Supporting Emergency Remote Teaching via a Responsive Professional Development Support System

Jennie Roloff Rothman, Ryan Lege, Euan Bonner, and Masaaki Ishii

Abstract This chapter outlines the design and implementation of an emergency remote teaching (ERT) online support system at a Japanese university. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors, holding the unique position of overseeing professional development and technology, immediately began preparing a training program for teachers to accommodate shifting to online teaching. The authors developed a holistic continuing professional learning and development (CPLD) support system in order to prepare over 70 lecturers for the transition. The approach employed was based on core principles of Drago-Severson's learning-oriented model of adult learning (Leading adult learning: supporting adult development in our schools. Corwin Press. https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/leading-adult-learning/book230518, 2009), alongside the concepts of distributed leadership (Spillane J, Distributed leadership. Jossey-Bass, 2006) and leadership-as-practice (Raelin JA, Leadership-as-practice. Taylor & Francis, New York, 2016). By conducting ongoing needs analysis throughout the semester, the support team was able to establish a dynamic, responsive system capable of evolving as needs arose. Teachers were surveyed to collect their feedback, and their suggestions for improvement were implemented. The lessons learned here may serve as a foundation for the development of dynamic CPLD programs that prioritize educators' needs.

1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the design and implementation of an emergency remote teaching (ERT) online support system at a Japanese university and discusses the effectiveness of the methods employed for the continuous professional development of educators in their online teaching. The authors, holding the unique position of

J. Roloff Rothman (✉) · R. Lege · E. Bonner · M. Ishii
Kanda University of International Studies, Chiba, Japan
e-mail: rothman-j@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

overseeing professional development and technology support, immediately began preparing a training program for teachers to accommodate shifting to online teaching. Coordinated bilingual communication with university leadership, educators, and ICT specialists allowed for the development of a system that supported both Japanese speakers and English speakers, thus ensuring all university educators had access to ERT support. Conducting needs analysis and feedback surveys throughout the semester allowed for the establishment of a dynamic, responsive framework capable of evolving as needs arose. This chapter will focus on the support systems, English-speaking educators' perceptions of the system, and lessons learned. Finally, the chapter will conclude with how this case study has informed ongoing CPLD at this institution and how it may be transferable to other teaching contexts.

2 Literature Review

Truly effective continuing professional learning and development (CPLD) in education, recognized in both Western and Japanese literature, must be context-specific and based on the needs of the school and students (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004; Guskey, 2003; Kinugawa & Tachi, 2003; Arimoto, 2005). In addition to its being tailored to the institution, Guskey (2003) determined the following elements as being characteristics of effective professional development:

- Enhancement of teacher knowledge (content and pedagogic)
- Promotion of collegiate and collaborative exchange
- Providing sufficient time and well-organized resources
- Alignment of reform with high-quality instruction
- Building leadership capacity

There is also extensive research recognizing a positive connection between mentoring or improved teacher leadership and meaningful CPLD, as they contribute to sustained collective, collaborative practices such as adapting existing materials for online use (Guskey, 2014; Vernon-Dodson & Floyd, 2012). Supportive environments can also implement Drago-Severson's (2009) pillar practices: mentoring (experienced educators supporting newer ones), collegial inquiry (also known as reflection or reflective practice), creating leadership roles (providing growth opportunities), and teaming (collective decision-making, for example, about instructional design). Furthermore, rather than leadership being top-down or centralized, reconceptualizing it as *distributed leadership* and *leadership-as-practice* recognizes that the work of leading an organization or activities is often a democratic, community effort that supports the growth of all parties involved (Raelin, 2016; Spillane, 2006). Content and pedagogical knowledge are also critical in CPLD (Crandall & Christison, 2016; Richards, 2010). These beliefs and approaches formed the foundation of the CPLD system described in this research and guided preparation for the rapid transition to online learning (Hodges et al., 2020). It also strove to foster the

growth of ICT literacy through higher order creation and evaluation activities (Churches, 2007; Puentedura, 2006) using digital technologies.

3   Context and Background

The focus of this case study is a private, four-year foreign language university in Japan. At this institution, students can learn a variety of languages but must also take compulsory English language courses. For context, the bulk of the first- and second-year courses are taught in English by fluent or L1 speaker English lecturers, predominantly non-Japanese. As most do not speak Japanese, this situation necessitates English-medium professional support (Kushida et al., 2018). The support described in this chapter is provided by two professional development specialists, one focusing on information and communications technologies (ICT) and the other on teacher development, as well as two members of the university's technology research center.

3.1   Support at the University Level

As countries around the world went into lockdown, the authors of this chapter began closely observing educational approaches, as well as teacher and student reactions to sudden shifts to online learning. It was particularly important to address teachers' need to get up to speed with online methods of content delivery, models, and methodologies. The authors compiled resources introducing the different online approaches (synchronous, asynchronous, hybrid, hyflex). Sessions were held explaining the benefits and drawbacks of each online education method, and teachers were able to comment, ask questions, and provide feedback on the different models. This step was crucial as it empowered teachers by allowing participation in the decision-making process. Following this, a plan was drafted to employ a combination of asynchronous and synchronous online delivery to help teachers manage their workload as well as help mitigate the cognitive demands of online learning. Furthermore, Zoom was chosen specifically because its breakout room features best-allowed core curriculum activities to be carried out with minimal changes. With a model and vision in place, the administration decided to significantly delay the start of the semester allowing for the preparation and training of faculty. The university-wide online transition team was divided into groups that ran three support tracks simultaneously: support for new students, current students, and faculty. The decision to focus on all stakeholders simultaneously was made in accordance with literature that recommends a more holistic approach, which grounds professional development in student needs (Gelles et al., 2020; Holloway, 2003). To support faculty, a website was built as a central hub for information concerning the

basic structure of online classes, how to design them, and information about the digital tools available to implement them smoothly. In addition, online workshops were held three to four times daily over a period of a month to give teachers the opportunity to become familiar with the online tools that would be used to facilitate classes at the university. In these sessions, mock online classes were created, and Zoom breakout rooms were demonstrated, with teachers participating in the role of student or teacher as they preferred.

3.2 English-Medium Support

Initially, all lecturers were presented with an in-depth plan describing the format of online lessons and given ample opportunity to ask questions, comment, and suggest revisions to the initial plan. Documents created by the support team suggested modifying the curricula to adopt a 50% synchronous to asynchronous balance as well as reducing the duration of synchronous sessions to a length of 45–60 min. This is in line with literature about the unique cognitive demands of online lessons (Hollis & Was, 2016). Additionally, during the first week of preparation, the online support team provided academics with a detailed CPLD support plan featuring not only a schedule of workshops, consultations, and support sessions but also resources for familiarizing themselves with online teaching and learning. This structure aimed to prioritize lecturers' professional autonomy by providing a basic framework within which to adapt and plan their lessons. That is to say, it avoided overly prescriptive guidelines while giving those preferring structure something concrete to work within. Following orientations on the relevant online tools, the next key step in the support plan was to support teachers in adapting course materials to fit the online context, which was done by grouping teachers for collaborative materials adaptation of the core courses.

Course coordinators mediated the groups and gathered input from the lecturers about their needs and concerns. Following this, a series of workshops were conducted under the principle of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), which recognizes that leadership can be an organizational quality that is spread across multiple leaders, structures, and situations. The workshop series began with peer-led sessions, which aimed at increasing the base of expert knowledge. They focused on how to maintain the current curriculum through the effective use of appropriate online tools. Teachers trained in one session thereafter led question and answer sessions for other teachers. In conjunction with this, an English-medium online hub was created in the recommended learning management system (LMS) for questions and materials sharing. By participating, teachers learned how to use this LMS, building skills they would eventually need for their lessons. Following workshops on online tools and teaching methods, question and answer sessions were conducted to help teachers more concretely consider how to adapt their classes. In the final preparation week, practice sessions were scheduled for every teacher to practice online teaching with other teachers acting as students.

Through the variety of workshops, resources, and practical opportunities to practice and develop skills, the hope was that teachers would be prepared. However, it became clear that once the semester began, the busy routine of teaching, giving feedback, and planning would necessitate even more support for teachers. Providing support to teachers teaching from home without the capacity for informal in-person interactions was a huge challenge. The ongoing support system would need to reach as many teachers as possible while being dynamic enough to fit the varied demands of adapting a system, curriculum, and pedagogy to a new paradigm.

3.3   During the Semester

In order to reach as many teachers as possible while utilizing everyone's knowledge, a real-time support chat was created in addition to the English-medium support hub and email. For the week of the semester, the online support team managed this chat, handling teaching or tech support issues and any time-sensitive queries. Subsequently, the online support team sought the assistance of the university's computer committee. Committee members made sure there was at least one person available during teaching hours to assist with time-sensitive issues. This would allow for dedicated teachers with specific skills and knowledge to provide support to the community. Teachers were also encouraged to utilize the same chat application as an additional communication avenue for their students. The computer committee also provided regular assistance in the support hub, which was used by many teachers institution-wide to share ideas or materials and get advice about specific issues relating to the teaching and learning process.

To continue addressing teachers' longer term professional development, the teacher development specialist provided a set schedule of office hours. Unlike previous years, setting specific availability was deemed more suitable for the online context. During these appointments, lecturers discussed, among other things, classroom practices, publication opportunities, and participating in the academic community. Hearing and responding to the needs of both teachers and students as the semester progressed was critical to making sure that as many voices as possible were heard and that their needs were shared and addressed.

Three confidential surveys of the English-speaking teaching staff were conducted throughout the semester. Surveys for Japanese faculty and the student body were conducted in a similar manner. The teacher and student survey results were shared university-wide. These surveys helped identify common issues and helped the support team to provide potential solutions. This was an important way of connecting teachers and helping them to better understand how to improve their lessons using everyone's collective experiences.

To manage the curriculum, the role of course coordinators was further adapted to the online situation. More distributed leadership was implemented as an approach to gain buy-in from course coordinators, making them more involved in key decisions than previous years. Meetings were held to gather coordinators' (and through

them, teachers') opinions on how best to adapt the courses and deal with potential challenges. One idea implemented from coordinators was to group teachers by the level of students they taught to encourage collaboration and reduce redundant materials development.

4 Methodology

As previously mentioned, a key part of the support structure implemented throughout the semester involved conducting needs analysis through regular surveying of the teachers. The initial surveys informed adjustments to the system in place to meet current needs. The final survey contained similar questions to prior ones, with some additional focus on the overall experience of ERT (see Appendix).

Open-ended survey items were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to look for patterns in the data. This allowed the voices of respondents to determine the emergent themes (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Approaching data analysis with pre-set themes would have resulted in crucial feedback and points for improvement being overlooked. The survey data gathered were used to answer the following research questions:

1. What were teacher perceptions of the support provided?
2. What specific benefits of the support did teachers identify?
3. To what degree did teachers feel successful/comfortable with their online teaching?

5 Analysis and Discussion

Out of 68 people in the department, 39 (57%) responded to the survey. Respondents indicated that overall, they were satisfied with their online teaching, and 2.5% (1) were extremely satisfied, 40% (16) were very satisfied, and 55% (21) were somewhat satisfied. Only one respondent indicated that they were somewhat dissatisfied.

Also, 82.5% (33) of respondents indicated that the delayed start was sufficient for preparing online lessons; however, many recognized its limitations when it was unclear what they were preparing for. One teacher commented, "I am new and had an extremely difficult time at the beginning but now that it's over, I feel much more prepared. If we are online again next semester I will be more confident." Teacher responses indicated that, unsurprisingly, teachers with different teaching and planning styles responded differently, though, on balance, most were positive about the experience. For institutions considering delayed starts to prepare for unexpected circumstances, it is important for both administrators and educators to remember that preparation time, while helpful, may be of limited use, so expectations should remain realistic.

5.1   Issues Experienced During the Online Semester

When asked to indicate where they had significant issues, teachers seemed divided on how they felt. Likert scale data about adapting materials for online learning indicated 36% (14) had no issue, 23% (9) rarely had issues, 38% (15) reported occasional issues, and one reported significant issues. However, one-third (7 out of 21) of the open-ended comments focused on the struggles they had, specifically regarding the time it took to prepare, adapt, or create materials from scratch for the online context. One teacher said, "I am trying to re-think the course from the ground up for online-only. It takes time." Another remarked, "I think rather than adapting materials to online contexts, I tended to create new materials instead. It was easier to start from scratch … than to try to change something intended for a traditional classroom to an online medium."

The time issue was borne out repeatedly over the semester in anecdotal comments received or via the distributed leadership structure of courses. While the support team endeavored to create a system that encouraged adaptation of existing materials, depending on the curriculum, this proved more or less practical. Some courses easily lent themselves to online instruction, such as the writing or reading courses, while others that were based on classroom group or pair interaction were more challenging. Program administrators should keep such factors, as well as the requisite preparation time, in mind when placing demands on teachers in unforeseen circumstances.

5.2   Reflections on Successes and Challenges

When respondents were asked to explain the successes and challenges of the semester, a number of themes emerged. Only those which seemed to directly link to the support program implemented are included in this study. More specifically, teachers shared their positive perceptions of how classes ran or how well they felt they utilized technology. Several teachers stated that "the semester went better than expected." Others noted that they experienced "smoother integration of technology [as they] became far more adept at using existing tech."

Regarding challenges, teachers experienced issues with time allocation, both in the personal and professional spheres. Some lamented the excessive planning time needed, while others identified missed opportunities for synchronous teacher–student interaction. One educator noted:

> I'm really disappointed that I wasn't able to spend more time interacting with students one-on-one or in small groups. At the beginning of the semester, I thought I would be able to arrange tutorials to make sure students were proceeding OK, but with the workload it would have been extremely difficult.

For others, this also translated into delays in returning work to students or providing assessment on certain tasks. As the amount of marking grew, they noted that work/

life balance suffered. Again, administrators should anticipate the real burden of online education and work to provide support that can mitigate time demands. Suggestions include setting realistic work expectations and encouraging workplace collaboration to reduce materials production burden.

5.3   Perceived Helpfulness of Activities and Level of Support

Overall, teachers felt supported, with 10% (4) indicating that they felt extremely supported, 59% (23) very supported, and 26% (10) somewhat supported. The remaining 5% (2) said that they felt somewhat unsupported. When respondents were prompted to make additional comments or indicate what other support they would have liked to receive, two themes emerged: opinions regarding specific online professional development support activities and appreciation for the support provided.

Teachers identified several support activities and tools as being helpful. The English-medium online hub and tools-focused workshops were described as "helpful, especially at the beginning of the semester." The just-in-time tech support provided through the chat group was "extremely useful in helping to solve tech issues in a timely manner" and even considered "a good idea" by those who did not participate. Another noted that "teacher surveys helped me to reflect on how things were going and … reaffirm that things were progressing positively." One person, however, did comment that "when the online shift started, there was an overabundance of articles published on how to adapt … many were commonsensical, vague suggestions that didn't actually help with developing an online curriculum." This highlights the importance of institutions carefully curating the type, quality, and quantity of tools made available when providing information and resources for CPLD to be effective.

Many respondents also expressed appreciation for co-workers and the support provided. "Having small groups to work with on each course was extremely helpful, and I'm very glad we had that," remarked one educator; while another commented that "the PD and … management staff … have done a great job under extremely difficult circumstances … [They] made very quick and strong decisions, and that meant I was able to concentrate on what to teach, rather than how to teach." One teacher was "very thankful to be working within such a professional environment during these difficult times." That so many educators recognized the challenge of the situation and the work being done for their benefit is encouraging for the field at a time when negativity would be understandable. Carefully selecting context-relevant activities and making clear decisions will be helpful not only for institutions looking to provide quality CPLD but also for their educators as they can focus on teaching better rather than getting overwhelmed by teaching situations.

The cumulative results of this survey allowed the authors to evaluate the effectiveness of the program implemented in the first semester and also provided insights into what support was needed or desired for the second term. The results informed

a reflective document shared ahead of the break between terms. This document contained advice on home teaching, solutions to common problems, ideas for making online activities more interactive, links to resources, and tips on maintaining mental and physical health. Without the feedback received, the online support team would have been unable to focus this document on the areas most salient to teacher needs and requests. This gave teachers resources to better plan for future online teaching. Though this was specific to the context described in this paper, the practice of summarizing and documenting practices to share internally and externally is a universally useful approach.

6   Lessons Learned

On the whole, the support offered contributed to a successful transition to online teaching. The approach pursued highlighted the importance of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and teaming (Drago-Severson, 2009) for getting teacher buy-in and providing a level of support that would be impossible for an individual or small team to offer. Distributing leadership roles contributed to the development of a more democratized model of CPLD, where the voice of the teachers informed the support provided. This approach ensured that more of the teachers were invested in the outcomes of the CPLD support and contributed to the services offered. Furthermore, this model helped facilitate the collection of feedback, which guided decisions concerning the support already provided and what was further needed to meet teachers' needs. To accommodate this feedback and change loop, CPLD approaches need to have flexibility ingrained in their design. Had the authors designed a set plan with little room for adjustment or modification, they would have been less able to respond to the constantly evolving situation.

The team further realized the importance of offering a variety of support that was accessible in multiple ways. No single approach, no matter how well designed and executed, can reach and be effective for every teacher (Guskey, 2014). Especially in a dispersed online environment, it is easy for people in need of support and training to fall through the cracks. If both communication and training are conducted through various channels and methods, the odds of successfully reaching more educators are greater. This was achieved by reaching out through regularly scheduled meetings and also providing informal drop in session hours.

Within this disparate environment, casual, spontaneous in-person interactions were not possible; rather, CPLD support had to be carefully organized, scheduled, and carried out in a formalized manner. Essentially, every interaction became a meeting. Creating opportunities for drop-ins was found to be an adequate middle ground between scheduled online meetings and unstructured free-form in-person exchange. The teacher development specialist offered weekly regular drop-in office hours twice a week, and informal lunch chats were hosted by different teachers each day. In this context, providing these office hours and lunch sessions appeared adequate, but this system could have been organized more effectively. To encourage

greater participation and reach more teachers, perhaps having the teacher develop-
ment drop-in hours distributed among senior lecturers would have been better.
Institutions could do well to implement a more flexible system involving more
teachers and more opportunities for informal interactions.

While flexibility is key to effective CPLD, setting certain boundaries in an online
environment is also important. One challenge unique to the online environment is
the separation of personal and work life, or the lack thereof. Establishing strict work
time boundaries by limiting after-hours email communication and discouraging off-
the-clock work interactions are effective ways to promote a healthier work–life bal-
ance. This can not only protect teachers' mental health but also reduce self-imposed
pressure to keep working. It also has the added benefit of reducing stress on those
providing support to said teachers.

Challenges notwithstanding, the support team found that many CPLD practices
developed in response to the pandemic were not only useful for that context but
could be applied in the future as well. Distributing tasks and responsibility to a
wider base of teachers, who may be outside of the institutional leadership structure,
could form an important base for future CPLD offerings. It is clear that going for-
ward, online education will remain an important component of higher education in
most contexts and CPLD practices based on meeting its unique demands will thus
be vital. Looking towards an uncertain future, where circumstances may continue to
drastically alter both the means and mediums of education, CPLD efforts need flu-
idity to adapt to changing contexts. Flexible approaches focused on empowering
and enabling individuals will be key to CPLD that can deal with the demands of a
changing world.

Appendix: Summary of Relevant Questions from the Final Survey

Survey Items
1a. How satisfied are you as a teacher with your classes this semester? (6-point Likert scale) 1b. Were the three additional weeks in April enough time to prepare for lessons? (Yes/no plus open-ended) 1c. Any additional comments about the above two questions? (Open-ended comments)

3a. Were any of the following significant issues during the semester? (4-point Likert scale for each item)
    ● Creating asynchronous materials
    ● Instructions and scaffolding
    ● Communicating with students when they are in breakout rooms
    ● Providing opportunities for students to talk to peers
    ● Providing opportunities for students to talk to the teacher
    ● Managing Google Classroom
    ● Adapting materials to the online context
3b. Any additional comments about the above? (Open-ended question)

4. What do you think went well this semester? (Open-ended question)
5. What do you think went poorly this semester? (Open-ended question)

7. To what degree were the following helpful (4-point Likert scale, "did not participate" option added):
    ● English-medium online support *Google Classroom*
    ● Real-time tech support *Line OpenChat*
    ● Workshops
    ● Zoom practice lessons
    ● Open PD office hours
    ● Teacher surveys
    ● Student survey results

8. How supported did you feel overall this semester? (Open-ended question)
10. What comments or feedback do you have? What help do you wish you had received? (Open-ended question)

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