

COLLABORATION AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY FOR NEW TEACHERS

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INTRODUCTION

The spring 2020 term at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) was unexpectedly moved from on campus to fully online, forcing teachers to quickly adapt. This was an especially challenging situation for teachers who were new to university teaching and already facing a steep learning curve. As two teachers both new to university teaching, we decided to collaborate on course planning together with the hope of increasing our effectiveness and efficiency. We supported each other while planning *Freshman English*, a required course for all freshmen students. The course is divided into six distinct thematic units and focuses on academic language growth and conversational ability. This paper will explore why we chose to collaborate, how we collaborated, and advantages and disadvantages of the process.

WHY WE CHOSE TO COLLABORATE

Our decision to collaborate was based on our mutual needs. Initially, we were assigned to work in course groups, small groups composed of more experienced and less experienced teachers in charge of similar groups of students. These groups were to work together to adapt materials for online lessons. However, we quickly found that our knowledge and skill sets lagged behind those of our more experienced course group members due to our newness to KUIS and to university teaching in general. We both had been teaching at the high school level for several years and so had similar vantage points as we entered into a new set of norms and expectations. We felt uncertain of the best way to approach planning our lessons and were filled with questions about the curriculum, materials, student needs, and tech use. With the inherent isolation of online teaching, we felt the need for a greater level of support from a sympathetic peer. Thus, the decision to collaborate was born of both practical and affective needs. Initially, we struggled through planning unit 1 of the course (the orientation unit) both by ourselves and with our assigned course groups. This prompted the two of us to work together on planning unit 2 (the Japan unit).

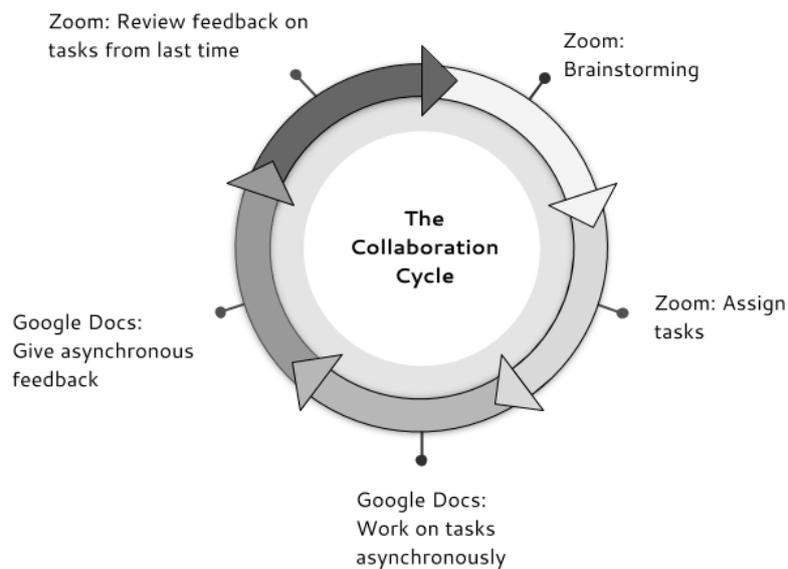
METHOD OF COLLABORATION

In order for the two of us to collaborate, we primarily used Google Drive and Zoom, with occasional emails and messages on LINE (a popular messaging application in Japan). We started by creating a shared folder on Google Drive for unit 2. Using the materials on the KUIS shared Google Drive, we made an adapted draft of a unit schedule and copies of relevant documents.

In the first meeting there was a great deal of information and many documents with which neither of us were familiar. After some time we came up with a flow that worked well for us,

which can be seen in Figure 1. We met on Zoom once a week for discussion and brainstorming. Then we divided the materials we would make asynchronously to prepare for classes. While doing said tasks, we utilized the comment function in Google Docs to ask questions and give feedback. In the next Zoom meeting, we started by reviewing comments and the tasks from the last time. If there were problems or questions, we used this time for more brainstorming and discussion. We repeated this process through unit 2. Since it worked well for us, we decided to continue collaborating throughout the term.

Fig 1. The collaboration cycle



ADVANTAGES OF COLLABORATION

Advantages to this collaboration process were numerous. Firstly, it helped us to gain a deeper understanding of the requirements of the Freshman English curriculum. We were able to discuss aspects of the curriculum we did not understand. As we were both learning together, we were able to stand on equal footing, working side by side toward mutual understanding rather than being taught from the top-down by more experienced teachers. This meant that we could each develop our own personal understanding of the requirements and explain them in our own words. We were also able to ask naive questions without fear of judgment.

Development of effective, quality materials is another advantage that came of the collaborative process. We each offered feedback on the materials that the other made, meaning we could catch potential issues before distributing them to students. Instructions that were unclear to another teacher would surely be unclear to students coming from a different linguistic background. Receiving positive feedback from one another helped us gain confidence that our materials would be effective in the actual lesson. We also gained

awareness of our own strengths and weaknesses with materials development, which surely will be useful in future years of teaching.

Another major advantage of this process was the time saved. As new teachers, we were under the burden of not only learning a new curriculum but also having to adapt existing materials for online use. Necessary adaptations included converting PDFs to formats that could be written on electronically, changing group projects that required meeting in person, editing presentation rubrics to account for a virtual setting, and so on. Working together meant that the time spent on these was essentially divided in half, so we could spend more time focusing on other responsibilities.

An unexpected advantage of collaborating was that we could veer off topic to casually discuss additional questions, which is difficult to do when teaching remotely. We could easily address subjects like technology issues, duties outside of teaching, how to answer questions from students, and even questions we had about teaching other classes. This also helped to abate some of the loneliness and isolation inherent to working from home.

POSSIBLE DISADVANTAGES

There may be certain disadvantages if other new teachers attempt a similar style of collaboration. One risk we took in collaboration was that we did not know each other well. Most new lecturers met on campus for one day. We also had some online orientation sessions together. However, online meetings are not always successful in creating professional relationships or getting to know a person. So there was a high risk that our personalities might conflict. For example, one teacher might have higher standards and expectations than the other. Collaborating with someone who is so different could create more problems than it would save time.

Another disadvantage is that colleagues have to agree upon and stick to a timeline. If one person is consistently late to meetings, for example, it can really disappoint or inconvenience another person. Matching schedules is always a challenge.

Additionally, a major disadvantage is that collaborating online adds more screen time. Due to the 2020 pandemic, many people have greatly increased their screen time. This can cause physical pain and other problems. So the added screen time may not be worth the extra help depending on a person's living situation, access to technology, physical health, and regular workload.

Finally, long-term online collaboration could be unnecessary for teachers with prior university experience. As both of us were new to the school, the curriculum, teaching in higher education, and online teaching, it was invaluable in helping us adjust to our first semester. Our main concern and difficulty was not understanding or knowing anything about the materials and curriculum. Even if online teaching is new for almost all teachers, KUIS educators have other ways of collaborating which could be sufficient for experienced university teachers.

CONCLUSION

As described above, a useful method of collaboration was developed as a way to cope with the emergency online teaching situation during the spring 2020 semester at KUIS. While this collaboration style might not work for everyone, the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages in our situation. We both agree that this arrangement was time saving, beneficial, and allowed us to work more effectively as teachers. This collaboration method may also be useful to new teachers in the future. Further research could investigate the possibility of creating a more formalized system to connect new teachers to each other as they find their footing in the university setting. This could be in the form of a voluntary peer-to-peer collaboration system or social events exclusive to new teachers. The insights gained from this experience are a useful reminder that good ideas often come from adverse circumstances.