

## TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: MAPPING THE TERRAIN

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines ways in which Business Education teachers can work together in professional learning communities to improve their teaching skills and the academic performance of their students. The paper posits that the professional learning needs of Business Education teachers are innumerable and include the incorporation of information communication technology in teaching, the employment of constructivist pedagogies in the classroom, improvising teaching resources from the business community, using authentic assessment practices, addressing diversity, differentiating instruction, reflective teaching and learning through action research and many others. As a way of mapping the terrain, this paper focussed on only three professional learning areas in Business Education and left the rest to professional learning communities in schools who can best determine their members' professional learning needs. The paper concludes by suggesting a professional learning programme that aims at sustaining the momentum of any pedagogical initiatives implemented in schools.*

**Keywords:** Business Education, Professional Learning, Professional Development, Professional Learning Community, Professional Learning Workshop

### INTRODUCTION

For current teachers and those working to become teachers, continuous professional development is needed to continue to grow and improve. However, many believe the idea of professional development is somewhat outdated, which is why many schools and teachers are implementing a system of professional learning instead. Professional learning embodies many of the ideas and goals of professional development. However, it emphasises a modernised version of pedagogy that encourages active and interactive learning strategies rather than traditional rote teaching techniques (Julie, Holtman & Smith, 2019). Scherff (2018) provides a useful distinction between traditional professional development and professional learning. She says professional development, which “happens to” teachers, is often associated with one-time workshops, seminars or lectures, and is typically a one-size-fits all approach. In contrast, professional learning, when designed well, is typically interactive, sustained and customized to teachers' needs. It encourages teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and to practice what they are learning in their own teaching contexts.

The enhancement of teachers' professional learning can be done by stimulating the development of professional learning communities (PLCs). A professional learning community is a group of teachers that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students (Huijboom, Van Meeuwen, Rusman. & Vermeulen, 2019). The improvement of the skills and

knowledge of teachers is done through collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialogue. In its guidelines for professional learning in South African schools, the Department of Basic Education (2015) suggests that PLCs should provide spaces where teachers share innovative ideas with experienced teachers and where experienced teachers mentor young teachers. This stimulates teachers to interrogate and re-invigorate their practice rather than to recycle old ideas. At its core, the concept of a professional learning rests on the premise of improving student learning by improving teaching practice. According to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many and Mattos (2016) professional learning operates under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for teachers.

In Business Education professional learning is important because Business Education is an ever growing and ever changing field. Because the world of business is dynamic and constantly changing it may be difficult for teachers to stay up-to-date with contemporary developments and the burgeoning quantity of potentially relevant information (McKenzie & Swords, 2000). This, by implication means that business teachers must be lifelong learners in order to learn new business subject matter content, teaching styles, techniques, tips and subject-specific teaching methodologies. In the context of Accounting Education, Draz and Ahmad (2017) argue that a special focus should be given to the instructional approaches of Accounting teachers to avoid professional obsolescence in knowledge and practical skills.

Thus professional learning not only allows teachers to learn new teaching styles, techniques, and tips but helps them to implement active learning strategies and collaborative learning methods that encourage social interaction and thus facilitate student learning (Dix & Cawkwell, 2011; Siguroardottir, 2010). In a review of research studies on the impact of teacher professional learning Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008) reviewed 10 empirical studies of teacher collaboration in learning communities within the United States and one large multi-site research report published in England. All of these studies reported data documenting the impact of professional learning on teaching practice and/or student learning. The authors examined what the studies conveyed about how teachers changed their teaching practices and found that professional learning participants' practices became more interactive and learner-centred over time.

What is apparent in the foregoing discussion is that effective professional learning enhances teachers' understanding of the content they teach and equips them with a range of strategies that enable their students to learn that content. Thus professional learning should be directed towards providing teachers with the skills to teach and assess for deep understanding and to develop students' metacognitive skills.

### **Professional Learning Programmes for Business Education Teachers**

The professional learning needs of Business Education teachers are innumerable and include the incorporation of information communication technology (ICT) in teaching, the employment of constructivist pedagogies in the classroom, improvising teaching resources from the business community, using authentic assessment practices, addressing diversity, differentiating instruction, reflective teaching and learning through action research, and many others. Most of these needs cannot be taught to teachers in a single, short-term programme. Rather, these needs are met through on-going professional learning.

As a way of mapping the terrain, this paper will focus on only three professional learning areas which the author, through his experience as a teacher and teacher educator, believes are

in the top 10 in African contexts. He will leave the rest to professional learning communities in schools who can best determine their members' professional development needs.

### ***Constructivist pedagogies***

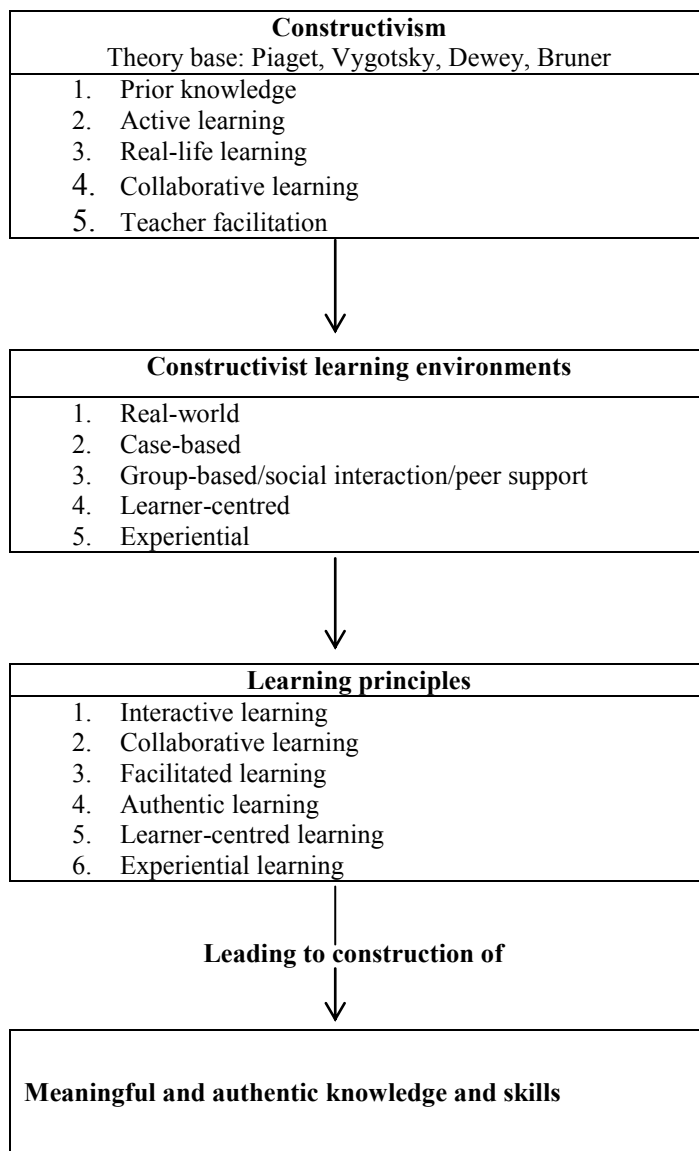
Constructivist theory offers a viable alternative to traditional teaching methods. In his study on constructivist pedagogy for the business classroom, Mathews (2007) came to the conclusion that Business Education and learning has become formidable and challenging over the last few years. He argued that a traditional learning environment is bereft of active learning where students only try to memorise terms and concepts and are unable to apply them to the real corporate world. He found out that in business classes, learners failed to comprehend basic business terminology and communication practices and concepts related to organizational administration and functioning. In such a state of nescience, there was a need to enable the students to maximise learning through knowledge construction in authentic environments that employ the context in which learning is relevant. He concluded that constructivism leads to learning that is action-based where learners construe or make interpretations of their world through interactions in the real world.

The employment of constructivist pedagogies in Business Education classrooms has its own challenges. According to Cochran-Smith (2003), the requirement that teachers should implement classroom practices with a constructivist orientation comes with many challenges and dilemmas for them as they will be required to "learn new knowledge and practices, and, at the same time, unlearn some long-held ideas, beliefs and practice" (p. 9). Research in this area indicates that classroom teachers find the implementation of constructivist instruction far more difficult than the reform community acknowledges (Windschitl, 2002). One of the most powerful determinants of whether constructivist approaches flourish or flounder in classrooms is the degree to which individual teachers understand the concept of constructivism. For example, in a study of middle school teachers participating in educational reforms, Oakes, Hunter-Quartz, Ryan and Lipton (2000:22) found that "efforts to employ student-centered constructivist pedagogy were routinely thwarted by the lack of opportunity for teachers to delve into the theoretical underpinnings of the practices they were expected to enact". What this means is that if teachers do not have a working understanding of constructivism, then they cannot be expected to successfully adapt constructivist principles to their particular classroom contexts. Teachers who hope or wish to teach for understanding as constructivism demands should be prepared not only to learn how constructivist fundamentals translate into classroom strategies, but also to undergo a major transformation of thinking about teaching and learning. In the South African context Fataar (2007) argues that a shift from traditional methodology to learner-centred, constructivist teacher development is not easy to implement in rural and township schools. This is because the context in which many teachers find themselves does not always allow for the shift to a constructivist classroom. Many teachers slip back into the traditional style of teaching and classroom management which is more of an information transfer than the mutual discovery and creation of rooted knowledge.

Embarking on professional learning activities for Business Education teachers offers a possible lasting solution to failure to employ constructivist pedagogies in schools. Sparks (1994) suggests that constructivist teaching occurs best through constructivist professional development opportunities. He proposes that teachers need professional development activities such as action research, discourse with peers, reflective practices and journal keeping to make sense of their own teaching practices. Le Cornu and Peters (2005) are of the opinion that, for teachers to shift their teaching towards constructivist methods, they need to

be supported in this endeavour. Teachers need to be engaged in professional learning activities that will result in transformations in their classrooms.

The following diagram summarises some of the materials that can be covered during a professional learning workshop(s) on constructivist teaching and learning.



**Figure 1: Professional learning workshop ideaa on constructivist learning (Adapted from Schreuder, 2014)**

Professional growth cannot occur without professional learning. Business Education teachers must develop knowledge about the constructivist approach to classroom teaching. The professional learning programme outlined above will help business teachers’ strategies into classroom teaching that are designed to activate prior knowledge and improve constructivist knowledge construction.

***Incorporating ICTs in teaching and learning***

Use of modern technology in teaching and research is the key aspect of professional development of accounting and other faculties. Use of modern technology in teaching and

research is the key aspect of professional development of accounting and other faculties. Advances in information technology have transformed classroom teaching and learning by providing alternatives to traditional teaching methods such as the standard lecture format by giving teachers and learners' access to a wide range teaching and learning tools. The pedagogical benefits and the capacity of computers to assist in Business Education teaching were outlined by Spinelli (2010) and these include (a) emphasis on active learning, (b) enhancement of collaborative learning, (c) encouragement of greater student independence and (d) task-based teaching (p. 43). In a nutshell, the ability of computers to bring realism and learner-centredness to teaching supports contemporary constructivist views of teaching where emphasis is placed on authentic learning environments, realism and active learner involvement in learning tasks.

Although the potential benefits of the use of computers as an alternative mode of delivery in Business Education have been reported, there are many empirical studies which have shown that established teaching methods remain in place and available technology is often underused and poorly integrated into classroom practice. In a paper on the professional development of Accounting teachers, Draz and Ahmad (2017) are of the view that the use of modern technology in teaching is a key aspect of professional learning of Accounting teachers because technology integration in schools remains practically unchanged because of teachers' lack of its adoption in the classroom (Raman & Yamat, 2014). Major barriers limiting school teachers in using ICT have been cited. These include lack of teacher ICT skills, lack of teacher confidence, lack of pedagogical teacher training, lack of suitable educational software, limited access to ICT, rigid structure of traditional education systems and restrictive curricula (Jones, 2004; Hare, 2007; Richardson, 2009;).

In a study carried out in Australian institutions of higher learning, Watty, McKay and Ngo (2016) found out that a significant number of Accounting educators resisted the use of modern technology in teaching. They argued that one of the greatest challenges facing business schools and education institutions in the 21st century is not new technologies themselves, but the ability of educators to embrace educational technologies. Similar findings were made by Sithole (2012) in his study pedagogical practices of Business Studies teachers in Botswana. The findings of the study suggest that business teachers indeed use ICT in teaching. They use computers to produce teaching aids, for record keeping, for research and for setting tests and assignments. However, although ICT resources may be available in the schools, the majority of teachers has not yet embraced computer aided learning (CAL) as an alternative pedagogical approach. Incorporating CAL in the classroom does not mean that teachers would abandon their way of doing things; all they need to do is to strive to find a balance between the traditional teaching and the use of ICT. A study on European teachers' views and perspectives on the use of ICT in teaching by Lindfors (2007) concluded that the best way to use ICT in class is to combine it with traditional teaching and the benefits of doing this can be immense.

The changing technological capabilities in education require all business teachers to become responsible for doing more in the classroom as they teach about technology as a business tool as well as consider using technology as a teaching aid. In the words of Kopcha (2012), there is increasing need for technology integration of in the classroom, requiring teachers to incorporate technology into their pedagogy. Table 1 below summarises some professional learning workshop ideas on how to use technology in Business Education classrooms to enhance learning:

**Table 1: Workshop ideas for incorporating ICTs in business education classrooms**

IT package	Suitable topic	How can the IT package be used?
<b>Word processing</b> (using a computer to create, edit, and print documents)	Varied	To write reports, produce handouts, assignments & tests, diagrams, concept maps, newsletters, lesson planning, reflective diaries, questionnaires, etc.
<b>Microsoft Excel</b> Spreadsheet software	Analyse financial information; calculations; create forecasting models etc:	Modelling: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cash flow forecasts</li> <li>• Balance sheets</li> <li>• Trading and profit and loss accounts</li> <li>• Start-up capital estimates, etc.</li> </ul> Teachers can use Microsoft Excel to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keeping electronic record books</li> <li>• Set up formulas to calculate grades</li> <li>• Tracking student grades (conditional formatting)</li> <li>• Keeping student rosters</li> <li>• Creating assessment rubrics</li> <li>• Converting data into charts and graphs, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Desktop Publishing (DTP)</b> Software used to create visual displays	Advertising	Development of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advertisements</li> <li>• flyers</li> <li>• brochures</li> <li>• business cards</li> <li>• newsletters</li> <li>• posters</li> </ul>
<b>PowerPoint</b> Presentations in the form of slide shows that accompany the oral delivery of the topic.	All topics	Can be used for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Active lecturing</li> <li>• Student presentations</li> </ul>
<b>Internet</b> The <i>Internet</i> is a global network connecting millions of computers	The world wide web	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business simulations, games, puzzles, etc</li> <li>• Online investigations;</li> <li>• Online research;</li> <li>• Discussions (discussion boards and chat rooms);</li> <li>• Exploration of endless resources (business literature, academic journals, facts, figures, etc).</li> </ul>
<b>Blogs</b> A blog is a type of website where entries are made such as in a journal or diary.	All discussion topics	Students share ideas and learn from each other and critique each other.
<b>Accounting packages</b>		E.g. Sage, Oracle; Manage an organisation's accounts including revenues/sales, purchases, bank accounts etc.

**Adapted from:** Borrington (2004): Teaching and assessment skills in Business Studies

Finding creative ways to use technology in the Business Education classroom can make teachers' lives easier by boosting student engagement levels during lessons. The potential benefits range from helping with communication among teachers and learners to enhancing presentations and lessons with media and visuals.

***Improvisation and the use of business community resources***



Instructional materials are defined as resources that organize and support instruction, such as textbooks, job-card tasks and supplementary resources (Shukla, 2018). They could take the form of textbooks, handouts, worksheets, charts, overhead projectors, slides, filmstrips, radio, television and many more. Basically, any visual and audio-visual resources a teacher uses to help him teach his/her students is an instructional material. As has been asserted by many scholars, the importance of the use of these materials cannot be underscored. Abdo and Semela, (2010 cited in Sithole & Lumadi, 2013) argue that the integration of instructional materials in classroom practice is believed to bolster the quality of instruction by fostering student-centred pedagogies. Similar sentiments are shared by Tuimur and Chemwei (2016) who in their study on the use of instructional materials in Kenyan schools stated that instructional materials are essential in that they help teachers and learners avoid overemphasis on recitation and rote learning that can easily dominate lessons. They allow learners to have practical experiences which help them to develop skills and concepts and to work in a variety of ways.

It is common knowledge that most commercially-produced instructional materials for teaching are usually hard to come by and where they are within reach, they are usually expensive to buy. It is for these reasons that instead of relying on schools to provide instructional materials, business teachers are urged to explore the environments around their schools whether urban, suburban or rural for instructional materials. In his study on the pedagogical practices of Business Education teachers in Botswana secondary schools, Sithole (2012) observed that one area that Business Studies teachers are not exploiting fully is the use of locally available resources to enhance teaching and student learning. Instead of relying on schools to provide instructional materials, he urged business teachers to explore the environments around their schools for instructional materials. Forward-thinking teachers should incorporate improvisation into their lesson plans to foster creativity and financial independence from the school.

The business community is awash with teaching resources. Teachers should know that the use of instructional resources in teaching leads to the active participation of learners and this will in turn increase motivation while also minimizing abstraction associated with business learning (Afolabi & Adeleke, 2010 cited in Sithole, 2012). Community institutions, people and businesses are a rich reservoir of instructional materials for business teachers because such materials can be sourced from local magazines, newspapers, government publications or the internet with minimum expenditure of time, energy and money (Sithole, 2012). Business documents such as source documents (in Accounting), business financial reports, bank withdrawal and deposit slips, newspaper advertisements, retailers' promotional materials, consumer protection pamphlets and many more can be gathered from the business community for use in individual or collaborative classroom activities (ibid).

Today, free reproducible and printable internet teaching resources have become a very important tool to impart education. Many government and private organisations have created internet-enabled free teaching resource materials that can be accessed anywhere by both teachers and students (Borrington, 2004). The use of community resources in teaching can make students appreciate the local and international relevance of what they learn in school while affording them the opportunity to apply Business Education theory in context. This is supported by Chew (2008), who, in her study on the development of localised instructional materials in Hong Kong, came to the conclusion that teaching and learning in business education could be enhanced to a great extent by using instructional resources based on local contexts, because such resources would be more authentic and more relevant to students' needs.

## Implementing Professional Learning Programmes for Business Education Teachers

The primary goals for professional learning are changes in teaching practice and increases in student learning. This is a process that occurs over time and participating teachers may require as much as 50 hours of instruction, practice and coaching before a new teaching strategy is mastered and implemented in class (Zarrow, 2020). According to Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson and Orphanos (2009), in recent decades, a new paradigm for professional learning has emerged from research that distinguishes opportunities for teacher learning from the traditional, one-day, drive by workshop model. This paradigm advocates for professional learning workshops of sustained duration so that they provide teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement, and reflect upon new pedagogical strategies that facilitate changes in their practice (Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017).

### Professional learning workshops

According to a study by Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Madelyn Gardner (2017) on effective teacher development, there are specific characteristics of professional learning that, when employed, have an impact on learner outcomes. First, the professional learning has to be centred on the content that participants are responsible to teach. It also has to include active learning, for example, there should be opportunities for teachers to build meaning by examining practices they will use and chances to try out those practices.

As has already been mentioned in the preceding paragraph, the professional learning workshops must be sustained for a sufficient duration. According to Linda Darling-Hammond, professional learning that the greatest impact on student achievement, was sustained learning, where the teachers engaged in an average of 49 hours of professional learning throughout the year. Although it is not implied that 49 hours is the magic number, for the sake of discussion in this paper, the writer will use this number as a benchmark for *sustained duration*.

A professional development programme adapted from Cannon (2019) as shown in Table 2 is recommended in this case. To begin thinking about what each of those 49 hours might look like, Cannon’s plan assumes that schools give teachers opportunities to work in learning communities. These learning communities can play an important role in sustained professional learning and could be a part of the 49 hours. The main aim of the plan is to sustain the momentum of any pedagogical initiative being implemented in the school. It includes 29 hours of professional learning from a school-based expert/coach (or an external resource person if a local expert is not available). Added to the 29 hours will be 20 hours that teachers might work in their learning communities, giving a total of 49 hours. This aligns with the findings from the Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) study.

**Table 2(part-i): A 29-hour plan to support ongoing professional learning communities**

Hours per teacher	Professional learning workshop	School-based instructional coach	Notes
6	School-based professional learning workshop		Build common expectations about topic
1		Base-line data meeting	Examine baseline data to ensure that instructional foci are aligned with learner needs.
1		Co-planning meetings	Plan lessons with the advice and feedback of instructional coach.
2		Lesson demonstrations	Teacher and instructional coach teach together small parts of the lesson modeled by the instructional coach.



**Table 2(part-ii): A 29-hour plan to support ongoing professional learning communities**

Hours per teacher	Professional learning workshop	School-based instructional coach	Notes
2		Instructional coaching	Co-teaching of lessons where teachers and instructional coach teach together parts of lessons modeled by the instructional coach
2		Instructional coaching	
1		Instructional coaching	
1		Mid-year meeting	Reflect on progress with regard to teacher growth and pupil learning
6	School-based professional learning workshop		Review implementation progress and/or obstacles and get expert advice
2		Instructional coaching	Support focusing on pupil learning goals identified by the teacher – teacher and instructional coach gather evidence on pupil learning and effectiveness of methods being trialed
2		Instructional coaching	
2		Instructional coaching	
1		End of year meeting	Reflect on data to consider pupil learning, current pupil needs, instructional responses and future programming

**Adapted from:** Cannon (2019), *How to sustain the momentum of professional learning*.

Cannon (2019) says that there are considerations to be made before selecting a school-based instructional coach. It is imperative that the school-based instructional coach has the pedagogical expertise to offer support in a variety of Business Education pedagogical formats. If not, support from external experts should be sought and potential school-based expert(s) should be identified so that they participate in the professional learning workshops alongside the teachers and shadow the external professional expert coach during school-based meetings, as models of effective practice.

According to Cannon, 49 hours throughout the school year might seem overwhelming, but the plan in Table 2 illustrates how professional learning can be customised and designed to offer sufficient opportunities for learning in many forms throughout the year. Time spent in workshops and professional learning communities combined with internal and/or external support create sustained professional development which supports every business teacher, and impacts student learning.

### **Business Education Teachers’ Professional Learning Needs and Priorities**

Based on the writer’s experiences as a Business Education teacher educator and his research in the field of Business Education pedagogy, the following professional learning needs in African contexts should be prioritised:

1. Using constructivist teaching methods.
2. Integrating technology into own teaching and learning strategies.
3. Authentic assessment and test construction skills.
4. Developing and using improvised instructional materials.
5. Applying entrepreneurial pedagogies in the classroom.
6. Using differentiated instructional strategies.
7. Conducting classroom-based action research.
8. Reflective journaling.

The list is not exhaustive but serves as a starting point for developing the necessary knowledge-base and skills that business teachers who are already engaged in professional practice require for carrying out their role(s) effectively.

## **CONCLUSION**

PLCs are attractive because they're nearly free, and they're incredibly flexible. Teachers, administrators and other staff members can design their work around their students' needs and work together to solve specific problems around achievement, school culture, and more.

To grow professionally, Business Education teachers should participate in a range of subject-related professional learning activities. In her study on the professional development of Accounting teachers in selected schools in South Africa, Schreuder (2014) found out that teachers particularly appreciated workshops which were related to Accounting subject content and methodology. Some reported that such sessions altered their approach to teaching. They reported that their learners benefited from the materials made available at such workshops and that the performance of their learners improved as a result of the content workshops. It is therefore recommended that subject-specific professional learning workshops in business subjects such as Accounting, Economics, Entrepreneurship, Commerce and Business Studies be held periodically in schools in order to professionally grow business teachers.

Komba and Nkumbi (2008) described professional development as a process embracing all activities that enhance professional growth throughout the teacher's career. It is recommended that in-service workshops need to be regularly organized to update teachers on contemporary developments in business education pedagogy. Teachers need to be constantly reminded that of late, teaching approaches have shifted from teacher-centred to constructivist learner-centred ones. The objectives of such workshops would be for teachers to reflect on their current practices and to encourage them to modify their teaching methods from techniques that involve rote memorization to the more participatory and student-centred methods.

Teacher professional learning workshops as described here have the potential to provide opportunities for business teachers to explore new classroom roles, develop new pedagogical techniques and to refine their existing practices.

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