



Asynchronous discussion forums as a peer support network for LEI student teachers

*Ana Maria Elisa Díaz de la Garza
Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla
Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas*

Resumen

The present is a summary of an investigation and tesis project of the BEd dissertation "Asynchronous Discussion Forums as a means of providing peer support between the students of the LEI program which I directed for Hernandez & Juarez: 2007 at the Tuxtla Language School.

This article is intended to offer a view of the problems which trainees are experiencing at the Tuxtla Language School in Chiapas, Mexico. It describes my attempt as a teacher trainer to address continuous academic development (CAD) in an effort to foster on-line peer support for trainees 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 for trainees in our Teacher training program through the fostering of a virtual learning community where habits of caring, shared VABs (Values, Attitudes and Beliefs) and an interconnectedness are encouraged and trainees are able to share information and experiences, as well as offer each other advice to successfully complete our teacher training program. 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

When potential EFL teachers enter the University they have a great deal of expectations and plans about what they want to do or learn, but during this process they may face enormous challenges which may be difficult to solve on their own. They may require a support network from both teacher trainers as well as from peers, mainly trainees from more advanced semesters since they have already adjusted to the school system and the culture that exists at the Tuxtla Language School.

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

- individual learning needs,



- deal with a variety of teacher trainers who have different expectations
- socialize
- deal with personal problems?

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.) in Mexico.

Preliminary results from the Language School's tutoring program have provided evidence that LEI trainees especially those who are leaving home for the first time, require assistance in dealing with adjusting to a new way of doing things.

In most colleges in Mexico trainees are provided with academic councilors to help them when academic and personal problems arise, but is this support network enough?

It is my belief that there is therefore a great need in my community for a trainee peer support network. In this study I explored the value of providing asynchronous online support for trainees in Chiapas, Mexico, as they try to overcome the difficulty of transition from high school to ITT (Initial Teacher Training) and attempt to successfully complete an undergraduate study program at college. The following study addresses these concerns by reporting on my experiences and those of my two dissertation students (Hernandez & Juarez:2007), of attempting to provide participants with the opportunity to interact and communicate electronically through an on-line discussion forum with peers from the entire teacher training program at the Tuxtla Language School in 2006. The main aim was to explore the use of a forum as a means of helping trainees gain confidence in their ability to become more effective college students. The development of such an electronic learning community may allow these trainees to openly discuss and address issues which concern them in this complex transition. This investigation explores my experiences setting up an ADF, encouraging trainees to participate in and the computer-mediated communications in which participants engaged during a six-month trial period. It also explores the



advantages and disadvantages of using this type of virtual support network as well as the reasons why many potential participants did not become involved in the use of the ADF.

2. Troubled Transition

Successfully completing their study program is the main aim of all college students. To achieve this successfully it is necessary to recognize the importance of providing Trainees with a support system. I will explore the difficulties which LEI alumni experience as they make the transition from being high school students to being college students. I shall begin by exploring the current LEI situation based on the findings of the Tuxtla Language School's academic counseling program which has discovered that many trainees find it difficult to study subjects in English, design didactic materials, socialize in an unfamiliar environment, adjust to a new school culture, get along with new classmates and new teachers who all have different expectations and deal with individual personal issues. The current student counseling program (programa de tutorio) is sometimes often not enough to effectively address these situations since most academic counselors are often assigned more than sixteen counselees each, and may not always have enough time to attend to trainees needs. Thus, it is necessary to implement other means to provide trainees with additional support and guidance to face the challenges they encounter once they enter the university.

2.1 The Tuxtla ELT Teacher Training Program

The Tuxtla ELT Teacher Training Program, the Licenciatura en la 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.

In the following section of this article I will discuss the results of the academic counseling program follow-up studies conducted in 2006 by Cal y Mayor & Moreno (2006), which have led me to believe that some trainees in my



community are often frustrated, exhausted and discouraged once they enter the teacher training program. Many struggle with competing demands on their time and energy as they attempt to fulfill academic requirements and have a social life.

Preliminary data obtained from initial follow-up studies of our academic counseling program (Cal y Mayor & Moreno 2006) identified the following problems:

- 11% replied that their advisor was not always available to provide assistance when they encountered problems.
- 18% felt their counsellors were not qualified to answer academic queries, provide guidance, nor aid them in developing a relevant action plan or in helping them to implement self-study strategies
- 25% felt that neither their academic success nor their adaptation to the University had improved as a result of the academic counselling program.
- 30% had not attended a single session with their academic counsellor from August/December 06.
- 16% did not attend a session due to either a lack of time or incompatibility in scheduling.

As a result, it is my belief that a great number of trainees require an additional support system to ease their journey through the university.

2.2 LEI Trainee Needs

College life is a demanding experience. Therefore, great care needs to be paid to provide trainees with a support network to successfully deal with the challenges they face once they enter the university so that they can learn to deal with these situations effectively. In addition, teacher trainers or mentors need to help guide student-teachers through this process to promote reflective practices.

3. Collaborative Learning Cultures

Passive-objectivist approaches to learning assume that students learn by receiving and assimilating knowledge individually, independent from others. In contrast, active constructivist approaches present learning as a social process that



takes place through communication with others. Learners actively construct knowledge by formulating ideas into words, and these ideas are built upon through reactions and responses from others.

A collaborative group refers to a group of students with varying abilities working together to solve a problem or complete a project. According to Dixon-Krauss (1996:79), collaborative groups are designed to encourage participants to help and support their peers rather than to compete against them. This idea is based on the assumption that the perceived value of academic achievement is raised when students are all working towards the same goal. Thus, this environment becomes a community of learners in which students are engaged in activities that facilitate the development of all elements of learning. Therefore, students should be given the opportunity to work comfortably with a wide range of [classmates] in order to acquire social and cognitive skills in working and learning (Dixon-Krauss 1996:79).

To sum up, collaborative groups are groups of students who work together searching for understanding, meaning or solutions or for creating a product. Collaborative learning activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, and other activities. In the following section I shall explore the concept of learning communities.

3.1 Learning Communities

Wenger (2002:4) 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.” This author mentions that learning communities share a basic structure. A community of practice is a unique combination of three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain.

When they function well together, these three elements make a community of practice an ideal knowledge structure –a social structure that can assume responsibility for developing and sharing knowledge.



The use of an asynchronous discussion forum (ADF) allows pre-service students to collaborate with colleagues while also providing opportunities for reflective practice. It provides a forum for the presentation and discussion of issues, which concern student-teachers as well as to allow them to share information and keep in touch. Hernandez-Ramos (2004) points out that discussion forums allow computer-supported communication and collaboration, encouragement of reflective practice, and a better understanding of the pedagogical and learning benefits derived from integration of these technologies.

The following are some characteristics of asynchronous discussion forums:

- Asynchronous electronic communication provides an independence of time and place that is highly valued in the society of today and enables lifelong learning.
- A forum system is an easy-to-use tool, which may be set up easily at a minimum cost to the university.
- Users work at their individual speed and have the opportunity to decide when or how much to participate.
- Freedom to explore issues, which encourage honesty to share experiences and thoughts that may result in the development of, shared thinking.
- The users are free to communicate and individuals may receive special attention from anyone willing to provide it.
- Participants who wish to “lurk” or “browse” may do so with no inconvenience to others.
- Participants may have a discussion with no fear of being humiliated or embarrassed.
- They allow participants to make sense of, rethink and redefine ideas.
- They are also good places for your teacher trainers to post and guide assignments and engage in group work,
- They allow participants to seek help and socialize. (After Diaz de la Garza 2006)



Based on the outcomes of a previous research project which provided a virtual support network for Newly Qualified Teachers at the Tuxtla Language School in 2006, I decided to explore if the more that trainees used ADFs, student-teachers' individual thinking and interactive skills became more developed contributing to individual and collective knowledge generation.

3.2. Support for LEI Trainees

In an ideal world a support system should exist in all universities for undergraduate students with the aim of providing a support network which promotes trainees' growth and development, and assists students in assessing their interests and abilities, examining their educational goals, and developing short-term and long-range plans to meet their individual objectives. Counsellors should be provided to all students with the aim of providing assistance and information on general education and major requirements, clarifying policies and procedures, discuss educational and career options, monitor academic progress, and direct students to other resources when necessary. However, in most universities in Mexico there are not enough resources in place at most public universities to provide adequate support. A great deal of college students report receiving little guidance about how to successfully deal with the challenges they face while they attempt to figure out the necessary knowledge and skills they require to successfully graduate from college. This support must be both academic and personal since many undergraduate students have admitted that they often deal with feelings of vulnerability, inadequacy, incompetence, discouragement, anxiety and frustration, as they aspire to complete pregraduate study.

In addition, most new college students are not in the habit of sharing their weaknesses with classmates or Academic Councilors. However, they must share ideas and discuss issues with peers for who else can better understand their situation and offer alternatives?

By not discussing issues with peers, novice college students struggle to survive and may soon drop out of college. To provide a support network, I took advantage of a previous investigation conducted at the Tuxtla Language School to



provide support to graduates of our Teacher Training Program through the use of an Asynchronous Discussion Forum which had been set up at a nominal cost to the university and which had provided useful insights on the potential of providing peer support through a virtual support system.

In setting up a community of learners it is important that members share the following resources for mutual intellectual activity (After Mercer 2000: 116)

- **A History** (in this case all participants are enrolled in the LEI teacher training program)
- **Collective Identity** (all define themselves as future EFL teachers)
- **Mutual Obligations** (all are enrolled in the LEI program and must fulfill class requirements)
- **A Common Discourse** (all share a common specialized language repertoire)

Online communication refers to communication via networked computers. It encompasses:

Synchronous Groups: Interactive groups where participants communicate using text-based communication in real time.

Asynchronous Groups: Members post messages at their convenience.

4. Creating an ADF at the Tuxtla Language School

The ADF was initiated on February 28th, 2006. The data of the analysis of this study was obtained during a six-month trial period from March 15th to September 15, 2006. I acted as the administrator of the site and e-moderator. The site is located at: http://elt.unach.mx/Foros_LEI/

Figure 1 illustrates the forum index:

Foros LEI
Foros de LEI en la Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla - UNACH

[FAQ](#)
[Search](#)
[Memberlist](#)
[Usergroups](#)
[Profile](#)
[You have no new messages](#)
[Log out \[admin \]](#)

Foro de alumnos de Lenguas
Moderators: None
Users browsing this forum: None
Goto page 1, 2 [Next](#)

[new topic](#)
[Foros LEI Forum Index -> Foro de alumnos de Lenguas](#)
[Mark all topics read](#)

Topics	Replies	Author	Views	Last Post
Practicum 2006 Diego Rivera	1	Miss Anita	10	01 Nov 2006 12:41 am alfarom →
Practicum Diego Rivera Oct 2006 (Culture & Civilization)	5	Miss Anita	40	31 Oct 2006 01:16 am perezj →
Welcome to the LEI forum!	1	Miss Anita	119	31 Oct 2006 12:26 am Hannah →
To Miss Anita. Suggestion...	0	floresn	14	20 Sep 2006 05:49 pm floresn →
Supersize This	0	Miss Anita	11	10 Sep 2006 03:01 pm Miss Anita →
SUPER SIZE ME 1st Sem ENGLISH LEI Sept 2006	8	Miss Anita	108	08 Sep 2006 01:54 am beltranj →
supersize me	0	gordilloj	12	07 Sep 2006 04:46 am gordilloj →
Wallace & Gromit 1st Sem Eng Fall 2006 [Goto page: 1, 2]	19	Miss Anita	406	28 Aug 2006 02:02 pm Guest →
wallace and gromit	0	velascoj	19	25 Aug 2006 04:40 am velascoj →
wallace and gromit	0	abarcae	13	25 Aug 2006 02:08 am abarcae →
wallace and gromit	0	castillok	9	24 Aug 2006 11:09 am castillok →
Fahrenheit 911	11	Miss Anita	131	23 Aug 2006 10:41 pm floresq →
wallas and wromit	0	marinf	17	23 Aug 2006 10:32 pm marinf →
Eng Lit I "Poetry" 7th Sem LEI Fall 2006 [Goto page: 1, 2]	22	Miss Anita	241	23 Aug 2006 02:25 pm Miss Anita →

Figure 1: LEI ADF Index

4.1 Target Population and Setting

For this study trainees from all 8 semesters of the Tuxtla LEI program (216 students) were encouraged to participate in the discussion forum.

Group	Population
1st Semester	31 students
2nd Semester	33 students
3rd Semester	24 students
4th Semester	34 students
5th Semester	20 students
6th Semester	32 students
7th Semester	23 students
8th Semester	19 students

Figure 2: Target Population



The ADF was initiated on February 28th, 2006. This study was conducted during a six-month trial period from March 15th to September 15, 2006.

Once the forum was up and running, brochures were created as a guide and invitation for all of the students in the LEI to participate; this hand-out contained the address and written instructions on how to use the forum. Visits were then conducted to all of the classrooms of the LEI program with the aim of encouraging trainees to participate. As a teacher trainer I personally conducted induction sessions with three groups in the Computer center. Trainees were assigned a task to familiarize them on how to successfully use the forum and post a contribution.

The following figure illustrates the chronogram of activities carried out throughout the 6 month trial period:

Date	Event
Feb. 28th, 2006	Creation of the ADF
March–April, 2006	Publicity about the existence of the ADF. Designing a user brochure. Induction on how to use the ADF with first and fifth and sixth semester LEI trainees
August, 2006	Induction on how to use the ADF with first, fifth and seventh semesters.
Sept.– Oct. 2006	Application of questionnaires/Face to Face Interviews/Linguistic Analysis of Written thread

Figure 3: Chronogram

5. Results

Due to the fact that this forum was created to provide trainees with a peer support system during their pregraduate studies, it was important to explore if trainees actually felt that they had received support when they faced difficulties during ITT. Their responses are summarized in the following figure:

Support Resource	Percentage
Classmates	33%
Friends	21%
Family	15%
Academic Counselor	15%
Other Teacher Trainers	13%
Nobody	3%

Figure 4: Support Resources

5.1 Using the ADF

The following step was to analyze trainees' participation in the ADF; in the first semester of the LEI, 100% of the polled students participated in the ADF, while in fifth semester only 70% participated, in the seventh semester even less, 63%, and, in the eighth semester only a disappointing 20% participated.

Trainees were asked if they had found something interesting and beneficial in using ADFs. Their responses are illustrated in the following figure

Reasons for Using the ADF	Percentage
Sharing ideas and opinions	46%
Class Assignments	17%
Obtain Information about the LEI Teacher Training Program	17%
To do extra Practice with English	6%
None	14%

Figure 4: Reasons for Using the ADF (After Hernandez & Juarez 2007)

In the case of trainees who had never participated in the ADF, it was necessary to explore the reasons why. These are illustrated in the following figure:

Reasons	Percentage
It is difficult to use it	2%
I don't have time to use it	41%
I don't like to share my problems with other people	7%
It is difficult to express my ideas	9%
I like to read what other people say, but not to contribute	7%
I have never used an ADF before, and I didn't know what to do	19%
I didn't know about its existence	15%

Figure 5: Reasons for Not Using the ADF (After Hernandez & Juarez 2007)

Finally, trainees were asked if the use of the ADF had contributed in their learning. Those who participated answered that the ADF had been useful in order to comply with class assignments. 44% percent of trainees mentioned it had been helpful while 17% said that it had not been helpful, on the other hand, the remaining 39% said that it has been slightly helpful.

Results indicate that a great number of trainees found the ADF interesting and useful, since most of them participated, even if cohesive methods were taken to assure that LEI trainees would enter the threads. The majority participated to comply with assignments left by their Teacher Trainer. Participants' opinions



indicate that this is an effective method to provide and obtain support with from LEI peers. Therefore, it is my belief that ADFs are an effective means, not only to comply with class assignments, but also to socialize and provide peer support for other LEI trainees. However, due to the fact that this type of support network is new it must be gradually implemented into the study program to allow trainees to feel comfortable using this technological resource.

5.2 Exploring Success & Failure in the LEI ADF Pilot Project

Many trainees commented that they felt attracted to using the ADFs and have worked hard towards developing on-line reflective practices. However, a great number of trainees admitted that they felt more comfortable obtaining face to face support from peers than through an electronic medium. It is also necessary to address the issues of finding time to use the ADF and available technology since many trainees do not have internet access in their homes and the infrastructure which exists in the Tuxtla Language School is insufficient to successfully implement the use of this on-line support network on a continuous basis.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of creating an ADF was to provide student teachers with opportunities to be able to develop reflective skills and to share knowledge as they explore issues which they wished to address collaboratively. ADFs have the potential to provide a peer support network to trainees throughout their journey through college and beyond. However, the formation of an on-line learning community at the Tuxtla Language School continues to be a work in progress. Infrastructure is a main concern to be able to use this resource effectively since the target population should have continuous access to computers and the internet for it to be successful.

In spite of all of the challenges I encountered, I hope that the ADF will continue to exist to provide support for future trainees of the LEI teacher training program and that these reflective opportunities should be ongoing and sustained.



This has been the second stage of my exploration regarding the use of ADFs, the first being a support network for Newly Qualified teachers which was mentioned in a previous issue. My next step is to establish a bridge between the Autonomous University of Chiapas and a university in another state with a similar study program in an effort to create a nationwide learning community.

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

References

1. Cal y Mayor, A. and E. Moreno (2006) El Programa de Tutores de la Escuela de Lenguas Tuxtla. Paper Presented at the San Cristóbal, Chiapas Tutoring Forum.
2. Diaz de la Garza, A. (2006) ADFs as Life Rafts for Newly Qualified Teachers in Schools. Dissertation to obtain the Masters in Education Degree from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom.
3. Dixon-Krauss, L. A. (Ed.). (1996). Vygotsky in the classroom: Mediated literacy instruction and assessment. White Plains, NY: Longman.
4. Hernandez, O. and R. Juarez (2007) Asynchronous Discussion Forums As A Means Of Providing Peer Support Between Students Of The LEI Program. Undergraduate Tesis to Obtain the Degree of Licenciado en la Enseñanza del Ingles at the Autonomous University of Chiapas.
5. Hernández-Ramos, P. (2004). Web logs and online discussions as tools to promote reflective practice. *The Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 3 (1).
6. Mercer, n. (2000) *Words and Minds: How We Use Language To Think Together*. London: Routledge.
7. Wenger, E., R. McDermott and W. Snyder (2002) *Cultivating Communities Of Practice: A Guide To Managing Knowledge* Cultivating Communities Of Practice: Harvard Business School Press.

Biodata

Ana Maria Elisa Diaz de la Garza is a Teacher Trainer at the Autonomous University of Chiapas. She has an MEd degree in Education, is a Cambridge Oral Examiner, and collaborates on numerous academic committees. She is a member of the academic body "Professional Development and Evaluation in Language Teaching", has lectured and written academic articles for magazines.

Contact: amediaz57@hotmail.com