Chapter 36
Mentoring Teacher Assistants to Use Online Tools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter indicates how a group of Teaching Assistants (TAs) was trained in the use of technology to help students enrolled in large first year Spanish classes excel in learning of Spanish as a foreign language. Framed by the Communities of Practice theory proposed by Wenger (1998), this study supports the theory that by examining their practices, trainees may become more effective in what they learn. Six TAs participated in the study and their reflection-on-action logs were examined and compared to the trainer's personal observations. Interpretation of the results was then carried out by comparing parallel and dissimilar ideas which were then used as focus for discussion. Outcomes support the theory that communities of practice and reflective inquiry are valuable teacher training tools.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has brought a new challenge: preparing teacher candidates to guide learning with technology. The methods used to train teachers before have gone from classroom management, teaching strategies, lesson planning and evaluation to ways to teach, practice and evaluate the same content using different tools that entail ever-emerging electronic technological changes. In second/foreign language teaching and learning this reality has also become apparent. The introduction of voice tools, e-books, e-language labs, Skype, videos, and more, has opened exciting and creative ways to promote interaction among language learners. The value that these new tools have added to the teaching and learning language experiences constitutes a key issue that needs to be addressed in training students who want to become language teachers. First, they need to be armed with an excellent knowledge of technology, and second, they need to be able to use it as an integrated guiding tool in the teaching-learning process.

In this study, theory and practice were combined to achieve the training goals. To accomplish these goals, the teaching assistants (TAs) of a university-based Spanish program examined their practices in order to become more effective in what they were learning. They planned, monitored, observed, assessed and reflected on their practices. Trainees were given tasks which they solved and discussed in groups; they observed how their individual group gave feedback to the students they were assigned, and then

came together to discuss their observations. Finally, they reflected on what they had learned from their study group. Framed by the Communities of Practice theory proposed by Wenger (1998), this case study is used as evidence to support the theory that by examining their practices, trainees can become more effective in learning about technology and its value in second/foreign language teaching and learning. Drawing upon the theoretical framework, the following objectives were formulated:

1. To examine how teaching assistants could benefit from a learning community with respect to using technology to teach
2. To assess how reflective learning impacts their effectiveness in assisting students learning Spanish as a foreign language.

CONNECTING TRAINEES AND STUDENTS WITH TECHNOLOGY

Over the years, the need to be more technologically literate has become prevalent among educators. Besides basic teaching practices like lesson planning and classroom management, the curriculum in pre-service teaching has been incorporating courses like Connecting Technology with Learning, Technology and Second/Foreign Language Learning, and Educational Technology. These additions have prompted researchers to conduct studies that investigate, for example, pre-service teacher's self efficacy beliefs about technology integration (Abbit, 2011; and Wang, Ertmer, & Newby, 2004). They argue that if self-efficacy beliefs lead to increased performance, they can help pre-service teachers increase their self belief so that, in turn, their use of technology can improve. However, both studies fail to prove this relationship. Abbit (2011) concludes that his study results represent perceptions of knowledge and beliefs and not evidence of demonstrated knowledge and ability.

Other researchers have studied the value of e-mail exchanges between pre-service teachers and students to open up dialogue between them (Cook-Sather, 2007), or to build skills for teaching writing (Davenport, 2006). Cook-Sather investigated how weekly e-mail exchanges between trainees and their teachers and trainees and their students create a unique space for teaching and learning for all participants. Participants in her study reported that e-mail exchanges are beneficial because they create a space that allows for instant, regular, individualized communication, careful analysis and reflection, and insight into others' point of view.

The fact that Cook-Sather (2007) gives special consideration to self reflection in her investigation is very relevant for this study. In teacher training, conscious development of insights into what the trainees are learning and experimenting with is paramount, and technology can be used to facilitate this practice and to guide the students' learning process.

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

The idea to guide learning with technology has represented a shift in education from the twentieth to the twenty first century (Fernández, García-Pérez, & Santiago, (2014); Fernández, Santiago, Tomaino, del Río, & Casaravilla, 2011; García-Pérez, 2014; 2011; Harmer, 2008; 2007; Niess, Lee, & Kajder, 2008; Wang, Ertmer, & Newby, 2004; and Willis & Willis, 2007). In second or foreign language teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been in practice since the 60's and has gone through three main stages: the structural/behavioral stage, the communicative stage, and the integrative stage (Koike & Klee, 2013; Yang, 2010).

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