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## Distance Teacher Education

It has long been possible to take English language teacher-training qualifications through distance education. For example, London, Reading and Birmingham Universities among others offer MA TEFL qualifications through distance modes. The quantity of courses underlines the international nature of our profession and shows both the thirst for personal development and the practical difficulties faced by the vast majority of teachers in finding time for a classroom based course. Distance learning courses normally involve printed, audio or video material sent out to the learner who studies alone and submits assignments for advice and moderation to a tutor. Communication, traditionally by phone or letter is now more commonly carried out by email; this increases the amount and the immediacy of communication between tutor and learner, but the model remains the same. The materials sent out are designed for broadcast (one to many) interaction and the tutor provides one to one support. Many courses require a short induction course or summer school to supplement the individual study. However, by choosing to study this way the many to many interaction which so enriches learning in the classroom is greatly reduced. The experience, perspectives, insights and arguments as well as the social and emotional support of peers is lacking in traditional distance education and means not only that following a distance education course can be a lonely path but that the tendency is for transmission models of education to be followed.

## Face to Face Constructivism

The classroom provides for face to face interaction among a group of people, allowing for more constructivist modes of learning to be explored. Constructivism emphasizes the importance of the knowledge, beliefs, and skills an individual brings to the experience of learning. It recognizes the construction of new understanding as a combination of prior learning, new information, and readiness to learn. Constructivist learning is based on students' active participation in problem-solving and critical thinking regarding a learning activity, which they find relevant and engaging. They are "constructing" their own knowledge by testing ideas and approaches based on their prior knowledge and experience, applying these to a new situation, and integrating the new knowledge gained with pre-existing intellectual constructs. The student is pursuing a problem or activity by applying approaches he or she already knows and integrating those approaches with alternatives presented by other team members, research sources, or current experience. Through trial and error, the student then balances pre-existing views and approaches with new experiences to construct a new level of understanding. The process of arriving at 'the academic deliverable' is synergistic, in that learners proactively attempt to achieve learning outcomes greater than the sum of their individual contributions.

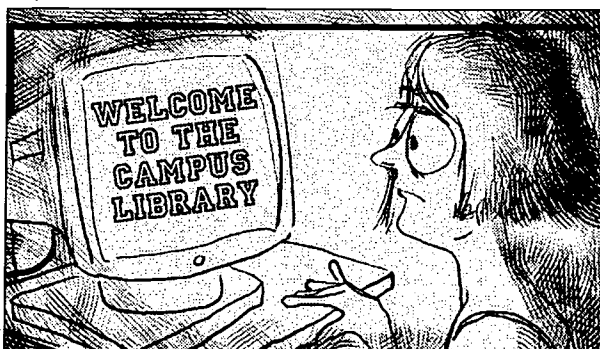
The teacher in a constructivist environment is a facilitator or coach, guiding the student, stimulating and provoking critical thinking, analysis and synthesis throughout the learning process.

The success of collaboration relies upon the ability and willingness of co-learners to share resources and accept the importance of the contributions of their peers. The success of a learning environment can be judged against its effectiveness in delivering the conditions for such interaction to take place.

However, the opportunities for constructivist forms of learning are not always exploited fully; often the learner is the most under-used resource. Pressure of time and a drive to standardization of courses leads to the marginalization of collaborative work in which learners learn from each other, in favour of individual study of concepts, theories and practical techniques applied to the individual's teaching situation. A good example of the value of such activities in teacher training is the group feedback sessions, which form part of UCLES CELTA courses. However, there is potential for more collaborative work that would value the learner as a resource and encourage trainees to take as much account of each other as of the course materials. The major drawback to face to face courses is that they are time and place dependent. All the members of the group have to meet at the same time and place for the course to progress. This discourages many people from taking courses as they cannot commit the necessary time or there are not sufficient numbers of interested learners in their area for a course to be viable.

## Computer Conferencing

On-line education, particularly that using computer conferencing (CC) provides us with a third domain distinct from those of distance and face to face education. In its most basic form CC is an electronic bulletin board within an online environment (usually following a campus metaphor, each area accessed being referred to as 'conference area', 'common room', 'library' etc.). The tutor gives the students a task which serves to provide a framework for subsequent on-line interaction. Having



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presented their position or argument in relation to the readings and to the topic, the learner's comments become interactive, making specific reference to previous notes, agreeing, disagreeing, extrapolating, questioning, illustrating, expanding, and synthesizing upon ideas presented by their peers. As a group, via the conferencing system, they must arrive at and present their findings. They log in (or visit the campus) as regularly as possible to read and contribute to the discussion. The communication is asynchronous, one student may post a message and reply to others one day and another student may access them at a later time.

It is here that CC holds advantages over face to face learning. For some learners it is not easy to join in a real time discussion or debate; they either lack the speed of thought or the confidence. Discussion in a classroom is often dominated by a small number of eloquent, confident students. Online there is the chance for all students to take time to formulate their responses, even to preview them, before posting them. This not only accommodates those who in a face to face setting lack the courage to jump into a discussion but may also lead to deeper processing of material due to the extra time given to reflection. There is always a record of what has been posted in each of the particular threads or discussions. The existence of this textual record of interaction is also a great advantage of using CC. For learners, there is the possibility of reflecting on the thoughts and ideas the group has produced at their own pace as well as returning to the beginning of an argument to clarify or reevaluate positions. This is problematic if not impossible in real time oral collaboration.

"The text-based, archived transcript of the interaction facilitates not only the transmission and sharing of ideas, but opportunities for reflective interaction." Harasim, L (1989:52).

For the tutor the textual record is a resource, which can be used to identify how much each member participated and contributed to the final product. In contrast when groupwork is carried out face to face it is hard to ascertain individual input to the final, joint product.

## Collaborative learning

The model most often used to structure online courses is one of collaborative learning, "Collaboration is the process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own. Collaboration creates a shared meaning about a process, a product, or an event." Schrage (1991:40)

For this to happen groups of learners need to be able to interact, share their resources, reflect upon the input of others and incorporate all this into the end product, for which the group is jointly responsible. This 'academic deliverable' could be a report, a syllabus, a lesson plan, a recommendation, an ordered list, a critique or any other product which required discussion among the group and reflection on the issues involved.

CC, with its 'anytime, anyplace' facilities provides the perfect forum for such activities. The logistics of collaborating, such as conflicting schedules, and uneven motivation patterns are greatly eased and furthermore group members are able to contribute when they have something fresh to contribute not think of something fresh to contribute when they happen to be in class.

## Access

There are of course problems involved with the use of CC; the primary concern at the moment being one of access. The UK has a rapidly improving IT infrastructure compared to many parts of the world, but not everyone can use the internet regularly enough to be able to participate in an online course. It may take a few more years before we can be sure that access is available to all who want it. Even if a potential learner overcomes this first hurdle there are certain technical skills required which may have to be pre-taught if participants are to use the system to its full capacity. However, neither of these problems is limited to the area of education; they are wider societal issues which will, I believe, be resolved more quickly than we imagine. The information revolution which we see unfolding before us will mean that within a few years the above issues will be less relevant. It is important that we don't sit and wait for full access to arrive before engaging with these technologies or we run the risk of having to adapt ourselves to advances made rather than influencing the directions of those advances.

There is also a real need to ensure that mechanisms for student support are in place both during and after the course. Before the course learners should be made aware of the basic assumptions of this type of course which are based on constructivist learning theories.

Everyone has their own "style" for collecting and organizing information into useful knowledge, and the online environment can be particularly well suited to some learning styles and personality needs. Those who are more used to transmission of information from the lecturer to the learner may find initial difficulties in adapting to online learning.

The online environment also lends itself to a less hierarchical approach to instruction, which meets the leaning needs of people who do not approach new information in a systematic or linear fashion. Participants should also realize the need to log in regularly and the importance of (reasonably) fast and reliable equipment. Finally learners must accept the importance of peer learning and that asking for help is a sign of responsibility, not weakness. During the course, prompt feedback from the tutor or technical support staff on problems encountered by the learners is vital to minimize confusion, anxiety and frustration.

However, probably the greatest obstacle to online learning for most people is the lack of human contact. Body language and facial expressions can play an important role in clarifying and negotiating meaning. In computer conferencing all exchanges are text based and carried out through a computer interface. This can feel

impersonal and may well alienate some learners. However, while appearances and gestures aid expression and the building of relationships, they can also act as a distraction and interfere with the authenticity of a working relationship. Computer Conferencing provides an intellectually pure environment in which the content of the message is not clouded by issues of race, gender etc. Discussions can be, "distilled down to their intellectual component, with all extraneous variables removed." (Quoted in Collis 1997)

## A New Domain

CC shares elements with both distance and face to face education. Like Face-to-face education, it facilitates many-to-many interaction; while neither CC nor distance education are dependent on place or time. However, CC is a separate educational domain with a number of distinctive features.

"The key attributes characterising this new domain are that it is an asynchronous (time independent), place independent, many-to-many interactive communication medium. This combination contributes to making on-line education a new and unique domain, distinct from that of face-to-face and/or distance education" Harasim, L (1989:51).

This requires a leap in conceptual thinking if we are to utilize CC effectively. "..... holding on to a traditional perspective may limit our understanding and realization of the full potential of this new medium." Harasim, L (1989:51).

The pedagogical principles upon which the online environment is built (reflection, collaborative learning and social constructivism) would seem to be ideally suited to enhancing teacher development. The possibility of reflecting at leisure on one's own concepts of teaching before contributing to a developing discussion and receiving measured feedback from your peers rather than just the tutor is something that face to face environments struggle to provide. The discussion in a CC system becomes what the learners make of it; their learning is driven by their own experiences and interests and those of their peers. This shared construction of knowledge is a key element in the success of any online course and could surely be of great use in teacher education.

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