

EXPLORATIONS

Creating an Online Resource Hub for English Language Teachers

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Due to the recent rapid adoption of digital technology, online collaboration has become easier than ever. Physical distance, time differences, and even global pandemics are no longer impediments to sharing educational resources and information. Roughly one year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we noticed a need in our academic department at a private Japanese university for a more modern, efficient, and collaborative way for teachers and administrators to share resources and ideas. To fill this need we came together to create an online resource hub. While the creation of the hub was not driven by the pandemic, as we had already begun working on its foundation close to a year beforehand, the timing was somewhat serendipitous, since we were piloting the hub just as the whole world was forced online. The following report will explore how the resource hub was developed and promoted, its practical applications, and finally the impact it has had during the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic.

The Situation Prior to the Hub

The main problem that we were setting out to solve was a lack of a concrete means for teachers to collaborate and share materials. Prior to the creation of the resource hub, each teacher in our department was largely left to their own devices. While there were regularly scheduled faculty meetings, these focused primarily on general administrative matters, allocating little or no time for teachers to

compare notes or ask for help with classroom teaching. Outside of this, the only way that teachers could collaborate was through chance encounters with each other between class periods or during office hours. Additionally, some teachers felt overwhelmed due to a lack of linguistic support needed to function in a Japanese institution and were thus unable to fully focus on their classroom teaching. With such issues facing our department, initial steps for the hub's creation were taken.

Hub Development and Promotion

When developing the online resource hub, simplicity and organization were key principles implemented to ensure the service would be a high-quality accessible tool instructors could benefit from. Throughout the planning phase, ease of use was at the forefront of design, as the level of technological savviness varied between department staff. This also factored into our decision of which platform would be the best fit. As the hub was created without funding from the university, only free platforms could be used. Of the large number of file-sharing websites available, Dropbox was ultimately chosen, given its large number of features, level of support, and user-friendly interface that most instructors within the department were already familiar with. Once the platform was decided, discussion of how best the website could be accessed by multiple users began. The most practical idea was to have all users share a single account by providing

an email and password created specifically for this project.

After the account was created, organization of materials became the focus, as clear and precise labeling can save teachers time when looking for materials suited to their needs (Cheng & Hwang, 2012). Information was classified into two categories: (1) Administrative Forms and Guides, and (2) Course Resources. All pertinent administrative documents acquired from the university were added, including forms to reschedule classes, how to access salary/payment information, and guides to tax filing. Many of these forms were only available in Japanese and were thus challenging to understand for instructors less proficient in the language. Therefore, the hub developers fluent in Japanese provided detailed translations of a handful of documents with the promise of increasing the number of translations over time. A series of video tutorials were also created for navigating the university website and uploaded to YouTube, with a link to each provided in the corresponding space on Dropbox. All forms were categorized and placed into separate folders, each with a small description of the documents contained within. These descriptions provided tags and keywords allowing teachers to find the file they needed with ease.

Course resources followed a similar design by having all materials categorized by textbook, as each course taught required the use of a specific book. Materials for the various texts included original worksheets, activity descriptions, and original testing handouts. For materials that could be applied to multiple texts or courses, a general folder was made and listed on the main textbook page. Additionally, materials created to support students with disabilities, as well as files related to an e-learning program used in multiple course curriculums, were given their own folders. As the number of folders increased, tags and descriptions

were a top priority so that staff could quickly and easily find what they wanted. Members of the hub community were free to contribute materials on the condition they provide their names and any necessary explanation for their contribution. However, materials that were subject to copyright, such as textbook scans and official audio or video files could not be submitted as was explicitly mentioned in a terms of use section on the main hub page. Official publisher websites or the original source of an item could be linked to in the appropriate Hub section. Furthermore, while any material created by an instructor is regarded as their intellectual property (Holmes & Levin, 2000), it was made clear that any submission would enter the public domain and could then be downloaded and edited by any member of the department for use in their own courses.

Lastly, once initial setup was completed for the hub, several steps were taken to raise awareness and promote it to the rest of the department. A brief presentation in the spring of 2021 during a yearly university colloquium was given. Due to the onset of Covid-19, the presentation was held over the video conferencing software Zoom and was unfortunately not seen by a large portion of the target department audience. Following this presentation and the reintroduction of face-to-face classes on campus a year later, advertisements were made and posted in a shared office that gave teachers the login details and information showcasing what could be found by using the hub. Through communication with the department coordinators, the hub was unofficially accepted and given its own segment during an orientation meeting in early 2022 reaching all department members. Accompanying this presentation was a PDF with more detailed information that was distributed to each teacher.

Practical Usage and Knowledge Sharing

The online resource hub primarily serves as a tool teachers can use, regardless of their location, to find administrative documents, guides, and course materials. Once the hub was created and promoted to the rest of the department, teachers were free to use it however they saw fit. Using shared account information, anyone could log in and browse the ever-growing catalog of materials. Aside from the administrative documents which were provided by the university, the rest of the hub has been completely reliant on the community of English teachers in the department. Everyone has been encouraged to add what they could to the hub with the belief that what they uploaded could help their peers searching for new ideas or ways to teach specific course content. Additional instruction could be given in the comments section of any submission which could also allow for better collaboration and feedback between instructors. This cycle of uploading original materials and using what others add ensures that content is always fresh and being continuously developed, scrutinized, and improved.

The importance and versatility of the resource hub goes far beyond providing teachers with the means to share files. A secondary advantage to using the hub lies in the realm of knowledge sharing, which can lead to teacher development and can ultimately benefit student performance (Ronfeldt, 2015). Knowledge sharing can be defined as the process of donating intellectual capital to others in addition to absorbing knowledge given by another to increase an individual's intellectual capabilities (Kausar et al., 2020). Those who use the resource hub will thus be participating in knowledge sharing. With access to materials from co-workers, individuals gain new information they can incorporate into their own lessons through, for example, adaptation of the material, or

using new ideas to reevaluate their teaching approach.

The willingness to share can stem from a variety of reasons, most commonly an individual's self-efficacy, familiarity with the person(s) they are sharing with or seeing their contribution impact others in a positive way (Tseng & Kuo, 2013). Without providing monetary reward or other more tangible incentives, the hub relies on both a teacher's altruism and their desire to plan lessons more easily and efficiently. The developers of the resource hub act both as the administrators and promoters encouraging this type of communal atmosphere. Such leadership and commitment are essential to create a culture within the workplace to facilitate positive developmental growth amongst educators (Runhaar & Sanders, 2015). The hub as it stands is a project created by teachers for teachers; however, to obtain maximum benefit and see more people partake in knowledge sharing, it would be necessary for the university to start similar programs and provide incentives for the use of a hub-like system.

Significance in a COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 Environment

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in December of 2019, educators around the world were forced to reevaluate how they conducted classes. In many countries, education facilities were forced to suddenly shift from a physical classroom to an online one using cloud-based video conferencing services such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This compelled educators to quickly adopt online tools with which they might be unfamiliar or not have adequate access to, depending on how prepared they were for online lessons before the pandemic started (Zhang et al., 2020). In Japan, while most public primary and secondary schools were kept face-to-face, universities, primarily due to the significantly larger number of students on campus and commuting from various prefectures in the region, opted for

online classes. Teachers found themselves conducting lessons from their homes, or from empty classrooms on campus if they lacked the equipment necessary for video conferencing. Due to this transition to an online space, educators were secluded from their peers without means to converse as in an office space.

In the time before COVID-19, teachers who shared materials or ideas largely did so interpersonally in their facility (Acker, et al., 2014). This was no longer possible due to new regulations on how classes would be conducted in Japanese universities during the pandemic. Therefore, the development of the online resource hub became vital to maintaining a system where educators could freely communicate and share both administrative documents and course resources. As this approach to sharing information was underutilized by teachers at the university, giving demonstrations during orientation meetings was crucial. It was necessary to show that both lessons and materials could be digitized and that knowledge of this technology and how to properly use it may be required in future everyday life should COVID-19 or any other virus persist (Miller, 2022). Even after several years and numerous vaccinations, universities that have students and staff who are at higher risk due to pre-existing medical concerns remain online. Interaction continues to be difficult, which suggests that the resource hub will remain necessary, as it connects individuals together while the pandemic keeps them from being physically in the same classroom or office. Continuing to educate teachers about technologies such as the hub and to encourage its use can lead to more collaboration amongst teachers (Wen & Tan, 2020). As it is currently not known when or if life as normal can return to the university, the resource hub will continue to support teacher needs through the sharing of materials. Being knowledgeable about using such a tool can also be beneficial to

teachers in the future, in case such an unprecedented situation repeats itself.

Conclusion and Future Use

In conclusion, the creation of the resource hub has helped to facilitate better collaboration and sharing between colleagues. It has allowed them to share materials for class such as worksheets and rubrics, as well as to provide linguistic support for various administrative tasks to be conducted in Japanese. While the current coronavirus pandemic has been a terrible burden, the creation of the hub was somewhat serendipitously timed, as it turned out to be a great resource when teaching moved online.

The future of this particular resource hub is still unclear. However, as the need for collaboration and knowledge sharing is unlikely to go away, the hub will likely continue to be used and improved upon. Similar resource hubs could prove to be useful at other institutions, and the development of regional, national, or international hub-like systems would also be beneficial to teachers everywhere, particularly those in remote locations.

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