10 Learning to Share and Sharing to Learn – Professional Development of Language Teachers in HE to Foster Open Educational Practices

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Abstract

This case study presents the staff-development perspective of the 'Collaborative Writing and Peer Review Project' developed at the Department of Languages, at the Open University, UK, between November 2011 and March 2012. The project was set up to promote the professional development of teachers through collaborative writing and peer review, encouraging open educational practices (OEP) and by extension the production and publication of teaching resources in an open repository. As teacher developers working in a blended environment, the authors facilitate opportunities for sharing and developing good practice as part of a broad staff development programme to help teachers understand and integrate innovative approaches into their practice. Participants in this project brought with them a range of experiences as practitioners from their work with language students both at and outside the University. This case study focuses on the professional development aspect of this initiative. It presents the different aspects of the process and analyses teachers' involvement with social online tools and the impact on teaching practice of engaging with the process of collaboration.

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1. Context: Staff development for language teachers in open learning

This case study presents the staff-development perspective of the 'Collaborative Writing and Peer Review Project' developed at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Education and Language Studies (FELS), at the Open University (OU), UK, between November 2011 and March 2012. The Department specialises in Supported Open Learning offering degree modules in English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, Welsh & Chinese (most of them from beginners to advanced). Students are geographically dispersed and study independently using mixed media teaching materials. They are supported by locally based part-time teachers through assignment feedback, email and forum contact, and online and face-to-face tutorials. The Department currently has more than 300 part-time teachers who are line-managed in teams by Staff Tutors (here referred to as regional academic managers). Regional academic managers are locally based academics whose roles include, among others, responsibility for the continuing professional development of their teams of language teachers.

In the current ever-changing socio-educational context, the professional development of language teachers evolves around the idea of lifelong learning and the need for ongoing familiarisation with new ideas and skills. However, as Seely Brown and Adler (2008) have demonstrated, the process of learning and developing expertise is associated with reflection and participation in the field, in other words, to "acculturating into a community of practice" (p. 19). When working in a technology heavy open learning context (see above) this will be a "virtual community of practice" (Seely Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 18) making use of professional academic development by technology. As teacher developers working with a diverse group of part-time practitioners in a blended environment, regional academic managers facilitate opportunities for sharing and developing good practice as part of a broad staff development programme which incorporates aspects of the blended learning tools to help teachers understand and integrate innovative approaches into their practice. The multimodal environment in which the University-supported open distance

learning takes place already enables teachers to acquire technical expertise and pedagogical understanding of a variety of digital tools including online social networking tools, as well as to developing positive attitudes towards sharing and discussing experiences of practice. Examples of this include recent staff development projects on Peer Observation of Teaching, Differentiation and more recently Dyslexia and Modern Language Learning, which have involved a strong element of collaboration and building on the work of others using synchronous and asynchronous online tools.

The project was one of nine funded under the University's Scholarship of and for Teaching strategy as it relates to two of its key thematic areas, enhancing teaching and learning with new technologies and developing professional identities and practice expertise, which underpin the Faculty priorities for its programmes of study.

2.   Intended outcomes: Encouraging collaboration in teaching material production

The project was set up to promote the professional development of teachers through collaborative writing and peer review, encouraging open educational practices (OEP) and by extension the production of content for open publication and reuse. All teachers are likely to have different strengths and weaknesses and varying levels of prior experience, and benefit from discussions with colleagues. Therefore, regional academic managers at the Open University support their teams of part-time teachers by providing sample resources, thus helping the teachers in designing their own effective tutorial activities to work with students in the OU's Supported Open Learning system. For this purpose an online resource bank (LORO) is made available.

This initiative presented an opportunity to encourage teachers to make sharing, peer reviewing and reusing of teaching resources part of their routine working practices. Prior to the project, most teachers' engagement with the online resource bank was predominantly receptive: it consisted of downloading teaching

materials for their particular student group or browsing resources for inspiration. Only some teachers engaged more fully in this online community of practice, by uploading new or reversioned materials and even fewer interacted with others through comment, offering praise or suggestions on uploaded resources. The project was set up to give teachers an opportunity to engage with the repository more fully during a defined period of time, in which support was available and engagement of peers with similar motivation was guaranteed.

The University's geographical spread across the UK at times limits the amount of regular contact between members of staff working in different locations. For the teachers in particular this can lead to demotivation, as they work part-time and from home, and may feel cut off from their teaching team. They might expect to deal with teaching issues in isolation or conversely become overly dependent on line manager support. The project therefore aimed to motivate teachers by providing opportunities for collaborative contact and working with peers, and to form subgroups for future joint working. The collaboration also enabled the different staff groupings to gain insight into each other's perspective, and to improve their use of the technologies available for teaching and collaborative working, through employing them practically in a dedicated task.

It was hoped that the project might lead to a targeted enhancement of the material provision, as teachers would identify and fill gaps they perceived in the existing collection. Furthermore, project participants might henceforth become champions of open practice: they might guide others in the use of the repository and lead by example in uploading of and commenting on materials, i.e. they would knit together the community of practice. An important aspect was for participants to engage with issues relevant to OER material development such as reusing materials or ideas developed by others.

Finally, the project was an impetus for all participants to engage in scholarship by reflecting on their own professional practice. Working with OER principles provided a supportive context, in which they could build on the existing scholarship by academic colleagues and an established network for dissemination.

3.   Nuts and bolts: Participants, technical tools and project schedule

The Department of Languages uses LORO, Languages Open Resources Online, to address the need to support its teachers as producers of tutorial activities for online teaching. LORO is an online repository of open educational resources (OERs) and was developed with JISC funding in 2010 to aid storing, sharing and accessing language teaching resources provided by the OU.

The project team brought together three regional academic managers and three members of the LORO development team who were course developers and coordinators. It worked in close co-operation with the twelve participating teachers. This triangle united a range of expertise, given the diversity of roles and backgrounds. The attributes sought in the teachers were the ability to deliver good, communicative language tutorials, having a firm understanding of diverse student need and inclusivity, having previous experience of creating imaginative and effective materials, familiarity with the LORO repository and, ideally, experience of collaborative work. The teachers, drawn from a diversity of languages, brought with them a range of experiences as practitioners from their work with language students both at and outside the Open University.

A designated online environment on the institutions' Moodle environment was set up for the project. The tools afforded were asynchronous forums, wikis and an online synchronous web-conferencing 'room'. The forum was provided for discussion and for communication between the project team and participants, for example, setting schedules and giving information. As the sub teams of participants formed, it was envisaged they would set up strands for their collaborative work. The wiki was set up for collaborative material development. The online 'room' (Elluminate) was available for synchronous meetings, either by the whole group as part of scheduled input sessions or the autonomous subgroups to discuss their joint work.

Table 1 below shows the schedule of tasks and steps planned by the project team.

Table 1. Collaborative writing and peer review project schedule

Stage	Dateline	Action	Tools
Preparation	Over a 4-month-period prior to launch	Project team meetings to design and plan	Synchronous and asynchronous conferencing
Recruitment	Month 1 (1-hour-session)	Invitation to all OU language teachers	Advert (LORO Newsletter - October 2011 - LORO), email
		Briefing meeting for all interested teachers	Online room
		Finalising participant list	Project mailbox
Training and discussion	Month 2 (2-hour-session)	Project launch (participants and project team). Session introduced participants to LORO functionality, the concept and history of OER and OEP and explored aspects around collaboration and peer review	Online room
	Month 3 (2-hour-session)	Presentation and discussion of tools for collaboration, using third party material and copyright issues, and creative commons licenses. Group formation and planning discussion	Online room
Group work	Month 3 to 4 (2-week-period)	Collaborative writing and peer review; participants from each group create • one new resource • one resource based on reuse/reversioning	Synchronous and asynchronous conferencing. Email
Progress meeting	Month 4 (2-hour-session)	Presentation and discussion of resources; discussion of collaborative writing and peer review	Online room
Completion	Month 4 to 5 (2-week-period)	Finalising and uploading of resources, peer commenting	LORO
Dissemination	Month 5 and beyond	Opportunities for participants to present at staff development events, championing LORO, OER and OEP	LORO, online room, face-to-face in various locations

Scheduled sessions were designed to be interactive and discussion-based so as to harness the participants' experience, to demonstrate the possibilities and strengths of peer support and to address the actual needs of teachers in this particular work context. Task outcome guidelines for subgroup formation and working were deliberately left flexible to allow for a good degree of autonomy.

4. In practice: How the plans were applied and received

Overall the project ran as scheduled in the plan set out in Table 1. Some variation occurred in the working of the subgroups, largely due to their choice of online tools.

Through forum postings and synchronous online discussions, participants formed four groups for joint work with those of similar interests (Table 2).

Table 2. Group and resources produced

Group:	Resources produced:
English for Academic Purposes	A case study about a bookshop with activities
Jing embedded video descriptions	Learning to use the tool and making resources
Intermediate Italian	Pronunciation, tongue twisters, description of an apartment activity
Cross languages	Materials in different languages for reversioning, differentiation and extension activities

During the group work phase participants had to organize their own schedule and work more independently. Here they mostly chose tools they were familiar with such as email for communication. Whereas it was quick and easy to use, this meant the work was not visible on the forums, and one participant, inadvertently left off one email, missed part of her group's work.

Time constraints meant that participants had no or few synchronous subgroup meetings. If at all, they used their own teaching rooms with preference over the project's room, access to which was less familiar to them.

Participants only used new tools if they afforded clear benefits. The wiki was the only tool new to some of the participants, and only one group used it to design their materials. One group introduced another tool, 'Jing', for short video recordings, explored how to use it, and used it to create materials.

The project produced 19 useful teaching resources which can be found on the LORO website by searching for the 'collaborative writing' tag. Two are illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 1.   Teaching resource in LORO created during the project[1]

In a final evaluation of the intended outcomes, eleven participant questionnaires were returned. When asked if they would use the materials produced in the project, 8/11 participants reported they would definitely use the materials they had produced themselves, 4/11 would use the materials produced by their group and 2/11 would use those created by other groups.

1. Jing activity: http://loro.open.ac.uk/2851/

Figure 2.   A beginners' French activity adapted for German[1]

The experience of writing collaboratively with new people was described in the final evaluative questionnaire as "highly motivating". Another participant commented,

"I think we had a shared underlying understanding of what constitutes effective teaching and were open to each other's ideas."

Participants were particularly positive about the helpfulness of peer support available through working in groups. When asked about giving and receiving comments 8/11 agreed the comments were valuable and none disagreed; one reported feeling uneasy having their work commented on, but 8/11 said they did not. Nevertheless, they were clearly aware that peer review has to be provided sensitively, as 6/11 said they felt uneasy making the comments, while only 2/11 did not. Figure 3 illustrates how tutors supported each other through constructive and tactful feedback.

Figure 3.   An example of developing peer evaluation
                    and comment in LORO

Participant 1, 02 Jun 2012 18:25
This is a very good idea, [name]. What sort of questions would you ask? For example: 'Quante finestre ci sono?' 'Quale stanza non ha finestre?'

Participant 2, 02 Jun 2012 17:27
This is a wonderful listening activity. How about adding some questions? This would help the students notice some of the language you used e.g. 'la cucina è abitabile'

Participant 3, 28 Apr 2012 23:09
I think this is a really good idea of how to exploit the course materials further by adding a new dimension to them. Thanks for a great idea, [name].

While participants experienced the time constraints involved in collaboration, overall they felt that this was worth it. However, when asked if working collaboratively took more time than working individually opinions were split. 6/11 agreed and 4/11 disagreed, while 5/11 thought it would save time in the long run and 3/11 did not.

The majority of participants reported having benefitted from the enthusiasm generated by the working in groups and giving and receiving comments. One participant concluded,

"It was a very interesting and useful exercise. It encouraged me to work collaboratively and I appreciated the benefit of it. I have certainly learnt different things such as how to use new tools in order to make my material more interesting and interactive. Furthermore, since I took part in this project I started re-using and adapting existing materials and it is saving me lot [sic] of time. Finally the project encouraged me to share my work and ideas with other [sic]: I liked to have feedback on my work before publishing it online (I thought it was very encouraging and reassuring), I have also been inspired from the work of other people."

5.   Conclusion

Following the principles of Open Educational Resources and Open Educational Practices as defined by Wiley (2007) among others, this case study illustrates how a staff development initiative for teachers of Modern Foreign Languages in Higher Education represents a good example of integrating OEP and OER into teachers' professional practice. The benefits of working collaboratively using social networking tools and publishing resources through open repositories have been indicated by participants in the project. By engaging with innovative pedagogical practices they found the process of collaboration a motivating and enriching learning experience which also gave them the opportunity to reflect on their attitudes towards and perceptions of ownership and open access. The process was underpinned by the use and reuse of individual teaching contributions to adapt them to the needs of learners as identified by the extensive teaching experience of participants. Thus some of the comments and feedback express the idea that materials produced collaboratively become "part of a community" and can be regarded "more as a proposal or a suggestion" rather than the creation of one individual. The impact of this initiative goes beyond improving teaching practice and it is reflected in the quality of the student experience as they benefit from the use of better resources and more confident teachers.

The full integration of LORO in the professional practice of Open University language teachers will be a long-term achievement which requires further work

to raise awareness and build skills amongst users, as well as regular monitoring among practitioners. However staff developers feel that the experience of this project has taken participating teachers to a level of "champions" and has offered great encouragement to teachers to be involved in staff development events and to play a key role in promoting collaborative OEP to the wider community at the OU and beyond. As a result, many participating teachers have already given presentations and run workshops for their peers at regional and national level events while some others have engaged in scholarship.

This case study not only illustrates the process of engaging practitioners with the production of open educational resources but, more significantly, we have provided a practical example of successful and innovative open educational practices in the context of Supported Open Learning, which has the potential to be replicated and adapted to a variety of settings. The project further demonstrates the potential of social networking tools to develop teachers' digital literacies required by the changing role of the practitioner in teaching languages in blended contexts.

Useful links

JING: http://www.techsmith.com/tutorial-jing-embed-content-using-screencastcom.html

JISC: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/inf11/sue2/loro

LORO: http://loro.open.ac.uk/

LORO newsletter: http://loro.open.ac.uk/2637/

Supported Open Learning: http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/the-ou-explained/teaching-and-learning-the-ou

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Research-publishing.net

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