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Training e-educators to support participant reflection in an online training course for teachers of English

Introduction:

This paper will explore how an online e-Educator training course can develop the skills and knowledge required by e-learning tutors to support the online reflection of teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). It will briefly consider what is meant by 'Reflection' and the crucial role it plays in language teacher development, the related challenges faced by e-tutors in supporting their in-service trainee teachers to reflect meaningfully and usefully, the ways in which the on-line E-Educator materials have attempted to address these challenges, and the results of piloting these materials with Chinese and UK e-educators.

In summer 2002, the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) issued a tender to bid for a number of collaborative education projects, known collectively as 'E-China-UK'. The University of Nottingham (UoN)[1] has been working with Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU)[2] and its on-line learning department (Beiwai) to produce a number of e-learning modules for an MA in e-ELT (English Language Teaching) for teachers of English in Chinese tertiary education. The principal aims of this project are to:

- enable teachers to develop greater knowledge, understanding and experience of alternative ways of organising English teaching and learning, particularly with regard to learner-centred methodologies and the use of new technologies;
- help teachers develop their own capacity for independent learning and self-directed professional development;
- enable teachers to develop greater confidence and independence as teachers;

These cutting-edge e-learning materials exemplified, to some extent, pedagogic theory and principles which were unfamiliar, not only to the participants, but also to their e-tutors. Thus, there was a clear need for a way of inducting and educating the e-tutors charged with managing, monitoring and assessing the learning of the participants. In 2005, the UoN embarked on a new project, also funded by HEFCE, to develop a framework and materials for an on-line course for e-Educators, to be piloted initially with the e-tutors working on the MA in e-ELT, but with the wider brief to be usuable as a generic course in a variety of international contexts. The course is being developed collaboratively with a group of 10 Chinese e-tutors[3] and consists of 5 units:

1. Induction: a brief introduction to the module and to expected ways of working.
2. Experiential Orientation: examples of e-Learning courses to work though and experience.
3. Personal Development Planning: a reflective unit in which trainee tutors explore their learning needs and develop a personal development plan for their studies in Unit 4.
4. Personalised Experiential Training: trainee tutors explore the five aspects of the eEducator training curriculum, 4.1. Community, 4.2. Empathy, 4.3. Methodology, 4.4. Cognitive Aspects and 4.5. Assessment.
5. Assessment: assessment of participants and evaluation of unit.

The focus on 'Reflection' is part of unit 4.3. Methodology.

What do we mean by reflection and why is it important?

The importance of reflection on practice as a means of personal and professional development is now widely accepted in the field of teacher education in general, and also in language teacher education (see, for example, Wallace, 1991, 1998, Gilpin 1999). Enabling language teachers to engage in fruitful reflection activities in their own teaching contexts, such as action research, problem-solving and critical thinking, is a crucial aim of the online MA in e-ELT, and, therefore, requires careful support and management by the e-tutors working with the participants.

It has been argued by many educationists that humans learn, not from simply experiencing, but by standing back and reflecting on experience. Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning (1984) has been highly influential in education. In his model, learners engage in a cyclical process of experience, reflection on that experience, abstract

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[2] BFSU Team: Cao Wen, Gu Yueguo, Tang Jinlan, Wang Tong.
[3] 'Reflection' team: Gao Chunli, Li Changan, Ian McGrath, Barbara Sinclair.

conceptualisation (i.e., extracting the learning point) and action. Thus, reflection is seen as the crucial bridge between experience and theoretical conceptualisation. Unfortunately, in much formal learning, it is the teacher, rather than the learner, who takes responsibility for reflecting on learning and extracting the learning point. This has led to classrooms where learners sit passively, waiting to receive pre-digested pieces of knowledge. Online learning programmes have typically followed similar patterns, providing lock-step activities for participants who simply have to 'get through it all' without much thinking. Such an approach to a development course would not enable in-service teachers to become reflective practitioners, able to respond flexibly and with insight to their learners' needs.

Gilpin (1999) differentiates between different types of reflection: at the lowest level, it involves just following, unquestioningly, what others think, or simply reacting to something emotionally or intuitively. At a higher level, reflection may involve reasoning, but against a fairly narrow field of reference. She suggests that a more effective level of reflection would involve examining an issue against a broader knowledge base. She goes on to propose 5 essential components:

- 'noticing, that is, becoming aware of some discrepancy and observing;
- reasoning, that is, articulating what has been observed, and analysing it, drawing on a wide knowledge base;
- change of some kind, whether conceptual or practical;
- questioning of what has hitherto been taken for granted;
- affective involvement'.

(Gilpin, 1999: 111)

Learning to reflect is important for teacher development because without it, we would fossilise as professionals, perhaps justifying our practice simply on the grounds of tradition, prejudice, ideology or, even, dogma (Cox, cited in Hargreaves, 1996).

Context and challenges

The MA in e-ELT is being developed for use with teachers of English in Chinese tertiary institutions. The corresponding e-Educator Course is being developed to enable e-tutors support these teachers on their online course. Typically, the e-tutors would work at a distance from the participants, although it might be possible for some face-to-face tutorials to take place. Some e-tutors may already be experienced at mentoring e-learners, but the learner-centred philosophy and principles of the MA e-ELT, as well as its newly developed tools[4] for supporting learning community and learner independence, mean that previous ways of e-tutoring may not be appropriate. In particular, supporting participants to develop greater learner independence through awareness and reflection has its own challenges. In cultures where, traditionally, the teacher has been seen as the source of all knowledge and highly respected as an expert, such as in China, it can be difficult for learners to question and challenge in the classroom. Even more unthinkable would be to interrogate the written word in textbooks and teaching materials. Learners in such contexts may react negatively to being asked to give their own, reasoned opinions and to share ideas. Our needs analyses showed that teachers of English in Chinese universities recognise the need to move their students towards becoming more reflective and independent, and the MA in e-ELT supports this. The materials for the e-Educator course reflect this philosophy so that the e-tutors learn through experience and develop into more reflective practitioners themselves.

Responses to the challenges

The unit on Methodology consists of two interrelated and important topics, i.e., Reflection and Learner Autonomy. The five sections in the topic 'Reflection' represent about 6 hours of study for the e-tutors on the programme, including reflective Journal Writing, a variety of readings for self-study, and online postings and discussion. The aim of the materials is to help participants think critically about aspects of reflection in the learning process and how they, as e-tutors, can support this in their own learners. The following sections are presented in diagrammatic form in the materials, and the participants can access them in any order they prefer, according to their own needs and interests:

- Introduction to reflection.
- What is reflection?
- Why is reflection important?
- What prompts reflection?
- How can the capacity for reflection be supported and developed in e-learning?

[4] See 'Developing new tools in e-education for English language teachers' by Kevin Caley in these proceedings.

- How can reflection be assessed in e-learning?

A typical approach would be to start with the introduction section, which contains aims and an orientation to the topic. For the purposes of demonstration, we will assume a participant has accessed ‘What is reflection?’

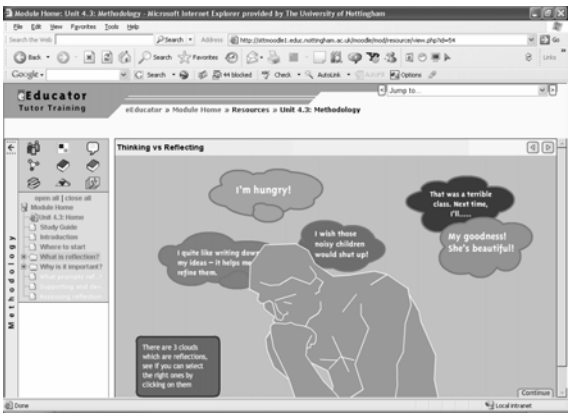
What is reflection?

In the opening animation participants see a representation of the famous statue of ‘The Thinker’ by the French sculptor, Rodin. The thinker, or ‘Fred’, as we have called him here, is seen reflecting (see Fig 1 below). We see all of his reflections on screen as he considers the nature of existence. This is suddenly interrupted by a sharp thought, as he complains about the pain in his back and gets up to stretch. This animation aims to amuse but also to encourage the participants to notice the difference between reflection and thought.

Figure 1: What is reflection?

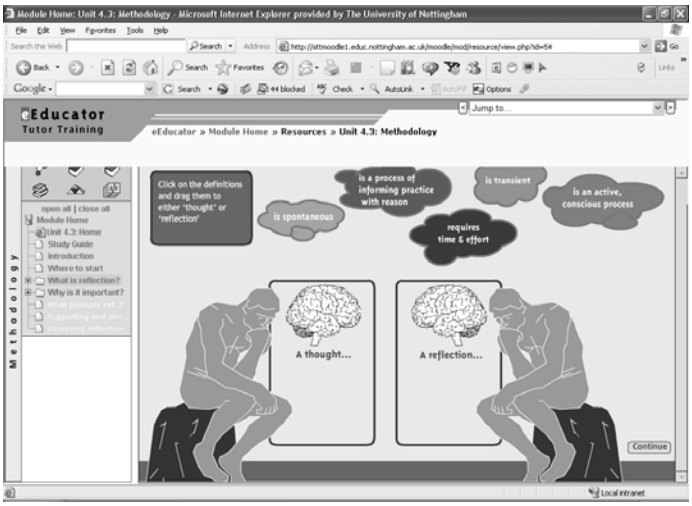
This noticing stage is made explicit by the next animation (see Fig. 2 below) in which the participants are asked to differentiate Fred’s reflections from his mere thoughts. Here, we see Fred with a variety of thought/reflection bubbles floating past his head as they run through his mind. Participants are asked to interact with the animation by clicking on the bubbles that represent Fred’s reflections. If they click on a thought, there is a booing sound. If they click on a reflection, the bubble bursts, there is applause and the reflection itself is saved onto the screen as a record. By asking participants to observe the discrepancy between thoughts and reflections, interact and to make choices, the materials are actually encouraging them to reflect, thus providing an experiential element to their exploration of reflection. Such activities mirror those carried out by the e-tutors’ learners on the MA eELT.

Figure 2: Thinking vs Reflection:



Following this, the participants are asked to engage in more reflection and interaction through a ‘drag and drop’ activity (see figure 3 below). On screen are randomly placed characteristics of thoughts and reflections. Participants click on each and drag them to the relevant ‘thought’ and ‘reflection’ boxes. The characteristics will not stay in the boxes unless placed correctly, so the participant cannot continue until all characteristics have been correctly identified. This provides an opportunity to reflect further in a testing and learning activity.

Figure 3. Drag and drop.



After being introduced to the differences between thoughts and reflections, participants are provided with a more academic review of the concept of reflection and are asked to engage in a reflective task which involves reading a set text, provided as a printable pdf file, and providing responses to a set of questions.

Figure 4. Reflection task

Reflection Task:

'Forms of reflective teaching practice in Higher Education'.

Download the pdf of the above article and reflect on the following question in your Reflective Journal.

- What are the main points being made about Reflection?

Now reflect on the following and post your opinions to the Discussion Forum:

1. To what extent do you think your students are used to thinking critically and reflectively in their studies and/or professional practice as teachers?
2. What problems do you anticipate as an e-tutor in encouraging and supporting such reflection in your students?
3. How would you get around such problems?

Comment on your course mates' opinions in the discussion as well. To what extent do you all agree?

An important part of this reflective task is the articulation of the participants' reflections on the text and the application of the ideas to their professional e-tutoring context. The sharing of these reflections with other course participants in the discussion forum lends impetus to deeper processing, and extended discussion focuses the participants on different and, sometimes hitherto unexplored, aspects of practice and development within the relative 'safety' of their own learning community. The participants then explore the other topics in the 'Reflection' unit in similar ways.

Piloting

In August 2006 the materials were piloted in China with a group of 10 Chinese e-tutors and 3 UK e-tutors. The results were highly positive. In particular, the piloters liked the visual aspects of the materials, and the interactive nature of the tasks. They felt the reading was informative and the reflective questions useful, although two piloters felt that the text was a little too long, and asked for the relevant ideas to be extracted from it. One piloter said of the reading task, 'Good, but it is better to sort out the main ideas, since the students don't want to be scholars.' It was interesting to note that these e-tutors felt that taking the time and effort to reflect in this way was too much to expect from a busy professional! In other words, they felt at first hand how their learners might feel, and were able to consider how to deal with such a challenge.

The most interesting outcome of the piloting was the postings on the Discussion Forum. In a period of 30 minutes, there were 31 postings, and evidence of a good deal of reflection concerning the e-tutors' experience with online learners. Some extracts are presented below:

Re: Q1. To what extent do you think your students are used to thinking critically and reflectively in their studies and/or professional practice as teachers?

'Most of the teachers I worked with in the past were also critical about their practice. They reflected on their teaching practice perhaps in an unconscious way. Some of them were simply too busy to reflect.' Tutor A

'I don't think most of my students are used to thinking critically and reflectively in their studies and professional practice. Instead, they are used to listening to their teachers' instruction and follow their suggestions on how to learn and teach. Most of them fail to realise that reflection is an important skill and process in their professional development.' Tutor B

Q2. What problems do you anticipate as an e-tutor in encouraging and supporting such reflection in your students?

'Most of my students complain that they are busy with their routine work, get used to rules instead of reflection. When i ask them to reflect on some thing, they urge me for specific advice. Usually I have to give in.' Tutor C.

Re: Q3. How would you get around such problems?

'When the students have enough time, I usually ask them to have a face-to face meeting, and show them the critical path of thinking. For those who lack related experience, I will give them specific steps of reflection.' Tutor D.

'To help them become aware of the importance of reflection (one example activity could be: ask them do a task, then ask them to do it again, i.e., with and without the reflection, to see the difference. This could be a self reflection, group reflection, etc. The second is to help them form the habit of reflecting. My suggestion is to let them start from everyday life, then gradually extend that to their studies and work.' Tutor E.

Conclusions:

In a paper of such limited space it is perhaps difficult to give an adequate picture of how reflection online can be encouraged, supported and managed by e-tutors. It is clear from our needs analyses and piloting, however, that the encouragement of reflection, a crucial part of learning to take charge of one's own learning, remains a challenge for learners and e-tutors in educational cultures where such activities have not been the norm. The materials developed by UoN and BFSU are intended to be stimulating, both visually and intellectually, informative and interactive. They aim to engage the e-tutors in activities similar to those their own online learners encounter, so that they can experience for themselves the challenges of being asked to reflect, and can reflect on their own professional practice. In this way, it is hoped that a change in practice, for the better, can be achieved.

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