

Decentring CPD: Voices from a teacher association in Argentina

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This article reflects on the experience of a member of the executive committee of a Teachers' Association (TA) with the organisation of an inclusive and decentred Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activity, conceived as an act of education. Drawing on a sociocultural perspective of learning, prevailing views of teacher CPD were challenged, and alternative routes were implemented. The TA committee's learnings will inform next CPD events and may suggest how future teacher CPD can foreground teachers' ideas, promote interaction among attendees, and ensure teacher learning and extended practices, beyond the CPD activity itself.

1. Introduction

Organising a continuing professional development (CPD) activity for fellow teachers is an act of education. The aim of this article is to reflect on such act. Specifically, my experience as a new member of the executive committee of Buenos Aires English Teachers' Association (APIBA) with organising the Teachers' Association's (TA) 2023 Annual Seminar. My involvement implied shaping the event within the executive committee, challenging prevailing top-down notions of CPD, and making sure there was consistency between the CPD activity offered and the teaching and learning approaches the members of the committee advocate. Namely, a sociocultural, inclusive, decentred approach to education (Banegas et al., 2022). What follows is a reflective account of the journey to implement the CPD activity in Buenos Aires, as well as a brief conceptualisation of the approach mentioned above. Then, there is an enumeration of the lessons learnt, which might suggest implications for teacher education and CPD beyond the context described.

2. Context

APIBA's Annual seminar as a one-day, on-site CPD activity for English language teaching (ELT) educators has been offered mostly for member teachers in the city and province of Buenos Aires for at least 40 years. In preparation for each annual seminar, a timely topic would be chosen, keynote speakers identified and invited, a few concurrent workshops of more classroom-oriented issues offered, around a hundred teachers would enrol, and eventually only half of them would turn up on a set date. Contrary to what the literature shows (Cirocki et al., 2023), the predominant understanding of CPD seems to be that teachers develop professionally through listening to so-called "experts" who impart knowledge from a stage. In the best of cases, teachers would be asked to interact in small groups, but their ideas would remain in the intimacy of such groups. So, in CPD activities organised with such a view of CPD, there is plenty of listening and note-and-photo taking, and only some interaction among colleagues during short breaks.

In 2023, the APIBA executive committee wanted to move away from mainly top-down practices to CPD towards more inclusive and decentred ones. Specifically, we wanted to bring the voices of teachers and scholars far and wide into conversation to build professional knowledge from it. We

believed that this shift would promote teachers' agency, as well as enact a sociocultural, inclusive, decentred view to Education (Banegas et al., 2021; Banegas et al., 2022; Lantolf et al., 2018; Liu & Nelson, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). Socioculturalism argues that knowledge emerges in a mediated and contextualised activity from interaction with others (Lantolf et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). Inclusive practices not only acknowledge diversity as an inherent trait of human beings – evidenced in identities, perspectives, cultures, beliefs, endeavours, contexts, intentions, needs and languages – but also act on diversity to dismantle oppression and ensure access and quality education for all (Banegas et al., 2021). Last, decentredness aims to understand and extend teachers' practices which can be built on by both educators and policy makers (Padwad & Smith, 2023).

Such an approach to CPD implied making decisions with regards to access, content, interaction, and sustainability. Specifically, who would participate, both as an attendee and as a presenter, which situated ideas would be presented, how interaction would be promoted, and how learning would be pursued. We envisaged a CPD event by teachers, teacher educators, curriculum specialists and scholars, targeted not only for teachers, but for other educational stakeholders, such as policy makers, as well. Having said this, it can be claimed that the principles of socioculturalism, inclusivity and decentredness underpinned only the vision of CPD the committee had in mind. As it will become apparent in the account below, this view did not entirely materialise in the CPD event itself. There was a paucity of interaction among colleagues during academic sessions which would have been imperative to ensure teacher agency and learning.

3. Implementing a game-changing approach to CPD

At the outset, we sought for a strategy to enact an inclusive and decentred CPD activity grounded in a sociocultural view of learning. This strategy would draw in as many diverse education professionals as possible – teachers, teacher educators, curriculum specialists, and scholars. Moreover, we aimed to encourage all attendees, and even teachers who have not been able to attend, to build relevant knowledge, develop understanding, and engage in meaningful action in a sustainable way.

With those ideas in mind, we designed a five-hour, open-access, free-of-charge, on-site, one-day CPD activity, which would stand the test of an act of education i.e., it would promote learning for all, including the organisers. In sum, an event which would invite educators from all trajectories to participate, interact, and extend the ideas beyond the boundaries of the on-site experience, by means of collective reflections and self-initiated projects. What follows is the rationale, description, and implementation of the CPD strategy we crafted, and some responses to the activity.

3.1 Harnessing CPD: The rationale towards inclusion, decentredness and sustainability

There are two opposing views of CPD described in the literature. Top-down approaches promote “teacher as ‘consumer’ modes of teacher learning” (Borg, 2015, p. 5), whereas bottom-up ones rely on the participants' enterprise. Many teachers tend to disregard CPD as a collective endeavour (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019), which looks upon teachers as active agents who can build knowledge. Teachers may have come to undervalue their own knowledge and experience, overestimating so-called “expert” trainers compared to what teachers can think for themselves (Xerri, 2022). Banegas et al. (2022) advocate for decentring ELT. Building on their capacities and “through collaboration [teachers] can improve the learning experience of their students” and challenge the centre, which represents power in terms of teaching trajectory, opportunities, culture, or location. Neither top-down nor decentred initiatives have provided the sustainability present in effective CPD (Cirocki et al., 2023). Thus, we planned for short presentations followed by delegates' interaction – placing teachers as agents of change and responsible not only for their own CPD but also for the generation of new ideas (Cirocki et al., 2023; Dhanavel, 2022; Keedwell, 2018; Tomlinson, 2017).

3.2 Shaping the event

First, we identified topics which would depict the current ELT landscape by consulting scholars, teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum specialists from the city and province of Buenos Aires, as well as other areas of Argentina and the rest of the world. We singled out: “interdisciplinarity”, “inclusion”, “artificial intelligence” (AI), and “CPD”. Therefore, the title we chose embraced those notions: “Challenges in the 21st century classroom from an interdisciplinary view: digital citizenship, AI, diversity and inclusion”.

Second, because we wanted to offer an inclusive academic activity, we decided that the event would be free of charge and open access, i.e., any person interested could attend. Although this entailed that the venue we chose had to be waived to us and that costs incurred would be kept to a minimum, the TA’s intention of decentring and catering for diversity and inclusion would become visible.

Third, we sent personalised letters to teachers, tutors, lecturers from all colleges of Education and many schools, as well as APIBA members, regardless of colleagues’ seniority, or popularity. We invited educators to join the seminar with their experience and expertise. We aimed for participants to be protagonists, not spectators. We wanted the educational community to learn from one another and get to know what goes on in the ELT classrooms. We also wished to allow time to pause, think collectively, and imagine possibility. Colleagues who were willing to present their ideas in the CPD activity were asked to enrol via a Google form. They stated whether they would present their ideas in English or Spanish, and the type and length of presentation they would offer (7-minute panel presentation, 30-minute concurrent session, or poster presentation). Prospective presenters were also asked to provide a title for their presentations, a short description of their thoughts, and a short biodata.

Then, we designed the programme with the presenters’ choices in an inductive way. Presenters were made up of a good mix: ten teachers, five curriculum specialists, five heads, four teacher educators, and three scholars. From the 20 proposals we received, we pinpointed three main strands for three different panels: “Rethinking English at schools” (in English), “The right for inclusion” (in Spanish), and “Rethinking CPD” (in English). The choice of language for each strand was based on the option each presenter had marked on the enrolment form. A panel gathered diverse voices in a short period of time and yet focused on a particular topic from the ELT landscape identified at the start. Concurrent sessions added to the themes dealt with at the panels, with classroom-based, situated topics such as “Pronunciation and AI”, and “Picture books in primary education”. There were five presenters in two of the panels, four in the other panel, and nine presenters in 6 concurrent sessions. All in all, there were 27 presenters in 20 presentations, who, of course, were also attendees in other sessions.

Additionally, we appointed one presenter on each panel to open the discussion and wrap up the ideas mentioned. Panellists were introduced to one another by email so that they could collaborate before putting their ideas forward at the seminar. They received a link to a shared Google Slides presentation to contribute with their slides. This shared document helped participants to develop a sense of belonging before the actual seminar took place, since every presenter could have a look at what others had in mind. We aimed to have a communal frame but promote as much individual creativity as possible, so that each presenter voiced their thoughts on their own pitch. As it happened, the panellists opened Whatsapp groups and were in touch before the event, out of their own accord. This camaraderie became palpable in the seamless development of the ideas presenters put across at the panels and in the many echoes from previously mentioned thoughts. However, this stream of collegiality did not extend to the delegates. As it will become apparent in the next section, interaction with and among delegates would have been needed for teacher attendees to move away from the role of consumer.

3.3 The event

The CPD event was carried out on a Saturday morning. Participants were welcomed with a hot drink

in a wooden-flooring hallway at a prestigious College of Education. Soon enough people engaged in chats, which were greatly appreciated after the pandemic. After a good half an hour, the president of APIBA, Romina Arena, opened the event at floor level, while attendees were still holding their cups. She briefed the participants about the principles underpinning the event. “There are no divas, or divos today”, she announced. She went on to say that the seminar was in the hands of educators from diverse trajectories and backgrounds, willing to deeper understand what is going on in Education and build knowledge with others. Having envisioned and designed the CPD event, it was now time for APIBA executive committee members to bow out of the scene and leave the floor to participating presenters and attendees.

The principles underlying the CPD event – socioculturalism, inclusion, and decentredness – materialised in some respects, such as the use of time and resources, and were lacking in others, such as interaction among participants during academic sessions. In five hours – from 9 am to 2 pm – there were 20 presentations, and three 30-minute social intervals to foster social interaction. There were over 100 attendees, three times as many as the number of teachers who had been attending over the last few years. There was choice in food, drink, and sessions to attend. There were outdoor spots to hold conversations, as well as indoor alternatives. There were some teaching materials to browse from stands and time to chat during breaks. Yet, during panels and sessions there was practically no interaction, except for a few questions asked towards the end. This happened mainly because some presenters went over the time limit and also because there was no specific activity designed to promote collaborative knowledge-building interaction.

3.4 Ideas presented at the seminar

As in most CPD activities, there were a myriad of ideas displayed. Each as relevant as the next and each related in some way to the seminar main topic. Describing all contents dealt with during the seminar is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, I will mention a few ideas which are directly related to the sociocultural underpinnings of an inclusive, decentred CPD activity, conceived of as an act of education.

Leonor Corradi defied binary thinking to become truly inclusive (Derrida, 1967), and along with other presenters, identified bridges between English and other disciplines to learn different ways of understanding the world. Building from Pope (1995), Corradi put forward many questions, such as, “Whose wor(l)ds are being represented – and whose wor(l)ds are thereby being mis-, under- or unrepresented?”. When shaping APIBA’s annual seminar, we asked ourselves similar questions and made decisions such as, opening the event for colleagues who may not be APIBA members, teach areas other than English language, teach at various levels – primary, secondary, university, training centres, and schools of English, have different roles in education, and come from diverse teaching backgrounds – both private and state-run. We also thought of running the CPD activity both on-site and on-line, but costs prevented us from achieving this hybrid, truly inclusive idea.

Other colleagues fleshed out the notions of inclusion and decentredness during the seminar. For example, Belén Albarracín put forward a case of global collaboration across educational levels and cultures by teaming up with student teachers from US universities to give her Year 7 learners a decentred learning experience. Likewise, a team of trainers from The City of Buenos Aires Ministry of Education posed the challenges of working interdisciplinarily, and Vanesa Polatri, Silvana Tejón, and Viviana Miglino showcased ideas on CPD. They highlighted inclusion, interaction, and socially constructed knowledge (Pérez Berbain et al., 2023). Most topics intertwined during the seminar, such as agency and diversity, corresponded with APIBA’s vision: teachers building knowledge from interacting across cultures, educational levels, and disciplines. Nevertheless, as it was previously acknowledged, this intent did not manifest itself entirely.

3.5 After the event

As members of the executive committee, we evaluated the CPD event and identified points for improvement. We read participants' feedback to learn from their experiences against our goal – to offer an inclusive, decentred CPD event which would have every delegate as a protagonist, who builds knowledge with others through interaction. 66% of the participants rated the event as excellent, 28% as very good, and 6% as good, and competencies such as interacting, reflecting, evaluating, considering, rethinking, and taking action were mentioned in their takeaways. We wrote back to some colleagues who had made contributions on their feedback forms, letting them know that their views had been taken on board. We summarised the ideas presented during the seminar and socialised them widely.

In addition, we encouraged attendees to follow up on the ideas shared during the event by contributing after-thoughts on a Padlet wall we created with all the PPT presentations. Besides, we invited attendees to an on-line short live gathering on IG, to share any further ideas or experiences they may have had since the CPD event. At the moment of writing, this gathering has not taken place. We expect a few teachers who attended the seminar to join in, plus many other teachers who have not been present in the original seminar. This reflects an understanding of an inclusive and decentred approach to CPD which opens diverse possibilities for professional development. However, as it will become clear in the next section, we acknowledge that the principles of socioculturalism, inclusion and decentredness have not featured during the event as we had intended to.

3.6 Lessons learnt and feedforward

The main lesson learnt is that there is a wide gap between intention and outcome. There is more to achieving inclusive, decentred, socioculturally driven, and sustainable professional development than visualising it within a TA's organising committee and planning towards it. There is adjusting the strategy to meet the goal, as well as communicating the vision of the CPD activity clearly from the start to all involved. As it happened, there was practically no interaction among colleagues to build knowledge during the academic sessions. Moreover, we came up with the idea of a follow-up to the in-person event once the event was over. Therefore, attendees did not expect a sequel to their learning. Furthermore, not all members of the TA's committee looked upon this asynchronous follow-up as beneficial, despite the advantages the idea may hold in store. Namely, the possibility to build and consolidate knowledge, strengthen bonds, and reach out to teachers who have not attended the on-site activity.

A second lesson is the need to manage time effectively and block out time for audience participation as if it were the space of several extra presenters. We set out to promote interaction and knowledge building, but as it happened, there was barely time for a few questions, not enough to elaborate new ideas or ponder on implementation. In the future we would ensure audience involvement by having thought-provoking questions at hand, and providing presenters and moderators with guidelines. We would also allow time after presentations for attendees to think of ways to implement ideas in their own contexts.

A third lesson we learnt is the importance of a shared vision when it comes to designing an event strategy and executing it. As it turned out, working on a voluntary basis, not all committee members could afford to invest the time needed to strengthen the vision. Consequently, our individual ideas on CPD may have remained unchallenged and rather than collaborating to break the ground, our team may have found themselves simply cooperating, i.e., carrying out different tasks (OECD, 2017).

A fourth lesson learnt is the value of data when it comes to making decisions. At the start of planning the event, we identified topics which would depict the current ELT landscape by means of informal professional interactions with colleagues from various areas. With hindsight, it would have been more valid and reliable to send a survey to as many colleagues as possible to single out main constructs from the evidence gathered.

Last, we learnt that as educators, it is only when we reflect and learn from experiences, such as putting together a CPD activity for fellow teachers, that we turn those acts into acts of education. This

can only occur if there is a joint intent within the TA to reflect on action and build future actions on our findings. Additionally, by sharing our reflected experience worldwide, our learnings may ring bells beyond their original context.

4. Conclusion

We planned the CPD activity described throughout this article grounded in a sociocultural, inclusive, decentred approach, which views teachers' interaction as key in their learning. Yet, having reflected on the experience of organising such a CPD event, we can see that not all the practices we adopted fostered this kind of collaborative knowledge-building interaction to happen. Therefore, despite the lack of valid and reliable data to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of the event (Cirocki et al., 2023), and based on our reflective account, we can state that educational professionals require not only diversity of CPD opportunities but also interaction with their peers during social and academic activities. To ensure inclusion and promote decentredness and agency, there needs to be a concrete strategy for interaction in the CPD event programme. This finding will inform our future CPD events. All things considered, there may be room for believing that CPD activities which are inclusive, interactive and decentred could be a chosen form of CPD within and beyond this particular context.

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