

# Mentoring in the Online Sphere: A Case Study of EAP Teachers

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## **Abstract**

In this study, I explore the introduction of a virtual mentoring programme as an alternative to a traditional face-to-face mentorship programme to provide ongoing professional development. I detail how participants in the virtual mentoring programme reported increased levels of self-confidence, knowledge and skill in integrating information and communication technologies (“ICT”) into their teaching practices. Moreover, the findings indicate that open communication, support and encouragement were integral components in enabling teachers to take risks and to see the potential of ICT in their own teaching practices.

## **Introduction**

Opportunities for ongoing professional development (“PD”) are vital for English language teachers to ensure that they remain up to date with today’s fast-changing pedagogical environment: one which demands increasingly innovative tools and conceptual approaches (Son, 2018). Both teachers and students now use a plethora of information and communication technologies (ICT), including laptops, tablets, smartphones and online environments to adapt, personalise and enhance the learning experience and, thus, to improve educational outcomes (Healey, 2018; Kessler, 2019). Because digital pedagogy has become a key component of the learning experience for students, it is only natural that professional development environments have, primarily, also been moved to the online sphere. Virtual mentoring – that which is also described as “distance mentoring”, “remote mentoring”, “cyber-mentoring” and “e-Mentoring” – is a form of professional development that can provide teachers with better access to information and to greater perceived levels of support (Alemdag and Erdem, 2017). By incorporating synchronous tools (e.g., webinars, WhatsApp, WeChat) and asynchronous tools (e.g., e-mails, wikis, blogs) into professional development activities, mentors and mentees can connect, build relationships and exchange knowledge without having to attend face-to-face meetings or events. Although many studies have investigated traditional forms of face-to-face mentoring, fewer studies have explored the benefits of virtual mentoring (Irby, Lynch, Boswell and Hewitt, 2017; Irby and Pugliese, 2019). In this study, I will shed light on the changing landscape of mentoring among language teachers in Hong Kong.

## **Research Context**

I have conducted this case study one of the largest English language centres in Hong Kong. In doing so, I have explored the introduction of a virtual mentoring programme as an alternative to the centre’s traditional face-to-face mentorship scheme. The existing scheme has been designed to provide all academic colleagues with opportunities to share their experiences, their knowledge, to enrich their own professional development and to contribute to the development of the centre. However, teachers struggle to take advantage of the scheme and to meet with their mentors face-to-face due to their professional and

personal commitments. Teachers are expected to teach for up to 20 hours per week, as well as to participate in committees, attend conferences, contribute to projects and apply for funding. Due to their hectic schedules, little time is left for mentees to discuss teaching-related matters with their mentors.

I designed and established the flexible virtual mentoring scheme to inspire more effective forms of knowledge transfer between mentors and mentees who can connect in a more authentic, regular and relaxed way while building their capacity to interact in a digitally-mediated environment. The aim of the virtual mentoring programme has been two-fold: (1) to improve mentees' technological capacities in using ICT and; (2) to improve teachers' levels of confidence while lowering their levels of anxiety when they use ICT.

The English language teachers who participate in the centre's professional development initiatives have access to various learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle to aid their teaching. However, these platforms are not easily customised and do not, therefore, allow teachers to make the most of the possibilities of online learning environments. There are only a limited number of ways in which teachers may amend and individualise the layout and design of such sites in order to render them more engaging, user-friendly and interactive.

The classrooms in which students learn English are generally outfitted with equipment such as Apple televisions, Mobile Computers on Wheels ("MoCoWs") and multiple screens. As such, they are ideally equipped for teachers and students to make full use of ICT in the contexts of learning and teaching practices. The availability of such equipment is part of a shared new, strategy among teachers to better meet the needs of today's students who may bring their own devices (like tablets, smartphones, or laptops) to their lessons and wish to connect their electronic equipment directly to a classroom screen or projector to facilitate group work collaborations and presentations. Allowing and supporting these approaches among students serves to encourage more authentic methods of English language learning.

Moreover, teachers are encouraged to incorporate student response systems, blogs and wikis as active learning elements in their teaching. Most teachers, though, lack the prerequisite training and knowledge to use equipment such as this – which requires a certain level of ICT skills – in a pedagogically-effective manner. Although teachers undergo professional development training, such sessions are often only a "one-off" and are delivered in a catch-all manner that can consequently lead to difficulties in terms of teachers struggling to understand how the training relates to their own teaching practices. This problem has been reflected in the existing mentoring programme, which relies excessively upon traditional forms of professional development and which does not provide either sufficient training for the development of staff members' practical skills or adequate follow-up support for teachers.

To address these issues, I decided to deviate from traditional mentoring approaches to instead adopt virtual mentoring mechanisms by way of providing additional guidance for mentees. To prepare for the use of virtual mentoring practices, I first had to identify the right platform to be a host. There were several options available, including social media and other interactive platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Facetime, Skype and blogs) which help to blur the boundaries between the physical and the virtual. As the primary aim of the virtual mentoring programme was to help them to become more familiar with technological tools and more confident in integrating them in their teaching, I consulted with teachers to determine which options to select. Together, we decided to adopt Facebook as our main

discussion platform, as it is widely used by teachers (Junco, 2013). The Facebook group was “closed” and private in the sense that only members of the mentoring group could join and interact with members of the group. By restricting access to the group to participants only, high-quality levels of collegial support and trust could be provided, sustained and safeguarded (Clara et al., 2015; Kelly and Antonio, 2016).

Next, we collaboratively developed a mentoring contract that answered key planning questions such as “What is the direction of the mentoring?” and “When should we meet [online] or post messages?”. Together, we decided that we should try out a new tool in our classrooms every fortnight. Then, we discussed which issues we may wish to address through the messages that would be posted on the site – such as, for example, technological tools and inspirational ideas – to facilitate the discussions among teachers. From my experience as both a mentor and a mentee, I know that it is important for teachers to feel that any mentoring opportunities are personalised and relevant to them. Having a shared agreement, understanding or contract of this kind among participants is indispensable if the effects and benefits of mentoring activities are to be immediate and interactive. The final step was to develop a plan to establish the focus of the virtual mentoring, which would help to guarantee the momentum and the continuity of the mentoring sessions and to hold all of the participants accountable (Kohnke, 2019a). Google Docs was used as an online platform both for designing the mentoring contract and the collaborative formulation of our plans for the programme so that all stakeholders would feel a sense of agency and ownership throughout the planning process.

### **Literature Review**

The ways in which learning and teaching activities are conducted are subject to rapid and continual change as teachers are presented with new learning environments including hybrid, blended, flipped, synchronous and asynchronous pedagogical approaches. Due to all of these fast-paced changes, teaching can be classified as a complex profession (Hargreaves and Godson, 1986). As teachers encounter these new learning and teaching environments, it is important to allow them to accumulate knowledge capital to implement new pedagogies in the classroom effectively. There is a direct correlation between student learning and effective teaching (Hattie, 2012). Thus, teachers are often exposed to an extensive variety of activities and exercises like courses, workshops, conferences, seminars, observations, and collaborations with colleagues in the area of ICT skills which has become an integral element of the Teaching English as a Second Language (“TESOL”) classroom (Healey, 2018; Stockwell, 2018).

However, a teacher’s ability to utilise technology to its maximum potential is primarily dependent on their ability to exploit it (Cabanatan, 2003). Teachers continue to demonstrate insufficient levels of knowledge and skill to use ICT after having undertaken traditional forms of professional development training (Tondeur et al., 2016). Therefore, that fact that ICT has not been integrated more successfully into current approaches to professional development is problematic as it reinforces the case for incorporating virtual mentoring in professional development activities. As a result of doing so, teachers would not only learn to optimise their use of digital learning tools in a way that is both effective and efficient but would also begin to acquire the necessary levels of experience to become confident in integrating the use of technology in their own teaching and classrooms.

## **Mentoring**

Previous research has established that mentoring relationships have positive effects on participants such as an increased enthusiasm for teaching and feelings of self-fulfilment, as well as the adoption of new teaching practices by mentees and mentors alike (Hudson and Hudson, 2010; Tomlinson, Hobson, and Malderez, 2010; Nguyen, 2017). Mentoring is integral to teacher professionalism (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012), and it has been defined as having two essential components: career support and psychosocial (i.e., personal and emotional) support (Kram, 1985). Moreover, mentoring can be divided into two specific types, namely, inside the classroom and outside the classroom. The former includes methods such as observation, coaching, demonstrating and co-teaching a class, whereas the latter refers to strategies like co-planning sessions and having brief interactions before and after teaching has taken place (Reese, 2015). An essential element of mentoring is participants' abilities to transform and to make sense of learning and teaching strategies – as well as to understand what works, and what does not work, in our teaching practices (Tsui, 2003).

Generally, the process of mentoring involves a senior teacher providing guidance and support to someone who is fairly new to the experience of face-to-face teaching (Richards, 2017). Mentoring can also occur between two novice teachers, two senior teachers, a senior and a novice teacher, or in a group context. Several different types of relationship can exist between the mentor and the mentee. Depending on the aim of the mentoring, mentors may fulfil a technical role, in which they help mentees to develop their lesson-planning and teaching skills. From my experience, mentors often take on a more directive role, where the mentor tells the mentee what to do and how and why to do it, as with direct teaching. On the opposite end of the spectrum is facilitative mentoring, which is an approach that involves discovery learning, where mentees gradually receive decreasing levels of help from their mentors so that they consequently become more autonomous (Smith and Lewis, 2018). Mentoring should be developmental in nature. A mentoring process should start by considering a teacher's current levels of knowledge, confidence and skills at the outset before helping them to reflect, to digest their mentor's input, and to explore new pedagogical skills and develop their existing skills in a safe and comfortable manner (Malderez, 2009). Effective mentoring occurs when both mentor and mentee can assimilate knowledge, transform their practices and deepen their capacities as teachers (Hobson and Maxwell, 2020). With particular reference to virtual mentoring, the flexibility of this system makes the mentoring process feel seamless, as long as the aims and expectations are clear.

## **Virtual Mentoring**

The importance and efficacy of achieving professional growth through mentoring processes is a well-established concept; there are many different structures in which mentoring can occur. With the influx of ICT into the education sector, it is becoming increasingly common for individuals to adopt technologies to facilitate and extend the mentoring process (Owen, 2015). Specifically, mentors and mentees collaboratively build and shape their knowledge and skills to become more effective teachers (Nolan and Molla, 2017). Virtual mentoring has several benefits and strengths when compared with traditional face-to-face mentoring, in that it reduces the prospective barriers that can be imposed by geography, time and hierarchy (Bierema and Merriam, 2002). Mentoring by means of ICT can increase the frequency of interactions between mentors and mentees. Indeed, a mentor

can support more than one mentee simultaneously (Bagley and Shaffer, 2014), thus averting any feelings of isolation among mentees (Gareis and Nussbaum-Beach, 2008).

Although virtual mentoring has several positive attributes, there are also some potential disadvantages. Depending on the specific form of technology that is utilised, mentors may not be able to interpret their mentee's body language and tone of voice, thereby increasing the risks of miscommunication (Brennan and Lockridge, 2006). However, the ability to communicate electronically may serve to promote conversations that would normally be regarded as being too uncomfortable to discuss in person. Virtual mentoring offers an up-to-date mode of communication of a non-confrontational nature, where both mentor and mentee have the time and opportunity to offer appropriate comments and to, in turn, digest them (Smith and Lewis, 2018). While various studies have already been conducted on mentoring and virtual mentoring, I hope that this explorative case study will offer new ideas and outline new expectations and insights in relation to the professional development activities of English language teachers and the subject of how they seek to enhance their ICT skills through mentoring. The guiding questions for this study are:

1. What are mentees' perceptions of virtual mentoring in improving their ICT abilities?
2. How does virtual mentoring participation improve mentees' confidence in using ICT?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

With this explorative qualitative study, my aim is to offer a rich and holistic understanding (Creswell, 2008; Mason, 2002) of whether the six teachers who participated in the virtual mentoring programme improved their levels of confidence and skill in integrating technology into their teaching practices. My study is positioned within an interpretive framework that holds the ontological position that reality is a subjective phenomenon that is co-constructed through an individual's experience and social interactions; the experience, therefore, needs to be understood within its particular context (Crotty, 1998; Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Interpretive studies such as this explorative one are more concerned with relevance than rigour (Blumberg et al., 2011).

### **Research Participants**

All of the participants had teaching experience from more than one country, including Japan, South Korea, the UK, and Canada. I invited the participants to join the study as part of broader efforts to expand and to personalise the existing mentoring programme in accordance with the needs of teachers. The first group of six participants (four males and two females, aged 34–47 years) acted as mentees in this research. The participants were all English language teachers, and their teaching experience ranged from 7 to 15 years. The second group consisted of two mentors (one female and one male), both of whom had previous mentoring experience; their teaching experience ranged from 15 to 20 years. Each mentor had three mentees. The study began at the start of the semester, and the mentoring process occurred over a period of 10 weeks. All of the participants volunteered to participate in the study. I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity, and they were all aware that they could withdraw from the mentoring programme at any time.

### **Data Analysis**

All of the participants agreed to provide written reflections (ranging from one to two pages) on their mentoring experience. I read the participants' reflective responses in the context of the two research questions and developed the preliminary codes and themes. These codes and themes then formed the basis for the interview guide (general and specific

questions for each mentor) that I used in individual, semi-structured interviews. Questions included: “What are your views on virtual mentoring?”; “What did you find to be most useful about the virtual mentoring?”; and “What did you find challenging?” The audio-recorded interviews lasted for between 21 to 36 minutes, and I transcribed their content verbatim. Moreover, I utilised the process of member checks to establish the trustworthiness of the data (Merriam, 2009). Each participant approved the reflections and transcriptions – without their requiring any revisions – in the first member check.

I chose to analyse the eight interviews thematically by using Braun’s and Clarke’s (2006) six steps for thematic analysis. I analysed the data manually as the sample size was relatively small. In interpretive studies, credibility is measured by how well the participants’ portrayals match their perceptions (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). Participants completed the second member check when they received the final results and an accompanying written discussion – including themes and representative quotations – of the research. Participants verified that the information accurately represented their experiences. No additions or suggestions were requested by the participants.

## **Results and Discussion**

I discuss the findings from all eight participants in order of the two research questions. To give equal voice and meaning to all participants, I have chosen extracts that capture their experiences and perspectives to reinforce my main observations in each thematic category. The results of this study suggest that collegial support in the mentoring programme provided valuable opportunities for participants to reflect on their teaching practices and their willingness to take risks and to try out new ideas inside their classrooms.

### *RQ 1. Perceptions of the virtual mentoring programme*

My first aim was to investigate mentees’ perceptions of virtual mentoring in terms of its role in improving their ICT abilities. The findings revealed that mentees felt more capable of integrating new technologies into their teaching practices during and after mentoring than they had done beforehand. Their knowledge and skills were enhanced by the fact that they had access to timely, ongoing and relevant support. Christopher clarified this idea:

As we are using Facebook in our mentoring sessions, I feel that I can better understand and see how I could use it with my students. I’m planning on creating a class account and using it to post information and to hold online office hours.

Another mentee, Crystal, divulged her reasons:

I was, at first, apprehensive about using wikis and blogs in my teaching, as I prefer students to write a traditional paragraph or essay. But after [I] experienced it myself, I can see how students can collaborate and build their knowledge. And I feel more confident that I know how to integrate it into my classes.

As previous literature has revealed, professional development sessions are often one-off workshops that do not transition to actual classroom practice (Borko, 2004). These excerpts clearly show that one of the main benefits of the virtual mentoring programme has been that participants have gained practical experience within their teaching context. By experiencing and identifying how technology can complement their teaching styles, teachers can adapt their pedagogical approaches accordingly (Kohnke, 2019b). This is particularly important in today’s “high-tech” classrooms with digital-savvy students who

expect to see, or to use, some type of technology, and in which English language teaching is often seen as being of equal importance to the use of technology (Son and Windeatt, 2017). Through virtual mentoring, teachers can practise relevant activities, experiment with social media and blogs, and consider how technology might be integrated into their teaching practices in a non-judgmental environment. By having the opportunity to experience technology actively during the mentoring process, teachers are not only supported in the sense of gaining technical expertise but also in terms of discovering multiple authentic teaching and learning opportunities.

### ***Technological Drawbacks***

While all of the participants mentioned the benefits of experiencing various ways in which technology might be used in their classrooms, several also commented on some of the technical drawbacks as well as their initial misconceptions about using social media. Laura thought that the ease of access to information and the practical experience that technology afforded was beneficial, but also felt that it could be overwhelming at times. She commented:

Messages can suddenly be posted very frequently, and it was difficult to follow the conversations. X had one idea, Y another and Z suddenly started another topic. Who[m] should I respond to?

This sentiment was a common one among the participants. When using Facebook as a chat platform, it is all too easy for the challenges of turn-taking and not being heard due to the lack of nonverbal signals to occur. Mentors, as the group moderators, have to be active participants to redirect the conversations, so that mentees' points of view are not neglected and everyone can be equally engaged in the conversations that are taking place online.

### ***Misconceptions of Facebook***

Anna commented that she was initially apprehensive about using Facebook for her professional development. She noted:

Facebook is for family and friends to stay in contact, share updates, post photos. I'm not sure I want to mix personal with professional interests.

This is an important point. Individuals being of the mindset that social media should only be for private use is quite common. As we continue to explore how Facebook can be used for professional development, we must seek to change this traditional mindset and to highlight the fact that social networking sites can be used for learning (Donelan, 2017). Moreover, the delivery of professional development content online through social networking platforms allows teachers to partake in practical, experiential learning opportunities that teach them how they can use technological strategies with their students.

### ***RQ 2. Improvement in confidence through virtual mentoring?***

My second aim was to explore whether or not virtual mentoring could improve teachers' self-confidence and lower their levels of anxiety when using ICT. Confidence is an essential element of a teacher's professional development (Eraut, 2012). The findings show that, while teachers participated in the mentoring, their confidence increased and their apprehension decreased as a result of their open communication with – and support and

encouragement from – their mentors. I discuss these findings in more detail below, referring to each of the key themes in doing so.

### ***Open Communication***

Open communication between mentor and mentee is a primary component in encouraging new ideas and in developing confidence in oneself and one's teaching practices (Beyene et al. 2002). This study corroborates similar findings. Both mentors and mentees valued the ease with which they were able to send each other messages and to discuss their ideas unreservedly; in general, they felt that their voices were being heard. Laura said:

I think before, when I [met] my mentor face-to-face, it felt quite formal, and I felt [too] uncomfortable to express my ideas freely. Now, it feels like we are on [an] equal footing and we can all learn from each other.

Similarly, Dennis commented on the closeness between participants – mentors and mentees alike – that developed as a result of the Facebook group chats; they served to make him feel comfortable and relaxed enough to discuss the challenges that he had faced that day. He stated:

Having this environment where I can express what I'm really thinking, trying to do, and knowing that everyone will listen and be open to my ideas [is] really important. We are all in the same situation and [we] no longer feel isolated, and [it] is easy to discuss what worked and didn't work during the week. We are all learning from each other's mistakes and successes.

Likewise, mentors stated that trust, respect, and open-mindedness were essential values for the success of a mentoring relationship. These findings reflect the research by Trevethan (2017) in which she argued that a shared vision would have a noteworthy influence on learning in this context.

Alfred, for instance, stressed that his virtual mentoring experience facilitated the development of an open, frank and transparent relationship between him and his mentees:

By removing the physical space, people are more willing to open up, share their experiences and try out new ideas. It feels that neither mentor nor mentees are being judged. We are all trying to learn, figure out how to use technology in a more pedagogical, sound manner with our students.

As these quotations suggest, the opportunity to be in a virtual environment that fosters open communication and constructive relationships is essential for teachers to step out of their comfort zones and to develop their pedagogical "know-how" in ICT. Mentoring should not be about evaluation; instead, it is about learning and growing together as professionals (Smith and Lewis, 2018). This is particularly relevant in terms of the ubiquity of digital devices in today's classrooms. If teachers feel confident about using technology, they are more willing to take risks and to try out new ideas and strategies (Nolan and Molla, 2017).

### ***Support and encouragement***

The findings show that teachers needed to have collaborative and supportive relationships with their mentor and other mentees before taking risks and experimenting in the classroom. In the interviews, several mentees stated that a lack of confidence was the



main barrier that was preventing them from exploring and trying new technological tools. In the words of Matthew:

I don't want to look incompetent in front of my students. What if it doesn't work in the classroom? All the students are really tech savvy.

It became apparent that three types of support – cognitive, affective, and instrumental – were provided during the virtual mentoring programme. Throughout the 10 weeks, mentees often sought out their mentor or other mentees in the context of the group chat to discuss a problem and to try to find a solution to it. Interviewees were very candid about their comfort in reaching out to the rest of the mentoring group. For example, Crystal pointed out:

We all want to improve how we use technology with our students, and I'm certainly not a techie and unsure how I could incorporate it more effectively in my teaching. It is really difficult to know what is good: there is just so much out there. Take two weeks ago. I wanted to use Lino for a Q&A session for the first time, and I wasn't sure what would be the best way to use it. So, it is easy to send a message directly to my mentor and my group to get some helpful tips.

Dennis elaborated on Crystal's point:

Today, I couldn't understand why the Kahoot! room wasn't visible. I felt really frustrated and embarrassed, so it was comforting to hear other mentees and my mentor's take on the problem and [to receive their] encouragement to try again.

As well as being supported emotionally, several mentees mentioned that they appreciated it when their mentors provided them with practical teaching strategies or pointed them in the right direction. As Christopher shared:

I often get stuck in the planning stages; I go online, and I search for something innovative [that] I can use in my classes, but often I don't know what would be suitable. I can just quickly send a message to my mentor group, and they can point me in the right direction.

Matthew added:

Personally, it is really encouraging [to] receive positive comments from other people in my situation. They are able to point me in the right direction and/or suggest other digital materials and tools [that] may be more suitable.

Numerous participants expressed their desire to gain practical experience of using a tool or conducting an activity. This is a positive finding, as it testifies to the participants' levels of openness to exploring new ideas. They are all actively trying to integrate technology into their classroom teaching practices while discussing the tools with which they might do so, trying to collaboratively identify pragmatic ways of introducing such strategies. Both of the mentors asserted that it is important to avoid spoonfeeding tools and teaching strategies to mentees; it is better to nudge them in the right direction so that the mentees have autonomy over their decisions and practices. As Birgit said:

It is important that they continue to have autonomy and [that] we as mentors stay open-minded...we suggest using certain tools and strategies, but it is up to the mentees to ultimately decide if and how they want to incorporate them or not. If

they do it differently and it works, we are both happy and we both learned something new.

Alfred further described that:

Things will go wrong when we are using technology, it happens to everyone. We are trying to create a safe environment where we can support and encourage each other, and it is totally okay to make a mistake.

Helping mentees to experience the full range of possibilities that using technologies can offer was a key priority for the two mentors. In addition, reverse or reciprocal mentoring was something that both mentors valued greatly as a process from which they themselves had benefited and grown. Nolan and Mulla (2016) have highlighted similar findings among professionals whereby both mentors and mentees have benefited from the mentoring process. Mentors were comfortable in reaching out and exploring ideas about how one might use a technical tool, which positively impacted their confidence in the classroom. Overall, the findings corroborated previous studies (van Ginkel et al., 2016) regarding the importance of open communication. The participants' responses about the levels of support and encouragement that were provided by their mentors suggest that virtual mentoring removes some anxiety about mentoring in a face-to-face context and increases levels of motivation and willingness to use ICT among teaching staff. Thus, virtual mentoring is an influential way in which we might facilitate the professional development of teachers.

### **Limitations**

This is a small-scale study of the professional development opportunities that are afforded through virtual mentoring programmes; I have limited my study to a small sample group of English language teachers in Hong Kong. Thus, my research findings present a snapshot of mentors' and mentees' experiences and perceptions of engaging in a virtual mentoring programme. This research material is limited to respondents' self-reflections and interview data. I have not analysed the respondents' online messages. This omission could be remedied in a future research project. However, the initial findings of this study nevertheless contribute to scholarly discussions about the efficacy of virtual mentoring as an integral component of professional development, either as a standalone mentoring programme or as a hybrid option in terms of assisting teachers to obtain the necessary levels of skill and confidence that they require to successfully integrate ICT into their teaching practices.

### **Conclusion**

In today's evolving educational landscape, it is becoming increasingly important to stay abreast of the latest technological advances in the field. In this article, I have explored the perceived benefits of a virtual mentoring programme in providing guidance to English language teachers. Specifically, I have investigated whether participants' technological skills have improved and whether they have become more confident about integrating ICT into their teaching practices as a result of participating in the programme. As evidenced by this explorative study, by participating in a small virtual mentoring group – with a common aim – teachers felt better supported which, in turn, increased their levels of willingness and confidence in relation to teaching with the aid of ICT, thereby enabling and empowering them to experiment with using technology in their classrooms.

This study has several implications for professional development. Firstly, in terms of mentoring platforms, social networking sites such as Facebook have been proven to be suitable for use due to their accessibility and functionality. By embracing the incorporation of technological tools into the mentoring process, teachers can gain practical experience of using ICT as well as to consider whether or not it would suit their own teaching needs and contexts. Participants were able to access the platform at convenient times, which removed the stress and burden of having to attend scheduled events, thereby minimising the levels of disruption in their professional and personal lives. The findings have also revealed that participants experienced increased levels of support and became more open to new ways of learning and teaching; they became increasingly comfortable about taking risks as a result of the encouragement and support that they had shown to – and received from – one another. Overall, as a result of being in a supportive online network, participants' levels of confidence grew while their levels of apprehension diminished. Although some of the findings might have been similar to those that pertain to face-to-face mentoring programmes, the teachers' openness to trying out new tools, discussing challenges and their commitment to supporting each other can be attributed specifically to the virtual nature of the mentoring.

Based on the findings of this study, virtual mentoring seems to have a considerable role and value in enhancing teachers' ICT skills and levels of confidence. Virtual mentoring provides teachers with easier access to information and a greater perceived level of support. Mentors and mentees can connect and build relationships more authentically. Hopefully, professional development administrators will take note of these findings and identify appropriate ways in which to adopt forms of virtual mentoring to empower their teachers.

### **Biographical note**

Dr. Lucas Kohnke is a Teaching Fellow in the English Language Centre at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His works have appeared in international journals such as *Journal of Education for Teaching*, *RELC Journal* and *TESOL Journal*.

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