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Recent Trends in Online Teacher Training

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Recent years have seen a growing need for teachers in EFL and ESL, and this demand cannot be filled by university qualified native English speakers alone. Indeed non-native speaker teachers, who have long had good cause to complain of marginalisation, are becoming increasingly important as English continues to develop as a lingua franca. There are also thousands of private language schools worldwide with a thirst for new teachers of English, and across the globe teachers already in work are keen to keep abreast of current developments and to continue to hone their skills.

All this has created a need for new teacher training delivery methods; methods which enable teachers to study anywhere in the world, in their own time and addressing their own development needs. Although distance learning has been serving such people for many years, new technologies are allowing for new styles of delivery and interaction in teacher training. This article aims to evaluate two major aspects of online teacher education and consider some possible futures.

Online courses can be broadly divided into two types: blended learning or distance learning. In the teacher training context, I will define blended learning as that which involves face-to-face contact between trainer and trainee alongside internet based input delivery and interaction. Distance learning, for the purposes of this evaluation, consists of input delivered entirely via the internet, and interaction taking place via similar technologies. I would like to begin by considering the

contexts to which each of these methods might be best suited, and ways in which technology is being used well, underused or misused in real life situations.

A typical blended learning scenario is the Cert. TESOL course at St. Andrews University. This course is directed toward pre-service teachers, or those with little experience of teaching English as a Foreign Language. The initial four weeks are conducted through distance learning, with readings and tasks delivered via the internet and feedback given weekly by the tutor. There are also online discussions in which trainees are required to participate. The final five weeks are full time and face-to-face, and include teaching practice (University of St. Andrews, 2006). The rationale is that trainees will come to the intensive course well prepared; in this case, the online portion of the course operates almost as an interactive reading list.

The trainer on this course was unfamiliar with teaching technologies before the course, and viewed the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) with some trepidation. This accounts for the basic nature of the online interaction (Trealor, 2006). However, although the technology is not utilised to its full extent here, the course is still an effective example of blended learning within its own remit. The trainees will arrive for the intensive course segment having familiarised themselves with the course materials and concepts in a much more meaningful way than if they had merely read them. This time saving element, which allows concepts suitable for self or home study to be introduced in advance, should not be undervalued as an advantage of blended learning.

Another model for blended learning is that of the VLE used as part of a longer term part-time or full-time course. In the UK context universities are committed to utilising these technologies, with software applications such as Blackboard and Web CT. However, as with teaching technology in general, the possibilities are not as yet being fulfilled. Martin Eayrs speaks of 'the core of power users' with a remainder 'initially reticent to adopt Blackboard at all' (2006, 19). As an MA student myself, I have mostly used the VLE as a storage space and delivery mechanism for basic Microsoft Office documents. A VLE is very useful for this, but when one considers the set up, licensing and administration costs it seems to be rather wasteful. As Eayrs suggests: 'There has in general been a lack of awareness on the part of academic staff ... and students of the real potential of online learning – that of moving into what print resources cannot do' (Eayrs, 2006, 19). This includes audio/ visual media, web-links, interactive discussions, 'wikis' (web pages which can be easily edited by users) and other opportunities to collaborate. Sharma describes the principles of the 'dual track approach' and how pre, during and post lesson integration of face-to-face and technology based learning are vital for effective blended learning (Sharma, 2005, 4). Even this can be problematical as 'up until now, the development of blended learning (BL) materials and complex blended learning environments (has been) primarily practice-led as opposed to research-based' (Neumeier, 2005, 164).

How can the practitioner be sure that learning is pedagogically sound? There is a vanguard of teachers and teacher trainers (and indeed language learners) for whom technology is becoming 'normalised' – that is, 'used every day by language students and teachers as an integral part of every lesson, like a pen or a book' (Bax, 2002, 23-24),

and who are driving practice forward. There needs to be further research in support of these practitioners to ensure that they are guided by sound pedagogical theory in the implementation of new methodologies.

If blended learning is still developing, then what is the current state of the pure distance learning course? As mentioned previously, distance learning is not a new phenomenon. However, new technologies are offering the teacher trainer and trainee teacher a variety of alternative options.

There are some distance learning courses suffering from the same technological timidity which blights education as a whole, with the internet being used simply to deliver print documents via email. When compared to traditional distance learning courses, this is still an improvement; the course is cheaper and quicker to administer, and trainee teachers can study while on the move. However, distance learning courses can offer so much more than this – it is time to stop viewing distance learning as inferior to face-to-face study, and time to start looking at what distance learning can offer over traditional courses.

Beyond the VLE technologies which we have already discussed, MOODLES offer exciting possibilities for the teacher trainer. A Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (MOODLE) is a learning management system with some basic similarities to other VLE's. However, unlike most VLE's it is both free and open source, which enables educators to adapt the software to their particular situation whilst saving money on licensing costs. Like most open source software, it runs across platforms and enjoys the support of technologically literate amateurs worldwide,

many of whom are happy to offer advice and assistance in setting up and maintaining applications.

On a deeper level, though, what makes the software particularly appealing to educators is the theory behind it. Commercial packages have been accused of being 'methodologically regressive, imposing a top down approach often based on a transmission idea of teaching' (Standford, 2006, 26). That is, through the rigidity of the environment, there is a danger that trainer and trainee will fall into old-fashioned knowledge provider and knowledge receiver roles. Although I must stress that most VLE's provide opportunities for various modes of interaction between learners, MOODLES encourage interaction with the software and provide an atmosphere conducive to self-discovery. This is in part due to the social-constructivist theory behind its design (Brandl, 2006, 20), which encourages learners to work collaboratively with or without the tutors guidance. This collaboration, based on scenarios from the trainees' own contexts, enables trainees to assimilate new ideas and incorporate them into their 'cognitive constructs'. What can make this style of distance learning more effective than full time face-to-face or blended courses is the potential for trainee teachers to apply new ideas in the classroom, reflect upon their experiences and share the information with their peers online. This is goes a long way towards 'bridging the gap between theory and practice' (Kupetz & Ziegenmeyer, 2006, 64).

English language teaching is not a field with clear internationally standardised paths for professional development. Although within particular contexts there may be structures in place (such as programmes in state administered education systems, or international organisations like the British Council), teachers are often

largely responsible for their own professional development. The habits that can be learnt through distance study can be of long term benefit to trainee teachers. After all, many language teachers are trying to help their own students attain at least some level of learner autonomy – it seems logical for teachers to aspire to self sufficiency in their own education. As with language learners, trainee teachers are likely to need training to develop independence. In an online pilot programme run by Kupetz and Ziegenmeyer, incorporating digital classroom video recordings, the trainers found that a significant proportion of the trainees were unable to make links between theory input and the clips (2006, 77). This illustrates a need for informed rather than blind learner training, especially with less experienced or novice teacher trainees.

A final issue related to distance and blended learning, which I think deserves attention, is how the trainer should approach multiple intelligences. As classroom practitioners many of us are now very aware of how we plan, create and manage activities so as to best serve our students' learning styles, and these ideas have been incorporated into many teacher training courses. Loop input, in which teacher training matches content and method (for example, an input session on teaching listening set up as a listening activity) is in some ways a logical progression of these ideas, and those of informed learner training. As a teacher trainer myself, I found that combining loop input, handouts, visuals, lectures and practice was effective in getting a high volume of information across efficiently, reaching trainees with different learning styles and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Trainers may lack

confidence in the ability of distance learning courses to offer the same experience.

Green and Tanner (2005) are sure that it can. By setting trainees a choice of tasks and allowing them to select the one most favourable to them, trainees can become more aware of their own learning styles and, by extension, those of their students.

At this point in time, the possibilities offered by technology are beginning to make some of the traditional differences between face-to-face and distance learning less important, and are raising whole new questions about flexible and blended training. I have covered some of the benefits offered by these new training styles, but one sticking point would appear to be teaching practice. Indeed, in other fields the credibility of online courses has achieved parity with face-to-face courses, but the practical demonstration of teaching ability remains a problem for online teacher trainees.

For courses grounded in theory this need not be a major issue, but many recognised teacher training courses have a strong practical element. The Cambridge ESOL teaching awards, for example, require the trainee to observe and teach a number of 'real' lessons.

There is a third way, however. The Distance DELTA is one of several new courses using what I call a 'proxy' tutor. The trainee submits coursework, receives information and interacts with his peers and trainers online as usual. In addition, he is allocated a local 'mentor' who observes his classes and gives feedback through seminars (Cambridge ESOL et al, 2006). International House has extended this idea by using online development programmes and peer feedback to support teacher learning in their global network of schools (Cattlin, 2006). This proxy method has

potential for experienced teachers living and working far from a training centre. However, I would still advocate blended or face-to-face learning programmes for novice teachers, to provide a greater level of support and guidance during a crucial developmental stage.

Whether blended or distance, a vital part of any online training course is the facility for communication, from peer to peer and between trainer and trainee.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) via networked computers encompasses (but is not restricted to) email, discussion boards, video or audio conferencing, MOODLES or bulletin boards (Son, 2006, 123). CMC can either be synchronous (in 'real time'), or asynchronous and I would now like to explore the implications of each for online teacher trainers.

As I alluded to previously, English language teachers need to be responsible for their own development.

Online interaction is learner training, particularly for pre-service teachers, in group reflection as a development tool. For in-service teachers, part of the appeal of an online course is the opportunity to interact with people from the wider context whilst reflecting on one's own specific milieu. Fundamentally, then, whether this interaction is synchronous or asynchronous is largely unimportant. However, from the online tutor's perspective there are several factors which need to be considered in managing different kinds of interaction effectively.

The first potential pitfall for a tutor administering a synchronous online discussion is facilitation. In the classroom, participants are able to use a number of nonverbal and verbal cues, and video conferencing and

conference calls still follow these rules of spoken discourse to some extent. They are also less commonly used than other methods of CMC due to the more advanced technical specifications required of the participant's equipment. With that in mind, in this analysis I would like to focus on written interaction through discussion boards and 'chat'.

Nunan (1999), reports how this was done on the fully online MA TESOL programme he ran from Newport Asia-Pacific University by developing a set of protocols;

? I want to ask a question

+ I would like to add something on this point

A I agree with this point

D I disagree with this point

// I've finished my turn

Go X It's your turn

(Nunan, 1999: 55)

The experience of Huan Japes in running an online Diploma course is similar; he began with thirteen trainees in discussion groups but found that any more than five was unmanageable, even with agreed turn taking cues (Japes, 2006). Although Nunan claimed that 'some of the transcripts (from synchronous discussions) could easily have been from a classroom' (Nunan, 1999: 58), it seems that without the nonverbal cues so important to communication, interaction needs to be carefully guided. This leads to a more teacher centred style than might be found in face-to-face interaction. A secondary issue related to the lack of non-verbal cues is the increased potential for misunderstanding. Humour, in particular, can easily be misconstrued, especially if the participants are working cross-culturally. However, the social and community building aspects of synchronous interaction cannot be

overstressed, according to both Japes and Nunan. Despite the undoubted benefits of online courses such as convenience, cost and flexibility, one advantage that face-to-face courses still have is the depth of direct human contact. Synchronous discussions can go some way towards providing that.

Asynchronous discussions, in which trainees communicate with time delays through email, listservs or on discussion boards, raise other issues for teacher trainers.

Utmost amongst these might be the problem of demotivation. Although online synchronous discussions are different from their classroom equivalents in many ways, one major similarity is required attendance. As we have shown, trainees can also be encouraged to participate through 'protocol cues'. Asynchronous discussions, however, with their increased lag time, can prove problematical for trainers and trainees alike.

Those studying online are likely to be juggling priorities already, and procrastination can lead to limited participation. In a programme run by the University of Southern Queensland, participation in certain tasks was made a requirement, but trainees mentioned the lack of experience with the technology, lack of time and a lack of direct feedback or response from others as negative aspects of discussion boards. However, participation rates were still high and most learners cited this aspect of the course as one of the most valuable (Son, 2006, 131). Set tasks are a common method of encouraging participation. Indiana University's online course nominated weekly 'starters' and 'wrappers' to give some structure to discussions and hand over some responsibility for learning to the trainees (Pawan et al, 2003, 132).

It appears from much of the literature, then, that lack of participation is not a major problem. Teacher trainees will commonly post questions which concern them, and enjoy addressing others questions if they think they have answers. One only has to look at the popularity of discussion boards unaffiliated to training courses across the internet to see this in action. I can draw parallels with my own experience as a teacher trainer in Japan, when I held monthly workshops for teachers working at schools across the region. As well as the social element, novice teachers valued the opportunity to share their experiences and seek advice from their peers. This situation was somewhat unusual, in that trainees later went on to teach for the same company and longer term relationships were easier to maintain. However, participants in most training programmes can easily lose contact once they have completed their course. Asynchronous discussions during a course can help trainees build online support networks of their own which continue beyond training. As I noted earlier, teacher development after training is largely in the hands of the teacher, so these communities can be a valuable asset.

Looking at deeper pedagogical theory, Garrison et al (2001) have created a model of practical inquiry which demonstrates how trainees use asynchronous discussion groups to work through ideas collaboratively. Trigger events begin discussion, leading to the exploration phase, in which learners reflect individually and explore ideas as a group. This takes learners to the integration stage, when solutions begin to emerge. Finally, the ideas are tested in the resolution phase (Garrison et al, 2001, 11).

Asynchronous discussion is therefore well set up to develop reflective practice in trainee teachers. With less time pressure than in the conventional classroom setting,

learners are not only able to reflect more deeply, but actively encouraged to do so (Arnold, 2006, 43).

This is particularly advantageous for courses taken by a mixture of native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English. NS teacher trainees can find themselves somewhat overwhelmed in fast-paced seminar groups, for both language and cultural reasons. However, the additional time afforded by asynchronous discussions can empower them, without disadvantaging NS trainees. Hirvela notes how learners on his course who were shy in class were much more confident online, and how a larger number of students were able to reflect and participate, building self-esteem and a sense of community (Hirvela, 2006, 239). Japes (2006) adds a note of caution, in that some of his students were initially reticent due to the permanence of the text, but also adds that trainees tended to 'mind their tongues' more than they might in real time face to face interaction.

With more time to reflect, however the volume of postings can become difficult to manage for both trainer and trainee. Rourke et al talk of 'Teacher Immediacy' in the context of building learner communities, and how online collaborative models allow the teacher to step back from instructivism and share social presence with the learners (Rourke et al, 2001, 6). However, I would posit that some trainees still value the role of teacher as leader, which may manifest itself in the expectation of immediate, frequent and lengthy feedback. The 'anytime, anywhere' nature of the internet can exacerbate these expectations and cause frustration for trainers and trainees alike.

Taken as a whole, online teacher training is neither better nor worse than the face-to-face model - just different. Although I have highlighted some obstacles in this evaluation, I believe that online training can do many things that face-to-face training can't and that it should be more than just an option for those who can't commit to a 'proper' course. It is vital that those involved in teacher education and course design recognise that in order to move forward

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