

Online Teacher Training from the Comfort of your own Home.

In an interview way back in 1999, David Bowie explained to a perplexed Jeremy Paxman about how the internet, still young but growing, was going to bring upon its shoulders a profound global change, breaking down the barriers that separated the artist and the audience in terms of his own work, "*where the interplay between the user and the provider will be so in simpatico that it's going to crush our ideas of what mediums are all about.*" Paxman, the sceptical journalist, saw the internet as simply a tool but Bowie, who was already distributing his music and reaching out to fans online, saw a coming revolutionary battleground, both exhilarating and terrifying in his own words.

The ever-innovative Bowie lived to see many of his bold predictions become a reality, passing away in 2016, a year much noted for featuring an abnormal amount of celebrity deaths, a fact all the more publicised by the very tool he had gushed about pre-millennium. His claim concerning the evolution in the relationship between the provider and user is certainly one to look at in terms of our more everyday jobs. The explosion in online services has made intercontinental communication almost instantaneous and jobs such as teaching and teacher training have a global reach, giving classrooms planet-sized possibilities. Indeed, for certain jobs associated with intercontinental travel such as English Language Teaching (ELT), it is becoming easier to train for these from the comfort of your own home.

Many of those working in ELT may start out teaching as a way of travelling and seeing the world, but a good few abandon the job as they return to their home countries to settle down. Others stay in the trade and settle in one of their ports of call, perhaps marrying and putting down roots there. The remainder may not fancy the idea of enhancing their prospects of promotion by spending an important chunk of their time heading off to another city or even another country, paying for accommodation and so forth in order to do a higher teaching diploma such as the DELTA in a face-to-face classroom. Therefore, the possibility of facilitating such a course online, in your pyjamas without even having to leave your house, must certainly be enticing and something educators should pay heed to as teaching becomes an increasingly online and technologically-related affair. Online facilitation of such a career-changing course may just entice a few of the leavers into staying in ELT too.

But is online training as effective as face-to-face study, especially when you think of the gremlins which still dwell within cyberspace? It can certainly be frustrating when trying to conduct a class with a language learner or even talking to a teacher trainer over Skype while the internet is on the blink. Furthermore, many complain of a superficiality in communication between people when online and, at times, online discussion forums in courses have been accused of having a lack of authentic interaction.

Take my own personal example for instance. I have been studying courses online almost constantly for the last eight years, having just finished a distance Masters in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages with Aston University in Birmingham, England, a city which I have yet to set foot in. I had

done a short pre-Primary teaching course with the Norwich Institute of Language Education, more commonly known as NILE, just previous to my dissertation stage. For the dissertation itself, I looked at the intended effects of online teaching, focusing on this NILE course which I and several colleagues in British Council Spain had completed. Again, the English town of Norwich is another place I have never visited. Anyway, colleagues who participated in my series of questionnaires and interviews generally reported themselves as being reasonably happy with course content and how it was transmitted to students, who were spread across several continents on the British Council network. Positively, participants spoke well of collective wikis, in which we had to add our own ideas for activities so as to create a base of ideas. The use of video and recording equipment was encouraged and generally commented upon in a positive manner too and I personally felt that these audio-visual elements could form the basis for observed teaching practice in the future.

A few voices felt that the use of online forums was, as I was previously warned, a little inauthentic as the course organisers obliged us to comment on at least two others' posts, and this felt quite superficial to some. However, in the course organisers' defence, I would say that this is sometimes necessary to kick-start interaction in a situation in which the participants are ostensibly together online but geographically isolated or chambered off from one another. I remember doing CELTA back in 2007, the Cambridge certificate which acts as a well-recognised preliminary English language teaching qualification, and a few of my peers used to lock themselves away and scowl at anyone who dared ask them for an opinion or a hand.

A lack of authentic communication between course participants can also exist in the world of face-to-face teaching. The question is, how do we make it more meaningful, especially online, as here is where much of our teaching and preparation to teach, is headed, not to mention positions in the worlds of arts and culture. As Paxman's tool and Bowie's revolutionary battlefield grows in size and influence, we must make it specifically more authentic. But does this authenticity lie in our attitudes to our learners and tutors as Bowie suggested, as opposed to the technology itself?

My personal attitude to classroom teaching has always been influenced by progressive educational specialists like the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997), who promoted a more egalitarian relationship between the students and the teacher. While this might be considered a little idealistic, especially if most of your students are younger learners, it would certainly be worth promoting in a classroom of adult trainee teachers, and the internet as an online agora might just be the place to exploit and develop it to the full. And the relationship between tutors and trainees, providers and users, might just become even more two-way in terms of teaching each other something new. Freire talked about dialogues being created through the teacher posing problems to students, thus making the learning process a shared responsibility between everyone in the classroom. But what would this look like in the online classroom, what activities would work best and what tools would facilitate it best? And importantly, how can learner or trainee attitudes be

transformed into something more affirmative, given that many are still of the attitude that they are there simply to learn from their tutors?

I would suggest collaborative projects between several students, organised into study groups of three or four with contributions from a course tutor, which would oblige the students to work together and communicate in a meaningful way. When I did the CELTA face-to-face way back then, we were put into study groups of four. While some preferred their own company during study, the majority of us found ourselves cooperating with each other, and this especially helped me as I had never stood up in front of a class of learners, whereas the others started the course with at least some teaching experience under their belts. While the NILE course had projects and activities in which we could produce videos, we did these alone. So for me, given that at times I have felt a touch of cabin fever while studying via internet, a collaborative project based on ideas generated from the wikis to which we added individual contributions could make online learning experiences less lonely. Collectively-written wikis in which trainees could strike out and add in another colour then negotiate the content's transformation through a video link or discussion board might produce something special in terms of shared outcomes. And course forums, or even social media groups like Facebook, would easily facilitate the discussion required for production.

Most people, however, do want to create something to call their own and the NILE course and my Masters study with Aston did indeed provide me with that opportunity. Trainees do need that opportunity so, to give teachers-in-training the opportunity to express themselves fully, discuss their ideas with peers and maybe even rob a few ideas, this type of editable wiki is required alongside discussion boards and plenty of supplementary reading or audio-visual content for ideas and methodology input.

The attitude of the online trainee towards the demands of online study should be dealt with sympathetically by the course coordinators and trainers at the beginning of the course, or even previous to the course kick-off. Since there are also those who are naturally more timid than others, they may benefit from a little coaching to make them more comfortable and confident in expressing their ideas when physically alone but in the company of others via cyberspace. These courses, especially in such a diverse context when trainees in Spain are sharing a platform with others in the Middle East or East Asia, are the perfect place to really open up debate and learn new teaching perspectives through discussion and simultaneous or subsequent document building. And that's really how Jeremy Paxman's simple tool has metamorphosed into David Bowie's global revolution. The ability to access and interact with geographically distant cultures in an instant, while the kids are asleep and you only have a few hours in the day to get a potentially career-changing piece of training done or simply for the love of learning, has become terrifyingly and exhilaratingly fast and accessible. And maybe, as the technology develops, we will come full circle and find ourselves once again doing face-to-face teaching and training, only this time on a global level and with holographic classrooms.

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