

CPD FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH THROUGH WEBINARS-A COOL AND TRENDY DIGITAL ERA APPROACH

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Abstract

Many teachers of English must have come across the conscientious academic who dashes to seminars, struggles to find an accommodation, journeys back aggrieved at having had only a couple of interesting plenary sessions and perhaps drained of hard earned money. This claims the author-cum-teacher educator is passé. For, in this digital era, Continuous Professional Development (CPD) can be achieved through a cool and trendy approach viz; the Webinar. Why is attending seminars outmoded? How is CPD possible through Webinar? To answer these questions, the author, a veteran participant of over a hundred Webinars shares his experience of attending webinars organized by leading publishers and organizations which helped him grow professionally without even leaving the confines of his cozy study.

The article begins by briefly mentioning the importance of CPD and goes on to define what a Webinar is and explains how it helps in one's professional growth. Next, information about leading organizers of Webinars are provided with links to their sites. It concludes by referring to the benefits of regularly attending Webinars and suggests activities for professional growth of teachers of English, following a Webinar session.

Keyword: Continuous Professional Development, Digital, English Language Teaching, Resources, Webinar

CPD for Teachers of English Through Webinars-A Cool and Trendy Digital Era Approach

*"Professional development is a life style not an event".
(Alvarez, 2016)*

Introduction

What is a Webinar?

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How does a Webinar help in CPD?

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1. INTRODUCTION

If professional development is perceived as a life style and if the modern teacher is seen as a life-long learner, one would be tempted to ask whether teachers can regularly set aside a specific time each week to learn new things for one's own professional growth. Studies have shown that professional development is necessary for every teacher to be effective in every teaching situation.(Jones, 1990)

For years, seminars were recognized as the sole mode for intensive exposure to a topic through presentations and discussions by several experts. Thanks to the advent of the digital age, this is beginning to become passé. A new approach to professional development, the Webinar has arrived and it is quickly replacing the earlier passion for academics to race to seminars for one's own professional growth. Drawing on his own experience of having attended over fifty Webinars, the author in this article affirms how the Webinar has become the vintage of the digital era and states why ELT practitioners ought to try out this cool and trendy

approach to Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

2. WHAT IS A WEBINAR?

Webopedia defines Webinar or (Web-based Seminar) as a presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar that is transmitted over the Web using videoconferencing software. A key feature of a Webinar is its interactive elements - the ability to give, receive and discuss information in real-time. An obvious advantage of a Webinar is that the participants are virtually connected and do not have to be physically present as in a seminar. While interactions with participants in a Webinar may be limited, in terms of cost, hardly any money is spent as most webinars are free and one never needs to bother about travel budget.

3. DIGITAL FEATURES OF WEBINAR

The digital features of Webinar include:

*Screen sharing, where anything on the presenter's computer display is also displayed on all audience computer displays.

*Shared control, where the participants can control the presenter's display screen.

*Polling survey capability, which allows presenters to query the audience with multiple choice questions (Technopedia)

The digital features listed above makes the learning ambience of the webinar superior to that of the face-to-face seminar. Those attending seminars must have on a couple of occasions, experienced a situation where, owing to lack of sufficient number of copies available, failed to receive a copy of the handout the presenter circulates among the audience. Such a situation will never arise for a webinar participant. This is because the handouts used if any are made available to the participants of a webinar via email a couple of days before the presentation or at the time of the webinar itself.

It is a common practice among Resource Persons to make use of PowerPoint slides during their presentations. Even studious participants who take down notes during seminar presentations may fail to note down all the bullet points on a slide owing to the faster pace of certain presentations. In this digital era, thanks to the cell phone camera, it is possible to quickly

take a snap of the slide even as the Resource Person makes the presentation. But at times, the quality of the slide captured may be poor and difficult to read. Fortunately, such things need not bother the participant of a webinar. Any PowerPoint presentation made use of by the speaker of a webinar is immediately visible on a window with full digital clarity to all the attendees of a webinar. And it is a regular practice among organizers to email the PowerPoint slides to the participant after a webinar. It may be recalled that in a normal seminar such a practice is unheard of!

In terms of screen sharing, a specific advantage that deserves mention is the use of illustrative videos by Resource Persons during webinars. Not only are such videos visible on the computer screen of the attendee of a webinar but also are the links made available for downloading the same after the session.

During a webinar, the polling feature is invariably made use of by speakers to quickly get an opinion on issues related to the topic being presented. It may be noted that webinar by the British Council, Oxford University Press etc. are attended on an average by participants from twenty-five different countries. The results of each poll is available within seconds during the webinar itself. These live data such as for instance, the preference of teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) to teach grammar compulsorily in the class or opinion on the need for teaching pronunciation can be used as raw data to frame a research question and pursue minor research in one's own locale after the webinar.

The polling feature has options: It could be used to click on multiple options of a given question, click to raise the hand icon to say 'yes' and even type the answer on the chat box. Such polls last hardly a minute and the participants have to stay alert during the webinar to answer the polls. This can often be fun because within seconds the poll result will be available and the participant can get a feel of where he/she stands among the list of participants from different countries vis-à-vis the question posed. Such personal experience is unheard of in face-to-face seminars.

Webinars hosted by leading publishers like the National Geographic Learning have a small chat box that is live throughout the webinar. Anything typed on the chat box is immediately visible to the presenter and all the attendees. It is common practice to pose questions to the presenter if there is any doubt even as the

presentation is in progress. Webinars are usually recorded and anything typed on the chat window gets recorded and is visible along with the name of the person who typed it. This is the modern equivalent of leaving one's digital foot print and attendees are careful not to ask irrelevant questions. A viewing of the recording of a webinar made available on the organizers website, followed by a close reading of the questions posed on the chat box, is a learning experience in itself. This is because, there will always be questions which are capable of triggering a train of thought related to an aspect which the presenter may have completely ignored. Compared to the regular seminar this is definitely an added advantage of webinars, as the chat box option gives every participant an opportunity to pose questions directly to the presenter during the presentation itself. In face-to-face seminars, only a handful of participants get a chance to pose a question to the Resource Person after the seminar owing to paucity of time.

4. HOW DOES A WEBINAR HELP IN CPD?

Making one's knowledge relevant and up to date and familiarizing oneself with changing trends in one's profession is a significant aspect of professional development. Thanks to the increasing popularity, it has now become possible to listen to some of the biggest names in English Language Teaching through webinars offered by leading publishers and organizations thereby giving ones professional development a boost. The recent Pearson Webinar series for instance discussed the challenges faced by teachers and teenagers and several other pressing topics. Macmillan English in 2016 covered several emerging areas including Flipped Classroom, Networking and use of digital resources. Regularly attending Webinars which focus on novel methods of teaching, learning and assessment practices can immensely benefit the practicing teacher of English and aid in ones CPD. To gain an idea of the kind of topics covered by Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, National Geographic Learning, American English and the British Council, please view the authors' own blog post on Participation in Virtual Seminars.

5. LEADING ORGANIZERS OF WEBINARS

Leading publishers of teaching-learning materials on English Language Teaching such as Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press, to organizations such as the British Council and teacher's organizations such as TESOL and IATEFL, organize Webinars on a regular basis. They are attended by teachers of English, learners and even parents in large numbers from different parts of the world. A recent Webinar attended by the author in February, 2018 organized by Cambridge University Press on Online resources and digital tools had no less than one thousand two hundred participants!

5.1. Cambridge University Press

"The Cambridge English webinars are a great way for teachers to get free online professional development...Each webinar is presented by Cambridge English experts, who provide valuable information about our (Cambridge) exams as well as tips and ideas to use inside and outside the classroom." After each webinar, registered participants get access to:

- *a full recording of the presentation
- *free downloadable support materials
- *useful links and resources
- *a certificate of attendance.

According to Catarina Brito, a teacher from Portugal, *"Cambridge English Webinars are an essential tool in a teacher's professional life. Not only do they give us very useful teaching material, but also they enable us to share experiences with other people from all over the world."*

5.2. Oxford University Press

The Website of Oxford University Press specifically states the advantages of attending their Webinars which they perceive as "a convenient way to access high quality professional development from experts in English Language Teaching...Learn about new concepts and theories in English Language Teaching...Interact with trainers and authors, and have...questions answered...Connect with teachers in other institutions, regions or countries...Take part live, or access our library at a time that suits...". They have also suggested seven ways to make the most of a professional development Webinar:

- 1.Be selective
- 2.Shut off distractions

3. Take notes
4. Ask questions
5. Network
6. Remember it is recorded
7. Watch with other people.

These seven steps addresses almost all the ideas proposed by Burstein (2013) in her post which suggests ways of making the most of webinars.

5.3. The British Council

The British Council's English Agenda has a special slot for CPD and their free monthly Webinars which deal with various themes are viewed by teachers and learners around the world. The Webinars are of sixty minute duration and every participant of the Webinar receives a certificate for participation. Past Webinars on emerging areas are archived and some which are worth viewing include:

- *Making mentoring a meaningful continuing professional development experience
- *E-safety in and out of the young learner classroom
- *Exploiting digital video for language development
- *Building sustainability into an EAP course

5.4. IATEFL Webinars

The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) organizes monthly Webinars which are free of charge and are open to both members and non-members. The Webinar recordings are available on YouTube and are a rich source of information.

5.6. TESOL Webinars

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) webinars are presented every week and are open to the public and a certificate of attendance is provided to the participants. A few webinars of 2017 which are worth viewing include:

1. Tips and Resources for Teaching Grammar
2. Documenting ELL Growth with Digital Portfolios

A recording of both these Webinars along with several others are available for view on YouTube.

6. BENEFITS OF REGULARLY ATTENDING WEBINARS

Perhaps the greatest advantage of Webinars is that within a short span of time, one gets an opportunity to update information in one's profession from the comfort of one's own room. The scope for discussion with experts to gain knowledge of aspects related to teaching and learning is an added benefit. Finally, the opportunity to earn a digital badge- the modern equivalent of a printed certificate lends scope for boosting one's professional growth and improved career prospects.

7. POST WEBINAR ACTIVITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

There are several things that a participant keen on professional growth can attempt following the participation in a webinar. He/she can experiment with new strategies learned during the webinar and can publish the findings in a journal or even share experiences at a seminar or conference. A few additional possibilities are listed below:

*In terms of quality of visuals and the nature of content included, the course materials prepared by National Geographic Learning (NGL) is of superior quality. The prices of such publications compared to the subsidized course books supplied by state governments in India, are very high. With a view to publicize the utility value of the NGL course books, after webinars hosted by NGL, specimen units are emailed to participants of the webinar. These can be used by the teacher as additional classroom resource for one's own teaching.

*Often leading authorities on emerging fields are invited to make presentations. Their opinions and thoughts are usually available in journals which one has to purchase to read. But webinars are usually free and we get access to materials on emerging fields through the handouts supplied by the presenter during the seminar. For a diligent scholar, this is a boon because

the material supplied can be used to prepare an article for publication or for presentation during a seminar.

* Most webinar hosting sites choose topics which are of immediate relevance to the teacher in the classroom. If for instance, 'Flipped Classroom' is the topic of presentation, the presenter would suggest certain strategies for 'flipping' one's classroom. The email address of the presenter is often provided during the seminar. A post webinar activity that can follow is the use of flipped classroom strategy in one's own class and gain feedback of one's experience from the presenter of the webinar through email.

*At times, webinars focus on newly released software or technological gadgets for ELT. Following such webinars, participants can download or purchase the software or gadget and check it on learners for effectiveness. Finally, if they are found suitable they can recommend it to be purchased by the management of the institution one is working thereby transforming language instruction.

*Often webinars provide tips for improving classroom instruction. These could be on bringing about changes in teacher behaviour, learner attitude, incorporating changes in the mode of presentation of a topic or the introduction of new interaction strategies using the available course material. Such webinars also provide a check list to see that the strategies proposed work in the classroom. Following such a webinar, a teacher genuinely interested in improving own classroom instruction, can meticulously make use of the check list supplied to find out whether the new strategies proposed can actually improve the quality of instruction being provided.

*Presenters of webinars provide links to resources related to one's own presentation. Following the webinar, if a participant gets interested in the topic, the resources can be accessed and who knows, such an exploration could turn out to be the spring board to a new avenue of inquiry.

*A distinctive feature of webinars is that several topics of current interest such as critical thinking and teaching of grammar with technological aids are covered. Most such webinars supply specimen task sheets to participants of the webinar. Following the webinar, such materials can certainly be exploited by the webinar participant who has the drive and motivation to conduct workshops for both students and teachers. By engaging in such an activity the teacher fulfils an

expectation of CPD : *"...a planned, continuous and lifelong process whereby teachers try to develop their personal and professional qualities, and to improve their knowledge, skills and practice, leading to their empowerment, the improvement of their agency and the development of their organisation and their pupils..."*(British Council).

*The archives of webinars available on several websites are a mine of resources. Following a webinar session, an interested participant can scout for similar topics in other websites. A distinct feature of webinars that become evident on viewing of recordings available on websites is that no two presentations are alike. While on the one hand one can gain new ideas and resources, on the other hand, one gets an opportunity to review the strategy employed by the two presenters. If a participant assiduously reviews a couple of webinars on a given topic, it would be possible to conjure up an interesting new way of presenting the topic in one's own class or before an audience comprising teachers and scholars.

*A feature of webinars is that they draw a large international audience. Most participants hail from countries possessing widely different values and attitudes towards teaching and learning a foreign language. For instance, teacher expectations and pupil attitude with relation to teaching English in a country like Philippines and India can widely differ. In this regard, reading the comments posted by teachers from different countries on the chat box when a webinar is in session can be an eye opener! In fact, the video recordings of webinars on ELT are primary source for data on teacher expectations and perceptions towards ESL instruction. A webinar participant who pursues a research of such a nature is likely to find such a quest, quite rewarding.

8. SUMMING UP

This paper has analyzed several features of Webinars which can be effectively tapped by teachers who are really interested in professional development. Strategies for professional growth following webinar sessions have also be listed. Issues of accessibility of webinars need not worry one any more as it did a few years back. With 3G and 4G connections becoming increasingly common and the launch of state of the art webinar hosting sites,

video and audio streaming in live webinars are rarely hampered by technical glitches.

The fact that Webinars are inexpensive and easy to produce has prompted leading publishers to compete with one another in organizing Webinars that help gain a larger audience. The wide range of topics available every month and the scope for choosing both the time and date of the Webinar has made participation considerably easy. Now it is all up to practicing teachers of English to fully utilize this trendy tool for own CPD.

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