Chapter 3
Blogging for Effective Teacher Education Course in English as a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

Two years ago, as teacher educators, the authors decided to integrate the use of blogs into their practice in order to contribute to the development of an understanding of the knowledge base related to the processes of teaching and learning English as a Second Language (ESL) and provide their teacher candidates with a space to critically reflect collectively and individually on course content. In this chapter, the authors use discourse analysis (Johnston, 2008) of semi-structured interviews conducted with these teacher candidates to explore how they use and perceive blogs within a course specifically focused on ESL teaching methods. This allows the authors to problematize the notion of technological integration in teaching and learning and complexify the notion of blogs as democratic spaces (Kuzu, 2007). On the basis of this analysis, the authors formulate four recommendations to guide teacher educators who are working in similar contexts.

INTRODUCTION

This case study took place at a Faculty of Education in a large Canadian research university. This institution has a history of teacher education excellence going back to the 1800s and has garnered numerous awards for its humanistic approach to education. The Faculty offers diverse undergraduate and graduate programs designed for the development of practitioners who are able to critically address current issues in education.

Every year, about 750 students attend the baccalaureate program in education in order to obtain their provincial certification to teach in public schools where English is the language of instruction at the primary and secondary levels. The age range of these teacher candidates is between 23-40 years. Although most of these teacher candidates have no prior teaching experience a significant number have taught abroad or in other jurisdictions within

Canada. The program is focused on developing teacher candidates who are knowledgeable, competent and reflective professionals. It is therefore crucial for teacher candidates to be aware of how to concretely and critically connect theory with their own practice.

The full-time eight-month intensive program of study for this certification consists of 36 course credits and a mandatory ten week practicum (5 weeks in the fall and 5 weeks in the winter). In 2008-2009 the tuition paid by teacher candidates in this program amounts to approximately $6,000 (Canadian) excluding ancillary fees and living expenses.

The course which is the focus of this case was one of the optional classes that teacher candidates could attend. It was a methodology course in English as a Second Language (ESL) worth 1.5 credits. The class met for three and a half hours once a week for 5 weeks. Four sections of the course were offered each year, two in the fall and two in the winter terms. Approximately 35 students enrolled in each. In this study, we report the findings related to three of these sections.

SETTING THE STAGE

In 2005, one of the goals of the university five-year academic strategic plan was to focus on learning that was focused on innovation and excellence. More specifically, one of the objectives was to increase the use of new technologies such as video conferencing, multimedia, and electronic portfolios. Since then, the university has invested a substantial amount of money on the installation of these technologies throughout campus and the provision of necessary technological assistance. There are more than 30 computer labs on campus and over 1,000 computers available to students. Most of the campus is now wireless and there are about 90 multimedia classrooms on campus equipped with Windows and Mac computers, internet connectivity, VHS videocassette players,

DVD players and LCD projectors. In case of emergency, the professors have access to telephones within the classrooms. Professors and students can also easily borrow a variety of multimedia equipments and download a multitude of software from university websites. Workshops and professional development courses focused on technology are also offered on a regular basis. Moreover, professors and students can access online course Web sites as well as other e-learning resources through the University's Virtual Campus.

In step with the rest of the campus, the Faculty of Education has embraced new technologies in significant ways for the last five years. The Faculty is currently expanding the number of multimedia rooms and has installed Smart Board technology in each one of its classrooms and meeting venues. Expertise in technology has become a major criterion in the hiring of professors, who are increasingly expected to integrate it into their course offerings and curricula. This is especially true in terms of on-line teaching innovations. Moreover, professors are increasingly expected to make use of more readily available equipment such as mobile computer cabinets, laptops and LCD projectors through the Faculty Resource Centre.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have changed the traditional thinking about teaching and learning and it is now imperative for teachers to recognize that a new generation of computer literate learners craves intelligent and sophisticated learning resources and support from their instructors (Wang et al, 2008). It is then not surprising that the need for teachers who serve as models in using ICT in the classroom has increased (Kuzu, 2007). It is within this institutional context that we decided to integrate the use of blogs within our teaching practice.

The word weblog was coined by John Berger in 1997. It refers to a web-based tool that enables individuals to create interactive web pages (Rachaël, 2005). Blogs provide a space where writers (e.g. bloggers) can post their ideas and readers can add their comments to the blog content. According to

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