TeachMeets
continuing professional development for teachers by teachers

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Potential impact	high
Timescale	short term
Keywords	TeachMeet, Twitter, continuing professional development, Guerrilla CPD, unconference

What is it?

A TeachMeet (TM) is a form of free Continuing Professional Development (CPD) that originated in 2006 in Scotland, and has since been known under many guises; guerrilla CPD, unconference, and bottom-up CPD. The forefather of this form of CPD is educational consultant Ewan McIntosh, who originated these meetings for those educators in primary and secondary schools who wanted to share ideas and talk expressly about teaching. From the very first TM, which took place on the peripheries of an educational conference, there have been certain characteristics that define this teacher-led CPD. The by-line for a TM is 'teachers sharing ideas with teachers'. As this strapline suggests, the presenters at a TM are also the attendees; they are there to learn from each other at a utilitarian meeting. The presentations, often described as micro or nano presentations, are short, and there is 'break-out time' when attendees can get together, learn more from each other, and share and develop ideas. Indeed, as Bennett (2012) suggests "the value of a conference is not the keynotes or even the workshops, but the conversations that happen in the corridor or over coffee" (p. 24).

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The same can be said for TMs, which is why, from its inception, there is always a moment for attendees to come together over food to discuss and make connections, which is also another important part of the TM movement.

Initially, TMs were accused of overly focusing on technological innovation, but, over time, TMs have evolved so that the majority of events now have a focus on a specific topic or theme, providing a more focused CPD experience.
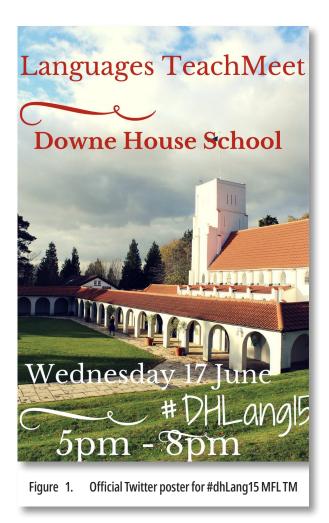
Despite all these changes, the essence of a TM has remained largely the same. A TM very often has a facilitator, who will organise the timings and the theme of the meeting, if there is one. As Almond, Johnston, and Millwood (2018) point out in their study of the evolution of the TM phenomenon, one third of meetings follow

> **❝** 'the build it and they shall come' lead, and reflect an event which invites variety in presentation topics by those who volunteer to present" (p. 239).

From their genesis, TMs have largely been advertised on online backchannels (social media such as Twitter) both before an event to gain an audience – and, thus, presenters who will share ideas – and during the event itself. A TM will have a name that hooks in the participants (such as Learning Rocks from TM Clevedon https://www.smore.com/b082-teachmeet-clevedon) and a hashtag with which to promote the event during the proceedings. Such an approach makes for a very inclusive type of CPD for teachers all around the world.

Example

An example of a themed event on Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) is #dhlang15 TM, where educators from languages departments from all key stages of primary and secondary school came together to discuss language-focused ideas. The presenters tackled themes and ideas that could be adapted by all parties in their own circumstances (Figure 1).

Figure 1.   Official Twitter poster for #dhLang15 MFL TM

The event was advertised locally and on social media, in particular *Twitter*, with the facilitator garnering financial support for the event via sponsorships that were largely language-specific. Among others, thisislanguage and VocabExpress, both companies that provide online resources for language teachers, were popular sponsors of the event. The participants and presenters were sought out and invited in the same way, via Twitter. On the night itself, participants used the hashtag to share pertinent ideas that were relevant to the language classroom.

Thus, the event reached well beyond the 70 participants in the room, with 'audience members' coming from all over the world.

Presentation topics ranged from technological tools that can enhance language learning to how to encourage more spontaneity in speaking. One presentation that had a particular influence on many in the audience was based on the importance of drilling and practising in modern languages. The ideas expounded upon in this two-minute nano presentation were forceful and to the point, and were a useful reminder for the audience of repetition in language learning.

Benefits

The variety of topics discussed at a TM allows attendees to learn about differing pedagogical approaches in use and to consider further teaching ideas that are being applied in the language classroom. For example, tricky skills, such as creative writing or fluency in speaking, are often considered, and provide some much-needed insight into how others tackle these areas. Participants can leave with real ideas and resources that they can use right away in their own classrooms. In addition, the chance to chat with colleagues at a TM gives a much-needed opportunity for educators to collaborate with and learn from like-minded individuals. Some even take the opportunity to let off steam about educational issues and policies, which might not be possible in traditional forms of CPD. Not to mention the lone voice scenario: if you are the only teacher of a subject, such as German, a TM provides an invaluable opportunity to discuss your subject with others. The general atmosphere at a TM enhances the whole experience, and attendees often come away feeling energised. Additionally, they are rife with opportunities to build community and personal learning networks with other educators from other institutions who are similarly motivated to enhance their teaching.

Potential issues

Given that the speakers are drawn from the attendees, it is never really possible to gauge the quality of the speaker beforehand. In themed evenings, some ideas

may not be transferable to every context, and it would be fair to say that some attendees may gain more than others, for whom the TM presentations might propound ideas that are already commonplace in their classrooms or simply not relevant.

Looking to the future

Even if attendees come away with just one idea to work with in their classrooms, the benefits of TMs outweigh any potential drawbacks. The recent pandemic has driven TMs online, and these have been very successful, with attendee numbers in the hundreds. In fact, the ability to connect with educators further afield is a positive side effect of this new approach; the greater field of educators willing to contribute and participate means that the quality of presentations is even greater, the proceedings are slicker, and attendees can more easily fit the TM into their busy schedules. This is to say nothing of the reduced costs for those who would normally have travelled to the TM and the refreshment costs placed on the organisers.

The desire for informal discussion, which is a feature of TMs, can be met via the online chat function of whatever forum is used for the event and on social media via the hashtag. Given the cynicism and general apathy that can surround traditional CPD, and that teachers increasingly want to take responsibility for their own learning, TMs are most definitely here to stay, and are likely to continue to getting stronger in this new online format.

References

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Resources

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#dhlang15 TeachMeet : https://dhtm.wordpress.com/2015/06/21/dhlang15/

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