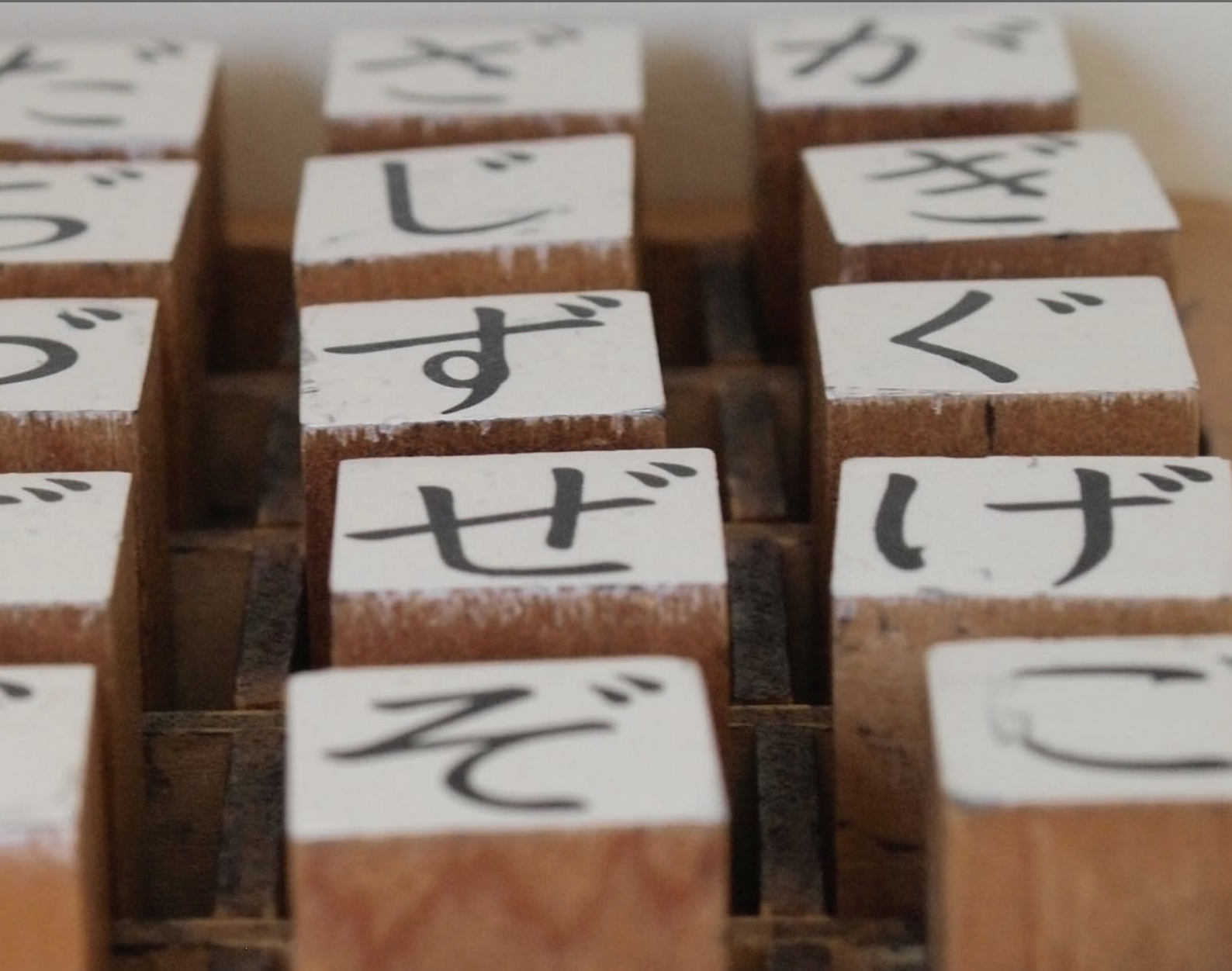


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Blended Learning for In-service Teachers' Professional Development: Lessons from the Experience of a Singaporean Chinese Language Teacher Educator

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Abstract

Traditional face-to-face workshop is a common avenue for the professional development (PD) of in-service teachers. Chinese Language (CL) teachers in Singapore also attend such workshops frequently. Research has however shown that such workshops often failed to establish sustained learning and produce little impact on teachers' practice, as well as students' achievement. To address this efficacy issue, a blended learning workshop for CL teachers was designed and conducted. Specifically, this study examined the experience of designing and implementing blended learning as seen through the eyes of a Singaporean teacher educator. This teacher educator had gone from being a participant to becoming an instructor of blended learning workshop. The role switching of the individual in different settings allowed acquisition of deeper insights into blended learning workshop as a PD approach. The considerations of the instructor, and the challenges she faced during design and implementation were described. The significance of this research lies in the lessons from the findings that could be useful for consideration when blended learning teachers' professional development workshops for better outcomes are to be designed.

Keywords: blended learning, professional development, course design, in-service teachers, Chinese language teachers

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Introduction

With the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies (ICT), professional development of teachers sees a shift towards more self-directed form requiring a change in the ways of learning some teachers have adhered to for decades. Some profound changes are noted in many studies at the micro level of learning activities that harnessed the affordance of ICT. For example, learning in the context of social media has become highly self-motivated, autonomous and informal (Dabbagh, & Kitsantas, 2012; McGloughlin & Lee, 2010; Smith, Salaway, & Caruso, 2009). Learners are also taking greater responsibility for learning (Vaughan, 2007), and engaging in more reflective practices and critical discourse (Shaw, 2015). Harnessing ICT, blended learning is one approach that contributes to these shifts in teachers' professional development workshops. Advantages of blended learning identified by scholars include its transformative potential (Graham & Robison, 2007; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), and its ability to enhance self-regulatory and self-efficacy of participants (Matheos, Daniel, & McCalla, 2012; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Gulbahar & Madran, 2009). Blended learning, where online and face-to-face instruction intersects, seems to take advantages of merits of both modalities. It has arisen as a promising approach for teacher's professional development (PD) now that the Internet is widely accessible by teachers. Blended learning in teachers' PD can potentially overcome limitations such as one-size-fits-all and transmissionist teaching found in traditional face-to-face workshops. Although there is a recent emergence of blended learning studies for teachers' PD with useful findings reported (for e.g. Belland, Burdo, & Gu, 2015; Matzat, 2013; Tondeur, Van Laer, & Elen, Philipsen, Zhu, Van Laer, & Pareja Roblin, 2016), descriptions of the design of PD and the learning environment enculturated by the designs were somewhat scarce. There is also little information about instructor's growth in the process of conducting blended learning workshops. To contribute to conversations over these gaps, the design of blended learning workshops, as a mean to advance Chinese Language (CL) teachers' professional development, is conducted by a teacher educator in this paper. Through her eyes, the considerations by a teacher educator, who has gone from being a participant to becoming an instructor of blended learning workshop, are examined. To guide this inquiry, the following research questions are explored from the perspective of the workshop instructor:

1. What are the considerations for designing a blended learning workshop?
2. What are the personal learnings derived from the designing blended learning workshop?

A Review of Blended Learning Literature

In recent years, researchers and educators have been touting the benefits of blending online and traditional face-to-face learning. Blended learning has moved into the centre stage of higher education and progressively into professional development

programmes. According to Graham (2006), definitions of blended learning include, (1) combining instructional modalities (or delivery media), (2) combining instructional methods, and (3) combining online and face-to-face instruction. Our research adopts the third definition. Potentials of blended learning highlighted in many empirical studies and meta-analyses include flexibility of time (Graham, 2006; Ocak, 2010), self-pacing and assess (Jun & Ling, 2011; Sardessai & Kamat, 2011), elimination of time, place, and situational barriers (Kanuka, Brooks, & Saranchuck, 2009). Many studies stated that blended learning should not be narrowly defined as the combination of the two modalities (Caner, 2009; O'Toole & Absalom, 2003; Patrick & Sturgis, 2015; Picciano, 2009). Instead, the designers should consider these channels' demonstrated merits for desired outcomes during integration (O'Toole & Absalom, 2003). Moreover, learning experiences are diverse due to the many components (e.g. pedagogy, knowledge accessibility, personal agency and social interactions) of blended learning that can impact learning environment (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Therefore, a fundamental redesign of learning and teaching is required (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Our study seeks to contribute to existing research by further exploring the factors that shape a blended learning environment.

In the area of teachers' PD, traditional face-to-face workshops are common. The impact of such workshops is often weakened when the teachers return to their busy routine work. Often delivered in disconnected sessions, such PD programme is less effective in transforming teacher's behaviour or affecting students' learning (Hellmig, 2008). Blended learning, as a relatively new form of PD, is said to address these issues (Alayyar, Fisser, & Voogt, 2012; Gynther, 2016; Kuo, Belland, Schroder & Wallker, 2014; Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013; Onguko, 2013). However, blended learning PD's outcomes and viability are also being debated. Steiner, Paul, Robert, David, and Laura. (2016) illustrated a blended learning PD for high school science teachers that was later described as having a beneficial impact on engaging teachers, deepening their understandings and connecting them with resources. Ho, T. V., Nakamori and Ho, B. T. (2014) added that knowledge was co-created through activities that facilitated and maintained the training as a continuous and long-term process. However, the insight from a case study by Boitshwarelo (2009) revealed a discouraging low participation in the workshop due to lack of adequate ICT skills and confidence besides constraints of the workplace (including culture, administrative support, ICT access). Another study showed that blended learning participants were less likely to be transitioning to, or practising new strategies as they cited not able to reasonably use in the classroom (Leake, 2014). Other issues raised were increased cognitive loads (Ellis, Steed, & Applebee, 2006), learners' readiness to engagement (Donnelly, 2006) and extra effort and time investment (Benson, Anderson, & Ooms, 2011). The abovementioned learners' outcomes were nevertheless, subjective in nature.

To seek further understanding of these issues, some scholars examined the views and perspectives of blended learning instructors (Belland, Burdo, & Gu, 2015; Jeffrey,

Milne, Suddaby, & Higgins, 2014; Jokinen, & Mikkonen, 2013). Critical issues and principles to the instructional practices of instructors were reported in these studies, but the personal learning of the instructor as a designer during this process appeared to be less explored. An early study of Ellis, Steed, and Applebee (2006) showed that instructors conceptualised blended learning very differently during implementation. Similarly, Gedik, Kiraz & Yasar Ozden (2013) demonstrated that joint use of two environments (face-to-face and online) entailed new design approach that requires harmonisation of both environments, with the need to evolve pedagogy that is tailored to focus on the aims of learning. It would be challenging for an instructor to manage the transition of traditional face-to-face delivery into more complex facilitation that blended learning requires. da Luz Correia, Mauri and Colomina (2013) suggested that special expertise of instructor is needed in the meaning-making process. An instructor is expected to carefully plan and design to ensure the blending of face-to-face and online practices, (1) support the learning outcomes (Jokinen & Mikkonen, 2013); (2) develops new designs for instruction and course delivery (Mccown, 2010; Mohanna, Waters, & Deighan, 2008), and (3) promote engagement of learners (Kliger & Pfeiffer, 2011).

The Current Blended Learning Workshop Design

To actively engage teacher participants during the workshop and to answer the call to shift away from a transmissionist approach, the design of the workshop in this study adopted a social constructivist view of learning (Vygotsky, 1986). Learning is anchored on social interactions aimed at constructing the community's knowledge. As such, the role of workshop instructors is less of a teacher giving direct instructions but more of a facilitator of learning. This switching of instructor roles may require a change of the instructor's epistemic beliefs about learning and teaching to provide transformative instruction, rather than merely exposing participants to available resources through a top-down dissemination. For the use of ICT in blended learning to be effective, an instructor needs to clarify the purpose of the course and make explicit the adopted pedagogical principles (Sharp & Oliver, 2013).

The current workshop was designed to encourage more instructor-to-learners and peer-to-peer interactions. In the 10-hour workshop spanning two weeks, there were two face-to-face sessions, one at the beginning, and one at the end. Online interactions were carried out in between these face-to-face sessions (Figure 1). Suggested dates to guide the posting and responding in the discussion forum were laid out in a timetable. During the face-to-face session, the instructor would first lead learners to discover some topics of interest related to a central theme through spontaneous discussion. Subsequently, the online platforms served to extend and continue the class discussions online. Two online platforms were used: a discussion forum for threaded discussions, and a Facebook group for learner reflections. Ground rules aimed at encouraging online interactions among participants were also introduced. For example, a *24-hour rule* stipulated that participants were expected to provide a reply response within 24

hours of receiving any comment left by their peers; a *post-1-reply-2 rule* was introduced to initiate and sustain discussions. The course participants were in-service primary school Singapore CL teachers.



Figure 1. The blending of interactions in a workshop

Research Methodology

The case study method (Merriam, 2009) was adopted in the current study. Rose (pseudonym), a lecturer of the Singapore Centre for Chinese Language (SCCL), was the subject of study. She had previously attended blended learning workshop, conducted by the second author, as a learner. Subsequently, for the first time, she used the approach as an instructor. As a former learner, she was familiar with what she could potentially gain from such blended learning workshop, and she could predict the enablers and barriers to the success of implementation. As a teacher educator, she was very accustomed to conducting traditional workshops focused on knowledge transmission. To facilitate the blended workshop based on the social constructivist way of learning, she had the need to reexamine her existing skills and make adjustments for the approach.

The current study closely examined Rose's experience of designing and conducting a blended learning workshop. Data sources included a face-to-face interview with the instructor, instructor's field notes, instructor's reflective notes, and discourse artefacts found during the workshop. Conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the collected data was carried out. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, two members of the research team coded the data separately before getting together to discuss agreements in the categorisation and divergent opinions that have emerged (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kanste, Pölkki, Utriainen, & Kyngäs, 2014). Triangulation of data from multiple sources was also exercised to enrich the findings (Rothbauer, 2008).

Findings

Based on analysis of the data, the relevant experiences of Rose that answered the research questions were presented in this section. The two main themes were namely, (1) workshop design considerations, and (2) instructor's personal frustrations.

Workshop design considerations.

The first theme that emerged was related to Rose's considerations in the design of the blended workshop. These considerations were founded upon Rose's past personal experience as a school teacher and participant of blended learning workshop. Firstly, a transition period for adoption of self-regulation habits was considered. Based on her experience, Rose was aware that teachers always faced a shortage of time due to their busy work schedule. As a result, Rose expected teachers to prioritise their school work over tasks related to their learning. To minimise procrastination, Rose created a Whatsapp group to send reminder messages in the hope of increasing response rate. She also provided a timetable of to-do tasks, and added the ground rules of interactions, and deadline information. Rose described her motivation as follows,

My way of doing it can be a kind of driving force, without intention to threaten the learners. Hopefully with this intervention, they will be willing to follow the instruction, rather than posting at their own wishes. Since I want the learners to enjoy process of learning, they might need some "pushing". When he is willing to post and see someone else's response, he can then enjoy the learning outcome while being encouraged to continue the act.

Overall, Rose was satisfied with the outcomes as learners were observed to be frequently posting and reflections were lengthy. In her other reflection, Rose considered how she could create a transition period to help learners to adapt to the new environment and regulate their learning processes:

My idea is that there is still a need for a period of transition from passive learning to autonomous learning before becoming an autonomous learner. This process requires that a crutch is to be obtained by the learner himself. Now, in addition to inform him that there is a crutch available for use, I will also remind him to use the crutch in time. Before he can feel the joy of self-determined learning, he has to go through this process. I think the teachers have no such ideas and habits, thus this reminder work is probably necessary.

In addition to lending support when needed, Rose also chose to provide limited spoon-feeding to the teacher participants,

My upbringing is also a process of being "spoon fed". I can truly understand expectations of teachers, and their hopes of bringing

something back after the workshop. If I am to attend a workshop, I will also share the same thoughts. This is why on the second face-to-face session, I have tried to balance the things and allow teachers to at least bring back what they have expected. During the second face-to-face, I have provided some practical examples for the teachers, but the process of “feeding” was not so straightforward through PPT presentation. I still asked questions in addition to giving examples, allowing other teachers to present their examples for the purpose of encouraging discussion. I believe that most of the teachers will feel “I did learn something” at the end of the course.

In the above actions, akin to knowledge transmission, Rose recalled her personal upbringing and learning experience and empathized with the teachers who would come to the blended learning workshop with expectations based on traditional workshops. Next, a climate of trust was purposely built as a trustful learning environment allowed learners to feel confident and accountable to each other during their interactions. As Rose said during her interview,

Obviously, the interactions I tried to enforce on the first face-to-face session helped them to find a common interest and topics. It played a role to help build relationship with unfamiliar people that eventually became co-learners to exchange ideas comfortably. During that particular face-to-face session, I had stressed to them that there would be nothing absolute, and we were all co-learners. I did not really demand them to produce outcomes of learning, for example submission of assignments. I think that all of these must be communicated in advance. Some teachers may hesitate to post openly about their thinking or ideas because we never have such a habit.

Setting the stage in the first face-to-face session was critical. Rose began by drawing on her prior experience as a learner. Firstly, she saw the importance of facilitator’s presence in supporting learners experiencing and transiting into an unfamiliar style of learning. Subsequently, a safe and low-pressure environment was needed for learners to express ideas and opinions more readily. To achieve this, Rose began with the communication of ground rules to encourage inclusive discussions. Following that, Rose attempted to create classroom equity by encouraging the expression of divergent views. Rose assured them that in this learning environment, there is no single right or wrong answer; learners should not be judgmental towards each other’s ideas. Although the deviation from the traditional knowledge transmission might render learners uncomfortable as they deemed little knowledge received, Rose allowed the presence of such discomfort. She believed that over time, learners would learn to accept such approach as they went through the workshop.

Thirdly, to tackle learners’ existing understanding of learning as Rose described,

During the class, we first communicate clearly the circumstances that might appear in this new learning approach, or “brain wash” them with how the class would be conducted, after which a question was entailed: “if your peer keep remain silent, do you think he will learn?” I am sure the teachers will answer “yes”. Teachers will then follow the way of thinking, and understand that those who not participate do not mean they learn nothing. From this experience, he learned that to train a student to become autonomous learner, one must first discover his own learning process.

As Rose predicted that most teacher participants lacked the experience of social constructivist learning in their formal education, it was crucial to facilitate discussions so that learners began to conceive alternative ways of learning (cf. transmissionist).

Lastly, an inquiry approach towards active learning was the key as Rose recalled,

The power of questions is infinite. The learners need to find out the problems and reflect on its relevance to their experience. Curiosity can drive them to figure out what is, for example, AFL (Assessment for Learning) in my class. They will try to sort out its meaning through internet searching. I feel that learners in my class more or less do well in this exercise. Some of them even find out books and try to recall what they have learned previously. I feel that my questions have encouraged them to find out answers. These questions are the driving force behind the attempts to transform them into autonomous learners.

In both face-to-face and online sessions, Rose promoted learners’ interactions through enculturating reflective inquiry practice. A blended learning setting afforded such practice within the virtual space, where more questions could be generated during the asynchronous interactions. Rose’s underlying intention was to encourage learners’ to think actively. Such an approach was subsequently observed to boost the intrinsic motivation of learners and helped to develop autonomous learners.

Instructor’s personal frustrations as a professional.

The second theme that emerged was related to Rose’s personal reflection from a professional perspective as she embarked on the journey of designing and conducting blended learning workshop. For instance, she described some personal struggles during her interview,

It was very painful. It was the pain of a senior instructor. Delivering course is something very familiar to me, it is not easy, but controllable. I can submit the course curriculum to the centre and start a class anytime, completely under my grasp. But blended learning is a concept, a complete subversion for a senior. From “known” to “ignorant” is kind of pain. This is just like one day somebody tells you suddenly that what you have learned is not something that I want now. You have to re-think how you deliver the course. Imagine our feelings.

In the above quote, Rose appeared to have undergone a period of perceived helplessness as she felt that the blended learning workshop required her to perform very differently from before. As a very experienced teacher educator who had conducted countless PD workshops for teachers, she felt subverted by blended learning as a PD approach. As Rose recalled some of these challenges,

The biggest challenge is the ability to synthesize the conversations of learners. For example, teachers put 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 together on a plate; the facilitator has to consider whether to put 1,2,3 on a plate, and 4,5,6 onto another plate. In the shortest possible time, the facilitator must first complete classification. After the classification of the subject content, he has to sort out, integrate and put forward highlights that are more prominent. If a facilitator does not have a strong ability to synthesize, analyze and express, the course can hardly succeed, and hardly avoid falling back to traditional routine. Another challenge is to lead teachers to discuss during face-to-face sessions.

In the above quote, Rose found facilitation, as a process, challenging. Specifically, it was related to the synthesising of ideas found in the classroom discourse. As the participants were many, their ideas could be diverse. Rose felt the need to summarise these ideas to focus learners' attention on some key points during the face-to-face conversations. However, the learners were not the only persons gaining from this process as Rose recalled,

The added value of this blended learning course is the extended learning. I have prepared 1,2,3,4,5,6,7, but I may only teach 7,8,9, I may also need to find out 10,11,12. They are learning, and at the same time, so do I.

As seen in Rose's words, the instructor could observe personal growth in the process of facilitating learners' growth. This could have made the frustration not all negative. But very importantly, Rose recalled receiving peer support during this journey,

I'm very grateful to have two colleagues with experience to talk to, they have answered a lot of my doubts and resolved many uncertainties in perceptions. For example, many learners do not follow the post-1-reply-2 rule, from my perspectives, it will be like "they don't learn" or "they are not doing well", very much resemble a student who doesn't submit assignment. But my colleague guides me to think that although the learner doesn't express his view during class or post-1-reply-2, it doesn't mean that he learn nothing. This thought never came to me before, because I always assume that you will never learn if you don't follow the rules. This is the teachers' general thought.

In the above quote, a source of Rose's frustration was the apparent non-performance of the learners in online discussions. This is even though she had planned and clearly laid out detailed instructions for the teacher participants. In this case, Rose had

assumed that if instructions were not followed, learning could not take place. However, her frustration was resolved after hearing colleagues' different perspectives which helped her to look at the issue differently.

Discussion

This paper followed the journey of a blended learning instructor to described the considerations on workshop design and her personal learning outcomes. From her experience as a formal learner in the blended learning setting, she foresaw some issues that might emerge during the workshop. Taking preventive measures, she put in place practices that act as enablers towards shaping a desired blended learning environment. These included sending reminders and creating a timetable with to-do-list and ground rules to follow. Although participants welcomed the measures, the demand for self-discipline and time management skills in blended learning posed a challenge to some participants. However, the instructor was well aware that habits would require time to develop, especially when teachers are so used to transmissionist-styled workshops. Her actions served to reinforce the expectations associated with the workshop aimed at enculturating a community of autonomous learners.

Following her effort to establish engagement norms, the instructor noted that a transition period was required before meaningful active participations among learners could be achieved. A complete transition from traditional to blended learning mode would require an extended period. Since the current workshop occurred over a short limited duration, it was hard for teacher participants to be totally detached from what they had been experiencing usually. Moreover, learners' variability was uncontrollable and posed a sense of uncertainty to the instructor right from the beginning of course planning. Therefore, any instructor may feel more secure by mitigating the risk, in this case, through limited spoon feeding during this transition period.

Next, the instructor considered how to build a climate of trust and openness to encourage the social meaning-making in blended learning. Mutual respect and trust were keys to enhancing communication and diversity of thoughts. The several tactics used by the instructor included building rapport at the start of the class, and emphasizing on everyone's right to their personal views, in other words, no single right or wrong towards different perspectives during the first face-to-face session. Rapport is probably less examined because it is often unmeasurable (Dyfrenforth, 2014). The instructor's experience in this study, however, showed that building rapport appeared to be central to the overall blended learning experience.

Another theme emerging from this study was how facilitation of the workshop impacted the instructor-self. To increase learners' engagement and promote autonomous learning, the instructor had extensive forethoughts before the actual conducting of the workshop. Based on the instructor's experience, knowing how to

teach in a traditional workshop was indeed different from knowing how to conduct a blended learning workshop. It appeared that the instructor's personal learning occurred at several levels in the process of design and implementation. In the beginning, the instructor started with adopting strategies used in the previous workshop she had attended as a learner with some adjustments to fit the new workshop content. Professional growth was achieved when she reflected on her practices and intentionally introduced changes to respond to considerations during the design and implementation processes. However, the instructor perceived this as a *painful* process as she had to *unlearn* what she had been learnt and applied over the years of delivering courses. Also, as seen from the instructor's journey, it would take extensive preparation and efforts to design and enable dialectic discussion. Particularly, the use of questioning aimed at promoting dialectic discussions required careful planning and sequencing. Hence, we noted that the amount of time and effort spent in designing and facilitating blended learning might be significantly more compared to the traditional delivery approach.

Therefore, the professional development of new instructors coming on board to conduct blended learning workshop is critical. This would include preparing instructors for the impending challenges, both skillfully and psychologically. Of particular importance, perhaps is to provide the new instructors time to learn and explore this novel approach. The instructor in the current study was not under any pressure to perform, nor given any hard target to deliver. The instructor also highlighted the importance of a team learning approach for a beginner to blended learning. In the current study, the instructor had the support of more experienced colleagues who had conducted blended learning workshop. The instructors, new and old, came together to discuss and explored ideas on the design and revision of instructional activities. These included the blend structure of the face-to-face and online components, and the learning goals of the workshop.

Conclusion

In this paper, we took a quick peek at the learning of an instructor new to blended learning. While the process may not be as frustration-free as we would like to see, the new instructor had journeyed through various considerations during the design and implementation of blended learning. The expectation of workshop participants with a traditional view of learning was a key aspect to be managed in the process. The instructor could have given up on the journey if she had not received the support of more experienced colleagues coming together to work as a team in support. For institutions working on blended learning to advance teachers' professional development workshops, this paper presented some lessons for sharing and consideration.

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