Self-Initiated Teacher Support:
Owning Your Professional Development
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and reflects on a year-long project aimed to supplement an existing professional development framework in a university language program with additional teacher-initiated professional development activities. The article outlines the rationale behind introducing bottom-up teacher development and support in a workplace, explains the procedures of the three forms that were chosen to be implemented in the particular context of Rikkyo University's Center for English Discussion working environment, and considers the implications of self-initiated teacher support for higher levels of job satisfaction and fulfillment among instructors.

INTRODUCTION

As Farrell (2016) famously pointed out, TESOL is a profession that eats its young. Indeed, research in the field of English language teaching shows that beginning teachers often leave the profession in their first three years of teaching, often due to a lack of appropriate support (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999; Odell & Ferraro, 1992). Positive and supportive workplace conditions lead to higher morale, stronger commitment to teaching, and intentions to remain in the profession (Weiss, 1999). However, it is not only teachers beginning their careers that need a supportive working environment. In fact, we might look at any EFL teacher's career as a career of a novice teacher: a new job inevitably poses new challenges, a new context forces instructors to experiment with and master new methods and techniques, a new classroom presents students who are different in every way from those we have taught before. Given the oftentimes precarious nature of this profession, "the support that teachers receive from their fellow professionals is known to be a significant contributor to job satisfaction, professional development and teacher retention" (Kelly & Antonio, 2016, p. 138).

It is not a coincidence that the words *support* and *professional development* can often be seen used next to each other when talking about teaching in particular. In his study of teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of continuous professional development (CPD) models, Maggioli (2017) asked the survey respondents how they envisioned their CPD. Overwhelmingly, they requested that it be part of their job and that they would have access to ongoing support systems. Moreover, one of the conditions of truly effective professional development that Maggioli's research found to be necessary is for it to be organized by teachers in a bottom-up fashion in the community that they teach in. "If teachers come together on their own initiative in order to reflect on their work, they can complement individual members' strengths, and compensate for each members' limitations, all for the common good of the group and the institutions in which they work" (Farrell, 2018, p. 154). While support and encouragement from administrators play a significant role especially during the first stages of a new employment, only teachers can help each other understand what really takes place in their classrooms and what their professional learning needs are based on that. Through opportunities to engage in self-directed learning, they can assume responsibility for setting their own goals for self-development and in this way take ownership of it. Professional development of teachers does not have to, and in fact should not, rely entirely on the programs run by employers and institutions.

Additionally, although much teacher development can occur through a teacher's own personal initiative, collaboration with others both enhances individual learning and serves the collective goals of an institution (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Cooperation becomes a value that

can guide the process of teacher development and emphasize the idea that teaching does not have to be a job done in isolation from your peers, within the walls and constraints of your own classroom. Communicating and sharing with other teachers can drive the actual teaching process, bring about creativity, and even reduce work-related stress.

That said, successful collaborative learning cannot be taken for granted and must be carefully planned and monitored (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The premise of this article and the project carried out with the English Discussion Class (EDC) instructors of Rikkyo University is to suggest ways for teachers to take on a more proactive approach towards satisfying their own professional needs, engage in their own self-development, and support others in doing so. It is important to understand that the EDC context is unique in the way professional development is organized and offered to the teachers. The EDC has a comprehensive, well-structured professional development program and training specifically in the first year of employment that continues further on into the following four years. This professional development (PD) program consists of numerous faculty development sessions (FDs) on topics related to the curriculum, observations held with both program managers and fellow teachers, opportunities to do research on areas related to teaching English discussion, amongst others.

After finishing my second year as an EDC instructor, I had enough experience with and knowledge of the PD program to see and appreciate its undeniable benefits. I also realized the (for the most part) top-down nature of this support: in the majority of cases, what my colleagues and I would work on in our PD projects or discuss in the FD sessions, was decided by the program. Also, while program managers unfailingly provide practical assistance to all of the instructors on a daily basis and colleagues are open to communicate with each other about work-related issues in their team rooms, it seemed to me that there was a space for establishing our own self-initiated support systems: teacher development and support that would be organized, planned, and activated for EDC teachers, by EDC teachers.

In order to take on this not inconsiderable task, it felt necessary to better understand the fundamental notion of *support*, a key concept underlying this study that is manifested through cooperative learning. Having the support of others within their profession is known to be critical for a teacher's development (Kelly & Antonio, 2016), so it is essential to make sense of what characterizes the very term of support. In the research on humanity disciplines, social support is often seen as a meta-construct involving several components, including support network resources, supportive interactions, and perceptions/beliefs that one is supported (Vaux & Harrison, 1985). Based on the definition that teacher social support in particular is summarized as interpersonal relations with elements of affect, aid, and affirmation (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980), types of social support can be distinguished as:

1. Emotional support in the form of esteem, affect, trust, concern, and listening;
2. Appraisal support in the form of affirmation, feedback, and social comparison;
3. Informational support in the form of advice, suggestion, directives, and information;
4. Instrumental support in the form of aid in kind, money, labour, and time.

(Kelly & Antonio, p. 139)

Social support in the workplace ideally happens in all four types through various forms; some of those forms might be offered as institutionally coordinated and formally organized professional development activities, such as in the case with the PD program in EDC.

In the next section of this paper, I will detail the procedures and rationale for choosing to plan and facilitate three teacher development activities, in which my colleagues would have a chance to take charge of their own professional learning and grow with each other's help. All three

separate projects relied on the spirit of collaboration and were looking to inspire a sense of 'togetherness', because through group activities each individual teacher can feel to some extent empowered (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The exploratory nature of this project was manifested in the modified research questions that had to be restated half-way through. Initially, I set about to experiment with mentoring as a way to provide mutual teacher support. Mentoring, when organized informally, facilitated and sustained cooperatively by the instructors themselves, could prove a valuable support system to rely on for both new and experienced teachers in EDC. However, as the project unfolded and I reflected on its impact on the instructors and my perceived view of its effects of support, I came to a decision to explore other formats of PD activities. By the end of this project, my research questions evolved and were, in their final form, shaped to look as follows:

1. How effective are the self-initiated teacher support activities that were offered in terms of procedures?
2. How effective are the self-initiated teacher support activities that were offered in terms of results?
3. What are the EDC instructors' perceptions of the self-directed teacher development and support systems?

DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the academic year 2018-19, I chose mentoring to be the sole focus of my professional development project and exploratory research. The idea came from my own increased interest in offering support to other teachers, learning more about mentoring, and in general *giving* as opposed to *taking* in my profession. I had planned for the project to revolve around establishing and sustaining mentoring relationships among instructors within EDC. I was interested in offering support to other teachers' professional needs myself and was also keen to promote the development of such relationships by teachers amongst themselves, on a voluntary basis, guided and inspired by the idea that "relationships are a major source of learning" (Clutterbuck, 2005, p. 2).

After reading professional literature on the use and potential of mentoring in both English language teaching and other fields, I came up with the structure of the project to be followed in the spring semester. This included facilitating monthly meetings, each focusing on certain aspects related to developing possible mentoring relationships among EDC instructors, and creating a shared online document as a database of potential mentors and mentees within the program. I had planned to re-assess the value of the project and the level of interest of participants towards the end of the term in order to make changes for the fall semester.

The first meeting aimed to gauge the participants' initial interest in the topic of mentoring. Sixteen teachers attended the session, and in small groups they shared their previous experience of being in a mentoring relationship, either in the role of the mentee or a mentor. The questions guiding their discussions included specific organizational aspects of those relationships, the goal statement, communication patterns, and so on. Also the participants were asked to give their assessment to the benefits, successes, and any problems that arose in the process. Finally, all instructors worked together to map out the characteristic qualities of both mentors and mentees, based on their own experiences and the stories they heard, as well as the features of the mentoring relationship itself. Mentors were described using the words "insight, guidance, comfort, nurturing, willingness, character, inspiring confidence, encouraging reflection, willing to share and listen," while mentees were identified as "eager to improve and listen, in need of something, desiring support, being less experienced in a specific context, feeling insecure." An interesting point that came to my attention before the meeting during the planning process and that was brought about

by some of the teachers in the session, regarded the potentially uncomfortable terminology of defining two members of the relationship as *mentor* (seen as superior) and *mentee* (seen as a novice). This distinction coming from the words themselves could create a power imbalance that some might feel uneasy about. Peer mentoring, vis-*à*-vis a *buddy system*, sounded less threatening and discouraging.

When describing mentoring as a relationship, Clutterbuck (2005) details five main phases that characterize it: rapport building, direction setting, progress making, winding down, and moving on to professional friendship. For me as a facilitator of the meetings, which as I was hoping might cultivate some supportive relationships between the colleagues, it seemed important to allot some time to rapport building. My colleagues agreed that even though teachers in our program spend a lot of time together in the team rooms, faculty development sessions, and even spend some time socializing with one another after working hours, there is still a lot we do not know about our respective professional backgrounds. In order for the mentor-mentee combination to work and progress, it is essential to share the appropriate balance of similarity and dissimilarity, which is manifested as an experience gap that provides opportunities for learning (Clutterbuck, 2005). It was with the purpose to identify those experiences and match them with the gaps that the second meeting was planned.

In the second meeting, teachers noted down and then shared with each other the complete stories of their professional journeys, including education, qualifications, jobs, major professional interests and achievements. As a result of this session, we collaboratively decided to create a digital resource that would contain information from and about teachers of the program who would be potentially interested in becoming either a mentor or a mentee. A shared Google document, accessible only to the EDC instructors and managers and called EDC Support Network, is open to edits and at the moment of writing this article comprises information about nine instructors, detailing their professional backgrounds and interests. Most importantly, in the document the teachers identified their strengths (i.e. areas they can help with and offer support for others) and their needs (i.e. areas they feel the need to receive support in from others). Specific examples mentioned were assistance with improving writing skills for papers and research projects, preparing conference presentations, guidance on carrying distance MA programs, e-learning and technology in the classroom support, EDC lesson support for less experienced instructors, as well as broader aspects that cover life of a teacher in Japan in general, such as strategies for learning Japanese, possible career paths for long-term expats in Japan, connecting to professional organizations, etc.

The third and fourth meetings, held later in the term, were poorly attended in comparison with the first two (four and three people, respectively), and it seemed to me that the interest of instructors in finding use in the project had waned. That somewhat affected the plans for the meetings. I had prepared to discuss the practicalities of organizing the relationships, such as deciding together when, where, and how to communicate, the importance of setting the purpose of the relationship and goals to be achieved, in order to give potential collaborations a head start. Instead of this practical approach, participants and I discussed possible ways to move on with the project with a more hands-off engagement on my part, improving the online document structure and presentation, providing more freedom for the instructors to follow up on the mentoring chances on their own.

In the final, fourth meeting, some skills and competences of an effective mentor were brought in to be discussed and reflected upon by those of the instructors who might be interested in learning more about becoming such a mentor. Self-awareness and behavioural awareness, a high level of emotional intelligence, the ability to pose the right questions and to listen rather than talk were mentioned among the skills and competences that might require specific training and

practice over time. This meeting concluded the semester-long project and an email was sent out to all instructors, with a reminder that the Support Network document exists online (last updated on October 16th, 2018), it is open for adding information at any time, and it can be used by instructors to find support on various professional matters from colleagues within the EDC program.

Upon reflection, I realized that the project needed a major shift of focus. It was clear to me that mentoring, organized informally in the way that was suggested and driven exclusively with the energy of those few instructors who expressed desire to be mentors, did not necessarily offer an alternative format of self-directed PD to all of the teachers, a format that would be attractive and suitable for their varying personalities and needs. A decision was made to broaden the scale of the project towards a bigger view of what might constitute self-initiated teacher support in EDC, taking into account the already existing complex system of faculty development sessions and professional development projects mandatory for all instructors.

Given the need to make some adjustments, what used to be the *mentoring project* expanded into a larger umbrella of the *teacher support project*. The project was planned to include two more forms of teacher development to be tested out in the fall semester, namely an online community, open to all instructors to join and create discussion threads on the topics of their interest or concern; and offline discussion group meetings. The major goal that concerned me now became to investigate which of the three distinct teacher-led support activities would be seen as more valuable and desirable as an additional form of professional development in our quite specific teaching context.

The online community called EDC Teacher Support Community was set up using the Google+ Communities feature in October 2018. The access to the posts is only available by invitation and was created on Google+ platform because all of the instructors already have a Google account provided by the university, which means that there is no need to reach to an external network and go through the process of setting up a new account. The purpose of this online community was to provide an extra space for EDC instructors to talk about teaching outside of the workplace and to support each other. Moreover, the online, asynchronous communication aspect could potentially lead to increased participation levels, especially if it could appeal to those teachers busy with assignments during their working hours and/or technologically-savvy colleagues.

A few emails were sent throughout the fall semester informing the teachers of this space being open for communication and sharing, explaining how to access the community, and encouraging to take part and initiate their own discussions on the themes related to teaching. Some of the discussion threads existing in the Google+ community included posts on such themes as challenges and successes in and outside the classroom, sharing useful links with resources for online PD courses, and exploring teacher identity reflecting on the questions, "Why did you become a teacher? How does it feel being an EDC teacher?" At the time of writing this article, the Google+ community consists of seven members, less than half of them having been active with posts and engaging in comments with others at the time of the project (October - December 2018).

Finally, one other form of teacher-initiated PD activity offered was discussion group meetings, held monthly for about an hour during working hours. In professional literature, such a form of teacher development is well researched and described under the terms of teacher development groups or teacher support groups (Farrell, 2018; Richards & Farrell, 2005) as a common, valuable type of collaborative reflective practice. Richards & Farrell (2005) mention a number of benefits to be obtained through participating in a teacher support group, such as greater awareness, increased motivation, effective teaching, benefits to students, empowerment, and facilitating teacher initiatives. Most importantly, since teacher support groups are created and

managed by teachers, they provide an invaluable opportunity for educators to truly own their professional development: "Teacher development groups facilitate dialogue, sharing and collaboration, and the exchange of resources, information, and expertise" (Farrell, 2018, p. 154). With this in mind, it seemed plausible that such a format might look attractive to a wide range of instructors who could see a chance to engage with their professional learning more directly.

The aim of the first discussion group meeting was to brainstorm the aspects of teaching that would later become the basis for future discussions, a needs analysis of sorts. The participants (of which there were only three, including myself), made notes and then shared the answers to the following questions:

1. What do we talk about in the faculty development sessions?
2. What do we talk about with colleagues outside of FDs?
3. What do you feel we do NOT talk about with one another in EDC?
4. What would you like to talk about in these discussion group meetings?

As a result of this activity and a fruitful discussion that followed it, over 20 specific themes and questions emerged that the group members felt keen on exploring with other instructors in self-facilitated discussions. The topics ranged from ones specific to our context (i.e. sharing experiences writing class comments for students, the lifestyle impact of this job, and sustaining teacher motivation in the context of a strongly unified curriculum) to farther-reaching issues of teacher identity, the life cycle of a teacher, technology in education, ELT theories and research ideas, and the long-term effects of teaching a limited set of skills. An email detailing all of the brainstormed questions and issues was sent out to all teachers of the program, and this same list of topics served as a springboard for three more discussion group meetings till the end of the school year.

This next section of the paper will focus on both my own personal reflections on the results of the project activities and the results of an extensive survey carried out among instructors at the end of the academic year. This survey sought to canvass opinions about each format of teacher support activities in particular, as well as the general view of teacher support types and formats in a workplace.

REFLECTION

From the onset of the project in May 2018, I kept a journal where I noted ideas and my shifting objectives, planned sessions to hold, and reflected on the sessions that were held. In hindsight, the journaling experience benefitted the project in more than one way. Not only could I connect the dots and see the logic of proceeding in a certain way, but I also had access to my changing thinking process and the chance to see how my reflection-on-action at every single stage impacted further decision-making and allowed the project to remain flexible. Additionally, at the end of the academic year I created a comprehensive survey for my colleagues to complete. The survey questions aimed to gather the instructors' opinions on the effectiveness of the three activities that they had been invited to join on a voluntary basis throughout the year, as well as to collect their general perceptions on the value of self-initiated teacher development and support formats in EDC context and beyond. It was both my personal journal and the results of the survey that informed this reflection and project analysis in general.

The critical learning that took place during the implementation of the project happened because of, or rather thanks to, getting stuck and disoriented in it by the end of the spring semester while piecing together the effects and results of the mentoring undertaking. Halfway through the term, I already felt slightly discouraged to continue with the project the way I had envisioned it, as it was not truly living up to expectations. Finding help and emotional support in the conversations I held about the project with a manager and a few colleagues, I realized where the

feeling of disappointment from irregular participation and only a faint interest expressed by a big percentage of instructors came from. The most troubling aspect of the mentoring was the following dilemma I faced: Am I doing this for others, or am I doing this to satisfy my own needs to be useful? As Clutterbuck (2005) pointed out, "the more the relationship is driven by the mentor's need to feel useful, the easier it is to overshadow the mentee's need to achieve independence" (p. 5). This resonated with me in the way that my own need to feel useful and do good blurred my understanding of what the real value and goal of mentoring was supposed to be, i.e. coming from the needs of the mentees.

Once I resolved the dilemma in my mind and felt comfortable with a facilitative role - creating opportunities for teachers to interact with mentoring in the ways that would suit them, no commitment, no strings attached to the project itself - it fell back into place and I could see anew what the support project could truly become. Now I accepted that the online document that we were compiling altogether, a database of the instructors willing to position themselves as prospective mentors or mentees, is a valuable resource on its own, and whether to use it or not, whether to reach out for help or not, is ultimately the choice of each individual teacher. The importance of the voluntary, informal nature of mentoring has been noted multiple times during the project by the teachers, and this idea has also been proven true by research. According to Maggioli (2017), "the mentoring relationship is best established through a common agreement between colleagues to work together. Research has shown that forced mentoring relationships do not actually work."

Later on, the survey results showed that among the reasons for inactive participation in the project was the lack of time, other obligations and commitments, or even a negative experience with mentoring in the past. One instructor shared that mentoring meetings they had taken part in on other occasions had sometimes turned into venting or complaining sessions and the negativity of it left a lasting impression. Such feedback made me even more convinced that in order to implement an efficacious mentoring program, it is important to make sure both mentors and mentees are well-prepared, while mentors are trained and made aware of the competences needed for developing a mutually beneficial relationship. There was also positive commentary about the project, and even instructors who did not actively participate in it shared that having such initiatives was a strength of the department. In fact, 60 percent of the respondents said that informal mentoring might be beneficial for EDC teachers, and 33 percent believed that formally assigning mentors from a pool of volunteers would also be potentially useful.

The online Google+ community seemed to be least interesting to the teachers and was thus the least successful part of the projects. While the invitations and multiple reminders to join the conversations in the community were emailed to all of the instructors, only 7 out of over 40 teachers in the program became members (including myself); just a few of those seven were actively engaged in discussions, both by leaving comments and posting new questions. Some of the survey respondents confessed to a lack of experience using this particular social networking platform, a lack of time, a lack of interest (or trust) in online communities, as well as a general preference for face-to-face communication for work-related matters, especially if colleagues share the same building and it is easy to contact each other.

After reading the survey comments, it came as a shock that 65% of the respondents answered that such an online community was possibly useful for EDC instructors. In hindsight, I recognize that one of the important missing stages of introducing this format of support system on my part was the lack of official orientation. It might have helped in attracting members and activity to the community to hold an additional face-to-face session that clearly explained the purpose and potential benefits, as well as to provide the necessary technical support in setting it up on computers and smartphones for ease of use. Participation in a social network requires time, energy,

and engagement that only occurs when there is an expectation of return in terms of direct or indirect benefits (Kelly & Antonio, 2016) – so pointing out those benefits and discussing previous experiences with online teacher development communities might have changed the way the instructors reacted to this initiative.

The most effective in terms of the teachers' engagement and positive feedback were clearly the four discussion group meetings held in the fall semester. The sessions following the first one had relatively big audiences (12, 9, and 7 instructors respectively) and there was good willingness to discuss and share ideas in each one. As was described in the previous section of this paper, the topics and questions that were generated by the three instructors presented more than enough discussion material for the three sessions that followed.

The survey results showed that an overwhelming majority of 93% of respondents believed that such discussion meetings were valuable, and here are some of their stated reasons:

> *It was interesting to talk about questions that normally don't get brought up in our everyday EDC teaching.*

> *It was good to step out and think about things differently.*

> *It was helpful to hear what other teachers are concerned about, it made me feel like there are others like me.*

> *It was interesting to see how different people react to the same issues and what they think of them.*

> *It was good to hear thoughts on what is good or could be improved in EDC. Knowing that many instructors share these thoughts and talking about it helped me deal with some of my job related stress.*

In an attempt to interpret such enthusiasm for teacher-led discussions, I included the following question in the survey: "Are you satisfied with the amount and quality of professional discussions that you have in this job (in FDs, in team rooms, and beyond)?" While many of the respondents mentioned how useful and helpful official FDs are, especially in the first year of employment, and emphasized the value of more casual team room conversations with their peers, there were some comments that, to me at least, explained the need for self-initiated discussions as were provided by the project (shared verbatim):

> *The official professional development and training sessions are great, but limited because they pertain to our work, which is limited too. The self-initiated discussion groups are very valuable because we can usually be more 'meta' about our work and step back from actual teaching or classroom-related training and development session and think more holistically about our experiences.*

> *I would also appreciate support and FDs related to teaching in general (i.e. growing as a teacher). Many of the FDs are focused on how to be a better EDC teacher." Although this has many benefits, I also feel that I've lost confidence in teaching other skill areas because I haven't had enough time or opportunities to discuss teaching these skills.*

From both the teachers' honest comments and my own personal experience planning,

facilitating, and reflecting on the discussion group meetings, I found the practical evidence of the true value of teacher support groups. Farrell (2018) mentions such advantages of teacher development groups as establishing supportive relationships for its members, creating non-threatening environment conducive for learning and supportive feedback, and offering an opportunity for language teachers to help other teachers face and overcome dilemmas related to their practice - all of these seem to me to be of utmost importance and, in fact, fundamental to a positive, healthy working environment, where teachers feel professionally fulfilled.

Finally, when answering the more general question of which kind of support is desirable in a workplace, the vast majority of respondents gave their votes to receiving practical assistance, advice and guidance, and interestingly, noted the importance of emotional support as well, something I personally value a lot in a workplace and what I think loops back to the benefits of collaborative learning. Among the particular forms of teacher support that are seen as preferable by the EDC teachers, small and big group team room conversations were the top choice, followed by the self-initiated discussion group meetings on the topics of interest, a format that was brought to the instructors' attention by this project. It was pointed out that there should be more teacher-led discussion groups and that more professional development that is not focused entirely on EDC is valuable.

CONCLUSION

In this exploratory, year-long project I attempted to introduce a variety of self-directed teacher support systems in addition to the already established institutional PD framework in order to explore the importance and effects of bottom-up teacher development. While the teaching context described in the paper is undoubtedly quite a specific one that offers a plethora of PD activities for its teachers to engage in, it still seems reasonable to draw generic conclusions that educators working in other contexts could take into consideration as well. With however mixed results and successes, the experiment shown in this article served one of its bigger purposes of illustrating the importance of teacher control over their own professional learning. There are many ways in which teachers can take ownership of their own professional development and collaborating with their peers appears to have a positive influence. Most importantly, a deeper understanding of the context and its teachers' needs is crucial in order to plan and offer a variety of activities that would be on demand and would appeal to the needs and interests of many. Even when it might seem that sometimes colleagues are uninterested in or indifferent to professional development activities, by choosing from a range of options they might find their ways to reignite the passion for what makes teaching exciting to them in the first place. That said, having a say in what they choose to do for their own development is a central element of a success PD story.

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