Virtual teacher learning
By Patricia Lauria and Susana Liruso, Argentina

Introduction

This article describes an experience in teacher training which involved the use of a forum facility in a virtual learning environment (VLE) to enable pre-service teachers to explore the issue of classroom management in a young learners' (YL) setting. We will describe the context, the theoretical underpinning of the project, the actual experience, and its learning outcome, both for student-teachers and for the teacher educators themselves.

The context

This article is about the 35 student-teachers and three teacher educators involved in a teaching methods course in the fifth and last year of the teacher training programme at the School of Languages of the National University of Cordoba, Argentina. On this course, two of the teacher educators employed the forum facility of the VLE established for this Methods course in the *e-ducativa* Virtual Campus [1], an e-learning platform available to all course instructors and students of this university. The structural characteristics of *e-ducativa* offer both synchronous (on-line) and asynchronous (off-line) use. The synchronous modality is realized via a chat room. The discussion forum, e-mail facility and other communication instruments (news, timetables, events, content files) constitute some of the asynchronous tools that *e-ducativa* offers.

The Methods chair created a VLE in the *e-ducativa* Virtual Campus in 2006, and has used it since then, both as a repository of useful material (files, links to various web sites, relevant information regarding the subject such as syllabus, guidelines, rubrics for tasks and scores) and as a means of communication among teachers and students. In particular, for the student-teachers who are also doing their teaching practicum, the e-mail facility and announcements board constitute essential media of communication with the instructors who supervise their teaching practice.

Rationale of the project

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[1] To access the web page of Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba click on
http://www.lenguas.unc.edu.ar/distancia/ead.html

The concept of teacher learning on which this project is grounded can be found in constructivism, the theory that views learning as construction of knowledge by the learner. According to Bates and Poole (2003: 28) social constructivists believe that the process of meaning making and knowledge construction "works best through discussion and social interaction". This conception of knowledge building and the ideal medium for it dovetails perfectly with the underlying idea of this project, namely, that student-teachers will construct knowledge on classroom management in the YL context through discussion in a virtual forum that involves observation (classes viewed on video), critical thinking and awareness-raising activities, and the building of new insights through participants analysing each other's contributions on the forum.

The concept of teacher learning on which the following technology-mediated teacher learning task has been based is one that sees teaching as an activity that means "thoughtful work" (Freeman :1990 in Freeman and Richards 1996 :221). This notion presupposes that a change in ways of thinking about teaching may bring about changes in action (Freeman: 1996). A related concept which forms part of the theoretical underpinning of this project is the process of critical reflection, which is a crucial aspect of the reflective practice model of professional development (Wallace: 1991). In this model, development is thought to occur as a result of practice grounded on both received and experiential knowledge, plus reflection on the practice. This constitutes the reflective cycle on the basis of which professional competence is gradually ─ but never completely─ achieved.

We opted for e-technology for two reasons. We hoped to get a larger number of students to discuss and interact than would have been possible with people meeting face-to-face. Had these discussions been conducted face-to-face, the demands on class time and physical space would have been greater. We also wanted to show the multi-faceted potential of a virtual tool that is becoming part of the EFL world and that student-teachers will have to use in the future.

The task: topics for discussion and assessment criteria
The student-teachers were divided into three groups of 12-13 members, each of which would participate in one of the virtual discussions. These were given the names *Forum 1, Forum 2* and *Forum 3* for ease of reference. The discussion was prompted by a

video taped lesson and an initial, triggering question. The rubric for this task was as follows:

Classroom management in the TEYL context

Starting on August 12th
Deadline: August 26th

View the following video and analyse the teacher's classroom management skills.
Possible steps :

1. Describe one aspect of classroom management observed.
2. Analyse the contribution of that aspect to overall teaching efficiency.

Classroom Management Forum 1

http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8WpiueGP5s

(Portrait of a new teacher - 3rd grade , 8-9 year-old students; 7 :14 min.)

Classroom Management Forum 2

http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=frwP9f85TnU&feature=related

(A classroom management system - 1st grade, 6-7 year-old students; 4 :30 min.)

Classroom Management Forum 3

http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=LWiN_kSFwwA

(An EFL primary class in Japan; 4:30 min.)

The student teachers were also provided with the criteria, on the basis of which this two-week, virtual discussion was assessed:

Assessment criteria:

Participants individually contribute / post <u>substantive comments</u> (relevent, to the point). Each contribution should be between 8-15 lines. You can post your comments until 26th August. Contributions will not be considered for evaluation after that date.

The assessment will involve consideration of the following criteria:

1. **Relevance** of the ideas presented in each posting (relevance to the issue for discussion presented)

2. **Comments tied in with other's comments**: Evidence that the participant has read earlier contributions and is building on them (simple repetition of ideas will be considered 'off task').

3. **Clarity of ideas** presented: capacity for synthesis, clear and precise comments.

4. **Use of language**: Correctness of language use and variety and relevance of metalanguage.

5. Contribution of **additional information to further the discussion**

6. **Task completion**: quality and quantity of postings presented within the avalilable **time** (respect for deadlines : VITAL)

The trial run

Before the actual launch of the discussion, all the student-teachers and two of the teacher educators met in the multimedia classroom (where there are 15 computers for students to share) and had a trial run of a forum discussion stemming from the following prompts:

The challenges of TEYL

Publicado por <u>Lauría, Patricia</u> el 10/08/2008

Discuss the following issue:

"Teaching in the young learners' context presents many challenges"

The Challenges of ESP

Publicado por <u>Liruso, Susana</u> el 10/08/2008

Please reflect on and discuss the following issue:

> "Teaching in the ESP context presents many challenges"

The rationale for this session was to give student-teachers the chance to solve any problems with the technology they still had and to ask all the questions they wanted about the actual use of this virtual tool. Surprisingly for us, the questions were not few. Many of them did not seem to have enough knowledge of how to operate within this VLE, so the session proved really useful as an opportunity to clarify technical queries. An additional benefit of the session was that it provided us with an insight into the student-teachers' view of the teaching methods course so far. Because the topics chosen focused on each of the two main strands of the syllabus, namely teaching ESP and teaching young learners, the discussions (which ran for an hour) provided the teacher educators with useful feedback on the course. The trial run was an effective way of giving student-teachers the chance of putting their technical expertise to the test.

Participation and Outcome

During the two weeks in which the forum discussions were open, student-teachers participated on average three times each, with only a few contributing just one posting each. It was important that participants kept in mind the different items that made up the assessment criteria. Our having discussed the criteria in detail during the trial run helped establish a structure to frame the assessment of the interventions.

In all three forum discussions, comments can be summarised around both cognitive and socio-affective aspects that were linked to classroom management. The comments concerning the cognitive aspect -- that is, those associated with teacher knowledge and thinking -- touched upon choice, variety and sequence of activities used, lesson planning (especially transitions between one activity and the next), and class organisation (individual, pair or whole class interaction). As to the socio-affective aspect, the most relevant issues mentioned were the teachers´ way of capturing language students' attention and interest, behaviour that signalled students' participation and enthusiasm and ways in which the teacher was perceived to deal with discipline issues (both preventively and reactively)

In some of the student-teachers' contributions, there were very interesting and insightful additions in the form of cartoons, quotes and reference to extra bibliographical search, presumably carried out in an attempt to contribute "additional information to further the discussion", in line with the wording and spirit of the assessment criteria.

When the forum came to an end, all student-teachers were asked to write a reflection detailing their learning outcome both with regard to the issue of classroom management in the context of teaching YLs, and with regard to their view of the role of technology in teacher learning. An analysis of those written reflections, as well as student-teachers' overall performance in the three forums has led us to the conclusion that while the experience brought enormous gains, some aspects need improvement.

Many of the positive results of the experience can be said to lie in the socio-affective realm. Most of all, student-teachers stressed that it was reassuring to have time to reflect and ponder upon an issue like classroom management. They also pointed out that "distance writing" (i.e., conducting a discussion in a VLE) helps self-expression. Many of the participants tended to be more constructively critical of the classes they watched and of the views their peers expressed in the forum than they tended to be in face-to-face conversation. As one participant put it, *"having the opportunity to share our opinions in written form is easier than doing it orally"*. One possible reason for this may lie in the fact that interacting in a foreign language in real time involves greater cognitive challenges (as regards both content and language) than does interacting in an asyncronous mode. A third payoff of the experience lies in the fact that viewing an issue like classroom management from different angles and perspectives can be very enriching. The synergy created by the voicing of multiple views in the forum has a positive effect that both student-teachers and course teachers themselves could perceive. As one student-teacher put it in her final reflection:

> "Naturally each of the participants contributed and, in the end, I
> realized that all together *we constructed knowledg***e.** All of us had
> seen the same video, but then, we focused on different aspects of
> classroom management and we were willing to share our opinions. I
> think that the discussion and the comments on effectiveness and
> discipline were particularly enriching, and I really liked reading
> about my classmates` opinions on these issues."

Other positive outcomes of the project can be said to lie in the cognitive realm, more precisely in student-teachers' acquisition of procedural knowledge related to the use of educational technology, which they would not have developed simply by reading about it. This comes out, for example, in the following comments from the final reflections of three of the several participants who expressed similar views:

> "....As a matter of fact I have always been quite reluctant to use technology and only willing to learn and use the essential things. So, I have definitely profited a lot from this practical activity and I think I have improved my technological skills a lot..."

> "As for the use of technology for learning, I believe that we are not used to doing these kinds of activities, like participating in a forum, but I think we ought to, since technology is part of everyday life. As future teachers we need to be acquainted with the different possibilities it offers to work with students."

> "...through the virtual forum I could experience first-hand the benefits of technology in educational settings..."

As teacher educators are included in the reflective teaching paradigm, we have reflected on our own learning outcomes. For one thing, several aspects of the experience seem to need adjusting.

Firstly, some points in the assessment criteria need redefining: a) "Participation" needs to be further clarified : should participants remain active all through the allotted time period (of however many weeks or months) or is one solid bout of participation enough?; b) Item 5: "Contribution of additional information to further the discussion" lacks clarity. The teacher educators interpreted "additional information" in different ways. This resulted in either rejection or acceptance of what were considered to be "additional points", on the grounds that they either did or did not address an aspect clearly observed in the videotaped class.

Secondly, this IT instrument is still a novel tool. Thus, the teacher educators involved in

it participated in different ways. While two of us joined the forum only sporadically, with general comments on the direction of the discussion and with occasional additional questions to spur or re-direct the forum, the other had a more direct style of intervention addressing the participants on a one-to-one basis, making special comments on their postings and giving them some feedback. Tutors' open and general comments seem to have encouraged self-expression and the voicing of multiple perspectives, while giving direct feedback to individual students might have had an inhibiting effect. However this deserves further research from a discourse analysis perspective.

Thirdly, the issue of duration needs to be re-evaluated. Having the forum extend for two weeks was perhaps excessive: by the second week it was felt that participation had to continue because the forum was open, but most aspects of the classes that trainees had observed had apparently already been already tackled. Moreover; assessing student-teachers' participation was time-consuming, although an instrument had been devised to ease assessment. The following grid was used.

Student's name ....

Postings: ⬇	Relevance of ideas	Comments tied in with other's comments	Clarity of ideas presented	Use of language / metalanguage	Task completion
1.					
2.					
3.					

The drawback of time was counterbalanced by the positive payoffs of the experience. Teacher educators saw in this environment the opportunity to get a glimpse of student-teachers' knowledge construction through critical thinking and discussion.

Conclusion

Student-teachers expressed satisfaction in the use of the forum discussion, they claimed "freedom" as one significant characteristic. They were free to choose what to say, when to participate and how to contribute. It is also interesting to add that this use of educational technology to foster reflection and critical thinking has shed light on the new roles that teachers and students may take when engaging in e-learning.

To sum up, it is clear that the forum provides a flexible and dynamic context where teacher educators can "develop two-way relationships with their classes" (Senior 2006: 161). These relationships constitute an interactive system which underlies teaching and whose nature can be said to be essentially social, dynamic and jointly built.

References

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