INNOVATIVE APPROACHES IN TEACHER TRAINING AND CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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FULL PAPER

SUBJECT: Continuous Professional Development

Abstract

There have been significant changes in the teaching-learning process over the last several years. Teachers have moved from the role of "dispensers of knowledge" to "transformative practitioners". This shift has provided students with the opportunity to take a more active role in their own learning and allowed them to foster competencies which employers are looking for in today's workforce. Teacher training in the 21st century needs to encourage the development of skills and characteristics that help teachers become reflective practitioners and effective facilitators, in order to better meet the needs of their students.

At the heart of Trinity College London's work is the support it provides for teachers, both in terms of specific support for teachers preparing candidates for their exams, and more general teacher development. This paper will focus on Trinity's commitment to providing both online and blended professional development training to support teachers' needs through our local Italian Moodle platform (https://bcelt.trinitycollege.it/).

This paper begins with a brief overview of our online teacher training experience and the changes that have occurred over almost a decade in our profession as instructional designers and teacher trainers. The discussion then turns to the professional development courses (designed in keeping with MIUR guidelines and EU education policies) delivered on Moodle and that explore innovative approaches to teaching and assessing English as a foreign language. The paper will also seek to offer some insights into how our support programme continues to adapt to the style and needs of our community of teachers.

Keywords - Blended learning, collaborative community, building shared knowledge, professional development, transformative practitioners

7,698	Registered teachers
316	Teacher Enrolled on online courses
85	Different e-tivities
62	Discussion forums
257	Badges Earned
17	Online live classes
30	Teacher Development webinars
626	Teachers attending webinars

OUR ONLINE TEACHER COMMUNITY TO DATE

Academic Year 2016 - 2017

1   INTRODUCTION

Professional development is paramount if we intend to improve classroom teaching and, in turn, student achievement. A raft of opportunities is available for teachers, leading to growth after the formal pre-service training associated with the qualifications necessary for securing a job. Although many teachers enter the teaching profession because of the high value they place on learning, too few engage in professional development on a regular, extended basis throughout their career. As teacher development moves online to take advantage of the scale and other affordances of the internet, it's important to ask what works and what doesn't and for whom. To answer some of these questions, the Italian academic support team investigated and explored many of the best models in this rapidly changing field by identifying top developers of online professional development — with an emphasis on language education, where much exciting innovation has taken place — and sharing what they have learned in the process of designing and implementing their professional development courses.

This paper is intended to serve as an overview of our local online and blended continuous professional development (CPD) courses. CPD is very important for shifts in teachers' practices because they must not only learn new skills but also "unlearn" almost unconscious beliefs, assumptions, and values about the nature of teaching, learning, and assessment. Professional development that requires "unlearning" necessitates high levels of emotional/social support in addition to mastering the intellectual and technical dimensions involved. In order for teachers to transform from presentational, frontal teaching to active inquiry-based forms of student learning, teachers must "unlearn" their own mental models, which include emotional investments developed over decades of, first, being a student receiving traditional instruction and then years of building skills in conventional teaching. Without "unlearning", teachers teach as they themselves were taught. Recent research on how people learn and how to better assess students has led to new curriculum and new teaching strategies.

Beyond these transformative shifts in language teaching, educational approaches must change dramatically to prepare students for work and life in the modern era. Rather than moving into stable industrial jobs, young people now must compete in a rapidly shifting, global, knowledge-based, innovation-centered economy. And, in order to secure a reasonably comfortable lifestyle, they now must go beyond a high school diploma and acquire not just academic knowledge but also character attributes such as intrinsic motivation, persistence, and flexibility. Moreover, mastery now requires the ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world contexts, not just in academic settings, by demonstrating proficiency via effective, authentic performances.

Context-based learning implements students' interests and real-life examples to help them gain interest in the subject matter. Research shows that when students are interested in something and can connect it to their lives or cultural backgrounds, they are more highly motivated and learn at a better rate.

Cooperative learning enables a team to combine its knowledge and skills in making sense of a complex phenomenon. It also provides experiences that develop both good learning skills and social skills. Research has shown that students who work in cooperative groups do better on tests, especially with regard to reasoning and critical thinking skills than those that do not. [1]

Project-based learning is filled with active and engaged learning, it inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they are studying. Research also indicates that students are more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning. In addition, students develop confidence and self-direction as they move through both team-based and independent work.

Technology enhanced learning supports teaching and learning through the use of digital technologies, providing students with engaging and motivating language learning experiences as well as promoting international collaboration and the exchange of ideas and know-how.

These approaches to deeper learning entail very different teaching strategies than the familiar, teacher centred approaches of industrial-era schooling, with its one-size-fits-all processing of students. Rather than requiring rote memorization and individual mastery of prescribed material, they involve in-depth, differentiated content; authentic diagnostic assessment embedded in teaching; active forms of learning, often collaborative; and learning about academic subjects linked to personal passions and infused throughout life. Teacher training is vital for achieving the transformation in practice emerging from this shift.

2 THE ORIGINS AND DESIGN OF OUR VLE

At the heart of Trinity' College London's work is the support it provides for teachers, both in terms of specific support for teachers preparing candidates for our exams, and more general teacher development [2]. Their work with teachers is supported by a growing international network of relationships with key education institutions. This ensures that teachers have access to the best professional development available. In 2009, Trinity's Italian Academic Support Team launched its own local Virtual Learning Environment (Figure 1) to offer English language teachers throughout Italy the opportunity to extend their skills and develop new ones through the VLE's professional development resources. In the same year they ran their first online professional development pilot course in response to the need for a comprehensive online support programme that would provide geographically dispersed teachers with a community of practice enabling them to interact, connect and learn more about Trinity's examinations and qualifications as well as learning from each other in ways not possible in more traditional face-to-face professional development events.

Figure 1 – Snapshot of our homepage - https://bcelt.trinitycollege.it

Nearly a decade after the launch of the pilot course with 490 teachers enrolled, our community now stands at over 7,600 registered participants.

Moodle was introduced as a viable open-source for the online Support platform. Designed by teachers for teachers, the Moodle pedagogy [3] seemed to best support teaching and learning online; with over 10 years of development guided by social constructionist pedagogy, the system delivers a powerful set of learner-centric tools and collaborative learning environments that empower both teaching and learning.
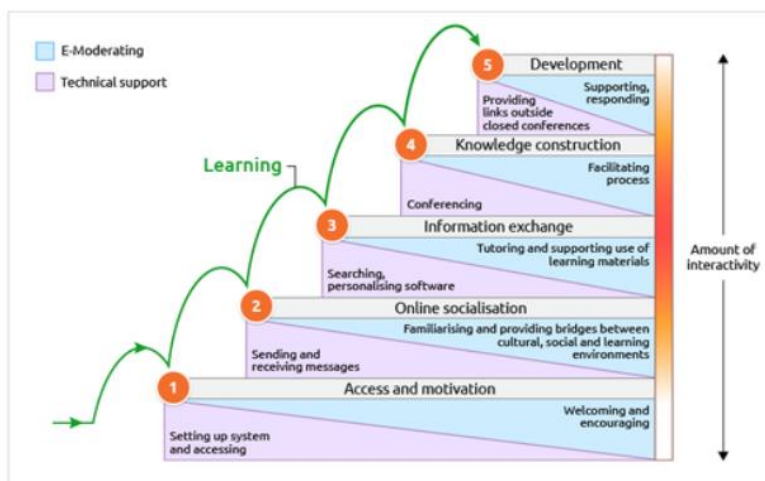

Figure 2 – Gilly Salmon's 5-Stage Model

The pedagogical framework underpinning all our courses and programmes is based on Gilly Salmon's five-stage framework.[4] The five-stage-model (Figure 2) offers essential support and development to

participants at each stage as they build up expertise in learning online. This scaffolding is particularly important in the initial introduction of online learning, as many of the teachers are at their first experiences of online courses and need to become familiar with the Moodle platform. The courses are delivered both asynchronously and synchronously by our e-moderators, who are all members of the Italian academic team with expertise in preparing students for Trinity's Exam suites, and whose role is to guide discussions, encourage full, thoughtful involvement of all participants and provide feedback.

Encouraging active participation online is further explored in the report "Best Practices in Online Teaching" [5] (July 2009, Hanover Research Council) where reference is made to the article "Enticing E-learning" by Vic Lally and Jerry Wallington: *In February 2002, The Times Educational Supplement reported that —there is growing evidence from research in [e-learning] that certain strategies…will enhance teaching and learning - just as certain tactics and strategies do work in face-to-face pedagogy. The article emphasized that successful e-learning must involve — a mixture of course design issues and pedagogical issues. In order to entice students to participate, a course must offer — group activities, structure, stimuli, cajoling by tutors and peers…[and] a purpose or a reason to go online.*

While our local e-moderators have been gradually implementing the technologies employed in online education these are still emerging as educational tools in mainstream education. Online technologies such as webpages, discussion forums, course management systems, audio tools, and video tools are well entrenched in the field of online teaching. However, with each technology come a number of planning considerations that are important for online moderators to reflect upon as they develop their courses and choose the most appropriate technologies.

The team designing the course content and the e-tivities ('E-tivity' is the word Gilly Salmon gives to a framework for active and interactive online learning [6]) also needed to consider one other very important factor in the planning and development component of the online teacher training courses: the need for our online courses to be delivered in such a way as to create a best practices community among teachers and moderators. Research shows that in many of the instances in which distance education courses fail, the cause is participants' sense of isolation or low level of self-directedness. In order to overcome this isolation factor, our local academic support team has developed an established protocol for building, maintaining, and evaluating participant-to-participant and participant-to-moderator interactions. Our protocol reflects Gilly Salmon's recommendation *"for online learning to be successful and happy, participants need to be supported through a structured developmental process"* [7], and Pelz's three principles of effective online teaching.

As the recipient of the 2003 Sloan-C award for Excellence in Online Teaching, Professor Bill Pelz of Herkimer County Community College in Herkimer, New York, was invited to share some of his thoughts regarding effective online pedagogy. Pelz defined the Three Principles of Effective Online Pedagogy [8] as follows:

A. Principle #1: Let the students do (most of) the work.

1. Student Led Discussions

2. Students Find and Discuss Web Resources

3. Students Help Each Other Learn (Peer Assistance)

4. Students Grade Their Own Homework Assignments

5. Case Study Analysis

B. Principle #2: Interactivity is the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning

1. Collaborative Research Paper

2. Research Proposal Team Project

C. Principle #3: Strive for presence

1. Social Presence

2. Cognitive Presence

3. Teaching Presence

3 DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES

Over the years the local academic support team have aimed at implementing these ideas and their own best practices in online teaching and have sought to adapt, where necessary, to the ever evolving styles and needs of our community of teachers.

Our online support offer has gone through five development phases to date in response to these changing styles and needs.

1. In phase one, 490 teachers participated in the first teacher support "journey", launched in October 2009 on Moodle 1.9. Participants enrolled in the journey voluntarily with no extrinsic rewards such as academic credits or incentives. The language of instruction and of online communication was English.

   The pilot lasted 5 months, during which we ran 3 five-week courses. Most of the activities were conducted asynchronously through online discussion forums, e-mail groups and wikis. There was also some synchronous communication through the use of chat rooms and Skype.

2. During phase 2, which ran from 2010-2013, a series of changes were implemented on our Moodle platform in order to maximize the experience for teachers. Basing the design of our online content on feedback received during the pilot stage, a single combined online journey was created for the exam suite that had shown the most active participation in the pilot phase: Trinity's Graded Examinations in Spoken English; Initial and Elementary stages. Contact was limited to written exchanges in Forum posts, wikis and live chat sessions, which were run once a week. This format continued to be implemented until Spring 2012 on the Moodle 1.9 platform, at which time our community had more than quadrupled.

   Three new moderators joined the Moodle team in phase 2 and were trained in instructional design using the Gilly Salmon approach. In response to feedback provided by teachers, the original 5-week journey was reduced in length and more specific content was designed for the various levels and exam suites.

3. Phase 3 (2013-2015) provided us with the most challenges. The upgrade from Moodle 1.9 to 2.6 caused quite a few changes on the platform and, as a result, had a significant impact on the workload for e-moderators and instructional designers. Another challenge that we faced after the upgrade was the limited functionality of the Moodle chatroom. One of the most successful elements of our online support offer at that time had been our weekly chat session with teachers where we could meet up in real time and share experiences and best practices. We experienced difficulties both with accessibility and time delays on the Moodle chat tool. Without this synchronous aspect of the online experience, we began to see a drop in active participation on the journeys. Teachers were offered the alternative to join e-moderators on Skype, but there was reluctance on the part of the majority of teachers to meet outside of the platform, which they seemed to perceive as an unprotected environment.

4. During phase 4 (2015-2016) our numbers climbed to just under 5,000 users. Teachers, who had previously been unaccustomed to using technology as a means of learning were now becoming more self-confident in using the internet as a medium of instruction. As teachers gained confidence in using the tools, we began to introduce additional Moodle activities and resources (lessons with quizzes, glossaries, e-books, etc) in order to bring a further interactive experience to the online courses. Our support program also began to expand to include teacher development on subjects such as Assessment literacy, CLIL, etc.

   In this period, teachers were also beginning to express the desire for more live events, so we started experimenting with the web conferencing system, Big Blue Button (BBB) which we hosted on our Moodle platform. With the introduction of live webinars, our online community grew by 410% in the first quarter of 2016.

5. In phase 5 (2016-2017), following on the success of the webinars, we introduced live classes using BBB in our online courses. Each course included one live session per module, which seemed to provide additional motivation to teachers.

   During this period, we also began to implement a badge system, which brought a further gamified nature to our online courses. In the past, teachers sometimes found a 4-week course too challenging to complete. The introduction of badges in the 2016-2017 academic year provided them with small, achievable goals to accomplish. Allowing teachers to earn badges as they completed each module

seemed to provide them with the encouragement and motivation they needed to continue on their learning journey which, in turn, led to an increase of 20-35% overall completion rate on our online courses.

4   OUR CURRENT TEACHER SUPPORT

In the forthcoming academic year (2017-2018), teachers will have the opportunity to choose from a variety of continuous professional development courses. All of our courses will help newly qualified teachers, and also teachers with some experience, to develop professionally through quality interaction with our expert team of moderators and with a choice of assignments suited to the experience and context of the teachers.

"Bite-sized" courses - Task specific mini-courses on Trinity exam format (5 hours)

- Graded Examinations in Spoken English - 2-Skill exam (Task focus: the Topic phase, the Interactive phase, etc)

- Integrated Skills in English - 4-skill exam (Task focus: the Reading tasks, the Writing tasks, etc)

100% online teacher development courses

- Teaching English to Very Young Learners

- Teaching English to Young Learners

- Teaching and Assessing Speaking

- Teaching and Assessing the 4 Skills

All our 100% online courses consist of between 4 to 6 modules delivered online, both asynchronously and synchronously, through cooperative activities and live lessons via webinar, and cover the following areas: 1. Orientation – Establishing common ground 2. Teaching approaches (specific content for the target group) 3. Performance based assessment 4. Classroom Research. The courses have a duration of approximately 25-35 hours and are spread over 5-7 weeks which includes a study week for the classroom research module.

The courses, also available to teachers on the S.O.F.I.A. platform, are designed to follow on from our face-to-face training events [9] for those who wish to go into more depth or on a stand-alone basis. Both our face-to-face and online courses share the common goal of promoting continuous professional learning on the job through collaboration and sharing with colleagues. Additionally, they emphasize teachers' use of student-centered, communicative-based approaches in their classrooms that involve all students, regardless of ability.

5   CONCLUSION

"It takes a deliberate act to look at teaching from the perspective of learning." (R Bass) [10]

Research suggests that teachers need the opportunity to learn on the job and try out ideas in their classrooms that are directly related to the subject and/or content they have to teach [11] . All our courses place emphasis on relevant professional learning, teaching approaches and performance-based assessment but differ in the extent to which they are directly relevant to teachers' needs. The Integrated Skills course (Figure 3) was the most teacher-driven and the most relevant because teachers had the freedom to design their own collaborative activities related to the English language courses they were teaching. The teachers who chose to participate appeared to have benefited substantially from their involvement, although the nature and extent of that growth varied.
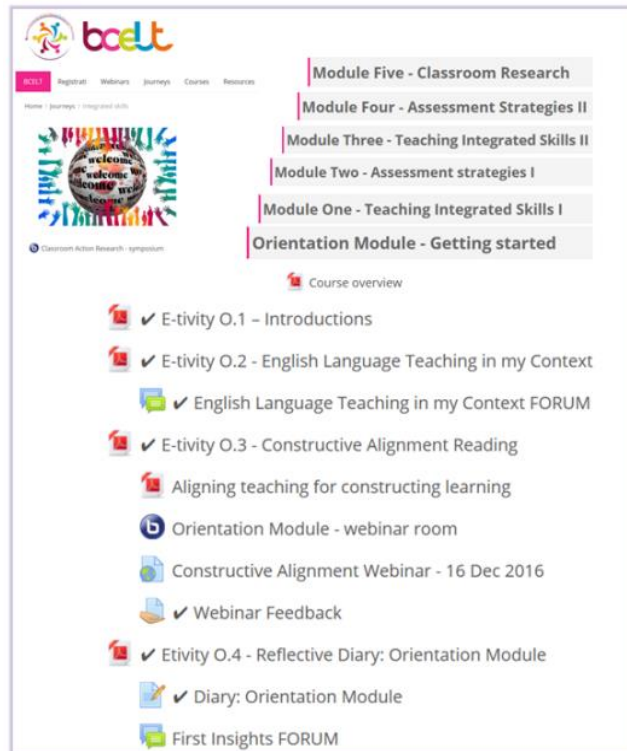
Figure 3 – Snapshot of Teaching Integrated Skills course – 30 hour online course

Development occurred in three main areas: level of technology skill, changes in pedagogical orientation and practice, and knowledge of the testing board (TCL – Trinity College London).

First, with respect to technology skill development, even those teachers who already possessed considerable technology skills found themselves developing new abilities in the use of broadband for videoconferencing, and expanding their knowledge to incorporate unfamiliar resources and unique software tools that were part of the course. Teachers with less technology background found that their involvement with the course content had generally expanded their IT capabilities too. They reported learning a variety of software applications that they had never used before such as discussion forums, PowerPoint, Webinars and the course management system.

Second, with regard to pedagogical orientation and practice, teachers expanded their repertoire to include more cooperative and student-centered teaching approaches.

In the words of a couple of teachers who took part in the course:

> *"... I had never done something similar before... I've learnt a lot and I've taken some interesting tips to use in my lessons. The best gift we receive from our students is when they tell us that we've been good teachers to them (not only for the English). It's a great satisfaction."*

> *"... it has allowed me to see that there are other ways students can learn and become more engaged and involved personally in their learning."*

Third, with reference to the TCL examinations, teachers felt more confident and familiar with the various components of the exam suite appropriate for their learners and most of them, by the end of the course, were already preparing their students for entry to one of the examinations. Many teachers reported undergoing changes in their perspectives on what constitutes good teaching, and were beginning to grapple with the concepts and rationales of basic communicative testing principles and in certain cases to implement these in their classroom teaching and assessment.

The result of years of online teacher training experience, together with recent changes in EU and Ministry directives has enabled Trinity's local academic support team to develop a flexible approach to the delivery of both online and blended support programmes with a focus on innovations in teaching and performance-based assessment, as well as helping to develop teachers' skills. Our goal of creating a safe and protected environment where teachers can share and exchange best practices has become

a reality, enabling geographically dispersed teachers to interact, engage and feel part of a truly professional community.

The writers have used their best efforts in preparing this paper with the intention of offering their contribution with some useful insights into factors that may facilitate successful implementation of an online community of teachers and wish to thank the many teachers who have helped to further enhance the quality and effectiveness of our online support programme.

> *Recognizing learning and successes from any part of an individual's life—including achievements in both formal and informal settings not traditionally assessed or recognized — opens up possibilities for people of all ages to share a more complete narrative of their personal identity.* [12]

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