



Open, Distance, and eLearning for Continuing Professional Development: A Reflective Case Study

Tony Mays*¹

Director: Education
Commonwealth of Learning

Betty Ogange²


Education Specialist: Teacher Education
Commonwealth of Learning


bogange@col.org

*Corresponding Author: tmays@col.org

Abstract

Traditionally, continuing professional development for teachers has taken the form of in-person workshops in which senior teachers, and teacher trainers, model desired classroom practice. With increasing use of technology in classrooms and increasing use of blended and online provision through open schooling to address the shortage of secondary school spaces and teachers, modelling best practice should now logically include continuing professional development offered through these means. Moreover, the pace of development in technology, particularly the recent explosion of applications based on generative artificial intelligence, means that the notion of 'continuing' professional development takes on a new urgency. This case study, based on recent work in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific undertaken by the Commonwealth of Learning, outlines some of the principles of and lessons of experience from the use of open, distance and e-learning approaches for the continuing professional development of teachers. It suggests that there is a need to offer professional development opportunities in manageable bite-size chunks from a menu of options, enabling self-directed and just-in-time learning. Educators can immediately apply new knowledge to improve their practice while also accumulating skills over time.

¹  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3506-8497>

²  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3133-7138>



Keywords: Continuing Professional Development (CPD); Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI); Open, Distance and e-Learning (ODEL); self-directed learning

Introduction

Despite global campaigns urging greater investment in education in general, and schooling in particular, many countries have simply been unable to build enough secondary schools and adequately employ enough secondary school teachers to accommodate all the learners exiting primary school or dropping out somewhere along the way.

In a recent report entitled, *The Price of Inaction*, UNESCO (2024a) estimated the global cost of inadequate access to schooling and school drop-out rate at a staggering USD 10,000 trillion annually. The scale of the challenge makes it clear that it can be addressed through expanding Open and Distance Learning (ODL): some 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries had their schooling disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2021) and not all came back when schools re-opened; the World Bank (2024) observes that the Gross Enrolment Ratio at the secondary level was still only 77 per cent in 2022; and according to Statista (2024), on average, 21.78 per cent of young people were not in employment, education or training in 2023.

The UNESCO (2024a) report indicates that 128 million boys and 122 million girls are currently excluded from schooling. As noted, in addition to out of school children, in most countries, there are large and growing numbers of young people who are not in employment nor in education and training. This is especially so in many Commonwealth countries (Narayan et al., 2021; COL, 2022a).

Of course, it is not just about building new schools. According to the UNESCO 2024 Global Report on Teachers (UNESCO 2024b), teachers are essential to achieving sustainable development goal (SDG4) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030; but 44 million additional primary and secondary teachers are needed globally to meet the 2030 targets and Sub-Saharan Africa

(SSA) alone needs 15 million additional teachers by 2030 to achieve SDG4 targets.

Because of the above challenges, many Commonwealth countries are exploring or actively providing some form of open schooling, that is using open, distance and/or e-learning methods to provide alternative and more flexible learning pathways into, or back into, formal schooling (Mays & Singh, 2020). As noted by Mays (2021), however, this means that teachers whose education and professional experience has been shaped by in-person provision need to be supported to rethink their practice and acquire new competences related to blended and online provision. It seems logical for such continuing professional development to model the practice it seeks to promote. Just as in-person workshops have been used to model classroom practices, so it seems appropriate to use blended and online approaches to model new blended and online teaching practices.

Literature Review

According to Ogange and Newman (2025), teacher development is foundational for enhancing the quality of education, particularly in developing contexts where resources are more limited. Critical thinking skills are then vital for nurturing creative and innovative thinking by both teachers and learners. This enables them to more easily identify and solve problems related to contemporary society (Asraf et al., 2023). Other researchers have argued that creative thinking and design thinking are both essential to transform teaching and teacher development in a complex and changing environment (Myrzatayeva et al., 2023; Phillips, 2023) and are key approaches to improving teacher training (Kwangmuang et al., 2021; Noh & Karim, 2021; Wannapiron & Pimdee, 2022).

Creative thinking includes the ability to ‘think outside the box’, to consider alternative ways of doing things and to experiment with new approaches and methods and is essential in an environment in which technology is ever evolving and in which learners, parents, and employers have begun to question the conventional schooling system, whose methods and approaches have not changed substantially since

the advent of mass education, leading to increasing absenteeism and lower than expected among other challenges (Asraf et al., 2023; Dzaly & Abdullah, 2024; Heyne, et al., 2024; Kwangmuang et al., 2021; Rossi et al., 2021; Wannapiron & Pimdee, 2022).

Design thinking is a structured, methodological approach that entails solving complex problems in a way that focuses on the needs of users. It involves an iterative process of understanding needs, crafting responses, testing interventions and evaluating outcomes to close the feedback loop into improved practice, and requires teachers and teacher educators to question assumptions, innovate and experiment (Noh & Karim, 2021; Faregh & Amrikhizi, 2023; Razzouk & Shute, 2012).

Both approaches are needed as the first fosters a mindset conducive to change while the second provides an approach or method to follow. Given that many countries have not managed to address the needs of all school learners using conventional methods and given the changing expectations of increasingly connected learners, there is need to employ a wider range of tools, technologies and methods and this in turn requires a rethink of teacher education policies, training and continuing professional development (Traxler & Oganje, 2021). Given that connected learners have access to any information on any topic at any time, the teacher's role needs to shift from being a content provider to being a facilitator of learning, helping learners to develop the skills of critically evaluating the information they have access to and then shaping this information into new knowledge. More of this engagement will happen in a digital space so teachers also need to develop new technical skills.

Blended, hybrid, and online learning provision presents more of a challenge for the initial and continuing professional development of teachers because in addition to mastering the technology, they must also understand how students learn, how knowledge can be represented through different media in an inclusive way and the role different senses play in the learning process. Teaching with and through technology requires teachers to explore different learning models, such as knowledge construction versus transmission, more authentic forms

of assessment and how to align technology use with specific knowledge domains or subject areas (Le & Pham, 2021; Mishra & Panda, 2020).

Reflecting on COL's CPD Initiatives for Teachers

Pre-Covid

Since its establishment in 1987, COL has been instrumental in supporting ministry- and institution-level interventions aimed at identifying ways to leverage ODL and Technology-Enabled Learning (TEL) for effective teaching, learning and assessment. These efforts, implemented through policy development, capacity building and resource development, play a crucial role in addressing the challenging contexts faced by teachers, especially in regions with limited resources. Through partnerships with ministries of education, COL has initiated projects that adapt various technologies to support teacher professional development, enabling in-service teachers to engage with their peers both locally and internationally through communities of practice (CoPs). This collaborative approach is designed not only to improve traditional face-to-face instructional practices but also to enhance teachers' digital skills to help them navigate the rapidly evolving educational landscape (Mishra, 2022; OECD, 2020).

Under its 'Teacher Futures' programme, COL supports capacity-building and resource development using modern technologies, including eLearning and microlearning, to improve teacher educator capacity, teacher quality and learner experience. The programme also promotes peer collaboration among teacher educators and teachers through networked learning and Communities of Practice (CoPs).

COL supports teacher education institutions, teacher accreditation authorities, and ministries of education to:

1. Develop technology-enabled teacher upgrading programmes and quality learning resources, including OERs, for school-based teacher development.
2. Expand teacher pedagogical knowledge and instructional practice through short standalone courses; support pedagogies

for problem solving, collaborative learning and other learner-centred approaches.

3. Evolve CoPs for peer learning within and across participating countries; build the capacity of teacher educators in teacher mentorship and CoP management.
4. Support the development of guidelines and policy models for effective teacher development.
5. Support evidence building through research in open and distance learning and technology-enabled learning for teacher development.

‘Teacher Futures’ is currently at various stages of implementation in The Gambia, Ghana, Jamaica, Kenya, Kiribati, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, with requests coming from other countries. Pre-Covid, the emphasis of capacity-building was on in-person workshops, whether offered by COL staff or COL consultants.

In-Covid

The Covid pandemic put a stop to in-person training and COL was quick to pivot online. Following campus closures, many Ministries of Education around the world requested teachers to move their teaching online. COL responded to requests from two countries to provide support in pedagogical and curricular change for online learning in this process. A Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform was used to upskill 11,568 teachers in two regions of the Commonwealth. Analytics from within the course, together with pre-, mid- and end-course surveys of participants’ perceptions indicated that while there was scope for improvement, the short course largely reached its objective of providing immediate support on an introductory level and that the approach adopted was largely appropriate for the purpose (Mays et al. 2021). COL then began to offer an increasing range of MOOCs in various other areas of teaching and learning and also created several micro-courses.

Post-Covid

In the mid-term review of COL’s current six-year strategic planning period, it was noted that while the use of MOOCs had been an effective response to the pandemic, post-Covid it would be necessary to focus

more on capacity-building that could be linked to recognition (for example continuing professional development points) and accreditation (for example through teacher education microcredentials). Also, the rapid expansion of Generative AI (GAI) has presented a new set of challenges and opportunities for teachers. This has led to the conceptualisation of a new project which seeks to bring together teacher education accreditation authorities, teacher training institutions and education technology specialists to develop blended and online training for continuing professional development opportunities which include the use of GAI in ways which keep the ‘teacher in the loop’ (Ogange et al. 2025).

Discussion

If we accept the premise that we should practise what we preach, it is logical that the starting point of any intervention to use ODeL methods to develop teacher’s ODeL skills should start with some form of baseline assessment of what competences teachers require and what competences they currently have so that CPD can be focused on addressing the gap (Mishra et al., 2022). This reflects a broader shift required in 21st century teaching to adopt more student-centred forms of engagement (Kisirkoi & Cude, 2021; Varghese, 2019).

The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) approach continues to provide a useful framework for designing both pre-service training and CPD (Deshmukh & Shrouy, 2022) while tools like UNESCO’s evolving ICT Competency Framework for Teachers (UNESCO, 2023) and AI Competency Framework for Teachers (UNESCO, 2024) provide useful guidelines and benchmarks which could form the basis of national frameworks for the recognition of teacher professional development in the form of continuing professional development points and/or microcredentials.

Video remains an effective tool for supporting teacher education at scale (Stutchbury & Woodward, 2016), whether as standalone resources or embedded in MOOCs. But gamification can also be useful to enhance more self-directed teacher professional development (Krishnan et al., 2022).

There is also need for a rigorous monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning strategy to close the feedback loop into improved practice both of the teachers undergoing CPD as well as the teacher educators who have designed and facilitated the training (Shuaibu, et al. 2022). The ethics of ICT use need to be a core component of such training (Mfaume, 2022) as should be cybersecurity issues (COL, 2022). Building an online professional community of practice can then support peer and lifelong learning among the teachers participating (Mfeka & Thomson, 2019). There is also a need to consider how teacher CPD is recognised and rewarded, perhaps as CPD points which led to microcredentials within a national qualification's framework (Wolfenden et al., 2019).

In fact, a technology-enabled microlearning approach would probably be more effective than long courses. Microlearning is an emergent learning strategy known for its quick response in bridging skills and knowledge gaps. It might involve a weekly update on pedagogical content knowledge and skills, including modelling of classroom or online good practices which teachers can adapt and use immediately in their practice, whether in-person or online (Muhammad et al., 2019). While ODeL clearly has potential for expanded pre-service training and CPD teachers, turning potential into actual practice requires the development and implementation of appropriate policy frameworks (COL, 2023) and systems for effective implementation (Karunanayanaka, 2024).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The fact that many countries have not been able to build enough schools or employ enough teachers to provide secondary education for all, coupled with the changed expectations of an increasingly connected student body, indicate the need to make greater use of ODL and TEL to increase access to and achievement in schooling, especially at the secondary level. However, this requires that we equip teachers with appropriate CPD opportunities to acquire the needed competences. This is probably best done using the very tools and technologies we would like teachers to use, and offered in meaningful but small enough chunks that teachers can master and practice the new

approaches immediately. There is need, therefore, for collaboration between ministries of education, teacher accreditation authorities, teacher education providers, and teacher professional communities of practice, to design continuing professional development micro-credentials linked to a national framework for recognition of CPD commitments in different aspects of ODeL provision including but not limited to OER, curriculum and content, collaboration, GAI, learner support, authentic online assessment and feedback and other aspects.

References

- Asraf, R. M., Hanafi, N. H., Supian, N., Yafo, A., Suryani, I., & Effendy, E. (2023). Teachers' perceived knowledge in developing critical thinking in the literature classroom. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(1), 1250–1264. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v13-i1/16270>
- COL. (2022a). *Out-of-School Children and Youth: A contemporary View from Selected African Commonwealth Countries*. COL. <https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/4057>
- COL. (2022b). Advanced Cybersecurity Training for Teachers (ACTT) 3. COL. <http://hdl.handle.net/11599/5011>
- COL. (2023). *Teacher Training through Open, Distance and Technology-Enabled Learning in Rwanda*. COL. <https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5506>
- Deshmukh, N., & Shrouy, V. (2022). *Enhancing Teaching Skills among Pre-Service Teacher through TPACK Framework*. PCF10. <https://doi.org/10.56059/pcf10.7171>
- Faregh, S. A., & Amrikhizi, P. J. (2023). Design thinking as an effective tool in education. *Journal of Design Thinking*, 4(1), 69-86. <https://doi.org/10.22059/jdt.2024.369668.1111>
- Heyne, D., Gentle-Genitty, C., Melvin, G. A., Keppens, G., O'Toole, C., & McKay-Brown, L. (2024). Embracing change: from recalibration to radical overhaul for the field of school attendance. *Frontiers in Education*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2023.1251223>
- Karunanayaka, S. P. (2024). *Teacher Education via Open and Distance Learning at The Open University of Sri Lanka: A Transformational Journey*. COL. <https://doi.org/10.56059/11599/5666>
- Kisirkoi, F., & Cude, M. D. (2021). *Becoming an Effective Teacher: A Teaching Reference Book for Teachers, Teacher Educators and Student Teachers*

A Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) Support. Kenya Literature Bureau, Nairobi, ISBN 978-9914-40-0000.

- Kirshnan, S. D., Norman, H, & Yunus, Md. (2022). *English Language Teachers' Professional Competencies Enhanced through Online Gamified Learning using Classcraft.* PCF10. <https://doi.org/10.56059/pcf10.9852>
- Kwangmuang, P., Jarutkmolpong, S., Sangboonraung, W., & Daungtod, S. (2021). The development of learning innovation to enhance higher order thinking skills for students in Thailand junior high schools. *Heliyon*, 7(6), e07309. [https://www.cell.com/heliyon/fulltext/S2405-8440\(21\)01412-2](https://www.cell.com/heliyon/fulltext/S2405-8440(21)01412-2)
- Le, P. T., & Pham, H. (2021). *Using blended learning in teacher training programs: Perspectives of pre-service teachers.* *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 11(2), 115. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2021-0035>
- Mays, T. J. (2021). Teaching the Teachers. In: Burgos, D., Tlili, A., Tabacco, A. (eds) *Radical Solutions for Education in a Crisis Context.* Lecture Notes in Educational Technology. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7869-4_11
- Mays, T. J., Oganje, B., Naidu, S., & Perris, K. (2021). Supporting Teachers Moving Online, Using a MOOC, During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 8(1), 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v8i1.497>
- Mays, T. J., & Singh, R. K. (Eds.) (2020). *Addressing the Learning Needs of Out-of-School Children and Youths through the Expansion of Open Schooling.* COL. <http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3731>
- Mfaume, H. (2022). Mobile Pedagogical Technologies and Teachers' Professional Ethics in Tanzania: An Inquiry into the Use and Abuse of Mobile Phones by Teachers in Secondary Schools. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 9(2), 176–189. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v9i2.610>
- Mfeka, H., & Thomson, J. (2019). 'My Work Got Lost in the Computer': *Establishing a Teacher Professional Learning*

Community Through Digital Skills Training. PCF9.
<http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3306>

Mishra, S. (2022). *Open educational resources: Status and trends* [PowerPoint slides]. Commonwealth of Learning.
<http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4013>

Mishra, S., & Panda, S. (Eds). (2020). *Technology-enabled learning: Policy, pedagogy and practice*. Commonwealth of Learning.
<https://oasis.col.org/items/e2a54a0d-558a-4907-b71b-f4c5a35dd967>

Mishra, S., Panigrahi, M. P., & Gopal, G. (2022). Enhancing Teacher Capacity for Implementation of Blended Learning in Teacher Education – A Case of Odisha, India. PCF10.
<http://hdl.handle.net/11599/4145>

Muhammad, J., Ogange, B., & Allela, M. (2019). *Technology and Teacher Professional Development (TPD): the Process and Content of Microlearning in a School-Based Integrated In-Service Teacher Education (INSET) Project*. PCF9.
<http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3313>

Myrzatayeva, G., Almetov, N., & Tazhmukhanova, N. (2023). Systematic training of future teachers for developing critical thinking of school pupils in Kazakhstan. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), 2202103.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2202103>

Narayan, S., Mays, T., Naidu, S., & Perris, K. (2021). *Out-of-School Children: A Contemporary View from the Pacific Island Countries of the Commonwealth*. COL.
<http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3779>

Noh, S. C., & Karim, A. M. A. (2021). Design thinking mindset to enhance education 4.0 competitiveness in Malaysia. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education*, 10(2): 494.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352516986_Design_thinking_mindset_to_enhance_education_40_competitiveness_in_Malaysia

<https://oasis.col.org/items/1b624eb2-fb68-4cb9-a8b0-901a2618b6d4>

- UNESCO. (2021, March 19). *One year into COVID-19 education disruption: Where do we stand?* UNESCO. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/one-year-covid-19-education-disruption-where-do-we-stand>
- UNESCO. (2023). *The ICT Competency Framework for Teachers Harnessing OER Project: digital skills development for teachers.* UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383206>
- UNESCO. (2024a). *The price of inaction: the global private, fiscal and social costs of children and youth not in learning.* UNESCO. [The price of inaction: the global private, fiscal and social costs of children and youth not in learning - UNESCO Digital Library](#)
- UNESCO. (2024b). *Global report on teachers: Addressing teacher shortages and transforming the professional.* Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388832>
- UNESCO. (2024c). *AI competency framework for teachers.* UNSECO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000391104>
- Varghese, M. G. (2019). *Cognition in Teaching skills A better approach to Teacher-Training Program.* PCF9. <http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3323>
- Wannapiron, N., & Pimdee, P. (2022). Thai undergraduate science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) creative thinking and innovation skill development: A conceptual model using a digital virtual classroom learning environment. *Education and Information Technologies*, 27, 5689–5716. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10639-021-10849-w>
- Wolfenden, F., Cross, S., & Adinolfi, L. (2019). *Digital Badges for Teacher Professional Development: Exploring Possibilities for Their Design and Implementation in India.* PCF9. <http://hdl.handle.net/11599/3386>
- World Bank. (2024). *School enrolment, Secondary (% gross).* [School enrollment, Secondary \(% gross\) | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)