A Strategic Analysis of the Online Learning Community for Continuing Professional Development of University Faculty in Taiwan: A SWOT Analysis

Tzy-Ling Chen, Assistant Professor
Agricultural Extension Education
National Chung-Hsing University
250 Kao-Kung Rd., Taichung, Taiwan
Email: tlchen@nchu.edu.tw

Tzu-Jung Chen, Graduate Student
Department of Human Resource Education
University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign
United States of America
Email: tchen@uiuc.edu

Abstract
This paper delineates an instrumental multi-case study conducted in Taiwan with university faculty. The study explores higher education teachers’ standpoints concerning adoption of online learning community (OLC) as a strategy for continuing professional development (CPD) taking advantage of the technique frequently applied to program planning or decision making analyses on internal effects of Strength and Weakness as well as external possibilities of Opportunity and Threat (SWOT). In the end, discussions of use of OLC for CPD of university faculty in Taiwan are elaborated.

CPD of University Faculty as a Shared Concern
By definition, CPD is stated as the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and the process of developing personal qualities necessary for professional services and technical duties throughout practitioners’ working lives through continuing education[1]. In the context of education, today’s constantly evolving educational environment has resulted in great demands on teachers of all levels and in all areas to engage themselves in CPD. Besides imperatives of survival, maintenance, and mobility, it is also pivotal to comprehend the concept of “worthwhileness” interpreted by Jarvis (1983) as the underlying motivation for CPD [2]. For example, to improve competences and promote the feeling of self-worth within the current role, to become qualified for career progression as well as learn how to learn effectively and engage in learning its intrinsic worth and so on.

In Taiwan, there emerges a boost in number of practicing teachers of all levels engaging themselves in CPD for the purpose of professional growth, and meanwhile, meeting the requirements of institutional performance evaluations. However, of all efforts made to explore teachers’ CPD, seldom there exist less than few inquiries to probe and discuss issues emphasizing on CPD of university faculty as a target group. Basically, almost all universities in Taiwan have a ternary mission, involving teaching, research, and extension services. As for university faculty members, not only they need to carry on interdisciplinary research in relate to their expertise and/or of their interests, but also it is required of them to engage in the effective transfer of innovative knowledge and technology to meet public needs by integrating research findings and effective transfer of innovative knowledge and technology to learners with a wide range of personal experiences and backgrounds. But, due to a lack of efforts to transform and include them as a set of criteria in the performance evaluation system for faculty’s tenure as well as promotion review, CPD practice of university faculty in Taiwan seems restricted and limited in terms of variance in activities and methods, and effectiveness.

Strategic analysis of OLC for CPD of University Faculty
With the advent of Internet technologies, the process of conveying information and knowledge has become overtly different comparing to what used to be decades ago. In addition, not only synchronous online learning events possible have been made possible, but also they encourage the development of learning communities where individual learners can create their own lifelong learning plans by taking advantage of the strengths of all forms of learning opportunities. It has been also evidenced that interactive online learning contributes to unique benefits those traditional formal, face-to-face-based CPD methods can impossibly achieve (Miller & Smith, 1998[3]; Oelrich, 2001[4]). As confirmed, much of the success of OLC comes from productive, online threaded discussions through which learners involved are able to construct their own understanding[5]. In this sense, OLC is assumed in this paper that it can provide university faculty with an alternative to initiate and pursue CPD for successfully meeting the concomitant needs for individuals to update themselves, to remain competent and continue to contribute themselves to universities as valued and productive members, and to enhance their mobility in the labor market. As a four-part approach of SWOT analysis aims to explore strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of a strategy or plan for action, overall it is viewed as a very effective tool designed to be employed in the preliminary stages of decision-making and as a precursor to strategic planning in various kinds of applications (Dugger, 1995[6]; Collett, 1999[7]). It is, thus,
utilized as a decision-making aid for analysis when OLC is suggested as a strategy for use to engage university faculty in CPD in this study.

**Qualitative Case Study Methodology**

Built upon the framework of SWOT analysis, an acronym in which four letters of strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat stand for, this study utilized an instrumental, multiple-case method as the primary research design. For a fundamental characteristic of the instrumental case study is attributed to its focus on an issue with the case used instrumentally to illustrate the issue (Creswell, 1998[8]), it was adopted to help better capture research participants’ perceptions in regard to the OLC used as a current strategy for CPD. The major objectives of this research are twofold. First, the research aimed to identify strengths and weaknesses of the application of OLC as the CPD strategy among university faculty. The second objective then involved an examination of where these participants can and should go from there. The data collection of a case study research design is extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, including observation, interview, questionnaire survey, documentation, archival record, and physical artifact, etc. The data collection strategy employed in this research is semi-structured interview. In accordance with qualitative methodology, three participants were selected based on criterion-oriented purposeful sampling. Not only the richness of information an individual case can provide was taken into account, but to be included in the study, the participants have to meet the following requirements: from the four-year universities in Taiwan with a ternary mission, involving teaching, research, and extension services, from any OLC, such as listserv or Web-based discussion group, etc., and consented to be interviewed. Participants all represented the field of agriculture. A more detailed description of three selected participants is illustrated in Table 1, below.

**Table 1 Profiles of Three Taiwanese University Faculty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>OLC Joined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. A</td>
<td>Associate Pro.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9yrs</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. B</td>
<td>Pro.</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12yrs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss C</td>
<td>Assistant Pro.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3yrs</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant codes were assigned to each interviewee to protect anonymity during analysis. An open-ended interview guide was used for each audio taped face-to-face interview. The interview guide consisted of questions that explore participants’ perceptions regarding application of OLC for their CPD. Interview questions included:

1. What is “golden” about the OLC in terms of CPD?
2. What kind of learning experiences do you have in participating in OLC?
3. What looks a bit rusty about OLC in terms of CPD?
4. What do you think OLC can be improved for helping attain better learning experiences?
5. What new needs of learners can OLC meet?
6. What are the emerging trends that benefit the development of OLC?
7. What are the negative trends?
8. Where is OLC vulnerable?

All interviews were subsequently transcribed and analyzed for key ideas, key participant comments, discrepancies in responses, and reactions to questions covered in the interview guide. Miles and Huberman (1994) illuminate that an audit trail as a method of logging and describing our procedures and data clearly enough so that others can understand, reconstruct, and scrutinize them[9]. The truthworthiness is contingent upon the audit trail being complete, comprehensible, and systematically related to methodological approaches[10].

**Conclusion**

Overall, the participants viewed OLC predominantly as a beneficial and useful strategy for CPD for its convenience, easy-to-use, interactive, and resource richness if resources and contents provided can ensure faculty to return and use them regularly. Findings further revealed that participation of OLC is highly related to faculty involvement in CPD. In other words, when faculty members have voluntarily dedicated themselves more to the pursuit of learning for updating their competencies and for professional growth, more likely they may become an active member of a professional OLC, which can be recognized as “integral or adept participants.” A lot of these integral participants are also highly literate in terms of skills of using online technologies. If the case is that they engage in CPD as only by required to maintain certain level of knowledge and skills to become equipped for the job, it is suitable to classify them as “involved participants” of OLC. Other than these two types of participants, the rest of faculty is considered as “potential participants” for OLC is, in fact, perceived as a valuable strategy for faculty to participate in CPD. Many potential participants may eventually become so-called “lurkers” in OLC because some of them are satisfied with getting involved in this way. In this sense, the development of OLC will be faced and challenged with the needs of a variety of participants’ types and learning styles as well. Constraints in use of OLC for engaging faculty in CPD as evidenced according to the analysis include a lack of reward and support systems for facilitating faculty participation, computer illiterate and phobic as well as distrust and uncertainty of network relations.

**Reference**


Rest of Reference is Available from Authors Upon Request