



## Asynchronous discussion forums as life rafts for newly qualified teachers in schools<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article is intended to offer a view of the problems which NQTs (Newly Qualified Teachers) are experiencing at the Tuxtla Language School in Chiapas, Mexico. It describes my attempt as a teacher trainer to address continuous professional development (CPD) in an effort to foster on-line peer support for novice teachers in a collaborative learning environment. The main focus of this study was to investigate and pilot test the use of ADFs (Asynchronous Discussion Forums) as a support network in an effort to help bridge the gap between pre-service and in-service professional development through the fostering of a virtual *learning community* where habits of caring, shared VABs (Values, Attitudes and Beliefs) and an interconnectedness are encouraged and NQTs are able to share information and experiences, challenge, question and offer each other alternatives to their usual teaching practice thus supporting this transition into their early years of teaching; in effect, to serve as life rafts for struggling NQTs. By describing this process and my findings, I hope to encourage other practitioners to continue exploring the value of asynchronous discussion forums (ADFs) to create learning communities in their own professional venues.

### 1. Introduction

Most graduates of the Teacher Training Program eagerly look forward to their first day of teaching in their first job as English teachers, fresh from the University, ready to conquer the world. However, once they begin working as EFL Teachers they encounter many challenges.

This situation is typical for most **NQTs** (Newly Qualified Teachers); they want to inspire learning and make a difference in each learner's life, yet they do their best to survive, more or less follow the institution's study program and keep some semblance of order in their classrooms. Why didn't all of the information provided in their initial teacher training (ITT) program help them to deal with the complexities they now face? Why don't young learners or adults respond as

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effortlessly and as predictably as they did in theory? How is a NQT supposed to deal with the difficulties and challenges she faces in a real classroom setting on a daily basis? Why is teaching English as a Foreign Language so complex and stressful?

How does a NQT learn to find enough time and energy to juggle:

- students' learning needs,
- integrate subject matter,
- evaluate each learner,
- handle difficult students, parents and school administrators,
- address the school's policies and endless paperwork; and,
- to be able to successfully teach?

In spite of successfully completing an eight semester teacher training program, learning to cope with these issues effectively has proven to be a difficult process for a great number of students in the BEd in ELT (Licenciatura en Enseñanza del Inglés: **LEI**) Program at the *UNACH (Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas: Autonomous University of Chiapas.)*

Results from the Language School's follow-up studies project have provided evidence that *LEI* NQTs, especially those who enter the workforce for the first time in their lives, require assistance with their teaching practice, especially in the areas of language teaching methodology, class management, adapting to the unique school culture which exists in each institution and in dealing with school administrators and parents.

It is my belief that there is therefore a great need in my community to prepare future teachers with a bridge between being students of teaching to becoming teachers of students in the form of a support network. In this study I explored the value of providing asynchronous online support to newly graduated EFL teachers in Chiapas, Mexico, as they try to overcome the difficulty of transition from pre-service teacher training to working life, school life and classroom life. The



following article addresses these concerns by reporting on my experiences of attempting to provide NQTs with the opportunity to interact and communicate electronically through an on-line discussion forum with colleagues from the three graduating classes which had successfully completed their studies at the Tuxtla Gutierrez Language School's *LEI* teacher training program between 2002 and 2004. The main aim was to explore the use of a forum as a means of helping NQTs gain confidence in their ability to become more effective educators.

## **2. Troubled transition**

Teaching learners and inspiring them to learn and to want to continue learning is the main aim of all teachers. To achieve this successfully it is necessary to recognize the importance of providing NQTs with an opportunity to bridge the gap between trainees' pre-service teacher training program and the reality they face once they begin their professional careers.

### **2.1. LEI Teacher Training Program**

The *Licenciatura en Enseñanza del Ingles (LEI)* was opened in 1999 at the Autonomous University of Chiapas (UNACH) to train potential EFL Teachers. Student-teachers attend seven hours of instruction on a daily basis and will have obtained 350 credits upon completion of the current eight semester study plan.

Greene (2005:11) points out that

“Learning to teach is not completed at the end of a pre-service program...teaching is a reciprocal process, situated in practice, interacting with the context of the learning, the community, the culture, the students, and all the surrounding environs.”

Thus, the reality of the classroom rarely conforms to novices' expectations or images. A follow-up study project was initiated at the Tuxtla Gutierrez Language School of the Autonomous University of Chiapas, Mexico in January 2003. Results



indicate that many NQTs feel that they are “*on their own*” once they enter schools since there was no support network in place to ease alumni’s transition from being teacher-in-training to being teacher-in-charge.

## 2.2. Collaborative Teaching Cultures

Teachers should not work in isolation; they require opportunities to interact with other practitioners to enrich their teaching practices and to explore alternatives to what they do in the classroom. Hargreaves (1999:11) refers to the concept of “collaborative teaching cultures” which may help experienced teachers to improve their practices. This author identifies key factors for the usefulness of collaborative teaching cultures in professional development since they allow teachers to:

- Keep up with the changes in what teachers are expected to teach,
- Determine the selection of teaching strategies to be implemented depending on the needs of students in specific contexts,
- Deal with “social work “ such as the responsibilities associated with learning and discipline problems,
- Integrate special needs students into ordinary classrooms, which most teachers are not equipped to handle, requiring more work for already overworked educators.

McLaughlin (1997 in Hargreaves 1999:12) states that “like students, teachers learn by doing, reading and reflecting, collaborating with other teachers looking closely at students and their work, and sharing what they see.”

## 2.3. Possible Solutions to Provide Support for NQTs

Practitioners need to understand the “complexity, artistry and demandingness of classroom teaching,” (Clark 1998, in Tom and Valli 1990:380)



In the following figure I compare Odel and Huling's (1998:68) novice support needs with the situation which exists for *LEI* students in the current teacher training program:

<b>Novice Teachers Support Needs</b> (After Odel and Huling 1998:68)	<b>Current Situation of Alumni in the <i>LEI</i></b>
Quality preparation programs that incorporate a variety of field experiences.	Theoretical based teacher training program which incorporates limited field experiences.
Reasonable assignments in school contexts that support and facilitate teacher growth.	NQTs take any convenient job available; in most institutions they are left on their own to "sink or swim."
Systematic induction support that includes a variety of supportive components.	Virtually no support network in place from the teacher training college (UNACH) and very limited support from schools.
Clearly communicated expectations about what constitutes quality teaching.	No clear specifications from each institution about what is expected of their on the job performance.
Teacher assessment procedures and measures that are consistent with the developmental nature of learning to teach.	Most assessment procedures are evaluative and not developmental. CPD is not common.
Integrating new practitioners into a school community and school culture that supports CPD.	Most Mexican schools have no induction program for new practitioners into the school community or school culture, opportunities for CPD are limited.

Figure 1: Novice Teachers Support Needs Compared to What *LEI* Teachers Receive

To better prepare NQTs to cope with this situation it is necessary to implement some type of support or mentoring system.

### 3. EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITIES OF SUPPORT FOR NQTS

Teacher trainers assume that novice teachers "enter the classroom with a "suitcase" of knowledge and skills needed to teach and then spend their careers "unpacking" and perhaps "rearranging" the contents of this suitcase. (Odel and Huling 1998:67) Unfortunately, as was previously mentioned NQTs face many difficulties. Putz (1992) classified beginning teacher priorities into four categories: teaching, planning, relationship and other concerns. Figure 2 compares these with the priorities of *LEI* NQTs' at the *UNACH*:



Priorities According to Putz (1992)	Priorities for <i>LEI</i> NQTs
<b>Teaching concerns</b> (i.e. class management, student motivation and participation, evaluation and accommodating individual differences among students.)	Due to the large size of groups in Mexico (i.e. up to 50 students per class) class management is a crucial issue. In addition, students in the majority of Mexican schools are “mixed ability” per classroom which exerts enormous pressure on beginning teachers.
<b>Planning concerns</b> (inadequate amounts of planning time, scheduling time to deal with workload, locating resources)	Quantity vs Quality: Teachers are “chambistas” in Mexico (i.e. many teachers work at two or three schools to survive economically). As a consequence, novices are overburdened and have little available time for reflection, planning or locating and designing teaching resources.
<b>Relationship concerns</b> ( dealing with school authorities, colleagues, parents and personal relationships)	Authoritarian administrative attitudes which provide limited support to novices and demand that they do the “job” as effectively as experienced teachers. Mexican parent’s judgmental attitude when dealing with their child’s academic problems. Professional envy may limit the support more experienced colleagues provide especially in an individualistic culture such as exists in Mexico. Personal problems with spouse and family when teacher is too busy with workload.
<b>Other concerns</b> (school policies, academic goals, personal concerns such as the lack of repertoire of instructional approaches, and the lack of familiarity with textbooks and resources to be used as well as the exhaustion associated with teaching, assuming the role of a teacher, and applying theory to practice.)	NQTs had limited field experience in the <i>LEI</i> program, which limits their teaching skills. Initiating a career with the adjacent responsibilities and obligations this implies may be challenging for many young inexperienced novice educators. Adapting to the unique school culture may be stressful and confusing since colleagues are not typically <i>team players</i> . Filling out the endless paperwork which is a requisite in Mexico (dosification, status reports, report cards, etc.) is stressful and time-consuming.

**Figure 2: Putz’ Beginning Teacher Priorities (1992) Compared to those of *LEI* NQTs**

As a consequence, novices often “struggle with the complexities and contradictions of teaching within the isolated, individualistic culture of schools,” (Rogers and Babinski 1999: on-line) where it is not common for colleagues to “discuss teaching and what goes on in the classroom.” (Lieberman and Miller 1984, in Rogers and Babinski 1999 on-line), resulting in most beginning teachers experiencing a sense of isolation, discouragement and fear of asking more experienced colleagues for support since they do not want to appear incompetent.



Who then may provide this type of assistance to struggling NQTs? In the following section I will address this issue.

### 3.1 Support for NQTS

Novice teachers require professional and personal support since they are often dealing with feelings of vulnerability, inadequacy, incompetence, discouragement, anxiety and frustration, as they aspire to become effective teachers. They require opportunities to share ideas and discuss issues with colleagues for who else can better understand their situation and offer alternatives?

Ideally, universities should provide novice educators with support networks. This support should include:

1. **Personal and emotional support** to deal with the complexities of initiating their professional careers. Hargreaves (1998:838) refers to teaching as an emotional practice where there is a “need to be supported by colleagues and ... [a willingness] to take risks in [order to improve] their craft.”
2. **Task- or problem-focused support** to assist beginning teachers to confront specific problems on a day to day basis.
3. **Critical reflection on teaching practice** by identifying a problem and proposing alternative practices collaboratively.

### 3.2 Developing LEI NQT Learning Communities

Since the 1990s, learning communities have become popular in Continuous Professional Development. Burgoyne (1978, in Jarvis 2002:143) refers to the concept of a learning community as “a learning situation where a group of people come together to meet specific and unique learning needs to share resources and skills.” Wenger (1998b: on-line) defines learning communities as:



“Groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.”

These communities can be successful in providing educators with an opportunity to explore issues together since their members share many characteristics which allow them to work collaboratively in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Thus, a learning community is a place for sharing and creating knowledge collaboratively and develops around things that matter to people.

#### 4. Establishing an On-line Peer Support Network

Taking advantage of new technology to address reflective practices, an asynchronous discussion forum was set up to provide anytime, anywhere opportunities to share ideas, discuss issues and develop a collaborative support network; in effect it may serve as “a life-raft” for struggling NQTs who felt that they are “drowning.” It was set up at minimal cost to the university and had the quality that members could post messages at their convenience.

##### 4.1 Advantages & Disadvantages

The following figure illustrates the benefits and drawbacks I found when using asynchronous discussion forums (ADFs).

<b>Advantages of ADFs</b>	<b>Disadvantages of ADFs</b>
Computer mediated conferencing allows for anyplace anytime learning opportunities	<b>Not for everyone:</b> Many people do not enjoy using them.
Users proceed at their individual pace.	<b>Many people resist using them.</b>
Freedom to explore issues which encourage openness to share experiences and thoughts which may result in the development of shared thinking.	<b>Difficulty Establishing Bonds on-line.</b> It is difficult to build an open and trusting relationship with colleagues when participants are only able to meet when busy schedules permit.
Convenience of choice over when or how much to participate. (less intrusive than face to face discussion)	<b>Limited Immediate Feedback.</b> The lack of face-to-face contact obscures vocal intonations and verbal and non-verbal cues, including body language and expressions of emotion. This may require changes in a member's habitual patterns of interaction and thinking in order to overcome this limitation. Dissatisfied members typically cite



	limited feedback as a disincentive to participate. (Galinsky et al., 1996 in Gary and Remolino 2000: 4)
Combines elements of writing and reflection in a medium halfway between spoken conversation and written discourse.	<b>Members with Limited Language Skills.</b> Members with language limitations (such as English as a second language) may be frustrated by the rapid pace and multiple dialogues, and consequently, may be confused by text-based communication. Furthermore, members may be challenged in communicating feelings and thoughts clearly to others.
Participants are free to communicate and individuals may receive special attention from anyone willing and able to provide it.	<b>Quality Control.</b> The quality of online support groups is inconsistent. Each sets its own standards and procedures. The moderator encourages participation but it can not be "forced."
Participants who wish to "lurk" or "browse" may do so.	<b>To keep the forum "alive" there must be discussion.</b> With no interaction participants become discouraged and the forum may cease to exist.
Participants may leave a discussion unseen and unembarrassed.	<b>Many people may just lurk and never become involved.</b>
Allows participants to make sense of, rethink and redefine ideas.	<b>Some participants may be receptive and only restate others' ideas.</b>
On-line support groups may attract members who previously avoided peers and traditional support systems.	<b>Potential users may avoid publicly stating their ideas in writing in fear of being criticized by others.</b> Others consider it a "cold medium" and will resist participating.
Computer-mediated communication tends to feature more balanced participation than face-to-face conversation, with less dominance by outspoken individuals.	<b>Extroverted and more confident participants may overwhelm and overshadow less confident individuals (in effect scare them away)</b>

**Figure 3: Advantages and Disadvantages of Asynchronous Discussion Forums** (Adapted from Salmon 2000:17 - 19)


My goal was to encourage participants to take advantage of this educational resource and to foster active participation addressing teaching and learning beliefs and practices thereby potentially becoming a type of "life raft" for NQTs who may be "sinking" instead of "swimming" in their first positions as EFL teachers.

## 5. Creating an ADF at the Tuxtla Language School

The LEI ADF website was created in August, 2005. I acted as the administrator of the site and e-moderator. The site is located at:

[http://curso.unach.mx/Foros\\_ELT/](http://curso.unach.mx/Foros_ELT/).

Figure 4 illustrates the forum index:



## Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla Forum

[FAQ](#)
[Search](#)
[Memberlist](#)
[Usergroups](#)
[Register](#)  
[Profile](#)
[Log in to check your private messages](#)
[Log in](#)

The time now is Sun Mar 26, 2006 3:23 pm

[Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla Forum Index](#)
[View unanswered posts](#)

Forum	Topics	Posts	Last Post	
<b><u>English Professionals</u></b>				
	<b><u>Jobs</u></b> A forum to post notices about jobs.	6	20	Mon Mar 13, 2006 4:30 pm <a href="#">peaktut</a>
<b><u>General</u></b>				
	<b><u>General Questions</u></b> Here we'll resolve the doubts about this site, and how to use it.	13	34	Sun Mar 26, 2006 12:13 am Miss Anita

Figure 4: LEI ADF Index

Once the forum was up and running e-mail messages and face to face invitations were sent to alumni from the first three graduating classes of the LEI teacher training program to “spread the word” about the existence of the forum.

## 6. Findings

The forum was not as successful as I had anticipated. Only a small number of NQTs actually participated (23%) in a six-month period. Participation was entirely voluntary on the part of NQTs and was there for them if they choose to use it. Many have admitted that they never really understood its purpose or how to use it properly.



Reasons for Not Using <i>LEI</i> ADF	Percentage
Time	90 %
Difficulty using this technology	50 %
No Access to Internet/Computer	50 %
Feel uncomfortable sharing problems in public.	20 %

Figure 5: Reasons for Not Using the ADF

Taking an interpretative approach to understand the reality of the situation I experienced in piloting the development of a virtual learning community, I am now aware that alumni require training in reflective practices to be able to effectively exploit an ADF. An induction period is required to help potential users to understand how to register, log in and use ADF technology appropriately. It has been very difficult to get NQTs involved in the discussion forums. I am now aware that I must develop a culture for using an ADF before alumni leave college so that they may obtain the full benefits of this type of technology.

## 7. Conclusions

The use of ADFs potentially allows NQTs to establish a social network which may be beneficial in helping them to transition from the supportive environment which they experienced at the university to that of the indifferent school cultures where they first begin teaching. The purpose of creating an ADF was to provide NQTs with opportunities to be able to share knowledge as they explored issues which they wished to address collaboratively. However, the formation of an on-line learning community at the Tuxtla Language School is still a work in progress. A major issue which must be addressed before contemplating using this type of resource is that of infrastructure. Potential users must have access to computers and the internet to be able to use it successfully and they must dedicate time to this pursuit or it will not be effective.

In spite of all of the challenges I encountered, I hope that the ADF will continue to exist to provide support for future graduates of the *LEI* teacher training program



and that these reflective opportunities should be ongoing and sustained. In continuous professional development teachers should be encouraged to question what they do in the classroom, why they do it and how it might possibly be improved in an effort to identify alternatives to their usual teaching practices and thus become reflective practitioners.

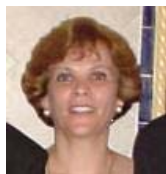
I hope other practitioners will continue exploring the value of asynchronous discussion forums (ADFs) to create learning communities in their own professional venues.

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## Biodata



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