Chapter 7

Acting and Interacting:
Teacher Narratives and the Building of Global Community

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the way in which an online discussion forum into critical incidents impacts on the professional knowledge and self-esteem of teachers engaged in in-service development on an MA in Education programme. The chapter shows how the online environment enabled teachers to share concerns and values about their profession and to recognise connections between apparently widely different cultural settings. The online discussion supported the teacher's individual actions and provided structured opportunity for teachers to arrive at action plans for their own development. The chapter explores the generative principles which made these activities work. It also considers the relationship between individual action and its capacity to impact on students, colleagues and institutions.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores a process of guided interaction through an e-environment between UK-based and worldwide-based teachers. The purpose of the interaction, and the focus of this study, is the question: how can teachers learn from reflection into their own practice and the practices of others? How can and does this reflection lead to change? And how can this change be framed and supported within an online environment?

The process of interaction starts with the sharing of critical incidents in teachers' professional lives. In the sense researched and defined by Tripp (1993), a *critical incident* is the interpretation of any event as significant (p. 8). It is professional judgment that determines whether or not an event carries profound implications and could be the stimulus for change. The capacity to identify significance and respond to it has been seen as a key factor in the development of reflective practice. Griffin's research (2003) revealed that critical incident analysis amongst pre-service teacher trainees "increased the degree of... orientation toward growth and inquiry." (p. 207).

Most of the research, however, focuses on critical incident analysis as a study of 'self' in relation to core values, rather than as a vehicle for the study of 'other' and the identification of patterns and shared causes.

This chapter considers the development of reflection as a shared enterprise in which teachers learn from one another. Since the teachers in this study lived and worked across four continents of the world, an aspect of this learning entailed the development of intercultural competences, amongst these what Byram (1997) called *savoir etre:* "a willingness to suspend belief in one's own meanings and behaviours, and to analyse them from the viewpoint of the others with whom one is engaging" (p. 34). This specific sense of learning with and through others is a core learning outcome embedded in the activity, providing an additional dimension to reflective cycles which focus largely on individual action.

The chapter traces four distinct phases in the activity cycle: a socialization stage for 'meeting and greeting', an exchange of critical incident narratives, group interpretation of these narratives in order to arrive at common statements about core values, and finally accounts of individual actions emerging as an outcome of the reflection. The chapter explores if and how these activities led to meaningful change in the teachers, according to their own evaluation. It also arrives at an analysis of task design features which enhance dialogue between learners, and which maximise diversity as resource and opportunity for shared learning.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the online environment has been theorized and deconstructed through multiple micro-studies of online learning in practice. Whilst most of these studies have related to students in content-focused programmes such as business (e.g. Rice, 2009), science (Haigh, 2009), language (Loewen and Reissner, 2009; Blake, 2009) a small

number have related to online learning as part of teacher development. Duncan and Barnett's study (2009), for example, focuses on online learning as the teacher skill itself to be developed, and arrives at the view that online learning needs to be more embedded into teacher education programmes. O'Connor (2009) describes the role of video observations as part of an online course for pre-service teachers. This study showed that the pre-service teachers arrived at their own insights into good practice which were as sound and varied as those which might have been reached through trainer intervention.

These studies, whilst specific to teacher education, connect with those from a wide range of other subject disciplines, which explore the online environment 'in the round' from the perspectives of the learner, the group, the task, and the technicalities of the environment.

Many ask the question, explicitly or otherwise, what makes a learner successful in the online environment? Haigh (2007) showed that in her context with science students at the University of Wisconsin, online students were more disposed to making a success of the e-environment than their face to face counterparts. They reported themselves as being "more comfortable than face-to-face students communicating electronically, had better access to the Internet, and reported better typing skills." (Haigh, 2007 p. 93). What also characterizes these learners is the belief that the online environment will be of value to them – a feature noted also by So (2009). So's study (2009) with graduate level students found that students participated more actively in a voluntary discussion environment than in teacher-guided ones. Here, the learner is prepared to see the study process as collective and collaborative, a process that distinguishes the online discussion forum from the traditional learning environment (Jewell, 2005). This was also noted in Frederickson, Reed and Clifford's (2005) study, where students engaging in an online course reported a higher satisfaction with their engagement with peers, than with their teachers

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