

Critical Aspects of the Professional Development of Higher Education Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to identify the critical aspects of professional development of higher education teachers from personal and professional expectations regarding their role at the different stages of their working career. The main objectives were to understand the professional development of higher education teachers, and to know what do they think and how do they live their practice, assuming that their activity has an impact on their professional identity as teachers, and that a continuous process of reflection and interpretation of their role could be helpful when dealing with educational changes. The research used a qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews with a group of 18 teachers of a Mexican private university with a multi-campus system. The general conclusion this study reaches is that the programs of professional development for higher education teachers must take into account their spatial and temporal context, and base their effectiveness on how it serves the needs and expectations of each teacher, which could vary in aspects like level of experience, area of professional expertise, learning style, and educational vision.

Keywords: *Teacher competencies, Faculty development, Educational practices, Professional education, Colleague faculty, Teaching experience.*

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Highlights of this paper

- This study seeks to identify the critical aspects of professional development of higher education teachers from personal and professional expectations regarding their role at the different stages of their working career.
- Results highlight the importance of appropriate time and space contexts for higher education teachers' professional development programs, and to base these programs' effectiveness on how well they meet the needs and expectations of each professor, which may have discernable differences in terms of experience, specialty, learning style, and educational visions.
- The interviewees found in their participation in this study a valuable opportunity to voice their views on their educational practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

The conditions faced by higher education institutions to improve their academic quality include the need to implement professional development programs for their teachers. Historically, it was rare for university professors to receive any formal training for their activity. Over time, programs of teacher training and development became a natural part of the operation dynamics of institutions, although the scope, reach, follow-up, format and evaluation of such programs have varied depending on the context of each institution. These programs are frequently implemented to support reform actions involving changes to the scenarios where academic tasks take place, as well as adjustments to the teacher's working conditions. However, there is little evidence to show these changes are significant enough to have an effect on the values, attitudes, and professional practices of the academic profession (Trowler and Bamber, 2005; Kehm and Teichler, 2013).

Currently, the training programs most higher education institutions offer tend to focus on thematic content or teaching techniques presented in a didactic manner but disconnected from real work experiences, without taking into account the individual needs and profile of the teachers (Webster-Wright, 2009). On the other hand, although there have been many studies on the teaching styles and strategies of teachers, little or no attention has been devoted to knowing the way in which professors prefer to engage their professional development, choosing in many instances standardized programs based on the perspective and interests of the educational center (Lueddeke, 2003).

Given the relationship between teacher performance and academic quality, and the constant efforts of higher education institutions to innovate in their educational processes, it is expected for every aspect related to teaching development to be addressed in an efficient and timely manner. While there are global trends of teaching development models and general patterns identified in teacher behavior, it is important to recognize that results can be different depending on the cultural context of the region, or the institution's profile.

When reviewing the related literature, it is quite evident that many aspects of the academic life have been thoroughly studied, including the teacher's point of view. However, given the confluence of many different generations of teachers in an ever-changing social and technological life, there is a need for further studies to discover which traits of the teachers' profiles have changed and which have remained the same, and to learn more about how professionals keep learning throughout their career, as teachers perhaps couldn't expect to be trained every time a new change appeared in relation to the tools, media or means of communication we use (Thomas and Brown, 2011).

The main assumption for this study was that, in order to understand the professional development of teachers, it is necessary to know what do they think and how do they live their practice, assuming the teachers' activity has an impact on their professional identity as a teacher, and that a continuous process of reflection and interpretation of their role could be helpful when dealing with educational changes.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A review of the literature reveals extensive research has been done on the topic of teacher roles, professionalism and teacher development. The professionalization of teachers has gained significant relevance in recent years, both in an academic context and a general social one (Nixon, 2001). However, even though it is a topic often incorporated into the discourse of educational innovation, there is still considerable discussion regarding the meaning of the term itself (Snoek, 2010).

Similarly, it is difficult to find a definition of teaching development that is sufficiently thorough and generalizable due to the fact that, among many other reasons, the development process requires multiple, cyclical movements between the systems of influence that make up the life of a teacher (Opfer and Pedder, 2011). The framework of this study finds the following definitions of teaching development relevant: “Any change allowing professionals to gain access to new and varied knowledge, skills, values and professional orientation to their work” (O’Meara and Terosky, 2010) “A process whereby teachers’ professionalism and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced” (Evans, 2008).

In a critique to the concept of professional development, Webster-Wright (2009) references many examples in which teacher development programs focus on the contents of the program rather than on the profile and particular needs of the participants. In this sense, and based on the theory of andragogy, Huston and Weaver (2008) created a teacher development proposal in which the knowledge gained by their experience could be used as a resource for their and others’ learning. The authors consider that this aspect should result in much more significant learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) on the other hand, calls for the close inspection of any meaning brought by the participants into their experiences.

Boyer (1997) offers another perspective, in which he distinguishes the teachers’ training needs according to their teaching level. For those teaching at a graduate level, a specialized study of the discipline could be the best way to prepare them to achieve good teaching performance, while undergraduate level teachers could potentially benefit more from mastering more precise pedagogical procedures. This could be an important aspect to consider when trying to define and characterize different teaching development models.

2.1. Teaching Development in Competency Based Models

Teacher tasks are being increasingly described in terms of competencies, although the number and definition of such competencies often present variations between educational institutions and theorists. According to Zabalza (2003) the term competency is useful to refer, in general terms, to the set of knowledge and skills that people need to perform an activity.

The concept of teaching development under competency based models is not unanimously accepted, however. For example, in reference to the limitations of the competency based model in the education field, Barnett (2001) points out that values, personal responsibility, collective commitment and real-world life are crucial elements of education that are not present in a business environment. To qualify an individual as competent means to assert that their actions meet a certain standard, which in turn has demands commensurate with the complexities of the tasks to be performed. Under this concept, the teacher’s tasks could be placed on the highest levels of demand given their actions can’t always address predictable conducts under predictable situations; that is, they are complex tasks for which they must take risks and be committed to learning from the experience.

Biesta (2009) has a similar perspective to Barnett’s, by asserting that teaching has little to do with the application of out of context knowledge and abstract rules; rather, it requires awareness of the moment and a skill to make appropriate decisions in situations that are often new and unique. Therefore, the teacher’s expert

professional profile often lies on their ability to make judgements regarding the more effective ways of ensuring specific results with certain students in particular situations. On the other hand, judgement applied by teachers in their professional practice is not characterized by a simple technical nature; it also necessarily involves values fueled by educational ideals.

2.2. Teacher Development as a Continuous Process

Day (2005) considers that the objective of professional development is to train teachers to perform their role in ever-changing contexts. Thus, discussing active participation in professional development activities means that the teachers, throughout their career, should be able to attain and maintain high teaching levels, interact with students differentially, be an active member of communities in and out of the school, meet external needs of change, and keep a level of self-commitment and confidence. Boyer (1997) had concluded that expecting teachers' performance to remain unchanged throughout their professional career goes against the reality of most experiences. In his opinion, the teacher's work should consider four progressive functions: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application and the scholarship of teaching.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted on a private institution of higher education in Mexico, with teachers from various academic areas, ages and training. At the time the study was conducted, the institution had 26 campuses in Mexico and offered 57 professional programs, with an enrollment of 55, 455 undergraduate students. The research only considered the participation of the teachers on one campus, in order for the result's interpretation to contain as many identification elements from a specific context as possible.

A qualitative methodological approach was chosen, based on semi-structured interviews that allowed participating teachers to express their views on higher education, as well as their feelings, opinions, expectations and professional development needs in relation to their activity.

The interviews were conducted with 18 teachers between the months of February and August of 2017, with the researcher using a guide listing several aspects to consider. Some of the participants also performed administrative duties in addition to their teaching practice.

The selection of the participants began with an invitation to teachers previously acquainted with the researchers, where a friendly relationship facilitated the participation and a good disposition, openness and honesty when conducting the interviews. The initial invitation was made via e-mail, and then confirmed face to face or through telephone calls. Subsequently, the list of participants kept growing thanks to the word of mouth of the interviewees, which created a snowball effect among their peers.

Although we were looking to feature diversity in age and seniority, and the potential combination of teaching practice and other activities, the sample did not consider the statistical representation of each of the programs of the institution, or any other stratum. The number of participants was limited by the time and resources available for research.

The profile of the interviewees, organized by the sequential order in which they were interviewed, is shown in Table 1.

Table-1.Characteristics of the participants.

Name	Area	Nacionality	Age	Position	Type	Experience
E1m	Mathematics	Mexican	36	Professor	Tenure	7 years
E2h	Medicine	Mexican	75	Professor	A.P.	43 years
E3h	Mathematics	Mexican	63	Professor	Tenure	38 years
E4h	Engineering	Mexican	51	On leave	On leave	15 years
E5h	Engineering	Mexican	45	Professor	Tenure	18 years
E6m	Biotechnology	Costa Rican	40	Professor	Tenure	6 years
E7m	Communication	Mexican	41	Professor	A.P.	15 years
E8h	Physics	Mexican	28	Professor	Tenure	2 years
E9h	Engineering	Mexican	41	Director	Tenure	19 years
E10h	Ethics	Mexican	57	Director	Tenure	32 years
E11m	International Relations	Italian	42	Director	Tenure	12 years
E12h	Accounting	Mexican	48	Director	Tenure	25 years
E13h	Medicine	Mexican	59	Director	Tenure	29 years
E14h	Medicine	Mexican	49	Professor	Tenure	18 years
E15h	Philosophy	Spanish	39	Professor	Tenure	11 years
E16h	International Relations	Mexican	31	Professor	Tenure	12 years
E17h	Accounting	Mexican	56	Professor	Part time Tenure	35 years
E18h	Communication	Mexican	51	Professor	A.P.	30 years

Source: Created by researchers through field data 2017.

An analysis of the participants’ profile showed diversity in 10 areas of expertise, with a span of 47 years of age between the youngest and the oldest teacher, and a span of 41 years of seniority between the teachers with least and most experience.

4. RESULTS

The information obtained during the interview stage was organized in four categories: General aspects related to the teaching practice, Initial teaching experience, Teacher development and Final stage of their teaching career. Each of these categories included several subcategories, as shown in Table 2, which allowed us to compile a context of the activities described by the teachers, as well as of the different stages of their teaching careers.

The category General aspects related to the teaching practice includes various elements related to the teacher’s performance, which are, in turn, crucial aspects when considering factors that have an effect on professional development. This grouping provided an initial approach to the categorization of the work of the higher education teacher.

The category Initial Experience includes information related to the first academic period in which the teacher interacted with a group of students. For some participants, this period covered up to their second year of practice. This category was useful as a reference to identify the starting point of the teacher’s evolution, both in relation to their stance regarding education and their personal development of skill or competencies for their teaching practice.

The category Teacher development is defined in this study as the stage following the initial teaching experience, but before the final stage that some of the participants had reached. Within this framework, the category includes the means used by teachers to advance, or in hopes of advancement, throughout their career.

The category Final stage of teaching career aimed to document the insights and opinions of teachers close to leaving the practice, in their last year of their career or close to it. This category also includes the participants’ comments from some of the previous stages when making references to the final stage of their teaching practice.

Table 2 shows the categories and subcategories of this classification:

Table-2. Data categorization.

Category	Subcategory
General aspects related to the teaching practice	Personal teaching theory
	Teacher's tasks and responsibilities
	Teaching professionalism
Initial teaching experience	Teacher identity
	Teacher profile
	Key challenges
	Teaching style
Teacher development	Aspirational options for growth
	Trigger factors
	Transition moments
	Growth possibilities
	Support
Final stage of teaching career	Capabilities
	Lessons learned
	Rewards

Source: Data analysis result of this study.

The information gathered from interviews allowed us to look into the academic life of a higher education teacher from their perspective, in a context both current and specific. A significant fact was that during the interviews, or afterward, some teachers expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their opinions on their practice, and some even found themselves reflecting on aspects they had never considered before. These reflections from the participants helped us to identify moments of particular relevance for their professional development, and the reasons for this evolution.

4.1. General Aspects Related to the Teaching Practice

The organization of the data gathered in the category General aspects related to the teaching practice includes the following subcategories: Personal teaching theory, Teacher's tasks and responsibilities, Teaching professionalism, and Teacher identity.

In relation to their personal teaching theory, teachers stated that they work with a model that favors active participation from the students. However, an analysis of their own narrative reveals that their personal teaching ideas don't fully match those of an educational model focused on the student, mainly due to a lack of confidence in the capabilities, motivation and responsibility of the students to learn, related to a perceived need to cultivate a sense of authority as a teacher.

When talking about the tasks and responsibilities of their practice, some teachers focused on the tasks directly related to their teaching practice, while others focused on the responsibilities they perceive in terms of the impact their work has on the education of the student. These two perspectives speak of the multitude of tasks and responsibilities of a higher education teacher. Some interviewees even mentioned the difficulties they endured to balance their teaching practice and other academic responsibilities.

When asked to conceptualize their practice in terms of profession, the definitions of professionalism varied. Some of the interviewees seemed hesitant to consider their work a profession, some were in agreement, others showed disagreement, and others explained their own interpretation. The analysis of this data reveals that the way in which the teachers conceive their activity is linked to the concept they have of themselves as a person and of the experiences they have developed. On the other hand, there is also an external perspective of the definition, led by the policies and standards established by the institution or the conceptual attachment to a particular theory. The

interpretation is also relative to the context (e.g. differences between two universities), the area of expertise, or timeframe.

Regarding the teacher identity, the interviewees' general opinion was positive, expressing a fondness for teaching. They mentioned that vocation was the basis of the identity of a teacher, although in some cases this identity can be shared with an identity that leans toward the actual profession that is being taught.

4.2. The Initial Teaching Experience

When analyzing the identifying features of the participants in the study, we found that teachers ages 50 or older started their career between the ages of 21 and 25 without any pedagogical training. On the other hand, younger teachers started their teaching career between the ages of 26 and 28, mainly due to the new institutional requirements for academic accreditation. Some of the key challenges teachers faced at the beginning of their teaching career are the concern for mastering the contents of the course, asserting their figure as a teacher in front of the students and the definition of their own teaching style.

From the individual perspective of a teacher, the first challenge revolves around the sense of personal emotional security that mastering the contents of the course could provide, something that he or she, as a beginner, feels like a necessity to perform effectively. The second challenge alludes to the perceived need to anticipate and surpass the knowledge that students have of the subject to affirm themselves as a figure of leadership and authority to the class. Regarding teaching style, many of the interviewed teachers stated that during the first two or three years of teaching practice their style was characterized by the exposition and explanation of prepared lectures they expected students to learn. The following reasons could explain this behavior: First, teachers assume that contents are the most important part of the course and the educational process in general, so they focus on that aspect; second, the teachers assume they have a responsibility to master these contents, in their eyes they become a requirement to take charge of a group of students; third, the teacher assumes the contents of the course must be thoroughly covered as a sign of appropriate professional performance and educational quality.

4.3. Teacher Development

The development stage is considered the middle stage of the professional teaching career cycle. This stage is characterized by the setting of expectations of professional growth, the emergence of development trigger factors and choosing actions to meet the personal needs of the required competencies for appropriate teaching performance.

Teachers mentioned the areas of research and academic administrations as aspirations of professional growth in an academic environment. None of them considered remaining in a teaching position and further develop into excellence; instead, they considered teaching as a springboard to hold administrative positions or research activities.

When asked about the factors they consider milestones of the advancement or growth of their professional development, the interviewees mentioned pedagogical aspects detected when conducting doctorate studies or stemming from attention to perceived performance shortcomings. They also showed a position of self-sufficiency in clear contrast with a position that considers personal experience and changes in the environment relevant. The following are some examples of these statements:

[E8h] I already know all the literature there is regarding Physics education, the basis, etc., so I see why this is being proposed.

[E16h] Something I've found very helpful is to not consider myself a master of the subject, that I am a complete teacher, in terms of the contents or the pedagogy I use. [...] Sometimes you could consider yourself an expert in the field, but things are changing so fast out there.

Regarding the means with which the teachers implemented or hoped to implement actions for their teaching development, they mentioned several kinds of support they had received from the institution, such as training courses or workshops within the same institution, help among peers and individual work. To help them in their professional development, the interviewees mentioned various types of support they have received or should receive from the institution, like internal and external training, opportunities to obtain higher academic degrees, events attendance and stimuli based on growth or achievements.

4.4. Final Stage of Teaching Career

One of the most relevant aspects of this study was getting to know the teachers' perception of their work in the final stages of their teaching careers. When analyzing this aspect, we included the views of teachers experiencing this stage in terms of age and employment contract, as well as the opinion of other teachers in the middle or initial stages of their professional career. This perspective from the teacher can help us understand the teacher's professional development both in profession and individual terms, once they have gone through each stage and reflect on their career, or from their current point in their career to share their aspirational goal of highest development.

In relation to the final stage of their teaching careers, one of the cases recognized a decrease in general cognitive ability, understood as the ability to acquire, process and apply information quickly and fluently (Gully and Chen, 2010); while another mentioned physical health issues:

[E4h] Look, right now you caught me at a time where my memory isn't the best, and some of my capabilities of retention and understanding are struggling, particularly with computer technology, it is very hard for me to learn new things. Although I give my best effort, it is an enormous effort. Unfortunately, my capabilities of retention aren't what they used to be, I am 75.

(E3h) I have a throat problem, so sometimes I have trouble, probably it's why I only have two classes. Well, actually it's been going on since last semester, but this is my last semester... as a teacher. [...] It was throat cancer ... in 2005... so, I made it through, thank God, but it affected me nonetheless.

In reference to lessons learned, most interviewees mentioned the experience developed throughout their teaching career, considered by teachers with long-standing careers as the most important resource in the final stage of their career. Comments about this concept were linked to their teaching career and their professional career in their area of expertise, and they valued it in terms of teaching performance and the students' opinion. As part of their lessons learned, teachers in the final stage of their career shared their idea of what should be the focus of the student's education.

As for the rewarding aspects of their practice, they mentioned the sense of achievement once they realize they managed to have a positive effect on students, and when hearing of gratitude, acknowledgment and even admiration from students.

4.5. Critical Aspects of the Professional Development of the Higher Education Teacher

Based on the identification of the key general aspects of the higher education teaching profession and the analysis of the comments made by the interviewees regarding their teaching career, we now present the critical aspects of their professional development as higher education teachers. We define critical aspects as those that had a significant impact or shaped the professional path of the teachers in relation to their practice.

- Teacher's idea of education. The first critical aspect in the professional development of the higher education teacher is the idea he or she has regarding education and, in this particular case, regarding the

education of the higher education student. This idea of their own work allows for a first differentiation between the profile of a teacher attached to traditional teaching models and that of an innovative teacher willing to integrate changes or adjustments to their practice. In terms of professional development, this is a determining factor if teachers can hardly change their beliefs even after changing their practices.

- When explaining their idea or philosophy of education, while most interviewees expressed favoring student-centered models and claimed to be working under such a model, some of the interviewees voiced strong convictions regarding the difficulties of achieving good student performance with this approach:
- [5h] The student is very quiet, is passive, has always been passive. Even if times change they will stay passive, they want everything easy and to have an easy life. Students advance at the same rate because there is no way for a student to jump ahead. Students are passive. Even if you turn them active, they are passive.
- According to the concepts analyzed by [McCombs and Whisler \(2000\)](#) it is expected of a student-centered model to grant students a considerable margin of responsibility, and they are trusted in what they can develop. With this, it is not assumed that the model guarantees by itself a better education for the student, it just highlights concepts to which the teacher has some attachment and their impact on some of the actions taken as part of his or her practice.
- The institutional context. Once they are part of an institution, teachers are exposed to a series of factors that, to varying degree, shape their attitude and performance. Some of these factors can be the institution's educational vision, available resources, quality criteria and requirements, growth opportunities, students' profile, colleagues' profile and the interactions with them. In the case of the institution where the study was conducted, the comments of the interviewees focused on high workload conditions, strong technology requirements, striving to apply state of the art educational processes, high demand for participation in development programs of teaching and professional competencies, and access to a variety of resources to support their practice.
 - When comparing the academic contexts and environments between different institutions, the general opinion of the interviewees granted a higher value to their work context, particularly by recognizing the link between these characteristics with the profile of the institution, and its advantages for their professional development. In this way, while in the literature review this diversity of aspects could be seen as part of the issues the teacher faces in his or her practice or professional development, it is mitigated somewhat by teachers' understanding that the high workload and quality demands are natural conditions of their environment within the institution. This opinion is not absolute, particularly when these factors are opposite to the teachers' expectations or needs, as can be gathered in the following comment:
 - [3h] [The institution] is a bit closed: we're going to do this because it's going to help you, and everyone is running around and under a lot of pressure. Then, summers become frustrating, because the teacher has to take this course he had been told about, completing one hundred hours or who knows how many... and the another one of three hundred... and this course and then this course ... seems as if [the institution] thinks we have nothing to do and doesn't want to see us like that... without activities. For me it was wonderful to have some time... not too lazy about, but to study.

- Professional development and training model. Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) point out the importance of understanding the teacher's growth process, as well as the conditions that support and promote that growth, since professional development models not always match the complexities of the process they intend to promote. Similarly, the critique (Webster-Wright, 2009) makes regarding the many examples of teaching development programs that focus on the contents and not on the profile or needs of the participants turns relevant in this case. One of the teachers conveyed the situation with the following comment:
 - [8h] [The institution] had gone through a lot, tends to copy what is happening out there and never looks to what is happening in here. So, then: it just copies from outside because now we're going to do this, because this is the trend right now, and doesn't notice if inside the next trend is happening, it might be already happening but it is ignored.
 - Finding out the point of view of an experienced teacher of advanced age, in contrast to that of young teachers in the beginning of their careers provides arguments to question the approach of learning by acquisition commonly used in educational institutions to train teachers, which is based on standardized training sets that teachers must complete without distinguishing between the level of experience or professional profile of the participants.
- Professional identity of the teacher. Using the term *profession* to describe their practice divided the opinions of the interviewees. This confirms the observation made by Snoek (2010) regarding the difficulty to define the teaching practice in terms of a profession. However, the term *professionalism* was met with general acceptance, understanding compliance and adherence to performing their work duties as the key characteristics of the concept, as well as their personal responsibility for their assigned tasks.
 - Thus, the higher education teacher adopts a concept of professional identity toward teaching often undermined by factors like loyalty toward their profession of expertise, lack of social acknowledgment compared to other professions, and salary limitations.
 - [E4h] I love teaching, and if it were up to me, I would stay a teacher. If I had financial security, I would've stayed a teacher and researcher for life. Sadly, the economic situation forced me out of the practice.
- The teacher's experience. A term often mentioned by interviewees of any age and seniority was *experience*. The broader and most immediate interpretation refers to the amount of time holding a position or performing their teaching duties. However, in the opinion of one of the teachers interviewed, the scope of this definition of experience could be relative, with advantages and disadvantages at each stage:
 - [8h] In a traditional class I would be at a disadvantage and a teacher with plenty of experience would be at an advantage. But, on the contrary, I think I would have an advantage in an active course and they would be at a disadvantage, due to all the bad habits that I don't have. Right now that there's change happening, that more activities are required, and there is a bigger push for students to work in teams, a teacher with lots of experience might not always be the best choice. It is very hard when you are used to teach classes one way, trying new things had always been considered but didn't use to be the focus of education.
 - The term was also used to refer to the proficiency level of teaching or professional competencies developed from their practice, according to the following comment:

- [4h] Definitely, years of experience can give you better control of a higher education class, and a... let's say, if there is a born teacher, who is good at teaching... I assure you that if he's good from the beginning, experience will take him to another level.
- In this sense, this comment brings to the forefront the proposal by [Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin \(1995\)](#) of creating or encouraging in institutions structures that would allow for experienced teachers to share their work experiences reflecting the contents and processes of what they have learned, something that is recognized as a necessity for younger teachers.
- For teachers with more seniority, the concept of experience is particularly relevant when the teacher considers it the most valuable resource to support his or her activity. The following comments illustrate this point:
 - [2h] I sometimes tell them that I don't know that and I need to look it up, and next class I explain it to them ... it is very rare for that to happen because I have plenty of experience on how to clear up something for a student... I answer using my experience.
 - [10h] There are many books on how to do things. How not to do things, that's the teacher's job. Books, generally, tell you: this is what you do. Experience is what tells you what not to do. That's why we need teachers.
- Workload. The issues of work overload and saturation of the higher education teacher's time devoted to their practice are often mentioned in the literature. The study's data shows that, while these issues are real, work overload often is conditional to aspects beyond those strictly belonging to the assigned teaching tasks, or due to personal decisions to teach additional classes. The following confession is an example of this:
 - [5h] For personal reasons I always have two extra groups, so I've been having six groups for a while, but that was my decision, I chose the workload. So, for personal reasons that's what I've chosen and I've been doing it like that for a while.
 - Some of the factors not directly related to teaching that affect the teacher's workload are: having to work administrative positions within the institution, attending training programs, research work, shared work responsibilities among various institutions or the professional practice of their area of expertise.
 - This work overload situation reduces not only their available time but also the physical and emotional stamina needed to take care properly of their professional development. One of the participants gave her view on this issue:
 - [11m] I feel like we are trapped in the day to day dynamic. Sometimes I see something incredible and save it to my computer, but who knows when I'll be able to read it. And now that I also have administrative duties, I have fewer classes but there's still all the other things. And when the semester is over you finally have some time to do all the things you didn't do during the semester because of the day to day grind, but by then you are exhausted.
- Use of information and communication technologies. One of the most explored topics in the current literature on educational trends is the integration of information and communication technologies into learning and teaching processes. Although some exceptions may occur, this topic represents one of the most significant differences between teachers from different generations, both when incorporating them as an everyday tool for the teaching practice and the vision of using it for their own development. The

following comments were made by teachers of ages over 40 years apart, and they show a distinct difference of opinion on the issue:

- [2h] Look, I was a surgeon and I was a teacher, and as a teacher or a surgeon I never needed computer technology. Computer technology has been useful to gain access to information, the we need to get to quickly and efficiently, but when it comes to teaching I find a projector and a blackboard are enough, I don't need a computer to teach. [...] Now, they are asking that I use a computer, and I put up a fight because it's hard for me. I don't understand many things, and I don't need it, I feel like I don't need it to learn what I have to learn, not to teach, I don't need it.
- [1m] At least in my department I like technology more than they do, some less than others, so I tell them: look, I used the calculator, I did this with the software, I did this... but they focus more on the... conceptual side of it.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

After the analysis of the information, the study identified the following critical aspects of the professional development of the higher education teacher:

- Teacher's idea of education
- The institutional context
- Professional development and training model
- Professional identity of the teacher
- Teaching experience
- Workload

While these critical aspects are present on every stage of the teacher's career, some of them gain specific relevance depending on whether they are found in the initial, middle or final stage of their career. The teachers' comments regarding the first phase of their careers highlight the need for better preparation and organization of the institutional strategy to achieve the best performance out of the available resources, in terms of the support they could provide for the professional development of the teacher. On the other hand, when offering their perspective from the last stages of their teaching career, teachers seem to be in a better position to integrate or clarify their concepts, approaches and attitudes regarding their practice. For these teachers, the experience they have amassed is one of the most important factors that every professional development program should consider both in terms of an asset to be leveraged and as a requirement to be established by the institution.

Assuming that the activities of higher education teachers are multifactorial and of uncertain results by nature, their actions can hardly answer to pre-established standard patterns. Thus, the general conclusion this study reaches is that the programs of professional development for higher education teachers must take into account their spatial and temporal context, and base their effectiveness on how it tends to the needs and expectations of each teacher, which could vary in aspects like level of experience, area of professional expertise, learning style, educational vision, etc.

The idea of professionalizing the teaching practice often comes linked to competency models and an achievement-oriented approach, aggressively pushed by the administration of the educational organizations. This has resulted in a series of warnings of how this idea of professionalism can devolve into bureaucratization or a technical vision of teaching oriented to the industrialization of the education sector, where standard results are expected, and the effort and capabilities of employees are under constant evaluation.

One of the highlights of the study was the relevance the interviewees found in their participation, as they considered it a valuable opportunity to voice their views on their practice. Therefore, a potential replication of this study in research or as a strategy incorporated into a professional development model must take into account that the interpretation and use of information from the teacher can be a valuable mechanism to ensure quality and innovation in universities, since it collects the aspirations, needs and willingness for professional and personal fulfillment of one of their most valuable assets.

Therefore, while some shared values and interests do exist, the differences in the teacher's profile and evolution stages demand the adaptation of the methods or strategies for their professional development, to ensure appropriate training in the technical aspects of their practice, in combination with the strengthening of the identity of the teaching profession, built on a foundation of experience and reflection on the practice. The systematization of opportunities and means through which the teachers can voice their opinion and share the experience of the tasks performed would help significantly to guide the teaching development programs established by the institution and can contribute to strengthening their professional identity as a teacher. Otherwise, the objectives of these programs are at risk of not being achieved, with the subsequent effect of a rift between the institutional goals and the teacher's goals. Hence, the importance of offering spaces and opportunities for reflection that provide insights into the teacher's views to focus on the critical aspects of their professional development.

Some aspects that future research works could expand on based on the results of this study are:

1. Finding out how do teachers live in the final stage of their teaching career. Such a study could attempt to make adjustments to a program of teaching development that: a) keeps the participations of teachers in the final stage of their career up to date, b) finds strategies that connect young teachers with more experienced faculty, c) identifies, explains and points out ways to leverage the real contributions of experienced teachers in the final stage of their careers.
2. Gain a deeper knowledge of the basis behind the teacher's educational theory. In transformation or educational innovation programs, it is important to know the foundation on which teachers base their idea and work to design an effective strategy for change. It is not enough, for example, to simply know that the basis of a teacher was another teacher that inspired him or her; more detailed reasons behind the inspiration are needed, or a fuller picture of that inspiring teacher. It is also necessary to know the moment and circumstances in which the teacher puts into practice the knowledge inherited.
3. Find which is the teacher's idea of the essence of the course he or she teaches. One of the participants of this study considered that his PhD led him to make his course more complex for undergraduate students, while another mentioned realizing he kept adding more and more content, wanting for students to learn it all. On the other hand, two teachers stressed that the teacher should only teach the essentials of a course. Some questions derived from this opinion are: What should occur during the education process of the student? Would breadth replace depth in contents of the course or the academic program? Which would be, if any, the teacher's concept of depth?

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