



Program development through teacher collaboration

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This paper describes how a group of colleagues initiated six projects aimed at promoting teacher collaboration and program development in a university EFL context. These projects included, among others, creating a peer mentoring system, setting up a database for sharing useful teaching materials, and establishing a system for voluntary classroom observations. The article describes our collaborative process, details how each project evolved, discusses challenges we encountered, and finally offers four strategies readers can use for overcoming challenges in their own program development projects.

この論文は、関西外国語大学穂谷学舎における教師間の協力と教育プログラムの向上を目標とした6つのプロジェクトが、どのように行われたかというものである。これらのプロジェクトには、本学ですでに何学期か教えた教師が着任したばかりの教師を助けるシステム、良い教案を共有するためのデータベースの設置、お互いの授業を見学するシステムなどが含まれる。この論文では、教師間の協力というアイデアがどのように生まれたか、どのようにしてそれぞれのプロジェクトが始まったか、どのような問題があったか、そしてこの協力プロジェクトを使用する場合に役立つ4つのヒントが述べられている。

In many educational settings, the individual teacher has little support from administrators or professional interaction with other teachers in the program. However, with a bit of group effort, teachers can improve many features of their programs and develop a variety of support options.

Working with colleagues on program development projects can provide a number of benefits to any educational program. First of all, it helps create a sense of community as teachers work together. Second, it provides opportunities for professional growth as people learn more about specific aspects of teaching. Third, it reduces individual workloads in the long run as colleagues share teaching ideas and materials. Finally, it can improve the overall quality of both the individual teacher's work and the program as a whole.

This paper discusses the efforts of faculty at Kansai Gaidai University to initiate and develop collaborative opportunities at our campus. The article first describes our collaborative process, details how six projects evolved, discusses challenges we encountered, and finally offers four helpful strategies for overcoming these challenges. We hope our experience will encourage teachers to initiate similar projects in their own institutions.

Our context & collaborative process

The three authors work with 13 other full-time foreign teachers of English in the Department of International Communication at Kansai Gaidai University. The department offers a set of four required English skills courses taken by first-year students as well as a number of elective English courses for second-, third-, and fourth-year students.

In our department, as at other large universities, multiple sections of required courses are offered. For example, during the current semester 12 teachers handle the 26 sections of our required first-year oral communication course. Despite this overlap in teaching responsibilities, prior to the initiation

of our program development projects, we felt there was little collaboration among teachers. Teachers taught their courses independently, rarely sharing materials or ideas.

The three authors had taught in university-based intensive English language programs in the United States, in which there were frequent opportunities to observe other classes and share teaching materials. We wondered whether our current colleagues might be interested in creating similar opportunities for collaboration at Kansai Gaidai.

We called a meeting of English faculty members and presented the projects we had in mind: a system for peer observation, a teaching materials database, and a post-conference idea exchange meeting. These ideas met with an immediate positive response. When we opened the discussion to other ideas, our colleagues quickly came up with three additional projects: a resource bookshelf, a mentoring system, and a professional interests homepage.

Realizing that all these projects could not proceed unless many people were involved, we asked for volunteers to help initiate and develop them. Nearly all of the 16 full-time faculty joined one or more committees. Within a few weeks, work was underway on the six projects detailed below.

The six projects

Peer observation system

Teachers in our department create their own courses and teach them as they wish. One problem this leads to is faculty being unaware of what others do in their classes, even among those who teach sections of the same course. Although some teachers wanted opportunities to observe

other classes, no observation system existed, limiting this option for professional growth.

The peer observation committee developed a voluntary system for teachers to receive feedback on their own teaching or to observe new teaching styles or techniques in other classes. The committee also developed extensive guidelines for preparation, observation, and discussion of observed lessons. Because teachers are often anxious about being observed, the guidelines stress the importance of focusing on teacher development and not criticism.

To date, a number of teachers have taken advantage of the peer observation system, and all have said the process is beneficial for both parties.

Materials database

The materials database project grew from a desire to increase the amount of shared teaching materials. The goal was to make available a collection of teacher-created materials that instructors could download for classroom use.

The committee began by looking for an adequate Internet-based solution. Faculty had already been using Yahoo! Groups as a message board, so incorporating the materials database within that site appeared to be a logical step. However, Yahoo! Groups' storage space limitations significantly undermined the potential for future growth, especially for storing large video or audio files.

The committee considered various software solutions before consulting the university systems administrator. He recommended searching for groupware, which is software designed to be hosted on a server and used by small

businesses, faculty departments, or other organizations. We first found Conflux, a user-friendly software package, and began using it for storing our files. However, in the past year, Yahoo! Groups increased its storage capacity, allowing us to keep our materials database on the same web site as our pre-existing message board.

Post-conference idea exchange

Teachers at our university often attend professional conferences, such as JALT and TESOL, but in the past rarely shared new ideas they picked up at these conferences. Any idea exchanges that did occur were informal, usually on a one-to-one basis, so the larger group of teachers missed out on useful information.

This project committee now schedules a gathering for colleagues to present brief summaries of interesting and valuable presentations from recent conferences. Each volunteer discusses one or two presentations and makes copies of handouts for others.

Textbook and resource materials bookshelf

In our program, teachers choose textbooks from a list of approximately fifteen recommended titles for each course.

In the past, a teacher interested in a particular book needed to hunt around for a copy, contact the publisher, or view information about it on the Internet. However, faculty thought a bookshelf containing the recommended textbooks for all courses would be more convenient and allow teachers to make more educated and informed decisions. This project committee succeeded rather quickly in obtaining funds

and space from the administration for setting up such a bookshelf.

The bookshelf now contains most of the textbooks on our list, received as sample copies from publishers or through donations from faculty members. Moreover, we have collected a large number of supplementary textbooks on pronunciation, grammar, and TOEFL preparation for teacher reference. This has become the most widely used of all the projects described here.

Mentoring project

Our campus is located in a rural part of Osaka Prefecture, and adjusting to life here can be daunting for newly arriving teachers. This is especially true for those who are new to Japan or who lack Japanese language skills. The aim of the mentoring project is to match teachers new to our campus with Kansai Gaidai veterans to provide personalized assistance and information on classes, daily life, and getting things done around campus.

This mentoring relationship begins via e-mail prior to the newcomer's arrival and continues for about one semester. The mentor is available to answer questions or point out resources and checks with the new instructor from time to time to make sure things are going well and to make him/her feel a part of the community.

In response to feedback from instructors involved with this project, an online faculty handbook is now being developed to complement the mentoring system. For this, teachers are using Cospire, a free wiki-based service on the Internet. To date, we have a growing collection of information on school-

related matters (e.g., placement testing, key events, research funds) and the local community (e.g., shopping, restaurants, transportation). Anyone in our Cospire community can post, edit, or update information, allowing us to keep it up-to-date.

Professional interests homepage

Since teachers at our campus tend to work independently, in the past it was sometimes difficult to know what professional activities others were interested in. As a result, opportunities for collaboration in research, writing, or conference presentations were sometimes lost.

The professional interests homepage was developed to address this shortcoming and is now one section of the Cospire faculty handbook site. Teachers can post and update information about their professional activities and interests here.

Challenges

While working on projects that involve program change, there are often difficulties to overcome. In the following section we discuss several obstacles our committees faced. We suspect that others attempting to develop collaborative projects might encounter similar challenges.

Administrative concerns

One challenge for foreign teachers in Japan lies in understanding the administrative structure and hierarchy of their educational settings. For example, approaching someone too high in the system with a request may cause

a face-losing situation for his subordinates. On the other hand, lower level administrators may be reluctant or unable to grant permission for projects. This issue came up for both our bookshelf and materials database committees.

The bookshelf committee wanted to set up a bookshelf in a central location, but faced the following questions: How could we get permission? Where could we obtain a bookshelf? To whom should we speak in order to get things moving?

In the case of the materials database, the university systems administrator significantly delayed the project through his inaction. Even with frequent reminders, it took nearly a year to get the groupware for our project up and running. During this time the project nearly failed for lack of progress, raising doubts among committee members: Did we approach the correct person? Could we have had someone speak to him on our behalf? Should we have spoken to his superior?

By understanding the administrative structure and hierarchy, and how they operate, projects stand a better chance of success.

Motivation

Another problem we faced was maintaining faculty motivation. After an initial flurry of activity, progress on some projects was sporadic and diminished over time, mostly for reasons related to leadership and accountability.

There is a sense of egalitarianism among English teachers on our campus, which led project committees to operate as groups of equals without designating leaders. Since no one

was responsible for setting deadlines or organizing future meetings, weeks or even months would pass with little or no project activity in some committees. When this occurred, faculty members began to question the value of their projects, which in turn tended to prolong inactivity. Other factors, such as administrative delays, faculty turnover, and time constraints also hurt motivation levels.

Time

At our university, teachers are busy with their work schedules and personal lives. All foreign faculty teach a minimum of 10 *koma* (90-minute periods) and hold three office/counseling hours weekly. Many are also involved in a variety of athletic or cultural activities outside of school, and several have families. In addition, project committees may be kept waiting by administrative delays. Finally, individual committee members tend to work at different paces; some complete tasks swiftly, while others are more deliberate or meticulous. All of these factors can make it difficult to find and manage the time required to work on projects individually or to meet with project committee members.

Other

Two other challenges we faced in implementing these projects were faculty turnover and a lack of resources. For example, the mentoring committee started out with three members, but lost one in each of two successive semesters when those members moved on to employment elsewhere. Losing committee members can make it difficult to maintain collaborative projects over the long term.

A deficiency of funds or knowledge can also hamper projects. For example, the bookshelf project committee didn't know whether money existed for the purchase of a bookshelf. Likewise, for the materials database committee, knowledge of the various software solutions was essential, and without the systems administrator's advice, the committee might not have considered groupware.

Strategies

Based on our experience in facing the challenges mentioned above, we recommend the following four strategies.

Designate project leaders

A simple strategy for keeping everyone on track and motivated is to make sure each project group has a leader. This person should be recognized by other committee members as responsible and responsive to the needs of the group.

At the end of each committee meeting the project leader should make certain the group has done the following:

- list tasks to complete in the near future
- divide the work evenly
- set deadlines for each task
- set the next meeting time

Both task and project deadlines, however, must be realistic and may have to be extended, depending on the size of the project and the types of obstacles encountered. It is important to meet regularly and not let too much time elapse

between meetings. In addition, because project initiative and motivation may wane during vacation periods, meetings should be scheduled as soon as possible after vacations have ended. Finally, project leaders and members must realize some degree of commitment is required. Without it, projects will take much longer than expected or may collapse.

Identify and make use of resources and knowledge

As mentioned previously, knowledge and resources are important keys to the success of a project. Before proceeding, committee members should be aware of and understand the available options. This may involve consulting experts, browsing online discussion boards, performing online searches, or reviewing related literature. In addition, it is worthwhile to find out the areas of expertise and experience of each faculty member in your program. Their special skills and knowledge can increase the probability of success for the project.

Our materials database committee, for example, began by reviewing online sources to get an idea of the software and resources available to us. Later, the committee utilized the expertise of our systems administrator in pinpointing a software solution. Similarly, the peer observation committee surveyed published resources and drew on their own experience in setting up guidelines.

Use a go-between

Unless members of your project committees are well connected in your workplace, a helpful strategy is to use a go-between to act on your behalf. This can be especially

valuable for foreign teachers in Japan, who rarely achieve insider status in their organizations. The ideal go-between should have the following qualities:

- familiarity with project goals
- knowledge of your school's administrative structure
- willingness to spend time on your behalf
- native ability in Japanese

The usefulness of a go-between lies in her insider status and expertise in the nuances of proper Japanese interaction to get your needs met—which is precisely what happened in one of our project groups. Making use of a go-between, the bookshelf committee quickly got funding and a place on campus for their resource materials bookshelf. On the other hand, the materials database committee dealt directly with the campus systems administrator without using a go-between. As mentioned, this group encountered misunderstandings and unnecessary delays before getting a server set up for their project.

Conduct periodic review and evaluation

Regular assessment is a final step for assuring project success. In our case, each project committee first conducted a brief internal assessment addressing the following questions:

- Is the project still useful and meeting its initial aims?
- Should the focus of the project be changed?
- Will anyone be leaving the committee?

- Is the group in need of additional members?
- Will group leadership change?

We then called a meeting of all English teachers so that each committee could share the results of their internal assessment. This was an opportunity to decide whether any projects had become outdated, unnecessary, or in need of revision, and it also gave us a chance to initiate several new projects. During this meeting, there were opportunities for teachers to move from one project committee to another, and for new teachers to get involved in projects of interest to them.

Conclusion

This article illustrates how colleagues at one educational institution initiated the process of faculty collaboration, created several professional development projects, and dealt successfully with various challenges by employing key organizational strategies.

We have found that collaborative projects allow colleagues to gain a sense of community, grow professionally, and enjoy reduced workloads. These joint efforts can enhance the overall quality of an individual teacher's work and that of the educational program as a whole. We encourage you to identify areas that may be improved in your teaching situation and to act with your colleagues to bring about successful changes.

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