User:Charles Jeffrey Danoff/Collaborative Lesson Planning

The Pre-Speech Written Version

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Note where you find ( ) are places I intend to put references

Jindobrei vitam peinstfa serdechnya. Good morning and welcome ladies and gentlemen.

Let me begin with a quick joke a Chinese friend taught me.

"How long does it take to finish university?"

Yes, "One second."

My topic today is collaborative lesson planning, which teachers around the world have been doing for a long time. I suggest that we move from doing so unrecorded in teacher's offices and meetings (Fawan paper) to public knowledge recorded online for colleagues around the corner and the globe to learn from and improve together. I am a teacher of English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL) and as it is the field I know, it is where I will focus my talk. Of course, these same ideas are applicable to teaching any subject.

The overall goal I think all TESOL teachers is finding best way to teach students English. I see the how for that goal as making better lessons in less time, and the way being teachers stop re-inventing the wheel by collaborating together.

What do I mean by re-inventing the wheel?

In the summer of 2008 I started assistant teaching English in Hamatonbetsu, a lovely town near Japan's Northermost point. Early on a head teacher asked me to find an activity to do for an upcoming textbook chapter.

I began by trying to make something on my own. Problem was I did not quite understand what the textbook chapter was actually trying to teach. I abandoned this path quickly, turning to the internet for solutions. I do not remember exactly what I typed into Google, perhaps something like "activity" +"teaching English" +"the name of the textbook".

I have forgotten what came up, but I remember being dissatisfied, and having to continue searching for a long while. At one point in the year I was asked to teach a lesson about colors. A quick search online yielded no easily accessible color flashcards, thus I made some myself. This is what I mean by re-inveting the wheel. I had to make color flashcards from scratch. Millions of color flashcards have been made in the world. NO ONE should EVER have to do that again.

Over time I learned how to find useful resources online, but there were several recurring problems that I encountered on many websites. One to many nature of most sites. Usually sites were built and maintained by one volunteer investing countless thankless, payless hours. Their sacrifices are to be applauded, but this structure is stifiling for mass conversation. Commenting on individual resources is difficult, because of the structure. Teachers were not talking directly to eachother, just to the webmaster. This also made uploading individual variations on resources slow and difficult. Frequently materials were either copyright all rights reserved, or informally licensed for educational re-use. This makes it difficult for individuals to download, adapt and then re-share their re-mixes. Also, there was little accountability for resources that are uploaded. Where did teachers get those pictures on their worksheet from? Some sites were wonderfully organized by textbook and then chapter with resrouces pertaining to individual pages. Noting these significant exceptions, the organization of most sites and the TESOL internet world in general is poor and unfriendly to inexperienced teachers trying to find materials to use in their classes. Most resources that are available, are in Microsoft word format. I believe the reason being most teachers use computers in their schools that utilize windows software. This is a problem, because it denies some users the opportunity to access these files. If you are not already aware of the pitfalls of propreitary document formats you can read Richard

Stallman's ( ). The most stringent barrier to access was that some sites charged teachers to use their materials. This is an obvious impediment as usually if teachers want access to these resources they have to spend their own money, which they are naturally loathe to do. There was a wonderful New York Times article about this issue in the fall of 2009 ( ). Teachers have the right to sell their teaching resources, but doing so only helps one teacher. If the goal is finding the best way to teach English, I believe in working together to benefit everyone for free.

As a result of these obstacles I ended up taking some resources for class and/or creating resources from scratch, then never puttting what I learned back into the community. This worked for my individual context as a teacher in Hamatonbetsu, and I hoped for my successor, but my year of experience was lost on the teaching community as a whole.

How can it be done better?

By building a system of collaboration allowing teachers to make better lessons in less time and where a new teacher can fire up the internet and find an abundance of resources online, all of which have been tested, reviewed and tweaked by colleagues in a fashion that corresponds to class size, level and class eccentricities. All of these resources should be free and available to share with common, easily understood licenses.

The first step is moving from a one to many site to a many to many site, such as a Wiki. This will not only expedite the process of teachers uploading new resources and re-mixes of old ones, it will enable specific conversations and reviews of resources teachers have used in their classes.

To start we should steal the organizational structure from those sites that do it by textbook chapter. One teacher could create a resource listing all of a textbook's individual chapters and topics, then link the lessons or activities they use. Then another teacher could search for the same book and repeat the process, adding notes on what worked or did not for them in class.

Eventually a group of teachers might work together over an entire year contiually uploading, sharing, and commenting on eachother's lessons. By the end that textbook would have a place on Wikiversity a new teacher could access and have a wonderful guide they themselves could then use in their classes and continue to build upon.

Of course all of these lessons, notes, activities and more would need to be free for others to see and then re-mix with an apporpriate license. At the beginning this process would require a select group to invest more personal time in re-inveting the wheel. Once it was complete, new teachers would need less time to do an individual lesson and focus on making a wheelbarrow.

Along the way it is extremely important for teachers to give credit as Wikipedia (ref page) does with its references to whatever materials they use from others around the web. At this point in history, almost no teacher is creating materials from scratch. To legitimize the collaboration it is extremely important to reference whomever gave the ideas for that lesson or activity.

Additionally all resources need to be either written in wiki code or uploaded in free formats so that teachers everywhere can freely access them. Proprietary software needs to be eliminated from the teaching world, it will only inhibit future collaboration.

So once the basic framework of the system is in place, how might an individual teacher use it?

Consider first my situation as a beginning teacher working in a vacuum. I had no one to talk with or whose lessons to base my own upon. It took me a lot of time of first making a format for my lesson plan, then I would have to incorporate what chapter we were teaching, the individual characteristics of each class and try to scaffold ( ) on the knowledge they had learned in previous weeks. Let's say I spent an hour and a half on each lesson plan.

In a different context, heading into the semester, I could look at the Wikiversity resource for my specific textbook. It would be organized by chapter, class size, level, and individual characteristics. I would likely not find something that specifically fit my class, but hopefully there'd be a lesson for chapter one that would be 33% appropriate. Thus, instead of an hour and a half, I would only have to work for an hour.

After teaching the lesson whether it was successful or not I would hopefully take some notes to review and learn from later. Instead of keeping these only to my own teaching journal, I could publish them in the discussion section of the resource, hopefully at the same time as three or four other teachers who had their first lesson. Individuals with whom I could then ask questions and bounce ideas off with for the duration of the semester. In addition to notes, I would upload whatever modifications on the public lesson I made, perhaps under my own name, as would the others. Along the way that half hour saved every week would have profound implications for my peace of mind.

The following summer another teacher would come to the same resource. She could peruse it and see perhaps ten different lesson plans for each chapter. With this much variety she could mix and match one to suit her needs so perhaps she finds something that is 50% ready. Thus, instead of the hour the I needed to spend, she only has to spend 45 minutes each week prepping.

And so on for subsequent years. Of course the lessons available will never be 100% appropriate and that's fine, teachers should still have to do some individual preparation for their own classes. But, even if it never gets beyond 50%, just imagine how much better all of those lessons will be. Instead of one teacher working in a vacuum each lesson plan they make wil have been prepared, taught and reviewed by multiple colleagues. Thus the lesson they teach in class will take less time to prepare. The wheel is no longer being re-invented, instead its become part of a wheelbarrow.

As I sad, the nice thing is, is that these sort of professional learning communities (Pawan article) already exist in most teacher's offices. The next step is taking the passing conversations teachers have in their free time or in structured meetings and putting them online so teachers in different cities in the same country and all across the world can talk and improve together.

Now, this all sound wonderful, but there are obviously some obstacles in the way. The first I see is that many teachers are not comfortable, or perhaps even aware of how to edit and use a wiki. The majority of resource sharing that is done online now is through uploaded Word documents that one can subsquently download and modify in a comfortable way.

Another problem might be that teachers would be turned off by giving their materials away for free and/or allowing others to re-mix them. Additionally, school districs and/or individuals may not like the idea of making lesson reviews public, especially in cases where said lessons may of gone poorly.

To address the first problem, a quick, direct explanation of Wikiversity its purpose and how to use it should be given, as already exists ( ). This may need to be simplified down to the purposes of whatever project a new teacher is interested in joining. For the second problem of free and shared resources, teachers need to be educated and shown examples of how this process can work. Two immediately available are Wikipedia and the Free Software movement ( ). In the future it would be better to have specific teaching related examples. For the final problem again education about the benefits far outweighing the costs of a teacher publicly sharing a lesson that went poorly need to be extolled.

Assuming in one way or another this collaborative lesson planning were to be implemented and successful, what could this lead to? Ideally, in addition to sharing lesson plans for a given textbook teachers would catergorize/tag them according to what aspects of the English language were actually taught. Thus, even a teacher not using a textbook could go to Wikiversity, do a little searching and then find something helpful for what they are doing. As this process continued, perhaps a set of universal best practices for teaching English would emerge and anyone interested could figure out how to teach English well really quickly. Additionally univeristies training new teachers would include constructive online collabortation as part of the curriculum, institituionalizing this process. On the other side, students might also be able to look at these teacher created resources and learn by themselves, along the lines of what MIT has begun with their open course ware ( ).

Naturally if these things came to pass, it would extend to all subjects and perhaps we would no longer need private textbook companies at all, and akin to Wikipedia's mission of the sum of all human knowledge freely available, the sum of all human teaching and learning could be the same.

In any event, I, myself, need to begin by finishing the process I have begun of putting all of my materials on Wikiversity for others to use and hopefully some folks will join me.

Jinkuyei zab shibiqe. Thank you for coming.

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