

Taking action on professional development

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Reference data:

Bollen, D., Cooke, S., Fenton-Smith, B., Rivers, D. J., Ruegg, R., Stillwell, C., & Yamamoto, K. (2010). Taking action on professional development. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper outlines some of the activities which have been developed by members of the English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) as part of a Professional Development (PD) Committee. The committee is comprised of numerous sub-committees which include: a writing circle that provides feedback on staff members' academic papers; a reading discussion group in which staff come together to discuss academic papers; a teaching discussion group in which various practical issues are discussed; peer workshops: presentations which harness the expertise of colleagues; peer observations: a structured process for observing lessons, being observed, and exchanging feedback; and social events including marathons and family activities. This collaborative work outlines how each of the sub-committees operates, discusses the professional benefits to be gained from such activities, and provides practical advice on how similar PD opportunities could be made available at other institutions.

この論文は神田外語大学の英米語学科 (ELI) 専任講師のプロフェッショナルディベロップメント委員会の一環で構築された活動の概要を示しています。この委員会は複数の小委員会より成り立っています。講師たちの論文にフィードバックを与えるライティング (著述) グループ、集まって論文について話し合うリーディング (読解) 討論グループ、様々な実践的な問題について話し合うティーチング (教授) 討論グループ、お互いの専門的知識を役立たせるために発表しあう同僚間でのワークショップ (研究会)、実際の授業を観察しあい、フィードバックを伝え合うことで成り立っている同僚間でのオブザーベーション会 (観察)、そして、マラソン大会や家族を交えた活動などを行う社交活動です。この共同論文は、各小委員会がどのように作用しているかについての概要を示し、またそれらの活動によって得られる専門的な利点について討論し、そして、他の教育機関でも同じような委員会が作れるように実践的な助言を提供しています。

It is considered healthy for professionals in any field to have an active role in their own development processes (Crookes & Chandler, 2001). However, until recently, the notion of “professional isolation” was a more appropriate lens through which to define the dominant characteristic of the teaching profession. Authors such as Lortie (1975) proposed the “egg carton” analogy to symbolize a lack of interconnectivity and collaboration between teachers working in the same institutional context. Indeed, within the context of EFL teaching in Asia, Pham (2001, cited in Vo & Nguyen, 2009) highlights that the notion of organizing an in-service development program or a professional learning community has remained distinctly uncommon, despite the fact that a sustained and focused teacher development program often renews



one's commitment and interest in teaching and promotes higher standards of teaching practice (Maslach, 1982).

Fortunately, in the past decade the topic of professional development (PD) has become increasingly recognised as a vital component of those institutional policies which aim to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Paralleling this process has been a shift away from traditional PD activities such as management-led workshops, where the teacher is often limited to the role of audience member, toward more "reform-oriented" activities, such as being mentored or coached and participating in various committees or study groups (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Putnam and Borko (2000) claim that such activities are more effective than traditional workshop-type procedures because the latter do not allow teachers to explore new concepts and teaching strategies in enough depth or with the provision of an extended amount of time, something which is essential for thoughtful reflection.

At present, there exists a plethora of well-documented activities and strategies which have the potential to shape and sustain long-term PD within the teaching profession. Recent publications such as Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) provide valuable guidance for those teachers who want to further their own development through collaboration and exploration with others. Much of this guidance is founded upon the idea that teachers possess varied levels of experience and knowledge which, when shared in a constructive manner, can be harnessed as a valuable source of professional and reflective growth. As Richards and Farrell (2005) aptly observe, "teachers have different needs at different times during their careers. . . the pressure for teachers to update their knowledge in areas such as curriculum trends, second language acquisition research, composition theory and practice, technology or assessment is intense" (p. 2). This is especially true for foreign language teachers, due to the almost constant evolution of SLA theory and its close relationship to

daily classroom practices.

Context and rationale

This paper shares the inner workings of a number of collaborative PD initiatives underway at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), a small private university in Chiba. Since its inception in 1987, the university's English Language Institute (ELI) has grown from a handful of teachers to its current size of over 60 instructors and learning advisors (here collectively referred to as *teachers*). These teachers come from all over the globe, in most cases having recently completed graduate studies in applied linguistics or TESOL. They are by and large from English-speaking countries, with ages ranging from their mid 20s to their late 30s.

Teachers at KUIS, like those the world over, are surrounded by other teachers. Because no two teachers have identical experience, training, beliefs, and interests, professional development in the workplace can be as simple as making use of opportunities to talk to colleagues and explore ideas about teaching. Indeed, an earlier paper on PD at KUIS found that conversation with colleagues was the most beneficial activity that the staff engaged in at the time (Peake & Fraser, 2004). In more recent years, however, a range of more structured PD activities has emerged as the result of the work done by a collection of teachers in a semi-formal "PD Committee." We use the term semi-formal since membership in one of the ELI's institutional committees was a condition of employment but the nature and degree of participation is predominantly self-determined. The activities described in this paper include a writing circle, a reading discussion group, a teaching discussion group, peer workshops, a mentor development program, and social events. The following section provides descriptions of each of these options, detailing the policies and procedures that give them structure and promote participation.

Professional development activities

Writing circle

In the field of academia, one of the foremost avenues for PD is the publication of scholarly articles in journals or books. With this objective in mind, a writing circle was instigated in 2008. In the past, colleagues only rarely had the chance to get feedback from peers on their writing, as reading an entire paper and providing feedback can be very time-consuming. Furthermore, teachers may be so busy that writers might feel guilty about asking such a favour. In addition to this, teachers might tend to ask their closest colleagues, who may be constrained by their close relationship from reading the article with an objective eye.

The writing circle consists of a group of teachers who mutually support each other in the writing of academic papers by giving feedback on drafts. Members are actively sought twice a year although anyone may join at any time. Membership involves the opportunities to both submit one's own papers for review and to review others' papers. Each time a paper is received by the circle organizers, two members are chosen at random to review it, using a review form developed for this purpose. Both the writer of the paper and the reviewers remain anonymous. The reviewers have one week to provide feedback, which is forwarded to the writer by the organizers.

This system has been found to be beneficial in various ways. The writer and reader are both members of the group and are dependent on each other for feedback. This motivates reviewers to give the best feedback they can in the hope that the reviewers of their own papers will put in a corresponding effort. This therefore leads to a high level of investment in the process. Since giving feedback to peers can in itself be a very beneficial endeavour (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), even members who do not submit their writing stand to gain from membership. Giving feedback on academic papers is valuable editorial experience

which can be hard to come by for people who are new to the field, as editorial positions are usually reserved for those with publications of their own. Furthermore, giving feedback to others on their writing has been shown to improve one's own writing skills (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009).

Reading discussion group

Intellectual fossilization is a challenge all language teachers face, given that opportunities for theory building and research are often curtailed by tight schedules, limited resources, and a lack of support. One option is to discuss theoretical literature with colleagues in a reading group. Two JALT2009 plenary speakers provided interesting rationales for such an initiative. First, James Lantolf (2009) argued that "SLA theory / research and pedagogical practice can and must be brought together" (p. 7). A workplace forum in which teachers can talk about theory is one way to achieve this. Second, Merrill Swain (2009) argued that "languaging," whereby "we come to understand something (e.g., the content of a text or a grammatical concept) by talking it through" (p. 15), is a crucial step towards acquiring and using new knowledge. A reading discussion group encapsulates this notion, since it involves content (reading), talk (discussion), and social mediation (group).

Setting up and sustaining a reading discussion group naturally involves attention to some practical matters. The first is time: When will the group meet and for how long? Frequency will be determined by the number and motivation of potential participants. The KUIS group convenes once a fortnight (during term) from 5:00-6:00 p.m. It meets immediately after work, and only for 60 minutes, in a bid to fit in with teachers' schedules and inconvenience them the least. Although not mandatory, it is assured of 5-15 participants each occasion since it is promoted to the 60+ ELI staff plus campus-wide academics via email. A second concern is the reading matter itself. In our case, the

content varies widely but is always related in some way to language or language instruction. A variety of sources and genres adds further interest: journal articles, book chapters, conference handouts, plenary speech DVDs, book reviews, opinion pieces, and interviews have all been used. The third practical concern is organization and leadership. One or two committed staff members are required to coordinate the activity (decide times and dates, select and distribute materials, and publicize events). Leadership of specific discussions is also advisable (preferably rotated amongst group members) to keep interaction flowing smoothly.

Teaching discussion group

The teaching discussion group seeks to capitalize on the diversity of lecturers by providing opportunities for teachers to improve and develop their classroom practices in an interactive forum. Unlike the reading group, which makes academic literature its primary focus, the teaching discussion group sets no prior readings and instead nominates a central theme and invites participants to contribute their direct experiences and personal opinions. It therefore provides a PD alternative for those who may be seeking the benefits of collaborative reflection without the time investment that reading academic papers involves. This discussion group focuses primarily on practice, whereas the reading group concerns itself with theory—although both groups have the common aim of linking theory and practice in order to develop professionally. In line with its principles of convenience and accessibility, it has traditionally met during the lunch hour.

The primary practical concern of the group is the choice of topic. A designated discussion organizer prepares and announces a theme in advance, which is circulated via a faculty-wide email. The theme is intended to get the discussion started and also give the participants something to think about in prepara-

tion for the discussion. Some topics that have been discussed include effective warm-ups, successful class activities, the quantity and focus of feedback on student work, and student dynamics in group work. Although a topic is prepared, the discussion focus itself remains flexible. The group's experience has shown that although a large group of colleagues is helpful in establishing a regular meeting, an effective teaching discussion can involve as few as two or three members.

Peer workshops

Peer workshops are another avenue for lecturers to share their knowledge and promote new ideas. At our institution, a system has been developed to facilitate a regular programme of workshops throughout the teaching term. At the beginning of each semester, an email is sent out to staff, asking for workshop proposals. Respondents are asked to draw upon topics of personal interest and experience which they think would be of benefit or interest to other faculty members. Proposals are checked for relevance by members of the PD committee and a schedule is drawn up and distributed. The workshops run for 1 hour, with time allotted for questions and discussion. The presentations are recorded for the benefit of teachers unable to attend. In addition, an honorarium of 10,000 yen, paid out of the PD Committee budget, is offered to the presenter.

The diversity of skills and interests amongst the staff is reflected in the range of topics that have been presented. Examples of recent presentations include "Generation and use of student-created materials," "Techniques for teacher observation, coaching, and conferencing," and "Qualitative research with NVivo—a basic guide."

Previous peer workshop presenters have commented on how their presentations have enabled them to not only practice their presentation skills in front of a friendly audience, but also

allowed them to come into contact with other lecturers who are interested in their field, which has in turn helped them to expand their knowledge-base and develop their thinking.

Peer observation

Peer observation is one of the most effective ways of creating opportunities for collaborative PD. Teachers can learn a great deal from watching one another, and post-observation conferences naturally provide many openings for teachers to tap into one another's expertise. Still, the perils of providing feedback make peer observation perhaps the riskiest form of PD. A review of the literature on peer observation and peer coaching shows that the experts unanimously agree that peers should not provide substantive feedback to peers (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Murphy, 1992; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Showers & Joyce, 1996). Part of the issue is that teacher observers typically do not have any specific training in observation, so they tend to be haphazard in the way they conduct classroom visits and conferences, using their own personal experiences and beliefs as the standard by which to pass judgment (Sheal, 1989). Of course, teachers involved in peer observations will quite naturally expect feedback and may feel that there is little point to the process otherwise (Cosh, 1999). What is necessary is a procedure for making the exchange of feedback somehow safe. At KUIS, the solution has been the creation of a mentor development programme.

A mentor development programme provides a structure through which teachers can train themselves at observation and conferencing, placing an additional layer of reflection onto the proceedings which helps all participants to maintain awareness of the potential impact their comments may have (Stillwell, 2009). Mentor development requires three teachers to work together in a cyclical process that involves a total of three classroom observations (one per person). After a round of pre-observation

conferences, Teacher A observes Teacher B, B observes C, and C observes A.

Once the observations have been completed, the teachers come together for a post-observation conference. During each stage, the teachers take different roles.

Table 1. Roles and stages

	First stage	Second stage	Third stage
Teacher A	Teacher	Third Party	Mentor
Teacher B	Mentor	Teacher	Third Party
Teacher C	Third Party	Mentor	Teacher

For the first 20 minutes of each stage, the Teacher and Mentor hold a post-observation conference while the Third Party silently listens in. Having no prior knowledge about the class being discussed, this Third Party focuses on observing the Mentor's techniques at guiding the discussion and promoting reflection. In the following 10 minutes, the Third Party then helps the Teacher and Mentor reflect on the post-observation conference itself, exploring the ways the discussion and sharing of feedback were handled, and bringing to light the perspectives and insights of all participants. Participants then swap roles to repeat the process through two more cycles, adding depth to the experience and allowing teachers to train themselves in the skills of observation and conferencing.

Social events

Social events may seem out of place in this catalogue of PD activities since it lacks a direct academic focus. We should not

assume however, that the professional benefits are any less meaningful. There are several reasons why the inclusion of structured social events beneath an institution's PD umbrella can lead to significant professional gains:

- a. non-Japanese EFL instructors away from their home environments may benefit from support networks that guard against social isolation;
- b. social events can help develop connections with people working at other institutions, possibly leading to employment opportunities;
- c. collaboration on extracurricular activities can promote collaboration on academic and pedagogical activities;
- d. the existence of coordinated events may attract candidates to the institution; and
- e. organizing events in the community can facilitate a deeper understanding of Japanese society.

We would like to illustrate the above points by providing some examples of successful social activities. The "ELI Football Club" is a team made up entirely of KUIS teachers. The team enters various competitions throughout the year and trains regularly. This requires extensive liaison with university management, other university clubs, and circles, and time organizing registration for the competitions. Several teachers have also formed the "ELI Running Club" and produced more than 10 finishers in the 2008 Lake Kawaguchi marathon in Yamanashi. Logistically, organizing an event such as this, quite apart from the significant amount of physical training, is not unlike organizing group conference attendance. Registration, for example, which is often in Japanese, requires membership in an association, while transport and accommodation also require extensive coordination. Of course the events need not be limited to the sporting arena. Cultural events, language circles, family picnics, and staff reunions have all featured on the workplace social calendar.

Conclusion

With the objective of promoting professionally orientated teacher development within a supportive network of peers, this collaborative paper has documented a range of activities which have contributed to the creation of a vibrant and stimulating work environment. All individuals have their own motivation for taking part in PD activities and select the activities that appeal to them. In encouraging such initiatives, an institution can simultaneously foster an enjoyable, collaborative work environment and enhance the quality of practice.

The initiatives described in this paper are just some examples of the avenues for PD taking place at this institution. All of them are manifestations of the drive for self-improvement among teachers and all of them have been conceived of and implemented autonomously. As staff members come and go and as our profession continues to evolve, the nature and necessity of PD activities evolves too. As such, this paper represents a mere snapshot of professional development involving one group of people within one institution at one particular point in time.

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