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Using a virtual classroom in the Practicum: Innovations and enhanced practices

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Abstract

This article intends to communicate some of the activities developed in a Practicum context in an English Teacher Education Programme. It describes and assesses some didactic choices aimed at promoting reflection, collaboration and dialogue, such as forums, collaborative writing and triangulation in assessment. Besides, it proposes that virtual classrooms may maximise the potential of these practices.

Keywords: practicum; virtual classroom; collaboration; reflection; dialogue.

Resumen

El presente artículo da cuenta de algunas de las prácticas de enseñanza que forman parte de un proyecto de Residencia de la formación docente en inglés. El punto de interés son las intervenciones didácticas que intentan promover la reflexión, la colaboración y el diálogo, como por ejemplo los foros de discusión, la escritura colaborativa y la triangulación al momento de la evaluación. Se explora además cómo el uso de un aula virtual en la plataforma Moodle puede incrementar el potencial de estas prácticas.

Palabras clave: residencia; aula virtual; colaboración; reflexión; diálogo.

THE PRACTICUM PROPOSAL this article intends to portray, apart from being in keeping with both the jurisdictional teacher education curriculum and the institutional policies1, also purports to respond to the intensity that characterises trainees' first teaching experiences. There is a lot in these experiences which is singular, and a lot which is shared: while their singularity is determined by the trainee's individual history and by the school and community culture(s) where they carry out their teaching, it is also true that most trainees share a combination of expectancy and uncertainty, regardless of their local context. One of the concerns of Practicum tutors is precisely how to address the novelty of the experience with all its challenges and dilemmas. My intention is to share those features of our Practicum project which are especially aimed at helping student-teachers enter the teaching profession in a state of hope and confidence and which involve explicit, purposeful dialogic practices of reflection and collaboration.

Since 2010, and as part of an institutional initiative, two tutors have been in charge of the Practicum - one is a teacher of English and the other a teacher of Psychology, Pedagogy and Philosophy2. In brief, the Practicum in our programme involves a three-week classroom observation period, interviews to the English teacher and other school staff, the design of a project, day-to-day lesson planning in the framework of that project, feedback sessions with peers and tutors and a reflective account of the experience in the form of a narrative essay. Due to curricular constraints, this process does not last longer than four months. It is time, precisely, one of the factors that make this Practicum experience particularly intense for both trainees and tutors.

It was in an attempt to deal with the hustle and bustle of this process that in 2011 we decided to create a virtual classroom in the school Moodle platform. When we started it, we did not fully appreciate its potential; our main aim at the time was to make the submission and return of unit and lesson plans more systematic. The virtual classroom, however, would gradually allow for different forms of communication and different modes of collaborative work.

Moodle and the Practicum Virtual Classroom

Moodle is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) which allows teachers to create anything from forums where to share ideas to complete distance-learning courses. In our institution a number of teachers have opted for blended-learning, which means their Moodle virtual classrooms are intended to support regular class work. The choices available to teachers in this respect are diverse: one can select Moodle resources such as wiki texts, which permit collaborative writing, for instance, or other types of tools which provide more controlled, individualised practice and/or testing, such as questionnaires.

Given the complex, multidimensional nature of the Practicum, most of the tasks we have included in our virtual classroom purport to promote collaborative work, interaction

and ubiquitous learning; there are forums where to exchange lesson plans, materials and teaching ideas in general, wiki texts where to keep a record of the Practicum experience and a repository of articles and websites trainees can find useful, among other tasks.

Martin Dougiamas (2013), one of Moodle developers, has identified five features of VLEs which seem to enhance the social, collaborative construction of knowledge: the possibility for all participants to alternate between teacher and learner roles, the chance to learn by creating something (for others), as well as by observing others do and create, the opportunity to give and receive feedback to/from peers and the teacher's possibility to adjust the course while it is in progress in response to the learners' needs.

These benefits are coherent with our Practicum project and even though none of them is exclusive of VLEs, we have found they can be maximised in the context of the virtual classroom, especially when other resources (time and personnel, for instance) are scarce. A case in point is open, full time access to everyone's production through the use of forums and wikis which facilitates immediate feedback originating from and expanding in several directions.

In the following sections I intend to describe the alternative built-in teaching and learning facilities this ubiquitous learning environment offers and to explore the connections between this resource and the principles that illuminate our Practicum proposal – namely, collaboration, reflection and dialogue. The decision to present practices and principles in an alternate fashion in this account is based on the belief that theory and practice neither precede nor exceed each other and that teachers can adopt and/or develop their teaching principles when they are able to theorise upon their own practices.

Dialogue and Collaboration

In the section *Tasks and Activities* in the virtual classroom there is a forum whose main purpose is the submission of unit plans, lesson plans and teaching materials. Each trainee is expected to participate in the forum by sharing the plans and tasks for their lessons; they usually do so by attaching a Word file to the forum entry. Tutors generally add comments in the same Word file and post their feedback in a new forum entry, as a response to the student's. The context of the forum and the message-response logic already make this activity dialogic; however, the potential for meaningful communication can be extended in several ways.

One of the advantages of this teaching facility, the forum, is that the exchanges capture the process of construction of unit and lesson plans, the changes and adjustments it involves. Plans are rewritten in response not only to the tutors' feedback, but sometimes also to fellow trainees' comments and suggestions. Apart from these explicit contributions, more subtle, 'invisible' conversations take place: each and every trainee

can access their classmates' projects, lesson plans and materials and the tutors' feedback and focus their attention on a particular feature, or many, which helps them frame or improve their own proposals. It is typical that trainees share the same theme for their projects, for instance, or that they borrow and adapt a classmate's worksheet, or that they discuss and agree on the most appropriate way to explain a grammar item. It has lately been the case that student-teachers placed in identical courses in the same school have developed units of work together, and these involved shared lessons, exchange of letters and collaborative writing between their two groups of students.

The opportunity to browse through classmates' work and borrow anything from simple ideas to specific materials is based on two principles: trust and cooperation. It is crucial that both trainees and tutors believe everyone is going to do their best, but not necessarily on their own: both the tutors' feedback and the classmates' learning processes serve as scaffolds for each student-teacher to achieve their learning goals. This assumption transforms the virtual classroom participants from individuals into a learning community.

Apart from the feeling of confidence the peers' support adds to the Practicum experience, we believe cooperative work at this stage of teacher education enhances the chances these prospective teachers will be better prepared to work with their colleagues and be part of an institutional project in the near future. It has been acknowledged that isolation, and thus frustration, is one of the problems teachers encounter; according to Murray (2010, p. 3), "[t]eachers all around the world face similar challenges due to the very nature of school environment. They teach their classes independently from other colleagues, which makes them feel isolated." In addition, working long hours at several different schools makes it difficult for teachers to be fully integrated into each and every institution's ethos. We are far from assuming that virtual work will noticeably improve these conditions; however, teachers who have had the experience of team work in a ubiquitous learning environment might have more and/or better strategies to put up with the challenge of teaching as part of a community. What we can firmly assert at this point is that the exchanges that take place in this virtual environment permit searches, cooperative projects and learning processes that would not be possible had we not had total, twenty-four-seven accessibility on the one hand, and a profound trust in cooperation, on the other hand.

Dialogue in Planning

It is through dialogue also that student teachers manage to comprehend the culture(s) that characterise their groups of students and propose relevant teaching practices for them. These dialogic exchanges may take diverse forms: interviews to school personnel, informal conversations with students, weekly meetings with tutors and peers, among

others.

I have already suggested that one valuable exchange facilitated by the virtual classroom is the conversations trainees and tutors engage in when they write and comment on each lesson plan. When participating in these virtual conversations both tutors and trainees operate on the assumption that, even though they represent different parties, they are equally interested in the particular teaching project. In this sense, it is worth noting that the Practicum here is not envisaged as a stage where the student-teachers need to display the teaching knowledge and abilities they have acquired along the course for the tutors to judge. Much to the contrary, tutors are active participants in the construction of the trainees' teaching proposals and this stand seeks to be coherent not only with the Practicum teaching approach but also with the approach trainees are encouraged to practice.

We adhere to a task-based approach to teaching (Estaire & Zanón, 1994): trainees are expected to design teaching projects based on the process to accomplish a real-life, communicative task. Each lesson they plan, then, is a stepping stone in the construction of the selected text; several genres have already been explored: a leaflet, a game, a recipe, a video game review, a year book, among others. There are two features that become crucial when planning within the task-based framework: functions and strategies. Reflecting upon the communicative functions involved in the accomplishment of the task helps student teachers depart from the structuralist approach to grammar most of them have experienced as learners; and carefully planning the learning strategies their students can resort to when working on the task intends to respond to the contexts where these trainees teach: secondary schools struggling to integrate their newly-arrived students3. In a nutshell, these are the tenets of the teaching approach promoted in the Practicum: real-life tasks, meaningful communication, student autonomy and assessment that inform teaching.

When it comes to lesson planning, we agree with Gloria Edelstein (2012) when she claims that a lesson plan is both a hypothesis and a statement. It is a statement because in order to plan a lesson one needs to take a stand: the lesson plan reveals the teacher's view of language and learning, her beliefs as regards teaching and the ethical value she perceives in what she teaches. From a different but related perspective, planning can be seen as a hypothesis making process because the didactic options – the tasks, the materials, the interaction patterns – need to respond successfully to the multifarious circumstances that may unfold during the lesson. Complex, unique, multidimensional, tense and unanticipated as teaching practices seem to be (Edelstein, 1996, p. 17), we believe that only a thick but open text can capture a new teacher's plans. Thick in the sense that there should be a description of the context and circumstances that make the teacher's epistemological, theoretical and didactic choices worthy and justifiable; still,

there should be room for alternatives and this is what makes the plan an open text.

The lesson plan under this light, then, works as a very detailed map which offers several possible routes. It is a map that should always be designed with the Other as one's guiding star (Edelstein, 2012): the Other is the students, those whose learning experiences we purport to enhance and maximise. In this sense, we follow Holliday (1994, p. 162) when he postulates that a teacher is both an ethnographer and an action-researcher: one who carefully considers the classroom and school cultures in order to develop a plan that seems appropriate on the basis of her observations. The author speaks about a becoming-appropriate methodology because the observation-action process works in a spiral fashion and is never complete: "An appropriate methodology needs to incorporate both how to teach and learning about how to teach. Indeed, it is too simplistic to call it 'appropriate' methodology: it is in effect always a 'becoming-appropriate methodology' (p. 164). Holliday's point is particularly relevant in this Practicum project because trainees need to exercise their cultural sensitivity in order to develop units of work and plan didactic interventions that are pertinent to the particular group they are teaching.

As it can be seen, planning is the site where a number of diverse exchanges take place; when planning trainees do not only overtly interact with their tutors, the classroom teacher and/or their classmates, they also engage in less obvious, yet profound, (self) reflective conversations aimed at reconciling their observations and their intentions with a constellation of possible outcomes.

Assessment as Dialogue

As I have already stated, one of the cornerstones of our Practicum proposal is formative assessment, assessment that illuminates teaching and learning, as opposed to measuring them. Each trainee's project should include an assessment built-in facility that allows them to monitor the progress, make adjustments and act upon difficulties. Some of the principles of formative assessment are communicable learning objectives, negotiated criteria to assess their attainment and communication all along the process (Anijovich, 2010, pp. 16 – 17), and we intend our students to actually experience these principles during the Practicum so that they are better able to understand and practise them. As soon as the semester starts, we ask trainees to identify the specific practices, strategies and techniques they would like to receive feedback on when teaching and record them in a shared wiki document in the virtual classroom. This results in a set of criteria that can be used to assess the student-teachers' performance both formatively and summatively. Some of the items selected by the trainees are: the use of the blackboard (handwriting and distribution of information), voice quality and volume, the ability to deliver and clarify instructions and some more complex practices such as being able to

handle unpredictable circumstances and focusing more on students' learning – rather than on their own performance only. Needless to say, we add other items we consider important, especially during the day-to-day of the practice teaching period, and on the basis of this list we discuss the past lessons with trainees and help them plan the lessons to come. When the time comes for us to decide on a mark for each student teacher, these criteria are useful as well.

Even though it is tutors who have the final say on the trainee's Practicum mark, the assessment process and its conclusion incorporate several voices. Trainees' voices are present at each and every stage of the Practicum and they are recorded for self and tutors' assessment by means of two different but related texts: journals and narrative essays. Each trainee keeps a record of her practice teaching experiences in a wiki text in the virtual classroom that can be accessed by peers and tutors. These observations encompass the trainee's feelings, reflections, doubts and questions and are usually coloured by the intensity of the process they are going through – they are spontaneous and the topics are diverse. The final narrative essay, on the other hand, is expected to arise from a process of reflection once the practice teaching experience is finished; while the journals are aimed at recording first-hand experiences, the essay is intended to communicate the new understandings the Practicum has brought about for each student teacher. These essays are posted in a forum in the virtual classroom and can be presented to the programme staff and students once a year.

The tutors also keep observation journals in the mode of wiki texts where they record their impressions, reflections and possible courses of action after watching a trainee's lesson. These collaborative documents condense important insights to be considered when assessing the process summatively and are a practical tool to share concerns and plans even when colleagues have little time to meet at school. The classroom teachers' voices are also heard when the time comes to decide on a mark for the trainee: these teachers write a report on the trainee's performance following a semi-structured questionnaire. The different participants' perspectives, which are systematically recorded, contribute to a practice that is also a feature of formative assessment: triangulation. According to Alvarez Mendez (2001, p. 16), "[t]riangulation plays a major role in guaranteeing justice in the exercise of assessment, in which each interested party is entitled to present their arguments" (my translation). The crossings between journals, essays and reports give tutors rich evidence on the basis of which they can arrive at a summative judgment of a very complex and intense process.

Non-conclusive conclusion

I have shared some of the features of a Practicum project which is far from being flawless; only by writing this account and consulting related bibliography I have spotted

areas that can be strengthened.

It is fair to acknowledge that different student teachers respond differently to the teaching strategies I have described; while some do profit from virtual exchanges, for example, others are more inclined to face-to-face sessions – which, unfortunately, due to curricular and budget constraints, are not as many as we would like. The number of new graduates who remain participants in the virtual classroom, and sometimes even active, is remarkable, however. This confirms, in my opinion, teachers' urgent need to be part of a community and the potential of virtual environments, in spite of their shortcomings, to strengthen teachers' assurance and sense of belonging.

Last but not least, it is worth highlighting that this project responds to the peculiarities of our teaching context and that it would be unwise to suggest replicating it in other institutional and jurisdictional contexts without any adaptations. Nevertheless, I am certain that the principles that guide the practical choices in our Practicum plan – collaboration, reflection and dialogue - can also illuminate other similar emerging projects and that the practices originated in those principles are open to adjustments and other teacher trainers can make them fit their own plans.

Notes

1. Instituto Superior del Profesorado N° 8 "Almirante G. Brown", in Santa Fe (Santa Fe, Argentina).
2. Given the fact that both my colleague and I have worked on the construction of this Practicum proposal and that it is supported by the institution, I will use the first person plural "we" in order to acknowledge the collaborative and communal spirit of this project. The first person singular "I" will be used to acknowledge responsibility for opinions, hypotheses and conclusions which are solely my own.
3. The National Education Act (2006) made secondary education compulsory for every teenager in Argentina.

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