

The production and critical analysis of the provision of an electronic professional development course for English language teachers designed to be culturally and pedagogically empathetic

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative heuristic, single case study was conducted into the effectiveness of delivery and cultural empathy of an international online professional development (PD) course for English language teachers. To achieve cultural empathy, the course material was provided with acknowledgement to the course presenter's cultural background and employed action research to allow participants to extract and experiment with pedagogic methodologies, strategies and techniques within their specific cultural and context. A personal narrative was written by the researcher to describe epistemology, socio-cultural positioning and to encapsulate the many facets within the empirical research journey impacting on the research. To provide equity and validity to the research, the researcher provided the course participants with an independent voice as a constructed narrative utilising a thematic analysis approach and verified by those involved. The discussion and conclusions emanated from triangulation of the two narratives and the relevant contemporary literature. The research's conclusion suggested that utilising action research within an online professional development course provides a discerning tool allowing participants to make decisions on what pedagogical practices are appropriate for their cultural milieu. The research also concluded that providing professional development in an online environment requires participants to be familiar with the particular I.T.s for effective course involvement, suggesting that pre-course training in those specific I.T.s is a necessity for quality engagement.

Keywords: Action research, cultural empathy, thematic analysis, equity, validity, narratives, case study, single participant, positioning theory.

INTRODUCTION

The need for the English language (EL) as a tool for international communication, a worldwide lingua franca, is increasing globally, escalating the demand for effective English language teachers. The English language teaching profession is vibrant and innovative, and educators invariably strive to be contemporary in their practice. The increasing global accessibility of the internet and the development of available shared resources has enriched English language teachers' pedagogy and connectivity. Through accessing relevant online sites, teachers have been able to augment and develop their pedagogy by joining online communities where pedagogical knowledge, ideas, lesson plans and experiences can be shared. This electronic connectivity has "benefited all those who have chosen, or are in a position, to use the medium" (Pledger & Mitchell, 2005, p. 11). In my over thirty years of teaching and teacher training experience, the vast majority of teachers that I have encountered value professional development (PD), believing PD appropriate to their specific pedagogical environment is essential. Richards and Farrell (2005) have indicated that this desire for PD is prevalent among teachers and suggest that teachers are expected to be pro-active in the development of professionally related skills across the spectrum of education, from I.T. to assessment, from pedagogic practices to theories.

With these concepts in mind, I commenced research into the design, effectiveness of delivery and integral cultural empathy of an international online professional development (PD) course for English language teachers. The PD course was intended to introduce selected contemporary English language learning and teaching methodologies and strategies through: 1) an introduction to these methodologies and strategies with alignment to theories of language learning and acquisition; 2) significant international peer-reviewed journal articles discussing the utilisation of the introduced methodologies and strategies; 3) an extensive related lesson plan; and 4) video of that lesson being taught in an international setting. Within the course's online learning environment, participants were able to discuss the presented material with reference to their teaching situation in dedicated discussion boards and chat-lines, design and implement an action research project to assess the effectiveness of the methodology in their specific context, and reflect on how the methodology or strategy might be adopted and adapted for greater effectiveness within the course participant's cultural and pedagogical setting, using participant blogs.

The empirical research required me to be positioned within the process in multiple ways: as the designer and presenter of the online PD course, the recruiter of participants, the course participants' mentor, and the collector and analyser of data. A researcher's personal narrative was formulated to describe the richness of involvement within the research, the ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researcher, and the empirical journey, all of which would influence the research.

A thematic analysis of all textual data collected from the various communication channels utilised within the online course, external to the course, and from the research designed data collection tools was used to create a research participants' narrative. The narrative construct was presented via third person researcher-devised descriptions and first person quotes, and was verified and amended by the course participants. Triangulation of the course participants' narrative, the researcher's narrative, and relevant contemporary literature contributed to the discussion and conclusions.

DESIGNING THE EPD4ELT.COM COURSE

The epd4elt.com course was based on the premise of cultural and professional equity, where all agents involved with the course can mutually learn from, inform and support each other.

In designing the epd4elt.com course, I was mindful of McFadzean and McKenzie's (2001) advice that to create an effective and supportive e-learning environment, participants must be encouraged to take ownership of the learning experience provided by an on-line PD course. McFadzean and McKenzie also propose that ownership can be enhanced through discussion, collaboration and decision making to create an ethos of course congruency and reciprocity. I therefore designed an online professional developmental learning environment that provided space for: English language pedagogic understandings and knowledge to be disseminated, participant interaction to occur, informed decisions to be made as to what was applicable and appropriate in each participant's specific learning environment.

epd4elt.com course content

The following five module titles represent the course outline as presented within the research. The rationale for these areas of English language teaching and learning was based upon current literature and extensive personal professional experience.

- Module One: Language Corpora and the Lexical Approach.
- Module Two: Grammar-Based Syllabi, a Deductive, Inductive or Combined Approach.
- Module Three: Task-Based Learning and Pedagogical Scaffolding.
- Module Four: Multiple Intelligences and Language Learning Strategies.
- Module Five: Content-Based Instruction and a Cross-Curricula Approach.

Communications within the course

To help promote an ethos of learning through shared understandings, the following strategies were implemented within the epd4elt course website:

- a message board where participants are encouraged to post questions, discuss relevant literature and personal or cultural interpretations, and discuss successes and failures of technique implementation;
- chat rooms, both text and voice, where the above can be discussed in a more immediate environment as well as a forum for less formal issues;
- networking and collaborative exercises where participants are required to answer certain tasks through negotiation and discussion;
- email addresses for participants to communicate privately, if they so wish; and
- a blog for each participant to form a reflective dialogue relating to the empirical elements of the course requirements.

I was also cognisant that the course design should alleviate a feeling of participant isolation by creating a community of learners, by facilitating social and professional interaction between participants, and by encouraging a culture of collaboration (Hutchens et. al., 2006).

Using videoed teacher observations within the course

Little research appears to have been conducted on the effectiveness of video technology in PD, although the general consensus amongst educators is that there are numerous beneficial training and assessment applications (Hollingsworth, 2005). Most teachers that I have worked with accept the great value of in-class peer observations. Much can be learnt from observing teaching colleagues practising his or her profession. However, there are a few shortcomings. Live peer observation can provide all facets of teacher performance and in-class interaction, but it is instantaneous and not

repeatable. An observer can also change the dynamics of the classroom, create a false environment and put pressure on the performing teacher (Harmer, 2003). By contrast, video of a lesson in progress can provide a medium that is highly malleable. The recorded image can be slowed, repeated, replayed in its entirety or by section, can be viewed from a teaching or learning perspective, analysed microscopically, or generally, and be analysed by individuals or by groups (Brophy, 2004; Hollingsworth, 2004). For the epd4elt.com PD course, I videoed five lessons directly reflecting, I believed, the methodology presented within each module of the course. These lessons were planned by me and the documentation presented to teachers, who were free to alter it in any way how they felt was appropriate. Ethics clearance was gained from everyone involved and a single high definition camera was utilised to record the lesson. From one to two hour sessions, a 15-20 minute video was edited, again by me. The videoed lessons were presented only as exemplars of teaching and learning within the paradigm, not as models of pedagogy to which to aspire.

ACTION RESEARCH AND THE EPD4ELT.COM COURSE

Parsons and Brown (2002) have described Action Research in teaching as a methodology that provides teachers with a tool for attaining valid and useful data which can be used to develop effective pedagogical practices, Burnaford, Fischer, and Hobson (2001) have stated that “investigations conceived, implemented, and evaluated by actual teachers in real classrooms among live school-children promise to better stand the tests of practicality and personal relevance” (p. 7). Action Research (AR) was therefore employed within the epd4elt.com course to provide PD that was able to function pedagogically and culturally empathetically. Requiring course participants to interact with the pedagogical materials provided through AR allowed for informed, constructed decisions on what was, and what was not, applicable for the participant’s unique pedagogic and cultural situation.

To answer the research question of whether the epd4elt.com course functioned with cultural and pedagogical empathy, I needed to assess whether AR provided the system for personal and cultural professional relevance within the participants professional setting, i.e. the classroom. Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) referred to this process as “classroom action research” and have pointed out that “classroom action research typically involves the use of qualitative interpretive modes of inquiry and data collection by teachers with a view to teachers making judgements about how to improve their own practices.” (p. 561). McTaggart (1996) also has discussed the adaption of AR within differing cultural settings and suggests that the AR paradigm does not need a specific definition, rather, the concept should be presented and the participant allowed to “reshape”, to the course participant’s requirements, to allow the reconstitution of AR in ways that make sense within the participants’ culture while retaining the philosophical features familiar to the course presenter.

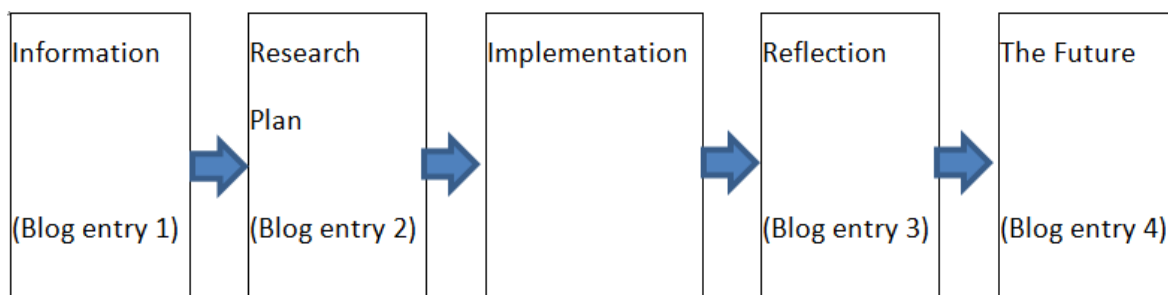


Figure 1: Action Research for epd4elt.com (Kebble, 2010)

The concept presented by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), providing an ongoing cyclical approach to AR through a repeated sequence of “plan, action, observe, reflect”, initially appeared to be the most appropriate model to utilise for the epd4elt.com course. However, although AR within the course is based on Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) model, I felt the need for a revised approach that would respect the time constraints of practising teachers involved in PD and the functional requirements involved for utilising a blog. Specifically for epd4elt.com, a practical and more time efficient five stage model for AR was developed (Kebble, 2010).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was based upon the post-modern tenet that there is not one specific truth that diversity is respected and honoured and that “by accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another” (Merriam, 2002, p. 375). Whatever is described within the study, including conclusions, is based on one’s own interpretations, which emanate from a personal cultural, experiential and socio-political standpoint. The nature of the way this research has been conducted is aligned to the description provided by Grbich (2004) who said “any borders (disciplinary, research approaches, country and culture) are constructions that can be crossed, incorporated or reconstructed” and that the “search for reality „out there“ is qualified by a recognition that the tools, language and process of discovery, are socially and culturally constructed” (p. 18).

It is my belief that second language acquisition and learning cannot be described as being based upon a definitive phenomenon and therefore, within second language pedagogy, there is no “correct” or “one” way to teach a second language. I would suggest the factors to be considered within English language teaching pedagogy are: a) the variety of cognitive theories of learning; b) the variety of language acquisition and learning theories; c) the cultural backgrounds of the agents involved in the process; d) the teaching culture and style of the pedagogue; e) the learning style and intelligence “strengths” of the learner; f) the environment in which the process is taking place, and g) the individual’s motivation for learning English. All factors contribute to how quickly and effectively the learner acquires another language, e.g. English. ESL teaching and learning differs from the underlying tenets of mainstream subject teaching, which, in many cases, can be described as following the trends of modernity in that educational concepts and information presented within a curriculum are often culturally standardised, presented as facts, and subsequently tested as such (Usher & Edwards, 1994).

Social constructionism, within this research, is based within post-modernist beliefs and is concerned with the analysis of the subject of the research, the epd4elt.com course, by the individuals directly involved. The description of social constructionism provided by Willig (2001) best describes the intentioned research tenet when stating that “Social constructionism draws attention to the fact that human experience, including perception, is mediated historically, culturally and linguistically”, (p. 7). Individuals involved in the research are viewed as “social beings constructed by the systems or networks they inhabit, but these compromise many socialising contexts with different meanings and practices” (Grbich, 2004, p. 21). I considered that each individual involved with the research project will create their own thoughts, ideas and opinions relating to the research, which is “derived from looking at the world from one perspective or other, and is in the service of some interests rather than others” (Burr, 2003, p. 6). These thoughts, ideas and opinions are to be accepted and respected within the research as such.

A single, heuristic case study

A single, heuristic case study approach to the research was adopted as the research topic, or in this case, the implementation of the epd4elt.com course and was clearly defined, as were those who

would be interacting within the case. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) have discussed the fact that “case studies are set in temporal, geographical, organizational, institutional and other contexts that enable boundaries to be drawn around the case” (p. 253). Merriam (1998) has explained that the term heuristic means “that case studies illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” and “can explain why an innovation worked or failed to work” (p. 31). Yin has expanded on this notion by explaining that a single case study is appropriate for the analysis of a “unique” (p. 47) case and that conclusions emanating from a single case study can inform the global nature of that unique program.

Nunan and Bailey (2009) have explained that “a case study is often characterised as being an in-depth analysis of one particular exemplar of the thing we wish to understand” (p. 8) and go on to point out that “case studies involve the researcher’s long-term, or longitudinal, involvement in the research context, as well as detailed data collection about the person or entity being investigated” (pp. 8-9). The empirical section of this research was conducted over a period of one year and focused on the multiple interactions between the epd4elt.com course, the course participant, the course presenter, and others directly involved with both and with the epd4elt.com course.

Positioning Theory and Respective Positionings within the Case Study

Due to the multiple roles that I would fulfil within the research, my positioning, I believed, might impact greatly on the interactions between me as the course presenter, the participant and the implementation of the epd4elt.com course, and hence would need to be acknowledged. Positioning Theory has developed from Vygotsky’s (1978) concept that a ‘person’ is defined, through language, interpersonally, in an “intimate interaction with others in the construction of a flow of public and social cognition” (Harrè & Moghaddam, 2004). Vygotsky (1978) discussed how an individual’s cultural cognitive development emerges at two levels: initially socially (interpsychological) and then on an individual level (intrapersonal) (p. 57). Further, any positioning comes with rights, responsibilities and duties that are culturally and experientially assigned to that position by the individual actors involved (Harrè, 2004). Positioning Theory would then describe how each individual involved with the epd4elt.com course constructs their social-cognitive position and perspective, and is positioned by the other through intrapersonal understanding and reflections, and interpersonal interactions.

Within the research I attempted to acknowledge my positioning within my narrative, and considered its impact could be assuaged by providing course participants with an independent positioning voice, a narrative, determined through the collation and analysis of all discursive interactions, and accepted by the participants. Tan and Moghaddam (1995) discuss that “positioning can be understood as the process by which speakers discursively construct personal stories” (p. 387) and that mutually acceptable negotiated positions must be based upon “the particular ideals, dimensions and storylines that people in different societies are likely to find relevant in positioning themselves and others, and the meanings they attach to these constructs.” (p. 398). As such, any recount narrative is therefore a construct of the retrospective analysis of the event, or events, including inferred references to respective positioning.

Constructing the Course Presenter’s Narrative

Duff (2008) discusses that increasingly researchers are providing accounts of “the involvement of the researcher in the study, the perspectives and biases (or subjectivities) of the researcher, and the reflections of the researcher on the research experience” (p. 195). The rationale of my narrative derives from my perceived need to elucidate upon my multiple roles and functions within the research process. These roles were:

- the epd4elt.com course producer

- the recruiter of participants
- the epd4elt.com course participants“ mentor
- the interlocutor for data collection

For my narrative I needed not only to describe the empirical journey taken, but also my background. This description would allow the reader to determine my positioning and credentials for the research and its outcomes. Bruner (1990) discusses the presentation of self through autobiography, or narratives, and suggests that the notion of self through a retrospective narrative is an interpretive construct that achieves a reality that is shaped “by a society, an economy, and a language, all of which have historic „realities“ which, although open to revision, have created a scaffold that supports our practices as human agents” (p. 117). My narrative would, then, provide my cultural, socio-economic, professional and ontological background; the many facets of the empirical journey that I felt would influence the research; and the interactions with the course participant and the course participant’s professional environment from my perspective.

Two excerpts from the Researcher’s Narrative

I come from a privileged background, in multiple ways. As a white, European male from a middle-class family with English as my first language I am positioned within our society accordingly. However, the factors forming my constructed global awareness and understanding stem, within the biases of my cultural and socio-economic position, from the privilege of a relatively unbiased upbringing. As a child, I listened to stories describing exotic locations and fascinating peoples. My grandparents and two of their children (my uncle and aunt) had lived in Nyasaland (Malawi) for 12 years, my grandfather being a lecturer at Jeanes Training Centre, a teacher training college at a place called Domasi about 10 miles north of Zomba. My father, having lived in Malaysia and Hong Kong, among other areas, and with some Bahasa Malaysia and Cantonese, described both Buddhism and socialism as his guiding philosophies....

I was taken on a tour of the school prior to being introduced to the staff at the weekly staff meeting. I was impressed. The school had a pleasant, vibrant atmosphere, students were polite and friendly, as were the staff, and all very welcoming. I, and my research topic, was introduced, and teachers interested in becoming Participants were asked to remain after the meeting. Nine teachers remained, and mentioned others who wanted to be included. We arranged a lunchtime discussion session where those interested would be introduced to the e-PD4ELT course material and website, and the requirements of course participation. Everything appeared ideal, until I was shown the computer room and the school’s I.T. facilities. The room showed signs of extended neglect, which was understandable as the computers were at least 10 years old and inadequate for anything other than use with simple software of a 10 year vintage, or more. Two machines, out of the 8 that were useable, were capable of running the internet. However, the internet connection was provided through a dial-up modem and running at, I observed, 48 bits/sec. This meant that a page of text from the e-PD4ELT website, without images, would take 5 to 10 minutes to download, practically unusable.

Data Collection and Instruments

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) have suggested that there is “no single prescription for which data collection instruments to use; rather the issue here is of the “fitness for purpose” (p. 181), while Lankshear and Knobel (2004) have stated that “what counts as data depends heavily on the questions or hypothesis driving a study, as determined by I” (p. 172). As the epd4elt.com course would be running over an extended period of time, and as I would be actively involved in the support of the subject, a range of data collecting systems were to be utilised. I believed that the data

collection methods were both appropriate for the purpose for which they were intended and that their construction could be related closely to the research questions. The data collection methods were: 1) epd4elt.com course related email communications between the CP and I; 2) intra-website communications from the messaging system provided within the epd4elt.com website between the course participant and I; 3) intra-website communications from the chat-line provided within the epd4elt.com website between the course participant and me; 4) post-course questionnaire for completion by the course participant; 5) post-course interview between the course participant and I, and 6) post course interview between I and the course participant's HOD.

Course participants were all practicing English language teachers in high schools in Japan, Taiwan, Vanuatu and Fiji. The total number of participants was 15.

Data Analysis and the Construction of the Participants' Narrative

Once all data had been collected, I decided upon a categorical analysis for which I adopted Bruan and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, being "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79). Boyatzis (1998) describes a theme as "a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon." (p. 4). I also chose to use Bruan and Clarke's thematic analysis to provide a more "detailed and nuanced account" (p. 79) of the themes that related directly to the specific research questions. Atlas.Ti qualitative data analysis software program was utilised for collating and organising all text, for the searching of codes and the grouping of text, and the selection of quotes from within these texts. In analysing the recorded data, I was mindful of Braun and Clarke's (2006) comments that the analysis "involves the searching across a data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated patterns of meaning" (p. 86) and that the "analysis is not a linear process of simply moving from one phase to the next; instead, it is more recursive, where movement is back and forth, as needed, throughout the phases" (p. 86). This process required extensive recursive analysis of the text, through which the themes for the participant's narrative emerged.

Generation of initial codes

I systematically read through the data giving "full and equal attention to each data item" (Braun & Clarke. 2006, p. 89). I developed initial codes using the five topics on which the interviews and questionnaire were based; that is: 1) Is the electronic system of course provision effective, 2) Is the course pedagogically and culturally sensitive, 3) Developing further insight of the Participants' pedagogy, 4) epd4elt.com participant involvement, and 5) improving the epd4elt.com course. A list of 17 initial codes was developed, as is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Initial Codes and themes.*

Codes	Theme
Action Research process within epd4elt.com	6
epd4elt.com Course-specific discussion	4
epd4elt.com course, Culture and pedagogy	1
epd4elt.com in remote areas	3
epd4elt.com interaction and support	4
extrinsic motivation	4
ICT Problems	2
ICT skills and pedagogy	2
ICT Support - online	5
ICT Support in-school	5
Improving epd4elt.com	3
off-topic	7
Positive course influence on pedagogical outcomes	1
Positive statements about the epd4elt.com course	3
Result of consultancy	4
Teaching style and experiences	1
Time Management	4

Searching for themes

Using the table above, and with reference to the initial research questions, I began “sorting the different codes into potential themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). The initial list of themes produced was: 1) epd4elt.com, culture and pedagogy, 2) epd4elt.com and I.T., 3) epd4elt.com – development and utilisation, 4) epd4elt.com and participant involvement, 5) epd4elt.com and participant support, 6) epd4elt.com and AR in practice, 7) Miscellaneous. I assigned themes to the codes within the Table 1, and collated the relevant coded data into the given themes.

Reviewing themes

I next read through all data, now collated into initial themes, searching for (a) relevant quotes epitomising the theme, (b) data that did not “appear to form a coherent pattern” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91) or was not appropriate for that theme, and (c) to “consider the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). Through the process of re-reading with reference to the “candidate themes”, I was also able to identify and collate data that informed more than one theme.

Defining and naming final themes

Data within the candidate themes were effectively defining the themes, and the data within these candidate themes provided an appropriate “coherent and internally consistent account” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92) when related to the research questions. I amalgamated certain candidate themes, and excluded others, to produce an initial set of themes from which to build the course participants’ narrative. However, I undertook the next stage with the understanding that these themes were still open to manipulation and modification if it was felt that the full story was not being presented. The final set of themes was:

- 1) Cultural and pedagogical empathy of the epd4elt.com course.
- 2) The effective provision of the epd4elt.com course through I.T.
- 3) epd4elt.com course involvement and interaction.

- 4) epd4elt.com and participant motivation, support and encouragement.
- 5) Action Research (AR) and the epd4elt.com course
- 6) epd4elt.com – Post-course reflection and future development

THE COURSE PARTICIPANTS' NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTED THROUGH GENERATED THEMES

The course participants' narrative was constructed utilising the original thematically indicated copy of the texts along with the electronically presented set of coded data. I found that both sets of data representations were necessary as the coded data needed to be contextualised within the original data for clearer comprehension. The candidate themes were manipulated for better cohesion throughout the production phase and were finally cemented on the conclusion of the production of the narrative.

The course participants' narrative was written in a mixture of third person, when I was generating the text, and first person, when quoting directly from data supplied by the course participants. I quoted the source exactly; however, spelling and punctuation were corrected, and extraneous utterances excluded.

Lankshear and Knobel (2004), in discussing the validation of a constructed narrative suggested the procedure of checking with the research participant that what had been written was accurate and acceptable. To this end, the final draft of the course participants' narrative was sent to all contributors via email for approval, which was duly received with revisions. These revisions became part of the course participants' narrative.

The course participants deliberated upon the positive cultural biases of the international journal articles provided within the course. Course participant B3 initially explained that "they were really interesting, I used mostly the articles". C1 expanded upon the notion by saying "the articles kind of reinforced what was in the (module) introduction". The articles were chosen as they were often written by international practising teachers and discussed their specific cultural and pedagogical in-class experiences. On answering whether C1 felt these articles were useful and relevant, the course participant asserted that "yes, there was a Japanese guy with the lexicon one, and an Indonesian one and a Taiwanese teacher". The course participant pointed out that "that was good because we could identify with them. Like, we are all ESL, so the problems he'll be facing are the same thing as the problem I'll be facing, because we are all second language speakers".

The epd4elt.com course, according to the course participants, was not culturally or pedagogically authoritarian, or prescriptive, and did not purport to describe how English should be taught. A course participant explained that "I just saw it as another way of teaching, another learning experience, and that is why I offered to do the course". This course participant also described that the epd4elt.com course:

"was not patronising, did not suggest that the pedagogical culture of the presented material was the correct model, did not expect me to change how I taught, did not expect me to adopt teaching strategies introduced within the course, made allowance for cultural diversity, discussed cultural pedagogy, and allowed me to adapt the presented material to my teaching situation".

TRIANGULATION OF THE TWO NARRATIVES AND CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) have defined triangulation as “two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour” (p. 141) while Stake (2005) has suggested “Triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (p. 454). Lankshear and Knobel (2004) have pointed out that “the higher the level of similarity between what an informant tells us and what someone who knows the circumstances of the informant tells us, the stronger I’s grounds are for believing the data are trustworthy” (p. 184).

Cultural and pedagogical empathy of the epd4elt.com course

I, as the producer and presenter of the epd4elt.com course, endeavoured not to position the content and delivery as prescriptive or culturally authoritarian, but as a cross-cultural sharing of professional experience and knowledge. Within the course I acknowledge that any material I may produce would inherently carry cultural bias. To promote cultural and pedagogical inclusion and respect, the course participant was encouraged to use whatever was provided within the course in any way they deemed appropriate. Aligned with this, I provided academic texts written from a variety of cultural backgrounds to further enhance the cross-cultural tenet of the provision of course material. The course participant recognised that the course had been devised to allow for cross-cultural usage and commented positively that she found the course not to be culturally or pedagogically authoritarian, or prescriptive, and did not purport to describe how English should be taught. The course participant believed that the course was not culturally patronising, was respectful of the teacher, her pedagogy and her culture. These beliefs suggest that the course was recognised by the course participant as functioning successfully and respectfully within her environment and that I, as the course producer/presenter, had not positioned myself, or the course material, from an authoritarian stance.

Mindful and respectful of an attitude towards English language competency amongst international EL educators, and the labelling of such, I was interested to learn that some course participants considered themselves, through personal labelling, as being an “English as a second language” speaker, but did not consider the term “ESL” to be derogative in any way.

This ESL positioning provided these course participants with a connection of understanding between themselves and the authors of many journal articles presented within the course, particularly those with an ESL background, and they commented that the articles created in them a feeling of empathy. My intention of creating a culturally empathetic course was, according to the course participant, successfully achieved through the inclusion of peer-reviewed articles from practising English language teachers from both native and non-native English speaking backgrounds.

The course participants believed that the course had helped them to become more creative and align lesson materials and delivery to the culturally appropriate needs of students.

The effective provision of the epd4elt.com course through I.T

The epd4elt.com course utilises I.T. for course delivery in the forms of a DVD for videoed material and an online website for the provision of course material, for the presentation of AR related text and for intra-course synchronous and asynchronous communications. My findings support the conclusions arrived at by Harlen and Doubler (cited in Vrasidas & Glass, 2004) that, I.T. allows time for reflection, flexibility in course design, feedback and to read feedback from others, and to produce online publishable text, enhancing the provision and acceptance of the PD. The data show that course participants accessed course materials multiple times, suggesting that they were able to

read and reflect on the presented topics. Over the time of the course participants' interaction with the online course, I was able to adapt, alter or add to the materials or the style of presentation in relation to the course participants' feedback or comments, or if I thought that a specific area could be enhanced. For example, the online quiz was designed to be used as a consolidator of provided information and not, as initially construed, as a test for acquired understandings. Initially, I allowed for each test to be taken twice, with each test limited to 1 hour, but course participants' results from the first test were relatively low and I received comments that the test did not allow time for thinking about the questions. As a resolution, I provided a Microsoft Word document with all questions presented. I then reduced the number of takes to one. This adaptation is an example of the flexibility that a PD course presented through I.T. intrinsically has. Feedback was a constant throughout the course's duration, whether this was achieved via emails or the chat line, allowing for discussions around all facets of the course and course material.

The production of the supporting DVD was created for access through either a DVD player or a computer. No problems were discussed, possibly suggesting that the mode of presentation, discussed by Shepherd (1999), was appropriate, accessible, and appealing, allowed for reflection, was logical and methodical, was clearly of practical use, presented material both linearly and holistically, and contained much visual and audio material.

The epd4elt.com website was created utilising the Moodle software platform and hosted through HostMonster.com, a private web-hosting company. Again, no problems were reported, allowing me to suggest that both Moodle and HostMonster.com were appropriate modes of online provision. A few course participants discussed problematic issues of using both synchronous and asynchronous communications within the epd4elt.com website, although website access to these online facilities proved not to be the problem. Course participants in both Fiji and Vanuatu discussed initial intra-course e-communications dilemmas related to the school's internet provision. Once reliable internet access was established, the course participants neither discussed nor demonstrated problems navigating the epd4elt.com website, or using the various forms of communication, suggesting that the epd4elt.com website might be functioning appropriately and intuitively.

I conclude from this data that the epd4elt.com website was functioning well in its role in providing course material and intra-course communications, and succeeds as "any time/any place learning" (McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001, p. 471). The data shows that the course participants were able to access the course whenever they wished, and that this was achieved over an extended period of time.

Most course participants had initially described themselves as having limited I.T. experience or even as „computer illiterate“, and demonstrated limited knowledge, skills and confidence when initially using the epd4elt.com website, particularly within the communications areas. The website was designed with user-friendliness as a fundamental consideration and utilised online modes for information presentation and dissemination, intra-course communications, hyperlinking facilities and quizzes. All elements were presented within a simple online structure and accessed through an initial 'welcome' front page. Course participants accessed a password protected individual personal learning environment (PLE), which could be customised to a limited extent (although it was not). The course participants discussed no particular problems with accessing all course materials or the quiz areas. However, the same course participants had initial problems in relation to the online communication systems due, not to the course participant's lack of knowledge, but to the school's inability to access the internet through their internet provider and local server. Approximately 75% of course participants were concerned about using the blog area where the AR process for each module was discussed. I was able to explain online through emails and demonstrations within the blog area how this was achieved. Course participants quickly understood the techniques required, although they had difficulty with the inclusion of images, which required the upload of image files to

a dedicated folder separately, and create a link to the image file from within the blog. Again, I was able to successfully describe the process online to the course participants involved.

The perceived lack of I.T. skills did not impinge on participants' ability to interact with the course, and in all cases the skills were appropriate for successful course involvement. However, I suggest that if the course presenter had offered a prepared pre-course training session, achievable face-to-face or online, the initial concerns with I.T. discussed and displayed by the course participant could have been greatly alleviated. Some course participants also commented that initial training in I.T. would have been beneficial. To sum up, I believe that the research has shown that effective interaction with the course can be achieved with limited I.T. experience, that I.T. skills can be enhanced through engaging with the course, that I.T. support is necessary during the course involvement and that pre-course training requires an I.T. component.

epd4elt.com course involvement and interactions

I communicated directly with the course participants when: 1) I was asked for help, 2) there was online evidence of course interaction, and 3) no apparent course interaction had occurred for a period of time exceeding 4 weeks. I used respectful and affable language in online communications regarding course participation, which the course participants alluded to positively. These communications stimulated a decisive response, and hence provided encouragement for the course participants to proceed with the course.

However, one course participant stated that I, as the course presenter, did not engage in enough regularised online interaction and suggested that weekly communications would have been more appropriate. The course participant suggested that if I had communicated on a weekly basis, they would have been more motivated to progress with the course. Regularised communications would have provided the course participant with access to intra-course support when there were problems, without the need to instigate the access, which they may have been reluctant to do. In fact, the course participant alluded to the fact that they would have preferred me to have adopted a more hands-on approach within the course to provide external motivation and a greater access to the expertise that I possessed. I now consider that the initial intention of limiting direct contact to withdraw from a position of authority was erroneous and that regular interaction need not position one as an authoritarian figure. Rather, regular contact could have created an online environment of professional support and engagement that would have provided an impetus for motivation and a mutual exploration of course participatory requirements.

Another course participant commented on the provided video materials and their limitations. The videoed lessons provided were all taken in one school environment, with five different teachers. This participant suggested that the videoed material was limited and they would like to have had a greater variation and multiple variations of each lesson plan in various cultural settings. I agree totally, and believe a bank of videos would be a real asset, however, time constraints and the need to meet ethics requirements makes the exercise complicated.

epd4elt.com and participant motivation, support and encouragement

The motivation to follow, and complete, an extended PD course is affected by both intrinsic and extrinsic influences (Harmer, 2003). Both effects were apparent in course participants' involvement with the course. The course was designed to be cross-culturally inclusive and mutually culturally and professionally respectful, which, as Wlodkowski (2003) has indicated, is a fundamental requirement to foster intrinsic motivation.

Through the initial 6 months of the course approximately 50% of course participants demonstrated modest intrinsic motivation to engage with the course due, it was explained, to time-consuming

curricular and extra-curricular activities. The motivation for completing the course became both extrinsic as external support became more available, and intrinsic, as course participants developed confidence with the mode of delivery, appreciated the quality of the course materials, and enjoyed the experience of following the course and interacting with other participants. Participants also discussed that course completion, and the related development of ESL pedagogy, would be welcomed and respected by all those associated with their schools. Hence, the course participants demonstrated increased motivation through a deeper interest in involvement with the course material and experimentation with methodologies and techniques, which was evident in communications with me and other participants, in the greatly increased online activity and in the presentation of material and text within blogs.

Some course participants explained that although technicians within the IT department were accessible, they felt conscious of utilising their time for epd4elt.com course-related needs. I found the school's IT departments that I communicated with to be very accommodating and helpful. The departments were obviously very busy, but appeared to be efficient and well managed. I believe that course participants' lack of confidence in I.T., and lack of knowledge of specific IT-related semantics, were major contributing factors to a reluctance to access help from the IT department. I also feel that the IT department would have been more accommodating than course participants believed, but, once again, an epd4elt.com pre-course training session, incorporating IT terminology, would have alleviated some of these concerns.

Action Research (AR) and the epd4elt.com course

The research project questioned whether the epd4elt.com course could function with cultural and pedagogical empathy. Having consulted relevant literature (Beaumont & O'Brien, 2000; Cherry, 1999; Kember, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Nunan, 1992; Parsons & Brown, 2002; Woods, et al., 2000) I introduced AR within epd4elt.com as the paradigm through which participants could interact and experiment with course material, and extract what was deemed culturally and pedagogically appropriate. The course participants unanimously stated that the AR process had helped to gauge the effectiveness of lesson materials and plans, and the results of the assessment enabled them to refine lesson materials and plans for future use. The course participants commented positively on the use of AR in teaching and suggested that they would continue to utilise the AR paradigm within their pedagogy. Course participants' comments on material implementation were invariably positive, suggesting that the materials that were designed and implemented were appropriate for their specific classroom situation.

Course participants' discussions through blogging, and subsequent interviews, suggest that the AR process allows course participants to design and implement culturally empathetic materials within the pedagogic methodologies and techniques.

Post-course reflection and future development of epd4elt.com

This study provides clear indications as to what was deemed successful in terms of professional development and how the epd4elt.com course can further be improved. The course participants were in the best position to discuss course developmental issues and provided an insight into how the course could be enhanced, changed or improved. First, one course participant explained that the course presenter needed to communicate more regularly with participants and suggested communications initiated by the presenter should be on a weekly basis. This more regularised communication would bolster participants' enthusiasm and motivation, and would provide them with access to course-related support when required. I accept this notion and believe that the course participant's advice is both sound and a necessary inclusion.

Second, the video material of teaching needs more variation. Course participants elucidated that being able to watch more video of lessons from the course conducted in differing settings, and with teachers discussing their lesson with an interviewer, would create far greater interest for the observer. I totally agree with this opinion, but am also aware of the difficulties, particularly in relation to ethics associated with the production of in-class video material.

Third, that pre-course training in epd4elt.com course related I.T. needs to occur. This notion became quite evident as the research progressed and I now believe that a well-designed pre-course training package is essential both for accessing the elements of the website and for IT skills required for interacting with the course. Pre-course training could be provided face-to-face or through I.T.s in the form of an interactive website including video. In conjunction with pre-course training, course participants suggested that accessible and downloadable documentation on the processes involved with utilising the epd4elt.com website be provided. Downloadable documentation could be provided within the pre-course training website.

Fourth, course participants felt that video introductions to the methodologies could be included within the video material. Although, when creating the course I decided against using videoed introductions as I wished not to position myself as an authoritarian figure, I agree with the course participant that video introductions might be effective. However, I would not want to present these introductions alone and believe this requires a variety of presenters.

Lastly, various course participants proposed video conferencing could be utilised for communications with the course presenter and with other participants, including the provision of synchronous online course-related support. It is accepted that video conferencing is quite achievable and would enhance the delivery of the epd4elt.com course.

IMPLICATIONS

In my role as researcher, I acknowledge that the implications this research has generated, which are discussed below, often requires further research to justify the suppositions presented. However, the discussion is offered through the limitations of this research.

The provision of an in-school electronic PD course, particularly in remote areas domestically or internationally where sources of internet access are limited, is influenced greatly by the I.T. convictions and decisions of a school's management. The availability of an online PD course is dictated by the availability of the internet access within the school. If the school's management believes that the provision of I.T. facilities, including appropriate internet access, is of a low priority, access to in-school online PD is problematic. Appropriate training needs to be provided prior to commencement on an I.T. provided PD course and a course presenter needs to design a suitable and accessible training course, incorporating video.

For an e-PD course to be effective, access to in-course support, both with I.T. and course requirements, needs to be provided. This could be achieved within the participant's immediate environment, such as support provided by the I.T. department and from teaching peers within a school. If multiple participants are following the course concurrently, peers could provide the necessary support through a mentoring system. However, the course presenter, with a deep understanding and extensive experience of both the mechanics and content of the course, needs to be available and accessible regularly to provide insight and support.

Advancement of I.T. skills becomes a secondary benefit of following an electronic pedagogic PD course. Participants perceive the enhancement of I.T. skills through attendance on an electronic PD course as positive, even though the lack of I.T. experience may have had an initial inhibiting effect on course participation.

Intra-course communications between the course presenter and participants needs to be engaged upon regularly and systematically. Participants require the course presenter to initiate regular communications, as much as once a week, to create an atmosphere of support and encouragement. This supportive atmosphere fosters a positive attitude towards course involvement and the relationship between course presenter and course participant. Systematic communication is not perceived by the course participant as positioning the course presenter in an authoritarian or prescriptive role within the course.

Intrinsic motivation is particularly required for successful completion of an online PD course if an outside agent is not specifically requiring participant engagement. Many teachers understand the benefits of professional development and are often motivated intrinsically to participate. If participants find a PD course relevant and engaging, intrinsic motivation will inspire them to engage with a course and derive as much as possible from the experience.

CONCLUSIONS

I would like to close by returning to, and answering, the original questions theorised within this research paper's heading. First, whether the epd4elt.com course was culturally and pedagogically empathetic and inclusive. I would posit an affirmative answer as the course was described as being both culturally and pedagogically empathetic and inclusive by the course participants, who are in the best position to judge. This was recognised through the research as being achieved via three systems: (a) the course presenter, and hence the course material, originating from a culturally acknowledged milieu; (b) the inclusion of course material from a variety of cultural sources promoting intra-course cross-cultural integration; and (c) by implementing Action Research as the course interactional paradigm. Participants were able to experiment with, reflect upon and draw conclusions from the introduced methodologies within the course and in relation to their specific cultural and pedagogical setting.

Second, whether online PD, such as the epd4elt.com course, can be provided effectively through digital technologies. I would suggest this research has shown the answer also to be positive, if certain conditions are met. These conditions are: (a) that the course participant has, or can acquire through training, the pre-requisite I.T. skills required to access the course effectively; and (b) that suitable I.T. facilities are available, or made available, to participants, including the provision of a reliable and appropriate internet service.

Finally, I conclude that for an electronic PD course to be ultimately effective, course participants require (a) intrinsic motivation, (b) supportive course management, (c) appropriate digital connectivity and (e) a pre-course introduction to I.T. systems with clear and accessible instructions on how to utilise the course management system. Also, for a PD course to be culturally empathetic, the requirements are: (a) culturally inclusive materials, (b) recognition of course presenters' cultural heritage, (c) interactional system, such as Action Research, allowing participants to engage and experiment with presented concepts, and reflect on to form conclusions of relevance and suitability.

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