Effects of the Peer Mentoring Process in the Development of a Teaching Portfolio

Yukari Kato*

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Abstract This study aimed at examining the awareness of mentor teachers, before and after supervisory experiences of their mentees’ teaching portfolios. In the context of the supporting teachers’ reflection on their teaching, two trials were conducted. The trials showed the following three points: (1) mentor teachers could understand the mentees’ actual expertise based on mentees’ educational philosophy by carefully reviewing the mentees’ teaching portfolios; (2) novice mentors could determine various career paths as a Japanese language teacher and focus on their own career decisions by reviewing their mentees’ personal history; and (3) mentees could plan research and projects effectively for their educational improvement by defining short- and long-term objectives.

Keywords: professional development, teacher growth, coaching dyad, teacher collaboration, career advancement

1. Introduction

In various studies on higher education, many researchers and professional experts have proposed models of cyclical processes to characterize peer coaching, in which pairs of teachers work together to support each other’s professional growth with respect to their careers and day-to-day teaching practices in their schools and institutions (1-3).

This working-together approach enables teachers to move from a passive role to a truly collaborative one. To encourage this type of professional collaboration, participants use alternative forms of inquiry, such as conducting peer observations, reporting on their own practices, and making collaborative reflections in the development of teaching portfolios. Peer mentoring activities have been implemented to broaden teachers’ ability to take control of their professional lives and create opportunities to publicize their views regarding educational expectations (4, 5).

Previously, the author developed collaborative Internet-based learning sites including four different activities: (1) developing e-learning contents; (2) preparing an e-teaching portfolio; (3) communicating with peers and mentors; and (4) carrying out topic-based learning (6-8). However, no one has systematically examined the process and outcomes of developing a teaching portfolio as rational and emotional changes.

In the present study, the author identified how an e-portfolio can be employed as an advising and pedagogical tool to encourage discussion between mentors and mentees by examining the activities of coaching dyads for e-teaching portfolio. The author focused on both mentor and mentee teachers’ learning aspects during teaching portfolio development.

2. Overview of the Projects

The author conducted a year-long evaluation study of two trials: the first ran from April 2012–September 2012, and the second ran from November 2012–May 2013. In these trials, the author assessed the utility and effectiveness of the portfolio systems (7) to identify problems experienced by Japanese language teachers in Japan and abroad and to locate potential system improvements. Table 1 presents the activities done in the trials.

2.1 Evaluations of the Two Trials

In the first and second trials, the author mainly used an e-portfolio system (http://katoyukari.net/) to promote professional communication among participants. This portfolio also served as a repository of reflective activities for participants and mentors and as a personalized learning space.

The e-portfolio shown in Figure 1 is a collection of electronic evidence assembled and managed by a participant, usually on the Web. Such electronic evidence may
include inputted text, electronic files, images, multimedia, blog entries, and hyperlinks. It also allows for the building in of reflective activities for participants and mentors, so that it works as a personalized learning space. This e-portfolio uses the open source software Mahara.

A majority of the participants in the first trial, however, stated that communication was inhibited; they felt afraid or uncomfortable with expressing their opinions and ideas to other participants whom they did not know. Young teachers were especially hesitant to express their ideas and opinions to senior counterparts. Based on these observations and data analysis, the author implemented two new activities: small inquiry groups and coaching dyads in the second trial.

Two of the author’s previous studies had discussed how collaborative faculty research was conducted within small inquiry groups on the Internet(7, 8). Both active and inactive participants within the small inquiry groups mentioned the difficulty of building a good and sufficient relationship that provides mutual and reciprocal collaboration over a distance(7). The participants also stressed the importance of mentors’ assistance and support for collaboration as means of improving the situation(8).

Table 1 presents comparison between the first and second trials.

|                           | The First Trial                                                                 | The Second Trial                                                                 |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participants              | 13 participants (4 teachers overseas, 5 teachers in Japan, and 4 staff members) | 18 participants (6 teachers overseas, 8 teachers in Japan, and 4 staff members) |
| Teaching Portfolio (TP)   | 1) Study e-contents (how to develop TP) on the Moodle site.                    | 1) Study e-contents (how to develop TP) on the Moodle site.                      |
|                           | 2) Receive advice from staff members.                                         | 2) Receive advice from two mentors who had developed their own TPs in the first trial. |
|                           | 3) Use TP samples of the first trial as a reference for the e-portfolio.       | 3) Use TP samples of the first trial as a reference for the e-portfolio.         |
| Collaborative Faculty Research | Use the discussion board to communicate with each other.                    | Organize eight small groups and exchange ideas to solve their own problems.     |

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2.2 Participants in the Second Trial

In the second trial, 18 participants (six mentee teachers (N–S), eight mentor teachers (A–I), and four staff members (J–M)) were involved in this trial, as shown in Table 2.

The 14 teachers and three staff members in this trial taught some type of Japanese language course during the study. Six teachers (A, B, C, N, O, and P) were novice who had recently completed their respective Master’s programs and had limited teaching experiences but were able to obtain full-time positions at various universities and educational institutions overseas, whereas the senior teachers (D, F, G, H, I, Q, R, and S) had a wide array of teaching experiences both in Japan and overseas.

Two of senior teachers were associate professors at national universities in Japan. Five of them were part-time Japanese language teachers at language institutes and universities in Japan. The last senior teacher was a lecturer working at the overseas branch office of an
independent administrative agency.

The coaching dyads were formed on the basis of differences in years of experience and the age of the teachers.

### 3. Practices during the Second Trial

As mentioned earlier in Section 2.1, in the first trial, young teachers were especially hesitant to express their ideas and opinions to senior counterparts and they desired mentors’ assistance and support to improve the situation.

In the context of supporting teachers’ growth and reflection on their teaching, this second trial examined how peer mentoring was conducted through an e-portfolio platform as well as what specific activities generated critical reflection within reciprocal teacher learning. The author focused on the awareness of mentor teachers, before and after supervisory experiences of their mentees’ teaching portfolios, by analyzing qualitative data from both mentees and mentors.

#### 3.1 Research Questions

The following research questions were posed in the study.

1. What learning activities do mentees and mentors report after participation in reciprocal peer mentoring?
2. What type of effective learning outcomes do mentees and mentors report after participation in reciprocal peer mentoring?

#### 3.2 Research Design

The author introduced peer mentoring in coaching dyads to build good relationships between younger teachers who had participated from the first trial and senior teachers who began their participation with the second trial as shown in Table 3. Especially, this study
attempted to address how novice Japanese foreign language teachers increased awareness of teacher excellence, through supervisory experience of other teaching portfolios.

Six in-service teachers as mentees in six coaching dyads experienced ongoing improvements of their teacher portfolios in the second trial as shown in Table 3. Each of these mentees had two mentors who had already created their own teaching portfolios in the first trial. Totally, seven mentor teachers and two staff members read their mentees’ the second version portfolio drafts carefully and sent comments to their mentees by e-mail. Based on the received comments, the mentees revised their teaching portfolios and submitted the final version as an e-portfolio, to Mahara. The mentors used Microsoft Word’s comment functions to indicate unclear expressions and words, deliver mentors’ remarks, and offer advice for improvement of the mentees’ draft portfolios during mentoring.

### 3.3 Design and Data Collection

To obtain a rich description of the learning activities, two different sources of data were used across a period of six months: semi-structured interviews and questionnaires completed before and after peer mentoring.

The main aim of this study was to define how participants evaluate a coaching dyad as a peer-support system. The author asked the participants to report the mentoring process and their experiences according to the following interview guide:

1. Why did you participate in this study?
2. What kind of educational outcomes did you get in this study?
3. What do you think about e-learning contents on the Moodle?
4. What do you think about small group activities on the Mahara in the second trial?
5. What do you think about the coaching dyads for teaching portfolio development in the second trial?
6. How do you feel about your growth as a professional teacher though this study?
7. What kind of problems and difficulties did you experience during this study?
8. What do you think about an online teacher training for professional development?

Within the scope of paper, the collected answers to the fifth and sixth questions in the interview guide were mainly analyzed. Additionally, the author mainly focused on the answers from young teachers overseas and in Japan because she attempted to address how novice Japanese language teachers increased awareness of teacher excellence.

The answers from the staff members (K and L) were not used in the analysis because they had worked on the design of the study and helped to conduct it.

### Table 3. Coordination of Coaching Dyads.

| Mentee | Employment Position (Institution, Region) | Teaching Experience | Mentor | Teaching Experiences |
|--------|------------------------------------------|---------------------|--------|----------------------|
| N      | Lecturer (University in Europe)          | 4 years             | K      | 10 years             |
|        |                                          |                     | H      | More than 10 years   |
| O      | Lecturer (University in Asia)            | 2 years             | K      | 10 years             |
|        |                                          |                     | B      | Less than one year   |
| P      | Lecturer (University in Europe)          | Less than one year  | H      | More than 10 years   |
|        |                                          |                     | G      | 8 years              |
| Q      | Ph.D. Student, Lecturer (University in Japan) | 10 years       | A      | Less than one year   |
|        |                                          |                     | C      | Less than one year   |
| R      | Part-time Lecturer (University in Japan)  | 7 years             | D      | 6 years              |
|        |                                          |                     | L      | More than 10 years   |
| S      | Associate Professor (University in Japan) | More than 10 years | I      | 10 years             |
|        |                                          |                     | L      | More than 10 years   |
Finally, the e-mail replies of 11 participants to the above mentioned questions were analyzed: five mentees (N, O, and P working overseas, Q and R in Japan) and six mentors (A, C, and G working overseas, D, H, and I in Japan).

4. Results

4.1 The Effects of Peer Mentoring

The majority of mentors stated that they were able to share ideas with their mentees because they read their mentees’ portfolios carefully and wrote constructive comments for improvement. Novice teachers working as mentors described their experience:

Making comments on other teachers’ portfolios and also reading their portfolios carefully gave me a chance to think over my own career. Through reading my mentee’s portfolio, I could understand her career path. In other words, I could learn how she has been teaching so far and why she is now teaching Japanese at a university. Her story really inspired me to think about my own career as a Japanese language teacher. (Mentor A, Female teacher in her 20s, teaching in China)

Through reading other teachers’ portfolios, I can easily see their interests and practices. In particular, learning about their teaching practices and teaching philosophies, encourages me to try new practices and challenges. (Mentor C, Male teacher in his 20s, teaching in New Zealand)

On the other hand, a mentee evaluated the opportunities to develop his own portfolio:

I made clear what I did in Serbia. I also received comments from my mentor and I revised my portfolio based on the comments. If I hadn’t participated in this trial, I would never have thought through my teaching philosophy and practices so deeply. It has been a great opportunity for me. (Mentee N, Male teacher in his 20s, teaching in Serbia)

A mentor also reflected on her own teaching portfolio development and evaluated the reflective process by documenting her teaching and analyzing learning outcomes:

Thinking in terms of short-term and long-term objectives was useful for me in the development of my teaching portfolio. Documenting my own expertise and collecting data became a starting point for presenting my research. After writing my teaching portfolio, I decided to present my practices at the annual meeting of the Society of Japanese Language Education. (Mentor D, Female teacher in her 30s, teaching in Japan)

4.2 Effective Learning Outcomes through a Teaching Portfolio

Experienced teachers working as mentors mentioned that the experience of being mentors made them notice the portfolio reader’s point of view. This experience helped them understand that a good teacher’s portfolio is as follows:

Through commenting on other teachers’ portfolios, I reconsidered my own portfolio’s contents and structure. My reviewer’s experience allowed me to recognize the importance of a teaching portfolio as a powerful tool to express a teacher’s excellence. (Mentor H, Female teacher in her 40s, teaching in Japan)

I was able to review a teaching portfolio objectively. In addition, I could really understand that a person’s teaching portfolio could report his or her teaching philosophy and practices in detail. (Mentor D, Female teacher in her 30s, teaching in Japan)

An experienced mentor also recognized the importance of the teaching portfolio and evaluated the reflective process by commenting on his mentees’ product:

Through reading my mentee’s portfolio, I found I shared the same problems as my mentee. I truly rethought the role of a Japanese language teacher and teacher growth. (Mentor G, Male teacher in his 30s, teaching in the Philippines).

5. Conclusion

Effective implementation of teachers’ professional development was facilitated by maintaining communication, and sharing participant’s own experiences through peer mentoring and reciprocal peer coaching. Through collaborative peer mentoring, including
Concerning the first research question “What learning activities do mentees and mentors report after participation in reciprocal peer mentoring?”, novice mentees reported that documenting their own expertise and collecting data made clear what they did at their schools or institutions. On the other hand, novice mentors indicated that they could enrich and expand their teaching skills through reading mentees’ portfolios carefully. This showed that mentoring experiences promoted their growth and change as a professional educator. Experienced teachers working as mentors suggested that they could recognize the importance of a teaching portfolio as a powerful tool to express a teacher’s excellence.

Concerning the second research question “What type of effective learning outcomes do mentees and mentors report after participation in reciprocal peer mentoring?”, novice mentors reported that they could understand there were various career paths as a Japanese language teacher and they could focus on their own career decisions. Experienced mentors also reconsidered the role of Japanese language teacher and teacher growth.

The second trial enabled young novice teachers to move from formerly passive roles to truly collaborative roles. It also shifted the emphasis in professional development thinking away from individuals and courses toward a reciprocal understanding in which learning was shared within a community of practice.

Finally, this study offered teachers autonomy, choices, and active participation, which are all critical for effective professional development. Through collaborative professional development, such as conducting peer observation and reporting on their own practices, this study provided novice Japanese language teachers with a mechanism to mentor their experienced counterparts systematically. It also provided guidance for Japanese language teachers (both in Japan and overseas) on how they can increase their ability to take control of their professional development.

A long-term goal of the author is to construct a common web-based teaching platform that can be utilized by a community of educators and practitioners committed to collaborative pedagogical inquiry and innovation.

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