

Meta-planning as a collaborative approach to creating a preessional summer teacher development programme

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Abstract

This case study explores the implementation of a metaplanning approach in the collaborative creation of a professional development programme for preessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers. The Birmingham International Academy's preessional English programme is attended by over 1000 students across various course durations and is taught by over 90 EAP practitioners. In order to offer development opportunities for teaching colleagues, the summer continuing professional development (CPD) programme provides staff with time and space to explore new approaches in English language teaching such as pedagogy, inclusive practice, and innovations in technology. Before planning the final CPD programme, the metaplanning approach allowed teachers to express their initial concerns and aspirations related to teaching on the preessional programme, which were then grouped thematically through discussion and debate with other teachers. The final stage of prioritisation encouraged teachers to recognise their immediate professional development needs. The outcomes of the metaplanning approach were used to inform the creation of a teacher development programme based on the needs and aspirations of preessional teachers. Throughout our community of practice, teachers were then invited to come forward to facilitate workshops based on a particular theme. This innovative approach to collaborative CPD programme design may be adapted to support decision-making and collaborative project planning in other areas across the University.

Introduction

This case study will demonstrate the value of adopting a metaplanning approach to the collaborative creation of a professional development programme for preessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teachers. Metaplanning could be defined as the design of the planning process, generating ideas which are then grouped thematically before being prioritised (Wilensky, 1981). The end result is a visual image of the discussion; links between themes, similarities, contrasts are highlighted on the metaplan. Within the context of the Birmingham International Academy (BIA), this approach affords teachers the opportunity to put forward their initial concerns and possible aspirations/interests, which could be addressed through professional development activities which are then grouped thematically through discussion and debate with other teachers in the group. The final stage of prioritisation, whilst recognising that priorities can and do change, encourages teachers to recognise their immediate professional development needs. The outcomes of the metaplanning approach are then used to inform the creation of a programme of professional development activities based on the needs and aspirations of preessional teachers. This approach could potentially be of use to education leaders, such as heads of education or programme leads in other contexts.

Background

A key aim for the CPD co-ordination team at the BIA was to move away from a more transmissive 'training' approach to CPD by getting teaching colleagues more involved with professional development activities. Kennedy (2005) proposes a 'spectrum of CPD models' (Fig.1) which moves from transmission to transformative. The metaplanning approach falls between the community of practice and action research models proposed by Kennedy, both of which offer increasing capacity for professional autonomy, and could have more of a transformative impact on practice. The method affords participants to be part of the planning process by offering their thoughts and ideas as to what could be included within the summer CPD programme.

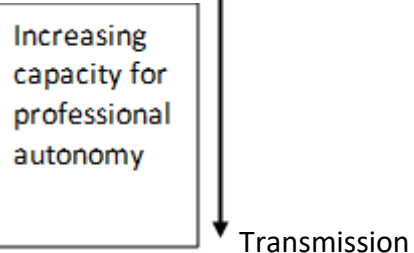
Model of CPD	Purpose of model
The training model The award-bearing model The deficit model The cascade model	
The standards-based model The coaching/mentoring model The community of practice model	Transitional
The action research model The transformative model	Transformative

Figure 1. Models of CPD and purpose (Kennedy, 2005, p. 248)

The agentic nature of this approach places the onus on teachers to reflect on their own professional development needs without co-ordinators imposing topics for CPD workshops and events in a top-down manner. This impactful and innovative approach to collaboration is easily modified and could be conducted online using synchronous platforms. Metaplanning could be straightforwardly implemented in other contexts where collaborative decision-making takes place.

Case study: summer preessional English programme 2022

The summer preessional English programme at the BIA welcomes over 1000 international students over the course of the summer on programmes of varying durations from 20 weeks to 4 weeks for unconditional offer holders. These programmes are taught by qualified EAP practitioners who bring different levels of experience and expertise to the team.

An integral part of the preessional is the professional development programme offered to teaching colleagues. During the teacher induction, a session is dedicated to teachers’ sharing of ideas and opinions on CPD and possible thoughts for workshops based on immediate needs and aspirations. In order to gather this information, an approach called ‘metaplanning’ was piloted during the summer of 2022 with 89 teachers. This method was innovative insofar that it had not been implemented before within the CPD programme

planning process and, after discussion with the Preessional Management Team, it was decided to trial the approach in order to ascertain the professional development needs of our teaching colleagues.

Metapanning is a collaborative approach to gathering qualitative data that goes beyond superficial identification and sharing of ideas (Wilensky, 1981). This method of data collection has its roots in business (Campagna, Ivanov and Massa, 2014) where it is used to support decision-making and problem-solving, however, it has applications in action research as a qualitative data collection method (Lawlor *et al.*, 2016). One key aspect of metapanning is stakeholder engagement. This involves bringing together different groups that have a stake in the outcome of the planning process. Ensuring that all stakeholders are represented and have a say in the planning process can help to build consensus and ensure that the final plan reflects the needs and interests of all parties involved (Schön, 1983; Wilensky, 1981).

The metapanning approach

The focus of the activity is to gain a deeper understanding of colleagues' immediate needs and concerns regarding teaching on the preessional programme as well as aspirations and interests that could be addressed through CPD.

It is possible to conduct the activity using a traditional approach (flipchart paper and post-it notes) or digitally (using Padlet or Jamboard). This case study is based on the traditional approach. Two pieces of flipchart paper are required; one titled 'Needs/concerns' and the other 'Passions/aspirations'. Each participant is given six post-it notes on which they write three immediate needs and three aspirations linked to teaching EAP. These are then posted to respective flipchart pages.

Working collaboratively, participants then discuss the points with the aim of grouping them thematically. Once categorised, the group assign a suitable title for each cluster of post-it notes e.g., 'Student engagement', 'Corpus linguistics'. The action of discussing and justifying goes beyond the simple identification and presentation of ideas and gives participants

agency to put forward contributions based on their experience and professional development needs. It is also an inclusive method of involving all participants who may not usually contribute to such discussions.

The final stage of the metapanning process involves prioritising the themes based on individuals’ wishes. This could be done using adhesive dots or felt pens with which participants indicate their preferences; three dots for highest priority, two dots for mid priority and one dot for low priority. It is important to acknowledge that priorities change over time, however, once data have been collected, they can be revisited year-on-year to add or adjust priorities accordingly.

Example themes from metapanning

The data collected by the metapanning process are anonymous in nature and it is difficult to assign comments to particular participants which may encourage them to be open regarding their needs and aspirations. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the overarching themes proposed by teachers across the different programmes.

20-week	15-week	10-week	6-week
Hybrid teaching; Inclusive Practice. (Teachers n=2)	Teaching Methodology; Classroom Management; Student/Teacher Wellbeing; Personalisation; Motivation & Engagement; Challenging assumptions; Academic curiosity. (Teachers n=5)	Motivation & Engagement; Time constraints/management; Inclusive Practice; Pedagogy; Cultural Awareness; Pronunciation; Technology. (Teachers n=31)	Technology-related; Student/Teacher Wellbeing; Learner Engagement; English as a Lingua Franca; Classroom Management; Autonomy; Materials design; Teaching methodology; New technologies; Student Voice. (Teachers n=51)

Table 1. Overarching themes collected by metapanning

Whilst some of these themes appear quite broad, this offers a wider scope for teachers who express a wish to facilitate a workshop. Guidance was available to teachers from CPD coordinators who may have required support with planning and focusing their workshop.

Links to the community of practice CPD model

Wenger (1998) posits that a community of practice is a group of people who share a common profession or interest and who engage in ongoing learning and knowledge sharing in order to improve their skills and knowledge in that area. This is also alluded to by Boreham (2000, cited in Kennedy, 2005) who states that there is an added value in learning communities where collective knowledge could support the development of individuals. The goal of a community of practice is to facilitate ongoing learning and professional development, and to foster a sense of community and connection among its members.

The metaplanning approach provided colleagues with the opportunity to reflect on their professional practice and experience, articulate issues and aspirations that could be addressed through CPD activities and possibly put forward proposals for workshops that they would consider facilitating.

By bringing colleagues' immediate needs and aspirations to the fore, we were able to tailor our CPD provision to meet these needs whilst offering teachers the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience of a particular topic (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Although voluntary, there is generally a high uptake of teachers wishing to facilitate workshops throughout the summer as well as presenting at our internal, annual CPD conference event in August.

Conclusion

In conclusion, metaplanning is a key aspect of effective project management, as it helps to ensure that the planning process itself is well-organised and efficient. Additionally, by keeping the big picture in mind and considering the long-term impact on learning and teaching, in this case, metaplanning could help departments to make more strategic and sustainable decisions in a collaborative and inclusive manner. Overall, the benefits of

metaplanning are numerous, and it is a valuable tool that gathers rich, insightful data to inform future decisions at a strategic level and could be used by heads of education and programme leads when evaluating programmes and planning for future iterations.

References

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