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Editorial

In recent years there has been a major rethinking of the nature and purpose of professional development in language teacher education (Freeman 1998) which has arisen from the realisation by teacher educators that traditional means of professional development rarely lead to changes in practice (cf Fullan 1991). It has become apparent that ‘training’ approaches to professional development that focus on the transmission of theoretical knowledge and practical skills are by themselves inadequate (Richards 1998). In contrast to earlier ‘top down’ approaches whereby subject matter knowledge was imparted to teachers through courses, workshops and conferences, recent models of language teacher education have therefore highlighted the need to use the teaching and learning process itself as the basis for developing professional understanding. The best way for teachers to develop and grow professionally, it is argued, is to become ‘reflective practitioners’ by studying their own practice and using data gained from these observations as a basis for evaluation and change (Richards and Lockhart 1994). To this end, a wide variety of methods such as collaborative action research, journal writing, self- and peer observations and structured reflection have been used as a means of investigating teachers’ beliefs and decision-making practices and fostering reflective practice (see, for example, Bailey and Nunan 1996, Burns 1999, Freeman and Richards 1996). One insight that emerges consistently from these studies of language teachers at work is that teachers learn by doing, by reflecting and solving problems, and by working together in a supportive environment.

The articles in this special issue of Prospect all exemplify the kind of reflective and collaborative approach to professional development that is highlighted in much of the recent writing on teacher professional development in language education, with a particular focus on the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). The contributions also demonstrate ways in which research can incorporate and inform professional development and professional practice in an institutional context. The first three articles by Burton, Burns and Tinker Sachs explore action research as a useful means of encouraging teachers to reflect on their own practice, while Wigglesworth demonstrates how other types of teacher involvement in research can enhance teacher skills and knowledge. The fifth article by Hyde outlines how research into teacher needs in professional development was used to inform the establishment of a professional development website, and examines how online technologies can be used to foster virtual learning communities within the Adult Migrant Education Program in Australia.

In the first article, Jill Burton proposes collaborative analysis as a self-directed approach to professional development in which language
Teachers are agents of their own professional renewal. She draws on her own experiences of teaching and learning as a teacher educator to examine the relationship between action research, teaching practice and case study analysis, and stresses the benefits that can be gained from a collaborative analysis of experience and expertise. Using her own experiences as a starting point, she argues that classroom teachers should be encouraged to reflect on and analyse their own professional practice in the form of case-studies which can be shared with others as ‘we are all teachers and we are all learners’ and our ‘relationships are reciprocal, complementary, and mutually beneficial’. Sharing these reflections can form a useful basis for group reflection and collaborative analysis, and thus encourage action research and other forms of teacher-research as professional development.

Anne Burns and Gertrude Tinker Sachs also examine action research as a useful catalyst for reflection and development in professional practice. They highlight in particular some of the issues and dilemmas that arise in the facilitation of such research projects in two different contexts: among AMEP teachers in Australia (Burns), and among secondary school teachers in Hong Kong (Tinker Sachs). Both authors tackle the important question of sustainability: how can individual teachers, whose working lives are already full and pressured, be supported in their efforts to identify and research areas of practice which are relevant to their professional lives?

Burns focuses on how action research initiatives can be fostered at the local level within the AMEP. Drawing on a review of collaborative action research processes in the AMEP over the last decade, Burns summarises the steps involved in identifying relevant areas of enquiry and conducting some of the major projects undertaken nationally. She then goes on to report the findings of a recent project designed to gain insight into the process of facilitating teacher action research, and to identify the factors that need to be taken into account when such projects are initiated by local organisations which are part of a national program. On the basis of the findings from this project, Burns concludes that several key factors are crucial if action research is to be encouraged at the local level: flexibility in the negotiation of time-lines and research processes that fit in with the culture of the local organisation; tangible support from the organisation; and personal choice by participants, both in whether or not to be part of an action research project, and in what questions to investigate. Burns reaffirms the importance of collaborative action research as a professional development tool within the AMEP, and provides recommendations on how professionals can be supported to conduct projects initiated at the local level in the absence of a national project.

Tinker Sachs also explores some of the factors involved in the management and support of action research, but in the rather different setting of secondary education in Hong Kong. She reports on a project designed to encourage English language teachers to reflect critically on their practice through participation in action research, and to help them cultivate a culture
of reflection and change in the teaching of English within schools. While Tinker Sachs remains committed to the efficacy of such an approach, her article catalogues some of the difficulties encountered by teachers and by the researchers attempting to support them in their projects. Some of the issues influencing the success of action research projects in promoting changes in classroom practice in Hong Kong are similar to those raised by Burns — for example teachers’ heavy workloads. Others relate more particularly to the context, and illustrate the importance of sensitivity to cultural factors in the facilitation of professional development initiatives of this kind.

The fourth article by Gillian Wigglesworth describes how teachers benefited on a number of levels from a series of research projects designed to investigate the effect of different variables on learner performance in assessment tasks. The projects not only allowed the participating teachers to gain a better understanding of issues affecting the selection and development of both teaching and assessment tasks, but also furnished results which provided a strong empirical basis for a series of professional development workshops that addressed issues of direct relevance to classroom and assessment practice. The projects described by Wigglesworth illustrate how relevant research-based insights can be productively used by teachers as a means of informing and improving practice.

The final article in this volume, by Patricia Hyde, is timely in its focus on the capacity of new technologies to address the increasingly diverse professional development needs of the AMEP in ways which can address individual needs and also build communities of learning across Australia. Hyde outlines the collaborative and research-based approach taken to the development of the Professional Connections professional development web site for the AMEP, and describes how potential users can be involved not only in the identification of their needs but also in evaluating the pilot web site. The article provides a useful overview of the current use made of the internet by teachers within the AMEP, and of different models of professional development on the web. On the basis of these reviews, Hyde proposes priorities for a professional development site dedicated for AMEP users: relevance to the day-to-day activities of teachers, in particular in supporting them to use the Internet; the provision of up-to-date professional resources; and the establishment of learning communities, including the delivery of short courses. Feedback from teachers evaluating the website has been positive and useful for further refinement of the site, and for the conduct of professional development through the site during 2000. As Hyde warns, however, the continuing success of this type of professional development depends on the content and relevance of the material made available through this means: as with other modes of professional development, close contact with practitioners is essential in order to ensure that the resources and learning opportunities it offers address current professional issues and concerns.
The issue concludes with three book reviews which also address language teacher professional development. The two reviews by Ruth Wajnryb address a teacher’s professional development needs at different stages in their professional life. Jeremy Harmer’s new book *How to teach English* is most relevant to a teacher at the beginning of their language teaching career, and provides a well-structured overview of some general patterns of teaching. The second book reviewed by Wajnryb, *Diary of a language teacher* by Joachim Appel, documents the experiences of one teacher in the particular context of a German secondary school. The reflective analysis presented by the author is relevant to teachers everywhere since it addresses what Wajnryb calls the ‘universals’ of teaching: how people connect, what learning is and how teaching relates to learning. In the final book review, Eugenius Sadtono recommends *Beyond training* by Jack C Richards as essential reading for both preservice and inservice teachers. He applauds Richards’ emphasis on critically reflective thinking and on the engagement of teachers in the exploration of the beliefs, knowledge and thinking that underlie successful teaching as a fruitful way of taking professional development beyond teaching skills *per se*.

We hope that this volume will provide readers with a taste of the range of ways in which research can be used in language teacher professional development to encourage reflective practice, and look forward to receiving the fruits of similar research and reflection in the form of articles for publication in future volumes of *Prospect*.

**References**


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