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Are Blogs Paving the Way for Collaborative Professional Development of English Teachers in India?

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Abstract

The most crucial requirement in effective teaching of English is the English teacher, but the teaching competency of English language teachers in several schools of India is inadequate. Consequently, professional development is one major area which needs significant changes if quality English teachers are to become available in India. This paper presents the qualitative findings of a two-year research study at RMIT University, to investigate a blog-based collaborative model of ICT professional development, with 32 English teachers from three private English-medium schools¹ in the Mumbai region of India. The study was conducted to examine whether this model could facilitate ICT professional development of English teachers in Mumbai through Web 2.0-based social learning.

¹ A school where all subjects are taught in the English language, rather than in the local, regional, or first language of the students.

Keywords

English Teachers; Professional Development; Web 2.0; Blog; Collaborative Social Learning.

**Introduction**

Within the complex educational scenario in India, the teaching profession is characterised by inadequate and ineffective pre-service education resulting in poor teacher preparation (Padwad and Dixit 251). In such conditions, in-service professional development assumes further importance, since it also has to compensate for teacher professional learning overlooked during teacher education. However, research claims that in-service English teachers in India are in a constant struggle to reconcile the theory of their in-service professional learning with their classroom teaching practices (Padwad and Dixit 253; Stannard and Matharu 160).

Presently, ICT is considered as an essential medium to promote innovative methods of student learning in India. However, it also should be used to develop teachers' skills for cooperation, communication, and lifelong professional learning (Menon 81). The use of Web 2.0 technologies in professional development could offer self-controlled and self-directed learning environments for learners that can renovate their learning process; as they could deal with new knowledge through a convenient, collaborative, contextual and constructive approach (Bell and Morris 704; Duncan-Howell 324; Prestridge 70).

Significance of the study

The schools in India follow a bureaucratic approach to teacher professional development where policy makers mandate single solutions, prioritising on large-scale workshop-based applications; which generate inadequate opportunities for need-based and social learning of teachers (Bolitho and Padwad 7). The competencies and practical knowledge of the

teachers is different, but the formal lecture technique tends to rule over in professional learning, and, more seriously, follow-up and school-based support is scarce (Bolitho and Padwad 6-8). Moreover, the strength of teacher learning by doing (resembling what students practice), by sharing and collaborating with other teachers, is mostly missing from teacher professional development in India (Bolitho and Padwad 7). As a result, the key goal of training – promoting quality changes in teaching practices – is rarely attained in spite of frequent face-to-face training programmes. This study therefore, examines a more decentralised approach to professional development, by investigating the prospects of Web 2.0 collaboration and social learning for English teachers in Mumbai.

Review of related literature

Recent research in India, on the ICT professional development of teachers, is starting to yield a consensus concerning the social characteristics of effective teacher learning (Gupta 35). Teacher interaction is what drives real learning and change in the teacher professional development of teachers in India (Mahajan 129). Increasingly, researchers have revealed that like all types of learning, teacher learning is not only individual, but ‘social’ as well (Hall and Davison 163). Teachers who learn together over time feel committed, not only to each other, but also to further learning (Stannard and Matharu 160). Moreover, teachers’ engagement and collegial discussions in networked professional learning communities develops improved practices of teaching and professional development (Menon 84; Scott and Scott 169). Most notably, strong professional learning network and collaboration of the teachers within their schools contribute to better student achievement and performance (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung).

Blogs have gained popularity as an interactive tool in online communities of practice, and represent one kind of social Web 2.0 software that is increasingly employed to enhance communication environments in the

educational domain (Kim 1343). Blogs foster better teacher interaction with features of asynchronous conversation and equal voices in professional development (Zandi, Thang, and Krish 531). Using blogs is one way to encourage teachers to communicate with other teachers on what is working and how they can integrate fresh ideas into their existing teaching tools (Toner 8). This study proposes a blog-based model for the ICT professional development of English teachers in Mumbai through Web 2.0 networking and collaboration.

Research methodology

I adopted a case study methodology gathering qualitative data from questionnaires, interviews and blog comments. Case study was employed to investigate in-depth the research situation, that is, the prospects of Web 2.0 collaborative learning for English teachers in Mumbai. Data was collected from 32 English teachers in three established private English medium schools in Mumbai.

I analysed open-ended questionnaire responses, interview transcripts and blog comments to generate initial codes and search for recurring themes among codes with the help of qualitative software program, QSR NVivo.

Much prior to collecting data, I also created a blog, specially designed as a social learning platform and teaching resource for English teachers in Mumbai. The blog was maintained and regularly updated from October 2013 till February 2015.

The blog link is <<https://teachingenglishwithict.wordpress.com/>>

Findings of the study

Teacher collaboration to overcome professional isolation

A majority of teacher responses to their professional development needs indicated a shift in the nature of professional development from working alone in the isolation of their formal workshops to working in collaboration with their colleagues and caring to share. Teachers accepted often working in isolation

from other teachers in the school. They were habituated, quite possibly due to their school cultures, to work in isolation. One teacher commented:

There is no teamwork among teachers to use technology. I always prepare my ICT resources on my own. (Tina)

Teachers agreed that a collegial relationship cultivated by the teachers would change the form of teachers' professional development, and instead of having unfrequented ICT workshops for teachers, professional development programmes should be redesigned to be more collaborative in nature. When asked what do teachers perceived they needed in order to improve their professional competence in ICT, their comments illustrate their need for new methods of professional development; taking into account teacher collaboration and networked learning:

Learning with other English teachers in an online social setting. Work on ICT development as a team, when, with ideas of more people, better teaching strategies can be shared and refined. (Dipika)

Collaboration and sharing practice. Development of support networks will help in developing more innovative uses of ICT in English teaching. (Nitya)

Teachers' responses suggest that professional development that involved collective participation, especially for subject-specific teachers, was believed to be able to sustain the changes made to their teaching practice. This would be made possible by building subject-specific online teacher partnerships for discussing their subject-specific ICT problems in teaching and the solutions to those problems.

Prospects of blog-based professional development

Most of the teachers had never used blogs or been part of any online teacher community for teacher networking and professional development. However, they showed an interest towards blog-based professional development

and believed that with the help of an online teacher community, the barriers of the isolated staff-room cubicles could be broken down by collective ideas and experiences of technology successes and failures, and a culture of collective knowledge could be developed. Out of the 32 participants in this study, 20 teachers (62.5%) subscribed to the blog. They were interested in the prospects of blog-based professional development for in-service teachers. The following quote exemplifies their views:

I believe that it encourages us socially, because we find the opportunity, ease and freedom to deliver our ideas possible without the fear of being judged or evaluated, unlike a training workshop. It will possibly make us more secure in that environment. (Madhu)

Through the medium of blogging, many teachers were seen engaging in social learning. Teacher Indira posted that her school had just taken an iPad initiative for teaching and she was researching about creating a podcasting team for her class students:

At my school we have just started working with technology. I teach grade 6 and my pupils have Ipad of their own. It's a part of a Pilot-project and we are just in the beginning, so it's rather exciting for all of us. Among the aims for the first year is to create a podcasting team. I'm just doing a little research now, the links in this article is very helpful. (Indira)

Sandhya's blog comment highlights her positive perceptions about ICT and also her reflections on the outcomes she had seen by using ICT in her classroom; a social learning practice possibly influencing other teacher-members of the blog:

I believe ICTs are of benefit to all children, especially for those with ESL. The fact that it can be self-paced, repeated when needed, students can choose specific areas of interest or learning needs; the list of benefits is endless. (Sandhya)

Similarly, teacher Aisha was excited about the benefits and impact of the VoiceThread application as her students already seemed to be enjoying the application in her English class:

I've been playing around with VoiceThread and my students seem to be really enjoying. I can't wait to see what a useful resource it will surely become as I use it more and more. (Aisha)

Largely, teachers agreed with the benefits of asynchronous communication for professional development as they believed it gave them the liberty to use ICT at their own pace and express themselves more openly in the teaching community. The following teacher quote is representative of teachers' agreement.

I believe that it encourages us socially, because we find the opportunity, ease and freedom to deliver our ideas possibly without the fear of being judged or evaluated, unlike a training workshop. It will possibly make us more secure in that environment. (Madhu)

Overall many teachers found blogs to be useful for teacher teamwork and sharing of ICT ideas for teaching of English. The following statement well confirms the same:

You share your ideas with the one source and simultaneously with all the blog members. I think that's really amazing. You just ask question everybody wants an answer for. And the answer to your query is the answer for everybody. (Indira)

School support

Attempts to integrate Web 2.0 technology in professional learning provoked a variety of responses from teachers and many agreed that blog-based professional development could empower them to collectively address the challenges they faced in their everyday teaching of English. Several teachers also complained that their existing professional development programs were insufficient and they viewed such professional development as something that

they needed to passively complete. The following comments are representative of the teachers' view of the issue:

The ICT workshops we attend at our school don't give us adequate skills to enable English teachers to mix ICT in English teaching.
(Jaya) Questionnaire

I make my own modules and feed it into the smart class system for other teachers' use but I don't know how much other teachers use it. I am never satisfied with what is available.... My school's ICT training is usually a generalised training going by everybody's capacity, so I go a little ahead to research and get a little more knowledge. (Indira) Interview

Most teachers expressed the need for a better school culture and support for effective professional development in ICT. They suggested that the school could play an active part in supporting and promoting this culture of collaboration and innovation in professional development:

For regular interaction of English teachers for planning, sharing ideas and resources, school should set up its discussion forum for subject teachers to share lesson plans and teaching resources.
(Chetana)

School must build a virtual community of English teachers as learners. Subject teachers must often get together [through this virtual community] to discuss lesson plans and weekly planning. The same can be done to share English teaching resources.
(Varsha)

Teachers demanded that they did not just need ICT support in the form of workshops, but instead they needed access to mutual support and teacher collaboration throughout their careers. However, collaborative learning was not happening in their schools:

English activities can be quickly prepared using ICT when English teachers work together as a team. But sadly that's not happening in my school. (Varsha)

Two teachers suggested that for changes to occur in their teaching practice, they should be given the responsibility for their own learning and professional development.

To be honest, I never used blogs for sharing English resources with other English teachers. But now I feel I should. It is something that we ourselves will have to change in us. (Madhu)

I think what you said that having blogs you know where the teacher community of the entire Mumbai city, if they can share their experiences and resources, I think that would be very good. If we could have something like that, I think it will be very very good. Because we are all the time learning, I mean nobody can say that I know everything. Teachers might come up with some different kinds of insights relating to teaching which some other person teacher, some other teacher, some other school might find it useful. (Nisha)

Most teachers believed that subject-specific and collaborative professional development, such as asynchronous online networking with other teachers outside school hours was a more effective and helpful form of professional development than the traditional and face-to-face form of ICT training. Overall, teachers in this study acknowledged that blogging:

- Was very useful in sharing ideas with other teachers
- Allowed them access to other teachers' ideas
- Helped them in keeping a good record of their own experiences

Discussion

Teachers in my study acknowledged that collaborative and innovative blog-based professional development experiences could potentially provide

them with greater readiness, confidence and ease to teach English with ICT. They believed in the effectiveness of teacher learning within a community of social and collaborative practice. Almost all of the teachers emphasized the usefulness of blogging in professional learning. They considered that through blogging they could learn a lot by sharing their views with other teachers in the community. This finding reflects findings from other studies (Hall and Davison 163; Prestridge 84; Toner 8; Zandi, Thang, and Krish 535), which advocated that mostly teachers had positive attitudes towards educational blogging for professional development.

The effective implementation of a new form of professional learning, such as blog-based professional development, clearly depended on teachers' readiness towards ICT. The primary agents for working this new form of professional learning in this study were the teachers. Getting the teachers to 'buy in' was central when a new form of professional learning (blog) was involved, especially for those teachers who were not convinced that technology was worth the time and effort. The first essential prerequisite of this blog-based professional development study then was to develop positive beliefs in teachers about blog-based professional development that included the idea that teachers can lead their own professional development through online professional interaction, mutual sharing and collaboration. However, the already existing positive attitude of teachers in my study towards blogs was an added advantage to the implementation of the blog. Their positive attitude was a catalyst to make changes in their professional learning more inviting for them. This positive finding really stands out and gives rise to a hopeful consideration of the future prospects of blog-based professional development; and the need for state, schools and teachers themselves, to carefully regard its potential in overcoming the major ICT barriers and fulfilling their ICT needs.

However, the value of teacher networking and collaboration cannot be easily reconciled in education settings where school-mandated professional

development programs traditionally supported formal ICT workshops. Based on these formal professional development practices imposed by their schools, teachers in this study were not exposed to each other's teaching strategies and constraints. Similar to the study of Scott and Scott (169), this study reveals that current professional development of English teachers in Mumbai mostly emphasizes a "directive" method and prescriptive learning with little emphasis on teachers' interaction and collaboration. English teachers in Mumbai were interested in social learning but needed more school support and encouragement to practice collaborative professional development in ICT through Web 2.0 technologies. Online communities are successful when time is provided for teachers to test new learning methods and to receive follow-up support as they face problems of implementing changes (Duncan-Howell 336). Overall, the discussion of findings suggests that supportive school culture could help the teachers to embrace more self-directed, innovative and collaborative technologies for their professional development in the long run.

Implications

This study has a few important implications. One of the most important pedagogical implications is that blog-based teacher professional development holds great potential in ESL contexts like India, but it should be conducted carefully and in consultation with teachers. It has to meet the needs of the English teachers it is aimed at, it must develop skills and knowledge which will improve the teaching of English in the classrooms, and more importantly, impact on student outcomes. Though blogs offer a collaborative opportunity to help teachers grow professionally, its future success is entirely dependent on the motivation of the participants through the support of their schools. Schools in this case could be enablers of new forms of professional development for their teachers. Schools need to be more open to change and support online networking and collaboration for teacher professional development.

The social environment of online activities for professional development is quite different from in-person interactions, therefore requiring new skills and behaviour in teachers. As teachers continue through their careers they will need guidance on new skills and professional understanding, provided that the culture of school enables this. Therefore, it would be useful to include a professional learning component that will teach participants not only how to collaborate to learn but also learn to collaborate. However, it is most important that the school systems are in place to provide these professional development programmes and to support the teachers' implementation of them in their social learning.

Implementing a one-size-fits-all model of professional development is a typical error made by many schools in Mumbai which still acknowledge formal and face-to-face professional development. Schools must remember that teachers do not come in standard forms; they are irreducibly unique with unique attitudes, skills, experiences and learning needs. The schools which are rooted in mandating the traditional methods of professional learning for their teachers should be more open to organizing new learning environments. Schools have the potential to be blended learning places for teachers. The learning environment in schools of Mumbai must offer a variety of both formal and informal professional development systems, ranging from face-to-face workshops to online programs depending on teachers' needs, so that teachers could take advantage of the methods which suit them best.

Most importantly, in order to enhance the utilization of ICT for educational purposes, schools should encourage their teachers to use ICT more frequently, use ICT co-operatively for their professional development, and schools should believe that collaborative professional learning through ICT may make a difference in the quality of their teachers' work. Most elementary to the schools' approach is the realization that the teachers must be given the tools to take the

lead in the pedagogic innovations needed throughout the Indian education system.

The collaborative approach to professional development promoted through this study is a response to the long practiced, outdated and formal professional development programs mandated by schools in India. This suggests the need for schools to support social learning, beyond the long-practiced formal training, through easily reachable online social networks and Web 2.0 communities for teachers. The findings suggest that blogs have the potential to be social learning devices for teacher professional development, when supported or mandated by schools. However, it remains unexplored whether school involvement could develop blog-based social learning practice and collaboration in the long run among school teachers in Mumbai. Future research could be carried out to investigate whether school intervention motivates teachers to seek out online professional development opportunities.

Conclusion

The conventional culture of schools in India usually considers a teacher's proper place during school hours to be in front of a class and which isolates teachers from each other and discourages collaborative work. It is a culture that does not set a premium on teacher learning and in which decisions about professional development needs are certainly not expressed by teachers, but by state, district, and school managers. School leaders in Mumbai should practice a changed vision for professional development, that nurtures their teachers' involvement in decision-making, ownership, responsibility, and development of their professional learning. They must remind themselves that motivating teachers in using ICT innovatively is more crucial than acquiring a large number of computers. Sadly technology in Mumbai schools is being used not for making the teaching-learning process a pleasure for the students and their teachers but for showing off affluence to attract enrolments and making the education sector a business. None of these efforts will attain a meaningful scale

and be a reality in developing locations like India unless the policy makers and educational administrators begin to envision our teachers as they do students—as learners with their own individual learning styles and backgrounds; who, like their students, need continuous school support, ongoing feedback and ongoing interaction with each other, so they can constantly improve their expertise (Khan 135).

Teaching solutions don't lie in technology; they lie in what English teachers do with technology. If an educational system is to stimulate transformation, the entire system must be restructured to allow teachers to contribute more freely. The findings of my research resonate what Padwad and Dixit (261) reported from their study of innovative professional development for English teachers in India, and identified that making provision for adequate time, breaking the hierarchy within the school system, and ensuring continuity and synergy between different formal and informal elements of professional development are important for the success of future professional development initiatives for teachers in India. Incomprehensibly, actualising a more useful pattern of teacher professional development obliges struggling against these limitations, yet it might likewise help to create a school culture that is more welcoming to teacher-led learning. The time and resources schools put into building and maintaining blog-based professional learning community for their teachers will benefit their teachers as they will engage in ongoing learning and purposeful collaboration that can have a lasting impact on their classroom practice and their students' learning. And although it is difficult to make a convincing case in an Indian school set-up that better professional learning is one that teachers themselves create and manage, blogs are a lot more easy to produce, maintain, update and use, all controlled and driven by teachers themselves, a compelling argument for school managers and policy makers in India.

This small-scale case study was an attempt to explore whether English teachers in Mumbai teachers embrace Web 2.0-based social learning for their professional development in ICT. Teachers were not satisfied with the formal face-to-face training conducted by their schools. Teachers believed that collaboration could raise their morale, enthusiasm, receptiveness to new ideas and all this could help them implement ICT and transform their teaching practices. In a workplace setting where teachers were isolated from each other for the majority of the day, most participants agreed that effective use of blogs was one method of bringing educators together. Most teachers expressed the need for collaborative, social and informal professional development through Web 2.0 communities of practice.

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