



CRITICAL REFLECTION ON EAP PRACTICE

Professional Development and the Precarious Practitioner: A Critical Friendship Approach

Natasha Jarnot: Freelance, Jarnotnatasha@gmail.com;

Antigoni Kapasaki: Freelance, capasaki@yahoo.gr;

Lindsay Knox: University of Edinburgh, Lindsay.Knox@ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Whilst the necessity of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to enhance teaching practice in diverse English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching contexts is acknowledged by the sector (BALEAP, 2024; Campion, 2016; Ding & Bruce, 2017), there are still relatively few published accounts of how such development is achieved (Fitzpatrick et al., 2022; Jarnot, 2024; Knox et al., 2024) either by individual EAP practitioners or by the institutions which employ them. This has importance for all EAP practitioners but has particular significance for those working in precarity, who often have limited access to CPD opportunities. Emerging from the three authors' CPD collaborations on a pre-sessional programme at the University of Edinburgh over the last two years, this article critically reflects on the challenges of identifying and managing EAP professional development from both the individual and institutional perspective. As a solution, we propose that critical friendship, supported by pro-active academic leadership, is an approach which goes some way to overcoming the personal, institutional, and sectoral barriers which may stand in the way of meaningful professional development. Drawn from our recorded conversations and written reflections about CPD, we reflect on the development of our own critical friendship and argue for an approach to professional development for pre-sessional teachers which has reciprocity, shared responsibility, and collaboration at its centre.

KEYWORDS

Academic leadership, Critical friendships, Pre-Sessional, Professional development, Precarity



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Introduction and background

Engagement in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is the hallmark of a professional in any field and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is no exception. The value of CPD, along with scholarship and research, to the individual practitioner and the wider profession is clear. Without opportunities to develop the required professional knowledge, there are risks to the individual for their socialisation into the profession which, in turn, impacts the sector's development and its ability to evidence its value in the academy (Bruce, 2021; Ding, 2019; Hakim, 2023). In a sector which does not have a clearly defined career entry point or an agreed professional qualification (Ding & Campion, 2016), in-situ CPD arguably takes on even more importance. This is true for all EAP practitioners, especially in the current context of budgetary crisis in Higher Education (HE), but perhaps especially for those without secure employment. Knowing how to navigate the EAP CPD landscape as a freelance practitioner moving between contracts brings its own set of challenges.

It is Natasha and Antigoni's shared experience and navigation of this challenging employment landscape as freelance EAP practitioners which provide the starting point for this article. Precarious EAP employment is a conversation topic they have revisited together both during and between their pre-sessional contracts in Edinburgh. It is likely that similar conversations regularly take place throughout the freelance EAP community and this may have simply continued in this way between two colleagues. However, for Natasha, it went beyond conversation and became the subject of enquiry for her Masters dissertation which sought to understand CPD motivations for EAP freelancers. A subsequent conversation during the Pre-Sessional with another Edinburgh colleague brought this to the attention of Lindsay who, with her academic remit to lead CPD for Pre-Sessional, was interested in learning more. Thus, the foundations of what has become a sustaining and motivating critical friendship were laid. The following account is the result of several conversations throughout the summer which continued during the year. We met regularly online to engage further in informal discussions focused on critical friendship and the challenges of identifying meaningful CPD as freelancers working in precarity. Deciding that there was a possible publication emerging from our discussions, these meetings were audio-recorded to support ongoing reflection and identification of key themes. The resulting co-constructed text reflects our shared insights into CPD-in-precarity and the role of critical friendship.

In this article, we offer this approach through a narrative of our own experience, with illustrative quotes from our written and verbal reflections. In doing so, we have three objectives: firstly, to contribute a practical account of CPD to the existing EAP literature; secondly, to describe a critical friendship approach as one possible solution to the between-contract-CPD-conundrum; and finally, to illustrate how an institutional-individual reciprocity framing of professional development can bring the EAP community of practice together in a way that may make colleagues working in precarity feel less isolated.

Evidencing professional commitment through CPD

For those individuals seeking work, often in a precarious environment of short, fixed-term contracts, a demonstrable commitment to CPD is a non-negotiable. Keeping oneself employable poses a daunting challenge and draws even greater attention to the role of CPD in maintaining professional visibility. As stated in the BALEAP TEAP Individual Accreditation Scheme handbook (BALEAP, 2024:21), the competent EAP practitioner is expected to “find time to keep up with developments in the EAP field” whilst also aiming to make a contribution to its development by carrying out “their own scholarship”. This expectation is usually clearly articulated in EAP job adverts. Essential and desirable criteria related to CPD are often required to be evidenced in a covering statement and in answers to interview questions if you are lucky enough to be shortlisted. Applicants need to demonstrate and evidence their ongoing engagement between contracts. While this kind of commitment is an entirely reasonable expectation in any profession, as Antigoni comments, there is an unfortunate irony in being expected to engage in CPD activities and demonstrate one’s commitment to professional development whilst being excluded from much of what is available.

If you're an outsider like us, it's what Natasha was saying. We don't have access to information, literature, or conferences. I mean, if you are a member of an institution, you might get a discount, let's say...You don't have all these benefits, or access to these benefits. So, I'm trying to argue that the CPD is a paradox. So, you are expected to continue to develop professionally, but at the same time, it's more difficult when you are an outsider.

The benefits that EAP colleagues with open-ended contracts may enjoy such as access to digital resources, funded CPD, memberships of professional bodies, dissemination of information about conferences or other similar events are often simply out of reach for the EAP freelancer.

Without an institutional affiliation and these associated benefits, the task of making informed choices about CPD to boost one’s chances of employment becomes even more challenging. This potentially adds to the stress of finding work, and, arguably, exacerbates feelings of insecurity reported by job-seeking EAP freelancers. They may then question, not only what kind of CPD to pursue, but also whether their investment has been worthwhile, especially for short employment contracts. Alongside financial and time pressures, some freelancers may even decide upon a new career path altogether (Jarnot, 2024:65; UCU, 2019). Consequently, those freelancers seeking pre-sessional positions may conceivably feel further separated from the institutional EAP community of practice which already considers itself on the academic periphery (Ding & Bruce, 2017; UCU 2019). In this situation, feeling like an imposter, and experiencing increased levels of anxiety and demotivation (Joubert & Clarence, 2024) could influence how CPD is approached.

However, we would suggest that responsibility for practitioners' professional growth should not lie only with the individual. A collective response from both the wider sector and individual institutions to support EAP practitioner development could go some way towards mitigating some of these challenges. At the sectoral level, there is certainly more extensive work to be done to co-construct a clearer articulation of what good CPD looks like. While the BALEAP Competency Framework for Teachers of English for Academic Purposes (2008) offers a useful description of EAP teaching skills, aiming to capture what characterises EAP teaching expertise, there is surprisingly little written about how this is acquired beyond classroom experience (Blaj-Ward, 2014; Ding & Bruce, 2017; Ding & Campion, 2016; Fitzpatrick et al., 2022). More crucially, little is still known about the role CPD plays in developing expertise. This point was highlighted by the CPD mapping survey (Knox et al., 2024) carried out by BALEAP's Teacher Education in EAP Special Interest Group (SIG) which sought to address this paucity of information on how professional development is managed at an individual or institutional level. We would suggest that this absence of well described accounts of CPD activity for EAP practitioners, combined with limited access to development opportunities or research literature (Evans et al., 2025) has a critical impact on professional development for freelance teachers unsure of what options to pursue. However, whilst the EAP knowledge base undoubtedly needs to include more empirical evidence of the importance of CPD, institutions are also an important piece in the EAP CPD puzzle, and, we argue, can play an important role in mitigating some of the CPD challenges faced by practitioners working in precarity.

Pre-Sessional: a site for professional growth

[Attending a CPD session] is very nice and the fact that you're just in a room with colleagues and you listen to things that are interesting. Honestly, in the summer, I feel as if I'm getting paid for my professional development. (Antigoni)

EAP pre-sessional programmes undoubtedly have potential to be a fertile ground for professional growth for the pre-sessional practitioner, though not always in the ways we might expect. Development can occur through both formal and informal activities. Formally, and more towards what Leung (2009:49) refers to as "sponsored professionalism", induction, classroom observations, and in-house CPD sessions, can all be inspirational sources of reflection for development. Additionally, these CPD sessions can promote a sense of belonging to a professional community, something which was vital for Natasha.

You have more freelancers attending the CPD sessions because once the contract is over, I have no more CPD sessions, and it's not the topic, I'm going to be honest, it's the fact that I'm in a room with other colleagues.

At the other, informal, end of the spectrum, more peer-led interventions can also be instrumental. Informal discussions with colleagues often begin in the teachers' room which, on a good day, buzzes with questions, ideas, and the sharing of activities. The undeniable value of these collaborative interactions is consistently emphasised in EAP research and noted for their

potential to support teachers' sense of agency and empowerment (Sadeghi & Richards, 2021). These everyday exchanges can often shape teaching practice in meaningful and sometimes transformative ways despite not being formally labelled as professional development (Campion, 2016).

This two-pronged approach raises important questions for those who lead on CPD during Pre-Sessional programmes. It should, of course, be acknowledged that there is a delicate balance which needs to be struck between meeting the pre-sessional programme objectives and institutional needs, but also those of teaching colleagues. Institutionally, operating in this high-stakes environment, planned CPD sessions offer structure, coherence and a necessary focus on areas such as assessment standardisation to ensure alignment with programme requirements and local priorities. However, this largely pre-determined focus risks constraining opportunities for more dialogic, peer-led forms of professional learning. For the individual, both approaches are certainly beneficial, and institutions should look for ways to combine these in their CPD offer but, once the contract ends, then so too do the easy access to development opportunities it affords. There is, therefore, a need for institutions to create CPD opportunities which take a longer-term view of the individual's growth. Addressing this requires academic leaders to be proactive in finding an approach to CPD which integrates both the formal and informal structures and which serves both the institution and the individual. It is against this background that we share this contribution to the discussion.

From pre-sessional colleagues to critical friends

I have come to realise that critical friend engagements could be seen as a vital component of interactive and proactive engagement in EAP, especially for freelancers who have no opportunity for the more informal workplace interactions where experienced colleagues can share work-related snippets around the water-cooler. (Natasha)

An alternative type of more informal CPD, which aligns with the need for a more sustainable form of professional development, is critical friendship. The concept has a long tradition in education (Swaffield, 2007) and refers to a professional relationship in which the central goal is to improve practice by dialogically shaping alternative perspectives. Through supportive but probing questions and reflecting back to their partner, critical friends hold up a mirror and guide each other towards deeper reflection on practice. Its value for professional development is recognised by BALEAP in their recent relaunch of the Critical Friend Network. This has been established to "offer a supportive space for BALEAP colleagues engaged in research and scholarship" (BALEAP, 2025b), confirming Swaffield's view that, to be effective, critical friends should have knowledge of the teaching context (Swaffield, 2007). This suggests that the pre-sessional environment is a promising locus for such friendships to evolve, and that these connections could be as meaningful as the more formal CPD sessions. The intense experience of working on a pre-sessional programme where temporary summer colleagues are

working and sometimes living together for several weeks combined with institutional intervention has potential to propagate such friendships as Antigoni relates here.

Our everyday conversations during the pre-sessional programme gradually became something more professionally significant. In the kitchen of our shared accommodation, amid discussions about assessment criteria, lesson planning, and the occasional shared frustration, we found ourselves returning to similar questions about practice and professional identity. At the time, this did not feel like professional development in any formal sense. Rather, it resembled what Boud and Lee (2005: 511) describe as a “symbiotic and co-productive relationship,” shaped by the immediacy and challenges of the programme. Importantly, these informal dialogues extended beyond the pre-sessional context. At the end of the contract, we returned to our year-round activity and stayed in touch through informal chats and messages.

In subsequent discussions, we have identified a turning point which added an even more critical dimension to the friendship. In 2025, several months after the end of the 2024 Pre-Sessional, Lindsay emailed Natasha encouraging her to put in a proposal for the upcoming slow BALEAP Professional Issues Meeting (PIM) (BALEAP, 2025a) hosted by Queen Mary University London which focused on professional development. Lindsay reflects here on her motivations for doing this.

I am very aware of the CPD challenges for our summer colleagues. Being limited in how we can support them as an institution beyond the end of their contracts is one of the conundrums of my role and I often think about how to deal with this. Raising awareness of development opportunities during the year and sharing them seems like a small gesture. In this case, I had read Natasha’s excellent Masters dissertation where she focused on the challenges of CPD for freelance practitioners, and it seemed like a good place for her to disseminate her work. I was also aware, because we had had several conversations about our shared imposter mindsets, that she might need a little encouragement, and so I jokingly told her “imposter syndrome is so last year.” (Lindsay)

However, it became apparent from later conversations that what felt, for Lindsay, like a very small action in response to a bigger issue, was more meaningful for Natasha.

This was valuable support. I am not sure that Lindsay realised the agentic and transformative power of those few words. This interaction propelled me to seek advice from Antigoni, my respected pre-sessional peer, and she decided to also contribute to the BALEAP PIM. This turned into a form of critical friendship as Antigoni and I began to advise, critique, and support each other throughout the process of submitting to the PIM. Without the institutional support in that

initial email, the PIM contributions (Jarnot, 2025; Kapasaki, 2025) would not have happened.
(Natasha)

Two important points about supporting professional development are worth emphasising here. Firstly, the importance of a proactive intervention from someone in a leadership role, a need noted by Joubert and Clarence (2024). This has the potential to support precariously employed colleagues by identifying informal professional development avenues as well as encouraging them and reinforcing their membership of the professional community. Natasha notes the importance of this: *“What basically keeps you going is knowing that if you are part of the network, you meet like-minded professionals and I think that is also important.”* The second point is the choice of colleague to engage with, and Natasha specifies that she sought out Antigoni, as a “respected pre-sessional peer.” This mutual respect and trust are key components of critical friendship and can emerge from the experience of working together in similar roles (O’Neill, 2002) such as on a pre-sessional. As critical friendships evolve over time, they can become an empowering CPD practice, aligning with Mann’s (2005: 105) description of teacher development as a bottom-up continuing process, “wider than professional development, including personal, moral and value dimensions”. This raises important questions for those involved in leading professional development activities for pre-sessional colleagues on short contracts about how they can balance both institutional and individual needs. It is understood that what can be offered to pre-sessional colleagues outwith their contracts is often limited by university policies and is very context-dependent (though we welcome more discussion among institutions, especially involving those who have found solutions). However, while institutional recognition of the emotional and psychological impact of repeated precarious contracts on EAP practitioner identity is an important first step, it is also essential to think about what other practical measures can be taken by academic leaders.

Creating space and brokering connections

In our induction programme we have learning objectives and the final learning objective is for colleagues joining us in the summer to “feel part of a community of teachers where their own knowledge and expertise is valued.” And what I’m thinking here is that this isn’t something... I thought about it for induction, but it isn’t something that I’ve necessarily carried through beyond that. (Lindsay)

Intentional setting of an objective which prioritises community-building during the pre-sessional can help mitigate some of the effects of employment insecurity and can go some way to addressing the feeling of being an imposter. However, as Lindsay states, it needs to go beyond induction. We propose that engaging in critical friendship can be understood, drawing on Ding and Bruce (2017), as a form of socialisation into the EAP profession. There is therefore a need for academic leaders to be proactive in identifying ways to support this within their particular institutional constraints.

With the understanding that critical friendships cannot be institutionally or artificially manufactured, we are proposing that institutions and their academic leads can nurture a working environment where these may bloom. Starting with induction, it can be encouraged by creating spaces which, between the necessary information-sharing sessions about the programme, allow for the exchange of expertise and experience of incoming colleagues. Similarly, Pre-Sessional CPD programmes could make space for summer colleagues to present their own research and scholarship and share practice with their colleagues. Opening up the space in this way and supporting colleagues to contribute can help mitigate some of the professional insecurities felt by those working in precarity by validating their prior experience whilst offering an opportunity to add to it. Such endorsement of these critical friendship spaces could grant teachers greater agency in shaping their own development and recognises the value of these meetings in supporting professional growth.

For those suffering from imposter syndrome exacerbated by precarity, the intentional support of an institutional academic leader, such as a line manager or course organiser, could also be an invaluable encouragement, as Natasha confirms. Here, the concept of brokering, proposed by Wenger (1998), offers a useful tool to work with. Brokering refers to the connections which can be made by people, such as (though not restricted to) academic leaders, who can share and introduce aspects of their practice with those who are on the boundaries of a community or, perhaps even members of an adjacent community of practice. It is worth emphasising here that leadership qualities do not only reside in those with official leadership roles. We acknowledge there may not be much time in the hurly-burly of a pre-sessional to systematically approach CPD on an individual basis for every teacher. However, there are often opportunities, through those casual water-cooler conversations or the more formal interactions (observations, for example), for the observant leader to note areas of strength, interest and expertise as well as areas for further development, and be proactive in pointing out CPD opportunities or synergies with another colleague, or in Wenger's terms, broker these connections. For some colleagues working in precarity, with the emotional toll that takes, putting yourself forward can seem very daunting, or even risky. The encouragement of an academic leader, however small, can make a difference as Natasha shares here.

And if you hadn't done that [sent an email], I would not be sort of where I am now and I wouldn't be engaging and I wouldn't be doing this now. (Natasha)

Although a friendly email to a summer colleague to encourage them to submit a proposal to a conference was a small intervention, what has been noteworthy for all involved is the ripple effect this has had beyond the forming of a critical friendship between two colleagues. Natasha's request for advice on her PIM proposal prompted further reflection and a deeper engagement on Antigoni's part, and she also decided to submit a proposal. Happily, both proposals, shaped and refined through the process of critical friendship, were accepted. This, in turn, with some academic leader brokering and support, led to two further co-presented (and

well-received) presentations about critical friendship as a form of CPD: one in-house for pre-session colleagues at Edinburgh and one for the BALEAP TEdinEAP SIG (Jarnot & Kapasaki, 2025). And currently, this collaborative trajectory has brought all three of us together in the writing of this article and for a further presentation at the upcoming St. Andrews EAP Conference. What began as shared participation in everyday practice (Wenger, 1998) has now reified in more public artefacts of scholarship. The reciprocity of this critical friendship with institutional and individual benefits is especially fulfilling and underlines that community-building can be mutually constituted and does not necessarily flow from the top down.

Conclusion

By sharing our reflection on this CPD approach, we hope to have shone a light on this under-scrutinised area of EAP practice and met our original objectives. We conclude that, while there is a balance to be found between promoting practitioner agency and autonomy and meeting institutional needs, professional development can flourish when the responsibility for it becomes a shared practice. By fostering a pre-session environment where connections can be made and critical friendships nurtured, academic leaders can be instrumental, through brokering, in empowering the freelance practitioner to claim their place in the community of practice, with reciprocal benefits. By making space for pre-session colleagues to share their own expertise and nurturing critical friendships, there is much potential for the development of EAP teaching practices, both individually and collectively. In addition, learning from these friendships can potentially also be transferred beyond EAP to other teaching contexts such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English Medium Instruction (EMI) and applied in the practitioner's own teaching setting, a definite benefit for the freelance practitioner who may be working multiple jobs.

Crucially, when there is mutual responsibility for the professional development of precarious practitioners, space can also be created for scholarship, which as well as the sectoral benefits we noted above, can also provide rich development opportunities. Engagement with scholarship supports them in maintaining their professional visibility for employability and helps to address the paradox articulated by Antigoni. As well as our own contribution to scholarship with this article, there are certainly other instances of this kind of collaborative work in progress across diverse EAP contexts. At the 2025 BALEAP conference, colleagues from the University of Westminster shared an excellent example, now published (see Gimenez et al., 2025), of a collaborative research project which included their pre-session colleagues as co-researchers. A forum (e.g., a PIM or a SIG) where more examples of these kinds of inclusive pre-session community building practices are made visible through public dissemination would be very welcome. We therefore conclude our reflections with an encouragement for colleagues, individuals and institutions, to contribute further to this discussion with their own professional development-in-precarity narratives along with their approaches to promoting more inclusive and collaborative CPD. CPD, including scholarship, is a cornerstone of professional practice and, as such, opportunities to participate should be available to all members of its community if everyone is to feel included. Whilst there are inevitably systemic and logistical barriers which

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can place obstacles in the way of this ambition, there are also steps which can be taken by both the individual and the institution, if not to dismantle those barriers, then to move around them.

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