Professional Learning and Development for Higher Educators in the Global South: Where to in Pandemic Times and Beyond?

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Abstract

Policymakers in most countries have positioned higher educators at the epicenter of delivering quality in education in both content and teaching, identified as essential for achievement of global participation and competitiveness. International education is dominated by discourses of the pre-eminence and prestige of institutions located in the Northern developed nations, and this extends to the value attached by Southern universities to academic staff with study/research credentials linked to such institutions. Implicit in these discourses are linear models of professional learning and development (PLD) that idealize the 'importation' of quality teaching practices. With international travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic excluding overseas academic sojourns, we have an opportunity to reorient thinking about development of quality teaching practices and educational research, and to explore 'home-grown' alternatives that can deliver not only professional learning and development focused on quality and excellence in teaching, but also productive engagement with the international research community in the field of education. In this paper, we present arguments for embracing local professional learning and development for higher educators based on well-known principles of reflexive practitioner action research (PAR). Not only can it align with current thinking on the nature of effective teacher learning demanded for delivering quality teaching and learning, but it can also overturn linear models of PLD and can build the research skills, profile and output of higher educators, connecting them with their international peers in making needed contributions to teaching and learning scholarship.

Keywords: Professional learning, professional development, higher education, linear discourses, practitioner research

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Introduction

The quality of the work of academics involved in knowledge production is "increasingly defined by economic relevance and closely tied to the creation of revenue" (Kim, 2017, p. 982) at both institutional and national levels. In this context, professional learning and development (PLD) has assumed the nature of adding value to human capital integral to an entrepreneurial, academic capitalism (Münch, 2014) model of higher education (HE). In universities outside the developed North, especially outside the Anglosphere which dominates higher education and research publication, academic mobility that includes short-term visits for professional learning and development (Kim, 2017) has frequently been a feature of institutional policy strategies to cultivate excellence in academic staff. Moreover, these practices are often perceived as essential to institutional, and often individual, survival in competitive national, regional, and global HE environments (Chan & Lo, 2008). Until the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, patterns of academic mobility for higher educators have been very similar to those observed in the global flows of international students; the general movement of academics, whether for longer-term employment or short visits, is from emerging to developed economies, but the most sought-after institutions are in the Anglosphere, predominantly the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (Bauder, Lujan, & Hannan, 2018). This hegemony of the English-speaking West has meant universities in emerging economies confronted an asymmetrical and hierarchical "geography of academic opportunity" (Bauder et al., 2018, p. 52) when they considered how and where their staff can 'profitably' engage in professional learning and development.

However, the last two years, 2020-2021, have seen worldwide disruption of higher education, including curtailment of the movement of scholars; just as teaching and learning of students has had little option but to shift to on-line models, academics have been able to interact with international colleagues and participate in conferences and other professional activities such as PLD only remotely via their Internet connection. In this paper we argue this presents, not an obstacle to development of teaching and research quality in Southern institutions, but an opportunity. Now is a time for interrogation of dominant power relationships and reorientation of thinking toward models of professional learning and development that can deliver quality grounded in the circumstances, advantages, and needs of our local contexts. We need to focus on exploration of 'home-grown' alternatives that can deliver not only professional learning and development focused on quality and excellence in teaching our own students, but also productive engagement with the international research community in the field of education. We begin with a brief critique of the dominance of the Northern/Anglophone academy and linear corporate models of development of teacher quality, before the discussion of how well-known principles of reflexive practitioner action research (PAR) align with current thinking on the nature of effective teacher learning demanded for delivering quality teaching and learning. It is proposed that embracing this as the basis of a model for local professional learning and

development for higher educators in Southern settings can overturn linear models of PLD, reassert the value of local knowledge-making about teaching, and can build the research skills, profile and output of our higher educators to connect them with their international peers in making needed contributions to teaching and learning scholarship.

Hegemony of Anglophone academy, corporate models, and linear discourses

The influence of discourses of the superiority of Western academic institutions goes deeper in universities in emerging nations than valuing learning available through academic mobility. The prestige accorded universities in English-dominant settings that lead international rankings systems has valorised the academic norms, standards, and practices, and the knowledge-making processes and priorities they represent (Bauder et al., 2018). Furthermore, English-medium academia acts as gatekeeper to international academic recognition (Liyanage & Walker, 2014a, 2014b) through publication, conferences, and academic networks. The desire of institutions outside this dominant network to become participants has resulted in attempts to translate the practices, orientations and values of the world's most successful institutions. Strategies to achieve this often include importation of staff from prestigious institutions, but another pathway is sponsoring overseas PLD of local staff and privileging publication by academics of research in internationally recognised journals. Uncritical acceptance of this asymmetry has seen adoption of managerial models that objectify higher educators as assets whose performances are managed, standardized, and audited. Professional development of academic staff is mandated as a strategic pathway that demands the agency of teachers be directed to achievement of institutional goals that ultimately gauge excellence and quality via comparisons with other institutions in competitive international rankings.

While individual academics generally frame their PLD in terms of learning about what and/or how to teach, and benefits for students, organizational judgements too often reflect a linear perspective that constructs PLD "as both a policy problem and a policy solution" (Mockler, 2013, p. 35) and development of quality in teaching as a technical activity evident in improved student outcomes that can be used in marketing to attract students and revenue. Models of PLD that position educators as mere mediators of (pedagogic) knowledge, and that evaluate effectiveness of PD in the instrumental terms described above ignore two salient points. First, educators are autonomous professionals, and positioning them as policy instruments of change cannot, and should not, ignore their individual agency (Robinson, 2012). Second, linear discourses of PLD are at odds with how we currently understand learning, and assumptions that "the teacher has full agency to take her learning and drop it, intact, into the classroom" (Strom & Viesca, 2020) ignore nuanced practitioner- and context-centred perspectives on PLD, and this includes the relation between formal PLD and practices in classrooms. We argue for a model that acknowledges the professional agency of higher educators, and also that learning about teaching is a dynamic, reflexive, and complex process that emerges in and through teaching in a multitude of social,

institutional, discursive and material relations. Practitioner action research (PAR) that acknowledges the complexity of these relations that shape teacher learning, and grounded in a reflexive approach, offers "a strong conceptual, theoretical, and practice and evidence-based foundation" (Harvey & Jones, 2021, p. 173) for a practical response by higher educators in the global South in confronting efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (HE).

Practitioner research as professional learning and development

The field of teacher PLD has seen a growing body of theorization and research, driven by the various stakeholders in an increasing search for advancements in HE teaching practice. These stakeholders include governments, institutions, employers, students, and, importantly, practising higher educators themselves, motivated by their own continuing professionalism. The global pandemic has resulted in an unexpected disruption of how higher educators practice and focused additional attention on the quality of educational experiences provided for students. In a perhaps unexpected consequence, this is generating scrutiny of the quality of traditional models of teaching and learning in HE, and of how (and if), in an era already typified by rapid changes in mobility, digital communication, and ways of working, HE has been responding the needs of students as learners and as graduates. Collaborative and policy-level attention, responses and support are required to address these questions, and the problems that undoubtedly confront individual practitioners in delivery of their teaching programs. To engage with these situations as opportunities for innovation, research, and learning, pedagogic responses require critical inspection, and reflective practice that is reflexive and incorporated in meticulous data-based research conducted by individuals, groups of colleagues, institutions, and even internationally between institutions offers a way forward.

If we hope to provide the foundations for institutional learning and change through advancing PLD of higher educators as practitioners of both teaching and research, we must embrace research methodologies based on rigorous evidence-based evaluation of innovations. It must be acknowledged here that although PAR has a considerable history and many who champion it (e.g., see Norton, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher, & Kearney, 2015), academic opinion regarding it as a research strategy is not all favorable. There are frequent criticisms directed at PAR as an 'unscientific' (Arnold & Norton, 2018) research strategy, and of the manner and rigor of its application and the value of knowledge produced. Inadequacies in the rigor and reliability of reported PAR, and its restriction to local settings, are identified even by its advocates. Gibbs et al. (2017, p. 6) observe in their review of PAR in HE that this is especially the case in PAR used to evaluate pedagogical innovations:

> How AR is utilized as a research method – how data are collected and analyzed, how positionality and bias are negotiated, and how the AR spiral/cycle is enacted,

and so on – often goes unexplored, leaving open any questions on rigor and reliability of the findings. AR often appears to be used as a tool to encourage critical reflection rather than to be reflexive …, and to increase professional efficacy in such instances rather than to serve as a research method.

These shortcomings of some PAR have led many in higher education to dismiss it as of a lesser status, and such perceptions have complicated the priority most institutions give to academics using their limited time and energies generating discipline-focused research and publication outputs. Research attention to teaching and learning is marginalized (Harvey & Jones, 2021), and this hinders higher educators, especially those outside the field of education, from engaging in research focused on their own teaching and learning. However, advocates such as Zuber-Skerritt (2015) provide strong cases for the conceptual foundations and integrity of PAR, and applied with rigor to the scholarship of teaching and learning it can make a vital contribution to the vigour of disciplines outside education; students are attracted and engaged by high quality teaching that can strengthen disciplines as professions and nurture future researchers.

Investigation of teaching and learning policies, approaches, and practices as a form of educational research is central to two dimensions of higher education's mission - teaching and research. The task of achieving quality in both is today considered an indispensable dimension of organizational success, and pursuit of these goals can be facilitated by PAR, which has always been motivated by desire for "change through critical scrutiny of self, society, and structures" (Walker & Loots, 2018, p. 167). Universities should consider developing structures and processes that encourage and value PAR, shifting it from the margins of research to embed it as fundamental in responsible and ethical institutional practice.

Questioning assumptions

Although PAR has a place as a tool for straightforward evaluation of teaching innovations or assessment practices, adoption as a model for PLD must be grounded on recognition that scrutiny, questioning, and understanding of assumptions about teacher learning and practice are indispensable dimensions of learning. To move outside the status quo, practitioners need to look to "change and challenge the assumptions that underpin practice" (Arnold & Norton, 2018, p. 5), to interrogate and contest the discourses and ideologies that shape practice and the context of practice. PAR as a reflexive learning and research practice compels questioning assumptions about what teaching practice is, and what it aims to achieve.

For even the most reflective professional, uncovering deep-seated assumptions and ideologies that influence or shape approaches to practice can be challenging, and the PAR practice of collaboration with a critical friend (MacPhail, Tannehill, & Ataman, 2021) can

be revelatory. Educational studies by outside researchers regularly foregrounds entranced and unconscious assumptions and thinking that influence teachers' practices. For example, in the field of teaching critical thinking to international students in Australia Liyanage, Walker, and Shokouhi (2021) found teachers of critical thinking skills often do not themselves think critically about their own assumptions concerning the meaning of students' backgrounds and how this shapes their classroom practice. In another example, this from the field of language teacher education, teacher educators can neglect to question long-held conceptualizations of language underpinning teaching practices, such as the nature of multilingualism, risking promotion of practice that is not student-focused, ethical, and just (Liyanage & Tao, 2020).

To expand on these issues, two areas are explored in the remainder of this paper. First, a discussion of the 'fit' of PAR with the quest for quality practice teaching and learning, given alignment between current conceptualizations of teacher professional learning (Strom & Viesca, 2020), and the recursive cycle of practitioner action research. This is followed by some consideration of the implications of the current pandemic, which has made urgent the need for higher educators to engage in pedagogical research that involves reflection on assumptions about what they do, how they do it, and why they do it as they innovate ways to continue to improve practice in new conditions.

PAR & educators

Currently, the quest for quality in teaching and learning in HE confronts managerial ideologies and linear product-oriented perceptions of learning that   construct effective teaching as a set of technical standardized practices (Norton, 2019). Institutional policies and programs of professional learning about teaching are often organized around traditional models of professional development that value introduction of 'knowledge' from 'outside' the teacher's practice experience. Promotion of standardized 'best quality' practices has given us the theory-practice dichotomy, and the much-observed 'gap' between what teachers learn as theory and its 'translation' to practice. PAR, on the other hand, accords value to knowledge generated 'inside' practice, to the practitioner as knowledge-maker, and advocates approaching teaching as a knowledge-making practice. Kemmis (2009, p. 467) describes PAR as a "practice-changing practice, …(a) meta-practice" that "changes people's practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 464). As the notion of a meta-practice implies, PAR as a strategy for teacher knowledge-making and learning 'from the inside' requires practitioners to begin by taking a 'step back' from their situation to begin to appreciate the relational and reflexive complexity of the context in which they work. Assumptions, or ideologies, or circumstances that confine reflection on current practice and future possibilities need to be interrogated, as does the methodological framework to inform and critique actions to ensure a foundation for further learning emerges from rigorous research practices.

An intricate model

The work of teaching is far from a straightforward and standardized practice. Higher educators work in dynamic contexts that are shaped by and emerged from the multiplicity of reflexive relations between and among themselves, students, material and physical conditions, and, on a more abstract level, dominant and/or resistant ideologies and discourses. Teacher learning in such dynamic contexts is itself complex, and so, unsurprisingly, is the relation between teacher learning and teacher practice. Current theorization of the complexity of teacher learning draws on sociocultural perspectives, complexity theory, and rhizomatics, and requires participant action researchers to contemplate onto-epistemological shifts (Strom & Viesca, 2020) in their understanding of their work as participant action researchers as what Strom and Viesca (2020, p. 14) theorize as "'learning-practice' to emphasise the entangled nature of these processes."

Much of what is conducted as PAR typically involves attempted changes or improvements in classroom practice/s through introduction of a new or innovative idea about which a teacher or group of teachers has 'learned' via a professional development experience, and focused on evaluation of the intervention to determine whether it 'works' as a 'product' of learning. The suggestion implicit in these situations is that teacher learning is situated in a PLD event, and can subsequently be 'applied' by teachers acting *on* their students rather than *with* their students, reflecting "a rationalist approach in which the teacher more or less controls their teaching, the human/non-human elements of the classroom are relatively stable and passive, and teacher learning and teacher practice have a one-to-one correspondence" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 2). Such linear conceptualizations of the relation of teacher learning and practice that "assume that the teacher has full agency to take her learning and drop it, intact, into the classroom" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 1) are incompatible with a complex model of teacher learning. The recursive and reflexive approach of PAR that situates teacher learning and teacher practice as embedded within each other, or entangled in the activity of learning-practice (Strom & Viesca, 2020) is a practical alternative to this dichotomous approach. The non-dualist concept of learning-practice provides a starting point for practitioners to question the assumption that they 'control' what happens in classrooms and reorientation from an application or transfer of teacher learning as a product to translation as a process. PAR shifts the focus from the teacher as the 'architect' bringing change in classrooms to practice with the understanding that classrooms are co-constructed social events in which both teachers and students learn. The influence of teachers as agents in the social world of classroom activity is considerable, but the influences of others' actions, of material and nonmaterial factors, of a multiplicity of factors in shaping attempts to change, and reflexively (re)shaping all of these, needs to be acknowledged. In learning-practice, the 'classroom' –the teacher, the students, the learning and teaching practices, the meaning/s of material artefacts and discourses, and so on - is always emerging as the multiplicities are reshaped in responding to interactive events. For teachers to fully engage in the process/es of their own learning and approach it reflexively

and recursively as participant teacher-researchers, as practitioner-learners, they need to understand this relational complexity, and be prepared to legitimize the agency of all the participants and the contextual dimensions of teaching and learning, especially students. Interrogating and negotiating understanding of the world in which they work, and repositioning as but one element of a "situated, multi-faceted, interactional" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 6) activity, is vital preparation for teacher learning, and harnessing learning in reflection on actions going forward.

The complexities that characterize a learning-practice model of teacher learning also underpin the principles of PAR as practice-based and practice-changing practice as articulated by Kemmis (2009). Arguing that the basis of PAR is a philosophical life, he argues the work of the participant action researcher is not theorization but "actually saying, doing and relating in ways that are wise and prudent, and informed by theoretical knowledge" (p. 465). In pursuing this, the action researcher must negotiate the "mediating preconditions for practice:

1) cultural–discursive preconditions, which shape and give content to the 'thinking' and 'saying' that orient and justify practices;
2) material–economic preconditions, which shape and give content to the 'doing' of the practice; and
3) social–political preconditions, which shape and give content to the 'relatings' involved in the practice." (p. 466)

In Kemmis's (2009) conception, practice is a process of making and remaking these conditions that negotiates an outcome between reproduction and transformation of understandings, actions, and relatings. The parallels with the learning-practice model are clear; teacher learning-practice is a "highly mediated activity" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 8) produced collectively through interaction of a multitude of factors connected to

> specific, situated political, cultural, historical, and material conditions and power flows, … (as) emergent vital and ongoing processes that are constantly changing as different elements in teaching assemblages come into composition and develop/transform in relation to all other elements of an assemblage. (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 8)

This alignment of PAR's principles and practices with models of teacher learning as an entangled process of learning-practice justifies an argument for approaching improvement of the quality of teaching in HE using PAR. It offers a powerful tool not just for teacher learning, but also a path for student learning, and as a research strategy it offers a strong conceptual foundation for conduct of research to contribute to teaching and learning scholarship.

In addition to PAR being 'fit for purpose' in efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning, it also lends itself to the demands of the time, namely, the disruption ensuing from the global pandemic. This has quickly become a situation requiring an urgent focus on how higher educators must continue to learn about teaching practices so students can experience the high-quality teaching that supports them in achievement of their potential as students and as graduates. This great challenge demands we rethink much about how and why we teach.

PAR & the global pandemic

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, and frequently without any alternative in the context of government directions and lockdowns, universities around the world closed their campuses and moved their courses online and restrictions on international travel prevented student mobility. This situation either continues in many institutions, or regular returns to lockdown of varying durations mean both teachers and students are experiencing ongoing disruptions of on-campus study. Although there is a widespread attitude that at some time in the near future, the conditions of teaching will 'return to normal', in the new circumstances, the focus of the question of quality in teaching and learning has shifted to the online teaching and learning that has replaced face-to-face teaching as practitioners evaluate their efforts to adjust. If this task is approached via PAR, it is time to interrogate assumptions about the 'normal', and whether the interests and needs of students are best satisfied by on-campus teaching in the conventional or traditional modes. Returning to normal suggests nothing has been learned during the time of disruption. Higher educators need to scrutinize the alignment of their practices, how they assess students, and how they ask students to work, with the circumstances graduates will encounter in workplaces. There has been a steady move to adapt teaching practices to the rapid emergence of digital world, and the pandemic offers opportunities to pursue this shift to ensure the future of HE offers the most appropriate and most responsive modes of teaching and learning that prepare students for their future needs and the demands of professional work.

In many respects these are not new circumstances. Many institutions have well-developed systems for management of remote learning, or to integrate information and communication technology with on-campus teaching or blended learning. Many higher educators are deeply committed to exploring and investigating practice in global classrooms in which technology is both medium and/or object of teaching and learning. A significant body of PAR reports diverse examples of the utilization of technology/ICT in face-to-face teaching/learning, or blended learning (e.g., Brudermann, 2010; Eales-Reynolds, Gillham, Grech, Clarke, & Cornell, 2012; Mathews, Andrews, & Luck, 2012; Stover & Vere, 2013). However, many higher educators are not prepared to meet the imperative of providing quality on-lune teaching. Pre-pandemic Australian studies reported that on-line teaching was accorded lower priority by many academics, and that their lack of experience and skill in teaching online was a significant factor in markedly lower course completion and

graduation rates for students studying online than for students learning on-campus (Stone, 2017). In the absence of support or appropriate training, and often without their own personal experiences of remote or online learning (Devlin & McKay, 2016), many higher educators have coped with the sudden shift to online teaching by simply moving face-to-face teaching materials to course websites and expecting students to adapt.

What is needed in these circumstances is a methodical approach to re-shaping the way/s educators approach their task, and the iterative PAR cycle provides a practice-centred and ethical strategy to inform understanding of attempts to do this. This understanding is essential, because, even with the best of intentions on the part of educators methodically engaging in practice-changing practice, change "may have consequences that are unsustainable for practitioners of these practices or for the other people involved in them" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 464), for example, students. All stakeholder in higher education stand to benefit from cultivation of institutional cultures that prioritize practice-changing practice. When educators research their own teaching and engage students as co-researchers of teaching practice and their own learning, "faculty members and the student body are provided with the opportunity to contribute toward the accomplishment of institutional change from the 'middle out'" (Gibbs et al., 2017, p. 5). In HE, this is a time for learning by interrogating our assumptions, turning our attention to "the mediating preconditions" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 466) in order to negotiate the complexities of the "emergent vital and ongoing processes that are constantly changing as different elements in teaching assemblages come into composition and develop/transform in relation to all other elements of an assemblage" (Strom & Viesca, 2020, p. 8). In the collective endeavor of renegotiating how teaching and learning is done in HE in turbulent times, PAR is a practical path for navigation between reproduction and transformation of practice and in so doing achieving verifiable quality.

Beyond pandemic times

Looking beyond the urgency of the need to respond to pandemic conditions, the quality of HE and development of the knowledge base of teaching learning scholarship (Harvey & Jones, 2021) can be advanced by researching changes in practices with colleagues and students. Additionally and importantly, for higher educators in the global 'South' PAR offers valuable and needed learning and research pathways. They often practice in situations where funded research oportunities are scarce, and where professional learning through travelling to more privilged institutions in the 'North' is more valued than that situated in local contexts. In the instance of teacher educators preparing graduates for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, for example, teacher PLD models tend to rely on either travel of teachers overseas to English-dominant locations, or bringing in experts from Anglophone nationsto import 'knowledge' of pedagogies. Many higher educators in the global South are also tasked with enactment of policies authorizing English language components in undergraduate degrees or the introduction of English medium instruction

(EMI) programs (e.g., see Liyanage, 2021a) and the flow of 'knowledge' about English and EMI pedagogy from the geopolitical North to institutions in the South can bring with it a plethora of cultural and educational assumptions that complicate the task of contextually responsive teaching (Liyanage & Bartlett, 2008; Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019; Liyanage & Walker, 2021; Liyanage, Walker, & Singh, 2015). Reorientation that reverses this relationship, and contextualizes the local globally, can, however, reinforce international and transnational connections to our mutual benefit through sharing our findings and conclusions. That researchers and teaching practitioners across the globe are all experiencing asimilar need to respond to the new demands of these new times in their own classrooms and institutions reinforces the value of collaborative approaches and of the sharing and dissemination of research. The interest in how educators respond to a global problem given local issues and circumstances of practice extends outside the confines of individual classrooms, and can prove valuable beyond institutional, national, or regional bondaries.

The culture and the work of higher educatorsis based on"collegiality, evidence- and theory-based practice, and a focus on reflection and evaluation to inform change and innovation" (Harvey & Jones, 2021, p. 173), and this aligns ideologically, as Harvey and Jones (2021) point out, with the reflective focus of PAR.It can serve a key role in the professional learning of higher educators, and through commitment to developing and refining teaching can cultivate quality in the work of individuals and of communities in HE institutions. It can generate contributions to the field of teaching and learning research, to development and refining of PAR methodologies, and to the research capabilities of academics and their students as co-researchers. However**,** the practiceof PAR demands ongoing interrogation of attitudes and perceptions. If conducted ethically, rigorously and with an orientation to the wider, global HE community, the impact could be far-reaching. Quality teaching and learning in places such as post-colonial and post-conflict Sri Lanka amdist local and unique circumstances can be challenging (see Liyanage, 2021b), but in diversity there are always expectations, experiences, dilemmas, and opportunitiesshared by all. The needs of students in HE in the global South are not removed from those of students elsewhere, and the practice of PAR affords practitioner learning that can make a difference. PAR offers a platform for professional learning that is local, practical, and achievable, that addresses students' needs through a learning-practice process responsive to the demands of changing circumstances, that can contribute to international teaching and learning scholarship, and with the aim of quality teaching and learning.

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