

Teacher learning about online learning: experiences of a situated approach

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This study explores how teachers experience an online course designed to provide a situated approach to developing understanding of online learning. It describes how the course designer aimed to exploit the potentials of online tasks and interactions in relation to a rationale for situated teacher development, and then explores evidence of how teachers engaged with these processes. A picture of teacher engagement with the course mechanisms emerges from the teachers' own reflections on their experience. Findings suggest that online learning provided for situated opportunities for reflection in and on action. However, the ways in which teachers engaged with and experienced the course were varied, these being accounted for by individual characteristics such as cultural background, by teacher understandings of themselves as learners and online participants, and by individual responses to specific course attributes. The research contributes to understandings of teacher learning in online courses.

Cette étude a exploré comment les enseignants expérimentent sur un cours en ligne conçu pour fournir une approche de situ, destinée à développer leur connaissance d'apprentissage en ligne. Elle décrit comment le concepteur du cours a visé à exploiter les potentiels de l'apprentissage en ligne et des interactions médiatisées par ordinateur par rapport à un raisonnement pour le développement de situ de l'enseignant. Puis elle explore l'évidence de la façon dont les enseignants sont engagés dans ces processus. Une image de l'engagement de l'enseignant avec les mécanismes du cours émerge des propres réflexions des participants sur leur expérience. Les résultats suggèrent que l'apprentissage en ligne a fourni des occasions de situ pour la réflexion dans et sur l'action. Cependant, les manières avec lesquelles les participants se sont engagés avec l'expérience étaient variées, celles-ci expliquées par différentes caractéristiques telles que le fond culturel, les vues des enseignants eux-mêmes en tant qu'étudiants et participants en ligne et par leurs réactions différentes aux attributs spécifiques du cours. Cette recherche contribue à notre compréhension de l'apprentissage des enseignants dans des cours en ligne.

Este estudio examina las experiencias de los profesores que tomaron un curso en-línea diseñado para proporcionar un enfoque situado en el desarrollo de la comprensión del aprendizaje en-línea. Este estudio describe cómo el diseñador del curso buscaba explotar el potencial de las tareas e interacción en-línea de acuerdo con los principios del enfoque situado para el desarrollo de profesores. También se examina cómo los profesores hicieron parte de estos procesos. Se puede vislumbrar la vinculación de los profesores con los mecanismos del curso a través de reflexiones de su experiencia. Los resultados sugieren que el aprendizaje en-línea brindó oportunidades situadas

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para la reflexión durante y sobre la acción. Sin embargo, la forma como los profesores experimentaron e hicieron parte del curso fue variada, debido a características individuales tales como el entorno cultural, interpretaciones personales de los profesores en el rol de estudiantes y participantes en-línea, y por las respuestas individuales a características específicas del curso. Este estudio contribuye al entendimiento del desarrollo de profesores a través de los cursos en-línea.

In dieser Studie wurde untersucht, wie Lehrer einen Onlinekurs wahrnehmen, dessen Ziel es ist durch einen learning-by-doing Ansatz ein Verständnis für Onlinelernen zu entwickeln. Es wird einerseits beschrieben, wie der Entwickler versuchte die Möglichkeiten von Onlineaufgaben und -interaktion im Hinblick auf eine Grundlage für situierte Lehrerfortbildung auszunutzen, und andererseits wie Lehrer mit diesen Prozessen umgingen. Ein Überblick über das Lehrereengagement für die Mechanismen des Kurses erwächst aus den Überlegungen und Erfahrungen der Lehrer selbst. Die Ergebnisse lassen den Schluss zu, dass Onlinelernen situative Möglichkeiten der Reflexion während und nach den Handlungen ermöglicht. Jedoch waren die Art und Weise, in der die Lehrer mit dem Kurs umgingen und ihn erfuhren, unterschiedlich; dies ist auf individuelle Merkmale, wie kultureller Hintergrund, Selbstverständnis der Lehrer als Lernende und Onlineteilnehmer, sowie auf individuelle Reaktionen auf spezifische Kursattribute zurück zu führen. Diese Untersuchung trägt zum Verständnis des Lernens von Lehrern in Onlinekursen bei.

Introduction

Online tools and environments provide opportunities for teacher educators to facilitate teacher development beyond what may be described as traditional face to face contexts. This may be for the delivery of distance learning courses to global or regional groups of teachers, or as a complement or an alternative to more local face to face in-service training. However, educators need to think not only about how they exploit the modality of online learning to provide flexible learning opportunities, but also, as in the face to face context, about how approaches to course design and implementation facilitate learning processes that are consistent with realizing learning outcomes. This concern with the relationship between processes and outcomes is central to this exploration of a particular online teacher development course.

The course in question is one of six taught modules for a Masters programme in Educational Technology and English Language Teaching, although it can also be taken as a standalone, in-service course. The programme provides advanced professional development to teachers interested in the use of technology in language teaching. Participation is either onsite or by distance. The teacher groups are diverse: they work in varied English language teaching contexts around the world; in primary, secondary and further education; in state and private institutions. They may be native or non native speakers of English.

The course under study is entitled *Computers, Language and Context*; it explores themes that relate to changing language teaching contexts that are increasingly mediated by technological drivers. A key context for change (either current or prospective) for many language teachers is reflected in moves towards online and distributed learning initiatives and this provides a central focus.

I first of all outline the theoretical thinking about teacher development and professional learning that underpins the conceptualisation of this module. I will then exemplify the ways in which this thinking informed the design of the course before looking at the actuality of teacher experiences.

Theoretical underpinning

Research into teacher development conceives teacher knowledge as highly contextualised and interpretive (Freeman & Johnson, 1998), drawing on the social contexts within which teaching takes place (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 2). This perspective draws on understandings of situated cognition in which the social context within which learning takes place is an integral part of the interpretation and application of that learning. Teacher learning involves engagement with questions about practice, about learners, about their beliefs as teachers. It is also recognized that much of what teachers bring to development situations is tacit knowledge, and the challenge is to enable teachers to surface this explicitly. As Shulman (1988, p. 33) affirms:

The capacity to answer such questions not only lies at the heart of what we mean by becoming skilled as a teacher; it also requires a combining of reflection on practical experience and reflection on theoretical understanding.

Reflection is, therefore, identified as fundamental to empowering teachers to engage with professional development opportunities ‘as a mechanism for change in teachers’ classroom practices’ (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 2). It is a purposeful activity entailing:

a recognition, examination and rumination over the implications of one’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and values as well as the opportunities and constraints provided by the social conditions in which a teacher works. (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 20)

Reflection in and on action (Schon, 1991) allows teachers to take ownership of that learning. It is also supported by interaction with others around ideas, theories and concepts, that is teacher learning is conceived as a social construction of knowledge (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 5). This supports an understanding of learning as distributed knowledge ‘across the individual, other persons and various artifacts such as physical and symbolic tools’ (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 5). Talk between participants plays a mediating role in that process (Verdejo, 1996; Curtis & Lawson, 2001).

In this respect the potential of discourse communities for professional learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Pawan *et al.* 2003; Butler *et al.*, 2004; Glazer & Hannafin, 2006) has been demonstrated. Moreover, there has been a growing interest in the potential of online communication tools to bring teachers together within the context of inter-institutional networks for professional development (Lieberman, 2000), and within specific course boundaries (Curtis & Lawson 2001; Motteram, 2001; Pawan *et al.*, 2003). The online environment provides tools that appear to facilitate interactive learning (Arnold & Ducate, 2006, p. 42) with specific claims for

CMC facilitating the co-construction of knowledge (Pawan *et al.*, 2003) ‘thus linking reflection and interaction’ (Warschauer, 1997, p. 473). As teachers engage in collaborative experiences and discourse, the very acts of talking and writing together provide a context for shared understanding and a scaffold for ‘reciprocal interactions’ (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006, p. 181), and serve to make the tacit ‘more visible’ (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 294).

Applications to online course design

If professional learning is itself a situated endeavour ‘constructed through experiences in and with the social practices associated with particular activities, in particular social contexts’ (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 2), then this poses a challenge for the design of teacher learning experiences in graduate teacher development programmes. Distance learners, who remain in their local contexts, may be able to ground their knowledge more immediately. The challenge is possibly greater for teachers who study full time away from their settings for a whole year. In the case of all of the teachers in this study, there was a particular challenge as they were exploring a mode of teaching and learning that was less familiar to them and which was not necessarily mirrored in their current teaching.

Adopting a situated approach, that is learning about online learning through online learning, would appear to facilitate teacher learning of ‘knowledge and skills in contexts that reflect the way the knowledge will be used in real life’ (Seely Brown *et al.*, 1989). Based on this rationale, the two cohorts (7 students onsite, 10 distance) were united as one learning group online. The onsite teachers, therefore, experienced this course very differently for the first time during this study. Whilst part of the onsite course (totalling about 3–4 weeks of activity) had previously been taught away from the physical location of the classroom, that is online, there was a feeling that the teachers had experienced only a *simulation* of distance learning and teaching contexts they might find themselves in, what Seely Brown *et al.* (1989) describe as a ‘hybrid’ activity, ‘limiting students’ access to the important structuring and supporting cues that arise from the context.’ In this respect the online course aims to not only facilitate access to distance learners, but also provide all of the teachers with the opportunity to develop experientially their understanding of the potentials and challenges of this mode of teaching and to exploit the potential of the resulting online community as a tool for social construction of learning.

The course, therefore, aims to reflect what Biggs (2003) describes as ‘constructive alignment’ between process and product, where learning *activities* as much as learning *content* are closely linked to learning outcomes and assessment mechanisms. This also emphasises the construction of what Biggs refers to as ‘functioning knowledge’ analogous with situated understanding. This linkage between process and outcomes is illustrated in Figure 1.

In terms of realising these aims, various decisions about how to construct that experience online need to be taken. These relate to the tutor’s understanding of how they will be achieved through the use of the online environment, and to wider

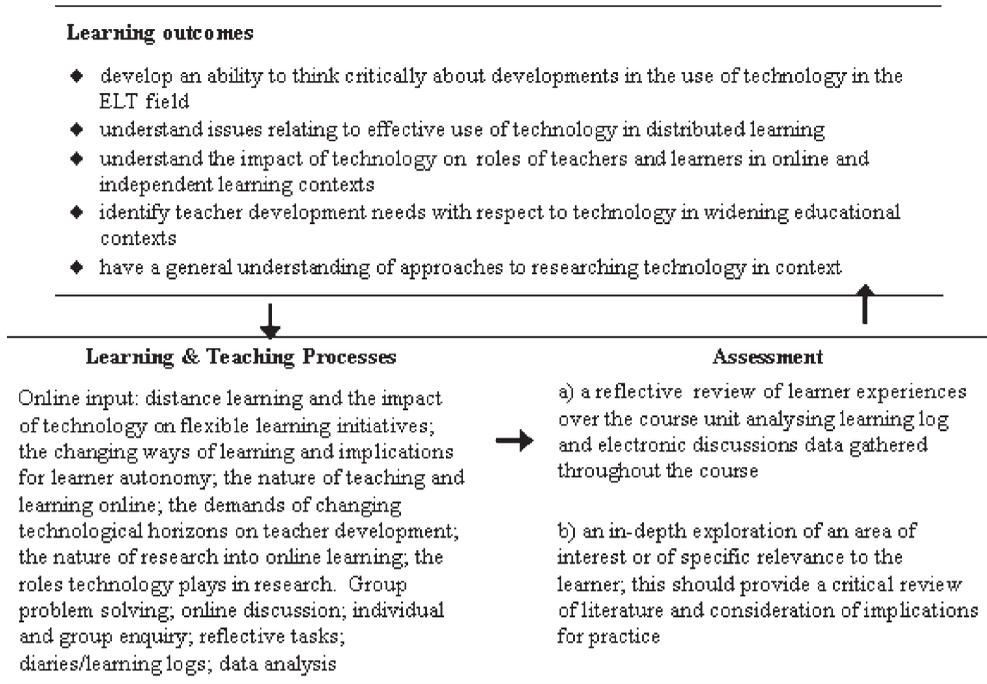


Figure 1. Achieving outcomes through teaching, learning and assessment processes

parameters that relate to the nature of the programme within which the course is situated. Collis and Moonen (2001) provide a useful framework to describe flexible learning courses in relation to:

- time (pace of study, start and end dates, interactions within a course)
- content (topics, sequencing, orientation, i.e. theoretical/practical)
- instructional approach and resources (social organisation, language to be used, resources including modality, source)
- delivery and logistics (contact with tutor(s) and peers, methods/technologies for support/contact, delivery channels)

I use these dimensions to briefly outline some of the attributes of the course.

Content and time. The course is topic-based but there are underlying themes linking each topic: distance and online learning; researching practice; the roles and needs of teachers and learners in contexts where technology is a key driver. The topics are organised into 6 units of study; various tasks are carried out individually, in groups and in pairs with interaction via an asynchronous forum or through synchronous meetings. Figure 2 provides an outline of content and timing.

The *time* dimension has provided cause for discussion. Anderson *et al.* (2005) identify the dilemma of learner pacing as opposed to tutor imposed pacing in ‘cohort based’ online courses, and specifically the challenge of creating conditions for collaboration within learner paced approaches. Previous incarnations of the course

Time	Focus	Input/Tasks	Purpose
Sept-Oct	Introduction to the course unit	Registrations; introductions to the forum; group web page production work	Establishing the community
October	Working within CMC Myself as online learner	Online input; synchronous seminar; reading and reflection tasks to forum	Awareness raising; exploring tools; establishing diary research
November	Technology in education/distance learning	Online input; targeted group search and reading; presentation and discussion.	Issues in distance learning; the challenges and potentials of technology; learning environments
December	Autonomy and independent learning contexts	Online input; group survey work and concordance analysis; synchronous seminar work with visiting specialists.	Understanding the need for and challenges of being autonomous; implications for distance/online learning and self access work (physical and virtual); initial experience of analysis of online discourse.
January	Teaching online: aspects of teaching, learning and assessment	Online input; student-led evaluation work; exploration of further virtual learning environments	Awareness of the teacher as e-moderator; focus on the nature of online teaching; begin to apply frameworks for analysis of course unit progression
February	Technology and Research	Online input; mainly studied independently.	Experience of how technology can help to research learning and how we research technology-oriented teaching and learning.
March	Technology and Teacher Education	Online input; synchronous seminar	Teacher training and development needs and approaches; online teacher development
April - May	Assignment work		

Figure 2. Course scheduling and content

had seen more flexibility in this respect with learners accessing the content as they are able in the spirit of completely flexible access. However, in terms of the fit with methodological underpinning, in which dialogue plays a key role, this seemed to result in a dislocation between participants. Decisions about timing outlined here thus aimed to facilitate the building of the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that seeks to provide the teachers with the conditions for reflection and dialogue.

Delivery and logistics. The outline of the working timetable provides some indication of the delivery mechanisms of the course. These relate to two areas of provision: knowledge resources—that is web-based input, with links both to further resources and research papers for reading and debate, and to tasks to facilitate reflection and debate—and participation tools: a forum, distribution list and synchronous communication tool. The distribution list is used for ‘push’ type messages, e.g. reminders about deadlines, messages to move topics along, whilst the forum and synchronous space are for academic exchange and socialisation.

Instructional approaches

The instructional approach is the embodiment of the conceptual thinking of the course developers. The case for reflective practice through situated learning and collaborative development has been outlined. Johnson and Johnson (1996) list collaborative behaviours that broadly involve engaging in group activity (small

groupwork, problem solving and investigative tasks); engagement with others' views and perceptions (exchanging, sharing and challenging ideas); monitoring what's happening in the group; providing support and assistance. Conditions for collaboration and reflection are established through a task approach. Figure 3 illustrates one task that aims to set such conditions.

Methodology

In designing and tutoring this course my own expectations were that *recognition, examination and rumination* about online learning are facilitated through situated interactions between participant and content, between participant and tutor, and between participant and participant.

Building and reflecting on experiences of CMC

Asynchronous and synchronous tools will have both similarities and clear differences, and part of the experience of this course is to evaluate not only what they offer from a technology perspective, but also how the types of interaction they facilitate contribute to learning. Some related tasks, therefore:

1. **A synchronous seminar**
2. **Related reading**
3. **Discussions on the forum**

Seminar focus

 The prime reason to meet will be to get to know each other a little more in a 'real-time' environment and talk about your early experiences as an online learner. To prompt reflections, I'd like you to read:

Schrum, L. and Hong, S. (2002) From the field: characteristics of successful tertiary online students and strategies of experienced online educators. *Education and Information Technologies* 7/1, 5-16

Note any factors that seem particularly significant to you. What implications do they have for you as an online learner of this course?

After the seminar

 Remember to note down your reactions in your diary. This will also prepare you for contribution to the forum in the next part of the task.

 Reflect on your experiences of the online seminar. How would you characterise the discourse? How do you feel about interacting online like this? Do you have any experience of using such tools in your own teaching?

 Then read the following article to help you to clarify your thoughts or prompt further reflection on the forum. Motteram, G. (2001) The role of synchronous communication in fully distance education. *AJET*, 17/2:131-149 <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet17/ajet17.html>

Figure 3. Illustrative task

Such interactions may be facilitated through various strategies to encourage collaborative activity as outlined above. Based on these principles, this exploratory study, therefore, asked:

- How do teachers experience a situated online teacher development course?
- How do teachers experience collaborative practice through the use of online participatory tools?

A first level of analysis involved the counting of forum postings and synchronous seminar involvement to establish an individual activity profile for each teacher. In global terms, there were 360 forum postings in total; 286 forum postings by students ($n=16$) and 6 synchronous seminars using different tools (MOO, Yahoo Messenger text and audio, Blackboard Chat area). Postings were then analysed into broad categories:

- postings of a social nature (under threads entitled 'Just Chat' and 'Progress checks')=55
- postings of an organisational nature (e.g. arranging synchronous meetings)=55
- group messages (e.g. design of group web pages)=53
- academic content discussion and reflection on learning=191

Within these categories, conversations or 'threads' around specific tasks or themes were identified. The relationship between numbers of threads opened in the conferencing software and the identification of these as 'new' topics for discussion is, in fact, a rather imprecise science as users are not always adept at adding comments to existing 'conversations' and may choose to start a seemingly new discussion. Similarly under some threads appeared comment that related to other conversations. However, counting numbers of threads provided a roughly-tuned picture of 'conversations'. There were 30 in total, 22 on academic content discussion and reflection on learning; 8 with a social/organisational function.

A preliminary activity analysis of each individual, achieved simply by looking at records of forum use (number of postings and number of threads a student contributed to) and synchronous seminar attendance, was calculated (Figure 4).

The visible spread of participation appears vast. All apart from teacher W completed the course i.e. submitted assignments. Teacher W was 'present' in terms of accessing the input material but only participated in one synchronous meeting and posted one message which was an introductory one in the first weeks. This preliminary look for evidence of participation was perhaps a narrow way of conceiving how teachers experienced the course. However, it set up interesting expectations when the content of those messages was explored. This resulted in a number of questions about the teacher experiences behind these profiles.

Evidence of teacher perception of the situated experience emerged in a rather different way in this study to much other research into online participation, which takes the posting as a unit of analysis as a basis for content or interaction analysis (see Cook & Ralston, 2003). Because of the alignment between process, content and outcome, the contributions from the teachers (forum postings, synchronous seminar

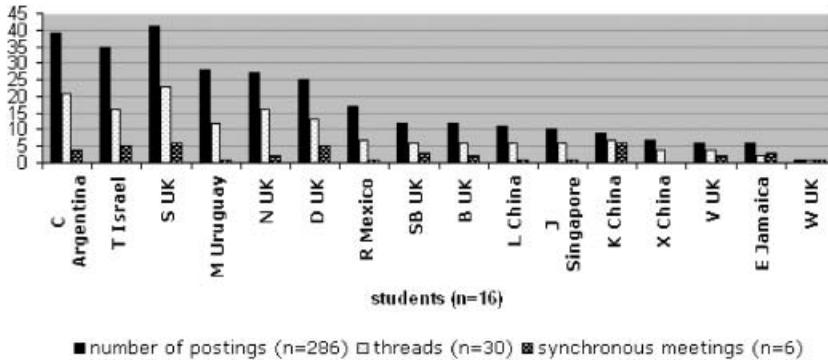


Figure 4. Analysis of teacher communication activity

logs and assignments which were based on an analysis of participants' own learning logs) provided not only records of teachers' ongoing engagement with the course processes but also reflections on their own experiences. In this respect the teachers provided both primary reactions and 'restored experiences' (Johnson & Golombek, 2002, p. 7) that formed the basis for interpretive analysis. The contributions were interrogated to surface an understanding of how the course had been experienced by the group and by individuals, that is, the voices behind some of the participation evidence.

Talking together online—learning together online? Various techniques espoused in the literature on online learning (Salmon, 2002) to develop community were employed: an early small group activity involving the creation of a collaborative web page; the use of specific threads in the forum for technical support, which gradually created a shared 'frequently asked questions' type support, and for socialisation needs (a thread entitled 'Just chat' included tales about holidays, marriages, films seen, as well as message empathising with local disasters and political turmoil); an early synchronous socialisation meeting (Motteram, 2001), employment of techniques such as weaving through threads (Feenberg, 1989) to provide a unifying overview of specific debates. One teacher observed:

Here on the discussion board, Diane is usually careful to mention all contributors by name when she 'threads'. I haven't looked at Maslow's pyramid recently but it may be that learners are more likely to persevere if they have a feeling of 'belonging' to a group. It may even be that some learners associate learning 'success' with the approval of peers or the teacher. [Teacher S]

However, this attention to creating a sense of belonging clearly did not result in *visibly* regular participation from all. Clues as to what was happening were provided by both those who participated frequently and those who did not appear to do so.

It emerged that a sense of the group was important, albeit in different ways, for many of the teachers. A recurring theme was articulated in terms of *personal* negotiation of meaning, which, for most of the students, whether they participated regularly or not, was, nevertheless, highly dependent on their reading of others' contributions.

Forum postings act variously as a visible measure of learner progress and understanding:

Although I haven't been particularly vocal on forums, it has kept me up to date with what everyone else is doing on the course, and most importantly for me as I don't meet anyone else to chat, what everyone else is thinking. I can use forums to gauge my understanding against that of others, and also use this as an indication of the standard I should be aiming to achieve in my own studying. [Teacher M]

as a source of learning for the individual:

I think that forums also naturally lend themselves to soliloquy. Pawan does not seem too keen on this (see paragraph beginning 'The second set of limitations...') but I think if it serves to clarify and develop one's own thoughts then it is quite useful. In this posting I am both clarifying my own thoughts on forums, vis-à-vis the Pawan article, and interacting with other peoples' postings. I think the two might safely exist in tandem though long soliloquies are dull to read—hmmmmmm sorry! [Teacher S]

On the subject of 'using the forum to clarify my own thoughts' I find that I do the same and I've often been tempted to reply to myself in order to add to my thoughts and, usually, to improve on them. [Teacher N]

Perceptions about collaborative talk were varied. There was much reflection, both personal and general, on the individuality of approaches to forum participation. Teacher C had a strong participation profile, and recognised why.

One factor we should not ignore in this area is personality. I'm not very sociable in big groups and my voice is usually low, so I don't take part in discussions carried out in big groups, unless I know everyone around or I'm the moderator/leader. Online I have the chance to pose questions and make comments I would not ask/make were I face to face with the rest, I guess. I also have this chip on the shoulder: I was very inquisitive when I was a child and couldn't refrain from asking the questions that came to mind, so I had trouble with some teachers. I feel more at ease here; it gives me the chance to speak out. [Teacher C]

As much as Teacher C recognises that the online context facilitates her engagement with the course which the face to face situation might achieve less successfully, Teacher E provided a real contrast, confirming the potential intimidation of forum spaces (Hammond, 1999):

I read the forum every day. I get so much out of it. But have to say I am not too comfortable with posting my ideas in the forum. People have so many interesting things to say. I find it difficult to add things and have to prepare what I'm going to write first so I don't make too many mistakes. They look bad. When I go back it somehow doesn't seem very valid. I'm not adding anything. But I'm like that in the classes too—I don't usually say much. I think there may be a few people like me. I think some non native speakers may find it a bit intimidating. I think I'd really have to take this into account with my own learners—maybe it's a cultural thing? I think I'll have to think about that a bit more. [Teacher E]

Teacher E's participation profile was one of the lowest. However, there is also evidence of deeper reflection. She has analysed her own participation, which she sees as no different from what she usually does, but also identifies the role that reading others has played in her learning. She might be characterised as a lurker which, as

Hammond (1999, p. 364) points out, may have rather ‘seedy connotations.’ This would be to do E a disservice. Contrary to some who see the forum as a liberating space, this is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Teacher E’s analysis seems to illustrate the potential of ‘visible talk’ as setting conditions for learning from a ‘legitimate peripheral position’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in the community even when not directly participating in a particular activity.

Nevertheless, some behaviours did not encourage those less reticent to participate more publicly. Earlier positive reference was made to the opportunity to ‘soliloquise’ but it was also identified as a potentially threatening attribute of forum activity, which may not be conducive to constructing understanding with others. Picking up on the length of some contributions, one teacher made this observation:

... could it be that learners are often concerned as much with seeking approval or respect—from the group or the teacher—as they are with adding to the body of knowledge? Do our egos sometimes get in the way of the effective, organised pooling of knowledge and the negotiation of new knowledge? [Teacher N]

In terms of this particular course realisation, this gave me cause for concern. The conceptual thinking about the design is strongly predicated on the participatory metaphor. We may have good intentions of exploiting this very powerful aspect of online technologies but the very characteristics it embodies can in turn become a threat to intended outcomes.

Doing together online—learning together online? A case has been made for engagement with tasks that allow for reflection, sharing and problem solving, and of the social negotiation of meaning as fundamental to teacher development. The schedule outlined earlier aimed to bring the community together online to provide a structure and conditions for that exchange. This included group problem-solving tasks aimed to provide the students with authentic opportunities to organise themselves into smaller groups and experience the challenges of group work online. I focus here specifically on the early task requiring the teachers to create a shared web space. Frustrations as well as opportunities are evident and different expectations surfaced across individual participants.

Thanks for commenting on my message from yesterday, trying to calm me down... The problem is that there doesn’t seem to be much going on and I’m under the impression that we are lagging behind the rest of the groups. I honestly want to get it out of the way and regard it as a closed matter. I guess that’s a genuine part of this course, experiencing distance education and especially group work done in this mode of study. Yet holding on to the natural differences among learners’ expectations and learning styles. [Teacher T].

As in this posting, there was frequent reference to ‘lagging behind’. There was a sense that task negotiations ‘took time’. Many pointed out how asynchronous negotiation necessarily took longer and synchronous communication was problematic because of teachers being in different time zones, a specific characteristic of the participants in this particular course. It was easy for some misunderstanding about commitment to emerge when negotiating across the challenges of computer-

mediated communication. Silence and/or delay led to in-group difficulties impacting on motivation.

I agree with S in that collaborative or cooperative learning might be demotivating. I recall being very enthusiastic about designing the web page, but I soon lost motivation when I noticed that we all had different things to attend to and different schedules.
[Teacher C]

As can be seen here, the challenges were as evident to them as to myself as tutor observing this ‘in action’ through the forum postings, and experiencing an uncomfortable sense of teachers needing to complete a task under conditions that made this challenging.

Group work in face to face contexts can be equally challenging. However, the opportunity to attempt such activity online with all its imperfections led to specific analysis in relation to the ecology of the online course and to their own beliefs as teachers. Teacher D, for example, debated assessment of group activity as one motivational device, yet acknowledges a potential conflict with aspirations to encourage more autonomy in her learners:

I think we would have worked very differently if ‘forced’ to do so—i.e. if the collaborative task was assessed in some way—another motivating factor. In parallel with this course, I’ve been tutoring an online course, and I have to confess to threatening my group with ‘You won’t get a certificate if you don’t do this!’ The learners said they were doing the exercises (and I believe they really were), and they felt these were really valuable, but they weren’t finishing off the units with the written work, so I had no way of monitoring progress. The threat worked and I started receiving work—but I feel that this approach conflicts somewhat with learner autonomy...

In reading these postings, one might deduce that this particular group task was less than successful, with the potential to detract from its aims of building a climate for collaborative practice. It is true that for some the intrinsic motivation of the task, aiming to encourage autonomy, was not sufficient to ensure sustained interaction and completion, and as I read these postings, I felt somewhat deflated. However, it was the very experience of that activity that formed the stimulus for these postings in which there is evidence of a clear tenet of reflective teacher thinking, of the interplay between dialogue, reflection and practice.

Being together online—reflecting together online? Course scheduling aimed to bring the teachers together to achieve some notional synchronicity, broadly in two-week blocks, as they engaged with each topic. This was intended to facilitate reflective conversations amongst the group. However, there was evidence of a tension between the internal pacing of the course and the teachers’ ability to work to that pacing throughout. This was particularly evidenced in those teachers following the course at distance. After all, one of the benefits of distance study is its any time, anywhere flexibility. One teacher illustrates this very clearly. Teacher M wrote in her assignment:

My diary entries for November were characterised by feelings of pressure. The topic was moving on; synchronous tasks were planned to pull the topic to a close; I had

started a new job; feelings of gradually slipping behind and it was only the second month of the course.

She then added:

Comparing these thoughts with my entries in February revealed a change. In the forum I had posted ‘not showing up in the forum doesn’t mean participants are not active. We all have a different way of processing information and a different schedule which means our contributions will definitely come up at some time.’ Returning to analyse my own contributions I realise that my participation tended to crop up at different times in my learning process and definitely not always in unison with the participation of others.

Although Teacher M’s participation rate was relatively strong, the forum is a reminder of the teacher’s own sense of pressure in not keeping up with this schedule. Her concern relates more to time of participation—if reflective engagement is not immediate i.e. within a timeframe that relates immediately to the task in hand, is this any less effective to the learner? In this case it appeared not.

Others, whilst recognising the potential tensions involved in these conditions for reflective practice, also identified the timeless quality of the forum which provides the necessary record for the student to return to.

... in a face to face learning context I sometimes come away with more questions than answers. In this forum, however, I can bring my questions back into the mix. Thinking time, it seems, is crucial (at least for learners like myself).

Thinking time is a prerequisite for learning be it in face to face or online contexts. The postings within the forum provided a record, however, of learning conversations that were permanent. Different teachers engaged with opportunity for dialogue not only in different ways, but also not always, as Teacher M identified, ‘in unison with the participation of others’. Contrary to some research findings (Johnson *et al.*, 2001) and indeed my own expectations, there was, furthermore, constant reference to ‘returning’ to previous threads. This return to postings did not always result in further contribution. However, the teachers revealed that there was an engagement with what they read there that is not perceptible through forum analysis alone. This evidence appeared through other mechanisms, the most important of which was the assignment. Whilst individual tasks were not assessed, and there was some reticence to pursue this line despite recommendations from other studies (Johnson *et al.*, 2001), the requirement for teachers to reflect on their experience at a more global level whilst drawing on specific data evidenced through learning diaries, forum postings, synchronous seminar participation allowed for each to analyse their own learning over time.

Learning online—learning onsite—learning differently? I was particularly interested in exploring the perceptions of the on-site teachers for whom this course presented a contrast with other modules. There was some validation of the situated approach:

One of the essential aspects of this module for the teachers on-site is seeing how distance learners situate themselves in the online environment and how they feel about online distance learning. There is also a matter of valuing or learning to value what your peers have to say. It seems to me that in order for a (potential) online tutor to

understand what role they can play in scaffolding and guiding an online course, they should be able to appreciate the value of peer interaction (if they don't think this is the case, they need to understand why they feel this). [Teacher S]

I learned how to develop my ideas and how to manage my time and how to think about learning. The most important thing I've learned is now I know how to 'step back and watch what I am doing', :-), in a distance context, these skills are important. But you've got to experience them to be aware. [Teacher K]

This is pursued further in the perception of their engagement with online learning as somehow a different experience than the face to face classes. [Teacher E]

A recurring theme again relates to time. At a surface level the teachers conclude that online learning 'takes longer.'

This module has demanded more of my time than the others; I have needed to spend more time making sense of the topics and exploring them via the forum and tasks etc. [Teacher S]

For this teacher the need for time to engage with the multiple artefacts of the course (tutor input, reading, tasks, forum contributions) is seen positively. She identifies a qualitative difference in the way she has both engaged with the course content and with her peers. She makes some claims for this successfully contributing to a construction of knowledge.

I feel I have interiorized a number of concepts which I had cerebrally grasped but not perhaps fully understood... From a socio-constructivist standpoint I have spent a deal of time reading the postings of my virtual classmates—frankly I tend not to listen to my classmates with as much attention in class—and this too has helped me interiorize my learning. To cut things short what I am saying is the extra time spent making sense of things myself and through others contributions to the site has lead to a different type of learning.

Time here is interwoven with demands made by the course approach and its tools on its participants, and it is a necessary variable in what she identifies as a 'different type of learning.' However, elsewhere, in discussing attributes of an online course that the group evaluated, she suggests:

It allows learners to work at their own pace and in their own fashion. This is an important point for me personally; I have a mind that ruminates rather than processes information quickly, so an e-learning environment allows me to mull things over.

Teacher S has, therefore, found a mode of learning that she also appears to have been comfortable with. This involves interacting with all the artefacts that the course has offered.

K, a teacher from China studying on-site, also talks about what and how he has learnt, but in a very different way to Teacher S. K had a low participation profile in terms of forum posting, although he attended nearly every synchronous meeting (9 postings, 7 threads, 5 synchronous meetings). Nevertheless, in his assignment, he was preoccupied with the idea of how learning has taken place. He articulates his comfort in terms of appreciating the opportunity for personal time and space to explore the content individually.

I get the chance to read the material and literature again and again. I find myself confused about some points and I will try to think them over. In classroom, it is not possible to 'replay' the session.

He further appreciates the time to formulate his thoughts, echoing the constraints of the face to face context.

We can read the posts which present other learners' and teachers' thoughts without any limits. It is quite hard to do so in classroom-based settings. When I write down my thoughts, actually I am reflecting and clarifying. I guess the written form could be seen of more quality? When we communicate orally, it is hard to organize our thoughts before the words come out, at least, less organized than in written. Does everyone agree? From the perspective of metacognitive learning theory, it seems communication in writing helps us more effectively to look at our own learning strategies and styles.

As for the social constructivist nature of the experience, he recognises that he misses face to face interaction but is still optimistic that online learning can achieve quality interactions.

I still feel that human need, still prefer physically social interaction. Can we learn alone? Not possibly. That is why the literatures regarding distance learning all emphasize the notion of social interaction. But no matter how we exploit technology to involve the learners in social interactivities as they learn from distance, they still do not interact physically, do they? What I want to say is that distance learning is more time-consuming due to the lack of physically social interaction and communication. I have no doubt that DE can achieve quality outcome, but it has to do it differently; and it has to last a longer period of time.

Interwoven here are reflections on the learning experience that have given rise to very personal interrogations of learning preferences. K provided further food for thought as he reminded me that two colleagues from his own national group had originally elected the course but withdrew when they knew how it would operate. K reflects on this:

People with different cultural backgrounds might have different expectations. May I just mention one issue? Learners should have control and freedom to choose their course, which is fair enough. But I think some students failed to reach the learning objectives of a technology programme. From this point, resistance is very important, even more important than 'learners' full control'. You might find it a little bit difficult to understand, :-)) but actually most of the students who changed their mind are from Asian countries. Subconsciously, we accept teacher-centred teaching methods and ignore the awareness of independence. I would assume they expected this was no different from learning in a classroom just that they would learn online and listen to the teacher in the same way. That's not true.

K is fully aware of his own learning which is articulated in terms of reflection on practice. He identifies how he might not have encountered the impact of such changes to his thinking about practice had he not entered this sometimes rather uncertain world. However, he is also cognisant of the fact that *public* display of that reflection, which is facilitated by the tools and the opportunities for joint online activity, may prove to be a poisoned chalice for some who are adjusting to a teacher development methodology that is already culturally unusual. The varied cultural

characteristics of my specific target learners must also be taken into account in the design considerations and they may go some way towards helping me to understand some of the variations in participation and the challenges with group tasks.

A final perspective on the situated nature of the course was provided by the one on-site teacher who failed to complete it. He showed no real visible evidence of participating in the course, but he was willing to be probed on this in interview in which he suggested that he had engaged with some of its content.

I've looked at most of the course input and done a good deal of the reading; I admit I didn't organise myself very well and personal events overtook me. I guess I could put something together for the assignment. But that's not what it's about. I look at the forum and see what's been going on and I don't think I've got the most out of this. I think I've done the course in a different way, there's more to it. [Teacher W]

His retrospective draws once more on his observation of learning within the forum spaces. He does not demonstrate any sense of discomfort with participating as evidenced in other teachers' reflections. His reasons are much more personal. Despite evidence of individual encounters with the course, this particular teacher eventually felt that non-participation in the community meant that his own knowledge construction was incomplete in some way. As a consequence, he asked to start the course again.

Discussion

Having conceived the course as a situated experience, drawing on the attributes of online tools to facilitate collaborative teacher development, I had particular expectations about how we might work together. There is clear evidence of this having been a rich experience for many of the teachers and equally for myself as tutor. However, the picture of teacher experience presented here illustrates a diversity of patterns of engagement which allowed for the identification of a number of implications for practice and areas that merit further exploration.

In this particular study, findings suggest that situating the learning experience appears to set conditions for specific encounters with ideas, research and personal experiences of online learning. These provided teachers with experiential evidence that acted as a source of participant interrogation about themselves as both online learners and prospective online teachers. Reflection was facilitated both *in* (whilst being involved in the learning experience) and *on* (as they look back on learning experiences) action (Schon, 1991). The nature of the forum also provided a timeless quality that may allow for critical reflection to develop over time (Farrell, 1999, p. 168).

Nevertheless, encouraging teachers to reflect on that evidence with others, that is, in more public discussion through the forum space, had a specific impact on individual participants. The fact that there was plenty of visible onscreen interaction as recorded in forum postings resulted in what Salmon (2002) refers to as a 'mirror on the screen'. Teachers looked into this mirror and saw different things. For some, as Salmon (2002, p. 389) observes, it had 'a similar impact to the compulsion to

check one's appearance in a large mirror in a shop or restaurant'. Others considered 'the presentation of thoughts and experiences of others on roughly the same learning pathway' (ibid.); taking this further, many reacted to what they saw and created further reflections for others to return to. The mirror, therefore, was ever changing as the course progressed. Achieving this dynamic in a teacher development course would appear to be an ideal aim.

However, not all committed to that collective mirror. The findings from this study show that whilst forum spaces may possess the technological attributes to embody the participatory metaphor argued for in the rationale for this teacher development course, there are intrinsic tensions associated with how individuals experience this aspect of course design. Sfard (1998, p. 11) argues that there is a need to guard against 'theoretical exclusivity and didactic single-mindedness' in learning approaches, and whilst his claim that 'no two students and no two teachers arrive at their best performance in the same way' is not a new observation, the reflections of the teachers in this study provided a reminder that tutors need to be aware of the individuality of learners as they encounter online contexts constructed around social constructivist principles.

In this study individual teacher characteristics were identified in terms of cultural background and awareness of themselves as learners in both face to face and online contexts. The teacher group in this study was culturally varied, and whilst there were insufficient members from any one nationality group to draw firm conclusions, the reflections of the teachers themselves point towards a need to explore further how cultural groups perceive CMC, these perceptions possibly acting as a filter to actual use within course such as this. Tu (2001) suggests, for example, that Chinese learners' perceptions of CMC are affected by their cultural understandings of behaviour in social contexts thus impacting on their interactions with others. Others explored their feelings about online learning variously in terms of themselves as learners, as second language users, as participants in social contexts. If we are to exploit the potential of online communities for teacher learning, the relationship between teacher identity and online participation merits further exploration.

Furthermore, the implications of an awareness of the individual do not simply relate to how, as teacher educators, we facilitate teachers' engagement with explicitly participatory approaches in online professional development courses. As prospective online teachers, our participants also need to develop for themselves their own awareness of specific variables that may impact on course design and implementation. There is a need to both understand others and to turn the mirror on themselves. Such engagement with personal identity and beliefs as teachers and learners is impactful on teacher learning (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Teachers need to be challenged to ruminate on these beliefs. Reading others online appears to both stimulate and validate such reflection. However, not all will evidence their ruminations in the public domain. This study suggested that public and private ruminations did occur. Nevertheless, this poses a further dilemma as, ironically, this understanding of learning within the online community requires some of the cohort to participate but has to recognise that not all will.

There was, moreover, evidence that other mechanisms should be provided. In this course, teachers kept learning diaries, paper or electronic in the form of BLOGs. The reflective assignment task established a relationship between course content, process and outcome by providing an opportunity to look back on evidence of thinking about content, experience and reflection on experience. It also served to validate reflection as a demonstration of teacher learning.

Conclusion

In constructing the course, I took particular design decisions. Not all of these decisions resulted in efficient and effective experiences for all, at least not in terms of immediate task products. Group work for this particular cohort was challenging; scheduling posed certain pressures for some; focus on shared outcomes and reflection resulted in inconsistent patterns of visible participation; the very methodological underpinning which predicated a social constructivist footing seemed to put extra demands on the teachers in relation to the time they had available. These have specific implications for the design of online learning courses that could be acted upon in revisions of this current course. However, interestingly, these course attributes have provided fodder for reflection in their own right. Whilst seemingly characterised by some imperfections, the situated nature of the course enabled the participants to reveal not only to myself as tutor, but also to themselves in their dual roles of online learners and teachers, the ways in which the ecology of a particular course is encountered and interpreted differently by its various participants. As Edge and Richards (1998, p.571) observe: ‘dialogues of doubt can be at least as important as the dictates of success, for whereas the former hold out the prospect of development for the sake of improvement, the latter imply that the destination is already decided’. Continuing to encourage and listen to the teachers’ dialogues will reveal further levels of understanding of the nature of these encounters and inform our mutual practice as online learners and online teachers.

Notes on contributor

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