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## Reflections Paper

# A Reflection on Implementing Professional Development Activities

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I was pleased to attend Jennie Roloff Rothman's plenary, "Understanding and Implementing Professional Development" at the 2020 JALT CUE Conference. Rothman is the Principal Lecturer of Professional Development–Teacher Development at the English Language Institute at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). Her presentation included an overview of research related to professional development (PD) and a brief outline of how PD activities are conducted at KUIS.

Faculty development (FD) is a commonly heard phrase in the hallways of Japanese colleges and universities, and Rothman used it to refer specifically to PD for instructors at the college and university level in Japan, including anything from conducting in-class observations to providing training for new teaching faculty. Beginning in the 1980s, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) began promoting FD in order to internationalize universities and to provide more innovative and higher quality education at the tertiary level (MEXT, 2019, as cited in Rothman, 2020b). Since then, FD has become increasingly organized and context specific; for instance, in 2005, the Japan Central Council for Education (as cited in Rothman, 2020b) acknowledged that FD activities should be conducted systematically, not as onetime occurrences. Although initiatives vary by institution, in my experience at private universities some of the options available include visiting colleagues' undergraduate classes, participating in workshops to learn about educational technology, attending symposia on research and practice, and writing articles for university publications (e.g., FD

newsletters or university journals).

Professional development, according to Rothman (2020a), is a broader term than faculty development; it is used to “refer to both the development of classroom skills as well as those which might involve joining a larger academic community” (p. 304). She outlined characteristics of effective PD in the West: developing teacher expertise in content and practice, providing sufficient time and resources for teachers, and supporting collaboration among colleagues (Gusky, 2003, as cited in Rothman, 2020b). She emphasized designing PD initiatives that are flexible and context specific; teachers have different needs depending on the situation and culture. In 2020, for example, those in charge of providing PD needed to pivot quickly and provide support to instructors who suddenly found themselves teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rothman has based the PD program at KUIS on the learning oriented model (Drago-Stevenson, 2009, as cited in Rothman, 2020b), which supports adult learning while encouraging growth through four main points: teaming (e.g., joining groups which self-determine goals), leadership roles (e.g., providing leadership training and opportunities), collegial inquiry (e.g., engaging in reflective practice or participating in research communities), and mentoring (e.g., supporting first-time authors or presenters or entering into formal mentoring relationships).

As a result, a variety of PD opportunities is offered at KUIS for the English language instructors (Rothman 2020b). They can gain team and leadership experience by participating in or heading committees, task groups, and curriculum panels. In addition, to promote collegial inquiry, teachers can work together in research communities focused on topics of mutual interest, such as reflective practice, conducting research, or sharing teaching ideas. Workshops are conducted by invited guests or peers on assorted topics. Mentoring is also available through a structured program, and mentees can receive support for specific areas, for example, identifying publishing opportunities, drafting manuscripts, or reviewing abstracts. These are just a few examples.

During the discussion section of the plenary, Rothman posed three main questions for participants: (1) What FD is happening in your context? (2) What

FD would be most useful in your context? (3) What are the challenges and how might you overcome them? These questions prompted me to reflect on the PD activities carried out by the PD committee at my previous workplace.

## **What FD is happening in your context?**

At the private university where I began working in 2016, there were several established PD activities for part-time and full-time teachers within the English program: evaluations, observations, and curriculum groups. At the end of each semester, students complete course evaluation forms which include general and course-specific questions. In principle, part-time teachers are observed once a year, and new full-time teachers are observed during their first semester. Full-time teachers belong to small working groups for curriculum development where they discuss course changes and improvements. New full-time teachers receive mentoring from experienced colleagues throughout their first semester and on an as-needed basis thereafter. Participation is required by the director and provides structured support for becoming familiar with all aspects of the English program.

In 2018, the program director asked for volunteers to establish a PD committee to support faculty who wanted to take part in more PD activities. Three teachers including myself stepped forward, and we worked together to coordinate and plan PD for the 2018-2019 academic year. I continued serving in this role during the following year with two new committee members.

## **What FD would be most useful in your context?**

During the spring semester, the committee began with one simple task: creating a space on the staff room bulletin board to share PD information. We posted flyers for conferences, calls for papers, and other relevant information, and we invited others to do the same. Although these were small actions, Rothman (2020b) stated that these are a form of informal mentoring, with more established teachers helping others to identify opportunities to become more involved in academic communities. In addition, we asked teachers to complete researcher profiles with their research interests, recent presentations, and current or future projects. These were also displayed.

After some initial discussion, the PD committee members realized that we did not know what other types of activities would be useful and interesting in this context. One characteristic of effective PD mentioned by Rothman (2020b) is to “prioritize or incorporate teacher voices” and “not [to] assume that teachers need fixing” (plenary quotes). In this regard, we decided to conduct a survey based on the PD section of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) (OECD, 2018). Our survey had approximately 15 questions and was conducted via Google Forms.

We asked teachers to identify their perceived PD needs, for instance, if they wanted more support for issues related to pedagogy, assessment, technology, or classroom management. Curtis (2008) states that PD begins with “...an awareness of what might be thought of simply as a gap in one’s knowledge, skills, or understanding” (p. 120). Therefore, completing the survey was a form of teacher self-reflection. We also asked them how much interest they had in participating in PD activities, such as workshops, research groups, or online discussions and how much time per month they would be willing to invest in these activities. In addition, comments could be written at the end of the survey.

Although workshops and seminars are the most common forms of FD at Japanese universities (Suzuki, 2013), they were not often conducted within the English program at that particular university. Based on this and the survey results, the committee decided to plan a one-day PD conference for the fall semester. After some discussion, we established three main aims of the conference:

- “To provide a platform for teachers, practitioners, and researchers to share and present knowledge about the teaching and learning of English;
- To foster the exchange of information, ideas, and experiences from research in language teaching;
- To provide a platform for teachers, practitioners, and educators to explore possibilities within the university community” (Professional Development Committee, 2018).

We applied for and received a grant from the department to fund the event. This allowed us to offer honorariums to plenary speakers and to provide incentives for participants: free lunch at a nearby restaurant and conference

goods, such as notebooks, pens, nametags, and professionally printed programs. We invited not only English teachers in our department but also the English instructors from other departments to attend as either presenters or participants.

The conference was held during the fall semester on a Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and the schedule included both presentations and collaborative research meetings. Approximately 25 instructors attended, and there were a variety of presentations addressing both pedagogical and academic areas, for example, using technology, implementing extensive reading, teaching collocations, and assessing oral presentations. The presenters were scheduled into four blocks, with two to three presentations conducted concurrently, so attendees could choose the topics that were most relevant or interesting for them.

After the presentations finished, we held 30-minute collaborative research group meetings on topics such as motivating learners and content and language integrated learning. The main purpose was to connect people who are interested in similar topics. Participants chose one meeting to participate in, and they discussed ideas, initiated partnerships, and made plans to work together after the conference. This is a form of collegial inquiry, much like the research communities Rothman (2020b) described. Unlike our post-conference sessions, the research community meetings at KUIS are held during a specific 90-minute period during the day, and teachers are free to change groups and participate in two to three different discussions (Rothman 2020b); therefore, it is convenient for them to attend the meetings and pursue multiple topics.

## **What are the challenges? How might you overcome them?**

Rothman (2020b) used surveys to gather feedback from teachers on the PD activities conducted each year at KUIS. Although most optional activities receive positive ratings, the invited speaker events are usually rated on the negative side. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that the topics were perceived as not particularly useful or relevant, which underscores the need to develop context-specific PD and involve teachers in the decision-making process.

We also distributed a survey to ask participants about their satisfaction with the PD conference. The results were used to make improvements for subsequent conferences. Although our survey was sufficient for this purpose, in order to measure perceived learning, behavioral changes, or impacts to teaching, a higher level of evaluation would be necessary (California Community College Council, 2003). Unlike the Language Institute at KUIS, which has institutional support for the PD program and a dedicated PD faculty position, the PD committee at this university is comprised of volunteers, and events are supported through a departmental grant. As such, measuring these aspects could become increasingly important in the future to justify continued funding.

The reactions to the conference were positive, but we noticed one major challenge: time. After the conference, sustaining the work started in the collaborative research meetings was difficult. At this university, the schedule was quite busy, so collaborating and scheduling meetings with partners during the work week was inconvenient. As Murphey and Brogan (2008) explain, one reason for that hesitancy may be because while professional development, relationship building, and identifying new opportunities are important, they are not usually perceived as urgent tasks. In other words, people are more likely to prioritize time-sensitive and important tasks, and for teachers that means teaching classes and meeting administrative deadlines. Self-care, family time, or part-time work may understandably take precedence over professional development meetings and events that are not required.

This is only the beginning of the PD committee's journey, however. As Curtis (2008) pointed out, "Creating a sustainable professional development program for yourself and for others can take years to establish ..." (p. 125). Although the original members of the committee no longer work at the university, new members now serve on the committee. They organized an online conference during the 2020 academic year, and in the future, the PD committee will continue to develop the offering of available activities. It is a long-term endeavor, and Rothman (2020a) emphasized that it is important to strive for "... a commitment to ongoing, systematic improvement over one-shot or intermittent FD activities" (p. 308). Her plenary provided listeners with a foundational guide

to carrying out effective PD programs at the university level in Japan.

## Conclusion

Implementing a PD program is a complex process that involves reviewing current initiatives, assessing teachers' needs, and consistently evaluating the effectiveness of PD activities. I commend the work of Rothman and her colleagues at KUIS for enacting a systematic approach to PD that addresses a wide variety of teacher needs from classroom pedagogy to writing for publication.

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