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A Phenomenological Study: On the Lived-experiences of Instructors' in the Higher Diploma Training Program

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Abstract:

Ethiopian Public universities require their staff to go through a higher diploma training that is thought to enhance their teaching capacity at higher education level to enhance student learning. A vigorous policy of staff development is an essential element for higher education institutions. Clear policies should be established concerning higher education teachers, who nowadays need to focus on teaching students how to learn and how to take initiatives rather than being exclusively founts of knowledge. In consideration of such policy Dire Dawa University, as in all other public Universities in Ethiopia, has instituted a higher education teacher development program usually referred to as Higher Diploma Program. Therefore, this study aimed to undertake a phenomenological research inquiry into the lived experiences of higher diploma trainees at Dire Dawa University which enabled me to explore relevant themes, process and patterns that have characterized the higher diploma training programs at Dire Dawa University, especially the reasons that lead to trainee dissatisfaction and dropout. The lived experiences of instructors who have gone through the training program was analyzed from four perspectives i.e. addressing trainees needs & interests, motivation for joining the training, educative capacity of the training and improving ones professional practice. Previous research concerning the importance of pedagogical training for higher education instructors has mainly utilized quantitative methodology. However, this study adopted a qualitative approach to provide unique insight into higher diploma training experiences of university instructors. The participants of the study were selected using snowball sampling method from the first, the second and third batch of trainees of the program. Data were collected from 8 instructors who have gone through the training program using unstructured interview. The collected data was analyzed using narrative qualitative analysis method. The findings of the study revealed that University instructors who joined the training didn't understand the objectives of the program, therefore participate in the training program for purposes other than what it was designed for and to guard their job against any threat of job insecurity they felt. Therefore, it was recommended that before instructors are coerced to join HDP training programs conducting need assessment and organizing & conducting orientation programs to identify gaps and raise interest and designing training programs depending on the gaps identified would help to alleviate most of the problems instructors and the program encountered while conducting the training.

Keywords: Education quality, higher education, Higher diploma program, teacher training, need assessment, staff development, pedagogical training

1. Introduction

Traditionally, in the context of Ethiopia, the expertise required for one to be an instructor in a higher learning institution is good subject matter knowledge indicated by a higher cumulative grade point average (CGPA) at graduation. Such experiences are also in line with the practices of most universities in the world (Postareff et. al, 2007). However, research is inconsistent as to the importance of pedagogical training for university instructors. Moreover, some researchers (Norton, et. al. in Karm, 2010) argue that there is little evidence to show that training has an effect on teaching behavior. In contrast, one can also find research that reveals that participation in pedagogical training helps university teachers become more aware of their approach to teaching and of their teaching skills (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Karm & Remmik, 2008; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2007 in Karm, 2010). Research reveals that approaches to teaching and personal beliefs change slowly (Halliday & Soden, 1998, Postareff et al., 2007 in Karm, 2010) and that if academic development programs are to bring about conceptual change, they must be specifically designed for this purpose. However, teachers/instructors professional development requires that they be adequately equipped with the necessary subject matter as well as pedagogical knowledge. Instructors cannot be good ones only with enough subject matter knowledge. Instructors need to be well conversant in the skill on how to teach the subject matter. It's only when they have adequate knowledge of pedagogical skills that they become professional teachers which is the major thing that differentiates instructors from other graduates of similar fields of study.

The importance of having a good pedagogical knowledge is indubitable for the provision of quality education for students. It is equally important as the subject matter knowledge instructors require to be good instructors. However, my personal experience and that of other colleagues shows that it was a widely held belief among academia that having good subject matter knowledge to be the only requisite for success as instructor in Ethiopian universities. This is quite exemplified in the recruitment practices of universities and ministry of education in the process of recruiting of instructors for universities. Personal and the experience of others testifies that the significant criteria these organizations use even these days is subject matter knowledge measured by their cumulative grade point average (CGPA) at graduation and fluency in English language or the medium of instruction in Ethiopian universities of the soon to be instructors.

However due to the dearth of quality of education in our country the ministry of education introduced the higher diploma program (HDP) for teacher educators in order to enable them use learner centered approaches of teaching. Later, recognizing the importance of pedagogical knowledge for effective teaching in universities, this same program extended its scope to include all instructors in higher learning institutions. Thus, all new academic staffs, especially recent graduates, are required to participate in a number of trainings such as pedagogical skills training, higher diploma program training and English language improvement programs. Even after recognizing the need for pedagogical skills by MoE (ministry of education) and universities the provision of higher diploma program training is limited to some interested academic staff and those in the school/colleges of education.

However, as the training is provided to academic staff while they are on duty and after completing a certain formal training that equips them for a particular job and since it occurs while they are at the same time offering courses to their respective students, the experience of being a 'student' while one is an instructor will have a unique meaning to those involved. Being one of the trainees in my university helped to have such a unique experience and witness the feelings and attitudes other trainees have towards the experience. Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of instructors who had gone through the higher diploma training program and the shared meaning that they created out of their experience. The study will attempt to understand what meaning these experiences have for instructors who went through it and to understand how the training has impacted their professional life.

1.1. Empirical Research on HDP

The higher diploma program in Ethiopia is a new phenomenon in higher learning institutions. At first it was intended for teacher educators but now at least in some universities it has expanded its objectives to include all other instructors working in universities. Higher diploma program (HDP) is a program of pedagogical skills training developed by ministry of education based on the findings of a study conducted by ministry of education in 2002 entitled '*the quality and effectiveness of teacher education in Ethiopia*'. The report highlighted a gap between intentions and realities. This gap has been created by, among other things, schools being occupied by unqualified and under qualified teachers that have problems with pedagogical content knowledge and skills. Even those who are qualified have similar problems with pedagogical content knowledge and skills because of their poor training received in teacher education institutions. To improve the conditions at secondary schools one of the solutions forwarded was to introduce the higher diploma program for teacher educators at teacher education institutions so that the soon-to-be teachers get a better education. The TESO document developed based on this study made it a requirement for all teacher educators to participate in HDP training program in order to improve pedagogical skills of instructors teaching in teacher education institutions to improve quality of education at secondary schools. The purpose of its provision is to improve the quality of education at secondary school level through better training of teachers at teacher education institutions. The MoE introduced the training program in order to alleviate the problem of education quality observed all over the country. The MoE identified the lack of quality education through the study it conducted in 2002 which eventually led to the introduction of HDP training program (Jeylan, 2007).

The HDP training is introduced so that those who participate will continue using student centered teaching approaches while training the soon to be teachers. However some researchers (Kedir, 2006a; Jeylan, 2007) and partakers in the training of the program complain about the inadequacy and irrelevance of the HDP program for their profession as a whole for various reasons. As one of those who went through the training program I was able to observe that the training fails to address the needs and interests of those who participate in the program. Furthermore, Jeylan (2007) contend that the failure of the HDP training is due to the ill organization it suffers from and from its inability to address trainees needs. In support of this, Adula & Kassahun (2008) attest that the impact of the training program is not felt in the classroom of the instructors who participated in the training program. He further argues that the logistical and moral elements required to carry on the effect of the training to the classroom was not planned.

1.2. Research Question

The study will attempt to understand the lived experiences of instructors who participated in the HDP training through the identification of the commonalities in the phenomenon (training) they exercised in their respective universities. It will also try to understand what sort of meaning instructors were able to construct from their training experience and how this affected their traditional way of teaching or offering courses to students.

It is important to understand the meaning instructors were able to construct from their experience of going through the HDP training and the commonalities in their experience so that based on the findings the program and how it is offered could be improved to address the needs and interests of the trainees. The assumption in this study is that instructors' experience of HDP training richly elucidates the nature of the phenomenon, and thus it is this experience that serves as the primary source of knowledge on the subject of HDP training. Thus the study tries to answer through the record and analysis of the lived experiences of participants the following questions;

1. What are the meanings instructors constructed out of their experience of going through the HDP training in Dire Dawa University?
2. What commonalities exist in the meanings instructors constructed out of their experience of going through the HDP training program?
3. Was the HDP training provided in Dire Dawa University attuned to the needs and interests of trainees?

1.3. Significance of the Study

It is obvious that being a trainee while one is at the same time engaged as an instructor in the same university is an important life event for individuals in the professional life of instructors. It is a phenomenon which has special meaning, and often different meaning, for different individuals. The essence of the shared experiences of participants' can only be revealed through a phenomenological research. Understanding the true meaning the training has for instructors can help improve the content or alter the way the program is offered. It can also inform those who provide the training to instructors to modify their practices so that they are able to address trainees' needs and interests.

1.4. General Objective

The overall objective of the study is to find out the common meanings instructors were able to construct from their involvement in the higher diploma training program and suggest ways of improving the training program.

1.5. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study include;

- i. To identify whether the higher diploma training program addresses the needs and interests of instructors.
- ii. To identify whether the training program helps instructors to improve their teaching.
- iii. To identify whether it is conducted in a way that engages instructors who participate in the training program.
- iv. To identify the motivations of instructors for joining the higher diploma training program.

1.6. Research Approach

1.6.1. Methodology

Qualitative research is a paradigm that serves a major role in bringing to the fore the meaning of lived experience of people or their reality. Phenomenology is a valuable qualitative approach to studying human experience. Crotty (cited in Morrissey & Higgs, 2006) suggests that learning and understanding people's subjective experiences has an obvious and multi-faceted importance, as well as very practical applications. Likewise, phenomenological research in education helps to inform educational programs. Phenomenological research assumes that experience is a valid, rich, and rewarding source of knowledge (Becker, 1992). Phenomenology is chosen in this study because the reality of a set of human experiences will be uncovered through the detailed yet subjective descriptions provided by the people being studied (Creswell 1994). The shared meaning that the trainees of HDP constructed will enable to inform and improve the quality of the training program. Further, Osborne (cited in Groenewald, 2004) asserts that Phenomenology provides an appropriate strategy for qualitative inquiry by positioning the researcher within the study to collect data on participant meaning, focusing upon a phenomenon, and bringing personal value to the study.

In order to understand the meaning of the experience of going through the HDP training, the study used a phenomenological qualitative study approach as it enabled to understand the lived experiences of instructors who went through the HDP training program. The use of phenomenological approach enabled to understand the meaning of being involved in HDP training and how it has challenged the traditional way of teaching instructors used to exercise while offering courses for those who were involved in the training.

1.6.2. Data Sources

The target population of this particular research consists of instructors of higher learning institutions in the country who had gone through the HDP training. Out of these a sample of 8 respondents from Dire Dawa University are selected to participate in the study as respondents. Boyd (cited in Groenewald (2004) suggest that a sample of two to ten respondents would be quite sufficient to reach a saturation level of understanding of the meaning people/instructors constructed from their experience of the phenomenon. The eight respondents are selected out of the pool of instructors who were participants of HDP training through snowball sampling method. Here one instructor or HDP training participant was selected or identified and then he was asked to recommend others for interview. Only 8 interviewees were selected in order to participate in this research due to time constraint and taking the purpose of the undertaking in consideration.

1.6.3. Sampling Method

The sampling method used in this study was snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling method was selected as a sampling method because it enables to find study participants without the need to conduct document analysis, in my case, to identify those who participated in the HDP training. I thought it is better because of the distance to be covered and resources that it requires to analyze documents containing all those who partook in the HDP training. After I identified the first study participant, I used snowball sampling in order to trace additional participants or informants. As one who went through the training myself I could have selected my

batch of trainees. However, I chose snowball sampling method because most of my batch of trainees have left the institution and made their inclusion in the study difficult and thus making it necessary to take other HDP trainees from different batches as respondents or participants in the study.

1.6.4. Data Collecting Instrument

The meaning instructors constructed from their training experience was collected using informal interviews, unstructured or open-ended interview and essay which also served as a means of data triangulation. The entire interview was tape recorded and the essay notes were organized to make them amenable to the analysis. Interview is chosen as data collection instrument because an understanding to the feelings, the meanings and in general the reality instructors constructed from their experience of being a trainee of the HDP training can only be gained through conducting interview with the study participants. Further, unstructured interview enables respondents to freely express their experience without restriction and interruption.

1.6.5. Data Analysis

Mainly verbal and some written data were collected through interview and essays from research participants. These data were recorded each on separate tape cassette for identification. The data then were listened to repeatedly in order to identify themes in the data and for description of the data. This also helped to identify the commonalities between the experiences of participants. Based on the themes identified through repeated listening to the recorded tapes the data were analyzed and interpreted.

1.7. The Research Strategy

Phenomenology is widely regarded as a set of methods where there is more than one legitimate way to proceed with a phenomenological investigation. I designed the method of phenomenology in this research to elicit rich texts as well as thematic and structural understandings.

This study utilized phenomenological strategies because the nature of the research lends itself to phenomenological analysis of gathering both thematic and structural understandings of experience or phenomena. Phenomenological approach to analysis contains steps of reduction and structural description that were useful to follow to analyze the life experience of HDP trainees. Similarly, as each participant told different stories of their experience, the development of individual participant portraits, as one of the analytical steps, was useful in structural analysis and reduction. Phenomenological approach facilitated analysis of the individual reports and descriptions of experience to identify essential structural components, and extract developmental and educational understandings not previously gleaned from other studies on the importance of HDP trainings in universities. Data collection and analysis occurred in three stages.

➤ Stage One: Description of the Phenomenon of Interest by the Researchers

This involved exploration of the literature to examine previous research about HDP or pedagogical trainings in universities. As with all phenomenological inquiries, the investigation focused on the lived experience of the participants. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to add to my understanding and description of the experience of going through the HDP training. After initial interest into the topic was piqued through participating in the training process and looking at some of the problems myself, further inquiry into the literature revealed a dearth of research, thus stimulating this research.

➤ Stage Two: Collection of Participants' Descriptions of the Phenomenon

Through snowball sampling method, eight instructors who have different work experience in universities, were selected. At the time of interview the dates of their HDP training varied from one year to five years and were able to attend the training under two different training coordinators, providing a vast perspective and wealth of knowledge on HDP training to draw upon. They were interviewed to illuminate in greater depth the phenomenon of HDP training. All interviews were voluntary and confidential. To explore the phenomenon of the training experience during the interviews a semi-structured interview format was adopted involving the following

• How would you describe your experience of the HDP training?
• Did you have any expectations of the HDP training before joining the training? (If so), can you describe them?
• Did you have any thoughts or feelings during the experience? (If so), can you describe them/tell me about them?
• What did you think of your HDP training program?
• Did you have any emotional reactions? (If so), what were they?
• What did the HDP training program experience mean to you, if it held any meaning at all?
• What led/contributed to your decision to engage in the training program?
• were you prepared well for joining the training program? (If so or not) what made you feel prepared, or what made you feel like you weren't prepared?
• What kind of effect do you think your HDP training experience has on your professional life, self-concept?

Table 1: Probing interview questions

1. A broad opening prompt: "Tell me about your experience of the HDP training." Such questions help evoke memories of events that have been lived through rather than thoughts about the phenomenon. The broad question asked did indeed elicit stories, feelings, and memories rather than personal theories and thoughts of pedagogical training.
2. A series of follow up prompts or topics to frame and focus the interview conversation. These topics were prepared in advance, typical of semi-structured interviews, by investigation of past research and consideration of the phenomenon and research questions to be explored. Sometimes the participants' answers covered several topics, and further questions probed or clarified points made. This approach is reflective of the aims of the phenomenological method, to understand deeply, perceptions of experience. These questions were thematic only. Often the wording changed to reflect the story and experience of the participant being interviewed. This research dealt with subjective experience and perception, and it was not intended to catch a participant in an untruth or exaggeration.

2. Data Analysis

Data were collected using unstructured interview from eight instructors who had the experience of going through the HDP training program. Description of some of these instructors is provided here as follows. All names used are fictitious.

Alem is a new graduate from one of the universities in the country majoring in Psychology. He was assigned to the position of university instructor by ministry of education based on his cumulative grade point average & fluency in the English language. He had taken not a single course in pedagogy or teaching. He attended a week-long training on how to teach organized by the university he was assigned to. He attended the HDP training by requesting the relevant authorities. By the time he started attending the training he had two years of teaching experience. Though all graduate assistants were required to upgrade their education to a second degree level, he and some of his friends were made to wait for one more year due to administrative action for a reason neither he nor his friends are aware.

Mulualem is a graduate assistant that has only a one year teaching experience at the time of attending the HDP training. His education at university at undergraduate level included courses in education. Thus, he is quite familiar with the content of what is offered in the HDP training. He was a victim of the same administrative action for a crime he was not well aware. The administrative action was the only reason that delayed him from furthering his education to a second degree level. Thus, his job security was threatened.

Tesfa is an assistant lecturer at the time of attending the HDP training. He had 12 years of teaching experience at a secondary school level. His undergraduate education included courses in education/pedagogy that made him well familiar to the topics taught in HDP trainings. He was also the victim of the administrative action taken by university officials. This administrative action forced him to delay his ambition of furthering his education to a second degree level. Due to this and the accusations that followed it, his job security was threatened. During the interview he revealed that he was very much enthusiastic about the training during and after the HDP training.

2.1. Addressing Trainees Needs & Interests

The HDP training requires trainees to identify their students' needs & interests before planning their lesson and provide their instruction in classrooms to their students. A training program can only address the needs and interests of individuals when it's content and the way it is conducted considers the level of understanding of trainees as well as the gaps trainees think they have in their professional practice. As the interviewed trainees revealed repeatedly, the interests of the trainees were not adequately aroused so that they are able to acquire the skills required of them from attending the training program. Though there is severe lack of awareness raising opportunities, interviewees revealed that the training program was properly tailored to the needs and interests of the trainees as it enabled them to acquire skills that they think helped to develop them as professionals. Moreover, the respondents expressed that the way it is offered was more interesting to the participants of the training, saying that they have enjoyed the training program just because of the way the trainer handled each training session and he/she was sensitive to their needs and interests. They further elaborated that when they were absent from a training session, the trainer personally tried to solve their problems by making a call and holding meetings. They further indicated that such acts by their trainer infused in them the importance of attending to the needs of each student in their class. It inculcated the importance of attending to each student's problems and solving them, if possible, so that the student will be able to attend class regularly. Following this example one of the interviewees discussed about how he tried to get involved in one student's life who is an orphan & HIV positive and tried to advise her to ease the burden so that she can attend her education. However one of the trainees expressed his discontentment for all of the training sessions he attended saying that though the trainer tried to engage everyone in the training he was so jaded that the only thing he thinks about after starting the training session was the time of its accomplishment. These instances reveal that while the training program has an impact on some of the trainees, still others were just attending the training program as a pastime and to fulfill what is required of them. The commonalities in all of these experiences are that the way the training program was conducted by the training coordinator has fascinated all of the trainees and to some this has helped them to grow professionally.

2.2. Motivation for Joining the Training

Trainees of the HDP program are considered to be mature professionals who would like to improve their professional practice every day through learning opportunities their profession provides. They are also expected to learn from every opportunity the university or other concerned bodies provide so that they are better fit to produce middle level professional who would carry on the development

efforts of the nation. As professionals they should be motivated enough to take on every opportunity which avails itself for the enhancement of their profession. The HDP training is one of such an opportunity for all those who are by profession required to offer courses in universities and colleges. The motivation for joining the training program shouldn't be for the sake of getting a certificate or a diploma but improvement of their professional practice. However data obtained from interviewees reveal that the only reason trainees joined the HDP training program is for the sake of obtaining the diploma which they get after completion. All of the interviewees revealed that they didn't have adequate orientation as to why the university organized the training program except that it is a requirement sanctioned by ministry of education for all university instructors. All of the interviewees joined the HDP training program not because they thought the training will improve their academic competence or lead to their professional growth but because they thought that by doing so they will satisfy what others require of them in order to fit in to their position. One of the interviewees conferred that due to the administrative action taken on his educational opportunity he was so afraid that he may be fired from his job that he himself requested the department head to allow him to participate in the training to which he has no interest or see any need to attend, but thought that his involvement in the training will somehow save his job. Still another interviewee indicated that the very reason for him to attend the training program was that he thought at the time that the certificate/diploma would enhance his employment opportunity in the country or abroad. The following statement is directly taken from the response of one of the respondents;

- "I joined the program (HDP training), frankly speaking, to get the certificate. Because I thought the certificate would serve as a guarantee for my position and I would be able to avoid further harassment from university officials."

2.3. *Educative Capacity of the Training*

The major objective of any training program is to provide the knowledge skills and attitude which it aimed to provide for trainees. To be able to provide the pedagogic knowledge, skills and attitude it has to select appropriate content, design the learning experiences in a way it enables to provide what it aimed to provide. In addition the trainer should also be well equipped and well conversant in the content selected and methods to impart it. To be educative and provide the necessary skills required to provide instruction at a university level the HDP training program needs to tailor the content it offers to the skills required by the trainees to be competent professionals. Furthermore it has to be offered by competent trainers able to be examples for the trainees as well as able to instill the skills to their trainees. Moreover there has to be adequate time and resources and follow up so that what is learnt is implemented in their everyday activities. All the respondents, likewise, revealed that though the contents and learning experiences were good, the trainees were less motivated and had minimal participation in the course of their training. The following is a statement taken from one of the respondents;

- "Some portion of the content (i.e. action research) was irrelevant for my professional practice. Due to this when I was attending the HDP training my participation was very low and my motivation was very low and got nothing from the training. Even during classroom observation I inform my students well ahead of time that my trainer is going to come and implement the active teaching/learning strategies just to show my trainer that I'm using them."

2.4. *Improving Ones Professional Practice*

The reason why the training was offered in the first place was to improve the professional practice of instructors i.e. to enable them be better teachers, to tailor their teaching to the needs and interests of students by using different teaching methods based on learning style of students in classrooms together with continuous assessment methods to help them identify weaknesses and strengths of their students and provide feedback and support based on what they have learnt from the continuous assessments conducted. Moreover, they are expected, after their training, to conduct action research project to solve any problems they face in the course of their professional practice to improve their professional practice. However respondents of the study revealed HDP trainings have little impact on their professional practice. The reason that they provide for this is that all of my interviewees joined the training program not for the sake of improving their professional practice but they thought that without the certificate they are considered incompetent by others and will not be able to work at a university level if they do not get the certificate i.e. the HDP diploma. Moreover some of them thought that if for any reason they are fired or quit their current job, the only way they will be able to get employment in another similar institution i.e. colleges or universities is if they have their HDP diploma with them. They even thought that they increase their chance of getting employment in universities abroad i.e. in European countries only if they have their HDP diploma. Some interviewees revealed that due to some problems in their university they thought they might be fired. This all reveals that the HDP training has little impact on their professional practice since they joined the training not because they saw their gap in their instruction or professional practice but thought that they might lose their job or its one requirement to be instructors in a university. They used the training opportunity for bolstering their employment opportunity and improving job security rather than for which it is intended in the first place.

3. Summary & Conclusion

3.1. *Summary*

This short phenomenological inquiry was conducted in order to understand the lived experiences of HDP training participants in DDU taking 3 instructors as respondents of the study. To enable guide the inquiry the following research questions were formulated and answered;

4. What are the meanings instructors constructed out of their experience of going through the HDP training in Dire Dawa University?
5. What commonalities exist in the meanings instructors constructed out of their experience of going through the HDP training program?
6. Was the HDP training provided in Dire Dawa University attuned to the needs and interests of trainees?

From the analysis of the data collected through unstructured interview guide I was able to learn the following from the lived experiences of instructors who participated in the HDP training program;

- Due to harsh relationship developed in the course of stay in their respective universities, the instructors considered the training opportunity as a shield against which all the fury of the university officials was guarded.
- The only motivation, in all the three respondents' cases, the instructors joined the HDP training program was to improve their employability, guard their jobs and fit in their position as instructors at university.
- The HDP program is characterized by lack of severe lack of awareness raising programs to arouse the interest of those who would take part in its training program.
- To be effective, the HDP training program conducted in Dire Dawa university needs to be preceded by need assessment programs in order for it to provide the knowledge, skills and attitude that it intends to impart.
- Due to the reason the instructors joined the HDP training program was not in line with the very reason the HDP training program was offered, the educative capacity of the program was severely hampered.

3.2. Conclusion

Assessing the lived experiences of instructors enabled to understand the reality the instructors were able to construct from their experience of the HDP training. Common to all is the way they looked at the HDP training as a means of enhancing their employment opportunity. Though training programs improve one's productivity and thereby enhance one's employability, the main purpose of participating in a training program, especially in HDP training program shouldn't be for enhancing one's employment opportunity. Conducting a need assessment and organizing orientation programs to arouse interest before providing HDP training to instructors would help to alleviate most of the problems instructors encountered while attending the HDP training.

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