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# Professional Development Discussions, Observations, and Achievable Aims: A Multi- Pronged Approach to Professional Development

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Further to the foundation of a new university department in 2017, the assembled team of English teachers saw an opportunity to create a community of learners. Beyond teaching, developing class materials, and attending meetings, the desire to further develop professionally became evident. As a result, over the scope of three years, the group tackled different facets of professional development by sharing observations, literature, and personal experiences over time. From this, three initiatives were developed: first, a monthly reading group where members shared and discussed academic articles; second, a peer observation scheme where members attended classes taught by colleagues and provided observations and constructive feedback; and third, a continuing professional development forum where members cooperated to set and work towards both learning aims and career goals. Although a complete shift to online teaching in 2020 brought challenges, it also resulted in significant motivation to provide support within the group. Writing and publishing the current article is also part of the group's career development, wishing to keep its momentum in pursuing future activities.

2017年、大学に新学部が設立され、そこに集まった英語講師チームが学習者としてのコミュニティを作るチャンスを見出した。教えること、教材を開発すること、ミーティングに参加することに加え、プロとして成長したいという願望が顕著となった。その結果3年間に亘り、チームメンバーは観察、文献、個人的な経験を共有しながら、プロフェッショナル・ディバロップメントの様々な側面に取り組んだ。そしてそこから次の3つの取り組みが生まれた:1つ目は、学術論文を共有、議論する月例リーディンググループ、2つ目は、同僚の授業に参加し、観察と建設的なフィードバックを提供する相互授業参観制度、3つ目は、学習目標とキャリア目標の両方を設定し、その目標に向かいメンバーが協力する継続的専門能力開発フォーラムである。2020年にオンライン授業に完全移行したことで課題が生じたが、チーム内でサポートを提供し合うことが大きなモチベーションへと繋がった。本論文執筆は、チームのキャリア開発の一環でもあり、今後の活動に向けて、この勢いを維持していきたい。

As Moritoshi (2012) posited, “the importance of on-going professional development which helps individuals to attain their career goals should be clear to us all” (p. 39). It was this ethos that encouraged the formation, over a three-year period, of a professional development (PD) support community at a private university in Japan. Members include both native and non-native English-speaking professors, visiting lecturers, and English teachers. There are a multitude of ways in which one can take action to develop professionally (Balloch, 1996), from attending conferences or conducting in-class action research to creating communities of practice between like-minded colleagues working in the same institution. Our PD programme consists of three main strands: a monthly Professional Academic Discussion Forum (PADF), a Voluntary Peer Observation Scheme (VPOS), and a Continuing Professional Development Programme (CPDP). This paper outlines each strand of the PD programme and how it was implemented, then sets out the benefits and drawbacks of each. It is our hope that this paper will help to motivate and encourage other English teams in tertiary education to put into practice their own PD programmes.

## **The Professional Academic Development Forum**

Farrel (2007) noted that educators should continually reshape their knowledge of teaching and learning. With this in mind, the initial strand of the PD programme, The Professional Academic Development Forum (PADF), was created. This is a

monthly, ninety-minute meeting for members of the department where academic papers related to language and education are discussed.

Prior to each meeting, participants read the nominated academic paper, briefly consider what they have learnt from the research, and note any issues they might have (e.g., methodological weaknesses or parts which were difficult to understand). During the meeting, members share their thoughts relating to the paper, raise their questions (which are then discussed by the attendees), suggest improvements in the methodology or consider ways that the research could be applied within the department. Each PADF closes with members proposing and then voting on the paper to be discussed in the subsequent meeting. The only rules relating to the choice of academic papers are firstly that they should not be directly related to classroom teaching techniques, in order to help broaden members' knowledge in areas beyond that narrow focus, and secondly that they should not be members' own papers, as critique of these had caused friction in a similar discussion group which some of the members had previously participated in.

Over the course of the PADF meetings, a broad array of topics has been discussed, including regional dialectical differences in the UK, learner autonomy, and the critical period for language acquisition.

Forum members have described several benefits of participation in the meetings. Lee & Boud (2003) identified scholarly writing as a source of fear and anxiety for academics, and participants reported that PADF meetings have helped to demystify this area. Some team members felt that the supportive nature of the meetings, in conjunction with the variety of subject matter covered, helped them to feel part of a wider academic community. Several participants reported that the discussions helped them when doing research for the Cambridge DELTA or master's degree programmes. Furthermore, the forum also helped all members to deepen their knowledge of the academic writing process. A minor drawback, however, was that attendance dipped at busy times in the semester, so the team decided that the PADF would be postponed if less than a third of members could attend.

Since the PADF's inception, two previously unpublished members have

become published academic authors, sharing their knowledge in JALT's *The Language Teacher*, *International House Journal*, and *KOTESOL Journal*, with several further academic papers awaiting review or publication. Perhaps most impressively, a PADF related to educational podcasts resulted in the English team publishing their own podcast (Ingham, 2020) to support students on the department's Content and Language Integrated Learning programme.

The PADF has helped participants to broaden their knowledge on topics that they would not normally have taken the time to explore. Furthermore, hearing varied viewpoints and opinions from team members has given fresh perspectives on a broad range of educational topics. Overall, the opportunity to meet regularly and informally to discuss a range of academic topics has helped to ensure that we are the enquiring professionals that we hope to be.

## **The Voluntary Peer Observation Scheme**

The value of peer observations has been widely stated, such as benefiting from the knowledge of experienced colleagues, improving pedagogic practice, and preventing falling into bad classroom practices (Swanson, 2016). However, it is our experience that peer observations are still not as widely practiced in Japanese tertiary education as one might assume, possibly due the fact that educators in tertiary education in Japan work more independently. A major benefit of peer observations is that one gets the opportunity to experience a co-worker's lesson. As educators, it is all too easy to teach in isolation in classrooms and lecture theatres, removed from other teachers.

The Voluntary Peer Observation Scheme (VPOS) is not formally evaluative but it has proven to be an extremely helpful way of sharing in-class best practices by providing members with constructive, actionable feedback. It works in two ways. A teacher can request a trusted colleague to observe their class for a specific reason, for example, for ideas on classroom management, to check whether the students are on task, whether the teacher exploits the materials to their fullest, or whether a variety of feedback techniques are being used. These have often been stated as common reasons for requested observations (Parrot, 1993; Wallace, 1998).

Alternatively, a teacher offers their co-workers the chance to observe a class they also teach, to provide them with the opportunity to see a different approach taken to teaching the same level, class, or content.

Following Bowen & Marks (1994), before an observation takes place, the teacher being observed and the observer agree on the ground rules and focus of the observation, e.g., something for the observer to look out for or to provide feedback on. Also, feedback should ideally be provided shortly thereafter in a post-observation meeting or email.

However, there are some limitations to an observation scheme, one of the most salient being that it is hard to allocate the time for the pre-observation discussion, the observation itself, and the post-observation meetings. Also, there may be some reticence among some colleagues to being observed if they have not had observers in their class for many years. Nevertheless, in our experience, leading by example has opened the door to future mutual observations and has highlighted the reciprocal benefits of peer observations with trusted colleagues.

Feedback from teachers who took part in the VPOS has been extremely positive, such as these:

- *Observing each other can be a useful way to share classroom activities and classroom management techniques. Seeing it unfold is often clearer than reading a long description.*
- *Since these observations were a little more casual, they provided the impetus for some experimentation, and then some feedback related to that experimentation. I didn't need to be concerned about any potential negative impact if the experiment didn't quite go according to plan. As a result, I tried out several new ideas that I will be adopting in the future.*
- *Observations really helped me to reflect on my own classroom practices and to re-evaluate whether what I do in class is principled, i.e., based on sound teaching theory, or ritualistic, i.e., something done out of habit.*

Such comments have been the greatest validation of a purely voluntary peer observation scheme and have shown that such observations can be developmental, rather than unnecessarily evaluative.

## **The Continuing Professional Development Programme**

A Continuing Professional Development Programme (CPDP) enables members to understand and map out the development of their competences after joining the teaching profession (Padwad & Dixit, 2011, p. 7). The idea to create a CPDP emerged from conversations during the PADF meetings, combined with a desire to develop as in-service teachers, both for current teaching contexts and career advancement. It was realized that despite the best of intentions, the teaching and grading loads, research commitments, meetings, materials development, etc., often forced professional development activities to be put off. Having to conduct lessons online due to the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a sense of isolation among staff, so the need to build a community of learners who would share, support, and motivate each other became clear. As Gee (2005) stated however, the challenges for learning groups include establishing common goals that are difficult to personalise, and disagreement with decisions taken by a leader.

The university in question offers faculty development opportunities, but they are informational sessions of a general nature, directed towards the majority of staff, meaning that the topics might not be particularly relevant to the professional development needs of many individuals. While this top-down approach helps to explore new avenues through an “expert-driven process” (Richards, 2015, p. 697), without a concrete plan for implementation, this information might fall into the good to know or maybe one day categories. Conversely, a bottom-up approach driven by teachers provides more agency, where they are “given the tools and skills to nurture their own development rather than ‘waiting to be served’” (Hughes, 2009, p. 27). Hence, the CPDP advocates personalised goals and requires participants to set clear steps and deadlines. However, Anderson (2018) provides a cautionary note, warning that only highly motivated teachers who hold themselves accountable might succeed in an entirely bottom-up professional development system.

Accordingly, the CPDP was designed following Dörnyei Directed Motivational Currents (2015) (in bold below), and Cambridge’s list of principles

that identify successful programmes built around the acronym INSPIRE: Impactful, Needs-based, Sustained, Peer-collaborative, In-practice, Reflective, and Evaluated (Richardson & Diaz Maggioli, 2018).

1. **Goal / Vision:** After an initial meeting devoted to explaining the process and agreeing to the parameters, members determined personal goals for the year, divided into short-term *learning aims* that focus on developing practical teaching and longer term *career goals* that focus on career advancement. Participants provided feedback to help peers narrow down goals that were too broad, non-specific, or seemingly unreachable.
2. **Triggering factor:** A desire for deeper professional development and peer support was shared among group members from the beginning. The switch to online teaching in spring 2020 prompted the creation of the CPDP, and its first meeting launched the project.
3. **Progress checks:** Progress is documented in a shared Google Document, which is easy to update and consult. The appendix contains an example. Members were encouraged to provide written feedback between meetings. There was a meeting every other month where each member would provide an update on their goals. Meeting every month would, however, be ideal to maintain a certain momentum, or “motivational current” (Dörnyei, 2015). A final meeting at the end of the academic year is recommended to allow members to reflect on and evaluate their progress over the year, to celebrate, and to commit to a new set of goals.
4. **Positive emotionality:** The meetings occurred in a friendly and casual environment. All feedback provided was supportive and constructive, from reading suggestions to personal opinions. There was no pressure, only encouragement, and although some goals were not achievable due to unforeseen circumstances such as those caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, this was not regarded as being overly problematic.

The Continuing Professional Development Programme provided its members with a framework on which to base personal and professional projects, and with a community of peers that brought support and feedback throughout those initiatives.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted some of the benefits of a multifaceted professional development programme. Specifically, it has outlined three strands: The Professional Academic Development Forum, the Volunteer Peer Observation Scheme, and the Continuing Professional Development Programme. It aims to encourage the implementation of similar programmes elsewhere. It is true that professional development takes time, effort, and good will to implement, but in our experience, the time needed may be less than often imagined, and the benefits derived from professional development greatly offset the effort invested. It is suggested here that a multi-faceted, informal approach to professional development encourages coworkers to participate, maintains and even enhances a collegial atmosphere, and keeps teachers stimulated and fresh as educators. It is likely also the case that the results are noticed and appreciated by learners, colleagues, and institutions.

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## Appendix

### An Example of a Shared Google Document for CPDP

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Learning Aim 1	Ideas & feedback
<b>Objective:</b> Reduce grading time for writing courses	
<b>How:</b> -Research different types of rubrics	Ask colleagues if they would be willing to share their rubrics.
-Customise the rubric: what are key elements of the course? What should students focus on?	Final drafts could be graded on overall improvement and development.  Simplify. Ensure students thoroughly understand assessment and what is required of them. Improve the peer review process. Feedback on all drafts, but only the last one is graded.
-Seek feedback from colleagues	Contact writing coordinators from other departments?
<b>When:</b> starting now, to be finalised before next semester.	

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Career Objective 1	Ideas & feedback
<b>Objective:</b> Become a published academic author	It is easy to attend presentations and events this year - many are online.
<b>How:</b> -Contact JALT re: requirements & their interest	Currently in discussions with a JALT representative about several potential ideas for publication.
-Increase networking opportunities through continued attendance of JALT events	Email the professor responsible for in-house publications.
<b>When:</b> Ongoing	

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