11 Open practices as a catalyst for language teachers' professional development

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Abstract

This small-scale pilot study enquired into the Open Educational Practices (OEPs) that freelance English language teachers in Switzerland are engaging in and the role these played in their Continuing Professional Development (CPD). Participants are members of a teaching association and work in adult education. Freelancers are often faced with precarious working conditions which can impact on CPD opportunities. Research has shown that engaging in OEP can open up meaningful learning opportunities *in situ*. However, these projects have mainly been in higher education settings where support and training has been offered. Hence, this study explored what freelancers are doing in their natural settings. This project focussed on activities associated with open teaching practices and digital networking practices. Findings are very limited but suggest that open practices can act as an enabler for learning opportunities that lead to knowledge development and improved digital literacy and literacy skills and language skills.

Keywords: professional development, open educational resources, open educational practices, freelance English language teachers.

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1.   Context of the project

This pilot study is part of an ongoing doctoral research project. It investigated the role that OEP plays in the CPD of freelance English language teachers in Switzerland. Participants are members of a specific teaching association and mainly work in adult education.

The association's primary focus is to promote CPD to keep language teachers in diverse educational sectors up to date with the current English language teaching landscape (see Table 1). Networking and sharing of resources through open platforms and social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter are encouraged. Freelancers are defined here as hourly-paid teachers whose employment is dependent on demand (i.e. student numbers).

Table 1.   Summary CPD opportunities

Format	Frequency
Face-to-Face	
National Conference	1 x year (2 days)
Professional Development Day	1 x year
Regional activities, e.g. workshops, informal meetings	Varies (12 Regions)
Special Interest Group (SIG) activities, e.g. informal meetings	Varies (12 SIGs)
Reflective Practice Groups	Varies
Content-based/Digital and Print	
Library (Print only)	Always accessible
eNewsletter	Monthly
Journal (peer-reviewed)	3 x year
Website (diverse resources)	Always accessible
SIG eNewsletters	Varies
Social media: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube	Always accessible

Freelancers quite commonly combine hourly contracts or uncontracted work with independent teaching. Consequently, fluctuating employment conditions can impact on wages, CPD opportunities, and motivation. They often work alone, which can lead to a sense of isolation and disconnection from peers. These identified tensions seem to align with those experienced by hourly-paid

language teachers in Europe (Beaven et al., 2010; Borthwick & Gallagher-Brett, 2014; Stickler & Emke, 2015).

It is common for freelancers to cater to the needs of different levels of language learners and diverse content areas at any one time. This entails personalising lessons to suit students' needs by creating or adapting resources, digital or non-digital, to supplement or replace coursebook materials which can be costly and time-consuming, particularly where teachers are responsible for supplying resources. Integrating Open Educational Resources (OERs) into their teaching practices and taking part in OEP could mitigate these issues as well as offer students benefits in terms of engagement with more authentic and relevant resources.

Conceptualisations of OEP vary with some being OER focussed and others being more expansive (Cronin & MacLaren, 2018) to include practices such as using open technologies and open teaching practices. This study drew on the Cape Town Open Education Declaration, which views OERs and the open practices associated with them as a vital component of open education, but "also draws upon open technologies that facilitate collaborative, flexible learning and the open sharing of teaching practices that empower educators to benefit from the best ideas of their colleagues" (CTOED, 2018, para.4).

Open technologies such as YouTube, Flickr, and social media tools can facilitate the location, curation, and sharing of OERs (Comas-Quinn & Borthwick, 2015). The affordances of social media tools enable accessible networking where teaching practices and ideas can be shared (Wesely, 2013), personal learning networks can develop (Veletsianos, 2013), and OERs can be discovered or mediated (Hegarty, 2015). This is particularly relevant to freelancers who find themselves working in isolation as this can hinder opportunities to share expertise and peer learning.

2.   Intended outcomes

Engaging in practices with openly licensed content such as OERs can be challenging. It requires awareness and conceptual knowledge of OERs and

licensing frameworks such as Creative Commons (CC) licences[2], as well as understanding the potential benefits of OEP and the value for the individual. CC licences enable users to engage in activities as outlined in Wiley's (2014) 5R framework (retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute). However, the type of CC licence employed can restrict some of these permissions and impact on how resources can be used and shared. Furthermore, sourcing and adapting OERs and using them effectively and confidently in teaching contexts can be problematic when digital literacy skills are inadequate. This is further compounded when access to meaningful CPD that addresses these needs is lacking.

CPD plays a significant role in the learning and development of teachers throughout their careers and is in some research strands inextricably linked to the learning outcomes of students. In contrast to mainstream education in Switzerland, there is no overarching CPD policy for freelancers. Hence, accountability often lies with the individual and is dependent on factors such as self-motivation, agency, personal changing needs, and a willingness to develop professionally (Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016). This can be facilitated in part by joining teaching associations, networking, and by learning through tasks embedded in, or connected to, daily teaching activities (Littlejohn & Hood, 2017) whereby bottom-up approaches to CPD are foregrounded.

Top-down approaches to CPD are often critiqued for being unsustainable, inauthentic, unrelated to practice, and do not align with teachers' needs (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015; Webster-Wright, 2009). Consequently, there has been a call for research that focusses on learning opportunities that arise from everyday practices (Evans, 2018; Webster-Wright, 2009). Thus, understanding what freelancers are doing and why in relation to OEPs, and the impact on CPD, can assist the association in supporting them in activities that are embedded into their teaching contexts and consequently, aid in furthering their development in a meaningful way.

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2. https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/

Some small-scale qualitative studies involving language teachers (Borthwick & Gallagher-Brett, 2014; Comas-Quinn & Fitzgerald, 2013) have highlighted that there are potential benefits in terms of skills and knowledge development to be gained from engaging with OERs and practices associated with the creation, use, and sharing of these resources.

Hence, this study aimed to capture the value of OEPs in terms of knowledge and skills development from the perspective of freelancers in their natural settings. It explicitly sought to explore and understand:

- types of open practices that freelancers are currently taking part in, if any;

- motives underpinning these practices; and

- whether taking part in these practices is perceived as an enabler for meaningful learning opportunities.

## 3. Nuts and bolts

3.1. Research design and methodology

Briefly, data was gathered for this qualitative case study via an online survey and professional conversations (Danielson, 2016). The survey was piloted on the association's National Council (NC) members (n=35) for two reasons, i.e. to test its feasibility for the main study and to avoid imposing on the membership, who will be invited to participate in the main project (2018/2019).

The questionnaire was designed so that interview participants could be identified based on sampling criteria, i.e. being a freelancer, and participation in open teaching practices and/or digital networking practices. The anticipated low survey response rate (22%, eight responded from 35 NC members) limited the survey's use in terms of analysis, but served its purpose as a means of recruiting interviewees.

Three respondents who volunteered for an interview and fitted the selection criteria were interviewed via Skype. The interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The audio-quality of one interview was poor and hence, a follow-up e-interview (Bampton & Cowton, 2002) was utilised to validate the transcription.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis model was implemented for data analysis and followed a recursive process as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.   Visualisation: phases of thematic analysis (based on Braun & Clarke, 2006)
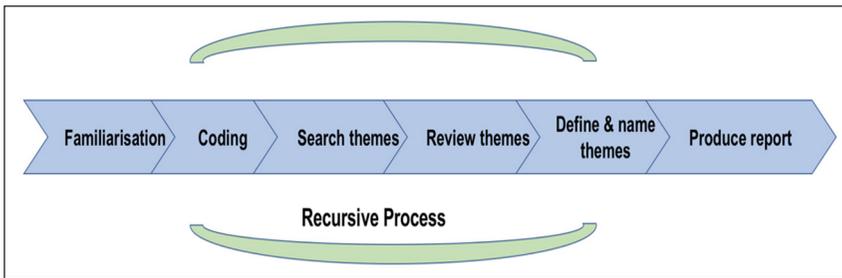
3.2.   Interview findings

Interview findings are based on data generated from two females and one male and as such are very limited (see summary Table 2). They are experienced teachers and well qualified for their role. Due to the participants being recruited from the NC, further demographics cannot be reported as anonymity has been guaranteed and it could make them identifiable. Participants are referred to as F1, F2 (female) and F3 (male).

Briefly, participants use diverse digital resources such as images, lesson plans, videos with transcripts, and comprehension tasks, but are unaware of CC licences and the term OER, despite their nuanced practices revealing that public domain and openly licensed resources are being used, in part, in their

teaching contexts. They source resources through platforms such as One Stop English, BusinessEnglishSite.com, YouTube, and Pixabay. Hence, they use a mix of educational and non-educational sites with little or no attention given to copyright restrictions or default licences. Resources are used to replace or complement course material and are shared by email, social media, or published on participants' blogs. Non-digital resources are shared in face-to-face situations.

Table 2. Summary of findings

Open Practices	Motivation	CPD
Teaching practices • use of digital resources with and without CC licenses • use of open platforms	Students' needs • provide authentic and engaging resources • gain ideas and inspiration Professional Development • stay up to date • personal learning Professional reasons • self-promotion	Improved: • knowledge (content, pedagogical, general) • digital literacy skills • language skills • literacy skills
Digital networking practices	Students' needs • source authentic and engaging resources • gain ideas and inspiration Professional reasons • alleviate isolation • personal learning • self-promotion	

Students' needs underpinned the motivation for searching, evaluating, and integrating digital resources into lessons. These activities were inhibited where course material is prescribed for the teacher, e.g. F1 commented in relation to

using digital resources, "I was teaching at [name removed] and there they had a very specific plan and so then I followed that. There… I'm not as flexible".

The need to provide students with authentic and engaging resources was a motive for adapting digital resources. F1 commented, "students seem to be much more engaged because I can get authentic texts". Adapting resources was perceived as a catalyst to promote critical reflection, e.g. "I think about my students more when you're adapting it rather than just taking a lesson and using it" (F2). Remaining fresh was also a motivational factor, i.e. "I really feel the need to be fresh for everyone, to try something completely different" (F1). This interviewee was fearful of falling behind, i.e. "I think if I don't do it I fear I become obsolete myself" (F1).

Regarding digital networking practices, F1 and F2 use Twitter to network with teachers, search for teaching content, ask questions related to teaching, and for self-promotion. F3 mainly uses LinkedIn to search for articles and resources for his students or for his own development. He connects with other teachers through the messaging system and contributes posts but feels he lacks the skills to use social media effectively for teaching purposes. F1 commented that she blogs "to connect with other teachers" because she sometimes feels lonely as a freelancer.

Concerning the impact of these practices on their CPD, some perceptions overlapped. Regarding digital literacy skills, F3 commented that, "my technical skills have really improved", and F1, "it keeps me up to date… keeps me developing. And I don't ever want to get to the point where I keep using the same old material over and over or just stay stagnant". F3, whose first language is German, perceived an improvement in his digital literacy skills and English language skills by learning how to use PowerPoint so that he could share public domain images in class. He explained that he used the English instructions which are "not necessarily the same as in German. Sometimes, I don't know all the words. You have to read a lot of things, explanations to help yourself. And I learn a lot of new terms" (F3).

Similarly, F2 felt her writing skills had improved through blogging as this involved crafting several drafts and reflecting critically before publishing. F3 commented that "I learn by doing" when asked about how he learns through these practices. F1 linked these activities to lifelong learning particularly when choosing resources for students as this improves her broader general knowledge, i.e. "that's why I do them because I want to keep learning".

All three participants commented that practices such as evaluating and adapting digital resources prompted them to reflect critically on their students' needs and appropriate methodologies. F3 wrote in the e-interview that, "each time I use a resource and adapt it or develop extra materials I feel that I learn something about how my students learn the language. It's the link between my reading and what happens in the classroom".

3.3. Discussion

Overall, there seems to be a general lack of conceptual and theoretical awareness of OERs and CC licences which concurs with related research (Falconer, McGill, Littlejohn, & Boursinou, 2013; Masterman & Wild, 2011). However, this does not act as a barrier to reusing or modifying resources, but does seem to limit what resources are being shared and where, which can constrain the potential for peer learning and reuse as they are not being shared openly with a broader audience.

Some of the practices discussed are not necessarily considered 'open' due to the lack of an open licensing framework but, nevertheless, are taking place in online social spaces. Practices associated with social media and participatory tools are enacted in nuanced ways. Sometimes participants engage actively, e.g. take part in open discussions or post comments on blogs and other times participation is peripheral, e.g. follow discussions. In some cases, the latter is linked to limited digital literacy skills and knowledge of how to use specific tools effectively. F3 commented for example, when asked about social media practices, "I don't think that I use them properly".

Initial findings indicate that motivations for taking part in these practices are primarily professional and closely related to students' needs. Evaluation criteria for choosing digital resources included the level of authenticity and the potential to engage and motivate students. In some instances, teachers did not use complementary material due to the prescriptive structure of their courses, which impeded on their autonomy and motivation to make changes in their practices. In these instances, workplace culture seemed to inhibit their agency and limited their engagement in OEP.

Concerning CPD, tentative findings suggest that there is potential for educators to improve their pedagogical, content, and general knowledge, as well as digital literacy and literacy skills and language skills. Additionally, the process of locating, evaluating, and modifying resources for students prompted reflective practice. This is significant in relation to CPD because it can stimulate teachers to think critically about their practices, which can lead to changes in teaching practices, improvements in the quality of teaching (Farrell, 2015; Richards & Farrell, 2005), and perhaps positively impact student learning.

4.   Conclusion

This study differs from similar small-scale qualitative projects (Borthwick & Gallagher-Brett, 2014; Comas-Quinn & Fitzgerald, 2013) in that it provides insight into what freelancers are doing in real-world contexts. As stated, preliminary findings are very limited. Nevertheless, they indicate that engaging in these practices is contributing in nuanced ways to participants' CPD in terms of skills development, knowledge building, and language literacy. This seems to be occurring through individual and social practices.

Overall, barriers and challenges to engaging in open practices stem from a lack of understanding and awareness of OERs and OEPs and in some cases inadequate digital literacy skills and workplace culture. The latter seemed to restrict the individual's autonomy, agency, and motivation, whereby a lack of digital literacy skills hindered experimentation with specific online tools.

Looking forward…

From the association's perspective, findings seem to point to providing support in relation to theoretical and conceptual knowledge of OER and OEP and facilitating the development of freelancers' digital literacy skills.

Concerning the main research project, the survey has been adapted to explore awareness and use of OERs and freelancers' conceptualisations of learning and development that is enabled through participation in OEPs. The interview schedule has been broadened to explore whether improved learning and development through OEPs is leading to changes in freelancers' teaching practices.

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