ELTPedia: A Learning Community for Digital Literacy and Professional Collaboration in English Teaching

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Abstract

The development and understanding of digital literacy is an essential cornerstone on the education of teachers and language teachers. The evolving nature of digital technologies require teachers to develop a positive attitude toward life-long learning and continued professional development so that they can respond to the challenges posed by the changing character of digital literacy(ies). This papers reports on a pedagogical experience that promotes the digital literacy and collaborative skills of pre-service English teachers at a Colombian university. The project started in the spring semester of 2015 as an initiative to improve the quality and impact of the Technology and Education class in the ELT Program at Universidad Industrial de Santander, a public Colombian university located in the city of Bucaramanga. Framed within the principles of Project-Based and Invisible Learning, the primary objective of this project is to foster students' digital literacy through a collaborative approach while raising awareness of the potential of continued professional development as a form of lifelong learning. The project includes the creation and maintenance of an online and on-site learning community. Students are in charge of setting up each semester's goals, creating digital learning objects, fostering interaction and positioning the brand on the web. As a result students have evidenced a high degree of engagement, autonomy, understanding of digital genres and modes and awareness of the concept of audience in digital spaces. Evidence of all the findings is available at the project's' website and social networks.

Keywords: English Teacher Education, Digital Literacy, Project-Based Learning, EFL, Invisible Learning, Professional Development

1. Introduction

Digital literacy refers to the skills individuals need to exist, coexist, interact and collaborate in digital spaces. This implies accessing and sharing information, communicating with others, developing professionally and personally, participating in democratic spaces and building and online and personal identity among others. [1] In this sense, critical thinking skills are central to cope with the huge influx of data and the rapid pace of the information society. This is particularly important in times when 'fake news' and 'post-truth' have become commonplace.

The concept of digital literacy encompasses other concepts such as information and media literacies, collaboration, self-development, online and lifelong learning, networking, digital identity, well-being, self-actualizing, digital footprint and security, among many others [2]. All of these are not only theoretical postulates but everyday occurrences. Our digital experience is non-stop; at all times we share our personal lives on social networks, send information through emails, interact in chat rooms, text, read the news, watch videos or, at least, share our location with numerous mobile applications. In this sense, it is fundamental that formal educational settings address the concept of digital literacy from an integrative standpoint rather than teach specific digital skills. Therefore, future teachers must be highly literate in digital spaces and must be capable to explicitly teach and reflect on the realities of a society that has become fundamentally digital.

The hereby paper narrates a pedagogical experience for the development of digital literacy among future English teachers in a Colombian university.

2. Context and Justification

The ELTPedia project is conducted as part of the 'Technology and Education' class, which is taught in the ninth semester of an English Language Teaching program at a Colombian university. The main goal of the class is to allow students to learn about and reflect on the intersections of education and

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technology. Additionally, students are expected to understand the ways technology can aid the teaching and learning of languages.

During the fall semester of 2014, data was collected to assess of the quality of the Technology and Education class. The data revealed a high level of dissatisfaction with the class on the part of the students. It was also possible to identify flaws in the development of students' digital competences and in the way students understood the relation between technology and education in the digital era. Specifically, students still had difficulties to understand that the transformations of the digital era were not only instrumental, but mostly of a structural nature. Overall, there existed an unconformity related to the class content and methodology, as they considered that the class was chiefly professor-centered and neglected the interests and previous knowledge of the students.

Thus, it was necessary to design a pedagogical intervention which allowed students to understand digital technology, not only as a possibility to add more tools to the teaching of English, but also as a space to redefine cognitive, socio-affective, pedagogical, and attitudinal aspects of the pedagogical process. It was also necessary to design a learning experience that would be more meaningful to students' lives. This required a transformation in the contents and in the methodological approach of the class.

As a response to this, a project was designed to address these needs. The project started with the overall objective of generating a learning experience which allows students to develop their digital literacy while collaborating with peers. In order to achieve this, other objectives were set up, namely: to facilitate the development of abilities for digital writing, to help students understand the impact of the digital technology and interconnectivity in education, to generate a real audience for students' work and to promote collaborative professional development among students.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Project- Based Learning

The basic rationale of Project-Based Learning (PBL) can be attributed to Dewey and his work on the 50's [3]. Dewey affirmed that students would get more involved in their learning process if they faced tasks similar to real life situations. PBL has some distinctive features:

1. A real life question or problem is identified;
2. Students design their own action plan to solve that problem, which must be agreed after an inquiry process theoretically informed by the teacher;
3. The groups work collaboratively to divide this action plan in tangible activities;
4. The teacher presents a series of theoretical and practical tools so that students, based on their learning objectives, select the most suitable ones according to the project needs;
5. Once the academic period is over, students publicly present a tangible final product. This product is the ultimate evidence of students' learning.

PBL is a constructivist methodology which prioritizes students' previous knowledge. It also encourages autonomy as it motivates students to design their own learning route. For this purpose, they must take into consideration their interests, talents and the nature of the problem to be solved. In addition, in PBL students develop metacognitive abilities as they design the strategies that will help them complete their projects and, therefore to learning.

3.2 Invisible Learning

Invisible Learning (IL) highlights the need to adapt education to the demands of a digitally-mediated society. It is not a methodology but a call to redefine the ways in which institutions and teachers understand students' learning processes. It underscores the role of collaboration in learning while favoring the use class projects, the development of problem-solving skills and the methodological adaptation of teaching to the resources offered by an interconnected world [4].

Invisible learning differentiates three types of learning: formal, informal, and non-formal learning. Formal learning refers to highly structured transmission of knowledge that is space-and-time-bound. Non-formal learning is still structured but is much more individualized since it responds to the needs of the learner. Examples of this include vocational courses, self-oriented reading, training courses, etc. Finally, informal learning concerns all learning that happens incidentally in learners' everyday lives. This type of learning is always self-determined. It responds to individual needs and interests and lacks a clear structure. [5] IL invites teachers to do some conscious efforts to integrate these different types of learning in order to provide much more meaningful learning experiences.

In this view, digital technologies play a central role in education since they are ubiquitous in learners' real life, not only from an instrumental viewpoint, but also as generators of cognitive, socio affective, and educational transformations.

4. Methodology

The class is fully student-centered and collaborative in nature. Below, a step-by-step description of the class is presented:

Initial assessment, project presentation and team-building: The project is presented to the students, including its objectives, theoretical foundations and history. In addition, a diagnostic test of students' digital competences is carried out to determine students' starting point and plan training workshops accordingly. Along with this, students propose projects and choose the team they want to be part of: Resources, Web Design, Professional Development and Research, and Community Management.

Basic training: The professor leads workshops for the usage of digital tools (web design, databases, social networks management, etc.). In the same way, readings are assigned, and seminaries are conducted to discuss fundamental terminology including digital literacy. Finally, the work teams define the projects for the semester.

Project implementation: The work teams determine the tools and skills they need for their projects and start working on them collaboratively.

First summative assessment: The teams and the professor jointly assess the progress of the project. They determine if the partial objectives have been accomplished and make decisions to improve the implementation process.

Project implementation: Teams continue their projects until their completion.

Project sharing and final assessment: Teams share their work and lead workshops to teach classmates some of the skills they developed during the semester. Finally, a summative and formative assessment of the project is done by the students and the professor.
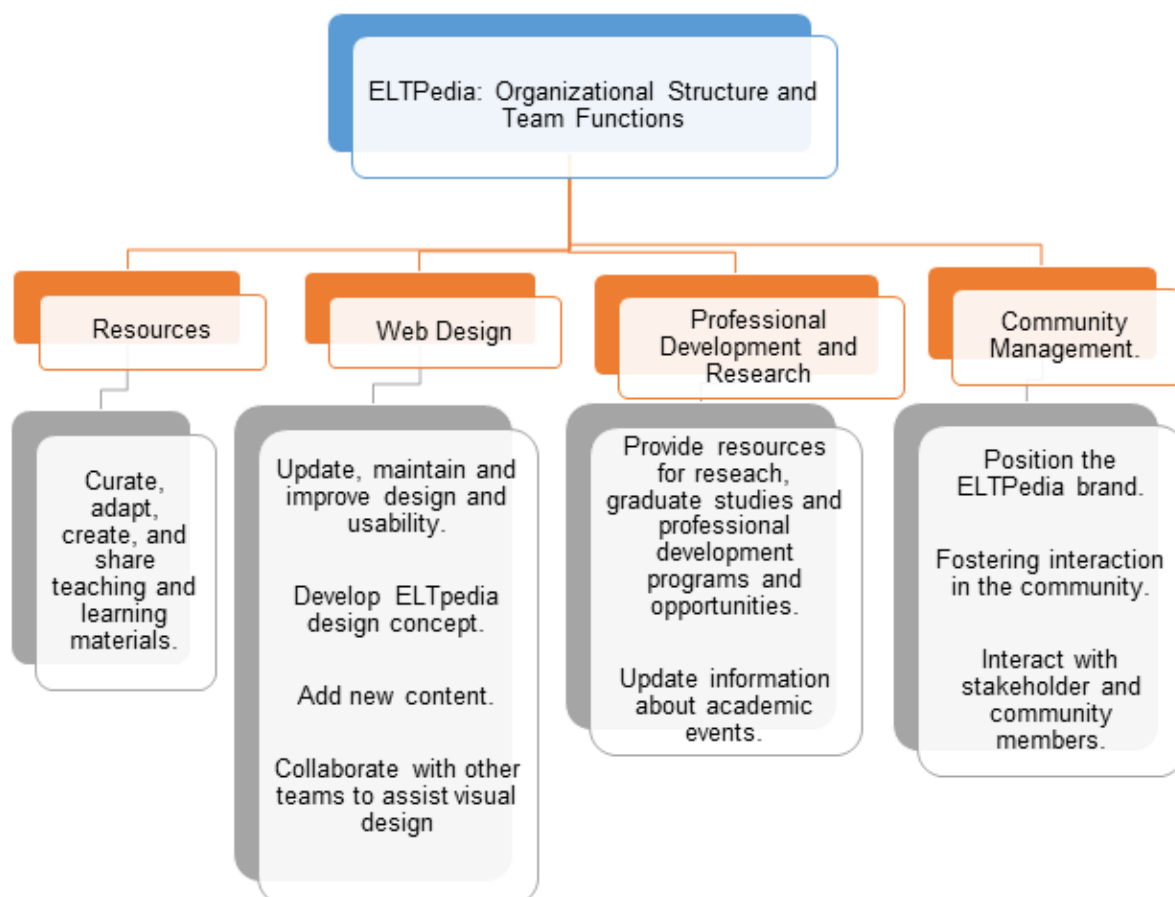
Fig. 1. ELTPedia: Organizational Structure and Team Functions

4.1 Assessment

Assessment is done in a formative, formal and informal way. In all the classes the professor meets each work group to make sure that they are developing the activities, to monitor their progress and give necessary feedback. Additionally, twice during the semester, the students self-assess and co-assess their work. These assessments are added to the assessment done by the professor. For this assessment, rubrics with specific criteria, descriptors and quantitative scales are designed.

5. Contents and Skills

The class contents and the skills developed by each student differ depending on the projects proposed by the students. Nonetheless, the most common skills developed by students include:

1. Web design;
2. Adaptation and creation of digital contents (images, videos, slides, animations, etc.);
3. Design of ELT digital materials;
4. Design of mobile apps;
5. Online project management;
6. Teamwork and online collaboration;
7. Effective digital communication;
8. Community management;
9. Copyright and free use software;

6. Results

As the project evolves, it has been possible to find different types of evidence of students' digital literacy. The quality of students work has rapidly progressed. Digital objects are now much aligned with current standards of, for example, video and image creation. Digital writing skills are much more developed, which can be seen in the website's conceptualization, layout and overall design. Likewise, social networks have gained greater audiences thanks to publications that are much more compliant with the conventions of digital genres.

Additionally, students have become more autonomous, they set up their own deadlines and do everything to possible to meet them, collaborate within and among the groups and devote more time outside classroom and personal resources to complete their projects. All of these indicate a higher level of engagement.

As recommended in PBL, the result of our work is public and subject to the scrutiny of the academic community in general. To see our work up to this day,, please visit the following links:

Web page: https://eltinsightuis.wixsite.com/eltpediauis

Facebook: ELTPedia UIS

Twittert: @ELTpediaUIS

Instagram:Eltpediauis

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