Chapter 48

Listening and Learning through ICT with Digital Kids:
Dynamics of Interaction, Power, and Mutual Learning between Student Teachers and Children in Online Discussion

Dianne Forbes
University of Waikato, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The following case reports on the involvement of children in online discussion with student teachers within initial teacher education in New Zealand. The focus is on listening to children, with wider implications for listening as a professional capability extending beyond the teaching profession. In this case, student teachers and pupils communicated online, exchanging ideas, debating, and engaging in co-construction of understandings around the place of Information and Communication Technologies in teaching and learning. The case explores the interaction and social dynamics observed and mutual learning experienced, with links to theoretical perspectives including constructivist and democratic pedagogies. Implications for improved practice are considered. It is argued that there is a need to explicitly teach listening skills and to encourage professionals in training to listen to clients. It is argued that the online environment is an excellent training ground for developing effective listening skills as it lends itself to reflective practice and to meta-listening awareness.

BACKGROUND

The Bachelor of Teaching (Mixed Media Programme) is a distance education degree offered by the University of Waikato, School of Education, in Hamilton, New Zealand. The degree results in professional accreditation as a primary (elementary) school teacher in NZ, so that graduates are qualified as beginning teachers of pupils aged 5-14 years. The Mixed Media Programme (MMP) has been operating since 1997, and is designed to cater for tertiary students whose commitments prevent them from par-

ticipating in a traditional on-campus teacher education programme (http:www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/mmp). MMP students are geographically dispersed throughout the country, often from rural areas, and complete their initial teacher education at a distance, by studying online using Moodle as a Learning Management System (http://www.moodle.org.nz/). Online study is combined with time spent in base schools in each student's local area. Students spend one day each week in a base school, where they receive support from an experienced teacher, and have opportunities to observe and participate in school life, and to teach. Students travel to on campus meetings several times a year, and complete a block practicum of 4-8 weeks each year in order to gain intensive teaching experience.

In 2002 the MMP programme was recognised by the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards (New Zealand), for excellence in innovation. At that time, the programme was offered via ClassForum, a customised elearning system. More recently, in 2008, the university transitioned to Moodle as a Learning Management System. Within either ClassForum, or more recently Moodle, students' online study usually requires participation in asynchronous online discussion, alongside completion of assignment work, across a range of curriculum and professional areas of study.

The case presented here reports on the experience of involving children in online discussion with student teachers within the Bachelor of Teaching (MMP), with a focus on listening to children, and with wider implications for listening as a professional capability, extending beyond the teaching profession.

SETTING THE STAGE

As a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Professional Studies in Education, I have taught in the Mixed Media Programme (MMP) since 2002, coordinating classes focused on professional practice in the context of teaching, learning theory, pedagogy, assessment, and learning through Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

This case represents an authentic educational example, stemming from an initial experience in 2004, when I first invited 12-year old pupils to join the MMP teacher education students in online discussion. As a result of the success and mutual learning experienced during this initial trial, I have involved children (aged between 10 and 15 years) in online discussion at least twice a year during the past five years.

The case focuses on one instance in which middle school children were involved in online discussion with first year teacher education students. The objective of the exercise was to encourage the class of fifty-seven teacher education students to listen to a group of nineteen year 8 pupils (12 year olds). The focus of the discussion was on Information and Communication Technology (ICT), how ICT can be used to enhance learning both within the classroom and outside of school as we know it, and how teachers and children might learn together through ICT. For two weeks, the student teachers and pupils communicated online, exchanging ideas, debating and engaging in co-construction of understandings around the place of ICT in teaching and learning.

This chapter explores the interaction and social dynamics observed between the two groups, focusing in particular on how the student teachers "listened" to the children in the context of the online discussion. Key points are illustrated by quotes from the participants in the discussion, which serve to bring the interaction dynamics to life. The dynamics of power are also examined, along with comment on how the subject matter and the online environment may have impacted on the distribution of power between the adults and the children. Mutual learning experienced by both parties is highlighted, with links to theoretical perspectives including constructivist and democratic pedagogies. Finally, implications for

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