could guide and inform the teaching and learning happening in their language classes. Three teachers worked together over a period of a school year (2008-2009) on this vision before approaching researchers to ask for support and collaboration.

Over the subsequent two academic years (2009-2010, 2010-2011) the group expanded to include all interested language teachers at the school and discussions continued to evolve as ideas were shared and questions were asked. In its largest form, the group consisted of 10 members: five teachers of French Second Language (FSL), one teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL), one teacher of Spanish and EAL, two teachers of Maliseet, and one teacher of Mandarin. Although all second/additional language teachers at the school were welcome to PLC meetings at all times, the core of the action research team was five teachers who participated actively and regularly in both the pedagogical and research aspects of the project; it is the insights and actions of these teachers that will be shared in this article. These five language teachers embodied the principles and ideals of a PLC and, despite challenges and occasional disagreements, were committed to the goals set forth at the outset of the PLC's formation. These five female teachers had varying years of

experience: one teacher had less than 5 years experience, three had between 5-10 years experience, and one had more than 10 years of experience in the teaching profession. All of these teachers had a specialization in the area of second language teaching as required by their respective universities.

Data Collection and Analysis

According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), “Classroom action research typically involves the use of qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers (often with help from academics) with a view to teachers making judgments about how to improve their own practices” (p. 561). In this paper we will focus on the data gathered during PLC meetings and in focus group and individual interviews with teachers.

Although teachers met informally in their schools on a monthly basis, the six formal PLC meetings took place in September, January, and May 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. During the day-long PLC meetings that took place at the university, researchers conducted focus group sessions lasting approximately one hour. In addition, researchers took field notes to document what occurred and what teachers discussed during PLC meetings. These field notes helped to elucidate how the PLC came to understand the CEFR and ELP as tools to inform pedagogy. To complement these field notes and further address the research questions, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with the aim of describing the experiences and perceptions of the teachers.

The data analysis was a recursive and iterative process involving on-going reflection and interpretation of the data collected both by teachers and researchers. One of the key features of this type of research is a “spiral of self-reflective cycles” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563), and therefore collection and analysis of the data often overlap as the collaborative learning occurs and as groups work together to construct meaning and to reflect on classroom practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Using a memoing technique described by Warren and Karner (2005), field notes and transcripts were analyzed for themes relevant to the research questions. These themes were brought back to the group for further discussion. In this way, teachers were actively involved in both the data collection and analysis following an action research cycle similar to the one described by Sagor (2005) in which teachers identify a focus of interest, articulate a theory of action, implement action, collect data, reflect on results, and plan further action. Action research is organic in nature and focuses on actions of participants as they work through particular pedagogical issues (Burns, 2011). The results that follow represent the actions in which the teachers engaged as they explored the CEFR and the ELP as a way to orient and guide their teaching.

Results

This project had several facets and the data yielded different types of qualitative results. For this paper we will focus on two key results: the development of a philosophical stance and of an action plan. These results emerged as the teachers and researchers worked through the action research cycle.

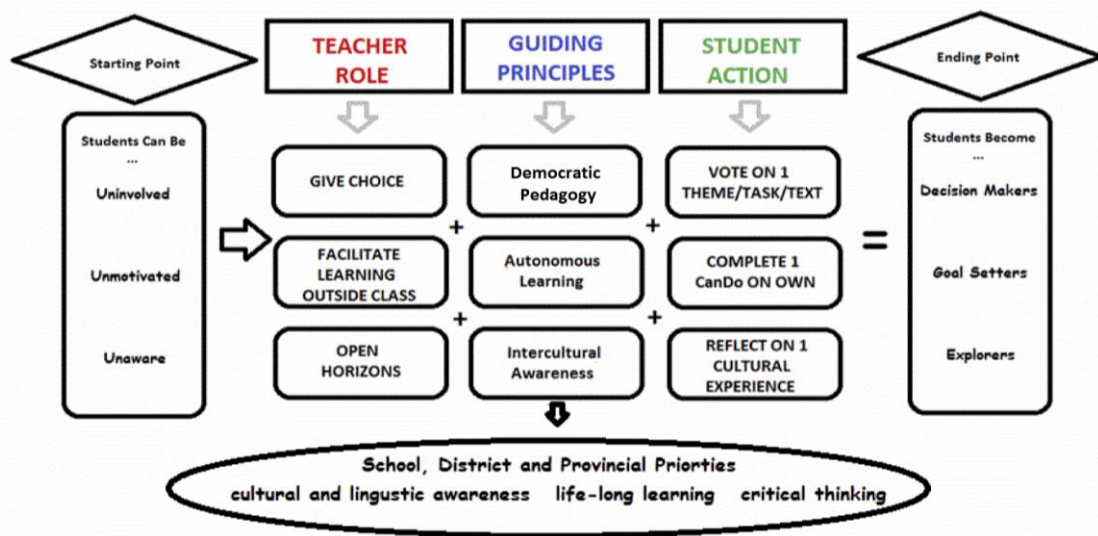
The Philosophical Stance

One of the actions taken on by the PLC and documented by the research team was the development of the philosophical stance toward the ways in which the CEFR and the ELP guided and informed teacher practice. Throughout the two years that the research team

worked with the PLC, the teachers created language portfolios that were based on the French and Swiss ELPs (Centre régional de documentation pédagogique (CRDP) de Basse Normandie, 2006; Vosicki, 2002) and reflective of the philosophies of ELPs described in the literature review. In addition, they designed lesson plans, activities, and posters based on the Can Do statements to aid them in their teaching. These Can Do statements were slightly modified versions of those in the French ELP; these modifications were made to better align with provincial curriculum documents.

As the title of this article suggests, teachers in this PLC began with an action-oriented approach to using the CEFR and the ELP, but as time for discussion and reflection was facilitated, teachers began to think more philosophically about what they were doing and why they were doing it. They realized that in order to successfully and effectively take on classroom-based pedagogical initiatives it would be necessary to explore more deeply the rationale for the project. Throughout the second year of PLC meetings and during focus group sessions, teachers identified the following guiding principles: learner autonomy, intercultural awareness, and democratic pedagogy (Figure 1). These principles not only fit with teachers' beliefs, but were also supported by the literature and by school and district initiatives.

Figure 1 Philosophical Stance



To explain the evolution of the above philosophical stance, we will begin with PLC discussions that occurred early in the first year of the project, 2009-2010. At the second PLC meeting in that year, the teachers talked about some of their challenges, revealing their perception that many students were uninvolved in the process of planning for their language learning. Thus, teachers were looking for ways to involve learners in decision-making and to make their classrooms a more democratic environment. It was not until teachers had time to reflect and put some ideas into action in the classroom that they were able to actually articulate their stance in writing. Teachers tried out several strategies in their classrooms such as providing choice of activities, taking polls of student interests and

preferences, and asking for student opinions of particular tasks. One teacher shared that one way she would try to enact this part of the philosophy was to directly involve students in shaping the lessons. She reflected,

... I read the article that David Little sent me [Splendido, 2009]. He said that was a good way for them to vote on their own, next steps, it wasn't only up to me because that wasn't teaching them to be autonomous learners... so, I said, ok pick the skill that you are not comfortable with yet and I will help you find ways to practice it.... And you can tell me what kind of activity you would like to do to get that [Can Do] statement. (Focus group, Hay¹, Dec. 2009)

In the PLC, teachers agreed they would try to foster a sense of democracy in the classroom, a concept related to learner autonomy, but one that, in the teachers' minds, gave specific action-oriented direction. Due to this distinction, they felt they wanted to separate the two terms in their philosophy. After experimenting with this concept of classroom democracy, another teacher remarked: "The students like to have choices of objectives and projects that we do in the course. It increases motivation and interest" (translation, Cormier, personal communication, September 2011).

Furthermore, the teachers wished to motivate their students to take ownership of their language learning beyond the walls of the classroom. During a focus group conversation aimed at exploring learner autonomy, a concept that was brought out by teachers as they developed their philosophical stance, one teacher reflected,

This idea that we're encouraging ownership but... what you want them to own it's not necessarily the physical materials it's the language learning process... I think... that this is a tool we use in class to encourage this higher principle which is: "this is your language learning journey. I'm just part of it. I'm just helping you in your journey." (Focus Group, Lafargue, May 2010)

Teachers hoped that this experience might encourage learners to set goals for language learning both in the classroom and outside the school.

Finally, the teachers wished to broaden the students' horizons by providing opportunities to gain more intercultural awareness. For example, during one PLC working session, certain teachers decided to be more explicit about exploring the cultural elements embedded in authentic texts as a way for students to gain a better understanding of the target language culture. Two teachers made plans for a class cultural field trip while another challenged learners to engage in a cultural activity outside the school such as attending a target language concert or play. Teachers talked about ways to help students achieve the goal of "becoming intercultural speakers" (Byram et al., 2002, p. 9) and saw the CEFR's grounding in authentic language use as a good springboard for this kind of learning. Also, by using the ELP, students are encouraged to reflect on and document their intercultural experiences.

After teachers had articulated a philosophical stance as a PLC, they began to talk about what was taking place in their classrooms with respect to putting these beliefs into action. By the end of the 2009-2010 year, teachers were starting to feel the need to have a more formalized action plan in place that allowed them to more consistently and

¹ We have been given permission to use the actual surnames of teacher-researchers who participated in this study.

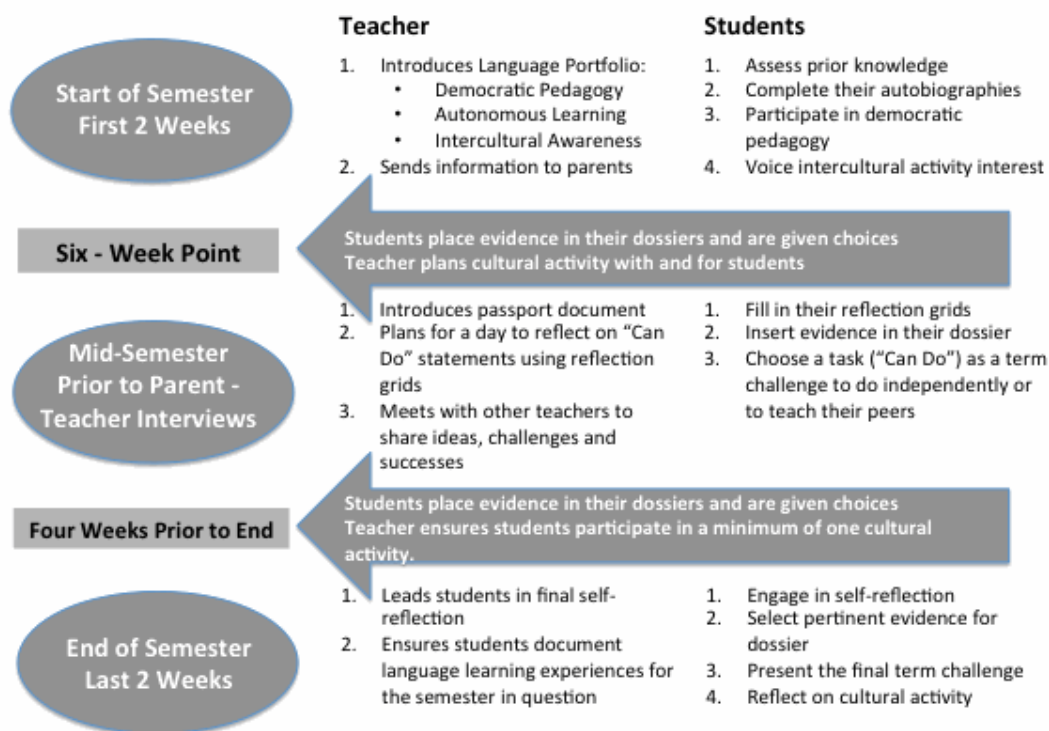
systematically reflect the principles embedded in the CEFR and ELP literature and in their philosophical stance. Early in the second year of the study, they worked on co-developing an action plan to help them stay on track, with the full knowledge that this plan was a work-in-progress and would continue to evolve as they continued to gain confidence and expertise.

The Action Plan

One of the members of the PLC team took leadership in the development of the action plan (see Figure 2) and described it this way: “The action plan came as a necessity... in our efforts to integrate the portfolio in our classrooms. It helped us develop a common strategy as teachers and to identify successes and challenges” (Personal communication, Hay, April, 2011).

Teachers in this PLC were diverse in their teaching styles and approaches, making the task of developing a consistent and systematic plan challenging. The guiding idea was to develop a plan that supported the principles of the ELP and the CEFR, but at the same time leave room for creativity and adaptability. Another teacher-researcher in the PLC shared the following: “I am able now to talk to other language teachers and I feel like we are all speaking the same language. It allows us to better collaborate as a department” (Focus Group, Lafargue, Dec. 2010).

Figure 2 Action Plan



At the start of the semester², using a student-created multimedia presentation³, teachers introduce the CEFR, the ELP, and certain key underlying principles. At this point, learners, via an autobiography, are asked to reflect on prior learning and experiences and then set goals related to linguistic and cultural learning. The setting of goals involves initial self-assessment followed by a selection of Can Do statements that reflect both their current and potential language abilities.

After the introductory sessions, learners should have a sense of where they are going and teachers are able to begin selecting and creating linguistic and intercultural activities that will meet the needs and the interests of the learners. The linguistic activities consisted of reading, listening, speaking, or writing tasks that related to particular Can Do statements. Teachers designed these activities individually and during PLC meetings. Their aim was to create activities which were authentic (simulations of real communicative experiences) and that also provided some insight into or connection to culture.

By mid-semester, teachers and learners are engaged in these activities and teachers need to take stock of how learners feel they are progressing and help learners to set language goals both for the classroom and outside the school. One teacher shared how these kinds of activities had an influence on her teaching practices: “My students love this approach because they see for themselves their progress and their shortcomings. The project completely changed the way I teach French as a second language” (Translation, Focus Group, Paulin, May 2011). The topics of reflection and self-assessment were revisited several times by the PLC in order to determine the best way to make this happen in the classroom. At an early point in the PLC discussions, teachers decided to create reflection grids that included the Can Do statements, related activities, and performance descriptors. Although teachers liked the idea of the assessment grids, many of them changed and adapted the original grid into simplified self-assessment slips used in conjunction with specific formative assessment activities. Related to this matter and to the challenges teachers faced regarding how often and in what format to conduct this kind of reflection, one teacher commented,

I think it is important for students to reflect on their language learning, so they can see how much they have accomplished, how they have accomplished it, and how long it took them to accomplish it. I think reflection can be done just as well orally, as it can written. I see that students aren't as inclined to write down as they are to just have a dialogue about it. I would say no more than twice a month... at least to do a formal reflection. However, I briefly reflect almost everyday... (Focus Group, Morales, May 2011)

In its current iteration, the action plan is meant to facilitate and encourage, not to overemphasize, self-assessment and reflection.

² A semester is a five-month period at this high school; students enrolled in a language course complete 350 minutes per week of language instruction.

³ In the previous year, during focus group discussions, teachers and students determined that it would be more effective if fellow learners who had previously used the ELP shared their experience and perceptions with newcomers to the portfolio. The result was a multimedia presentation “Prezi” (Steeves, 2011) developed by one student in consultation with teachers and peers:
<http://www.unbf.ca/L2/SchoolbasedlanguagePortfolioPortfolioscolairedeslangues.php>

As per the action plan, at the end of the semester, the teachers help the class determine the Can Do statements addressed during the semester. Individual learners, depending on their language proficiency, take on self-directed activities and projects that contribute to their linguistic and intercultural development and address personal goals. Using the passport document, learners reflect on accomplishments made in the context of that particular course as well as any personal goals they may have achieved during the same time frame. All five teachers in the PLC felt that it was important to conclude the semester in a manner that allows learners to acknowledge successes and set future language goals. Although they all agreed on this point, one teacher tempered this general feeling with the following remark: “Yes, we take out the passport and see what we’ve successfully done here in class but it also means you probably will revisit some of these throughout your lifetime” (Focus group, Hay, Dec. 2010).

These two actions taken on by the PLC (the action plan and the philosophical stance) took time and intense collaboration on the part of the teachers. In the discussion, we will share some of these underlying pedagogical issues faced by the PLC members as they worked through the action research cycle.

Discussion

The data shared in the findings stemmed from two years of work taken on by teachers in a PLC who wanted to motivate learners and enhance their teaching. As per the research questions, the two results that we share in this article are reflective of the dialogue in which teachers engaged in order to better understand the CEFR and the ELP and the implications for their teaching. In terms of the action research conducted, these findings are also examples of initiatives taken on by the PLC members in order to help them formalize and articulate their actions. In this discussion, we will describe the process that led from action in the classroom to insight related to the principles articulated in the philosophical stance and the action plan.

As Cranston (2009) suggested, working together toward meaningful goals sometimes requires disagreement. Similarly, Levine (2010) concluded that although in theory PLCs provide an ideal environment for working through a pedagogical problem or initiative, in practice challenges may occur as “... real groups of teachers engage in multiple and evolving forms of collaborative activity” (p.124). In this study, although the PLC was able to collaborate in order to put into practice their growing understanding about the CEFR and the ELP, the process was not without challenges. Little (2009, p. 224) noted that a “challenge to pedagogy” can happen when teachers face doubt from their colleagues who do not share the same interest in CEFR and the ELP. In this case, some resistance was due, in part, to a “lack of teacher know-how” (Little, 2009, p.224) about how to relate the Can Do statements to existing curricula and resources. The teachers created the philosophical stance and action plan, in part, as a response to a desire to communicate ideas in a clear and coherent fashion to those in the school who were curious about the project. As in some European contexts (European Centre for Modern Languages [ECML], 2011; Perclová, 2006), the adoption of the CEFR and the ELP did not happen on a school-wide basis. Furthermore, prior to the project, not all teachers consistently encouraged learner self-assessment and reflection, so finding ways to make these practices part of each teacher’s pedagogy was challenging. Time to experiment, reflect, discuss, and reassess was essential to helping the teachers in the PLC fit these CEFR and ELP principles (Council of Europe, 2001) into their pedagogical practice.

As suggested in the literature (Dufour, 2006; Durrant & Holden, 2006) and supported by findings in this study, PLC members must share a common vision, but not necessarily a similar teaching style. In this PLC, teachers were able to build their understanding of the CEFR and ELP without sharing identical pedagogical perspectives. Moreover, although a PLC does not necessarily have to include researchers, ensuring that there is a balance of theoretical and practitioner knowledge can contribute to meaningful professional growth (Durrant & Holden, 2006; Harris & Muijs, 2005; Maloney & Konza, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Williams & Brien, 2010). In addition, the need for positive working conditions such as release time, a suitable workspace, and pedagogical support (DuFour, 2006; Harris & Muijs, 2005) was also underscored in this action research project. As Little (2007) pointed out, in his discussion about the challenge to curriculum, working with the ELP can require extra time and effort on the part of teachers.

This study points to the value of Stoll et al.'s (2006) notion of being "intellectually vigorous" and Mullen's (2000) principles of "collaborative mentorship". Framing PLC discussions around pedagogical and empirical literature, in this case related to the CEFR and the ELP (Little, 2009, 2010; Schwienhorst, 2008; Splendido, 2009), allows practitioners to have a point of reference and a shared language. Although members of the PLC may disagree about how to interpret or enact their understanding, a solid foundation such as the one provided in this project allows dialogue to be productive and facilitates the action research process.

This study supports Burns' (2011) assertion that although action research can be labor-intensive for teachers, it increases the potential impact of a project or initiative and puts reflective practice in the forefront. When such a project requires a change in philosophy or professional practice, which was the case for this PLC, it is of particular importance to ground action and reflection in focused dialogue rather than unstructured idea sharing. This kind of informed and reflective professional conversation requires teachers to not only consider the topic at hand, but to also examine their own practice in terms of the vision of the PLC.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges that can occur when taking on collaborative action research, it holds promise as a means of exploring a particular pedagogical idea or initiative. It allows for a dynamic and reflective means to encourage both inquiry and action. This study demonstrates an initiative that values both practitioner and researcher knowledge. Furthermore, although the results represent a synthesis of the work of the PLC, the process that led to these actions was also an important aspect of this study. In this way, this research contributes not only to literature on action research and PLCs, but also to the growing body of work related to the CEFR and the ELP.

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