



E-learning in Teacher Training: from Scepticism to Careful Optimism

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Abstract

*The point of departure for this 2022 case study is gathering-based teacher training at Nord University, with three weeks on campus and three weeks of online sessions per semester. There are challenges involved with this format, especially as the work of the (future) teacher is founded largely on relation building, and it may seem a paradox that a teacher training program on the one hand should ideally be one of modelling, and on the other hand moves towards more online learning where such important relation building is challenging. Though increasingly more teachers become proficient in e-learning and online teaching, the students are often not sufficiently active – or indeed activated - during an online session, and the barrier to relationship building is greater than meeting face to face in the classroom. This case study is based on working with the graphic novel *Illegal* [1] in the subject English in teacher training and addresses the following challenges: 1) fostering student activity both prior to and during online sessions, and 2) teacher/student interaction prior to and post online sessions. The asynchronous preparatory learning path and the following synchronous 5-hour online session aim at 100% student activity, where both learning path and online session are constructed based on elements of social constructivism, collaborative learning, personal cognitive development, connectivism, and in-depth learning.*

Keywords: *Teacher training, e-learning, student activity, teacher involvement*

Relation building is one of the most important skills and competencies of the teacher, and teacher training should ideally seek to be a good role model emulating this. Rationalization and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the use of online teaching, and though the move from traditional classroom teaching to digital teaching may be technically challenging, the greatest challenge might be relation building. Hosting an online session will for many mean carrying on traditional lecturing, or opt to lecture if a lack of competence involving students in meaningful online activities. Ensuring student activity in online learning sessions is for many a challenge, especially where learning sessions on campus would involve the use of tactile tools. Lecturing in online sessions provides little time for student activities and the dynamics of small talk and physical face-to-face reflection during breaks. Building a teacher-student relationship in physical meetings might be challenging, and is indeed more so online. A prerequisite for building a good psycho-social learning environment for not only academic, but also social and emotional competence, requires an interaction and communication between teacher and students; where student participation and -activity is very much a part of this equation.

Carefully planned, teacher-student relations and student activity may both be promoted and enhanced in a digital learning setting, and this case study (teacher training year two, six students) shows the teacher and students in the learning process *together*, as opposed to the traditional idea of the teacher handing out tasks as a follow-up to lectures. Preparatory work for an upcoming online session with focus on student activity is paramount in order to maximize the learning effect, and is demonstrated here by providing an asynchronous learning path ending in a synchronous online session.

The graphic novel *Illegal* [1] is the focal point of this case study, and is the story of young Ebo who undertakes a dangerous journey from Ghana to seek a better life in Europe. True to the concept of journey on more levels than one, the asynchronous learning path created on the electronic learning platform Canvas is set up as a journey where teacher and students travel together. The path is personalized by visuals and text, and addresses the students directly through a first person narrator. The sensation of being on a journey is provided also by e.g. providing a packing list including everything needed: From required texts, attitudes, ethic values and – reflections, to marshmallows and a thermos flask of tea or coffee. The learning path consists of images, texts, links to external



documentary videos on migration from Africa to Europe and the climate of Sahara, along with information on the genre of graphic novels and a selection of facts of interest linked to the main topic. Each step of the way along the path provides a variety of tasks, including reactions to selected news/documentary videos, reflections, own experience with refugees, setting up a playlist for music associated with the journey, and a quiz. All tasks are linked to designated discussion forums on Canvas, and the students are also requested to respond to a minimum of two peer contributions per task. The asynchronous learning path takes roughly four to five hours to complete, and the students may take their time and re-read/-view information and complete tasks at their own leisure and at their own tempo. This is a form of adapted learning, and important as such, as in teacher training programs one often *speaks* of adapted learning, but there is rarely room for de facto adapted learning in the lecture hall.

The concept of teacher and students journeying together provides for teacher/student interaction and relation building, as I also participate in the learning path by completing the tasks; though careful to wait until most of the students have responded in order not to define a direction or set a standard. Being alerted each time a task response is posted, I may offer my comments and feedback as the students progress along the path. This is important in relation building, as the students see and experience I am working alongside them – literally on the same journey – by both following their process and giving immediate and personal response in a conversational form. Though there are only six students in this case study, it is doable with twenty-plus students; it all depends on how much time the teacher chooses to invest. Rather than being the professor with a monopoly of knowledge, being a fellow traveler I may communicate with my students as fellow travelers. My interest in the students' process is also felt when I monitor their process through Canvas, and I may contact a student directly to enquire of challenges or problems completing the path on time. By following the learning path, students make connections between different resources, engage with a variety of perspectives, and build relationships with other learners. The learning path demands sharing and commenting on each other's work, and thus an approach to social constructivism [3] and in-depth learning by triggering the experiences and knowledge of the individual outside the university program. The learning path itself is largely set up applying to the concept of connectivism [2] by emphasizing the importance of networks, connections, and learning as a continuous process. It also highlights the role of technology in facilitating learning and acknowledges the importance of diversity in learning. By following a learning path, students and teacher make connections between different resources, engage with a variety of perspectives, and build relationships with fellow learners. Though not part of connectivism, reflection is also an important part of the learning path. The learning path is personalized to the needs and interests of the individual learners, allowing them to tailor their learning experiences to their own goals and aspirations. Thus the learning path contributes to social constructivism through scaffolding by providing support to learners helping them build their understanding [4]. Participating in the activities of for the learning path I may identify and target students' Zone of Proximal Development [4], allowing me to provide appropriate challenges and assistance in my feedback fostering optimal learning and development already *before* the online session.

The 5-hour online learning session functions as the conclusion of the learning path, where knowledge gained and reflection shared during the learning path is sought transformed into competence. Assuring maximum student activity, the online session is self-driven and synchronous for the students, thus without teacher presence. Lasting from 0900 to 1400, a Canvas page is created and set up to automatically reveal the session at 0900. The page includes resources to be used during the session and a detailed schedule for the day, with four tasks before a 30min lunch break at 1130, followed by three tasks after. There is a link to a Teams room for the online session, where one of the students has in advance been given the role as host. My only presence is asynchronous by three 90 second videos embedded in the schedule: one as a welcome to the session, one motivational one breaking for lunch, and a final one at 1400 requesting feedback on the day. The background images reflect the stage of Ebo's journey they are at during the work with the novel. The information provided is in an informal and personal style, and the tasks are varied; including an introductory quiz based on the learning path, individual and group written reflections, plenary discussions that are not put into writing, short film analysis, creating and posting videos as pair work, and creating lesson planning documents. The entire session is set up with social constructivism and collaborative learning in mind, emphasizing the importance of collaboration and interaction among learners. In a teaching/learning session, creating opportunities for students to work together, engage in discussions, and share their perspectives promotes the construction of knowledge through social interaction. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of learning within authentic contexts, and the online session gives room



for sharing experiences that connect to real-life situations, allowing the students to apply their knowledge and skills in meaningful ways. This is shown through the various tasks given during the online session – and also promoted in the learning path. .

So, what happened to relation building with the lack of my presence during the online session? Being a fellow traveler along the learning path proved to create bonding as fellow learners during preparatory work, and letting the students work on their own during the online session shows my trust in their autonomy. The element of relation building linked to the online session is provided *after* the session, when I accessed the material the students produced and gave feedback on their work. Not as in the traditional red pen, but through dialogue praising the work undertaken, and at the same time through following post-session online discussion with the students show both care and consideration for the good work carried out.

Feedback from the students is unanimous: they looked forward to having a day where they were in control, but they already within the first hour missed having their teacher as moderator to check on timing and content, as they became too involved in discussions and also bringing in topics not directly linked to the tasks to keep to the timetable. On questions on cooperative learning and social constructivism, there is agreement that the activities and their work certainly fit the learning theories. The students report of never having been so productive during an online session, and though they were exhausted, they benefitted greatly.

The experience from this case study may be summed up as one of social constructivism and connectivism, where the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator who creates a supportive and engaging learning environment, encourages active participation, provides guidance when needed, and promotes learner autonomy and responsibility. The combination of the learning path and the online session opens for the exploration of multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Teachers can facilitate and participate in discussions where students express their ideas, challenge each other's thinking, and consider alternative viewpoints. This promotes critical thinking, reflection, and a deeper understanding of complex issues; and not the least the chance to build relations through E-learning.

References

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