

Teacher development in the digital age

Kat Robb shares some of her ideas on improvement.

Penny Ur (1996) argues that ‘teachers who have been teaching for twenty years may be divided into two categories: those with twenty years’ experience and those with one year’s experience repeated twenty times’ (Ur, 1996: 317). We are all guilty of repeating the same activities with new courses because we know they have worked previously with learners, but what works with one class may not work with another – one size does not fit all. So, while we are tired, pushed for time, and struggle to fit marking and lesson preparation into our busy schedules, especially with the current blurred boundaries between our professional and personal lives that are both taking place in the four walls of our homes, how can we possibly consider finding yet more time for teacher development? Well, even small changes have a big impact, and while we may not be explicitly searching for impact, personally I feel it would be a shame to think we just ‘did our best’ and not what was ‘specifically required’, in order to meet learner needs and reach learning objectives.

Professional development begins with personal development

I don’t think I’m alone when I say that a bad night’s sleep or a personal issue has a negative effect on my day and how I perform at work? What I am saying is that our personal lives can affect our professional output, so if we try to develop personally it will also have an impact professionally. I recently took a free course on FutureLearn about



well-being and resilience at work. While this does not directly relate to classroom practice, it focuses on reliance and adaptability at work, both of which I have had to learn quite quickly when using one specific online platform for teaching that crashes regularly, and that does not allow students who have poor internet connections to download documents or turn their cameras on. Online teaching is full of little challenges that test our resilience, patience, and adaptability because we are not in control of the technology we are using. There are lots of free courses both on FutureLearn and Coursera so I would recommend having a look, because now more than ever it felt really good to belong to an online community, discuss work issues with others and learn how to do things differently.

Learn a language

You may have dabbled in learning a language through one of the plethora of apps or courses available today, but how often have you put yourself in your learners’ shoes and thought about what it feels like to be a language learner? Not many of us actually learnt about the grammar of our first language at school, yet here we are trying to explain it clearly and succinctly to other learners who probably haven’t learnt about grammar at school either. It is easier to gauge comprehension in a classroom but not so much online. What better way to understand how it feels than to choose a language you know nothing about and try to teach yourself? What is it you like about the materials you are using, what is it

that really helps you understand the mechanics of the language, where are the materials or the explanation weak? These are all questions you can reflect on and map the responses for the strengths and weaknesses onto your own teaching practice.

Bullet point reflection

Bullet journaling is a personal organisation method using scheduling, reminders, and to-do lists to organise your personal life. The idea is based on the tenet of tracking the past, organising the present, and planning for the future and having that all in one organised place, so no more to-do lists on post it notes or scraps of paper.

This year I have started using the bullet point idea for my own reflective practice and action research in my usual desk diary. At the beginning of each day I look at what I have organised (the present) and decide how best I am going to approach the tasks. At the end of the day, I look back on how webinars, classes, training sessions, researching and writing went (the past), and bullet point a few reflections. I then look forward to the next day (the future) and see if I can employ any new strategies to help me improve the way I approached something. The next morning I will look back at the previous day and reflect on what I did and how I

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can make changes or improve on the things I was not satisfied with. It all sounds like a lengthy process, but if you use a desk diary anyway, it does not require much more effort. Despite the option for digital reminders and notes on my desktop and phone, I personally find the physical process of writing with pen and paper more cathartic, but I am sure you could use the same strategy in digital format and it would be equally effective.

Write an article

And of course, last but by no means least, there is the wonderful opportunity given to us by MET to put our thoughts into writing and share them with the teaching and learning community globally, by contributing an article. Writing is the best form of reflective practice and can help us pinpoint areas for improvement and/or interest that can be worked on through action points. For example, if you write an article about a topic you know little about, it can encourage you to research it to find out more before putting your ideas in writing. Or maybe you write about something you feel confident about, but even then there is always room for growth, so you can ask yourself if you put into practice the suggestions you are proposing. As Buddha once said, ‘An idea that is developed and put into action is more important than an idea that exists only as an idea.’

In the course of writing this article I have taken the topic area suggested by the magazine, reflected on my own personal experiences and ideas, given them some sort of structure and, finally, tried to put them down in a way other teachers throughout the world will understand and find a link with. In terms of teacher and personal development, that is a good exercise worth repeating.

References

Ur P (1996) *A Course in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press



Kat Robb has been involved in ELT since 1995, and during this time she has spoken at conferences, authored, taught, and trained teachers globally. Her passion lies within educational technology, which has seen her move increasingly in the direction of authoring digital teaching and learning solutions, including AI and autonomous systems. She can be contacted at trinarobb@hotmail.com

