The Expert Novice

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Abstract: The central proposal of this paper is that the novice experience is critical to the learning process of groups as well as individuals. How do "experts" become "novices" and move in directions that require them to put aside their theories of action? How does a group of experts collectively accomplish that? From our experiences as members of the ACE teacher educator team, and the research we have done on the team over the past three years, we propose that not only is the novice state of mind essential for professional development, change, and creativity, it also enables the teacher educator to empathize with students' experiences of being novices. We propose a new way of looking at the term "professional development" which suggests that "novice" is not the opposite of "expert". These two states are not different sides of the same continuum - they can exist simultaneously.

The Concept of Novice Within the Community

Often, making a difference involves making a change and transformational change means learning. This paper will briefly examine the development of a community of learners, a team of teacher educators, and the importance of the concept of "novice" within that community. The central proposals of this paper are that the novice experience is *critical to the learning processes* of the group as well as the individuals and that the novice state of mind *fosters the conditions that enable change* in those two spheres. As opposed to the traditional way of looking at professional development as a linear progression from novice to expert, we propose that these are not different sides of the same continuum - that "novice" is not the opposite of "expert". These are two states of mind and ways of being that can exist simultaneously.

The authors of this paper are members of the ACE team and the data on team processes were gathered through participant observation and content analysis of semi-structured interviews with all team members, meeting protocols, email exchanges and informal conversations over the past three years.

Where it all Started

The ACE staff is a group of experienced teacher educators working together to develop and implement an experimental program of teacher education within the Kaye College of Education in Israel. The long-range goal of the program is to bring about a transformation in teacher education and a resulting change in the state educational system.

Over the past four years the program has moved from an idea to a reality and the program staff has transformed itself from a collection of individuals to a "group" and eventually, a "team – "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable", (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 45). This process was accompanied by differences of opinion, trial and error, fights over territory and status and the necessity of learning to cope with a high level of ambiguity. It was also accompanied by feelings of achievement and satisfaction, group cohesiveness and support, and a clear program and team identity.

One of the central features of the program that resulted from this multi-faceted experience is *practical wisdom*. This approach sees knowledge as emerging through experience but experience in and of itself is not enough. That experience must also be researched and learned in order to be understood. Since learning is the main topic that concerns the team, developing its own practical wisdom, researching and understanding its own experiences, is a natural part of the group process.

The Past as Prologue

No group starts out as an empty shell just waiting to be filled. When talking about a community of learners, it is important to realize that each individual comes into the group with the outcomes of past individual learning. Whether people come together to form a group or someone joins an existing group, each member of these

groups comes with a past – with an inheritance that becomes a "dowry". From this point on, a process of mutual interaction begins. Each person, who they are and what they bring with them, interacts with the group as a unit and with the individuals within it. There is a web of interaction and influence and although it cannot usually be determined exactly what influences what or who influences who and to what degree, the one certainty is that there are mutual influences. Therefore, it is important to understand who comprises the team and what the members of the team bring with them.

This year's team of 10 is a heterogeneous group whose diversity finds expression on a variety of dimensions. The team can collectively be described as women and men with an age range of about 15 years, married and single, with children and without, grandparents and the parents of school-age children. They were brought up in Israel, America, Romania and Egypt and are Jewish, Moslem and Druze with mother tongues of Hebrew, Arabic, English, Romanian and French. They live in big cities, suburbs, rural areas and kibbutz spread out geographically over an area of 185 kilometers. They have formal education in philosophy, educational counseling, biology, literature, psychology and education and have taught in higher educational settings, kindergarten, primary and secondary schools and have been school principals.

Each individual has numerous theories of action (Argyris & Schon, 1978), theories, learned or developed, that tell them what to do to achieve a specific outcome in a specific situation. As experienced teacher educators and as experts in their specific fields, ACE team members have theories of action that have served them well. One proof that their theories of action are successful is that they were selected to join the ACE program on the basis of past performance. But on the other hand, one of the missions of the program is to develop something new – a different way of helping students prepare themselves for the teaching profession in hopes of educating teachers who will make a difference.

In many cases of change, there is a gap between knowledge and practice; between vision and reality. Often, resistance to change is responsible for much of that gap. What helped this team overcome some of the obstacles of change? How do "experts" move in directions that require them to put their theories of action on the side? How does a group of experts do that as a collective? What are the cognitive and affective aspects of the process? These are questions that will be briefly considered in this paper.

Professional Development and the Novice State of Mind

Most views of professional development assume that novices will develop expertise based on the experiences in their work setting (Daley, 1999). Many definitions of professional development view it as linear improvement as professionals progress in their career. Sometimes this viewpoint is clearly expressed and sometimes it is implied. The professional starts out at point A and progresses to point B and beyond. Often it is conceptualized as "keeping current". For example, the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology (undated) defines professional development as "a process of learning and keeping up-to-date in one's area of expertise". Fullan (1991) looks specifically at the professional development of teachers and takes a much broader view by including "the sum total of formal and informal learning experiences throughout one's career from pre-service teacher education to retirement" (p. 326).

In light of the ACE team experience, we would like to endorse looking at the term "professional development" in a way similar to more recent perspectives on teacher professional development (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). This approach to professional development is characterized by a focus on a series of related events based in a constructivistic pedagogy that emphasizes the active learner rather than one-time workshops or lectures using on a transmission-based model in which the learner is passive. Professional development is a collaborative process of culture building and not mere skill training (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001) and therefore it must be linked to a realistic context and work to develop staff member communities of learning and inquiry.

We propose that if this view is accepted, the most effective way to further professional development is to adopt the novice state of mind and act in accordance with it.

Ruthi and Ariela - Two Views of "Novice"

Ruthi, an ACE team member from its inception, talked about the juxtaposition of expertise and learning, in her interview. The experience of "being in two worlds" became apparent to her when this "expert" teacher, with long-term experience in both secondary and higher-education, had to face the task of teaching others to teach.

> "I think that on one side it's because I'm new. I never supervised student teachers in the field before, and I don't have all the most basic knowledge or expertise. Right, I'm a teacher and I've been a teacher for many years and that's a type of expertise also but I feel much more comfortable in this part because there is nothing that I feel I built inside myself that is stable and solid and that has proved itself and that I want to insist on. I'm more open. I accept a lot of things and it's become clear that I learned a lot of things that I thought I already knew. But with time, I discovered that I didn't know them well enough. I'm still pretty much in the learning stage about different aspects of supervising including all kinds of paradoxes and uncertainties and things are very, very open."

On the surface, this quote from Ruthi seems to present a paradox. The lack of knowledge she expresses here tells us that she is a novice. However, admitting doubt or a lack of knowledge requires a basic confidence in her own abilities, a state not typical of novices (Daley, 1999).

Ruthi tells us that when she has a solid, proven theory of action she is likely to insist on its correctness and its implementation. But when it comes to field supervision, she has no theory as yet. She admits she is a novice and therefore is open to learning. Only because of her expertise can Ruthi identify what she knows and does not know and isolate a specific area in which her novice state is acknowledged. However, Ruthi is not a novice in the traditional sense of the word. She is an expert and she is aware of her expertise and this awareness is the tool that allows her to admit her inexperience.

The novice experience can also be conceptualized as a state of mind not connected to a specific perceived lack. After a routine staff meeting in which the concept of "novice" was briefly mentioned, Ariela talked about the co-existence of expert and novice and its implications for her in an email exchange with other staff members.

> "One of my strongest experiences in starting to act in a new field is a feeling of dissonance, cognitive and professional, that is created as a result of the tension between my professional repertoire and experience that I bring with me and the desire to put it on the side in order to permit newness, listening to others and a real dialogue aimed at creating something new. When trying to do this I rely on Freire's argument that in order to have a real dialogue, you have to feel that the other person has something worth learning and if I know so much, it will be hard to teach me. On the other hand, I discovered that for me, the cost of doing this is heavy because shedding my cloak of professional knowledge and experience sometimes leaves me feeling naked, I have nothing. I'm left with the question of "what's my part in this new dialogue?"
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> But in the end, I don't really remove my cloak of professional knowledge. It changes along with me in this process of renewed dialogue. In this way, when I put it across by shoulders again, both of us are already in a new place. In short, I don't take off my uniform, leave the field and return to the place I knew before. Rather I continue in the field that I was in, alone and with others, and redefine it: different, improved, new and known together."

In this quote, Ariela is basically giving us a description of professional development as a process of transformation. Through reflective dialogue, her understandings and knowledge are constantly changing although her basic professional identity remains the same. As Don Schon said, "Our systems need to maintain their identity, and their ability to support the self-identity of those who belong to them, but they must at the same time be capable of transforming themselves" (Schon 1973, p. 57). Although he was talking about organizational systems, his views of the process and necessity of transformation can be applied to individuals as well. How can this process of change and identity maintenance be nurtured and sustained? What does it mean to change and not change at the same time?

Each team member came into the ACE program with a "double dose" of expertise. Each individual was formally educated in a specific subject matter and each is also an experienced teacher educator. But as Ariela's

quote shows, openness to learning with and from others is possible only if our own expertise is not allowed to take center stage. We have to become "*zipped experts*", meaning the expertise is moved to the background although it is always available to be called into action, or *unzipped*, when needed. The essence of individual expertise doesn't shrink; only the volume that it takes up in day-to-day working. The aspect of being an expert in a specific field of knowledge is preserved but the aspect of expert as conferring overall status is rejected. The specific subject matter expertise retains a lot of its flavor but the teacher education expertise becomes open to change. Having individual expertise is what gives confidence, a faith in oneself that allows one to "zip it up" and at the same time to admit vulnerability and be willing to take risks in a changing, uncertain and complex environment. Individually and collectively, team members can say "I don't know", "I'm not sure", or "Let's try it and see what happens". They are not really novices in the true sense of the word - they might better be called "expert novices" or having "the novice state of mind" and they are willing to act accordingly.

From this perspective, it seems that these two states of being - novice and expert - are not different sides of the same continuum - they can exist simultaneously.

Easier Said Than Done

Even when the team culture encourages, supports and even subtly requires its members to adopt the novice state of mind, there is no guarantee they will do so. What is obvious and taken for granted by some members may be unnoticed or unappreciated by others.

The novice state of mind is an essential part of becoming a full member of the ACE team and all that implies. The limited scope of this paper does not permit an explanation of what it means to be a member of the team, but suffice it to say that it is a very intensive, high involvement experience. Although the ideal situation would be otherwise, the team is not a single unit. That reality was expressed in the interviews when veteran members of the team were referred to by terms such as "the inner circle" and "the nuclear team".

The veteran team members, those who joined the program during the first 2 years, went through a personal and collective novice stage. The process was a natural one, inherent in the process of developing something new - a new program aimed at changing the perceptions of teaching and learning in the educational system. The staff realized that going in a new direction meant being willing to put their old perceptions and ways of doing things on the side. In addition, change always entails frustration and ambiguity and being part of a group of novices legitimates that feeling. But even at that starting point, not all of the original staff members opened themselves to that experience. They stayed within the confines of their expertise and the result was turnover of some staff members during the first year and at its end.

Towards the end of the second year, as a result of reflection on the team's ways of working and being, "novice" became one of the team's central values and took on a life of its own. Being a novice was no longer viewed as just part of a developmental process that occurred and then ended. "Being a novice" became a state that was actively encouraged and in its ideal form, non-ending.

After that initial two-year period, new members who joined the team did not go through the same experience and there are several possible explanations why they did not. One possibility is that newcomers entering an established group with a strong group identity may believe they have to prove themselves and may not feel they have the luxury of putting their knowledge aside and opening themselves up totally to the new experience. From this point of view, it may be unreasonable to expect that newcomers will allow themselves to show their uncertainty. Their actions may also have been a display of "respect". Perhaps they did not feel comfortable raising the questions and doubts of the novice because they perceived themselves as entering something already formed, something other people had put a lot of time and effort into, something that had been carefully thought out. From the other side, perhaps the veteran members did not encourage questions and doubts as fully as they should have because of an unconscious desire to protect what they had worked on so long and so hard.

Individual confidence is not enough to allow the novice state of mind to emerge. Other conditions are necessary and the basic one is trust - trust in others that the outcomes of openness and of exposed vulnerability will be used in positive ways and not as ammunition. If newcomers do not have basic trust in the rest of the group they will not allow themselves to join the novice experience. Whatever the reasons, the outcome was that the newer members were socialized into an existing situation rather than taking an active part in developing that situation. The

end result was that they stayed within their expertise and therefore, for the moment at least, on the periphery of the team.

Professional Development as integral to Organizational Learning

Learning, change and development are terms used in both individual and organizational spheres. The processes in these two spheres are not identical but they support each other. Previously the question of simultaneously changing and maintaining identity was raised and it was proposed that this is what occurs when the novice and the expert co-exist. Perhaps some answers about facilitating that process can be found in the way the ACE team views learning, knowledge and expertise. Once again, Ruthi provides a cogent perspective on the effect that ACE had on her approach to knowledge and learning.

"There's a different type of thinking here. In my first year I was very confused and I felt I wasn't working. It took me a long time until I started to see how things were done and that's exactly what I think parallels to a certain extent the difference between the perception that says that your knowledge is your personal knowledge. You acquire it or create it, build it, whatever. But it's yours. It's personally yours. You control it. There's a difference between that approach and the creation of group knowledge that doesn't turn into the exclusive possession of one person. In this sense it's a completely new experience, completely new. It took me a long time to understand what's going on, to understand that it's okay – I don't have to be the sole possessor of this knowledge and it doesn't have to stay only with me. It's out there and everyone needs to use it. That is, all of us together own the knowledge."

This quote illustrates how the approach to knowledge, to expertise, to learning within ACE differs from the approach that many academics are used to. As much as possible, members each place their individual dowry into the collective pot and everyone else is free to, and expected to, use it. But use refers to something more than passive use. Using knowledge, becoming part of the collective ownership of knowledge, implies changing that knowledge, adding to it, making it personal. Although it may seem like a contradiction in terms, making learning and knowledge "personal" also exists on the group level. In other words, individual learning is diffused among the whole team and becomes both individually owned by each team member and collectively owned by the group. The person who is most open to the process of learning is the one who has adopted the novice state of mind.

On the individual level, professionals are expected to continually learn and obviously, professional development means learning. In addition, just as there is professional development on the individual level, there is professional development on the group level and this collective process is a crucial element in organizational learning. But the question is "what are we learning"? We can learn how to do what we do in a better way – that is, we can "improve" what we are doing. This type of learning, what Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to as single-loop learning, does not raise the question of whether what we are learning to do better is the thing we should be doing at all. Single-loop learning is instrumental, adaptive learning that changes strategies of action or assumptions underlying those strategies in ways that leave the values of a theory of action unchanged. Although we may keep improving, we can easily fall into what Levitt & March (1988) term a "competency trap" – continuing to do what we are doing because it works although there may be something much better that we could be doing.. In much the same way, Tucker et al, (2002) argue that organizational learning can be prevented by problem-solving behaviors that focus solely on remedying or overcoming immediate obstacles in part because short-term success diminishes motivation to remove underlying causes of problems.

On the other hand, the learning process can be one in which everything we have done in the past is open to examination and re-evaluation. Double-loop learning (Argyis & Schön, 1978) is anticipative and generative learning that occurs when underlying norms, policies, and objectives are examined and modified if they need to be. The basic assumptions concerning the connections between actions and outcomes are re-evaluated.

The learning organization has to deal with various paradoxes including the tensions inherent in having to slow down in order to speed up (action versus reflection), and the use of conflict and confrontation to enable collaboration (Laiken, 2001). Organizations tend to be conflict-adverse (Laiken, 1994 in Laiken, 2001) but in the learning organization, problems and differences of opinion are viewed as opportunities for learning. Mistakes can be admitted because the culture is one of problem solving and not one of assigning blame.

What is the role of the novice state of mind in this process? Individuals in the novice state of mind view questions as a necessity, see everything as requiring explanation, regard nothing as sacred and know that the possibility of making a mistake is always lurking in the background. Novices in this situation are allowed to make mistakes, something real novices fear (Daley, 1999). In short, the novice state of mind fosters the conditions conducive to double-loop learning.

The Importance of the Novice State of Mind

The present state in which not all of the staff members are fully integrated into the team is not the ideal situation to be in. Each year there are some changes in membership, consequently, there are always newcomers. Therefore it is important to ask how the team can improve their processes: What can the team do to let "newcomers" voice their opinions, their doubts, their expectations and desires? How can the team enable/encourage newcomers to experience the situation of being a "novice" as the veteran team members did? How can the image of what it means to be a "novice" be made into a positive, crucial position that newcomers will not shy away from?

There are no easy answers to these questions and they have formed the basis of several discussions over the past two years. The first step towards changing the situation has been taken - the issue has been acknowledged. The next step is still to be built and it forms a central focus of the team's learning.

ACE focuses on helping its students learn to "read the situations" they are in. This approach is based on the idea that educational situations are complex situations composed of actors, settings, institutions, behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and so on in addition to the interactions between these elements. Therefore, it is usually ineffective to just pick a solution out of a learned repertoire and implement it "as is" in a given situation. Reading a situation involves asking oneself what is known and what needs to be learned about it, what I already know about being in this situation and what I have to approach with fresh eyes - that is, to be a novice. In the beginning this is easy because the students are novices in the truest sense of the word. But ACE would like them to see the value in becoming experts while retaining the novice spirit in the future also. By this we mean "reading the situation" by integrating the expert who is self confident enough to approach the "unknown" situation with the fresh eyes of the novice who faces each situation as new. The field is always novel in some way therefore learning the experience is always necessary and that means always retaining the novice experience in some sense in spite of the temptation to rest on expertise alone.

Looking at these two foci, the novice state of mind the team hopes their students will develop and retain long after they leave the program and what goes on within the team itself, it can be seen that both cases refer to the same thing - learning. The novice state of mind is what allows the learning process to continue - both on the individual and on the group level. It allows for true dialogue based on the premise that there is always room for what I can learn from others and with others.

The novice state of mind, trust, sharing, individual and group learning - all these are critical components of true professional development and enablers of the double-loop learning necessary for real change to occur.

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