

10: An English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teacher education blog

Name and role

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Background

Kirklees College is a large FE college in West Yorkshire, created from a merger between Huddersfield Technical College and Dewsbury College. Dewsbury College has a history of running ESOL teacher education and from May 2008 offered the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA) course as a dual qualification: firstly as the internationally recognised qualification to teach EFL abroad and secondly as the first stage towards becoming a qualified ESOL teacher in the UK.

While the majority of trainees on the CELTA are planning a career in ESOL teaching in the UK, a number of trainees have successfully gained employment in private language school abroad.

From May 2008 – July 2009 three CELTA courses ran. All the trainers are experienced ESOL teachers and have an interest in using technology creatively with language learners. Therefore we were all keen to support the trainee teachers in exploring the use of technology in the classroom, both in terms of their own teaching and also as a tool within the CELTA course itself. Over the three courses two blogs and one wiki were set up and their effectiveness in supporting the trainees was evaluated. The result of this evaluation was that the initial aim to provide a space for trainees to communicate with each other, as well as the trainers, outside the class, was not fulfilled effectively.

Two more CELTA courses ran 2009-2010, where a Moodle VLE was developed. The use of blogs and wikis were not possible during this year due to stringent blocks on internet access in the newly merged college. It was not until Oct 2010 when the current two CELTA courses were due to start that another class blog was set up.

Intended outcome(s)

This class blog was set up to develop 'a group site where we can all share and discuss ideas and issues outside of the CELTA classroom.'

The challenge

The biggest challenge that I have addressed in my practice as Course Tutor for the CELTA course since the first course ran from May 2008, was how to support trainees to communicate and collaborate with each other outside of the class hours.

A second challenge was about how I could communicate effectively with the trainees outside of the class. During 2009-2010 when I was first becoming familiar with the VLE, I used the news forum to communicate with the trainees, update them of any changes, send reminders, etc. This became a replacement for the blogs and wiki that had been used in previous courses. This was very much one way communication, trainer to trainee, and feedback from the trainees was that they were never sure when to log into the VLE to check for these updates between the weekly classes, as the college system was unable to provide email updates to private (ie non-college) email addresses.

In May 2010 I went to a conference on technology and teacher education and this where I was introduced to Twitter as a CPD tool and Posterous Spaces as a useful class blog service. The user friendly nature of Posterous Spaces really appealed as a way to address the challenges described above. There was no subscription needed and email updates were sent automatically. For these reasons I chose Posterous Spaces as the class blog for the new CELTA courses starting in October 2010. The VLE would continue to be used for course documentation and classroom based activities.

Established practice

Having evaluated various technologies with previous CELTA courses I felt that the VLE predominantly provided a valuable space to share course and lesson documents, and had some useful features for use in the classroom, such as the forum and wiki features. Having used blogs with CELTA trainees, ESOL tutors and ESOL students I felt that the most successful use of blogs had been achieved with the ESOL students and that this was because their class blogs showed student created content which is where I believe that technology can be most effective. Therefore, when I heard about the Posterous Spaces service I thought this could be useful tool to create a classblog for CELTA trainees. It would provide a space for the trainers to share and update with the trainees, as well as provide an opportunity for trainee-trainee collaboration and discussion.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

The CELTA is a classroom based programme, with trainees having to complete 6 hours of Teaching Practice (TP) with ESOL students. Trainees have always been actively encouraged to use technology in their own teaching, which has predominantly involved the use of IWB, whether this is with the IWB software, PowerPoint or to show images or YouTube clips, etc. This use of technology inside the classroom was modelled within the taught sessions of the CELTA, where the trainers developed their own sessions using these technologies.

As a practitioner I was very keen to use technology to support the wider learning opportunities outside the classroom as well as inside it, and I brought my experience of using blogs with ESOL students to the teacher training course. So for me, the benefit of using the Posterous Spaces site is that I know I can post something easily, through my email, and be confident that everyone on the course will get notification of this update. They can then very easily respond to this by simply replying to the email, if they wanted. I also know that this update is saved in a central place (i.e. the blog) which can be referred to at any time. When I find something interesting on the web, I know I can very easily send the link to the blog to provide up to date, relevant wider reading opportunities to the trainees.

For the learners, they have several choices. When an email notification arrives they can choose to read it there and then, read it later or delete it. They can respond or not. They can go to the main blog page and catch up with any posts at any time. They can engage with the discussions by reading them or by responding. As a teacher trainer I feel that I am giving my learners wider opportunities to engage in the course and their learning.

Key points for effective practice

Points for other practitioners to note include:

- Use a service that utilises email, with no lengthy subscription needed. Set up the blog before or at the beginning of the course so that it becomes a recognised and accepted part of the course.
- Be willing to engage in the blog through adding updates about the course as well as subject relevant content.
- Be willing to read and comment on student posts
- Be prepared to be surprised.

The biggest surprise for me (so far) was, when coming up to half way through the course, one trainee added a post about how she was struggling with the course. As a trainer I wasn't too sure about how to deal with this. She had chosen to put this into the public arena and so I felt my reply should go into the same space, but I did spend a lot of time thinking about this. Through this delay other trainees were given to the opportunity to respond to her. All their comments were positive and reassuring, so that as the trainer I was able to post that I agreed with everyone's comments and added that myself and the other tutor were always available if she wanted to talk privately about anything. By the time the class met again she'd posted that she was feeling better, that posting about her concerns had helped and she chatted to both trainers briefly during break.

Conclusions and recommendations

I believe that there are two key elements to creating a successful class blog. Firstly, the fact that the Posterous service is easy to use, there is no need for a subscription to engage with it and that it utilises email effectively. Secondly, the engagement by the tutor is a key element to its success. The tutor needs to take an active role in participating in blog posts, either through adding links, photos and audio from classroom activities or responding to trainee posts.

I also think that setting up the blog a couple of weeks before the first class helped; once the trainees were enrolled onto the course they were emailed copies of the pre-course tasks at the same time as being added to the site as contributors. After the first two welcome posts from me the next post was from a trainee who said:

"hi all, new to this and only 5 minutes before mad men starts..just giving it a quick go. Hope to see you all later. "

This post received 13 replies. Trainees started introducing themselves (some had previously met at group interview), asking questions about pre-course tasks and even adding links to language related web pages.

I also wonder how much the evolution of the internet is reflected in the success of this class blog. Social networking is a more acceptable feature of the internet and having an online identity is becoming more and more common place and as I engage in social networking through twitter and various blog sites I feel I am in a strong position to offer up to date information to my trainees.

Additional information: Sources

<http://kccelta.posterous.com/> - current class blog (courtesy of the current cohort of students).