Professional Development, Motivation, and Community in a Moscow In-Service Recertification Course

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Between September 2010 and May 2013, the author conducted six cycles of an 8-week recertification course for in-service English teachers in Moscow, Russia. The course syllabus was built on developing a community of practice, as a motivating factor in teacher development. The community was fostered both during in-person meeting time and online participant interaction. While the participants' objectives were varied, the overarching goal of the course – beyond knowledge and skill building – was to engender a sense of ownership among the participants, both of the course itself and of their own continuing professional development. This was realized in both small incremental ways, such as launching a new discussion online, and in bolder, farther-reaching ways, such as organizing a mini-conference for a local school district.

Keywords: professional development, motivation, exploratory practice, community of practice, collaboration

What is the objective of in-service professional development for EFL teachers? And who determines it? The Ministry of Education in establishing standards for professional development workshops and courses? The agencies that contract with the ministry to provide trainers, facilities, and content? The trainers who deliver the workshops and courses? Or teachers themselves?

The answer is all of the above, though too often teachers are forgotten as active agents in their own professional development (Casteel & Ballantyne, 2010; Wichadee, 2011). For three years, between September 2010 and May 2013, the author facilitated a recertification course, held twice a year, on behalf of the Moscow Institute of Open Education, using a curriculum known as "Shaping the Way We Teach English." The syllabus had been designed by a previous facilitator, and over the years the author redesigned it to better suit the needs and interests of the participants. While the official objectives of the course did not vary semester to semester, the professional development objectives of the participants themselves were as varied as

the number of the teachers enrolled. Some of the objectives included: please an administrator, receive a certificate, find inspiration, re-energize a lagging career, learn new ideas for the classroom, network with colleagues, increase language fluency – just to name a few. Many of these were realized, in large part, by greater interactions among the group and a sense of ownership of the course itself.

Materials and Methods

The course

As outlined in the syllabus, the course used a constructivist, inquiry-based approach. As such, the participants created the course's outcomes through their shared experience, built on an open exchange of questions and answers. The syllabus was designed to give participants the opportunity to observe different classroom practices, to reflect on their own practice, and to share their ideas for adapting techniques and materials to their own context. While attendance at the

eight weekly classes was expected, equally important was participation on the course Ning (an online social media platform tailored to the needs of the course). The final qualifying project for each participant was a group presentation, made not only to the course participants, but also to the other Moscow teachers at an open session at the American Center.

Table 1 shows a sample of the course syllabus used.

Professional Development

Few would argue against the importance of professional development for teachers. Day's (1999) summary of the essential features of professional development is frequently cited:

> Professional development consists of all natural learning experiences and those conscious and planned activities which are intended to be of direct or indirect benefit to the individual, group or school and which contribute, through these, to the quality of education in the classroom. It is the process by which, alone and with others, teachers review, renew and extend their commitment as change agents to the moral purposes of teaching; and by which they acquire and develop critically the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to good professional thinking, planning and practice with children, young people, and colleagues through each phase of their teaching lives (p. 18).

Expanding on this definition, Hayes (2014) writes that continuing professional development is "a multi-faceted, lifelong experience, which can take place inside or outside the workplace and which often moves beyond the professional and into the realm of a teacher's personal life too" (p. 5).

With any professional development opportunity, it is the challenge of both the facilitator and the participant to make the most of the time and resources allotted so that the course contributes meaningfully to the "multi-faceted" whole of a teacher's life.

When first encountering the Shaping syllabus, many teachers balked, doubting they would have the time (and perhaps the inclination) to be engaged in the various assignments. Online communities were familiar to some, and completely foreign to others. Reflection on individual practice was one thing; to share with others they had just met quite another. A group presentation in an unknown setting to an unknown audience, barely six weeks into the course, was simply implausible. To the extent that participants warmed to these tasks and indeed excelled at them, the course was successful, both collectively and individually.

Online Community of Practice

In all incarnations of the Shaping course, it had an online component. As the syllabus evolved, the class Ning became an increasingly essential feature, fulfilling various functions, from a tool for materials delivery to a site for community building. With just eight weeks allotted to the course, and ambitious objectives, building community outside of the classroom was critical.

This feature of the course was developed with the principles of community of practice in mind. In a community of practice, people with a shared profession or values come together to share knowledge and experience and to grow personally and professionally. Indeed, exploring the concept of community of practice was a core activity in the first class session. The objective was to consider the community of practice as the intersection of learning, social participation, and identity – both individual and communal identity (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). First, together the class reviewed the three characteristics of community of practice: the domain (i.e. shared interests), the community, the practice. The participants then investigated the similarities and the differences in their worlds. Table 2 shows an example activity for building community of practice.

In-class discussion, pair-work, and group-work were central in building the Shaping community, but equally essential was the online component. While it is impossible to force any group to build a community of practice using an online platform, when an online community component is successfully fostered, it can be extremely effective in its ability "to represent content, scaffold processes, and shift the user's social context" (Hoadley, 2012, p. 299).

The Shaping Ning (see Figure 1) was the area in which participants expressed their widest range of engagement. At one extreme was the participant who logged in once a week, made the required contribution, and then disappeared till the next required visit. At the other end of the spectrum was the participant who logged in daily, commented frequently on other participants' posts, uploaded photos and videos, and shared additional readings and websites relevant to the week's topic. Happily, the latter type of participation frequently occurred, and these highly engaged individuals transformed the "social context" of the class for themselves and for their fellow participants. As one participant wrote, "the main aim of the course is to inspire teachers and it is very important for us not to keep our knowledge to ourselves, but rather to share our ideas with our colleagues" (Chistova, G., personal communication, February 2015).

Results and Discussion

Exploratory Teaching Project

In the second year, a new element was introduced to the course syllabus, the exploratory teaching project (ETP), adapted from the principles of exploratory practice. Like its cousin action research, exploratory practice engages teachers in reflection about classroom practice. Unlike action research, the end goal is not necessarily problem-solving or change, but rather providing teachers with the opportunity to develop

Table 1
Sample course syllabus

Shaping the Way We Teach English in Russia
ИЯ-10 МИОО
Dates
Toni Hull, Senior English Language Fellow
sponsored by the U.S. Embassy, English Language Office
mobile: email:
our Ning site: http://shapingthewayinmoscow.ning.com/

	Date	School xx (16.00–18.00)	American Center (16.00–18.00)
1	date 1	Introduction	
2	date 2	Reflective Teaching	
3	date 3	Pairwork/Groupwork	
4	date 4	Authentic Materials/Tasks	
5	date 5	Contextualizing Language	
6	date 6	Metacognitive Awareness	
P	date	➝ ➝ ➝	Presentations – Group 1
7	date 7	Integrated Skills	
P	date	➝ ➝ ➝	Presentations – Group 2
8	date 8	Critical and Creative Thinking	

Course description & objectives:
The course uses a constructivist, inquiry-based approach to give participants the opportunity to observe different classroom practices, to reflect on their own practice, and to share their ideas for adapting techniques and materials to their own context.
During class sessions, we will:
• discuss ideas introduced in the weekly reading
• review a variety of techniques, activities, and materials
• experiment with various online sites and tools
Out-of-class work will include:
• reading articles related to the weekly topic
• exchanging views and information on the class Ning
• keeping a weekly blog reporting on progress on individual exploratory teaching projects (ETP)
• giving feedback to other course members on their exploratory teaching projects (ETP)
• experimenting with other Web 2.0 and IT tools
• preparing and then presenting group presentations at the American Center on assigned Wednesdays
Requirements:
Weekly sessions: regular attendance and active participation (maximum: 3 absences)
Reading: one article per week, read before the assigned session
Online: weekly participation in Ning activities + other Web 2.0 activities
Exploratory teaching: -weekly blog on progress on individual exploratory teaching projects (ETP)
                                  -feedback to course members on their exploratory teaching projects (ETP)
Group presentation: 15–30-minute teaching-technique presentation at the American Center

Table 2
Activity to identify "the domain" in the Shaping community of practice

Part I:
- On your own, take a few minutes to think about yourself – your teaching self and your personal self. Do you imagine it is very similar to others'? Very different? Somewhere in between on the continuum?
- Make a mark on the continuum below for each category, and note down a few words about an example.

MY SCHOOL very similar _____very different
EXAMPLE:_____

MY CLASSROOM very similar _____very different
EXAMPLE:_____

MY TEACHING very similar _____very different
EXAMPLE:_____

MY PERSONAL LIFE very similar _____very different
EXAMPLE:_____

Part II:
- In a group, share your self-assessment and discuss similarities, differences.

Part III:
- In your group, agree on 2–3 of the most interesting (unexpected, important, unusual) similarities and differences.
- One person in the group should be ready to briefly (in 1 minute) share your list.

"their own understandings of language classroom life" (Allwright, 2005, p. 353). Exploratory practice has the virtue of requiring neither academic research nor data collection, a significant advantage in an 8-week course.

While not widely utilized worldwide, exploratory practice has had successful application in professional development projects for teachers in municipal schools in Brazil. Miller and Bannell (1998) write that among the teachers they have worked with,

> some have also changed their professional self-image – from seeing themselves as 'having a job' to viewing themselves as professionals. Most importantly, they have gone from seeing teacher-research as something hard to carry out and alien to their pedagogic practice to adopting an investigative stance which they can enjoy and sustain by doing what they normally do, i.e. using their familiar narrative accounts of classroom practice and their familiar pedagogic activities as investigative tools (para. 20).

There was neither time nor expectation that change would be enacted; during the course the goal was observation, reflection, understanding, and perhaps – time permitting – an adjustment in the question to explore the question more deeply and gain deeper understanding (see examples in Table 3).

Though the ETP began as an in-class activity, it continued as a community of practice assignment. Participants began a blog on the Shaping Ning, described the question they had decided to explore, and then shared their observations and – if they achieved it – their understanding. The assignment also required

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Shaping the Way in Moscow Ning.

Table 3
Introducing the Exploratory Teaching Project

Developing your Exploratory Teaching Project
Step 1 – Identify a question about your classroom teaching
Step 2 – Refine your thinking about that question
Step 3 – Finalize your question to focus upon
Step 4 – Find appropriate classroom procedures to explore it
Step 5 – Adapt them to the particular question you want to explore
Step 6 – Use them in class
Step 7 – Interpret the outcomes
Step 8 – Decide on their implications and repeat steps 4–8

Getting started
Frame your ETP idea as a "research question"
e.g. Is our new textbook providing enough xxx practice?
e.g. Why do some students like xxx, and others don't?
e.g. If I were to start xxx-ing, would it improve zzz?
e.g. Why are students having so much difficulty with xxx?
e.g. If I increase xxx, will students do better on their quizzes?

List 3 things that are happening in your teaching/your classroom that you would like to understand better

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
(adapted from Allwright, 2005)

participants to read and comment on each other's ETP blogs. When participants were engaged with each other's ETP, they contributed to the overall objectives of the community of practice as well as those of the ETP. Dar and Gieve (2013) found in their work with exploratory practice that "it is a common experience of EP practitioners that the act of mutual, collaborative engagement in seeking shared understanding also has the effect of generating a more productive, less antagonistic, communal working environment as well as a better understood one" (p. 20). About working with other participants, one teacher wrote that the course succeeded by "bringing out the best teaching skills in everyone who longed for the opportunity." This participant felt she "could learn to be self-sufficient, more interactive, and more effective in team work" (Soloveva, O., personal communication, February 2015). The ETP project was successful in direct proportion to the time given to it by the participants, but at its best, it supported the Shaping participants in

their growing sense of community, and ultimately in the group work required for the final project.

The Group Presentation and Motivation

At the beginning of every course, a good deal of time was spent trying to convince the participants that the group presentation was feasible. Their concerns were understandable. Most had never done a peer-to-peer presentation outside of their schools, and, admittedly, the assignment (see Table 4) was just barely realizable in the short period of time given.

In spite of the inevitable resistance this project met every semester, it proved, for many, to be the most gratifying part of the course, perhaps because it was so challenging. Success with this project rested on the course's ability to tap into the participants' source of motivation.

Much is written about student motivation in language learning. Less discussed, but equally essential, is teacher motivation, an elusive quality that is challenged daily by obtuse administrators, argumentative parents, mountains of paperwork (both of the physical and online variety), and unmotivated students (Erkaya, 2013; Hastings, 2012; Kassabgy, Boraie, & Schmidt, 2010). In his extensive work on motivation and language learning, Dörnyei has remarked on the crucial role that the teacher's own motivation plays in learning achievement (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2010). How teacher motivation worked in this project is explained below.

One objective of the Shaping course – more implicit than explicit – was to generate enthusiasm for continuing professional development among the participants, with the expectation that a more positive attitude to professional development increases one's motivation, with the desired effect on student learning (Kubanyiova, 2006). The ultimate test of this intention was the final project, the group presentation.

Extrinsic motivation was initially the primary driving force. This was a non-negotiable assignment, upon which successful completion of the course rested. Participants were given time to warm to the assignment during the first weeks of the course, as groups were formed and members began to discuss ideas. Not incidentally, earlier in the course the participants had read an article about the differencess between cooperation and collaboration. According to Kozar (2010) "cooperation can be achieved if all participants do their assigned parts separately and bring their results to the table; collaboration, in contrast, implies direct interaction among individuals to produce a product and involves negotiations, discussions, and accommodating others' perspectives" (p. 17). In class, discussion about this article focused

on classroom application with group work. Several weeks later, Shaping participants had the opportunity to experience the essence of collaboration as they worked together on their own group presentations.

A shift to intrinsic motivation was observed when group members realized the task was feasible, their ideas were valid, and that success was attainable. The desire for a certificate did not diminish, but the desire for personal and professional actualization was equally potent, and this carried through to the presentation itself. As one Shaping teacher wrote, "Maybe not everything was good in our group or in my particular part, but it is a real challenge to perform in front of our teacher and our colleagues. When in our classrooms something goes wrong, it is only we who know it. But there in front of this experienced audience it was both difficult and really useful. This real-life experience helped us get over ourselves" (Ilyina, T., personal communication, March 2013). For many the collaborative element of the project was critical to the sense of achievement. "Group presentations were a great help at creating a foundation of successful teamwork," wrote one participant. "This is a skill we all need in our professional lives" (Denisov, I., personal communication, February 2015).

Conclusion

As all teachers know, what works perfectly with one group of learners may be only modestly successful with another group. This certainly was true with the Shaping course. In the spirit of exploratory practice, the author aimed to understand why certain features were successful in engaging participants during one course cycle, and another time they were not.

The most fully engaged group, in class and in the online community of practice, was the one that had been invited to join the Shaping Ning two weeks before the start of the class. During those two weeks they shared introductions, family photos, personal anecdotes, and professional concerns, the number one being their anxiety about fulfilling the objectives of the course with this new tool, the Ning. By the time classes actually began, this group was truly a community of practice, their primary shared interests the course itself and the success of the participants, individually as well as collectively.

In-service professional development benefits when participants are invested in a shared outcome, not just individual certificates. At its best, the Shaping course succeeded by providing a variety of ways that participants could reflect on their own teaching, share their experience with colleagues, and challenge

Table 4
Presentation assignment

Objective: Participants, working in groups of 2, 3, or 4, demonstrate a classroom activity while practicing making presentations to colleagues in a professional development context

- WHAT: a 15–30-minute presentation of a classroom activity that focuses on using
  - o Authentic Materials & Tasks (not taken from a coursebook)
  and
  - o Pairwork/Groupwork
- WHO:
  - o presentations should be made in groups of 2, 3, or 4 (you create your own group)
  - o depending on how many there are in your group, divide the tasks so everyone has an active role during the presentation (e.g. 1 person explains context, 1 person "teaches", 1 person monitors group work); all should be involved in the planning
- HOW:
  - o briefly explain the context in which you would use the activity (student level, stage in a lesson/unit; overall class objectives, etc.)
  - o then "teach" the activity to the audience/ participants; that is, you take the role of teacher(s); audience members take the role of students
- audience will consist of fellow members of this course, your invited guests (colleagues, family, etc.) plus regular attendees of the T2T Workshop series

their professional identity. The Ning provided the convenience of an online outlet, where participants could choose how involved they wanted to be, from wherever they had internet access, at whatever hour of the day or night. The final presentation was, to some degree, the opposite of the Ning. Full participation, in a very public and interactive way, was required and non-negotiable. These two components complemented each other, and made it possible to achieve a great deal in a very short period of time.

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