

Teacher Professional Development Online: Lessons From Africa

by [Andy Curtis](#)

For many of us in the 1980s, our first glimpse of the beauty of Africa was through the film *Out of Africa*, released in 1985, starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford, directed by Sydney Pollack. The film was loosely based on the autobiographical book of the same title, written by Isak Dinesen (pen name of Danish author Karen Blixen). I was in my early twenties when the film was released, living in England, working as a clinical biochemist, at a hospital in Birmingham.

I had not travelled much at that time, but after seeing *Out of Africa*, I was determined to go there. For various reasons (life, love, and so on) I never did. But then, nearly 30 years later, in December 2012, I was contacted by TESOL's Education Programs Manager, Sarah Sahr, who invited me to work with TESOL International Association and the U.S. Peace Corps (USPC), to develop a new online course for 20 language and culture coordinators (LCCs) in 20 different countries across Africa.

Assessing and Meeting Needs

The course would run over 5 weeks, in March and April (2013), with a 1-week break in the middle, while the Annual TESOL Convention was taking place in Dallas, Texas, USA. However, with all the precourse and postcourse work, it was eventually a 6-month project, from December 2012 to May 2013. We started with a needs assessment, so we could tailor the course as closely as possible to the needs of the LCCs. The needs assessment form, which took some time to develop, asked about their first and additional languages, their number of years of teaching experience and where they had accumulated that experience, as well as their English language learning histories, and how they rated their English language competences in the different modalities.

At the request of the USPC, the course was to focus on second language acquisition (SLA), so the needs assessment form also asked the LCCs what they already knew about SLA, and which areas they were interested in knowing more about. The USPC also asked us to make the course as practical as possible, which was one of the first big challenges, as there is still something of a divide between those who carry out SLA research and publish in academic journals, and the language teachers who are in classrooms every day with learners.

The needs assessment form also asked the LCCs about their access to computers, the Internet, and other online technologies, as another challenge was the relatively limited bandwidth in most countries in Africa. So, there would not be any live lessons via webcam, we could not use video, and we were limited to online readings and a discussion forum. Also, in terms of familiarity with this way of teaching and learning, 14 of the 16 LCCs who completed the needs assessment form indicated that they had *never done an online course before*.

Creating a Classroom Community Online

In addition to the technological challenges was the fact that these LCCs were not teachers of English, despite the project being developed by an international ELT association. The LCCs teach African languages to Peace Corp volunteers, so the volunteers can interact with local

people. Therefore, for some of the LCCs, English is a third, fourth, or even fifth language, after one or more African languages, then in some cases French, in former colonies such as Benin, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. Consequently, one of the specifications of the project was that the course material should be at no higher than an eighth grade English language reading level.

To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever tried to write a book on second language acquisition for eighth grade readers, and some of the best known books, like Ellis' *Study of SLA* (2008), runs to more than 800 hundred pages! So finding the right content at the right level took some time. Eventually, after thoroughly analyzing the needs assessment feedback, we decided to make use of freely available online materials, such as those from the [Center for Applied Linguistics](#) (CAL), a nonprofit organization in Washington, DC. In addition to the language-level criteria, our other criteria were that the articles needed to be well written, well researched, and clearly presented from reliable sources, as well as being theoretically sound but with a practical focus. Here are two of the free CAL articles we used:

- Week 4: "[Eight Approaches to Language Teaching](#)," Don Snow (1992)
- Week 5: "[Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction and Sample Activities](#)," Ann Galloway (1993)

Another one of the challenges was the geographical area over which the course participants were spread. The LCCs were from, in alphabetical order: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, and Zambia. Creating a cohesive classroom community with 20 different course participants from 20 different countries, with such a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and work experiences, would have been no easy task even in a face-to-face classroom. But spread over such a large geographical expanse—Africa covers an area of nearly 12 million square miles, where more than a billion people live—made the creation of a classroom community all the more challenging, especially as face-to-face, real-time interaction was not possible.

Successful Outcomes

In spite of all the challenges, the feedback from the LCCs was extremely positive, with all 16 respondents answering "Yes" to the question: "Would you recommend this course to a colleague of yours?" And there were also many positive feedback comments like this one:

The course gave me the opportunity to learn from other colleagues and my instructor, new methods of language instructions that will help in my post. The course has also given me more insight to some of the things I/we do in Ghana with regards to second language learning. This has resulted in me thinking critically about some of the methods, information, materials and teaching processes used here and which need to be changed or modified to meet current trends.

It was inspiring to see the dedication of the course participants, many of whom were working in "resource poor" environments, in terms of access to online technologies. And it was enlightening to see how the course brought together teacher supervisors from so many countries, who learned so much from sharing ideas with each other, and who taught me so much in the process.

Lessons Learned for Online Teaching

Here are a few of the many things we learned, and in some cases relearned, from this process and this project:

1. Allow as much time as you can for the needs analysis, and get as much input from as many course participants as you can, even if you have to resend the needs analysis forms and send reminders.
2. Be somewhat insistent about course participants including a clear, recent photo with their profile, as being able to put faces to names can help a lot with creating online classroom communities.
3. Encourage course participants to respond and reply to each others' posted comments, and not just to the instructor's posts.
4. One way of doing #3 is for the instructor to refer to several course participants' postings in each of the instructor's reply/response postings.
5. Do not try to respond to postings individually, as 20 people can generate hundreds of postings quickly and easily! So, "batch" your replies and respond to a few postings at a time with "composite" replies.
6. As an online instructor, without a physical classroom or office, you need to set time aside every day to read and respond to course participant posts, and it can help for that to be at around the same time each day, if possible.
7. You can develop your intercultural competence by learning about the countries where your online course participants live and work, before the course begins, especially if you've never been there in person yourself.
8. Be open to your course participants telling and teaching you about their day-to-day lives, and be genuinely interested in what they do, both inside and outside the classroom.
9. As in all relationships, trust is essential. This takes time, but one way to build it is, if you're comfortable with it, to gradually and carefully share with your course participants details of your work and your life. If you do that, they will often follow suit.
10. Even the most advanced technologies cannot be 100% guaranteed. Consequently, the technology will let you down sometimes—so be patient and always have a Plan B.

I still have yet to visit Africa, but after this experience, I am more determined than ever to get there one day!

References

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Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

***Andy Curtis** received his MA in applied linguistics and language teaching and his PhD in international education from the University of York in England. After working for some years as a clinical biochemist in hospitals in England, he eventually left and found his true passions in language teaching and learning. Andy served on TESOL's Board of Directors from 2007 to 2010, and he writes a biweekly [TESOL blog](#) about teaching and learning online.*