Digital teachers' rooms – using online platforms to enhance physical space

Rose Aylett describes putting the teachers' room online.

The teachers' room – a manic hub of frantic teachers desperately cutting and copying in the few remaining minutes before classes start. Often noisy, crowded and almost always in a state of semi-organised chaos, the teachers' room is nevertheless the beating heart of our educational institutions. From staff meetings to post-lesson chats over a cup of coffee, the traditional teachers' room is a multipurpose physical space where teachers plan, share ideas, socialise and train. But are current teachers' rooms fit-for-purpose? With the rise in popularity of online, blended and mobile learning, does our conceptualisation of the teachers' room need to change to reflect the new technologies now ever present in both education and everyday life?

The teachers' room as a physical space

What do we really use our teachers' rooms for? Teachers' rooms are much more than just physical spaces where teachers plan lessons. They host libraries of resources and methodology books to supplement lesson materials or look up tricky grammar points; there

Agouza Teachers' Room

are photocopiers, water coolers and kettles to gather around and share post-lesson reflections; on the walls hang noticeboards sharing upcoming training, courses, news and social events. Without a doubt, the teachers' room is one of the most important but overlooked spaces in a teacher's professional development. Those teachers that don't have one in their schools, wish that they did. Those of us that do, wish they were bigger and better resourced. Forget the classroom for a moment – the teachers' room is where learning happens.

Despite their prominence in CPD, our teachers' rooms are woefully lagging behind 21st-century classrooms. Like their language learning counterparts, teachers' rooms should be going digital, to further enhance the extensive peer-to-peer learning that is taking place there. As I see it, this doesn't mean that your school needs internet access, just that the teachers do – digital teachers' rooms should allow for teacher development 'on the go' via applications on mobile devices. The three projects described here are good examples of this. They have been successful in an Egyptian context and could be easily replicated elsewhere. So read on to find out how to bring about a digital renovation of your own teachers' room. No painting or decorating required …

Use of space

For your digital renovation to be effective, it should start with an open and honest analysis of the use of physical space in your institution. Imagine you are looking down at the teachers' room from above – a bird's-eye view. Where do you spend most of your time? At the resources shelves? At your desk? At your manager's desk?! What do you do there? Now ask yourself again what you really do there. All of these communal focal points have interpersonal and developmental functions that are often overlooked. Whatever this might be, whether to socialise, to educate, to inform or inspire – we can create an online space that serves the same purpose.

Desks and noticeboards

Lesson planning is essentially a private practice, and unfortunately often a very time-consuming one, particularly for those who have recently entered the teaching profession. Developing techniques to plan high-quality lessons quickly and effectively is something that can take years, and is not typically covered on pre-service training courses. For me, planning alongside more experienced teachers in the teachers' room fundamentally helped me when I was starting out. I wondered if we could accelerate and enrich this learning process, improving teachers' planning strategies by sharing tried and tested methods in a visual, eye-catching fashion.

This was the thinking behind the first (to our knowledge) ever art exhibition of EFL lesson plans, which took place at the British Council Agouza last July. A diverse range of plans and accompanying notes were solicited from

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teachers across our centres in Egypt, then lifted off the page and onto the 'digital wall' using the online platform Padlet. The results can be viewed at: http://padlet.com/egypt/artofplanning

Padlet is a fantastic, free, easy-to-use online tool to which you can pin a range of media, from Word documents to audio files. A Padlet wall can become an online noticeboard, a teachers' room wall, or even, as in our exhibition, an upturned desk. Besides lesson plans, in your own digital teachers' room you might want to consider displaying images of teachers' boardwork, worksheets they have created, students' project work and so on.

One of the key factors in the success of this particular project was that it linked with a simultaneous face-to-face exhibition of the same 'artwork', involving a little creative re-appropriation of physical space within the teaching centre. For two whole weeks of the summer term, the British Council Agouza training room was converted into an art gallery, complete with official opening ceremony and visitors' book. But it was the use of online space that made the exhibition accessible to teachers all over the country who were unable to attend in person – and provided a record of the work so that it can still be viewed today.

The kettle and the photocopier

Some of the best lessons I have ever taught have been inspired by a quick chat with a colleague as the kettle boils. There is no price that can be put on these conversations that take place in the kitchen, by the copy machine or over a cup of tea. They are moments of immeasurable impact that can embolden a cautious teacher to try something a bit different, inspire a jaded old-hand to liven up a lesson they've taught a hundred times, or impart instant workable ideas to inexperienced colleagues. The question is, of course, how to capture their essence. How can the ideas from these dynamic discussions be recorded, shared and archived, for the benefit of the whole staffroom? This was

Art of Planning Exhibition
Photo: Nick Baguley

the premise behind the 'Digital Tea Cup' – an online version of the face-to-face 'Tea Cups' already happening at the Al Azhar English Training Centre (AAETC) where I currently work.

If I lost you at the phrase 'Tea Cup' – then let me explain! 'Teach-Ups' or 'Tea Cups' are the invention of a colleague, Ahmed Othman. In contrast to the more time-consuming weekly internal teacher training sessions, Ahmed wanted to make room for teachers to share best practice with each other, on top of their daily teaching workload. Tea Cups are mini-INSETTs designed to be the perfect antidote to a hard day's work: delivered by teachers, for teachers, and with a clear 'takeaway' idea that can be used in your next class. Crucially, these INSETTs should last no longer than the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, and so can be enjoyed with one (hence the name).

Early this year, we began recording video versions of these Tea Cups, to edit, upload and share with the wider teaching team. Although time-consuming, this process has been really motivational for the teachers, who in addition to featuring in the videos, are developing their technical abilities and critical editor's eye. Training has been delivered on the use of video editing software, and how to create a YouTube channel and upload videos. As the year progresses, our digital cupboard is slowly filling up with increasingly well-produced teacher training crockery.

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The room

Online teachers' rooms should be spaces where teachers can easily connect, share ideas and network. With their group and class structures, social networking sites such as Facebook or Edmodo are ideal for this purpose. However, you may choose to use an alternative platform, depending on your context. Whatever online space you decide upon, make sure you seek teachers' views during the selection process. In setting up our own online teachers' room at AAETC, the choice of platform has undoubtedly been the most important factor in determining its success. If teachers are faced with too many different communication channels, they simply won't use them all, so choosing a platform with which most teachers already have accounts, and are familiar and active users, is key.

It was for these reasons that we decided to use Facebook for our own online space. It soon became clear, however, that using Facebook as a social tool is very different to using it for educational/professional purposes. As Facebook users we have become conditioned to simply 'liking' posts to indicate approval or agreement. I became particularly aware of this myself recently when working on Moodle and found myself searching for a discussion forum 'like' button which didn't exist! Bearing this in mind, teachers may need guidance on how to engage critically online in order to benefit fully from the new learning space, e.g. writing and responding to comments, sharing articles (whilst also including the reason why they are sharing them) and tagging colleagues in posts they might find interesting. At our centre, this involved an element of face-to-face training. "This was useful because it showed us how clicking 'like' is not enough and you have to participate actively," Ahmed commented afterwards.

Another factor to take into account as you set up your teachers' room

is how to communicate its purpose to ensure that it is regularly and appropriately used. You might want to include a statement of purpose on the page itself, or introduce the concept in person during a meeting so that colleagues have the opportunity to ask preliminary questions. If not properly consulted and informed at the outset, it can sometimes be difficult to later win over teachers to the cause, especially those resistant to the integration of technology into their practice. At this stage, it's also worth considering how much control you want to have over discussion forums and other collaborative spaces. Will posts be approved in advance by an administrator or can anyone upload their own contributions? Resolving these issues at the outset will likely affect teachers' feeling of ownership of the room and how often they visit it.

Finally, once you have your digital teachers' room up and running, how can you keep up levels of engagement over time? Keeping teachers actively involved is perhaps the biggest challenge of all. I've found that one way of ensuring participation is to consistently link posts in the online teachers' room with activities and events taking place in physical space, such as training sessions, teachers' meetings, lessons, etc. Try to add pre- and post-session announcements, tasks, articles and links on a regular basis. Making this connection with the 'real world' is essential to make sure teachers are kept informed, motivated and regularly check in to find out what is going on.

Challenges

There are a number of obstacles we faced in undertaking our move into digital space. When setting up your own teachers' room, consider the following.

- Lack of IT skills – Will teachers need training?

- Lack of participation/motivation – How will you ensure teacher engagement over long periods of time?

- Internet access/poor connectivity

– Do all staff have reliable internet access? Will connectivity be an issue?

- Time-consuming – How much time will you be able to dedicate to setting up and administrating digital teachers' room projects? How much time will teachers be expected to dedicate?

- Work-life balance – Where does the working day end?

- Privacy issues – What data will teachers be expected to share online?

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So why renovate?

There is an argument that adding a 'digital layer' to our schools just consumes valuable working hours as we duplicate what we already do 'in the real world'. Though I have some sympathy with this argument, I think if introduced carefully and constructively, the case for digital renovation is an even stronger one.

I have found that creating this online space for our staff has been invaluable in developing teachers' learner autonomy and encouraging them to take control of their own professional development, both as

individuals and as a cohesive group. Today, with an internet connection and a mobile device, just like their own students, teachers can learn at anytime and anywhere – and perhaps most importantly, learn together. Discussions that may once have taken place between just two or three teachers are now more inclusive, and learning is collaborative. The longevity of online posts also provides a digital record, allowing teachers to easily locate and re-read content at a later date, whilst giving them time for reflection before making their own contributions.

The internet, and the digital technologies associated with it, are not going to go away any time soon. Whether we like it or not, they are slowly creeping into many different spheres of our lives, from the social to the professional. Creating a digital space online as an extension of your physical campus can provide teachers with access to a range of invaluable networks, increase their engagement and motivation, as well as developing the skills they need to be truly effective 21st-century professionals. As one teacher, Hossam, commented: "It has given spirit to the teachers' room." So … what are you waiting for?

This article is a summary of a presentation of the same name given at the January 2016 NileTESOL Conference in Cairo.

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