

Reflective Practices in Collaborative Intercultural e-Tutor Teams: A UK-Sino Case Study

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Abstract:

We review the use of an online shared journal in the tutor forum of an intercultural online course. We argue this represents a new methodological approach to collaborative reflective practice in action and on action. This is also an important response to the call by Boud (2006) to create reflective practices that recognise team work and a course context. We describe the use of this approach in an online course with a tutor team made of 3 Chinese and 3 UK tutors. The two major features of the changing context of practice are firstly those associated with its collective rather than individual nature, and secondly its multidisciplinary or often transdisciplinary character. (Boud 2006).

Introduction

Intercultural e-tutor teams are an emerging phenomenon of working online in distributed course teams. Individual and collective approaches to reflection are urgently required to support learning in such contexts. One practical solution based on our experience, is the use of shared online learning journals as a facilitator of collaborative reflection in action.

Intercultural online course teams have tutors often in different time zones and distant countries. Such collaborative tutoring is complex involving tutors working with the rest of the course team, with learning sets and with whole course groups. Tutors and participants construct an intercultural mosaic.

Tutors need to negotiate and implement a shared form of practice that is flexible enough to allow for differences amongst all concerned. The tutors work with different interests amongst participants and different patterns of interaction. In an intercultural context the practices of each tutor, their previous experiences and pedagogical heritage come together to create a hybrid online tutoring team. Good communication is therefore vital throughout the collaborative delivery of the online course.

Intercultural online team teaching has unique professional development needs. Some of these competencies are only just being discussed (see Bowskill et al, 2007). In order to function effectively it is important to develop reflective practice both individually and together. In this paper, we argue that shared learning journals are a new methodological approach.

Literature Review

There is an ample literature discussing the issues, processes and benefits of journal writing as part of reflective practice –both in and on action (see Boud, 2001 for a full discussion). Problems include the right conditions and context for writing. Barriers to writing include assessment, trust and the possible readership for the writing activity.

The Social & Course Context

More recently, Boud (2006) has argued that in "a world characterised by team working and cross-professional collaboration insufficient attention has been given to groups reflecting on common concerns (as distinct from the common practice of individual reflection in groups)" This idea of reflecting in courses and teams is a key part of our interest in this article.

Sharing Journals

Kerka (2002) notes the need for both individual reflection and group discussion in order to make learning journals effective at capturing reflection-in-action. Conway (1999) cites Usher, Bryant and Johnston (1997) in commenting on the relationship of journal writing being shared: "Successful reflective practice entails engaging in a continual rescripting of one's own practice, not in merely having it rescripted and played back by others. In 'practical' terms, keeping a journal (and sharing its content with others) is the key to this."

Sharing Journals Online

The use of online journals is described succinctly by Phipps: "E-journaling provides an opportunity for learners to express opinions, ideas, and concerns about the course materials that would not be shared otherwise." (Phipps, 2005). Elsewhere Andrusyszyn and Davie (1997) note: "Reflective journal writing encouraged learners to process what they were learning and make sense of it by sharing it with an audience". Andrusyszyn and Davie (1997) also noted 3 themes emerging from their study of interactive online journal writing. Firstly there was reflection as a personal process, as synthesis, and as a dialogical process. We can see that shared learning journals work in different ways and at individual and group levels.

Haberstroh et al (2005) used online journals to maintain contact between different professional trainees bringing them together "spatially and temporally" extending and complementing face to face discussion. Participants felt that writing had validated a shared experience and also that it made relationships more concrete amongst the participants. Other participants reported that it helped the group move beyond the surface into deeper issues.

King & LeRocco (2005) cited Chickering and Gamson (1987) agreeing that e-journaling "encourages contact between students and faculty, encourages active learning, provides prompt feedback, increases time on tasks, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning." The authors noted closer collaboration between tutor and student and a gradual increase in understanding and deeper reflection. E-journaling also created a more collaborative relationship between students and tutors.

The idea of sharing online journals dates back at least as far as 1997 with Andrusyszyn & Davy. There is, however, little research on shared e-journaling amongst intercultural course teams.

The Research Context - Using a Shared Online Learning Journal

The eChina Project "Intercultural Pedagogy Project" is based at Lancaster University (see <http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/echina>). The Project was part of a UK-Sino consortium from November 2005 to May 2007. An online course on inter-cultural e-learning was designed by the consortium following a learning community model (as per McConnell 2006). A team of 6 tutors (3 from each country) was assembled and supported by an e-learning expert (Prof. David McConnell) acting as an internal consultant to the team.

The online course began with a 1 week induction for the participants followed by the main course lasting 12 weeks. The entire course was online with no formal meetings of participants. Small group work involved an equal number of Chinese and British participants in an inter-cultural mix.

Within the Moodle VLE, tutors collaborated within a closed Tutor Forum. In the forum a shared online journal was written throughout the course by the lead author of this paper. The entries were entirely random and informal typically generating several entries each week - often daily. Other tutors voluntarily commented, questioned and gave feedback on the journal. Space only permits a brief sampling of this journal but we present this research as much to indicate a new methodological approach as for any findings.

Research & Analysis

A grounded approach was taken to the study of the data (as per Glaser & Strauss, 1968) involving a close reading of the journal archive to reveal emerging categories. Those categories then became the means by which the data was sorted. The categories are:

- Reflection on the Learning Journal as a Tool for Learning
- Reflections on Tutoring as an Intercultural Course Team
- Reflections on tutoring with Intercultural Participants
- Reflections on Personal-Previous e-Tutoring Practice

Reflection on the Learning Journal as a Tool for Learning

The shared journal provided a means of control for the author but it also served as scaffolding for other tutors working in such a unique context.

...initially the rhythm would probably come from the course, the other participants and the structure. It's all externally controlled. Later you will find your own rhythm that is created by you and your own context. That is internally controlled. I think one of the main techniques that helps you develop that control is the diary. Writing gives you author-ity over time. ... [Thursday, 21 December 2006, 12:41 PM]

...I am benefiting a lot from your diary in the way you set out in some detail your thinking as you deal with what is happening in your learning set. It is almost like a Mind Map ... So your 'thinking out loud' stuff really helps! [UK Tutor B - Tuesday, 14 November 2006, 01:56 PM]

To tell you something...I read your diaries whenever I access and it really helps me think. Thank you for this! [China Tutor A - Thursday, 16 November 2006, 01:50 PM]

Reflections on Tutoring as an Intercultural Course Team

Through the journal we became aware as a team that we were experiencing a global dimension to tutoring teams that meant covering the clock together.

Yes, I agree with you. So we are in a very special professional development ourselves in this inter-cultural e-tutoring team. Another interesting thing is that I like this across-time-zones way of working, because we can expect things to happen while we're sleeping. [China Tutor A - Thursday, 2 November 2006, 10:21 AM]

Thank you for sharing your diary. It is interesting that almost every.... hour one or more participants are online .so no one will feel lonely. When you are asleep, we continue the discussion. [China Tutor C - Friday, 3 November 2006, 10:08 AM]

Reflections on tutoring with Intercultural Participants

The journal entries showed the importance of ensuring everyone had an opportunity to speak. This appeared to be particularly important in an intercultural context where some participants were disinclined to ask questions. Thinking your way into the context of different learners was also shown to be important in the journal.

[one of the participants] mentioned that she'd joined a skype session at the start in the induction week but that part way through it all fell silent and then it was closed. It seemed as though she had something to say but wanted to be invited to speak and when an invite didn't come she just let it pass. Again this may be another aspect of inter-cultural work and the need to facilitate group phone conferences by going around the group asking them to give their views as a means of letting them speak. [Thursday, 7 December 2006, 03:20 PM]

..you do need to shift your mindset to that of your...participants and to work in their culture once you have some sense of it. I think when there are more cultures involved then the task is to build bridges between them that allow for a critical view but framed within a harmonious context. How that is best achieved is my task and the task.... [Monday, 23 October 2006, 09:16 AM]

Reflections on Previous e-Tutoring Practice

The journal showed evidence of comparisons being drawn between working in locally distributed online teams and remotely distributed teams. Metaphors in the literature were also discussed.

However my previous experience was on a course provided by a single institution. The tutoring team worked quite differently. In that earlier model there were 4 tutors and we each had a small group or learning set. We were in different buildings but we knew that we could meet together or separately any time. What is interesting here is that we are very much further away from each other and the opportunity to discuss and react to things is very different. We are communicating across time zones and we only meet up once every few months. In fact we will only meet once during the course. [Wednesday, 1 November 2006, 11:07 AM]

Very interesting metaphors! I like them! Actually I don't think I am a 'sage on the stage' in face-to-face classrooms. Never! I'm also waiting, fishing, shepherding ... There're many things I do aside from explaining language points. You're right in this point. To summarize the role of tutors or teachers in such a way is somewhat arbitrary. [China Tutor A - Monday, 18 December 2006, 11:39 AM]

Discussion

As we move beyond the individual towards the social context then..... [w]e need to find ways of rehabilitating some key aspects of reflection that have been eroded through unthinking use while moving further to deal with these new issues. This is the challenge from professional practice that confronts us (Boud, 2006).

The very idea of team teaching in Higher Education can still be problematic and others have noted that it may even be against the general culture of some tutors to collaborate (Knights et al, 2006). They had a peer observe a teaching session as the basis of a dialogue. Our approach involves team reflection in action in an online intercultural course team with the possibility of collaborative reflection on action.

Keeping an online learning journal of the tutoring experience has many benefits. The author has an opportunity to gain deeper understanding of experience through writing. Sharing the diary also helps gather feedback from other tutors to validate issues amongst the intercultural course team. where many events on the course occur in parallel. The shared journal serves as an anchor for the team.

The diary has value for readers too. It helps them see how others are experiencing the course they share. It helps validate feelings they may have or it may raise issues that conflict with their own experience or understanding of the course tutoring experience. Each tutor does have different groups they interact with and although the course design is shared and certain forums involve everyone there can be differences of experience within the course. Each tutor is also unique and this shared experience will overlap with different personal professional lives as well as different cultures that may exist across the course team.

The diary also functions as a detector of shared and intercultural significance within the course experience. The moments when other tutors chose to add comments to the shared diary indicate significant issues for the tutors and intercultural team. More research is needed in this respect. Although this may be an instance of individual reflection in groups it actually functioned very differently. It prompted others to start journaling and it also produced sharing of extracts from those journals. In addition, the individual journal became the focus for dialogue leading to multiple perspectives and diverse input. In short it was collaborative reflection that provided a shared resource in the course context for immediate and future use.

From this brief sampling of the learning journal we are aware of a great deal of research still to be done. We offer this view to indicate a new methodological approach to the issues raised in Boud (2006) - a need for reflective practices to acknowledge individuals, e-tutoring teams and courses.

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