**Supporting Continuing Professional Development of Teachers in the Pacific**

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**Abstract**

As noted by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL, 2023), open, distance and flexible learning (ODFL) is an important channel for increasing educational opportunities and outcomes. It is particularly relevant for the Pacific, given small dispersed remote populations and limited access to secondary and post-secondary opportunities in rural and outer island locations.

Despite the potential of ODFL for the region, there has been limited investment. The COVID-

19 pandemic further reinforced the need for the Pacific to be better prepared for non-contact

teaching and provision of learning approaches outside of traditional classroom-based

practices. Consequently, COL initiated the Partnership for ODFL in the Pacific (PODFLP),

which is a 5-year project (2020 – 2025), funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign

Affairs & Trade, to support enhancing capacity and efficiency of education sectors in the

Pacific through greater use of innovative delivery mechanisms and technology. COL, together with the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD), implements the project in the nine Commonwealth countries in the Pacific **(**Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the unprecedented disruption of education globally, threatening to reverse gains made in access to education and learning across countries. Education and learning in the Pacific have also been affected given limited access to distance learning during school closures, especially in rural and outer island locations. As an immediate response to COVID-19, the project supported the region in two ways, providing access to Open Educational Resources (OER) to support distance learning; and developing and offering professional development for teachers in distance learning. Effective interventions in this space require an understanding both of teacher identity in general and specific contextual and cultural dynamics as well as of the role of technology in teaching. As noted by Mays (2021), teacher identity is formed over years of experience from being a learner in school, then as a student teacher in college and then as a classroom teacher in a school. For most teachers currently in service, these experiences were all framed by engagement in a physical space. However, adopting ODFL, and in particular supporting effective fully online learning, requires a new set of capabilities on the part of teachers (Gasevic, 2020). This paper therefore explores how continuing professional development offered to help teachers acquire new knowledge and skills related to use of new technology and new teaching approaches not premised asynchronously.

**Introduction**

There are several facets that make up teacher’s role. They are professions who need spaces where they can share their professional experiences. While teaching they also manage people, resources, time and reporting apart from acting as caregivers in classrooms. During the course of their career, teachers develop a range of pedagogical practices. It can not be denied that they are also specialists is the field. Given that teaching involves so many aspects, any effective intervention to address the ODFL adoption in the South Pacific will

need to consider the various aspects of a teacher’s identity and at the same time be aware of the cultural diversity that exist in the region (Matopo, 2021; Reynnolds, 2021; Taleni, et al.

2018).

Moreover, it is important to understand that for effective continuing professional development

(CPD) it is not enough for teachers simply to have mastered the content they are required to

teach, they must also know how best to teach that content in ways that help pupils to learn

effectively – what Shulman (1986) called ‘pedagogic content knowledge’. Given the

increasing use of technology in teaching it is also important for teachers to make informed

decisions about what technologies are best used in what ways and for what learning

purposes (Mishra and Koehler, 2006; Koehler and Mishra, 2009).

**COL’s work on Online learning in the Pacific**

An important precursor to the PODFLP initiative was COL’s response to a request received

from Fiji near the start of the pandemic to guide teachers in using online tools and resources

to cope with emergency remote teaching. In a very short space of time, COL created and

offered a short online course called *OER for Online Learning: An Introduction*. Although there was no time to consult with teachers in the region before launching the course, a key design feature was encouraging teachers to share resources and experiences with one another (Mays. et al., 2021) and regional mentors were appointed to facilitate such discussions. This initial short course is aligned with the first level of the UNESCO ICT-CFT – focused on knowledge acquisition.

Between March and June 2021, the short course was offered again as the first of several

strategies to provide support to teachers. The course provided teachers with guidelines for

working in new ways, using openly licensed online resources. It served as a useful foundation on which further, more in-depth learning could subsequently be built.

One of the earliest activities in the PODFLP initiative was development and population of a

regional OER collection which provided teachers with free access to a variety of guidelines

and examples of how to use digital resources to support emergency remote teaching and

subsequently blended and online learning. The regional collection was then replicated at a

national level to allow each country to customise the collection to address its own national

curriculum structure and interests. Two countries have so far modified and added locally

developed resources to their national collections with help from COL (Muthu & Mays, 2022)

and a third country has just started with customisation. In addition, COL published guides on

re-versioning OER and integrating OER into teaching in ways that would make for a better fit

with local contexts and needs (COL 2021 a, b).

Given that most teachers’ experiences have been shaped by working in physical classrooms, it is necessary to provide training in how to use ODFL methods, the focus of the PODFLP initiative. Taking the lead from the very successful short course developed at the start of the pandemic, COL partnered with the OER Foundation to design, develop and facilitate an open online micro-course on Digital Skills for OER Sharing (DS4OERS). Lessons learned from the experience gained from the facilitation of the inaugural cohort offering were used to make some revisions to the course, whereafter it has continued to be openly hosted to allow stakeholders to access, use or adapt as best suits their need (Mays & Mackintosh 2022). For example, the University of the South Pacific recently offered a slightly adapted version of the

short course. Lessons learned from these experiences have shaped the development of

several subsequent open short courses on Communication Skills for ODFL, Assessment

Skills for ODFL, Learner Support for ODFL and, most recently, Quality Assurance for ODFL

Part 1. The latter course focuses on strategic issues while a second course is currently under discussion which will focus on operational issues. The design and content of the latter short courses has been informed also by a series of regional webinars and this marks a shift away from COL anticipating training needs towards stakeholders in the Pacific identifying and themselves addressing local challenges and related training needs. To this end, COL also commissioned development of another short course called Empowered Digital Teacher for Online Learning which aims at training senior teachers in the Pacific to use the open course platform which has been developed to create and offer courses for other teachers in the Pacific. In similar vein, the PODFLP project also supports a local teacher capacity

development initiative called the Wisdom Community of Pasifika teachers, which is an

initiative of the Fiji National University. These later interventions can be seen as aligning with

the second level of UNESCO’s ICT-CFT model focused on knowledge deepening.

In the second half of 2022, a series of webinars was held to explore high level policy, strategy and financial issues related to ODFL provision. The webinars were targeted at senior Ministry officials. The first webinar provided an overview of key issues, the second webinar was designed to facilitate responses from partner Ministries, and the final webinar was designed to solicit project proposals. While no formal project proposals were received, several activities are currently happening in response to these discussions. The webinars, as well as the short course Empowered Digital Teacher for Online Learning, can be seen as the beginning of a move towards the third level of UNESCO’s ICT-CFT which focuses on knowledge creation. In March 2023, COL hosted a face-to-face meeting of Ministry focal points in the region to discuss how PODFLP activities can be enhanced in the second half of the project.

COL also commissioned development of an Open Course Catalogue to provide a one-stop

website where teachers can find other open training opportunities they might need. The

intention is that the course catalogue will increasingly be populated with open courses

developed and offered in the region and that the platform itself will eventually be maintained

by an institution based in the region (Mays 2022). In all iterations of the open courses

developed and offered in the Pacific, local mentors have been contracted to support the

learning process and to help better to contextualise the learning. COL commissioned the OER Foundation to review the lessons of experience from these engagements and to proposed ways in which the mentoring model could be improved. A discussion on building a regional mentoring network is ongoing. As part of Partnership for ODFL in the Pacific, several open courses were developed and offered for teachers in the. Not all the teachers who register for a course engage and completion rates are very low. However, the courses remain open after the initial facilitation period and teachers can access the course content at any time as needs arise. Trends have emerged from the work done to date show that many Pacific teachers lack the prerequisite ICT skills to fast track their independent learning online. Many Pacific countries lack the ICT infrastructure and skills to manage open online ecosystems effectively. Additionally, many of the mentors who have been contracted in the past to support the process lack both the requisite technical skills and the online interactive pedagogy. (OERF,2022, pp.3-4).

**Conclusion**

We also know from prior experience that key to high engagement retention and completion of online CPD short courses for teachers is that participation should be recognised for

continuing professional development credits/hours and that Ministry-based staff should be

actively engaged in providing mentoring support (Mays et al. 2021). It has therefore been

proposed to establish an online platform to train regional mentors and to provide a space in

which they can share professional practices (OERF, 2022).

Increased use of ODFL approaches can help the Pacific Island Countries to reach learners

who have not previously been reached and to ensure continuity of learning in the face of a

number of events which may impact traditional face-to-face provision. However, the

experience of most teachers in the region has been shaped by working in a physical setting

and traditional classroom-based teaching. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers are offered continuous professional development opportunities to acquire and practice new skills related to ICT use and ODFL practices. We will have most impact if CPD interventions speak to contextual realities, are recognised for CPD points/hours and where there is active

mentorship by Ministry officials or Ministry-appointed senior teachers.

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