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Achieving the Impossible? Teaching Practice component of a Pre-service Distance English Language Teacher Training Program in Turkey

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to describe the model developed for the teaching practice component of the pre-service Distance English Language Teacher Training Program (DELTT) at Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Turkey. The steps taken to improve the model over a six-year period will be explained and the recent developments in the teaching practice area of the current program will be discussed in the light of recent research on learning and personal development. Lessons learned and the steps taken during this developmental process will be explored and recommendations for other programs concerned with the teaching practice component will be made.

Introduction

Preparing high-quality teachers is the ultimate aim of teacher education programs (Bransford, Darling-Hammond & LePage, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1997), These programs have the responsibility of educating future teachers who will directly affect the future of a nation. Such programs should be able to help its trainees to prepare well-organized lesson plans, to adapt a flexible attitude while applying those plans, to reflect on their lessons and to think about the strengths and weaknesses of their lessons. Considering the fact that student teachers have varying degrees of success in adapting to the challenges of a real classroom while they are all provided with the same knowledge during their formal education, we can conclude that knowledge does not lead to good practice all the time and learning is an ongoing process (Fairbanks, Duffy, Faircloth, He, Levin, Rohr & Stein, 2010). As a result, the most important aim of teacher education programs should be to give their trainees the perspective that they should feel themselves responsible and willing for learning from every opportunity throughout their lives. Student teachers working in these programs should also serve as models of this mission in their own practices.

Teaching practice that builds a bridge between university and schools and helps future teachers to apply what they learn at the university is the most important component of teacher education programs (Broadbent, 1998; Hazzan & Lapidot; 2004; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Stanulis &Russell, 2000; Tanruther, 1994). Although most teaching practices support school-university partnerships, many of them demonstrate problems related to organizing and monitoring teaching practice. Most of them have been criticized for not establishing an equal relationship between school teachers (practitioners) and university supervisors (academics). As Valencia, Martin, Place & Grossman (2009) argue, one of the reasons for the above mentioned disorganization problem is that most of the school-based teacher educators are not usually provided with the kind of preparation and support they need in guiding the student teachers. However, as indicated by Zeihner (2010), an equal and more dialectical relationship between the academic and the practitioner is necessary for building a bridge between

universities and schools. Only with such a relationship can the school teacher help the student teacher in linking the theory to the practice.

In our case the student teachers are scattered at different practicum sites most of which are quite far from the university they are studying. The only way to approach these great numbers of pre-service teachers (student teachers) during the practicum process is through distance learning. Thus, the organization of the practicum becomes more crucial. Although teaching practice through distance education has been criticized by some researchers (Mc Grath,1995; Haworth and Parker, 1995 in Hall and Knox, 2009: 222), with the inclusion of the recent technological developments, the benefits of distance practicum are pointed out by others (Hammond, 2005; Dymond, Renzaglia, Halle, Chadsey and Bentz, 2008). Providing opportunities to explore new ideas using the internet, creating various interaction patterns different from IRF pattern of a classic classroom and encouraging forum discussions for collaborative learning and reflection can be mentioned as some of the benefits of distance learning (Hall and Knox, 2009; Reinders, 2009).

Following such claims, this case study aims at describing the model developed for the teaching practice component of the pre-service Distance English Language Teacher Training Program (DELTT) at Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Turkey. Within the scope of this study, first, the context which teaching practice is a part of will be clarified, then, the organization of teaching practice and its components will be described and the steps taken during this developmental process will be explored. Finally, lessons learned during this process and the recommendations for other programs concerned with the teaching practice component will be made.

The Context

Distance teaching practice takes place in the last year of a four year Distance English Language Teacher Training (DELLT) program that started at Anadolu University in 2000 to educate greater number of students as language teachers. There was an increasing demand for language teachers in Turkey resulting from the 1997 education reform framework, which included English language in the fourth and fifth grade curriculum in the elementary school instead of the sixth grade. 12,462 students have registered for the DELLT program since it was first established in 2000.

DELLT was designed as the only blended four-year undergraduate program in the country: the first two years are delivered face to face and the last two years through distance education. During the first two years, learners are provided with the courses aiming to help them to improve their language proficiency. The learners have upper intermediate English proficiency level when they are accepted to the program, yet as future language teachers who will be models for their students, they need to improve and polish their language. Therefore, the first two years focus mainly on language improvement, because it is thought that the interaction which has a major role in language improvement can be facilitated by face-to-face interaction among and between the learners and the teachers in a regular classroom teaching environment. Moreover, such a process is thought to provide natural realistic communication opportunities for the pre-service teachers. During the last two years (that is, 3rd and 4th classes), the students are given courses that aim to improve their skills and knowledge in the areas of literature, linguistics and methodology including teaching practice. These courses are delivered through distance education. The courses have on-line components which are realized through Web CT, books and CDs. Web CT includes content explanations, self-practice tests and a discussion forum where the students can consult their teachers at the

university about points they are unclear or have discussions with the other students on various topics, such as study skills and content.

In the following section, the teaching practice model developed for the DELTT and the steps taken for its improvement over the past six years are explained.

Teaching practice within the DELLT

Teaching Practice in the DELLT is based mainly on the faculty-school partnership and follows a similar procedure to regular teacher training programs in terms of the schools chosen and the roles and the requirements of the student teachers, the cooperating teachers and the university supervisors. At the beginning of the academic year, student teachers are assigned to state schools in their home towns which might be any city within the boundaries of the country. They are told to comply with the schools' schedules and to be responsible for everything for which their cooperating teachers are responsible during their stay at the schools (five hours per week over 25 weeks).

Cooperating teachers are English language teachers working at state primary, secondary or high schools. Teachers with at least three years of experience and with the score of 85 and above in a national English proficiency examination are selected as cooperating teachers. At the beginning of the teaching practice, these teachers are trained and the whole process and the responsibilities of the participants are explained to them. Meetings are held regularly during the process. Supervisors are university teachers working in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Department or School of Foreign Languages. In addition, two experienced university teacher trainers are assigned as the Academic Coordinators who are responsible for all the academic decisions and the organization of the teaching practice process of the program.

During the 25 weeks, student teachers are required to make observations and do actual teaching in a real classroom context. The teaching practice is composed of Micro and Macro Teaching. For both, student teachers are required to prepare lesson plans at least two days before applying them in real classrooms and getting feedback from their cooperating teachers. After making the necessary adjustments based on the feedback, these plans are conducted in a real classroom context.

Micro Teaching practice occupies the first ten weeks. During this process, student teachers are required to prepare lesson plans that include activities lasting for 15 or 20 minutes of a 40-minute lesson. The rest of the teaching time is taught either by another student teacher or the cooperating teacher himself. The aim of Micro Teaching is to encourage student teachers to act as teachers for part of a class hour, before taking the responsibility of the whole lesson. Eighteen micro lesson plans, focusing on various skills, are expected to be planned and taught. The remaining fifteen weeks of the academic year is allocated to Macro Teaching practices. Student teachers are required to prepare the entire lesson plans for 40 minutes and apply them in the classroom. The same procedures of pre-teaching feedback sessions and the making of necessary adjustments are followed during this process, too.

The student teachers are required to write their lesson plans in the *Teacher-Student dialogue format*, including their justifications for their decisions throughout the plans: that is, they need to write down instructions, explanations, examples, answers and other details in their lesson plans they could possibly use while teaching. They are told to write the 'Teacher's parts in the *Teacher-Student dialogue format* with some alternatives, if possible, leaving out the 'Student' parts. The aim of doing so is to encourage them to think about classroom teaching, focusing on multiple perspectives and to consider alternative reactions to the situations they might experience while applying their plans in the classroom. Thus, such a

process is thought to increase the student teacher's awareness and improve decision making skills during the lesson planning. In addition, the thinking processes and reasoning that underlie student teachers' particular choices become more visible to themselves and their cooperating teachers as well as to their supervisors.

The following section explains the steps taken in the three main phases of the development of this teaching practice process. Each phase is developed based on the feedback obtained from each stakeholder.

Phase 1: Initial Steps in the Development of the Teaching Practice

The Teaching Practice started in the 2003-2004 academic year with the first group of 4th Year students. 200 student teachers and 70 cooperating teachers in 48 state schools were involved in the process in the first year.

At the beginning of the first phase, a guide book (Keçik, 2003) was provided for both the student teachers and their cooperating teachers. Its purpose was mainly to help student teachers to achieve the mission of teaching by building a positive attitude at the beginning of their lives as teachers. It consisted of different parts focusing on the purpose and the organization of the process, the requirements of all the participants in the process and the assessment. In this book the fundamental aims of the Teaching Practice were stated as follows:

- to increase faculty and school cooperation and collaboration;
- to help student teachers learn about the school context;
- to encourage student teachers to increase their teaching skills and competencies.

The book also included information for the cooperating teachers on how to approach to student teachers, before, during and after their teaching. Examples of lesson plans with comments on them, explanations related to these comments and a checklist for the evaluation of the plans were included in the book. There were 15 items in the checklist that would be taken into consideration in giving feedback to the lesson plans and in evaluating them. Besides, the cooperating teachers were given an observation checklist and information on how to observe student teacher's classes. The observation checklist consisted of items related to various aspects of teaching, such as classroom management, language use and achievement of objectives.

In the following years the book was improved to include examples of various lesson plans for teaching different subjects and different skills at different levels. In addition, basic information for teaching separate language skills and some practical ideas were provided for the student teachers, as a form of support and a reminder of the content they had already covered in the other methodology courses during their previous years of university education.

Each student teacher was expected to keep a portfolio that included lesson plans, materials used while teaching, their mentor's feedback and observation sheets, and some school administrative documents they would need to refer in the future.

At the beginning of the term, a series of meetings with the student teachers, cooperating teachers and principals of the state schools were held separately in order to explain the process, their roles in it and the requirements and expectations of the Teaching Practice for each participant. During each term, continuous feedback from student teachers and cooperating teachers was received and necessary information was provided through telephone conversations with the individual cooperating teachers or the student teachers. For common problems relating to content and management issues, letters were written to either the cooperating teachers or the student teachers, explaining the possible solutions.

The third stakeholder, supervisors, contributed to the process at the end of each term for evaluating portfolios of the student teachers. One hundred and twenty-six English language teachers volunteered to participate as supervisors. A series of in-service training sessions was held for them. During these sessions, the supervisors were given information about the whole Teaching Practice process. They were also provided with the plan evaluation criteria and various sample lesson plans involving different skills in order to achieve consensus. Each item in the criteria was discussed on the basis of the sample lesson plans and different points of views were gathered in order to help the committee members make objective decisions during this stage. All these training sessions involved long hours of discussions among the participants in order to set the plan evaluation norms. During this process, teachers reflected that these in-service training sessions offered the flexibility of looking at events from various perspectives and renewed their professional knowledge by making them aware of the recent improvements in the area of language teaching. During the evaluation process, each student teacher's lesson plans within his portfolio were assessed by two supervisors following the checklist. This evaluation checklist included 20 items focusing on various aspects such as:

- success in determining the learning outcomes of the lesson correctly,
- stating the outcomes in clear wording;
- selecting appropriate activities to achieve these outcomes;
- considering possible difficulties learners might encounter;
- involving learners while applying the activities and checking them; and
- using English language correctly and appropriately.

Each supervisor was also required to complete forms reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of the student teachers' lesson plans. Those reflections were then sent to the student teachers as feedback and used to determine common problems during the Teaching Practice process. For instance, most of the student teachers had problems in determining the learning outcomes. They either wrote too vague outcomes as; "*at the end of the lesson the students will be able to learn vocabulary*" or outcomes that are not related to language learning process as; "*students will be able to fill in the blanks*".   In the light of this data the student teachers were provided with further information on the problem areas via books, letters and discussions during the site visits.

At the end of each year, a general evaluative feedback on the whole process of teaching practice was gathered through surveys from all the participants. In addition, interviews with those who could be reached were conducted. As a pilot study, seven cities in different parts of the country were visited by the two coordinators. During these visits, meetings with student teachers, cooperating teachers, school principals and directors from the Ministry of Education were held separately. Feedback on student teachers' lesson plans and their actual teaching was given and this served as a form of in-service training by providing a model for the cooperating teachers. Both the student teachers and the cooperating teachers were given questionnaires developed to determine how the Teaching Practice process was perceived by different participants. After piloting the questionnaire in the seven cities, some changes on the wording were made and the revised version of the questionnaire was sent to 900 student teachers and 235 cooperating teachers. The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions each having three options (yes, no, partly) and a space was given for the commentary for each question. The same instrument with a little change in wording was given to both groups (Keçik, 2007).

The results obtained from the questionnaire made it clear that there were some problems in terms of meeting the requirements of the teaching practice process and the need for additional steps was obvious. For example, some student teachers did not perceive the necessity of preparing lesson plans and wrote them after they had finished teaching, and some cooperating teachers did not have enough knowledge or willingness to guide these kinds of

trainees. Similarly, some cooperating teachers had difficulties in evaluating student teachers' lesson plans or their actual teaching. The high number of class hours cooperating teachers had to teach and the number of students for which they were responsible were among the factors causing them to experience difficulties in the evaluation process.

The collection of this feedback formed the beginning of the second phase, which followed the beginning of the third academic year.

Phase 2: Adjustments made in the process

As a result of the feedback received from the evaluation of the questionnaire and telephone and e-mail messages, the book was rewritten to include the required information on the problem areas and make the necessary elaborations. Such as, to supply the need of the cooperating teachers and the student teachers related to the good model lesson plans and information about their applications in real classroom settings various samples were provided through the books and CDs. Sample videos of lessons recorded by student teachers in the regular teacher training program that could be used as positive models were sent to both student teachers and cooperating teachers. These lessons were accompanied by the original lesson plans and the transcriptions of feedback on both the plan of the lesson and the post-observation by the supervisors. Besides, in-service training workshops were held with the language department heads of each practice school. They were invited to the university and they attended the workshops on recent developments in language teaching methodologies and mentoring. Experiences were shared and sample cases focusing on the teaching process from various points were dealt with. The sessions were video recorded and the videos were used by the department heads to train the other cooperating teachers in their own schools. Because of some practical reasons it was not possible to give these interactive workshops efficiently to the great number of cooperating teachers, only department heads were invited as representatives and they organized similar workshops at their home towns using the video recordings. Further, they were asked to reflect on the workshops they organized, get the cooperating teachers' feedback and send them to the coordinators. All these reflections were used as the basis for new in-service training sessions.

Similarly, the supervisors required more in-service training sessions on the analysis and evaluation of lesson plans. They also needed more examples of plan-evaluation sessions. Therefore, to provide more assistance for supervisors the evaluation checklists were revised. In response to individual questions, for those who needed support, individual meetings or training sessions were organized as often as possible.

Despite their contact through telephone, e-mails or letters and close interaction with their cooperating teachers, the student teachers expressed discontent about being distance education students and not having sufficient contact with the university supervisors, and, in a way, feeling lonely. In order to solve the problem and give the students more support by providing facilities to contact with the university supervisors, a discussion board was initiated through a Website designed for the DELTT students.

The discussion board aimed to encourage distance learners to feel more connected to their university, their peers and the teachers and to encourage them to perceive a sense of community. Student teachers were free to ask any questions or mention any problems they had experienced during the Teaching Practice process and were provided with emotional support in addition to the information they needed. The discussion board was made available to the cooperating teachers as well, but they were not forced to use it during the process. It was the course coordinators' and a few supervisors' responsibility to answer the student teachers' questions.

Following these first steps, site visits to the schools, where practice teaching is held, were realized at the beginning of each semester. For this purpose, two coordinators and a group of university supervisors who were also responsible for the Teaching Practice with the regular face-to face student teachers at the same university were assigned. The supervisors were informed about the DELTT program and the applications of distance Teaching Practice. They were asked to help cooperating teachers by conducting similar in-service training meetings in various cities. The cooperating teachers were informed on how to give feedback to student teacher's lesson plan and their teaching. Lessons of the student teachers were observed and feedback sessions were carried out together with cooperating teachers and the student teachers. These sessions were considered to be valuable by both the cooperating teachers and those student teachers who did not have the opportunity to meet with the university supervisors on a regular basis: they expressed their appreciation at the effort being made for them.

Continuous feedback through letters or e-mails was also provided. The ones who did good work were acknowledged. These measures helped to improve the performance of the school teachers as cooperating teachers, since every year the same teachers were encouraged to take over the new student teachers. Those who were not able to carry out mentoring effectively or were not sufficiently motivated to be cooperating teachers were dropped from the system at the beginning of the new academic year.

As a result, the feedback received at the end of this phase revealed the need for ongoing interaction among all of the participants, especially between the university supervisors and the student teachers, who stated that this would help them to overcome the feeling of loneliness common to the distance education students. As reflection of Turkish culture, our student teachers needed more emotional support and still had problems in being autonomous learners, which is especially necessary for distance learning. In addition, the inclusion of the university supervisors in the teaching practice process would help both the student teachers and the cooperating teachers to get different views on the teaching process.
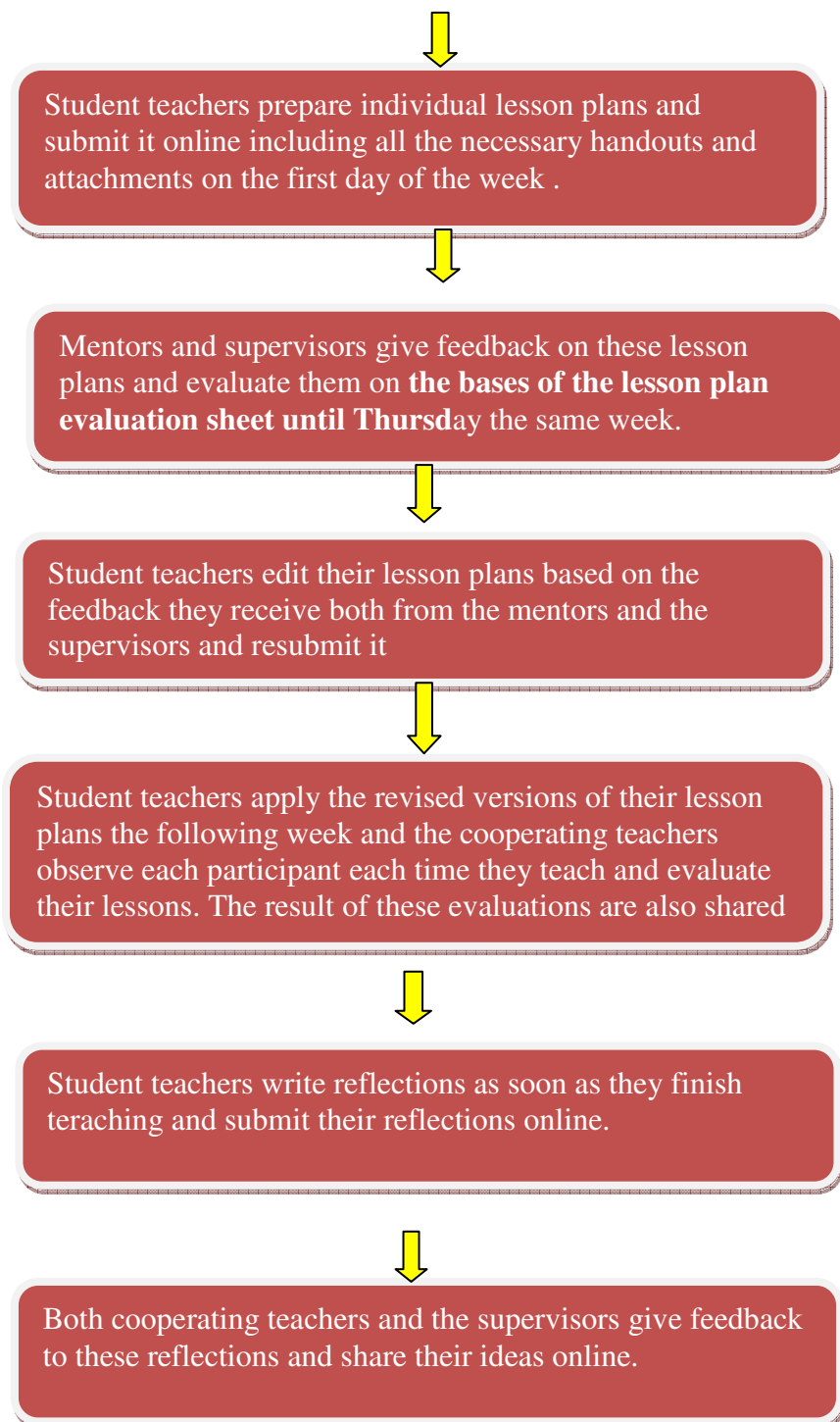
Phase 3: Moving on to the on-line platform

As a result of the feedback obtained at the end of the second phase and the developments in technology, a web support involving an e-portfolio model was implemented into the teaching practice process in 2009-2010 academic years. The aim was to increase the amount of interaction between the university supervisors and the student teachers and to provide them with continuous on-line feedback on their lesson plans before they were applied in the classroom. Thus, the supervisors would get in touch with the student teachers throughout the teaching practice process and the interaction among all the participants would be facilitated. In many studies, e-portfolios have been found to have a facilitating effect on student teachers' learning: for example, Sung, Chang, Yu and Chang (2009) found that teachers' learning improves by using portfolios and their professional development is facilitated. Barbera (2009) also argues that with the help of e-portfolios, students can realize that improvement is continuous and a work can be improved over the learning period.

In this system, each student teacher has a compilation of lesson plans, reflections written after applying these plans and feedback they have received for each plan from the supervisors and cooperating teachers. Lesson plans are evaluated by cooperating teachers and supervisors separately and the plans with feedback are put through the web, which means that the evaluation process is transparent for everybody involved in the Teaching Practice process and student teachers have a chance to improve their practices by being aware of their strengths and the weaknesses. Besides, student teachers have opportunities to contact

supervisors who are at a distance and cooperating teachers who are with them for further information about the feedback they receive. If their plans need serious changes, they are required to edit and resubmit them.

E-portfolio system includes a compilation of each student teacher's lesson plans, reflections written after applying these plans and the feedback they received for each plan from the supervisors and cooperating teachers. The following figure summarizes how e-portfolio system works;

Student teachers prepare individual lesson plans and submit it online including all the necessary handouts and attachments on the first day of the week .

Mentors and supervisors give feedback on these lesson plans and evaluate them on **the bases of the lesson plan evaluation sheet until Thursd**ay the same week.

Student teachers edit their lesson plans based on the feedback they receive both from the mentors and the supervisors and resubmit it

Student teachers apply the revised versions of their lesson plans the following week and the cooperating teachers observe each participant each time they teach and evaluate their lessons. The result of these evaluations are also shared

Student teachers write reflections as soon as they finish teraching and submit their reflections online.

Both cooperating teachers and the supervisors give feedback to these reflections and share their ideas online.

The process starts again following the same steps for 25 weeks.

4 student teachers doing their teaching practice in the same city are grouped. Each cooperating teacher is responsible from 1 group of student teachers and each supervisor is responsible from 2 groups.
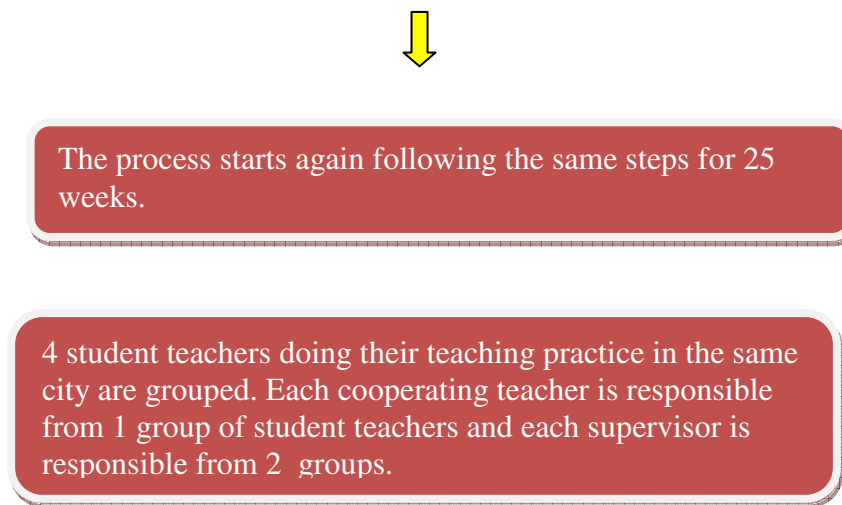
Figure 1: The E-Portfolio System

As seen in the figure above the whole teaching practice process including all the assessments and the applications is transparent for everybody involved and teaching becomes public. As Lieberman & Mace (2010) argue, this transparency created by public teaching gives student teachers a chance to improve their practices by being aware of their strengths and the weaknesses. It allows the student teachers to extend their own learning experiences by benefiting from the lesson plans that other student teachers prepare and the feedback they get from the cooperating teachers and university supervisors. Therefore, they have the opportunity to see events from multiple perspectives and learn from each other. We can argue that this new system provides more facilities than just a network of student e-portfolios. Therefore, it is similar to what Barbera (2009) calls a 'netfolio stystem', because mutual feedback is given and taken by all the participants and ideas are exchanged in an interactive way.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to describe a model for the teaching process that needs to cross geographical barriers with huge numbers of distance student teachers. The basic steps taken in the process of creating facilities for future teachers to have real teaching experiences have been explained here. While we are well aware that these attempts should be seen only as initial steps in the distance teacher education process, and further support and training are still needed for all the participants, our six years of experience has given us an opportunity to create a huge learning community of people who are all motivated and ready for continuous professional development.

We are also aware that improving the Teaching Practice, as explained here, will necessitate further re-evaluation of the current application. Empirical research is needed to test the initiatives from various aspects focusing on its strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, we believe that the dynamic, interactive and reflective characteristics of the model will provide insight for teaching practice component of teacher education programs and for future teachers by being a model of continuous development.

We hope that student teachers trained in such a system will be successful in coping with many factors that operate in real classrooms by finding the links between theory and practice more easily.

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