Virtual Learning Communities:
Reflecting on my Teaching Practicum

Ángela María Gamboa[1], Catalina Herrera[2]

Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Colombia[1,2]

Abstract

This paper intends to present the design of the virtual learning community done for the research in progress called "Reflective practice about teaching practicum and beliefs about teaching"; whose aim is to analyze how eighth semester pre-service teachers from the Bachelor program at Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, Bogotá, Colombia reflected and shared their beliefs, theories and practices through their participation in a virtual learning community, since this is considered a social network where more than sharing information, participants experience an alternative way of learning and self-reflection. The Virtual Learning Community was designed in a cloud-based web development platform using the three moments of reflective practice proposed by Farrell (2013) and Schön (1987): in-on-for action. From the design of the Virtual Learning Community using the reflective practice model, it can be concluded that the platform where the virtual community will be designed must be carefully selected, as well as attractive and easy to use, in order to promote participants' interaction and contribution. Moreover, to guide participants' reflection in each of the moments proposed, it is required to design questions that make pre-service teachers think about what they have done and planned before and after the practicum, to make more conscious decisions that guide their future actions.

Keywords: *Pre-service teachers, Reflective practice, Virtual Learning Communities.*

Introduction

Reflecting about the practice inside classrooms should be a constant task developed consciously in order to improve actions and make the right decisions to guide students' learning processes. Eventhough, sometimes pre-service teachers are not aware of the relevance reflection brings to their development as future teachers. That is the reason why a Virtual Learning Community was proposed as an alternative way to help pre-service teachers strengthen concepts, reflect and be conscious of their teaching practicum through the interaction with others.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is not new in the teaching as a foreign language field. There are different theories about reflective practice (Korthagen, 2001; Abkari, 2007; Walsh, 2011; Farrell, 2013), nonetheless, it is noticeable that the definition of the concept of reflective thinking in the teaching practice was first introduced by Dewey (1933) and then developed by Schön (1987).

According to Dewey (1933 cited in Farrell 2013), reflective thought involves intelligent thinking which is conceived as actions that allow development and professional growth; on the contrary, routine thinking involves acts guided by impulsive actions, tradition or authority. In other words, intelligent thinking is done in a conscious and voluntary way, in order to make rational decisions.

Similarly, Farrell (2013a) considers reflective practice as those actions based on evidence (evidence-based reflective practice), that is the kind of practice which occurs when teachers systematically examine their practices, collecting evidence about their own teaching and the learning of their students, and not only wondering what they should be doing in their classes in a fleeting way. With this type of practice, teachers can use the evidence they collect to make informed decisions about their practices and thus benefit their students' learning, moving away from every day or routinary decisions, as Dewey stated it years ago (Farrell, 2013a).

On the contrary, Schön (1987) proposes a definition of reflective practice with a different perspective, since it is recognized that teachers generate knowledge based on intuition as a direct result of the practice without stopping to systematize what happened in class. As said by Schön (1983, 1987) there are two types of reflection: reflection-on-action, and reflection-in-action. The first refers to the reflection on the practice, after the action, and on one's own actions and thoughts; the second is related to the reflection on the events and the spontaneity in acting during the action, in the middle of the practice. "Reflection-in-action involves examining our beliefs and experiences and how they connect to our theories-in-use". (Farrell, 2013, p. 36). Based on the reflection-in-action, the information that allows the

teacher to reconsider what has been done in the class in order to improve is obtained, as well as the creation of new meanings, a metacognitive process that leads teachers to the elaboration of action plans for future sessions. (Farrell, 2013a).

The third type of reflection, reflection-for-action, would be the result of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, this reflection-for-action is "understood as the prospective reflection on the planning and the didactic knowledge before the teaching practice" (Pujolà, 2010, p. 136). The latter proposes a reflection by the tacher not to examine the past or to be aware of what has been done, but to coherently guide the future action. With these types of reflection on-in and for action, teachers will be able to reflect and compare their beliefs about teaching and learning with what they actually do in the classroom, so they can develop a full understanding of what they want to achieve in terms of their students' learning (Farrell, 2013b). With Dewey and Schön's theories, teachers are able to "look at what is actual and occurring (theories-in-use) in their practice and compare this to their beliefs (espoused theories) about learning and teaching". (Farrell, 2013a, p.39).

Virtual Learning Communities

Nowadays, technology offers diverse tools such as Virtual Learning Communities (VLC) that might be included in classrooms to promote different learning experiences. VLC can be defined as a social network where a group of people with particular interests meet to share and exchange information, experiences, concerns and reflect about a common field. (Becerra-Traver, & Gutiérrez-Esteban, 2016; Padilla Partida, Ortiz Rubio & López de la Madrid, 2015; Ribón, Monroy & Plinio,2018; Rivera-Vargas & Miño-Puigcercós, 2018) In this case language teaching methodology.

This VLC contributes to maintaining the social character learning has, having in mind learning might not be considered just as "internalization of knowledge, but a process of becoming a member of a sustained community" (Lave, 1991 p.65). This means that knowledge is not just acquired and processed, but it is also transformed and built thanks to the interaction with people from the same community with different experiences and visions of particular interest.

To design and apply a successful VLC is essential to include four elements (Benavides, 2012). The first one is accessibility, which means all community participants can establish communication with the other members of the community, as well as to have access to the information shared in it. The second element focuses on the participation of the member of the community, due to share and exchange information and experiences from different points of view, requires that each participant contributes to the discussions and activities with a high a degree of commitment and participation.

The third element makes emphasis on the need to teach the participants how to produce, share and interchange ideas and knowledge that contributes to comprehending better the interest they are reflecting and analyzing. The last element shows VLC requires activities where participants are able to discuss and construct knowledge to create clear conclusions from their common interests.

Designing a virtual learning community

The VLC was created to promote pre-service teachers' reflection about their own practicum and knowledge, as well as share experiences and ideas with other pre-service teachers about language teaching methodologies.

The VLC was designed on a cloud-based web development platform, Wix.com, having in mind students can get access easily and it is a well-known platform. To introduce the pre-service teachers into reflective process and activities, firstly a case study was presented, followed by three parts which contained individual and group work reflective activities. The answers to the activities were shared and posted in forums created for each activity.

Fig. 1 Virtual Learning Community

To prepare pre-service teachers to reflect about others and their own practicum, a hypothetical case study was set out. It was about an English teacher who planned a class using task- based learning. However, he had some difficulties when he applied the lesson plan during his class. Based on that case, the activities of the first part were applied. These activities were divided into three sections. The first one attempted to check if pre-service teachers identify some of the key elements of language teaching methodology in the case; the next section asked pre-service teachers to define some of the concepts, check their meaning and share them with other participants of the VLC. The last section was an introduction to the reflective practice, in this sense, pre-service teachers were asked to take the role of the English teacher and ask some questions about it, in-on and for action were proposed to reflect.

For part two, pre-service teachers had to design a lesson plan for showing in detail the procedures of their methodology to teach English. Then, they were asked to record the session they had planned and finally, they had to answer different questions to make them reflect in-on and for action according to what they planned in comparison to what they actually developed in class. All of this with the purpose of making pre-service teachers aware of the theories they put into practice when they teach and compare them with their beliefs about teaching.

Finally, in part three, pre-service teachers finished the participation in the VLC reading one of their partners' lesson plans and watching one of their classes. They had to compare and analyze the coherence between the lesson and the class recorded and then, participate in a forum answering again questions in- on and for action.

Conclusion

At the end of the whole process, it was expected pre-service teachers worked collaboratively, so as to the VLC became the tool for them to reflect consciously about the actions they developed in their lessons, how they are connected to the theories they have studied, and the way these actions and theories reflect the beliefs they have been constructing or deconstructing along their formation as future English teachers.

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