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DOCUMENT 13**Exploiting the Potential of Electronic Conferencing in Developing Open and Distance Learning Courses for Teachers**

This provides a description of how electronic conferencing, using the widely adapted software, FirstClass, has been developed in one open and distance-learning program.

Has anyone perfected the art of fitting in time to listen to readers on a regular basis whilst the rest of the children work on meaningful activities?

I'm being brave and tackling my weakest subject head on by creating a poetry unit. I've chosen the theme, 'Feasting on Poetry.' Any suggestions for multicultural, multiform, cross-the-centuries poems on eating and drinking?

A Year-Seven pupil said to me, 'My dad doesn't want me to learn French.' What do you say to a pupil who is getting active discouragement at home?

Are these snatches of conversations from a student teacher's common room or part of a college seminar? They are in fact both and bypass typical college restrictions of time and space. These are electronic messages from students studying in one of Europe's first and largest teacher-education programs, the Open University's Postgraduate Certificate of Education.

Numerous studies (Schrum 1991; Casey 1992; and Selinger and Parker 1996) have looked at how teacher education is using new technologies. Fewer studies, however, explore the ways that computer-mediated communication challenges our knowledge about the learning process itself. Reflecting on how an electronic community of student teachers and experienced professionals work together illuminates the complex process of becoming a teacher.

An Electronic Community

I am just beginning to talk about exchanging lesson plans and materials with a couple of other students, and it does give one the feeling of belonging to a community ... a feeling that one is not alone.

The Open University's 18-month, part-time course that annually trains more than 1,000 graduate teachers from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland is one of a new generation of school-based teacher-education courses (Moon 1995 and Lakerved and Nentwig 1996). As in all the Open University's distance-education courses, a tutor supports student study of multimedia materials with correspondence, telephone, and face-to-face teaching at bimonthly tutorials or day schools.

The program provides every student and tutor with an Apple Macintosh computer, printer, and modem for the duration of the course. The modem enables students to access an extensive and stimulating electronic network controlled by the FirstClass communications program. FirstClass provides user-friendly access to a private mail box, read-only bulletin boards, conferencing, and real-time chats, and the facility to attach and send documents. The system's pervasiveness and its capacity to provide both synchronous and asynchronous communication makes it a fascinating and flexible mode for teaching and for student support that is unexplored in most teacher-education courses.

Students can choose to operate in a variety of environments, some created specifically to support the postgraduate program, others that offer access to university and worldwide conferencing and the Internet. Because experience shows electronic communication to be most effective when it builds on face-to-face contact, tutors encourage their students to participate in a tutor group conference, which has a maximum of 15 students. Here, students discuss study materials, forthcoming assignments, and school experience. Tutors introduce teaching points and raise key issues for discussion between tutorial meetings.

The profile of Open University postgraduate students is distinctive: the majority are adult learners who come from varied employment and life experiences. Occupational backgrounds range from landscape architecture and pharmacy to opera singing and tourist board marketing; educators are well represented. Just 20 percent are under age 30, compared to the national profile of 52 percent of graduate student teachers under 26. All Open University students have deliberately chosen a part-time distance-education course for reasons of work, personal circumstances, or learning preference. Seventy-four percent are women, many of whom are responsible for young children in addition to maintaining full- or part-time work. Others intend to return to paid employment after full-time parenting.

Patterns of use illustrate the FirstClass network's accessibility for students with different schedules. Evening is the period when students are most

active in posting messages, 8 to 10 p.m. being the most popular. Work patterns create informal networking:

I've noticed that people tend to log in at particular times. I'm usually a night person, and there are several people I 'meet' regularly. I logged in this morning, and I didn't recognize a single name.

The Learning Curriculum

Students work in a primary or secondary school near home that has agreed to enter into partnership with the Open University. Participating schools receive resources that enable them to appoint an experienced staffperson as a personal mentor to train the teacher.

Berliner's (1988) notion of progression from novice to expert underpins the design and structure of the course. The student moves from observing and working alongside experienced practitioners for three weeks of school-based work toward solo teaching, which demands six weeks of continuous teaching practice. The program encourages a constant interplay of theory and practice: course materials feed into school activities, which in turn inform students' written assignments and subsequent study.

The Open University's postgraduate program offers a primary course and seven secondary ones: music, English, history, modern language (French), design and technology, science, and mathematics. It also provides electronic conferences for each area, which complement the work of the mentors. Conference titles ("Salle de Francais," "the Design and Technology Workshop," or "English Room") are linguistic extensions of FirstClass's visual, desktop metaphor of a university campus.

Subject conferences vary in style and organization although all have a read-only bulletin board with information about publications and media events as well as debate about new developments in the field. The academic specialist who writes and updates the subject-specific course materials also organizes and moderates each conference. Moderators attempt to develop a philosophy and environment that reflects the best practice of their respective subject departments in U.K. schools. The moderator of the "English Room," for example, aims to acknowledge and build on cultural and linguistic diversity; encourage an enthusiasm for and sharing of literature; and stimulate a critical, questioning approach to media, texts, and ideas in general—all important concerns for English teachers. All conferences provide a nonjudgmental environment. Moderators collect arguments and develop discussion, encourage students

to set agendas, and ensure an exchange of classroom strategies and teaching materials. Like the tutors, they combine the roles of facilitator and teacher.

Many conferences provide folders of teaching ideas and resources. In the “English Room,” for example, you can access the complete works of Shakespeare, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the original *Beowulf*, and *The History of the English Language*. Various satellite conferences are also available, such as debates about the relationship between mathematics and science, or an analysis of media education (an area new to many students) led by a guest lecturer.

Discussion in the specialist areas differs. The comments of those studying French, for example, are most commonly advice on lexical items or explanations on usage; conversation is less frequent, and students tend not to use one another’s names. Students of English, on the other hand, initiate controversial debate, are frequent users of anecdotes, and use first names as a matter of course (Leach and Swarbrick 1996).

From Novice Teacher to Expert

Conferencing enables students to have access to a rich variety of people, activities, and resources. Activities have included correspondence among students in schools separated by distance and culture and debates on issues such as gender in the teaching of reading, the use of calculators in mathematics, and teaching with French as the target language.¹ Over a two-month period, discussion in the English conference alone included references to 140 individual texts or authors, ranging from Spenser’s sixteenth-century poem, “The Faerie Queen,” to contemporary media texts and teenage “point horror” (a series of horror stories). Some students have produced a collaborative online newsletter using graphics and photographs with a cross-curriculum edition on drama. The curriculum encourages analyses of pupil case studies; for example, students recently discussed a bilingual pupil’s progress in history class.

Conferencing also provides informal “meeting places” for students working at a distance:

Going into a conference at first, it’s just a list of messages, yet each has its own atmosphere, its own rules. In the student ‘bar,’ (sic) we never discuss education, politics, religion, or sports. It’s an 18-month-long joke! I couldn’t have survived the course without the opportunity for this informal support as well as serious study.

¹ *Target language* is a term used in Britain meaning teaching substantially through the medium of the language being studied—even with beginners.

Students' evaluations illustrate their views on the purposes of FirstClass:

Support in the course itself: "I use FirstClass because it's something related to the course, which I can accomplish in 3–20 minutes (not normally a useful block of study time)."

Study support: "I have drawn some relief from finding that others are in the same boat with regard to overload."

Discussion of school experiences: "I have traded ideas for teaching, and this has stimulated further ideas for me."

Personal relationships: "I like private chat for meeting peers. Sometimes it is hard to have a strong sense of achievement or sense of humor when you're working alone."

Direct teaching: "I find direct contact with people, like the course team, is very helpful. They have been very supportive."

These comments demonstrate the interplay between the private and the professional, the course-related and the personal, and the affective and the cognitive aspects of the learner. The whole person is engaged. This is an evolving learning curriculum that is ongoing and experiential; as, for instance, students debate theory, engage in dialogues about classroom resources and planning, and discuss school problems. As students and teachers share their collective knowledge and experience, we see the creation and transformation of knowledge.

Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger's (1991) research with adult learners engaged in new learning situations has led them to focus on the social situation in which such learning takes place. They propose the concept of **legitimate peripheral participation**, a process of gradual involvement in **communities of practice** that is at first peripheral then increases in engagement and complexity. To become a full member, they explain, "requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, to 'old timers,' and to other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation" in communities of practice (p. 26).

From this perspective, becoming a teacher is not a one-person act but rather a process of increasing involvement in teaching communities. Our electronic system offers student teachers studying at a distance the opportunity for ongoing activity in such a community. Although it is a

virtual community, it enables expert practitioners—course writers, tutors, regional staff, managers, and administrators from many educational contexts—to work and relax alongside student teachers on a day-to-day basis throughout the course.

In a recent questionnaire to French and English Open University postgraduate students who are active in their subject conference, students rated “personal contact with other course members” highest as a purpose for using electronic conferencing, followed by “exchange of teaching ideas.” Of all FirstClass environments,² these students rated the subject conference highest. The questionnaire asked students to rank their reasons for using the subject conferences. Students of English rated “teaching materials and resources” highest, closely followed by “contact with other English specialists.” Modern Foreign Language students rated “contact with other linguists” highest, followed by “teaching and learning strategies.” The data also revealed that students seek out and value “expert” contributions by course team members and tutors.

² For example, Postgraduate Certificate of Education meeting room, regional bulletin board, regional conference, general chat, subject bulletin board, subject conference, tutor conference, and private chat.

These findings illustrate the concept of legitimate peripheral participation. Valuing personal contact most highly, many of the students seek it from the subject community to which they hope to belong. Subject conferences provide the opportunity for sharing between experienced practitioners and aspiring subject specialists. These students have chosen to participate in a subject-specific learning curriculum that is inseparable from social relations. In this sense, subject conferences have the characteristics of communities that enable participants to practice a variety of roles: the novice requesting basic information, the collaborator working alongside others to reflect on challenging school experiences, and the aspiring expert offering solutions to peers.

The concept of legitimate peripheral participation raises critical issues about access and the ways in which any system can exclude newcomers from participation and thus from learning. Electronic conferencing can create “out groups” just as surely as face-to-face contexts do. Specialist language can inhibit novice participation; more experienced, verbally assertive experts can be wearisome. What are the factors that discourage students from participation? What are the issues for non-native speakers of English, those who feel their own culture is disregarded, or those disempowered by specialist discourse? These are critical areas for research.

Questions for the Future

Through the secure environment of their various electronic conferences, novice teachers participate in the concerns of a community—the community of the school and the curriculum area within which they hope to become expert practitioners. Other education programs in the Open University, such as the Ph.D. and the M.A. in educational management, have begun to build on this experience. Undoubtedly, distinctive electronic communities will emerge with their own professional discourse and concerns. This raises important issues for teacher education:

- What range of opportunities should we develop that will best contribute to an effective learning curriculum?
- Can conferencing assist in the process of defining and developing the critical area of “subject knowledge for teaching?”
- How can we build on student experiences to explore and address concerns about access?
- What should the role of moderators be in this process?

Although electronic communities may operate using the metaphors of the real world, they can never replace it. Yet the environment described here provides a secure setting in which novice teachers may practice their emerging skills. It may also provide models for the kind of learning communities our students will establish when they become teachers. In the words of one student:

I leave the course with this vision of an ideal teacher in front of me ... the kind with antennae for mischief before it happens, an embracing sense of humor, and a feel for the subject that will enable both the eager pupil and the reluctant.

Source:

Leach, Jenny. 1996. “Teacher Education—Online!” *Educational Leadership* 54(3). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Va.