This is a pre-print version of the following book chapter:

Professional learning for open online educators: The #Openteach story

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Abstract

This case study explores the experiences of the #Openteach project team in developing a flexible and evidence based approach to support professional learning for those who teach online. This chapter will be of interest to educators who are engaged in the Continuing professional learning and development (CPLD) of educators in higher education; who are interested in applying design thinking to develop online learning; or those who simply wish to improve their own professional practices in online spaces. It offers advice and guidance, derived from our analysis of the scholarly literature, talking with our students (teachers) and based on our own reflections upon our work in the project with hundreds of learners who were eager to teach in more engaging and successful ways online. The project had a number of phases, which included a needs analysis of online students and educators about effective online teaching, the publication of a review of the literature, and a pilot evaluation report. The #Openteach open course ran in March 2020 and focused on five key aspects of teaching online: social presence; facilitating discussion; collaboration online; live online teaching; and supporting online students. The case study draws on qualitative and quantitative data collected from online educators pre and post the initiative. Data was generated via two phases of data collection involving online focus groups and completion of online questionnaires. The case study concludes with consideration of whether a larger scale adoption of the open, flexible, and online approach to professional learning can better support access to CPLD for all educators. Our findings suggest that walking in the shoes of the online learner has a powerful impact on teachers and allows them to bring empathic approaches to bear in their professional practice. We give examples that we hope will be useful to others, of helping alleviate understandable educator fears about unfamiliar teaching environments and giving them instead new competences and confidences.

Introduction

This chapter tells the story of the #Openteach: Professional Development for Open Online Educators project, which was funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Ireland from 2019-2020 and was based in Dublin City University (DCU). The aim of the project was to create an evidence-based and open CPLD approach to support educators to teach online.

Teaching online is different. Teaching online requires different pedagogical approaches to traditional lecturing, therefore institutions need to support teachers transitioning into online teaching to ensure quality (Gurley, 2019). Effective online teaching supports student

engagement and success, this is key as online students are more vulnerable to attrition (Coker, 2018; Woodley & Simpson 2014).

The #Openteach project was conceived prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, to meet a locally identified need for CPLD for our DCU cohort of adjunct online educators. At the time, online education was a niche but growing area in Ireland. The Covid-19 pandemic changed this context radically, shifting online from the periphery to the mainstream. The pandemic has impacted on 1.5 billion students worldwide and precipitated a move to emergency remote learning (Bozkart et. al., 2020). Since March 2020 in Ireland, higher and further education has largely been delivered online to 233,973 students without prior experience of online learning (Bozkart et. al., 2020). Additionally, the pandemic has thrust 17,521 higher education staff into teaching online, the majority without previous experience of this mode of education (Bozkart et. al., 2020). The chaos of the pandemic changed the path of the #Openteach project. The course suddenly became a support not just for our staff, but for educators from across Irish and international higher education institutions.

In this chapter, we will tell the story of the design, development and implementation of the #Openteach project. In the next section, contemporary perspectives on professional learning for online educators are discussed.

Contemporary perspectives on CPLD for online educators

In this section, contemporary perspectives on best practices for supporting the CPLD of online educators are discussed. Such perspectives suggest that support should focus on online pedagogy, and the roles and competencies necessary to be an effective online educator. In addition, the literature indicates the importance of institutional support, time and flexibility and technological readiness when designing CPLD for online educators.

The quality of online learning is firmly linked to the professional development and support received by educators for teaching in the online environment (Adnan, 2018; Englund et al., 2017). Educators who move from traditional teaching to the online environment often bring their traditional pedagogies with them, which may not be as effective in the online environment; they need professional development on using online pedagogies that are more tailored for that specific teaching mode (Bezuidenhout, 2018).

Bawane & Spector (2009) proposed that professional development opportunities should be focussed on the competencies required for the most important roles of the online educator. Kilgour et al. (2018) carried out a multiphase research study in the US and Australia that identified a number of threshold concepts experienced by novice online educators relating to three themes: (1) preparation and course design; (2) online presence; (3) interactions and relationships. Reporting from the same study Northcote et al. (2015) developed a set of recommendations for the implementation of effective professional development. Recommendations were to: (1) place pedagogy above technology; (2) cater for diverse levels of development; (3) allow teachers to take the lead; and (4) recognise emotional issues.

There is a move in higher education staff development towards 'just-in-time' professional development (Northcote et al., 2015). Educators have identified that the shift to online teaching can appear overwhelming and that implementing one small change at a time will benefit them (Sword, 2012). Canadian online educators noted that professional development that can be enacted immediately and that fits in with their schedules works best (Adnan, 2018). Similarly, Baran and Correia (2014) reported that studies show that educators require professional development that fits in with their schedules, and that can be used within a current course.

Educators, in a large multi-campus university in the US, identified lack of time and fixed schedules as a challenge to the uptake of online teaching as they were unable to attend professional development. These educators recommended that such professional development be given locally at a college level (Kibaru, 2018). Bezuidenhout (2018) referred to the lack of time as the 'silent barrier' and suggests that educators and their institutions have to manage time efficiently. Institutions need to be able to provide short flexible sessions, at times and places that suit educators (Baran & Correia, 2014).

Educators with training and experience in online teaching identified the following institutional infrastructure issues; "enrolment systems, technical support, professional development needs, workload and time issues, and role clarification among administrative and academic staff" as having a bearing on their ability to engage in professional development (Northcote et al., 2015, p. 328). It is clear from the literature that institutional support for all aspects of online teaching is critical to its success (Adnan, 2018; Baran & Correia, 2014; Northcote et al., 2015; Walters et al., 2017). Walters et al. (2017) found that one of the most important factors for online educators was the reliability of the technology. Despite the fact that the College of Education in a mid-west US campus provides good faculty support, the online educators expressed a need for "improved technological,... administrative support ...to overcome issues arising from: ..., limitations of course management systems, acquisition and maintenance of newer innovative technologies for teaching and learning" (Kibaru, 2018, p. 184). Overall, institutions have a responsibility to provide their online educators with both professional development and ongoing support (Vaill & Testori, 2012).

Baran and Correia, (2014) highlighted that a lack of technology skills can impact an educator's ability to engage with aspects of online teaching such as those relating to student engagement. They suggest that technology support is required, particularly when they are transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching. Educators with experience in using technology 'due to past experiences' have little or no difficulty in creating digital artefacts (Adnan, 2018). This was also reflected in the use of the VLE during a training programme, with those unfamiliar with Moodle taking some time to get to grips with the technology (Adnan et al., 2017). Reporting on an evaluation of an Online Teaching Initiative (OTI) course in a university in the US, Borup and Evmenova (2019) found that those educators who weren't 'ready' with the technological skills had a deep learning curve and may not have benefited from the exposure to new tools as much as educators who had prior experience in that regard.

#Openteach approach to CPLD for online educators

Based on the analysis of the literature above, we have identified a set of interlinked factors that should be considered in order to enact effective CPLD for online educators. The #Openteach approach to professional learning for online educators focuses on four principles:

1. CPLD is tailored for online educators; Both novice and experienced educators, in particular those without prior knowledge of online pedagogy.
2. Is authentic, evidence based and structured but allows for flexible participation;
3. Focuses on effective situated delivery, ie is situated in the online context.
4. Supports community building and integration into the institutional academic community (Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, 2019).
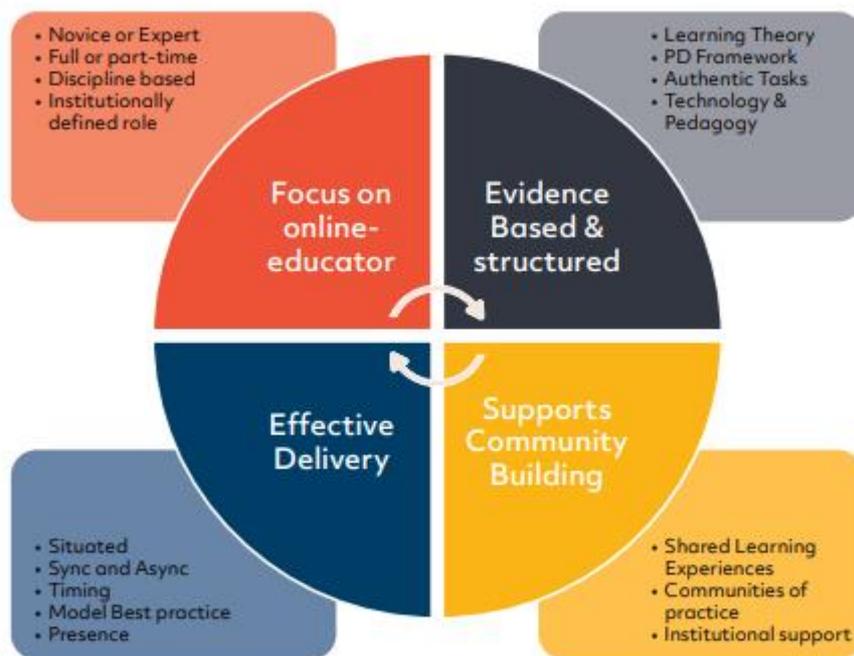

Figure 1: #Openteach approach to professional learning for online educators

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods case study approach, that of a single intrinsic case study focusing on the CPLD experiences of online educators (Creswell, 2007). Using multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data, this approach facilitated a rich narrative of the professional learning needs and experiences of online educators in the #Openteach course (Stake, 1999). This case study draws on a variety of qualitative and quantitative data collected over the course of the project from the needs analysis, design process, and pilot evaluation study, see table 1 below.

Table 1: #Openteach data sources

Data source	Phase	Sample
Online educator survey	Needs analysis	55 online educators
Online educator focus groups	Needs analysis	3 focus groups, 15 online educators overall
#Openteach participant evaluation survey	Evaluation	101 responses
#Openteach participant focus groups	Evaluation	3 focus groups, 10 participants overall

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (REC Approval number: DCUREC/2019/072). Participants gave informed consent, confidentiality was adhered to and the data was anonymised.

The quantitative data was analysed using a combination of Qualtrics and Microsoft Excel. The qualitative data were analysed using a data-led approach following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis, which involved a number of cycles of coding, generating candidate themes, reviewing and refining themes, and assessing themes for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. During the analysis, the qualitative questionnaire dataset and focus group dataset were combined and analysed thematically using Nvivo 12. These themes are reported in the findings section below.

Case study context

The #Openteach project team are based in the Open Education Unit (OEU) at Dublin City University (DCU). Formally known as the National Distance Education Centre and subsequently Oscail, the OEU is a provider of online, off-campus programmes through the DCU Connected platform since 1982. Throughout the years the mode of delivery moved gradually from that of a traditional distance education provider to incorporate more elements of online learning (Farrell & Seery, 2019). Following an open and online learning philosophy, the OEU aims to afford educational opportunities to students who have not managed to access more traditional entry routes into higher education.

The OEU teaching team is comprised of 100 adjunct faculty that are geographically dispersed around Ireland who teach through the DCU Connected platform, coordinated by Open Education. The #Openteach project aimed to provide flexible online professional learning opportunities to this cohort of online educators. Thus, addressing an important gap that exists in the provision of professional development for part-time and online teachers who rarely have the opportunity to avail of campus-based resources and have limited access to professional development (Beaton & Gilbert, 2013; Hitch, Mahoney, McFarlane, 2018).

The #Openteach story

The #Openteach project was developed to generate new knowledge about effective online teaching practice and to harness this new knowledge to support the CPLD of open online educators. The #Openteach project had four phases, see figure 2 below.

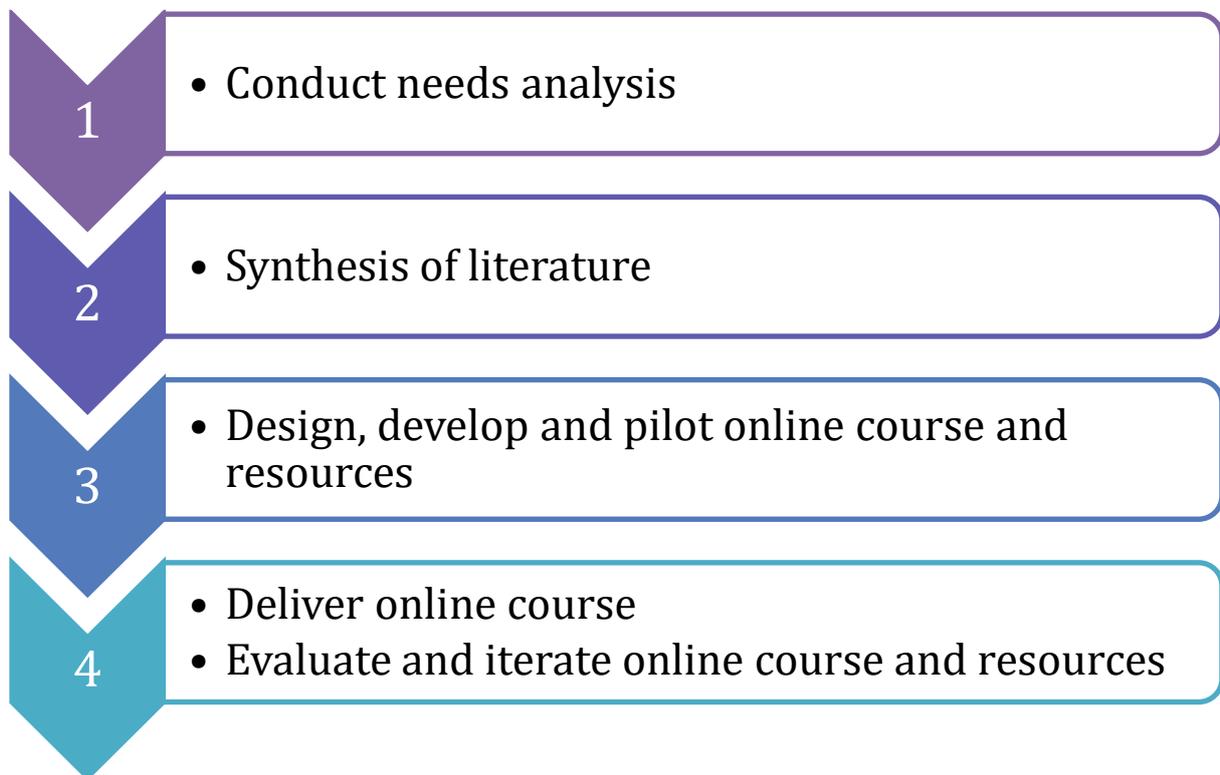|	
1	• Conduct needs analysis
2	• Synthesis of literature
3	• Design, develop and pilot online course and resources
4	• Deliver online course • Evaluate and iterate online course and resources

Figure 2. #Openteach project phases

The principle of openness was at the heart of the #Openteach project. All of the resources and intellectual outputs were Creative Commons licensed and openly shared through social media and the project website.The #Openteach online course was free and participation was open to anyone, from anywhere, with the capability to join an online course. The sustainability of project outputs was facilitated by ensuring that the Moodle based, open course files are available to anyone who would like a copy of the course. This, and an open textbook version of the course, are available from the project website www.openteach.ie.

Phase 1: Needs Analysis

In phase 1, we conducted a needs analysis of the target population: online educators based in the Open Education Unit, and produced a report with our findings (Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon,Trevaskis, Eccles, Ní Shé, 2019). Data was generated through online, semi-structured focus groups with online educators conducted in real time online using a private Adobe Connect online room. A focus group interview schedule was created that contained questions about teaching online, student support, and professional development needs. Three focus groups for online educators were conducted with a total of fifteen participants. Concurrently, an anonymous online survey was administered. It included open-

ended and five-point likert style scale questions about the features of effective online teaching and professional development needs and experiences. 55 online educators participated in the online survey.

In the data, online educators identified five areas that they would like to develop further through professional learning:

1. Technical skills for teaching online;
2. Online learning & teaching pedagogy;
3. Online facilitation skills/approaches;
4. Encouraging online interaction;
5. Community of online educators: Both being part of a community of educators and how to foster a class community in their online teaching practice.

In addition, the needs analysis study identified a number of key findings in relation to educator's perceptions of effective online teaching:

- Educators placed the highest value on the interpersonal professional skills or soft skills for the online educator. These interpersonal skills encompass being caring, approachable, supportive, responsive, friendly, and building rapport. The findings of this study indicate that effective online educators employ these interpersonal skills to foster a supportive online learning environment;
- The importance of clear communication in the online environment for effective online teaching was emphasised by educators. This was described as involving active listening, clarity, regular contact, and delivery of consistent and accurate information using unambiguous language. Establishing clear norms and expectations for communication approaches and appropriate online conduct were perceived as key elements of effective online teaching;
- Educators identified the building of a cohesive online class community as being crucial to online student engagement, and necessary to counteract the feelings of isolation often experienced by online students. Facilitating the creation of a class community through active online engagement in discussion forums, synchronous online tutorials, and through informal peer support groups was identified by educators as an important feature of effective online teaching.

Phase 2: Synthesis of the literature

In phase 2, a report containing a synthesis of the literature entitled *Teaching Online is Different: Critical Perspectives from the Literature* was produced, see figure 3 (Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon,Trevaskis, Eccles, 2019). The report details a synthesis of the literature about online teaching since 2010 and examined the roles and competencies which characterise effective teaching online, as well as approaches to supporting the professional development of online educators. The previous literature section draws on this report.
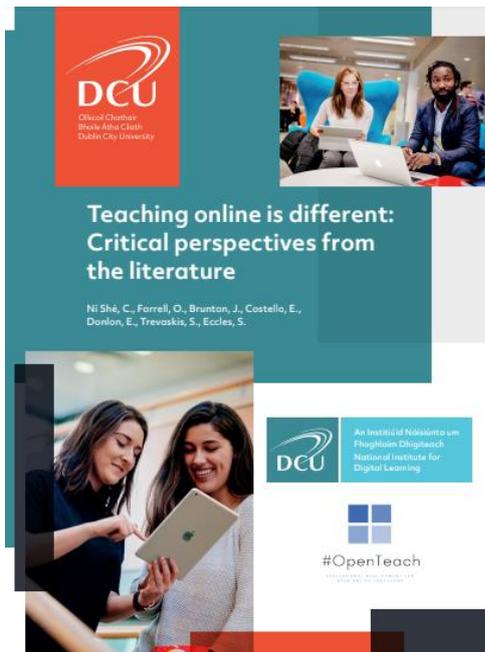
Figure 3: Teaching Online is Different Report

Phase 3: Course Design and Development

In phase 3, the needs analysis and literature synthesis reports were used to guide the design and development of the #Openteach open, online course. The course was designed following the ABC Learning design approach, which is an effective and structured approach for designing online and blended courses. The ABC approach is based on activity based learning and is structured around designing a course that facilitates six learning types based on Diana Laurillard's conversational framework: acquisition, inquiry, practice, production, discussion, and collaboration (Young & Petrovic, 2016; Laurillard, 2012). You can read more about the design process in our ABC case-study. This design process resulted in a ten hour, fully online CPLD course, which was discipline agnostic (Ní Shé, Farrell, Brunton, Costello, Donlon, Trevaskis, Eccles, 2019).

The course focused on the following topics identified through the needs analysis and literature synthesis: social presence; facilitating discussion; collaboration online; live online teaching; and supporting online students. The learning outcomes for the #Openteach course are outlined below in table 2.

Table 2: #Openteach course learning outcomes

Number	Learning Outcome
1	Demonstrate awareness of teaching and learning pedagogy associated with online learning
2	Facilitate online communication and discussion forums that engage students in learning
3	Create a supportive community of learners using online teaching pedagogy
4	Develop and facilitate online collaborative activities that support student learning
5	Design online teaching activities that encourage student participation and learning and reflect on personal learning from this activity
6	Use digital tools effectively to support online teaching

The #Openteach course followed a scenario based approach and participant engagement was largely asynchronous and self-paced as this provided the flexible approach recommended in the literature. The course was designed and delivered on the DCU Moodle site called Loop, and used a variety of tools such as H5P, video, audio, discussion forums, quiz, and workshop in its design (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4: #Openteach course design

Phase 4 Course pilot

The #Openteach open course ran in March 2020 and focused on five key aspects of teaching online: social presence; facilitating discussion; collaboration online; live online

teaching; and supporting online students. The pilot run took place from 23rd of March to the 10th of April 2020, with 450 participants from a variety of Irish and international higher education institutions. The pilot run coincided with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting pivot online, so participant numbers for the course far exceeded expectations due to demand for professional development relating to online pedagogy.

Phase 4 Pilot Evaluation

Following the course pilot in March 2020, an evaluation study was conducted in order to explore, understand and evaluate its impact on the professional learning experiences of the participants and to inform the iterative design process. The evaluation study yielded a number of interesting findings in relation to the #Openteach course pilot and educators' experiences of CPLD in four thematic areas:

1. Knowledge and understanding of online pedagogy;
2. Community of Educators;
3. #Openteach course design;
4. The Covid-19 Pandemic context.

Knowledge and understanding of online pedagogy

When asked if participation in the #Openteach course increased their knowledge of online teaching, 98% of 101 respondents answered Yes, 1% responded no and 1% responded maybe, see figure 5 below.

Do you think you have increased your knowledge of online teaching through participation in this course?
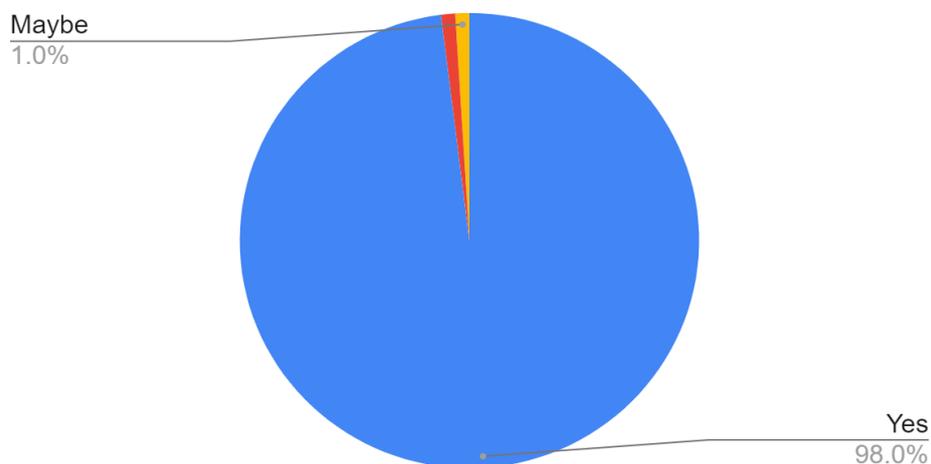
Maybe
1.0%

Yes
98.0%

Figure 5. #Openteach impact on knowledge of online teaching

When asked whether participants would apply their new knowledge and skills in their teaching practice, 97% of respondents answered yes, 2% answered no and 1% answered maybe, see figure 6 below.

Will you apply your new skills/knowledge in your teaching practice?
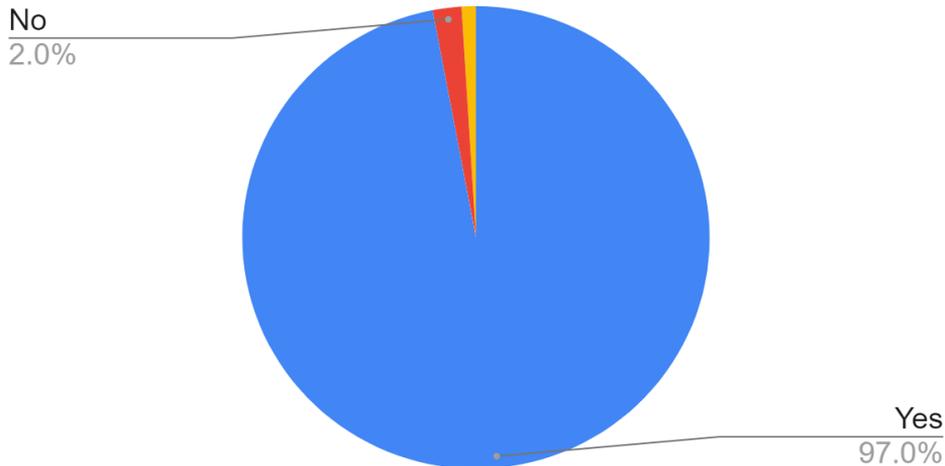
No
2.0%

Yes
97.0%

Figure 6. #Openteach application of new knowledge in teaching practice

The data shows that the #Openteach course impacted both experienced and novice online educator's knowledge and understanding of teaching online in a number of ways:

- Building confidence about teaching online;

  " I had no knowledge of online teaching beforehand and I feel I could teach online with my learners now. I have small groups and individuals so I would be comfortable working online with them now."

- Developing new knowledge about online teaching including key theories, technology, and strategies for encouraging student interaction;

  "I particularly liked the emphasis on pedagogy. The course suited my needs perfectly and allowed me to deepen my knowledge and raise my awareness of the need for carefully designed learning pathways. Online is definitely different to the traditional classroom"

- Gaining insights into online learning by experiencing it from a student perspective;

  "Experiencing a fully online course and seeing the different tips and strategies for engagement in an online environment"

- Developing ideas and strategies about engaging students in both asynchronous and synchronous environments.

  "Suggestions on how to better engage students - specifically some of the suggestions on how to use breakout activities, polls etc. Opportunity to read all the very useful suggestions from others on the course, in the various forums"

Community of Educators

When asked if during the #Openteach course participants felt part of the course community, 69.3% responded yes, 15.8% responded no, and 14.9% responded maybe, see figure 7 below.

During the Openteach course did you feel part of a community?
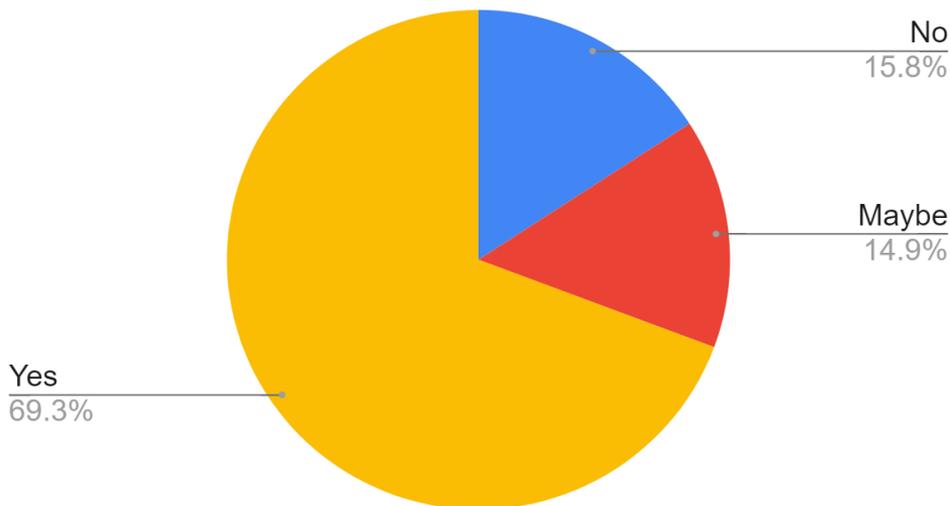
No
15.8%

Maybe
14.9%

Yes
69.3%

Figure 7. Feeling part of the #Openteach course community

As indicated in the quantitative data reported above in figure 7, the majority of the #Openteach course participants felt part of the course learning community. Activities such as the icebreaker, the live online sessions, and the interaction on the asynchronous discussion forums were reported by participants as making them feel part of a learning community.

> *"It enabled me to reach out from my COVID isolation and connect with other educators across a variety of disciplines, share practices, and learn some extremely useful tips".*

For a minority of course participants, they did not feel part of the #Openteach community.

> *"The course was very short to feel properly part of a community but I appreciate the attempts that were made and am confident that these would work in a course of longer duration."*

The #Openteach community continues to interact, primarily on Twitter. Many participants contributed activity ideas to the Openteach open text book which was launched at a community event in June 2020 (Farrell, Brunton, Ni She, Costello, 2021).

Course design

The #Openteach course design was perceived by participants to be interactive, well structured, and user-friendly.

> *"The layout of the course was easy to follow, it was very well laid out and easy to follow"*

The scenario based learning approach using online educator dilemmas taken was perceived positively by participants and as encouraging engagement.

> *"I liked working on the dilemmas. It made me really reflect on what I was learning and put it in practice."*

The flexible, asynchronous, self-paced chunking of content into short units incorporating animated video and discussion was described in positive terms by participants.

"Being facilitated to work through the course in a way that made it seem so easy because it was broken down into such small little chunks of learning. This made everything very manageable in terms of getting through each topic and task. I also loved the animations that were used to accompany the script relating to the scenarios. I thought they added such meaning to the script. They really were fantastic - actually they were probably my favourite part of the whole course."

Covid-19 Pandemic Context

The release of the #Openteach course coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Due to the fact that #Openteach was an open and free professional development course about teaching online, the numbers that signed up increased rapidly in a matter of days from 120 to 450. The sudden pivot online by those in the further and higher education sectors thrust many educators into teaching online for the first time.

For those who were teaching online for the first time, the #Openteach course provided them with reassurance, support, and encouragement during a challenging time.

"I am a true beginner so my participation has been limited, but I got a good feel for what is involved in this essential area of teaching"

A number of challenges related to the rapid pivot online were reported in the data by educators. These challenges included problems relating to working from home, poor broadband, underdeveloped digital competencies, time management issues, caring responsibilities, and workload.

"Because we were in crisis, I was not able to give the time I would usually give to new learning. I was fitting this in among a hundred other demands, so I was more stretched than I would ideally be when learning."

"I was working from home due to the lockdown and my internet is not consistent, some days I couldn't get online at all"

Final thoughts

Over the course of the project, the #Openteach project team learned numerous lessons from the design, development, and delivery of the course about online educators' experiences of CPLD, and we share these now as our final thoughts.

CPLD about online pedagogy should be situated online, and the experience of being an online student is invaluable for online educators as it facilitates empathy with students learning in online contexts. Participating in and building a learning community contributes positively to the learning experience for educators. Time management and workload are major challenges for educators, therefore professional learning should allow for flexible engagement. Building confidence and reducing the fear of online teaching is an important aspect of professional learning related to online education. Developing understanding and knowledge of online pedagogy is an important element of
professional learning about teaching online. Finally, confidence and competence with the tools and technologies for teaching online are important threshold digital competencies for online educators.

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