



Commitment to Core Values in Professional Development in ELT Contexts: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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The need to continue professional development will increase in all professions. Recent studies have been conducted in an effort to emphasize the role of core values in guiding action steps in teachers' professional development plans. This paper focuses on the exploration of commitment to core values in professional development in the local ELT context in HCMC, Vietnam. The results were based on the qualitative data from the six interviewees who were the exemplars previously selected for their long service of more than five years to establish an insight into the faculty's core values. The findings are recommended as the basis for building standards of professional conduct in the local ELT context.

Continuing professional development in ELT

In order to enhance professional learning, researchers propose the creation of professional learning communities with the suggestion that the focus is not just on individuals' learning but on professional learning for collective knowledge and growth, i.e., professional learning communities help teachers enhance their own and their school's development (Stoll, 2010). The concept of professional learning was further developed by Hallinger & Liu (2016) as the continuous acquisition of new knowledge and enrichment of the teaching profession. In the teaching context and the corporate one alike, if teaching professionals have opportunities to learn to improve excellence and understanding of learners' needs, they may improve their teaching practice and help learners better. Lezotte (2005, p. 182) "concluded that school reform could be neither successful nor sustainable unless it was embraced by the teachers, administrators, and support staff that define the professional learning community." Sparks (2005, p. 156) asserts, "Successful professional learning communities clearly demonstrate what is possible when teachers learn and collaborate within their schools as part of their daily work." In the same manner, numerous researchers stress the importance of professional development activities, such as workshops, conferences, action research, team teaching, and so on, thanks to which schools learn by listening to teachers' ideas for innovations (Timperley, 2008; Vescio, 2008). Curwood (2015) added the modes of workshops, conferences, and sharing sessions for professional learning, which could be delivered face-to-face or virtually using conferencing technology.

There are also empirical studies in the context of ELT with similar conclusions about creating professional learning communities to enhance professional learning among teachers as the ultimate goal for the sustainability of a language school (Richards & Farrell, 2005; LaRocco,

2009; Murray, 2010; Lorimer, 2012; Donaldson, 2009). In practice, there have been many professional learning projects implemented in local ELT institutions in Vietnam, such as British Council, RMIT, ILA, British International School Hanoi, etc. to name some. Professional learning has stepped beyond the context of higher education to prove itself a meaningful practice at all academic levels from primary to high schools (Senge et al., 2018).

Roles of core values in professional development

Leading people has been causing headaches for leaders all over the world, especially in the new economy when people are increasingly demanding. Leaders in the flat world are aware of the human capital, which they find the most difficult to gain and the most difficult to sustain. Bolman (2008, p. 117) is right to say: "Our most important asset is our people." Reality shows that it is the way people are treated that really matters, not just the money. Many organizations nowadays, both business and educational, are more successful just because they know how to treat people so that they will contribute their best (Effron, 2003; Donald, 2007; Senyucel, 2009). Cases of such models consider teachers to be the most important and offer them the environment to work with pride (Bolman, 2011). After all, leaders' efforts are to make employees 'satisfied' and thus decide to stay. Successful employers, therefore, are those who know how to manage and lead employees by providing them with regular professional development activities (Seyfarth, 2001; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Timperley, 2008).

In most organizations, professional development is not easy, which could be attributed to cultural factors that may affect commitment (Senyucen, 2009). In the field of ELT, although teachers are aware that teaching is lifelong learning and they need opportunities to engage in the improvement of their practice over time, they would adhere to standards of professional conduct and, therefore, core values as long as they perceive embedded principles of professional learning (Lezotte, 2005; Timperley, 2008; Stoll, 2010). Tomlinson (2013) stipulated that professional conduct should be instilled through the core values that organically reflect the organization's vision and mission statements. Educational leaders in ELT are expected to know how to build professional learning environments in their schools through which core values are effectively communicated so that teachers are well-prepared to continue their professional development (Mann & Mohammad, 2016; Kouze, 2010).

Commitment to core values in professional development

Literature shows the alignment between professional development and core values. Leaders communicate core values in order to enhance perceptions of professional learning among their employees, who will eventually continue professional development (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Elmore, 2002). Since teaching is a knowledge profession, continuing professional development is even more critical. Life changes so fast that we lag behind if we stay the same (Sparks, 2001; Brandt, 2004; Senge, 2010). Thus, those who continue professional development will, and vice versa, demonstrate adherence to standards of professional conduct, which are commonly built in alignment with the core values of an institution (Mann & Mohammad, 2016; Ulferts, 2021). In the big picture, employees' commitment to core values positively affects their professional development plans and, eventually, their career advancement over the long term. Many researchers have already confirmed this alignment based on the universal fact that core values are, by nature, basic human needs. One of the classic presentations of the alignment between core values and human needs is Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. In the new economy, Ashmos (2000) and Covey (2006) provide a conceptualization of core values based on human

needs with a focus on ‘*spirit*’. Covey (2006) visually presents core values in the whole-person development paradigm below (**Figure 1**):

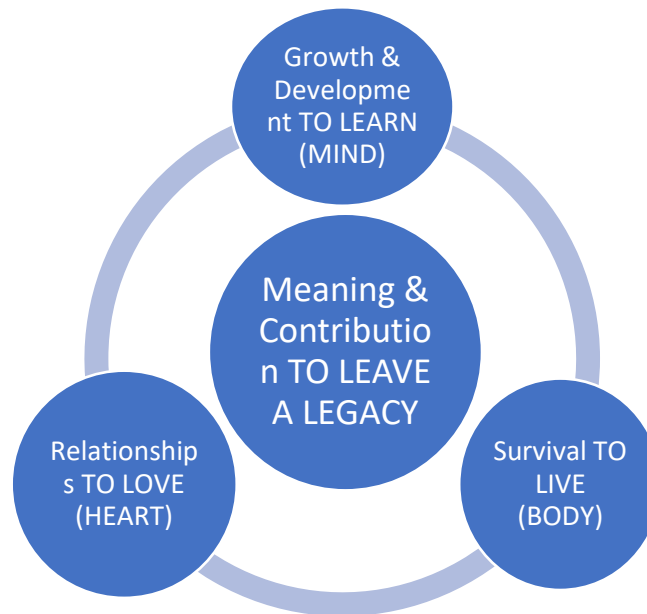


Figure 1: Whole-person development (Covey, 2006)

According to the paradigm, employees today need to have opportunities to use all four parts of their nature: body, mind, heart, and spirit. By placing spirit in the center means, Covey (2006) means that leaders today need to take more care of employees' needs and that when employees are paid fairly, treated kindly, and used creatively, they are able to develop as a whole person and willing to adhere to core values and thus contribute.

Russo (2010, p. 18) gives sound examples of such commitment in the corporate world: “This is one reason why Bill Gates still works, why Warren Buffett and Steve Jobs come to work. There is just no denying the importance of ego and no shame in acknowledging that it is the basic human need to want some strokes now and then.” In the context of schools, Bolman (2008, p.196) stresses the importance of commitment in terms of agreement and harmony, which the author states “are easier to achieve when everyone shares similar values, beliefs, and cultural ways”. Bolman (2011) introduces a symbolic view of schools with a focus on building institutional culture through inherited values, i.e., those in the schools whose behaviors are shaped by the culture are expected to make a commitment to the values in order to continue professional development and eventually grow in their career.

The conceptual framework

The conceptualization of commitment to core values in professional development can be visually presented in the diagram below (**Figure 2**):

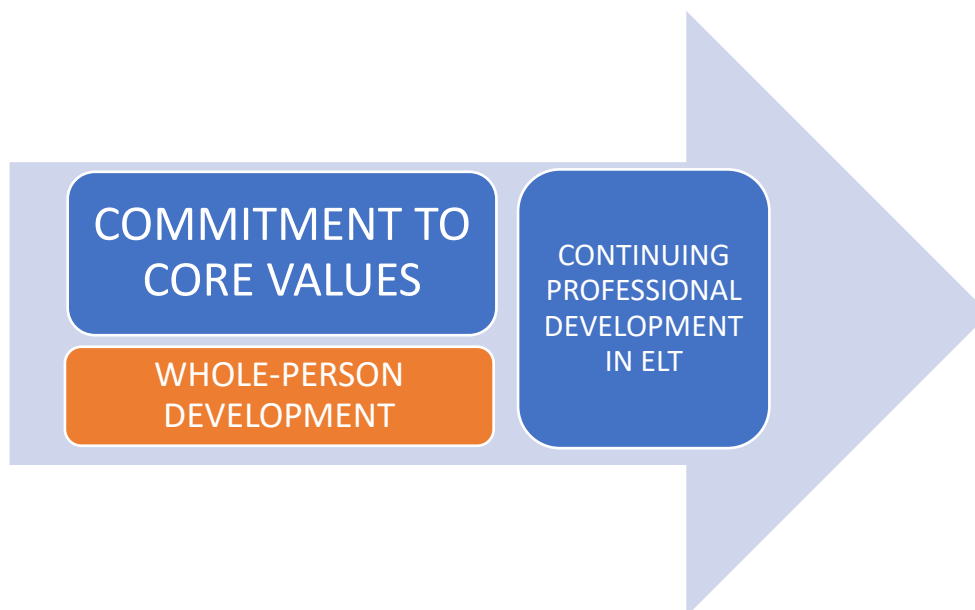


Figure 2: The conceptual framework

Aim of the study

There has been a myriad of studies in the field of professional development. However, there have not been enough empirical studies in the local context providing insights into the role of core values in professional development in ELT. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on the issue, which aims to explore ELT professionals' commitment to core values in continuing professional development. To achieve the aim, the following research questions are to be answered:

1. How do ELT professionals perceive core values in professional development?
2. What are the outcomes in line with the core values that they expect to achieve?

Methodology

Research design

The study used a case study design and a qualitative approach. There was initially a survey to identify exemplars among teachers at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, HCMC, Vietnam, who were expected to give their responses to the research questions. Besides this key question, the researcher asked some other questions to clarify some information.

Participants

The researcher sought to mitigate any bias by including teachers across the faculty, where the researcher has been working for more than 20 years, and thus not only has adequate knowledge of the faculty but also easier and official access to the participants. In this study, all the teachers of the faculty were invited to participate in a survey to confirm their perceptions of professional learning in the context of the faculty and accordingly identify the exemplars, which formally produced quantitative data as part of the case study evidence. All of the six interviewees selected have been staying at the faculty for more than five years.

Data analysis technique

The researcher applied the four steps suggested by Creswell (2003). In STEPS 1 & 2, all the responses were transcribed, and meaningful quotes were highlighted to obtain a general sense of the information from the interview and taken into properties. Step 3 involved packaging those properties into a small number of categories, each of which was labeled with a code. Step 4 was the most important one. The themes were carefully considered to be used to answer the research question in light of the reviewed literature as the output of the findings. Below is a sample tabulated analytical procedure:

Table 1: A sample tabulated analytical procedure

PROPERTIES	CATEGORIES	THEMES
I <u>have heard</u> of the core values of the faculty, but I <u>just don't remember now</u> .	Knowing the core values	Perception of core values in professional development
Core values <u>must be aligned with goals</u> set to achieve	Understanding the roles of the core values	
Understanding the core values helps proactively innovate teaching methods, which <u>eventually improve my expertise</u> .	Growth & Development (EXCELLENCE)	Expected learning outcomes in line with core values
Understanding the core values helps <u>confidently conduct research</u>	Research (FLEXIBILITY)	
Understanding the core values helps <u>get access to opportunities for career advancement</u> .	Survival (ASPIRATION)	
Understanding the core values helps <u>develop cooperation among colleagues</u>	Relationships (INTEGRITY)	
Understanding the core values helps <u>develop relationships with others</u>	Meaning & Contribution (RESPONSIBILITY)	

Discussion of the results and findings

Perception of core values in professional development

According to the properties obtained, it can be concluded that all the participants well perceived the five core values of the faculty, namely Excellence, Flexibility, Aspiration, Integrity and Responsibility (EFAIR). Specifically, *first*, all the teachers expressed their awareness of the core values on continuing professional development. *Second*, most of them properly understood the core values and their roles in professional development though some of them did not clearly remember the name of each. *Last but not least*, all the interviewees well perceived the core values in terms of what a teacher needs to or must adhere to and accordingly achieves professional development goals.

Expected learning outcomes in line with core values

The respondents all shared the learning outcomes one would expect to achieve when continuing professional development. Interestingly, the outcomes were well aligned with the core values of the faculty and the human needs presented in the whole-person development paradigm (Ashmos, 2000; Covey, 2006).

- Growth & Development – EXCELLENCE

Most interviewees, when asked about expected learning outcomes when making a commitment to the faculty's core values, were consistent with similar responses to the need for excellence in professional development. They clearly stated they chose to belong to the faculty and adhere to its core values because they needed to improve their knowledge. T1 (T stands for teacher hereinafter) clearly stated that “The core values are the guidelines for meeting learners’ needs”, accordingly, he added that the core values expect ELT professionals to develop habits of mind towards self-actualization, confirming Maslow’s conceptualization and the findings of contemporary researchers, such as Lezotte (2005), Donaldson (2009, Mann & Mohammad (2016) and so on. In the same manner, T2 asserted the importance of properly understanding the core values in professional development, which encourages English language teachers to proactively improve their knowledge and teaching methods.

- Research – FLEXIBILITY

The qualitative data shows that most interviewees are aware of the importance of being flexible in order to gain confidence in conducting research. T2 and T5 confessed they gained such confidence thanks to attending regular research workshops held by the faculty. T5 added that “It was at such workshops that I had exposure to and gradually perceived the Faculty's core values, one of which I like most is flexibility”. Obviously, this professional development activity is apparently an effective one in communicating the core values and raising teachers’ awareness of flexibility so as to enhance their research capacity, which stresses the importance of teachers’ engagement in order to be open to change for improvements, as stated in literature (Sparks, 2001; Lorimer, 2012; Senge, 2010). Furthermore, all the interviewees exhibited their pride of owning research publications, both nationally and internationally. T5 & T6 mentioned the Faculty's International Conference on English Language Teaching (ICELT) as a forum for exposure to the core values and at the same time, presenting research achievements.

- Survival – ASPIRATION

The results from the responses to this core value are quite significant. Individual and collective success is always a topical issue to discuss among experts, educational leaders and teachers when it comes to the critical concept of survival (Barendsen, 2006; Betts, 2009; Senge, 2010). When asked about the expected learning outcomes in line with this core value, T4 addressed, “When an individual continues professional development, he or she may inspire others”. T5 gave a clearer description that specifies, “Individual achievements contribute to collective success and collective success is attributed to individual achievements”. T1 and T2 were even more serious, stating that adherence to the core values must be mandatory so that the faculty could witness the participation of all the faculty's teachers in professional development for the sake of all.

- Relationships – INTEGRITY

The faculty teachers participating in this study were interested in this question. T6 as a young teacher, even thought integrity is the most important core value, which was easy to understand when the teacher shared he had just completed his thesis. According to most interviewees, one

needs to develop relationships with others on the journey to become an ELT professional, especially when completing important tasks which require his or her integrity so as to have respect for and learn good things from others and on the other hand, say no to bad things. T2 added integrity is then based on agreement and harmony for mutual learning and this opinion is clearly consistent with Bolman (2008), Betof (2009), Donaldson (2009), and Cohen (2010) when discussing the roles of leaders as teachers. Also, according to T2, The Faculty's professional development activities, such as Research Camp, help build relationships and therefore develop integrity among teachers when they better understand each other and become more open to criticisms that they believe are constructive. T6 puts it this way: "When teachers adhere to the Faculty's core values, they are aware of integrity enough to know what is right and what is wrong in order to adjust their professional conduct; however, they also try their best to keep relationships".

- **Meaning & Contribution – RESPONSIBILITY**

Commitment to core values is ultimately expected to result in social responsibility as practiced in most parts of the world, both in businesses and educational institutions (Ashmos, 2000; Covey, 2006; Bolman, 2011; Ulferts, 2021). The study's faculty's teachers were no exception since they all emphasized the core value of responsibility and surprisingly considered this an outcome. According to the interviewees, that teachers can contribute to society is their honor. T3, though she was a young teacher, had been working in social work since she was a student, and she had already realized the role of responsibility. She simply thought students' achievements after graduation were truly an outcome for teachers. T5 also agreed with the idea by stating, "the faculty's teachers contribute a lot to the country's human resources, many of whom are successful people and even decision-makers in the government, which is our happiness deep from the heart. In return, these successful alumni return to contribute to the development of the faculty and, of course, that of teachers and, ultimately students".

The qualitative results demonstrate the positive fact that EF faculty members, who have spent a significant period of service at the unit, are not just clear about the message of the five core values but also already developed, to a certain extent, awareness of how to put them into practice. This is shown in the array of professional development activities and programs they have joined, and their personal career enrichment has not ever ceased.

Conclusion

Whole-person development has been the quest among employees all over the world. In the field of ELT as a knowledge profession, such development is obvious. Continuing professional development is not traditionally focused on filling one's mind with more knowledge, but innovative ELT professionals are more aware of developing other abilities, as found in alignment with the core values of the Faculty of English Linguistics & Literature, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNUHCM, Vietnam respectively: research, survival, relationships, and contribution. The core values of the faculty would offer ELT professionals guidance as to what is essential for their natural professional development in their working environment rather than being told what is good for them and what to do, as Timperley (2008) confirmed. More than that, the ELT teachers are well aware of how to build their professional development pathway to their own aspiration that fits their own competence, which is in line with Avidov-Ungar's (2016) research findings.

Recommendations

The findings recommend the role of the faculty's leaders in effectively communicating the core values to enhance teachers' perceptions of the core values so that they have the guidelines and motivation for their continuing professional development despite the unfavorable circumstances they may encounter. The affirmation that the core values of a particular organization shall not be generalized across many has been stated in Gokce (2021). This research study can also serve as a reference for leaders of the faculty in the future or even those of other organizations, including businesses. Furthermore, the research suggests further study with a deeper insight into the issue by comparing different faculties in different countries to understand cultural reasons that affect teachers' commitment to embracing the core values.

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Biodata

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