

Using asynchronous discussion to support initial teacher education about English as an additional language

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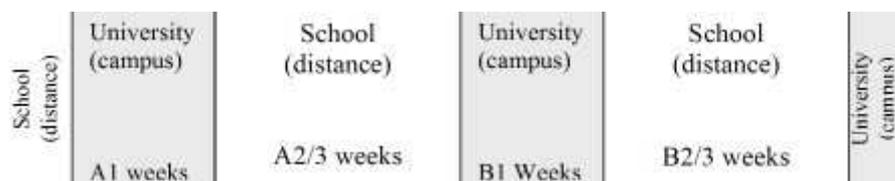
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Higher education is expected to incorporate elements of e-learning. In 2005 HEFCE announced its e-learning strategy and Higher Educational Institutions, including those involved in Initial Teacher Training, continue to develop and implement e-learning strategies involving the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to a greater or lesser extent. From earlier use in workplace training and distance education the use of VLEs has moved increasingly into the mainstream.

Within Initial Teacher Training (ITT) lie opportunities for not only “blending” technology with face to face and situational learning, but also for the creation of competencies and predispositions for online learning and dialogue which moves from purely academic study into professional training and career-long development. In moving into middle and senior management in schools in the future qualified teachers are expected to undertake distance learning and blended learning as an established part of national initiatives in the profession. The University of Leicester PGCE courses are supported by a VLE like other institutions. The focus for this article is a cohort of 21 post-graduate trainees, training to teach History in Secondary Schools, who had very little experience of using VLEs as undergraduates and no prior experience of online dialogue to support their learning. Sensitivity to the lack of experience in interacting online in the context of a course meant that careful induction and support also required planning. One of the aims of the use of the VLE was to support the development of a predisposition for online discussion.

The structure of the course was a key influence on the introduction and use of discussion boards. The course has a preliminary two week primary school placement followed by two phases (A and B) which give the course a degree of symmetry.(fig 1) Campus based weeks were chosen for induction and blended use of the VLE and the school placement periods were regarded as “distance phases” of the course.

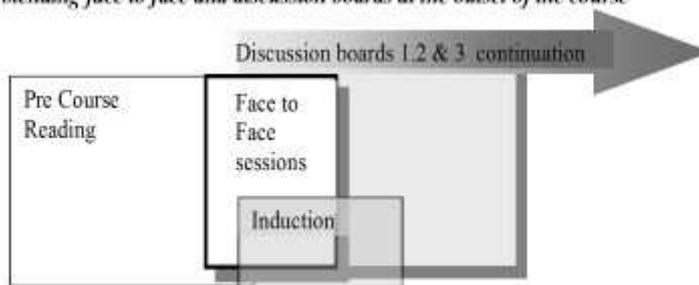
Figure 1. The structure of the PGCE course



For the integration of the VLE to be successful there were a number of prerequisites which had to be achieved in the relatively short campus based phase (A1 weeks). Familiarity with

the VLE to ensure trainees could successfully navigate to areas they needed to access; the motivation to engage with the discussion boards by seeing their relevance to their learning; knowledge of their peers, including names to facilitate ease with online discussion; finally, regular exposure to discussion boards. These were planned for through a half day induction building directly on pre-course reading and the first sessions of the course in a number of ways. (Fig.2). To allow trainees to work at their own pace and at a time that suited them the first boards had no set deadline for completion but a recommended period of two weeks to try out the use of discussion boards.

Fig 2 *blending face to face and discussion boards at the outset of the course*



Once the induction had involved trainees in three pre-determined boards the tutor then entered into negotiation with the group at the conclusion of face to face sessions over the relevant issues to include on discussion boards. Towards the close of the third week of face to face sessions trainees began to identify and suggest possible discussion board topics and began to initiate topic threads for discussion independently.

Salmon (2000) outlined a five stage model for successful online learning based on distance learning programmes. As the proposed development of online discussion was to be part of a blend, Salmon's model needed careful planning and adaptation to the course.

Figure 3 *Salmon's five stage model of online teaching and learning*

5	Development	E-mod - supporting, responding Tech - providing links outside closed-conferences
4	Knowledge construction	E-mod - facilitating process Tech - conferencing
3	Information exchange	E-mod - facilitate tasks; support use of learning materials Tech - searching, personalizing
2	Online socialization	E-mod - familiarization; building bridges (cultural, social & learning environment) Tech - sending & receiving messages.
1	Access & motivation	E-moderating - welcome & encourage Technical - Setting up & accessing

Although Salmon's model outline strengths in structuring and developing online learning, the short time scale prior to trainees' professional placements required the swift establishment of online discussion as a habitual behaviour with the cohort.

Salmon's model offered useful insights into online behaviours needed to encourage interaction and knowledge construction. However, the relevance of the model to a blend of face to face and online was limited and it was important not to follow the stages outlined by Salmon in a rigid linear fashion. Instead there needed to be a rapid integration of online discussion with face to face learning. The first two stages of Salmon's model could be supported in face to face sessions and did not have to be prioritised in designing the use of the discussion boards. The tutor role, face to face, like the e-moderator role online, needed to welcome trainees to the course and their socialization took place in a number of game activities as well as the insistence that in the first two weeks of the course trainees worked in face to face sessions with people in the group they had not previously worked with. All face to face sessions involved group and pair work so that discussion and exploration through discussion was established as a norm.

Salmon's model informed the design of a half day induction to the VLE. The first discussion required trainees to use their pre-course reading and their understanding of the political influences on the school curriculum from the first session of the course, to draft a statement of their own views of the nature and importance of history in the school curriculum. Trainees posted their views in the induction session. A second discussion began by asking trainees to follow links to an online lesson on the French Revolution. Trainees were asked to write a review of the online lesson in the light of that morning's session discussing the implications of Bloom's Taxonomy. The significance of sharing such reviews for their workload as trainee teachers was discussed during the induction. By finding and reviewing different websites trainees could use the discussion board as a resource – indicating useful and less useful online resources for their use in future. The first board served as a familiarisation exercise by familiarising trainees with the navigation of the boards and with the "netiquette" of responding to each other. The second demonstrated the usefulness of the boards for consolidating their own learning (Bloom's Taxonomy) in a highly practical way (selecting good resources for class room use) whilst also allowing them to support each other (knowledge exchange). A third board was introduced in the same vein as the second. The third board was to serve as an expert knowledge exchange facility. Each trainee assumes responsibility for acting as an expert in a particular area of history where others have little or no knowledge (wide- ranging as the national curriculum is, no graduate of history commences teacher training knowing all the historical knowledge they will be required to teach.).

The boards were developed in line with the need to support the learning curve of graduate "expert" historians into the realm of "inexpert" trainee teachers. For this reason, boards began requiring discussion within the realm of prior knowledge, understanding and subject knowledge before engaging trainees in new areas of learning relating to teaching. (Fig 5)

Figure 5 The nature and purpose of each discussion board in relation to trainees' experience.

Week	Title of discussion	Aims / focus of discussion	Relationship with prior learning
1	History, Schools and Society	To explore the relationship between History, the curriculum and society.	Personal response using pre-course reading and media reporting
1	History Exchange	To act as Peer Coaches – Each student electing to act as expert in an area of historical knowledge	Subject Knowledge

1	Internet Reviews	To consider the possible effectiveness of web sites for Key Stage 3 in the light of learning theory	Teaching and Learning
3	Local History	To discuss the importance of local history in schools. Linked to a research task.	Subject Knowledge applied to learning through historical enquiry.
4	Assessment	To discuss the use of different assessment and feedback strategies from a range of subject specific articles.	Teaching and Learning Assessment for Learning

Once trainees were on placement full time, from the sixth week of the course, a further board “checking in” with no formal requirements was opened and the choice of topics for discussion left entirely to trainees. Trainees made more frequent use of this board, posting about their school experiences and exchanging information, exploring solutions to problems they found with discipline, homework, and seeking support from others’ expert knowledge in a particular area, every two or three days. The exchanges in this board also evidenced a high degree of social/emotional presence with trainees supporting each other with difficulties such as early teaching “catastrophes” and celebrating and congratulating each other on successes. Studies have demonstrated that online interactions in distance learning contexts can lead to some learners experiencing alienation or isolation and that where the social presence of tutor and learner are strong there is greater learner satisfaction. One advantage of blended use of online learning is that participants have a foundation of face to face interaction and in the case of the Teacher Training course – social activities in addition. This was capitalised by the blending of discussion boards, with face to face sessions and was well established with the cohort before they were required to explore the issue of EAL learners online.

The decision to engage trainees in further asynchronous discussion about learners of EAL was the result of four factors. Firstly the degree of satisfaction and ease of use identified by the trainees themselves in early feedback after five weeks indicated that they regarded it as an established part of their learning. Initial fears about the “public nature” of the discussion boards where some trainees reported anxiety about posting had been largely overcome in the preceding five months with trust, an important factor in assuring a sense of privacy, important for affecting social presence and online interaction being established within the group. Secondly trainees reported that the asynchronous nature of discussion boards served as an aid to reflection. A pattern of visiting and revisiting boards a number of times had become an established behaviour by trainees. They appreciated the extra time afforded by asynchronous discussion as compared with face to face discussion. Initial visits to discussion boards to read recent posts by others lasted between five and fifteen minutes. There would then follow a period of hours or days in which trainees would reflect on the perspectives of and issues raised by others before they themselves authored suitable responses to post on the boards. The opportunity to repeatedly visit boards and “lurk” was the most frequent behaviour by all trainees and apparent from the outset. The extent of this behaviour was borne out by metadata showing that over 24 weeks trainees authored 700 posts. The discussion board hits numbered 30,026 over the same period. Across six boards the ratio of hits to posts was between 17.4 to 1 and 28.89 to 1. This pattern repeated on the EAL discussion boards where the ratio of hits to posts was 21.86 to 1. Thirdly the degree of trainees’ experience of EAL learners in their own classrooms was variable according to the schools in which they were placed. The timing of the board between placements in schools, meant trainees had some classroom experience to reflect on and further classroom experience to plan for. Fourthly, the

availability of a range of suitable online resources through the NALDIC website meant that discussion could easily be linked to those resources directly from the relevant discussion board.

The task required trainees, in small groups of five, to select, agree and discuss two articles from the NALDIC website focusing on their implications for teaching and learning. One aim of the discussion board was to enable trainees to explore in depth the highly individual nature of EAL learners' educational and cultural backgrounds – taking into account a variety of factors affecting pupils. Using their acquired knowledge and understanding trainees were also expected to consider more fully the implications of what they had learned for schools and for their own practice as teachers of history.

Fig 6. The Task Using the link to the NALDIC website choose TWO articles to read along with other members of your group. Then summarise the most important points of learning from the articles you chose and the implications for these for your teaching of history.

There are more links in the course materials folder for B1 weeks

Analysis of trainees' discussion

Over 27 days the task generated a little over 15,000 words of discussion and exploration. Some discussion online included the process of deciding as a group which articles to read. The content of the initial posts were analysed to determine what particular interests had guided the trainees' choice of reading. The 15,000 words were then analysed to find the high frequency words used by trainees. It was anticipated that after pronouns and prepositions there would be a reasonable proportion of modal verbs to show that trainees were being reflective. Recent findings showed that in delayed debriefing of lessons some trainee teachers were observed to reflect more, by initiating points in discussion and through the use of modal verbs in debriefings delayed until 24 hours after observations by mentors. In the EAL discussion board word frequency showed that in total 2,108 words were used.

Fig 6 Frequency of modal verbs.

COULD	39
WOULD	56
MIGHT	17
WILL	40
CAN	85
MAY	33

The decision to enter into discussion of an article was the result of initial responses leading to a recommendation to others to read the article. The most frequently stated reasons for choosing an article were: that initial reading had offered an insight into EAL learning; that something had been found interesting or intriguing; that an article offered strategies for impacting on learning in the classroom or that a trainee had confidence in an article in the light of the trainee's prior experience of teaching EAL pupils in their first placement.

Examples:-

Insight gained

The case study of Ikram alerted me to one or two points of which, having yet to teach any EAL learners, I was somewhat ignorant. Firstly the challenges of writing in two languages in

opposite directions. It had not occurred to me that, of course, that Arabic and similar languages read right to left. It must be doubly confusing to present a child fluent in an Arabic language an English textbook and expect them to read it 'backwards'. For some reason I had not considered this and yet it is something that, obviously, as teachers of EAL pupils we must be aware.

Need for specific classroom strategies

There are lots of suggestions in there, but in particular the bit on 'Supporting Teaching and Learning' on page 9 onwards is useful. From this the ideas that I can see that we can implement in our lessons (and are probably already doing, but can pay more attention to) are using mini whiteboards during question and answer sessions, so that students can associate the spoken answer to the written word without errors being permanent.

Affirmation of prior experience of teaching learners of EAL

In particular I liked the suggestion of focusing on two main aspects; 'Access' and 'Expression'. Focusing on access involves using whatever means possible to communicate meaning through drawings, diagrams, gesture, demonstration and using simplified English to improve listening and reading. These are all things I tried with the bilingual and multilingual learners in my classes and they did seem to have an effect.

The main role of the tutor in the discussion board was to offer and provide further clarification, for example of Jim Cummins' work on language development. Such interventions by the tutor were occasional – 3 posts in total. The developing degree of autonomy with which the group used the discussion boards meant that at this stage of the course the online tutor role was an infrequent feature which did not, as some research into distance learning suggests, detract from the highly interactive use of the board by trainees.

Phrases from posts containing the modal verbs were analysed to determine more precisely the nature of trainees' reflections in relation to the articles discussed. For those with little or no prior experience of teaching EAL pupils there were clear advantages for the trainees in being able to use articles and resources from the website.

Fig 7 Analysis of EAL Discussion board posts.

Nature of Discussion or Reflection	Number of statements in posts	Number of Trainees
Reflecting on specific strategies for future use	38	21
Cultural associations of language – implications of	19	14
Reflection on need to understand specific situation of EAL learner	18	16
Oracy vs. writing for classroom practice	11	8
Reflection on subject specific language issues –historical terms and texts	9	9
Questioning appropriateness of assessment strategies especially mother tongue for assessment	9	9
Reflecting on importance of EAL learner's historical culture	9	6
Changing trainee preconceptions of learners of EAL	8	8
Need for positive regard for EAL learners	8	8
Reflecting on / exchanging specific strategy tested in classrooms	7	4

Reflecting on own personal experiences of language learning as learner	4	2
Role or importance of Home school links	3	3
Requesting ideas for using in classroom	3	3

The posts unsurprisingly replicate one of main reasons trainees selected articles with the greater proportion of discussion being devoted to specific classroom strategies for future use, (38 occurrences) as well as those already used (tested) by trainees (7 occurrences). Linked to these were references to subject specific language and terminology, and to oral and written language as a medium for learning. To a lesser extent the posts mirrored trainees' initial insights into EAL learners in reflections on the uniqueness of EAL learners and the changing of their preconceptions (8 references) although these insights tended to inform later discussions about implications for planning and teaching; cultural associations of language and of pupils' own histories being a regular topic for discussion and reflection. The use of the discussion board did encourage reflection and exchange of views and knowledge amongst trainees. The degree to which this exchange encouraged greater or lesser reflection or acquisition of knowledge and understanding of EAL in comparison with other methods of learning is not indicated. In the end of course evaluations, the discussion board exploring EAL ranked as over half the trainees' first or second preferred board in terms of their learning and 15 of the trainees indicated that they would be likely or certain to use the NALDIC website for future reference. All trainees in the cohort felt adequately prepared for planning and teaching pupils of EAL and most were comfortable with the notion that they could continue learning from the foundation they had acquired. As recent NQT surveys have suggested that Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) expressed a lack of confidence with their training for pupils learning EAL, the possibilities for supporting both trainees and NQTs through online learning, linking to appropriate expertise and resources through websites such as the NALDIC site shows significant potential.

References and Further Reading

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