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An Online Teacher Professional Development Framework for Taiwanese English Teachers in Supplementary Schools: Undoing Self-Marginalization

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INTRODUCTION

Marginalized Taiwanese English teachers in supplementary or cram schools (bǔ-xí bān) tend to undermine themselves (Su, 2009), and unfortunately, many non-native English speaking teachers use their non-native identity as an excuse for their poor aptitude in the English language and/or their lack of confidence in teaching (Choi, 2007). Sadly, their low self-perception as English teachers inevitably breeds self-marginalization. The dilemma for Taiwanese English teachers in supplementary schools does not only involve getting the right teacher education but also the need to engage in continuous teacher learning and professional development opportunities that enhance the value of personal and professional growth (Tiangco, 2005). Given the fact that many Taiwanese English teachers enter the EFL classroom without formal preparation specifically in teaching EFL, teacher professional development (TPD) has become more important than ever. TPD can include formal or informal learning experiences throughout one's career.

“institutionally-sponsored, classroom-based, and highly-structured”, while informal learning is a “category which includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but is not typically classroom-based...” (p. 12). Traditional forms of TPD may include annual local, national, or international conferences, workshops, college course (Little, 1993), while the most recent forms of TPD activities that teachers can do on their own and for their own sake (Edge & Richards, 1998) include joining communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), co-teaching, mentoring, coaching, reflecting on class lessons (Schifter & Fosnot, 1993), self-directed learning, and action research (Guskey, 2000). Traditional TPD has conventionally been offered as a face-to-face activity, and in most cases, held after school, during the weekends, and sometimes during holidays where teachers could find time to participate. Garet et al (2001) posit such TPD is “widely criticized as being ineffective in providing teachers with sufficient time, activities, and content necessary for increasing teachers’ knowledge and fostering meaningful changes” (p. 920). Such reproof on the deficiencies of traditional professional development creates a niche for alternative forms. The advent of new technologies and the massive popularity of the Internet provide endless possibilities for innovative approaches in delivering and/or facilitating continuous online teacher professional development (oTPD) (Lock, 2006); the dynamic nature of oTPD using interactive web tools bridges the gap in providing teachers access to professional development. This chapter provides a discussion of the results of a qualitative study highlighting an online teacher professional development (oTPD) framework that integrated

mentoring in online environments. The results show that despite some limitations of the study, the Taiwanese teachers benefitted from the oTPD through the construction of new knowledge and skills that had direct implications for their attitudes, behaviour, and practice.

Setting the Scene

The snowball sampling approach (Atkinson & Flint, 2004), where friends, colleagues, and other teachers were requested to pass on the information to others, was used to recruit the Taiwanese teachers who participated in this study. To qualify, teachers were to meet the following criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1: Criteria in Choosing Participants

1.	Must be of Taiwanese ethnicity (regardless of gender)
2.	Practicing EFL teaching in cram schools /supplementary school (part-time or full-time)
3.	Have access to computer with Internet access
4.	Have basic knowledge in computing and Internet skills
5.	Willing to participate in online TPD activities

Participants were then included in a number of activities as described below.

Asynchronous Discussion in Yahoo! Group

30 teachers who participated in asynchronous discussions in Yahoo! Group (YG) were interested in relating to

online group was that of an overt participant (cf. Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993) because I was able to participate in the discussions, and the members of this group knew that I was conducting research and that their participation and contributions to the discussions would be used as data in my study. Teachers were free to post anything that would spark dialogue and sharing of opinions. About 80% of the teachers in this group teach in cram schools that also offer after-school services (i.e., help with homework from mainstream school program). The other 20% also teach English in primary schools on a part-time basis. They were asked to identify their teaching needs and what instructional skill or other related areas they wished to learn or enhance. The following topics were raised and covered during the YG-discussion project:

1. How to teach English and enhance the students' language skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing
2. How to increase students' motivation to learn
3. How to improve teachers' language skills
4. How to improve teaching style
5. How to integrate technology into the classroom

Synchronous and Asynchronous Action Research Group

Two teachers (Joy and Cindy) were invited following the same criteria above and, most importantly, they expressed their willingness to participate in the action research. Joy's and Cindy's oTPD was done separately due to the specific teacher learning needs that they had, which had to be matched with appropriate mentors (cf Murray, 2001). Nonetheless, both

attend a synchronous webinar, where practicing expert teachers from various countries were invited to share effective teaching practices and offer advice. Class observations were held twice: one prior to the online webinar and the other was post-webinar observation. Class observations were video-recorded for analysis to establish the relation between perceived role and performance, and to see how much knowledge was gained from the web conference, whether or not it was implemented in their classroom, and to gauge the effect of their practice on students' learning, if there was any. As part of their action research, Joy and Cindy were asked to create a blog to serve as their online journal. They wrote blog entries concerning the online conference, class observations, reflections on lesson plans and class activities, and other class related events.

Mentors

The open call for volunteer teacher-experts to participate was announced on my social and personal learning networks (PLN) and the Webheads in Action (Webheads), an online community of practice (CoP) in which I have been a long time member. Webheads are language teachers who "engage in helping each other pursue lifelong, just-in-time, informal learning through experimentation in use of social-media and computer mediated communications tools" (Stevens, 2009, para. 9). In the call for mentors, I described what their participation would entail and the particular professional skills/knowledge the Taiwanese EFL teachers wanted to learn more about. Colleagues who felt that they had something

extending their help to mentor/coach these Taiwanese EFL teachers, expressed their commitment and followed it through to completion. Allocation of volunteer mentors to Taiwanese EFL teachers was made by making sure that these mentors had considerable experience and were knowledgeable enough in their field of expertise, and that their skills were matched to the teachers' learning needs (Murray, 2001). The invited mentors in this study were experts in their own right and all of them had solid background and experience in ELT/EFL. Table 2 below shows the teachers' learning needs and the invited mentors for their oTPD.

Table 2: Mentors and Mentees

Taiwanese Teacher	TPD Needs	Expert teachers ¹ with extensive experience
Asynchronous Yahoo! Group	Teaching and instructional skills Lessons and activities Teacher and student motivation	Webheads 1) Elizabeth- a teacher trainer and an educational technology consultant who conducts online courses using collaborative tools; she is also professor emeritus at California State University, 2) Arnold- a retired teacher trainer from the

Taiwanese Teacher	TPD Needs	Expert teachers ¹ with extensive experience
		Netherlands, 3) Michael- a British EFL teacher in Shanghai, China. He participated in asynchronous discussions by sharing, responding, and offering suggestions and help regarding teaching strategies.
Synchronous & asynchronous Action Research group	Joy: How to teach writing to young learners	Webeads Dafne: ESP professor teaching in Spain, Teresa: primary school English teacher from Portugal, Gładys and Alejandra: English teachers from Argentina.
	Cindy: How to teach speaking (English conversation) to seniors/adult learners	From Non-native English Speakers in TESOL Interest Section (NNEST-IS) Terry: ESL teacher in Adult Education in San Francisco

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Cognitive Apprenticeship in Online Environments

The informal oTPD adapted in this study used a core conceptual framework as the basis for measurement of its effectiveness, i.e., what kind of knowledge or skills were learned as a result of their oTPD experience, and whether there were any changes in their instruction. The use of Collins et al.'s (1989) cognitive apprenticeship scheme and applying it in online environments allowed me to examine how 1) modeling, coaching, scaffolding and mentoring were applied in the oTPD process, 2) the various methods which the Taiwanese EFL teachers availed themselves of in articulating their needs, thoughts, feelings, and opinions with the other local teachers and mentors, 3) how they analyzed and reflected on their teaching and their participation in the oTPD activities, and 4) how they practiced their exploration skills, i.e., transferring what they had learned from the mentors into practice by creating learning activities for their students, changing their instructional practices, etc. This theory centers on the development of higher level thinking skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, learning to learn, and being creative.

Online Teacher Professional Development Framework

The graphic representation (Figure 1) shows the four core areas and the integration of online tools needed in facilitating the proposed oTPD framework: Awareness, Catalyst, Core & Structural Features of oTPD, and Teacher Change.

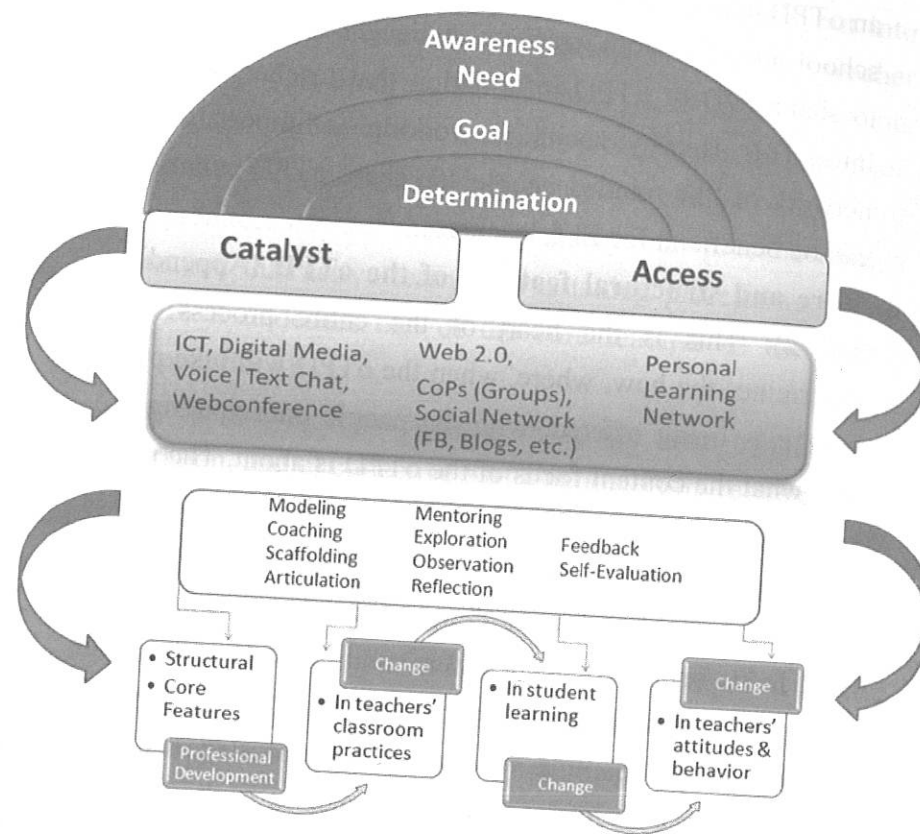


Figure 1: oTPD Framework

- Awareness:** The oTPD framework begins with having an understanding of what the teachers' learning needs and goals are in relation to their classroom practices, combined with determination to make meaningful changes.
- Catalyst in providing Access to oTPD:** This is where online tools are now integrated into the process as they will be used as a "gateway" for teachers' oTPD. Being a catalyst