Teacher professional learning: developing with the aid of technology

Marianna Kyprianou[1] and Eleni Nikiforou[2]

Abstract. Education is a field that constantly changes, which dictates the need for continuing teacher professional learning and development. Teacher professional learning and development can be divided into two categories: formal learning/development and informal learning/development. This paper focuses on the experience of the presenters as coordinators of a large language section in a tertiary education institution, as this gave them the chance to develop professionally through informal learning, without attending any formal training sessions. Both coordinators did not have any previous experience in coordination, but they decided to keep a positive outlook on challenges and weaknesses, turning them into opportunities and strengths with the aid of technology. The experience of coordination will be presented using a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats/challenges (SWOT) framework of analysis. The present paper will report on this experience and how it helped the presenters develop professionally, and will also discuss the role of the use of online tools in the process.

Keywords: continuing professional development, CPD, informal learning, SWOT, technology.

1. Introduction

The current project is an example of informal learning, reflecting on the experience of the authors as coordinators of a large language section in a tertiary educational institution in Cyprus. The authors assumed coordination duties in July 2014 and decided to take a reflection in-action and reflection-on-action approach in order to collaborate in the best possible way so that they could carry out their duties as coordinators. The application of the SWOT framework enabled them to formally

1. University of Cyprus, Limassol, Cyprus; kyprianou.marianna@ucy.ac.cy
2. University of Cyprus, Limassol, Cyprus; eleninik@ucy.ac.cy

How to cite this article: Kyprianou, M., & Nikiforou, E. (2016). Teacher professional learning: developing with the aid of technology. In S. Papadima-Sophocleous, L. Bradley & S. Thouësny (Eds), CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016 (pp. 248-253). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.eurocall2016.570

© 2016 Marianna Kyprianou and Eleni Nikiforou (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

examine their experience and reflect on their own professional development through informal learning.

2. Literature review

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has been defined in the literature as "a commitment by members to continually update their skills and knowledge in order to remain professionally competent and achieve their true potential" (CAE, n.d.). In education, CPD carries connotations of teacher quality, reflecting on the quality of learning received by students (Borg, 2015). UNESCO (2014) proclaims that "an education system is only as good as its teachers" (p. 9), stressing the need for CPD in order to improve teaching and learning.

When CPD is cited in the literature, it is often linked to obvious examples of structured learning, such as seminars and conferences (see, for example, Villegas-Reimers, 2003). While these are excellent examples of CPD, there are also other, not so obvious activities which count as well, such as sharing and collaborating with colleagues, private study etc. CPD can be divided in two categories: formal and informal learning. For the purposes of the current paper, we will follow the definition provided by Levenberg and Caspi (2010, p. 324):

> **Formal learning** is learning supported by an educational or training institution, structured [… and] controlled by a teacher or a guide, resulting in a certificate.
>
> **Informal learning** is not supported by an educational or training institution. It is controlled primarily by the learner.

3. Method

The coordination project was conducted over a period of two years, starting in July 2014 and ending in August 2016. A SWOT framework was employed to identify and analyse the internal and external factors that can influence the viability of the project, following Rouse (2013). The SWOT analysis focuses on the following four elements: Strengths (S), Weaknesses (W), Opportunities (O) and Threats/challenges (T). Rouse (2013, para. 3) defines them as follows:

- Strengths: the internal attributes and resources that support a successful outcome.

- Weaknesses: the internal attributes resources that work against a successful outcome.

- Opportunities: the external factors the project can capitalize on or use to its advantage.

- Threats/Challenges: the external factors that could jeopardize the project.

The English section is the largest language teaching unit at the Language Centre of the University of Cyprus. Over 2000 undergraduate students from 22 departments register to around 100 courses every year. Approximately 20 instructors (both full-time and part-time) teach the various English courses that are currently on offer (13 different courses, English for academic purposes and English specific purposes).

The coordinators of the English section work closely with the various university services in terms of scheduling and allocating courses, overseeing courses and course supervisors, establishing communication within and outside the section, examining and granting course equivalences/exemptions and generally dealing with any issues relating to the English section. The current authors had no previous experience in coordination, but nevertheless made a choice to see this as an opportunity to develop professionally by keeping a positive outlook on threats/challenges and weaknesses and turning them into opportunities and strengths during this coordination project.

4. Results

4.1. Strengths

The authors identified the following strengths on which they could rely throughout the duration of their coordination: (a) they both had previous experience as course supervisors which helped them understand the structure of the section in depth as well as the characteristics each role had i.e. the role of the supervisors and the role of the coordinators; (b) they both had long teaching experience at the University of Cyprus which translates into in-depth knowledge of not only the structure of the English section and the courses it offers but also the structure of the Language

Centre and the University of Cyprus; (c) they collaborated well with each other on various projects; (d) they have good organisational skills; (e) they are both adept in using technology; (f) they are both highly motivated individuals who always strive for the best possible outcome in whatever endeavour they follow, and finally (g) they are very keen on reflective practice as a means of developing professionally.

4.2. Weaknesses

In undertaking coordination, the researchers identified the project's weaknesses so that they could approach them in the most effective way. First of all, a mentoring scheme was not in place, which means that the new coordinators needed to familiarize themselves with the task at hand on the job. Secondly, they had to deal with heavy teaching workloads. Moreover, there is a lot of paperwork involved in the coordination of a section of this size. Finally, there was lack of online databases. To deal with all these issues the use of technology was adopted, which helped make tasks less time-consuming, assisted online collaboration, supported the creation of online databases, and helped support each other throughout the duration of the coordination.

4.3. Opportunities

As aforementioned, the authors undertook the project with a positive outlook and the determination to turn weaknesses into strengths and challenges into opportunities. For example, they saw an opportunity to create an online database for the accreditation of external exams which would make the process easier for those involved (students, coordinators, administrative staff). They also took the initiative to create databases for syllabi, to develop handbooks for the English language instructors, to revise the descriptions of the English language courses in collaboration with colleagues. They collaborated with all the departments of the university closely to improve the existing schedule. Furthermore, they suggested the establishment of a mentoring scheme for new coordinators. They increased sharing and collaboration with colleagues through the use of technology. Finally, they increased the visibility of the English section with their active participation in events and conferences, as well as with their involvement in the organisation of events and conferences.

4.4. Threats/challenges

The challenges faced during the coordination project included budget constraints and tight deadlines. These external factors are commonly found in Higher Education institutions (see, for example, Yuan & Powell, 2013 on budget constraints).

4.5. The role of technology in the SWOT

The application of technology during the coordination project made it feasible for the coordinators to collaborate efficiently, enabled them to reflect upon their work, kept them motivated, and helped them be organised. The tools used were the following: Dropbox, with which the authors collaborated in creating and editing the materials relating to the coordination of the section; Viber, Skype and emails for their communication; Microsoft Office (especially Excel and Word) for data analysis, development of materials, and creation of databases; and an online shared calendar to organise and manage tasks.

5. Conclusions and reflections

The authors, upon reflection through the application of the SWOT framework, came to realize that in dealing with weaknesses and threats/challenges, they should be well-informed in order to both pursue what was best for the English section but also to be able to work together on the various issues at hand. Especially in relation to weaknesses, it became evident that hard work was needed in order to be able to execute their duties well. It was also apparent that they needed to make suggestions to improve the situation in the future, for example they made a suggestion for a mentoring scheme for future coordinators. When it comes to threats/challenges, the authors realized that they needed to be informed on the policies and regulations pertaining to the budget issues and deadlines.

Following a reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action approach during the coordination project, the authors were successful in developing themselves professionally through informal learning. Following this approach, they took numerous initiatives to improve practice and to create a more efficient working environment for themselves and their section during their coordination. The role of technology in this was paramount, as it supported them in creating an online space where they could work collaboratively to coordinate the English section.

References

Borg, S. (2015). *Contemporary perspectives on continuing professional development*. Teaching for Success. British Council.

CAE. (n. d.). *What is CPD?* Cambridge Association of Entrepreneurs. http://cae-org.co.uk/cpd/

Levenberg, A., & Caspi, A. (2010). Comparing perceived formal and informal learning in face-to-face versus online environments. *Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects, 6*(1), 323-333. http://www.ijello.org/Volume6/IJELLOv6p323-333Levenberg706.pdf

Rouse, M. (2013). *SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis) definition.* http://searchcio.techtarget.com/definition/SWOT-analysis-strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-and-threats-analysis

UNESCO. (2014). Teaching and learning: achieving equality for all. *11th EFA global monitoring report*. Paris: UNESCO.

Villegas-Reimers, E. (2003). *Teacher professional development: an international review of the literature*. UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001330/133010e.pdf

Yuan, L., & Powell, S. (2013). MOOCs and open education: implications for higher education. *JISC Centre for Educational Technology and Interoperability standards (CETIS)*.

Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

© 2016 by Editors (collective work)
© 2016 by Authors (individual work)

CALL communities and culture – short papers from EUROCALL 2016
Edited by Salomi Papadima-Sophocleous, Linda Bradley, and Sylvie Thouësny

Rights: All articles in this collection are published under the Attribution-NonCommercial -NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Under this licence, the contents are freely available online as PDF files (https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.EUROCALL2016.9781908416445) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Easy Conferences, info@easyconferences.eu, www.easyconferences.eu
Cover layout by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Photo "bridge" on cover by © Andriy Markov/Shutterstock
Photo "frog" on cover by © Fany Savina (fany.savina@gmail.com)
Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-43-8 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-44-5 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-45-2 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: décembre 2016.