

REFLECTIONS

Collaborative Reflection on Career Trajectories: Perspectives from Practice

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Various challenges arise in educational institutions seeking to establish university-wide English language education systems. Although each university faces its own specific issues, many of these are shared across institutions. Therefore, cross-university collaborative reflection is particularly valuable, as it enables participants to share emotions and explore diverse perspectives. This paper reflects on how cross-institutional collaboration, facilitated through multiple tools, supported two English language educators navigating career transitions in Japanese tertiary education. By reflecting on this process, we highlight the benefits of collaborative reflection beyond institutional boundaries – including the value of dialogue among different institutions and positions, the enhancement of reappraisal and emotional belonging, the formation of new professional communities, and the recognition of burnout.

Keywords: collaborative reflection, professional development, shared journal, cross-institutional collaboration, reciprocal relationship

University-wide English language education in Japan is generally managed within institutional frameworks, and coordination of programmes is most often entrusted to tenured faculty. According to Hata (2023), the roles of tenured and full-time university faculty extend beyond research and teaching; they are also expected to contribute to university administration and social services. In other words, tenured and full-time contract faculty members are required to juggle multiple responsibilities in order to manage the university at various levels and provide more consistent and equitable learning opportunities across classes. Despite these institutional roles and responsibilities, quality assurance in language education remains a persistent challenge for many Japanese universities (Young, 2021). According to Prichard and Moore (2016), Japanese universities tended to grant individual teachers high levels of autonomy in pedagogical decision-making, and faculty members were less inclined to adopt a top-down approach to language programme coordination. This tendency may contribute to considerable variation in the quality of instruction, highlighting a systemic issue in the Japanese higher education context. Although every course has its own description and objectives within university-wide English language education, teacher autonomy allows teachers to interpret them as they wish. In the case where there are not enough shared understandings between full-time and part-time faculty, teaching approaches and areas of focus could differ significantly. While the full-time course coordinators emphasise quality assurance, the inadequacy of collaboration and communication between teachers makes it difficult to achieve.

Tenured and full-time faculty carry administrative burdens; in contrast, part-time faculty experience a different set of challenges, largely shaped by their limited institutional involvement.

First, they are more likely to have difficulties in grasping the broader picture of university operations and following changes. Even though guidelines and information are shared, their access can be limited because many part-time faculty work at multiple institutions. Another relates to emotional struggle. Part-time lecturers often face isolation that emerges from a lack of information and communication between other part-time and full-time lecturers. In that case, they need to deal with worries concerning classroom management and student behaviour issues independently. Lastly, they might feel insecure because their position is not guaranteed due to annual contracts. This uncertainty can make them feel less connected to institutions and occupied with additional work and job hunting during their part-time employment. These factors add complexity to part-time teachers' lives and could hinder communication with full-time colleagues.

These institutional dynamics informed our own professional experiences. As co-authors, we acknowledged the challenges outlined above before engaging in collaborative reflection. However, the degree of our awareness of the challenges deepened through collaborative reflection and career transitions. Although we were not novice teachers, working in a new institution often meant that our previous approaches were no longer effective, and adapting to the culture of a new workplace became essential. This process, however, is not always easy and can diminish educators' sense of efficacy and confidence as well as lead them to experience emotional upheaval. For example, a communication method between teachers that was effective at a previous institution failed to develop teacher relationships in the new environment. In such circumstances, collaboration and a safe space to have one's voice heard are particularly important. In this article, we demonstrate how collaborative reflection beyond institutional boundaries can support full-time faculty members in not only surviving but also thriving in their professional roles.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice plays a pivotal role in teaching development and is widely regarded as a key professional competence (Farrell, 2022). Regarding the systematic framework of reflective practice, Boud et al. (1985) proposed a reflection-in-learning model consisting of three stages: returning to experience, attending to feelings, and re-evaluating experience. They explained that a person can prepare themselves for a new experience through these three stages. More specifically, the first stage helps them to reflect on the actual events, the second facilitates reflective process by fostering a positive affective state, and the third involves associating new knowledge with prior knowledge, integrating the two types of knowledge, testing for internal consistency between them, and personally appropriating new knowledge. Reflective practice at these stages can be approached from either a subjective or an objective perspective. The subjective perspective allows practitioners to focus on their own voice and experiences, whereas the objective perspective provides opportunities to broaden or reshape their understanding of their experiences.

Writing is one of the activities that serve as an aid to the reflective process. By describing events and expressing honest feelings, writing can help individuals recognise their affective aspects and provide an objective account of the events (Walker, 1985). Previous research has demonstrated positive effects of journals on novice language instructors. For example, Yoshihara et al. (2019) found that solo journaling can be beneficial for processing emotions and recognising difficulties and challenges. However, they cautioned that the benefits would be limited to the situation where supervisors are unavailable because feedback can play an important role in reevaluating experiences.

On the other hand, collaborative reflection has gained increased attention as a primary tool for reflection, particularly following the socio-cultural turn, which emphasises learning

through social interaction (Tajeddin et al., 2022), whereas forming a reflection group with peers at a similar level can facilitate transitions to new contexts and help avoid professional isolation (Farrell, 2016). Group or collaborative reflection is considered particularly effective, as engaging with diverse perspectives enables teachers to critically reevaluate their experiences from both subjective and objective viewpoints. According to Walsh and Mann (2015), dialogic reflection can contribute to richer analysis than written forms of reflection because a practitioner can reflect on practice while discussing it with another. This approach is particularly valuable because the dialogic reflection can provoke collaborative sense-making and mutual learning among practitioners.

Contexts

Backgrounds

This collaborative reflection took place from April 2022 to the end of September 2023. The initial plan for the collaborative project was shaped when we learned of similarities in our teaching philosophies in the 2022 academic year. That was the time one of us asked the other to participate in her research project, which helped us to learn about our perspectives intensely. We decided to invite one more collaborator who could provide a different insight into reflection. After the third person joined, we conversed about duties and job opportunities via social media group chat (Facebook Messenger) and started journaling. Those topics allowed us to develop a reciprocal relationship because all of us were eager to pursue academic career development. After the 2022 academic year, we (the authors) decided to continue our collaborative reflection voluntarily. Looking back, one of the key reasons for sustaining this collaboration was that both of us were experiencing career transitions to new teaching contexts, roles, and positions at that time. One of us previously worked as a part-time lecturer while pursuing doctoral studies, and the other balanced a full-time contract position with part-time teaching. As we both transitioned into tenured roles, we anticipated that continuing our collaborative reflection would support us in navigating the professional and institutional adjustments required in our new environments.

The universities where we worked full-time have several faculties, having medium-sized student populations. Both of us held responsibilities to coordinate university-wide English language education programmes, including supporting and recruiting part-time lecturers, providing faculty development (FD) workshops for part-time lecturers, allocating teachers and students to classes, designing curriculum, and verifying the effects of the coordinated programmes where teachers used shared syllabi. While the university-wide English language education programmes consist of both mandatory and elective English courses for all first- and second-year university students in the universities, both of us had only one or a few additional colleagues who managed the programmes. Additionally, each of us belonged to several committees within the universities, which focus on university administration. While the time for research during working hours tended to be limited, personnel evaluation consisted of not only teaching and administration but also research publications in most cases. Consequently, we pursued teaching, administration, and research in a well-balanced manner.

Collaborative Reflection Tools

Multiple tools were used to collaboratively reflect on our experiences as teachers in higher education. We collected journal entries at our own pace in shared Google documents during the 2022 and 2023 academic years, and we also provided comments on each other's writing. Zoom meetings were held four times to verbally share our experiences and identify similarities and differences in our work. Each Zoom session was recorded and automatically transcribed using the Zoom function. We read the transcribed data before and/or after a Zoom session for review.

Moreover, Facebook Messenger was used for casual communication, such as scheduling meetings and handling everyday inquiries related to teaching practices.

In the process of reflecting on our collaborative reflection, we reviewed all the data sets including our journaling, Zoom meeting transcripts, and social media chats collected between 2022 and 2023. We analysed the effects of collaborative reflection inductively and created four themes.

As for data reporting, we anonymised ourselves as Author A and Author B to protect our anonymity. Revealing personally identifying information in qualitative research could lead to negative judgments from colleagues or undesired career consequences, even though storytelling that includes researchers' real names might have a stronger impact on readers' perspectives (Lapadat, 2017). Considering the potential vulnerability of researchers, we do not disclose which of us corresponds to Author A or Author B. Furthermore, we did not use these anonymised labels consistently across all excerpts; in other words, "Author A" does not always refer to the same individual in order to ensure anonymity.

Effects of This Collaborative Reflection

In this section, we demonstrate four effects of our collaborative reflection conducted between the 2022 and 2023 academic years. These effects include: (1) being able to share openly due to working in different institutions and holding different positions, (2) fostering reappraisal and emotional belonging through collaborative journaling, (3) the expansion of a community apart from existing ones, and (4) recognising burnout through reflection.

Different Institutions and Positions Helped Us Be Open

Working at different institutions and in different positions turned out to be a positive aspect of this collaborative reflection. Our differences encouraged us to be honest about each individual's questions. For example, Author A raised a question on Facebook Messenger about how to increase part-time lecturers' involvement in a university FD workshop. Author B highlighted the challenges she faced, such as working at multiple universities and having limited time to focus on a single institution. The following extract illustrates our exchange:

Author A: Quick questions for you as a part-time lecturer. If your workplace offers some professional development workshops for part-time lecturers, would you like to learn something from the university except information such as attendance policy and a way to do hybrid classes? If yes, what kinds of topics are you interested in?

Author B: As a part timer, I find it hard to attend FD sessions because of the time restrictions. And I usually ask for help in the lecturer's rooms, so I wouldn't attend it unless I'm desperate [grinning face with sweat emoji]. But in the case of using designated textbooks, I would like to learn how others use them to adjust the difficulty for the students or to make it related to them [smiling face emoji]. (2022, May 31)

Through this honest exchange, we developed a deeper understanding of the situations faced by part-time lecturers and reflected on what types of FD workshops could be effective. Moreover, the dialogue enabled us to engage with the inquiry without fear of negative evaluation from colleagues or threats to our professional reputation. Author B described herself as a good teacher, normally directing herself to work for the students; thus, not participating in FD made her feel guilty. However, she could confess that participation without pay would be less fair for part-time lecturers who were busy with teaching different types of courses.

In many cases, accepting criticism can be emotionally challenging. However, in this instance, Author A, who asked the question, described the event as insightful, accepted the critique, and reflected on it as a positive experience in her journal. Although her natural personality as an honest person was one of the factors to reinterpret the event, the discussion with Author B, working at a different institution, could be another factor to make it easier for Author A to realise that part-timers had reasonable reasons not to participate in the FD workshops actively. Additionally, her reinterpretation in the shared journal allowed Author B to learn how an opinion as a part-timer could be acknowledged. Conducting collaborative reflection across different institutions is a useful way to share honest opinions on experiences. Moreover, occupying different positions makes us more aware of diverse perspectives depending on employment status. This episode illustrates how collaborative reflection created an emotionally safe space.

Collaborative Journaling as a Pathway to Reappraisal and Emotional Belonging

We found shared journaling to be an effective tool for self-reflection. Through these shared journals, we were able to read each other's experiences and events, which allowed us to rethink our own experiences more objectively. This process also provided us with new perspectives. When both of us wrote about our struggles in the journals, we experimented with a cognitive behavioural therapy practice known as reappraisal. According to Uchida (2023), reappraisal is a psychological strategy where a person pauses when experiencing negative emotions and reassesses the situation to determine whether or not those feelings are necessary. By reevaluating the situation or emotion, they aim to shift their response in a more positive direction. This idea of the reappraisal approach came from Author A's journal entries, who was influenced by Uchida's book regarding reappraisal:

I recently came across a section on reappraisal in psychology in a book I am reading, and it reminded me of our discussion last Saturday. [...] It seemed that both Author B and I engaged in several instances of reappraising negative experiences objectively. In addition, by reading each other's journal entries, we were able to indirectly experience the other person's situations, which also contributed to our reappraisal processes. (2023, June 12)

Applying the reappraisal approach to our journal entries and discussing them in an online meeting helped us transform negative experiences into meaningful ones. Author B had picked up the reappraisal attitude in Author A's journal entry, which had made her want to embrace it in her journal before learning about the concept during an online meeting. In Author B's journal, she wrote "I read Author A's journal entry, particularly the section on reappraisal. For someone like me who is prone to subjectively interpreting situations negatively, having professional connections beyond my institution served as an important source of support and reassurance" (2023, August 5). In other words, collaborative reflection created two steps to learn about the reappraisal approach, consisting of reading entries and discussion. Indirect experience by reading entries helped Author B reflect on her attitude and prepare to make a change before learning about a new concept explicitly. Adopting a new concept to bring about change can be challenging when people find it unrelated. However, she could benefit from the preparation stage to make the experience relatable. Additionally, the explicit explanation from her partner in the meeting allowed her to conceptualise the approach and share her learning with the partner. In short, Author A naturally explored a certain part of Boud et al.'s (1985) reflection-in-learning model through the process of reappraisal, and her journal entry encouraged Author B to implement it through collaborative reflection.

Moreover, sharing not only positive but also negative thoughts in our journals and online meetings fostered a safe space that made us feel, "*I'm not the only one experiencing this* (2023, April 28)", "*I felt calm by reading my partner's journal* (2023, April 28)", and "*I can relate to it, so I can learn from you* (2023, September 13)". This sense of safety and mutual trust enhanced a sense of emotional belonging between us. As Farrell (2016) pointed out, we both could avoid isolation through collaborative reflection. In particular, the shared journals were a powerful tool that allowed us to resonate with each other's stories within this secure environment, deepen emotional connection, and eventually develop a more positive outlook.

Expanding a Community Apart from Existing Ones

This new community also helped us interact with each other, especially through Facebook Messenger. Both of us often felt difficulties and guilt about sharing our negative thoughts and worries with members of our existing communities. However, because we gathered around similar educational philosophies and interests, this environment allowed us to share everyday topics, including job-hunting struggles and classroom practice ideas. Our community continued to evolve as we experienced career transitions. When we eventually found ourselves in similar positions, we viewed the community as a more valuable place to share emotions and difficulties. We were not constrained by institutional group dynamics, which allowed us to remain open in our collaborative reflection.

For our reflective practice, we thought that connecting with communities outside our existing networks facilitated easier consultation and reflection, which is consistent with Burt's (1992) structural holes theory. This theory highlights that non-redundant contacts provide access to more diverse information compared to contacts within a dense network where contacts overlap, such as those in competitive business environments. This framework is also applicable to higher education, where individual research competitiveness or economic contribution is emphasised. In such universities, open discussions within institutions are sometimes challenging, especially regarding workload for the following reason. Many academic positions are characterised by a high degree of autonomy, allowing employees to manage their working hours. Consequently, a certain portion of work is considered to be under individual control. As a result, excessive workloads are sometimes regarded as matters of personal choice rather than structural issues, making it difficult to address workload inequalities internally. In contrast, in our cross-institutional collaboration, we were not bound by institutional obligations or contracts.

Cross-institutional collaborative reflection served as a platform for us to discuss the roles we shared in common. We could discuss events and experiences displayed in the journal entries, sharing different features of our workplaces, which promoted critical discussions. By comparing differences and similarities, we analysed problems and possible causes. Notably, our evaluation of the events and experiences ended with positive remarks, including suggestions for a different view or a future step. This sense of mutual support was captured well in our reflection shared in a Zoom meeting:

Author A: I thought that after moving to a new place to work, the connections that I had built would be weakened or lost. But we continued this project so I could exchange information and share emotions with you. If I had kept journals alone, I would not have seen this positive effect.

Author B: I see your point. It's like we were going beyond our institutional boundaries.

Author A: And then I started to recognise good points in the new place. (2023, September 12)

While moving to another university can certainly broaden one's academic network, one of us initially perceived such connections as fragile, worrying that physical absence from a community might lead to a loss of belonging. Nevertheless, collaborative reflection through online tools allowed us to stay connected and keep up with each other's changes. Maintaining a sense of belonging to a community beyond our institutions helped one of us view the new environment more positively. This experience demonstrates that communities created across institutional boundaries can play a valuable role in sharing information and cultivating a positive mindset. Moreover, it illustrates that mutual support and shared reflection can foster non-redundant contacts, thereby strengthening a sense of community.

Recognising Burnout

Yahiro et al. (2022) point out that human service professionals, such as educators, are particularly susceptible to burnout as an occupational stressor. Through reviewing our collaborative reflection, we realised that we both experienced burnout. According to the World Health Organization (2019), burnout has three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion
- Increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job
- Reduced professional efficacy

In our cases, Author A felt energy depletion and exhaustion when she tried to complete every task perfectly, which forced her to work even on weekends. This struggle led her to lose confidence and to become impatient in pursuing research. In contrast, Author B experienced reduced professional efficacy when she was required to manage ambiguous tasks and roles without adequate support. As a result, she also lost confidence in her role as a full-time lecturer. Both authors documented journal entries and discussed their experiences during Zoom meetings. For example, Author A reflected on the moment she was suffering from burnout in a Zoom session on 12 September 2023:

When I compared myself to others, I realised that I used to push myself to give my full effort in every task, and as a result, I often ended up exhausted. I stayed late in my office, worked on weekends, and overworked myself to the point that I didn't allow my private time to be restorative. I put pressure on myself in that way. It negatively affected my other work as well, and I noticed that I hadn't been managing the balance well.

Looking back, we realised that during the process of collaborative reflection, we had overlooked moments when we were actually experiencing burnout. In retrospect, however, we also recognise that without engaging in collaborative reflection, we might not have become aware of our burnout at all. Burnout often builds gradually through layers of stress, and once someone is in that state, it can be difficult to notice or acknowledge it. Thus, our collaborative reflection played a significant role in helping us reflect our burnout and perceive it as a lesson. This reflection suggests that recognising burnout through collaborative reflection is a crucial step toward maintaining teacher well-being, as it allows educators to restore balance, reaffirm their professional purpose, and continue engaging meaningfully in their work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this collaborative reflection had a significantly positive impact on us during our career transitions. At a mid-sized university, English language education programmes often recruit only a small number of faculty members, which limits opportunities for collaborative reflection and mentoring. In our case, there is only one other faculty member—or at most a few—in the English language education programme, and the situation has required us to manage multiple complex tasks such as curriculum coordination, working with and recruiting part-time lecturers, and other tasks, which are not related to curriculum coordination. These common challenges made our cross-institutional collaboration especially meaningful.

Engaging in collaborative reflection beyond our institutions provided an emotionally safe space where we could openly share questions, struggles, teaching practices, and research ideas without hesitation. We also recognised that this process helped us avoid dwelling on negative thoughts and prevented us from carrying them into our classrooms. Some of the reasons our collaborative reflection was successful include maintaining dialogue through Zoom meetings, casual conversations at the Japanese Association for Language Teaching (JALT) conferences, and in-person meetups in Tokyo. Furthermore, our shared backgrounds—as English language educators with similar teaching philosophies and research interests—helped sustain our collaboration. For example, we often shared information about academic conferences and events. Ideally, all language lecturers at tertiary education should have access to such peers, and we believe that attending JALT conferences and SIG gatherings can be valuable opportunities to find colleagues with shared interests and similar teaching philosophies.

Nowadays, university educators are expected to juggle various professional and personal tasks. Therefore, collaborative reflection with peers may sound like extra work. For those who find it challenging, we would like to share our secrets. We were honest about our progress, and when deadlines were difficult to meet, we adjusted by rescheduling meetings or extending timelines. These proactive attitudes helped sustain our reciprocal relationship. Rather than worrying about delays, we focused on continuity and flexibility, which enabled us to keep our collaboration alive. In a divisive and complex world, we found that collaborative reflection provided us not only with practical strategies for managing tasks but also with a sense of belonging.

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