

Sustainable Professional Development to Promote Collaboration between Japanese Language Teachers Domestic and Overseas

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Abstract: The main objective of this project is to promote teacher collaboration for new curriculum development and assessment for Japanese language education, reporting their practices and exchanging ideas with each other. In order to promote professional communication between Japanese language teachers and professionals in teacher education, the author organized virtual learning communities, utilizing two different sites: moodle-based website and e-portfolio system. In use of these sites, nine participants and four mentors tried to report daily activities, and share knowledge for improvement of domestic and overseas language learning. Through such collaboration on the web, it proposed the model for fielding small inquiry communities of project's participants in order to improve their practice and challenge new program to improve their students' learning environments and their teaching and management skills. Practical reports for six months revealed the following: (1) participants did not have sufficient opportunities to communicate with each other, although they were highly motivated; (2) continuing discussion among participants was needed to build a community of practitioners (3) participants were hesitant to make comments on the teaching portfolio of the others because they do not know each other, (4) the projects for students' video exchange and the local seminar for Japanese language teachers were attractive for participants who did not have enough opportunities to consult other teachers.

Keywords: *The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Professional development, Pedagogy of investigation, Real-World Practice, Professional development*

INTRODUCTION

Recently, some leaders at higher education institutions have begun to provide Open Course Ware (OCW), which enables free sharing of lecture notes, exams and other resources. Such convenient environments by networking will support the building of a teaching community, which is a community of educators committed to pedagogical inquiry and innovation who come together to exchange ideas about teaching and learning (Kahn, 2004). Most importantly, by placing a knowledge sharing system on the web, a faculty member takes a crucial step toward making his or her teaching public and available for others to comment on and learn from.

Hatch et al. (2004) also emphasized that many scholars are excited about electronic media's capability for "publishing" rich representations of teaching and learning, including solutions to course design and classroom problems as well as examples of student work. In addition, electronic communications and repositories make it easier to consult colleagues about teaching problems and find resources developed by colleagues for their own teaching (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). This indicates the importance of e-portfolios, which support the development of new modes of collaboration and sharing, such as teaching circles and project groups, and new forms of presentation, such as course portfolios and pedagogical colloquia (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). In this context, Information Communication Technology (ICT) can create learning workspaces for teachers and teacher educators by offering close, concrete, and inside information about teaching and learning (Lampert & Ball, 1999).

In order to optimize faculty development practice, it is essential to fostering scholarly teaching: systematic and critical examination of how learning in each discipline can be improved (Taylor, 2010). According to Swales (1990), engagement in a discipline requires not only shared knowledge of a subject matter but shared goals, methods of inquiry, and communication styles. In such context, the most effective method is based on real-world practice, which would enable faculty to examine their own practice, reflect on their methods, and socialize.

OVERVIEW OF THE VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

This study investigates Japanese language teachers' methods for confronting and solving problems in pursuit of consensus at a distance. It primarily promotes teacher collaboration for new curriculum development and assessment for Japanese language education, based on reporting practices and exchanging ideas with each other. Through such collaboration, a model is developed to field small inquiry communities of faculty members to improve their practices as professional language teachers. To promote professional communication between Japanese language teachers and professionals in teacher education, I developed two different communication websites—a Moodle-based learning website and an e-portfolio system—that reported the daily activities and shared knowledge of the participating teachers (Kato, 2013).

The moodle website (<https://lms.katoyukari.net/>) is designed to provide a collaborative space through a discussion forum, a course, a voting system, and questionnaires to support and encourage the exchange of ideas. In this space, members are gathered for discussion sessions led by a mentor. After the topic has been presented to the members, they can inquire or discuss a scope of topics.



Figure 1. Screenshot of moodle.

The e-portfolio (<https://sns.katoyukari.net/>) serves as a repository of reflective activities for participants and mentors and a personalized learning space. This e-portfolio uses open source software called mahara, based on which the content and layout can be personalized to create multiple views meet the specific, differing, or changing requirements of the user. This supports a key tenet of reflecting on teaching activities and learning events, by using blog functions and diaries to share thoughts. Furthermore, this portfolio serves as evidence of the topic discussions posted on the moodle website.



Figure 2. Screenshot of mahara

THE EVALUATION STUDY OF THE FIRST TRIALS

Objectives

This evaluation study continued our ongoing inquiry into effectively promoting reflective feedback and teacher collaboration by using a Moodle-based website and an e-portfolio. The study assessed the utility and effectiveness of the systems to identify problems experienced by Japanese language teachers in Japan and abroad as well as potential system improvements. In the pilot studies, the author investigated the effects and operability of two systems with nine participants. The study focused on the following three questions:

- 1) Why do you want to participate in this project (online teacher learning system with e-Portfolio)?
- 2) How do participants communicate with other participants and mentors?
- 3) Do participants have any suggestions in order to develop collaborative space for teacher learning?

Participants

Five senior teachers working in Japan and four junior teachers working overseas reported and reflected on their own practices over six months. Four mentors (one instructional designer, two experienced teachers, and one system engineer) were also involved in this project. Given the exploratory nature of this project, I used multiple methods to collect data to gain a broad understanding of the ways in which Japanese language teachers confront and solve problems.

Method

The author facilitated focus group interviews with six participants and four mentors, which covered issues regarding the participants' conception of the project and the functionality and utility of the systems. The focus group meeting on August, 3, 2012 was digitally recorded and the recording was transcribed before data analysis. In accordance with the nature of a semi-structured focus group interview, the interviewers requested elaboration on emerging topics to obtain detailed responses.

RESULT

The overarching expectation was that the systems would help them communicate with each other and receive comments on their own practices. Themes that emerged from the focus interview data include the participants' expectations for this project, the strategies they used to communicate with other participants and mentors, and their suggestions for developing a collaborative space for teacher learning.

Expectations for Teacher Learning System

Most participants agreed that the "systems are convenient tools to promote communication between teachers." They also indicated that self-reflection and discussion on their teaching practices, students' learning, and teaching materials effectively aided professional development. The following quotations (presented verbatim) represent the expressed views:

"I am interested in SNS and am going to use it in class activities because many international students use it in daily life. My friend asked me to join this project. So, I decided to participate in this project." (female, 30s, part-time instructor at a language school in Japan)

"I am curious about mahara and moodle. I want to use it for my class. I need discussion with others about my class even if I have been teaching international students for many years. Teaching portfolio is also a good chance to rethink of my teaching experience." (female, 40s, part-time instructor at a university in Japan)

"I think portfolio is a convenient tool to check my teaching practices. I need such a self-check tool because I have been working overseas without supervision of my boss." (male, 20s, teaching in an overseas aid program in New Zealand)

Communication between Participants in the Use of the Systems

Most participants stated that they experienced less than expected communication between members due to the fear of expressing opinions and ideas to unfamiliar people. The following quotations illustrate prospective Japanese teachers' views on the e-portfolio:

"I got some comments from mentors. But I expected more comments and discussions. In my dairy of mahara, I wrote my daily life but did not ask questions. I just reported generally, so I did not focus on one topic and actual problems. The participants, who got many comments from mentors, reported their works in respect to one topic (for example, writing) and asked comments in their dailies." (male, 20s, teaching in New Zealand by overseas aids program)

"I have not commented on others because I am not an experienced teacher. I think that mentor's role is to make comments on participants." (female, 20s, teaching in China by overseas aids program)

"I have difficulties to share the background knowledge because participants work at different institutions, curriculum, and learners. I think I can easily exchange ideas if I found the participants who work under the similar condition." (male, 20s, teaching in New Zealand by overseas aids program)

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Suggestion to Promote Collaborative Interaction for Teacher Learning

The participants stressed the importance of the following: (a) mentors' assistance and support for collaboration, (b) notice of new information on the e-portfolio, and (c) creation of a supportive atmosphere. Based on the interview with participants, the following are examples of their suggestions:

"If I write good news or mistakes in daily life in blog and dairy, participants and mentors can comment and response easily. Through such small communication, we feel more relax and talk freely, which promote collaborative activities between participants." (female, 30s, part-time advisor at a writing center in Japan)

"I think mentor's call is effective because participants react it and start discussion and collaboration." (Female, 30s, part-time instructor at a language school in Japan)

The teaching commons is a learning environment in which participants and mentors collaboratively perform tasks and exchange perspectives and information. This project requires social interactions among participants and mentors. Through the use of a moodle-based learning website and an e-portfolio system, participants were expected to compare their thought processes and opinions, both core activities for the professional development of in-service teachers. The findings, however, showed that communication between participants was insufficient, even though they were highly motivated. Based on observations and data analysis, I will enhance the educational aspects of this system by developing and implementing solutions to the specific problems, thus continuously refining both the information technology and supporting activities for teacher collaboration.

THE SECOND TRIAL AND FUTUTRE WORK

In the second period (Nov., 2012- June, 2013), nineteen participants, including eight participants and four mentors, are continuously working with this project. This trials offer a more intensive and attractive contents than teaching portfolios and voluntary activities that most participants worked on the first period. This trial investigated the effects of a facilitator and the collaborative support function of mahara on group meeting outcomes. At the kick-off meeting, the participants set up eight small groups and decided the facilitators of each group. Each participant selected at least one topic-based project in which the facilitator tried out sharing teaching tips, planning a new project, investigating and studying new assessment for language learning.

Moderated groups with active facilitators experienced improved group processes and greater cohesion and reported impressive group outcomes: video exchange projects among non-native students studying Japanese in different countries (Fig.3-4) and a local seminar for professional development of non-native Japanese teachers in Cebu, Philippine (Fig.5-6).



Figure 3. Record of Video Exchange Project on Mahara

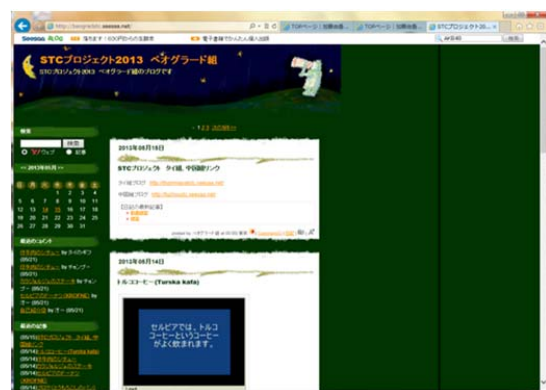


Figure 4. Students' Videos on Bolg Site (Serbia)



Figure 5. Log Data of Discussion with Related to Seminar on mahara



Figure 6. Local Seminar for Japanese Language Teachers in Cebu

Facilitator and other participants tended to enhance one another's effective influence on collaborative discussion for planning.

The long term goals are reconstruction of the web-based teaching commons, a community of educators and practitioners committed to pedagogical inquiry and innovation. I am currently developing teacher training courses based on design guidelines and rules that promote reflection and collaboration, both individually and collaboratively.

Acknowledgement

This work has been partly supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) (No. 23300296) and Challenging Exploratory Research (No. 23653585). Information about this project can be found online at <http://www.katoyukati.net/>

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