

## Reflections on improving teacher performance through online learning

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**Abstract:** The Internet is often used to transmit information on a wide scale, but online learning by itself may not adequately address the professional development needs of teachers. How may online technologies be used from an overseas course to improve teachers' performance through fostering understanding, reflection, collaboration, and inquiry?

In this paper, I shall present my reflections on how online professional learning with the Harvard Graduate School of Education has influenced my thinking about teaching practices and the levels of engagement that can be brought about to foster engagement in the classroom. The primary focus is on how professional learning from the online course has led teachers to re-craft the way they design their lessons in the classroom. How online technologies can potentially improve teaching performance by fostering understanding, collaborations, reflection and inquiry is analyzed. How networked technologies can promote learning to such an extent that it can have a positive impact in the classroom will be shown. I shall make the case that online learning can thus help teachers achieve the Singapore's Ministry of Education paradigm of 'Teach Less Learn More' while simultaneously nurturing in students a passion for life-long learning. The presenter will give examples of the online professional development, by delineating the goals, principles, implementation processes, and results gained from the subject area of Geography.

**Keywords:** online technologies, teaching performance, collaborations, fosters understanding, reflections

### Introduction

In October 2005, Victoria School embarked on a plan using the 'Teaching for Understanding' (TfU) framework, initiated by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, as a school-wide pedagogy from 2006 onwards. To acquire a practical sense of the TfU framework in action from WIDE World, (WIDE World is an innovative online professional development program run, designed and taught by experienced instructors from the Harvard Graduate School of Education for practicing teachers), teachers across subject areas complete a Wide-scale Interactive Development for Educators course that focuses on TfU from Sep to Dec 05. This is a 12-week experience of rigorous professional development that directly helps teachers integrate the TfU framework into their teaching practices. In this paper, I shall reflect on how the learning of the TfU framework via an online professional development program has helped teachers to teach better that is "to engage our learners and prepare them for life, rather than teach more for tests and examinations" (MOE work plan seminar 2005)

## **Rationale for Adopting Online Professional Development for Teachers**

Collaborative approaches to online distance learning were limited by the cost and sophistication of the technology not too long ago. However, with advances in computer technologies and telecommunications, it is now possible to offer collaborative learning experiences, in the like of WIDE World programs, in a cost-effective manner. These advances coincide with a general shift in educational theory to a collaborative constructivist conception of learning, which recognizes the learner's need to share control and assume responsibility for constructing meaning in the context of a peer group (Anderson & Garrison 1998).

### **How may online technologies be used from an overseas course to improve teachers' performances through the processes of fostering understanding, reflection, collaboration and inquiry?**

#### **1. Platform for interactions and collaborations**

While online learning offers many advantages over class-based learning, the researcher is cognizant that problems do exist. One such problem is the attrition rate of online learners, brought about in large part by a sense of isolation (Adelskold, Aleklett, Axelsson, & Blomgren, 1999). She found that the collaborative learning approach ameliorates this sense of isolation. Collaborative learning on WIDE World involves the teachers in social interaction, as groups work together to solve problems.

In the design of the online course, there was a folder known as the 'workspace' for teams and teachers found it user-friendly. It was where the team reporter for the session could pick up the posts from team members and collate his report for his assignment. Team members could read each others' posts before they went public. This was where teachers could respond to each other in private and reversion their posts until they were ready for them to be posted publicly.

More than that, teachers were pleasantly surprised at how quickly the coach responded. The researcher's team closed the day by making a public post and next morning, they received a response that shaped their thinking and provoked further thought without them meeting their coaches face to face. To a large extent, learners feel connected and are cognitively engaged and there exists a community that supports and encourages ideas to be critically analyzed and meaning negotiated.

The discourse is purposeful and focused. The coach is able to interject new ideas, diagnose misconceptions, and move the discussion toward resolution that may or may not be predictable. According to Garrison & Anderson (2003), the role of the coach "goes beyond a neutral weaving of participants' contributions" The researcher saw clarifying, explaining

and summarizing as legitimate functions of the coach and felt that as long as this direct intervention is constructive, open communication is not threatened.

As learners can moderate their discussion in small groups, it actively engages most learners in a committed and free manner. The key is for learners to report back their progress or conclusions. In this way, they receive appropriate feedback from all participants and confirmation of their understanding. By providing this increased responsibility and control, learners are encouraged to become more self-directed during the course.

## **2. Fosters understanding of each other**

The initial online induction was through interacting with team members from overseas. Teachers began to realize that there were others beyond our little island state in far away places like Scotland and Europe who were interested in the same professional learning. Simple short introductions generated responses which built up the beginnings of camaraderie and online relationships. What struck home was the virtual reality in which teachers learnt when different ones informed about the snowy weather in contrast to the damp rainy season of October in our country. Though separated by geographical distance, through the Internet seemed so near.

Through the course interactions, teachers began to realize that teaching was not done very differently in other countries too; that there were common areas for improvement in the way they teach. This awareness helped them realize that they could be open about their interactions. Interestingly enough, they seemed to approach lessons sometimes in similar ways. At times, they realized that other communities had practices they could learn from. That became the common underlying understanding upon which they could be more open about their discussions.

In this virtual reality, the online platform has enabled course participants to develop some trust among themselves, so that they were freer with their interactions despite not having met each other. As a form of 'etiquette', the Ladder of Feedback is an online engagement 'protocol' of the dos and don'ts for online communication when giving feedback so that information, constructive feedback and reflections of one's own learning can be achieved in a sincere, candid, collegial and non-judgmental or threatening way. The photograph of course participants next to their posts made the interaction more real as the face told course participants who they were interacting with. Teachers, though separated spatially, gain a sense of togetherness as they share and clarify ideas, actively and cooperatively contribute to solve problems (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000).

In the process, teachers also discover that in order for teams to succeed, certain member qualities must be present. Among those desirable qualities are an ability to clarify and

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commit to goals, an interest in other team members beyond the task at hand, a desire to confront conflict positively, an understanding of others' perspectives, a commitment to make decisions inclusively, the valuing of individual differences, a willingness to freely contribute ideas and encourage team members, an open and honest evaluation of team performance, and a readiness to celebrate accomplishments (Robbins & Finley, 1995).

### **3. Fosters understanding of the course**

The way the TfU course was designed has deepened an understanding of what TfU is about – how to develop a deeper understanding of what is taught. The way the course unfolds is an example of how course participants can develop understanding of TfU. The online platform allows for 'messaging about' activities, followed by individual, then group discussions and then the self reflections. The very design as an example is a very powerful tool to develop understanding in an authentic way.

One 'cultural' factor of interest was that there was some discomfort as teachers attempted the first 'messaging about' activity at the beginning of the course. The question that they had to attempt was "what is understanding and how does it develop?" We were told, "Don't worry if you are unclear about a lot and want to say 'I don't know' Just think onto the page". No Asian would want to expose their inner thoughts by thinking onto the page lest they make a mistake and 'lose face.' It will take a lot to salvage such a shameful situation. Perhaps Americans are freer in their expressions and course participants had to break out of their mental frames and adjust accordingly.

Being efficient and wanting to get on with the right thing is very much a trait of our society and the impatience we felt with this 'messaging about' activity left us wondering whether the assignment was worth the effort. But this is where high levels of engagement in the lesson began. With the 'messaging about' activity, it was alright if the answer is not altogether correct as it is the beginning of a journey of discovery, but thoughtfulness was what the assignment required.

In one messaging about activity, teachers were engaged in somewhat like an online forum where all were requested to make posts without the need for identifying themselves, and at the same time it incorporated elements of thinking skills with instructions such as 'compare' and 'synthesize.' From this, one can understand how intriguing a 'messaging about' activity can be in engaging pupils in thoughtful ways.

### **4. Develops communities of practice**

Teachers work in isolation in the classroom. Developing online communities challenges traditional ways of developing lessons. By going online, the teacher can now communicate his insights and private questions and test them against the views of his peers at the click of a

button. The technology allows teachers to transcend physical space and in this very convenient manner facilitates the scope of his practice as he taps into the shared thinking of others.

Education is both a personal and public learning experience. The challenge of educators is to link the properties of asynchronous online learning with the ability to create communities of learning and inquiry that integrates the cognitive, social and teaching presence to meet individual and societal needs. The asynchronous property of online learning has integrated the interactive and reflective characteristics to enhance cognitive presence beyond that in even small face-to-face groups. True communities of practice are possible through collaborative and reflective communication. The end product is independent thinkers nurtured in a collaborative community of inquiry.

Barriers are further broken down as the online technology crosses international boundaries and reaches communities of practice in other countries. For example, at points in the course, teachers were required to critique and provide feedback on the lessons designed by their peers overseas. This also provides a platform for tapping into global communities of practice.

### **5. Develops reflective practice**

According to Dewey (1933), the ultimate challenge is how “shall we treat subject matter ... so that it will rank as material of reflective inquiry, not as ready-made intellectual pabulum to be accepted and swallowed as if it were something bought at a shop” (p. 257). In contrast to the spontaneous verbal communication of face-to-face learning contexts, the asynchronous and largely written communication of asynchronous online learning would appear to provide the conditions that encourage if not require reflection. In addition to providing time to reflect, the permanent and precise nature of posting written communication online also allows if not requires reflection to interpret and construct meaning.

Reflective practice serves to correct and make us critical of ourselves so that we can revise our thinking and teaching practices. It helps us construct new descriptions, makes new sense of situations of uncertainty by reflective inquiry, and finds new ways of setting the problem.

That which is intuitive can now be articulated. Like a scientific art of research, it develops in one the ability to discover the new, through firstly, the peer review where we are instructed to “respond” to another team’s post and then through self review. The reflective practice via the online platform has helped develop teacher capacity by bringing to the surface knowledge from within. For Dewey (1933)<sup>4</sup>, reflection has to do with the state of learning and one’s own mind (knowledge and strategies; to know and use). Learning was inducing reflection

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through questions and actively monitoring this inquiry for the purpose of achieving understanding. Tacit knowledge is made explicit.

One outcome of reflective inquiry of the TfU course is that teachers began to rework their approaches to teaching practices upon believing its benefits of engaged learning. They accept that changes are necessary although they agonized over using more time to get through a unit. Although initial time to adjust is heavy, in the long term, time is saved.

Another outcome of reflective inquiry is that teachers are more willing to experiment and explore to make lessons more creative and exciting for the students. Teachers are more willing to conduct demonstrations in class although it consumes more time and to discuss and work on a project over a sustained period of time. Overall they make learning more effective.

### **How has the online professional development influenced the way we view our thinking about our teaching practices and the levels of engagement we bring about to foster engagement in the classroom?**

The presenter will give an example of online professional development, by delineating the goals, principles, implementation processes, and results gained from online learning as applied to Geography. The statements below are with reference to the Geography unit entitled, 'the location and growth of settlements' that was developed by the Humanities team.

#### **Results**

With the online platform for learning provided by the TfU course, course requirements which could be accessed online was not confined to place and time. For example, I was working from Shanghai where I was holidaying and contributed to the postings from there. So learning took place despite the geographical distance and differences in time. Learning was continual.

Next, the online platform has added a new dimension to teacher performance. Most forums are about social conversations, but now in this course, the online platform has enabled me to engage in meaningful discussions such as intellectual exchanges with colleagues from the school as well as the teams from our overseas community. This exposure gave me the idea to create blogs from which my students post their works for discussions. Instead of the online platform provided by Harvard, the parallel mode of functioning was the blog platform for student and teacher comments. I also tapped on how instructions and deadlines could be given on the blog. The learning community were my students who were encouraged to comment on their peers' work, while the teacher took on the role of facilitator of the discussions and moderator of ideas.

The benefit comes with the right community of users who are committed to the blog so that there can be intellectual growth of ideas.

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## Challenges

The researcher acknowledges that there are challenges to the effectiveness of online learning in contributing to enhanced teacher performance. Firstly, there is that premise that teachers must believe that an online platform can serve learning well despite its lack of a face to face environment. To this end, where an online course requires all participants to put their individual photographs alongside their online postings is commendable since it puts a 'face' to a name and a virtual cyberspace meeting on the forum becomes a meeting and sharing by real people and not just 'names'.

Secondly, another factor that is not easy to manage will be cultural differences both in terms of norms and expectations. In doing an online course with American educators through an American Online Learning Course, we honestly felt a little uneasy when we were encouraged to write down what we thought about something and told not to worry too much whether it was 'right' or 'wrong' and submit it as an online post. Our reticence and unease at this task may stem from differences in our Asian culture, as opposed to American culture, where it is a 'norm' not to say more than what is 'known' and that which can be 'substantiated'. Expressing one's view, without fear or favour, and not having to worry too much whether it is 'right' or 'wrong' is consistent with American culture whose guiding tenet is 'freedom of speech.' This will then be both a cultural norm and expectation of American coaches and educators. Hence the need for mutual awareness, timely clarifications, patience in wait-time for responses and the giving of encouragement and assurances by one culture to be met by the gracious acceptance, appreciation and reciprocal response by the other.

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