<runningheadleft>Professional Development through Teacher Research
<runningheadright>Ghosts in the Machine?

3 Ghosts in the Machine? Exploratory Teaching on a Distance Learning Development Project

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<A>Introduction

This chapter reports on an exploratory practice project designed to better understand the affordances and constraints of using a cloud-based software platform (VoiceThread) to facilitate online discussion with trainee language teachers on an MA TESOL Independent Distance Learning (IDL) programme at a university in the north-east of England. Exploratory practice (Allwright, 1992, 2003, 2005) can be defined as 'research generated by practitioners working to understand their own practices and their own lives' (Allwright, 2005: 345). Such research typically begins with a puzzle (Allwright, 1992, 2005; Hanks, 2017) or an issue related to practice that requires development and improvement.

In our case, the puzzle arose after we had been tasked with rewriting and improving the MA module, Theories of Second Language Learning, which sits within an MA TESOL IDL programme. As teacher educators, we both developed a strong sense that the pedagogical model operating within this programme emphasised the transmission of knowledge through self-paced, independent and individual study at the expense of collaborative dialogue and participation. Indeed, student feedback pointed to a need for more participation in high-quality online discussions. Participation in existing discussions via virtual learning environment (VLE) platforms was patchy and had, in our view, begun to feel a little tired. As a result, our students, many of whom were practising teachers, were, we sensed, being positioned very passively in the teaching and learning process.

Having worked with Open University VLE platforms for many years, we were aware that other possibilities were available. For these

reasons, we wanted to explore something new and, crucially, to develop our own pedagogical practices around online discussions at the same time – a need that has been given greater impetus by the shift to online learning necessitated by Covid-19. Based on previous experience in other contexts (e.g. teaching academic writing in a Japanese context), we set out to redesign our online discussions around the VoiceThread software platform.

The chapter documenting our experiences is organised as follows. We begin by outlining the approach to exploratory practice developed by Allwright and colleagues (1992, 2003, 2005) and subsequently highlight how the suggested steps map onto our own work in redeveloping practice within the micro and macro aspects of our own context. This then allows us to articulate the reasons for exploring the changes in our practice, and our analysis of what these changes ultimately meant, and can mean, for the participants.

<A>Exploratory Practice

Exploratory practice has a long history in language education research, and was originally developed almost as a guide to allow practitioner teacher-researchers to better understand their own classrooms, thus cutting out the middleman of the distant and high-level academic researcher who may otherwise dictate practice that is not suited to any specific context (Allwright, 2005). As a framework, it has been used to successfully reflect on practice and has been part of broader changes both in classroom practice and in how participants relate to each other across a variety of contexts (see Hanks, 2019, for discussion).

Allwright (2005) distanced himself from his earlier step-by step approach to exploratory practice, since he wanted to avoid a 'problem – solution' type of inquiry which can become overly simplistic. However, as newcomers to this type of research (and very much challenged for time and resources), we found the guidelines from the earlier model (1992) helpful (with the potential weaknesses described by Allwright [2005] very much in mind – see later discussion) in designing our approach and writing up the findings to this project. Following the suggestions from Allwright (1992), then, we sought to reflect on and explore our practice as teacher educators within the new IDL context that we found ourselves in, when asked to teach and develop an existing module of work for an online programme. This involved planning, developing and working through distinct passages of work, in line with the suggested procedures from Allwright (1992), which are summarised in Table 3.1.

<A>First Procedure: Identifying the Puzzle

To identify the puzzle, the first step was to take a broader view of our own context and see the task at hand in terms of where we were as educators, locating this within the shifts in thinking that are taking place in terms of technology and independent distance education. The online learning experience is developing so rapidly that it was estimated that by 2017 the proportion of all students taking at least one course online would grow to 33.1%, from 31.1% in 2016 (Lederman, 2018). This shift towards online education has been

driven, firstly, by developments in technology, which have meant that distance education can be handled much more effectively, with online platforms providing digital space for materials, interaction and feedback. This means that, as Kurzman (2013: 331) pointed out, 'it is now possible to offer college and university education to more people, at a greater convenience, and often at a lower cost'.

Secondly, the shift to online education has its roots in relatively recent global shifts, in a world characterised as one of global flow by Appadurai (1996). This world can be broadly characterised as neoliberal, defined as:

> a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. (Harvey, 2005: 2)

Under neoliberalism, education is commodified (Anderson, 2017) and marketised (Giroux, 2014; Luke, 2008). This is evident across higher education and within the English language and TESOL fields more specifically (Block *et al*., 2013 Hall & Knox, 2009; Walker, 2014). Here, practitioners desire the higher status that an MA TESOL qualification provides to develop their career and professionalise away from private sector work, characterised (e.g. Walker, 2014) by low pay, low prestige and exploitative working conditions. In such a context, a distance learning degree offers professional development while the student is able to continue working. Given the precarious nature of much of the work in the TESOL sector, this is important, although how it impacts on motivation and professional development is not yet fully understood. Under neoliberalism, as a result of the commodification of knowledge and skills, there is a danger that teacher educators and students are positioned as passive consumers rather than as active participants in learning. As Giroux (2011: 3) has warned, pedagogy can be reduced to 'a set of strategies and skills to use in order to teach pre-specified subject matter'.

<B>Challenges of distance learning

Pedagogical deficits and impoverished learning experiences may account for the fact that dropout rates for distance education are an increasing problem (Cohen, 2017) and higher than in conventional learning environments (Boston *et al*., 2012). Some studies have suggested that this trend poses an existential threat to distance education institutions (e.g. Cohen, 2017; Simpson, 2013). Research suggests that online students struggle with lower levels of motivation (Hartnett, 2016) and generally experience lower levels of satisfaction (Cole *et al*., 2014), and that dropout in online education relates to broader social issues, with many students trying to combine full-time work, family responsibilities and self-study (Ashby, 2004).

That said, the learning experience offered also greatly impacts dropout rate. While there will always be circumstances beyond the control of the institution, those involved in the delivery of distance learning need to maintain student interest and drive

student learning by providing a rich, satisfying pedagogy. Research has found that the amount of instructor-student interaction and learner-content interaction, and internet self-efficacy, are all important predictors of student satisfaction (Kuo *et al*., 2014) and that the amount of learner-instructor interaction can have a decisive effect on student dropout (Croxton, 2014), with a lack of online participation being a barrier for teacher educators and something that can have a negative impact on the student experience (Berg, 2005).

In this regard, Anderson and Dron (2011) suggested that distance pedagogy has gone through cognitivist, constructivist and now connectivist phases, where pedagogies that assume access to digital technology are built around networked relationships and problem solving through information access and retrieval. Part of the challenge with teaching through distance, as we enter the so called 'network and connective future' (Anderson & Dron, 2011), is to keep developing systems of practice that actively involve the student within a community of online learners (Hauk *et al*., 2016).

Garrison *et al*. (2001) developed this into an influential model known as community of inquiry (COI), comprising three interdependent components: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. These components provide a contextualised view of online teaching in which the students, content and instructors play a central role in creating the desired COI. The model assumes that, in the absence of face-to-face interaction, participants in online distance learning must attempt to 'recreate the social and knowledge building processes that occur via the moment by moment negotiation of meaning found in the classroom' (Shea, *et al*., 2010: 10). Research within this framework has largely focused on understanding each of these three main constructs (e.g. Arbaugh, 2008; Garrison *et al*., 2001), with researchers analysing the content of online postings and thematically coding the interactions according to function.

Ways of developing an online community have been widely discussed in the education media (e.g. Darby, 2019) as well as the distance learning literature (e.g. Moore, 2014; Vesely *et al*., 2007), with research noting the importance of the medium used to stage learner-instructor interactions (Mishra, 2002) and confirming the importance of:

> a strong and active presence on the part of the instructor – one in which she or he actively guides the discourse – is related to students' sense of both connectedness and learning. (Shea *et al*., 2005: 77)

Other researchers (see Dennen, 2008; Preece *et al*., 2004) have tried to understand the behaviour and performance of students in and around discussion boards, which are the most obvious places to try to track participation and learning. Walker *et al.* (2010) summarise much of this work and describe the distinction between 'lurkers', 'posters' and 'shirkers' as terms to encapsulate different modes of behaviour within an online community. Posters are those students who actively participate with postings and responses, while lurkers are seen as co-participants who read and can learn from the community,

without actually contributing their own thoughts and ideas. Shirkers are the students who do not even log in or appear within the community, even though they have access to it. As Walker *et al*. (2010) comment, very little is known about these absent students, although in one study they were found to comprise as much as 10% of the total cohort (Egan *et al*., 2006).

<B>The programme

We were acutely aware of all these issues through the ongoing restructuring within our own institution, with programmes being cut and staff losing working hours and roles as a consequence of the free-market model adopted by UK Higher Education (e.g. Radice, 2013). We felt that it was important to understand what pitfalls there were with delivering online education in a neoliberal context, and how we could potentially improve our own offer and the learning experience of our students. In our case, the MA TESOL programme in question was well established and running for its 20th year, having been one of the earliest TESOL programmes in the UK to offer a distance learning component when it started back in 1999. The optional module, Theories of Second Language Learning, was offered online in the Spring semester from January 2019 until the final submission of assignments was complete in May of that year. The programme was structured as shown in Table 3.2. The IDL module ran in parallel with the on-campus course that was taught over 12 weeks with two 2-hour sessions per week. There were a total of 26 students taking the module by distance. These were distributed around the world in China, Japan, the USA, and other parts of the UK, as well as the Middle East and Africa. The project was cleared through the University of Sunderland ethics procedures. This meant that all participants in the module were given electronic notification of the research project that we were undertaking, and asked to give their consent to their work and their feedback being included in any write-up of the project. It was made clear that any reference to their work would be anonymous, they could choose not to participate, and that they could also withdraw from the project at any time. All of the students on the module agreed to participate in the project.

The module was housed in the VLE known as Canvas. Learners were organised into sub-groups and assigned an academic tutor (AT) who worked at a distance and dealt with academic, administrative and technology-related problems. The module was managed on campus by the module leader.

Content, organised around 10 short units and covering different SLA theories, consisted of printed text and target readings and follow-up question and 'model answer' sequences, as exemplified in Figure 3.1. Students worked through these materials at their own pace and in their own time. Follow-up discussions were posted in the asynchronous discussion tool that accompanied the module.

While these materials provided the basis for establishing a baseline understanding and knowledge of each theory, they did suggest a particular type of transmission learning, premised upon an autonomous, independent learner. The single 'model answer' potentially positions our learners as passive recipients of received knowledge that was not open for negotiation or challenge. It seemed

to us that the IDL context of our programme, with remote students and materials posted by an unknown instructor, was the type of teaching-learning process where Giroux's (2011) concerns could easily become realised.

This then defined our puzzle. How were we, given the time and resource constraints we were under, going to position our learners more positively as professionals and co-constructors of knowledge? Further, in keeping with the ethos of exploratory practice, how were we going to better *understand* the whole process from the learners' perspective?

<A>Second Procedure: Refine Thinking

With these broader contextual concerns about education as a commodified product and with task design issues in mind, we sought to develop our pedagogy and practice and to present the learners with a different kind of task, where the 'answers' were not clearly defined and problems were more open to discussion that would be shaped by the learners themselves. Related concerns to us as educators, of course, were the real constraints on time and resources (Malcolm & Zukas, 2009) that we had at our disposal. These constraints, plus pressures to actually produce classroom materials within quality management constraints, meant that we had to consider adapting existing resources.

Fortunately, various Web 2.0 technologies are currently available to provide different communication channels, including text, voice and audio, and each has the potential to improve the learner experience in IDL contexts. For our purposes, VoiceThread (VT), featuring text, audio and video comment sharing, was selected, primarily because the authors were familiar with it from previous teaching projects. VT allows collaborators to make audio or video presentations, and to comment on individual or group video clips or images (e.g. photos and concept maps), through text, audio files, video and drawings. These multimedia artefacts can help learners effectively construct understanding of target learning materials (Hsu *et al*., 2014). This multimedia capacity means that online collaboration using VT can be interactive and multimodal, where learners can see and hear their collaborators in simulated asynchronous face-to-face interaction (Ching & Hsu, 2010; Kidd, 2013). For our purposes, the multimodal aspect of VT was attractive and we felt that it was in accordance with our overall collaborative goals for the module. It was also compatible with the VLE that supported our online programmes, allowing VT material to be placed into each study unit within the module. Learners were required to sign up to the site and to sign in once they accessed the links through Canvas.

<A>Third and Fourth Procedures: Particular Topic for Focus and Appropriate Procedure

The PowerPoint slides of each classroom session were recreated in VT and learners were encouraged to comment or ask questions, much as they would be expected to do so in the face-to-face classroom. Similarly, concepts were presented that brought together important quotes with images and students were asked to make connections and

think through issues raised. Language learning data from research papers were also presented and learners were asked, in the well-known words of Goffman (1974), to answer the question: 'What is it that is going on here?' Included in each unit, in keeping with our redesign, were video-recordings of the lecture slides, related questions for discussion posted within the slides, and related learning tasks that were designed to facilitate participation, stimulate discussion and engender more discovery-based interactional sequences, as described above. In more general terms, we hoped to *position* our learners as co-explorers of meaning within the area of second language learning theories. By having students respond to images and data from representative studies, we hoped that they would feel valued as contributors to the growing understanding that may be distributed throughout the group.

It was hoped that this experience would provide a powerful and effective learning experience for these teacher trainees. For the Sociocultural Theory unit, for instance, students were presented with a short quote from a key thinker in the area, in this case Vygotsky (Wertsch,1985), and next to this is a a photo of a child interacting with their carer. No further context was given, and learners, based on their reading, were asked to make sense of the juxtaposition which related to Vygotsky's theory of mind. Various interpretations were possible, meaning that students were invited to discuss and explore possible connections and what these connections might mean for practice.

We analysed the data as follows. The VT site allowed access to the data for each class posting so patterns of participation could be tracked. At the conclusion of the module, postings from the VT site were downloaded, placed into a Word file and organised according to topic. An example topic was then coded for both social presence (Appendix 1) and cognitive presence, using the COI framework (Garrison *et al*., 2001) and the coding definitions developed by Shea *et al.* (2010). This analysis allowed us insight into how the learners and instructors had been working together throughout the semester.

In order to understand how the students were feeling about this experience, participants were also offered a short questionnaire (Appendix 2) on their experience as learners with the VT system, and how the module had progressed from their perspective. The questionnaire was sent out electronically on the completion of the grading process, and responses were anonymised to comply with ethical concerns and to protect the identities of the participants. We very much wanted them to give us their full and frank feedback on their experiences. There were 10 questions with a mixture of closed questions (Krosnick, 2018) that collected factual information regarding the degree to which they felt they had participated in the module, and open questions where students could express more personal insights and perspectives on their learning and interactional experiences. Out of the 26 students enrolled in the module, a total of nine students responded with detailed responses to the online questionnaire, and a further four students returned their feedback by email. The comments and other feedback received through email and course feedback were collated and coded using a

thematic coding consistent with qualitative data analysis protocols (see Friedman, 2012).

The researchers coded independently and then met to discuss categories, themes and any inconsistencies with the coding process. These data were used to contextualise the online interaction data (Hauck *et al*., 2016). Within the data collected, exemplar interactions were chosen to highlight emerging themes in the overall data set. We selected the discussion around 'Acculturation Theory' to code and analyse in more detail because it was the discussion with the most contributions and allowed us to highlight interaction features common to all of the interactions over the 12-week period. The sample coding in Appendix 1 highlights the factor of social presence within the discussions, because we were particularly interested in social presence within VT since the development of professional identities was an overriding concern for us in teaching this module. The coding categories and definitions have been adapted from Shea *et al.* (2010). Following individual and collaborative coding, we now interpret the outcomes of our research.

<A>Fifth Procedure: Interpreting the Outcomes

As outlined by Allwright (1992), exploratory practice involves interpreting the outcomes in light of our original puzzle, in order to better understand the teaching-learning context as well as the particular needs of all stakeholders in the process. In this section, then, we discuss our findings. The data show that interaction and participation were initiated by the self-introduction videos that staff members left for students to interact with. Just being able to introduce oneself or present content audio-visually personalises the often distant teacher-student relationship and is therefore of considerable value in promoting a sense of group cohesion within an online community of practice (Wenger, 1999). Participation was then maintained for most of the module with a small group of the students contributing to discussions throughout, until participation dropped off in the final three weeks of the module. This pattern reflects the shift in the pedagogy towards the final assignment.

It is also noteworthy that some students were not participating actively, but were 'lurking' (Dennen, 2008), following the content and discourse more passively. The relatively high number of views, compared with contributions, of the VT files, provides a clear indication of this. Closer examination of the data confirmed that it was the same group of students, comprising 12 students, who were actively participating in posting and discussing throughout the module. A further four students were less involved, although they did appear in various discussion posts.

In general terms, there was clear evidence that the VT experience had been a positive aspect of the module. For example, S1 made the following comment:

> Very useful. I enjoyed the video lectures and the discussions. They were far more interactive than Canvas. The conversations were lively; response to comments by tutors were quick, the black background for me makes the platform warm unlike Canvas which I found austere. (S1)

This is a comprehensive endorsement of the VT experience, when compared with the text-based discussion forum experience that learners had experienced the previous semester. A different student (S2), supported this idea and reported that VT had

> helped to reduce the isolation I had felt as a distance learner. The interactive nature of it, being able to make and see others' comments, engendered a more social experience. (S2)

The interaction and the more visual presence that existed on VT meant that the student felt more engaged and less isolated, within a community of learners. Continuing this theme, S7 commented at length about the use of VT in her experience:

> Distance learning requires a tool that can effectively bring all participants together in a pleasant way. VoiceThread made this happen for me. It has a different flavour. It supports the existence and creation of knowledge and I think that more people contributed to the discussions than in the forum in Canvas. (S7)

The idea of community was emphasised by the notion of everyone coming *together* and contributing in the VT site, a perspective that was echoed by S8, when asked to compare VT with other learning platforms:

> Thanks – I really enjoyed VoiceThread – it really helped me but more than that it made me feel part of a community. This was lacking in the first modules for me. (S8)

Our data show all the characteristics of high social presence (e.g. vocatives, humour, instruction), and this was a positive in our study. There is evidence that, for example (see Appendix 1), students were able to use humour, self-disclosure and the use of emojis to express emotions – behaviours that are all associated with the creation of community and that have been shown to stimulate further interaction (Shea *et al*., 2010). More subjectively, just reading through the online discussions again made it clear that many of the students were engaged and that real learning was taking place.

There was also evidence that one of our stated goals as educators had been realised. From the outset, we were keen on trying to position our students, discursively, as near-peers and professionals. As S4 commented in email feedback received on 20 June 2019:

> This was very useful for me. I got more confidence by sharing my ideas more. I want to feel like I am a professional and share with other professionals in TESOL. (S4)

We saw this as evidence that increased participation with peers and instructors can have the positive effect of professionalising the discourse, making learners feel that they are becoming part of a community of practice as they move through the programme. This was commented upon by S6, in explaining that the multimodal tasks were a

part of the enjoyment and learning, but also emphasising that that they were becoming part of a community of TESOL practice. In response to Q5, which asked for an example of positive learning within VT, S6 wrote:

> I enjoyed the picture task and text – looking at original quotes from the literature and making sense of them – sharing ideas and thoughts. This is what I imagined I would be doing – like, now I'm an MA student for real! (S6)

For S7, the experience of interacting with the problem-based tasks allowed them to become part of the ongoing discussions with the profession:

> This made me think about my teaching and myself as a teacher – do I understand theory enough? No – I want to be taking part in the conversations in my field or my area. This was good practice for that time! (S7)

This idea of sharing and communicating about key ideas in the field resonated as being an important part of becoming a researcher and/or professional within TESOL.

Here there is evidence that the design of the tasks themselves was starting to position the student as a professional and as part of a community of practice. We saw this as a positive sign that a dialogic and exploratory approach to the classroom interaction was proving beneficial and that some of the learners at least felt that this kind of interaction was what they were expecting as students studying at this level.

Despite all this, our data revealed that levels of participation in the intervention were uneven. Thus, of the 26 students enrolled, seven students did not participate in VT at all – they were the so-called shirkers – and several other students only contributed in a very minimal way. Dennen (2008) made the distinction between 'lurkers' – who actively read the posting of others, perhaps as a way into their own participation – and 'free-loaders', who are those students who do not take part, yet still benefit from the work of their peers. With a more positive perspective on this phenomenon, Fritsch (1997) discussed the learning that can occur with 'witness learners', by which he meant those students who take part without there being any evidence of participation within the interaction.

It is still not clear to us what was happening in our own context, since – perhaps a touch ironically – these were students who also, by and large, elected not to participate in the research questionnaire or to offer their feedback on the module. The Canvas VLE provided notice of the total time each member spent online in the module space, and for this module the participation rates went from a high of 77.28 hours down to one hour and 14 minutes. A total of nine students were online for less than five hours throughout the 11 weeks in total for the module. These students were examples of what have been termed 'shirkers', or what Beaudoin (2002) called the 'invisible' students of online education.

How, then, might we explain this unevenness in participation? There is evidence that, for some students, technology itself can

prove to be an insurmountable barrier to participation in these contexts. These comments mostly related to the process of actually using the VT technology, embedded as it was within another system – the VLR. Although embedded within Canvas, then, VT did not provide a seamless experience. Learners had to log in to another site and remember another password. Thus, in this regard, S8 commented that 'I found it difficult to sign up and found most of the content I needed on canvas'. These thoughts correlated with the comments of S9, who did not seem to have understood the nature of the VT experience: 'I did, but didn't enjoy it. I preferred to read text and not log onto another website to be told information. (Sorry)'. There could also be issues with access due to Wi-Fi efficiency or other technology hardware related issues. In several cases, this barrier was enough for learners to report that they could not actively participate.

Other students voiced their opinions about the navigability and usability of VT, expressing frustration and sometimes even irritation with the technology. In the following excerpt, S10 perhaps saw this as a problem of their own technological skill and understanding:

> Many comments or slides were timed, and if you didn't let the entire time elapse (e.g. you read the comment quickly and moved on to the following slide); the slide/comment would remain marked as unread. This was really irritating, because for ages I would log in and think there was new material and hunt around for it, only to find that there wasn't. Admittedly, this could just be my inability to grasp its proper usage. (S10)

These findings are in keeping with previous findings (Chen *et al.*, 2010), where internet experience and efficacy were found to be a strong indicator of performance in online learning tasks.

In addition to problems around the use of technology, students also attributed their lack of participation in the intervention to time constraints. As shown in Table 3.1, the students had already studied two modules without VT. S12 made a typical comment: 'I don't have time to use the extra site. Actually, I never used it. I just want to get to the assignments'. The idea of just wanting to skip to the assignment is a difficult one for us to accept as educators, although we respected both the candid nature of the comment and the fact that we had no real understanding of the constraints that the student was working under.

S13 elaborated on this theme and gave us a clearer sense of why time might have been such an issue: 'I work full-time and therefore I have set days/times for studies. Therefore, I found the interaction less helpful as it did not always suit the time I had available to study'. This excerpt provided an insight into a harsh reality for many distance learners who seemed to be struggling to get through the programme while leading busy professional and personal lives. The comments of S11 rather confirmed this:

> I didn't find it useful. I preferred just using the texts/answers/information on each module. It's difficult when working overseas. I don't have enough time for this extra activity. (S11)

From our perspective, this is perplexing, since the *extra activity* described was really the core pedagogical activity of the module. The module descriptor set out the assumed amount of self-study (300 hours) that was meant to provide an equivalent study experience for online and distance learners.

In light of the concerns expressed regarding distance education in times of the marketisation of educational processes, we are left to ponder what, if anything, we can do as educators to try to reach all of the cohort and engender much wider participation. Reminder emails about participation were sent, but most often not answered. Some of the students were evidently distant as well as working by distance, and much more research is required to better understand what happened in such cases. We might speculate that for some of the elusive and invisible students, the Master's certificate itself had become the goal of their joining the programme, rather than the learning itself. In a commodified world of higher education, Shumar (2008: 73) contended that, 'like the commodities in the stores, students come to think of course work and research as another commodity form'. We do not have clear evidence that this was the case, although it is difficult to reach a different conclusion, given the very low rates of engagement that we saw on this module from some of the students. However, it might simply be the case that students think distance learning is not going to be as time-consuming as face-to-face learning and sign up before realising that they do not really have the time to be studying alongside all the other things they are doing.

<A>Sixth Procedure: Implications and Plans

Our initial goals were to improve the learning experience for our students and, we hoped, position them more as developing professionals within a community of practice. As we reflected back on the experience as educators, we agreed that we had confirmed our own ideas about the value of continuing to explore ways to energise online discussions in terms of maximising student participation and of humanising/personalising distance learning provision. In terms of the pedagogical implications, integrating texts and tasks with discussion, rather than conducting discussion more remotely on an asynchronous discussion board, is perhaps one positive recommendation that we can take from the VT experience. Designing tasks in which difficult SLA concepts could be explored collaboratively, in relation to authentic language learning data, rather than searching for a simple answer, is one way forward. For us, introducing tasks and activities, such as the SCT example described in Figure 3.2, models good practice in developing online pedagogies and positions students as potential academics as well as teachers, providing them with the opportunity to apply the insights of SLA theory to the often messy details of real language learning. For us, too, harnessing the multimodal capabilities of VT helps to personalise and humanise distance learning and promote a sense of a community of practice.

In terms of research, we need to better understand what happens with students who pay a considerable fee and then seem to pass through the module of work, like ghosts, with little meaningful

participation, focused only on submitting the assignments that will accrue academic credit. The challenges they face need to be better understood. With this in mind, our questionnaire could have focused more on capturing the broader context of the learning and life situations that our students faced as they balanced the challenges of full-time work, family and online study.

Furthermore, reading around the idea of exploratory practice (Allwright, 2005), it was also clear that a 'problem – solution' way of conceptualising our approach was not going to be viable. We needed to develop a much better understanding of the whole notion of learning online and by distance in the TESOL field and what that means in the current neoliberal climate of higher education. In these terms, our findings were to some degree both problematic and incomplete.

This will be the focus of future research work on our programme and is an area still little understood, despite the growth in distance education. The experience has certainly made us more aware as educators, very much in keeping with the thoughts of Allwright (2005), that our task is not simply one of refining or improving our pedagogical design – which was our initial focus.

Perhaps, however, what we learned as practitioners more than anything through this process is that distance learning presents unique challenges and situations that we need to be more mindful of as we approach future iterations of our own teaching. In particular, however good the software and task design, participation in a module, mainly through online discussions, is often constrained by factors other than the pedagogical.

We really need to understand better what these factors are and how they interact, whether these be personal, technological – i.e. accessing and manipulating online software and systems – or more ideological, in the form of an increasingly instrumental student approach to education, one which may prioritise assessment-related tasks and discourage participation in that which does not seem directly relevant to final accreditation.

Appendices

<A>Appendix 1: Example Coding of VoiceThread Interaction for Social Presence: Acculturation Theory Unit

Social presence in VoiceThread	Social presence (categories)	Indicators	Definition	Examples
	Affective	Expressing emotions	Conventional expressions of emotion	However, to my surprise, my Korean only stayed on day to day surviving level after two years, just like Alberto.
		Use of humour	Teasing, cajoling, irony, sarcasm, understatements	If you are familiar with the U-curve which illustrates the phases of culture shock, I got stuck at the bottom of the curve for a while!
		Self-disclosure	Details of life outside of class – likes, dislikes, preferences	I've lived in the UAE for 6 years now

		Use of unconventional expressions to express emotion	Unconventional expressions of emotion: includes repetitious punctuation, conspicuous capitalisation, emoticons	Thanks for your stimulating questions :)
		Expressing value	Expressing personal values, beliefs and attitudes	I do not see how learning Arabic will add value to me if I do return to my home country.
	Open communication	Referring to others' messages	Direct references to content of others' posts	Hi Student 1 & Instructor 1 – some interesting issues raised here. As pointed out 'motivation' and its role in SLA is a popular area of research. I agree with instructor 1's comment about qualitative research
		Asking questions	Students ask questions of other students or other participants	Was Schumann at any point concerned about accuracy?
		Complimenting	Complimenting others or content of others' messages	This has been a very fascinating read and discourse
		Expressing agreement	Expressing agreement with others or content of others messages	Similar to what Student A's experience, when I was in Korea for two years, I've never felt the needs to learn their language.
		Personal advice	Offering specific advice to classmates	I would recommend reading into language socialisation approaches to SLA
	Group cohesion	Vocatives	Addressing or referring to the participants by name	Similar to you Instructor 1 – when first arriving in Korea I was totally flummoxed by the language
		Addressing or referring to the group using inclusive pronouns	Addressing the group as we, us, our, group	We will look at Eva Hoffman's book in the unit on identity a little later in the module.
		Phatics, salutations and greetings	Communication that serves a purely social function; greetings or closures	Hi all, Sorry I've joined in rather late
		Course reflection	Reflection on the course itself	Thank you, these slides plus narration really help!

<A>Appendix 2: Questionnaire

(1) How often did you interact with VoiceThread during the ELTM11 module?
Never 1-5 6-10 11-15 More than 15

(2) If you did not use VT can you explain why not?

(3) If you did use VT – did you find it useful? Why or why not?

(4a) VoiceThread allows various kinds of texts and tasks. Select below those you found the most helpful/useful:
Video introductions / Spoken text over lecture slides / Text comment / Spoken comment / Discussion task around data/quotes

(4b) Briefly explain your choice.

(5) Can you describe an example where VoiceThread activity helped you understand and learn the content of the course?

(6) Were there any negative aspects of using VoiceThread? Please explain below.

(7) Overall, how would you rate VoiceThread as a learning space for MA TESOL modules?
Not Useful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Very useful

(8) Please explain your selection in Q7.

(9) How would you compare VT with other ways of communicating with your classmates/instructor, such as the discussion forum in Canvas? Would you use these tools differently? Same?

(10) Compare studying a module that has VT with a module that does not.

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Table 3.1 Applied procedure for exploratory practice

Process for exploratory practice	Applied to current project
(1) Identify a puzzle area	The IDL context and pedagogical approach within our given context
(2) Refine thinking	The need for more participation and interaction and positioning of students as professionals
(3) Particular topic for focus	Theories of Second Language Learning IDL Module – interaction through task design
(4) Select appropriate procedure	VoiceThread files embedded into Canvas VLR
(5) Interpret the outcomes	Community of Inquiry model
(6) Decide on implications and plan accordingly	Analysis and discussions related to future practice

Source: Adapted from Allwright (1992).

Table 3.2 Programme overview

Phase of programme	Modules	Timing
Certificate	Principles and Practice Linguistics for ELT	October–January
Diploma	Theories of Second Language Learning The Research Process	January–May May–September
Master's	Dissertation	October–February

Activity 2

Develop a critique of this hypothesis by answering the following questions and giving examples where you can:

- Can the learning of linguistic rules happen in a natural environment?
- Can the acquisition of communication occur in a classroom setting?
- Can we say when language performance of the learner is the result of conscious attention and when it is the result of subconscious processes?
- Can learning turn into acquisition?

Feedback 2

- It is obvious that learning linguistic rules can happen in a natural environment and acquiring communication can occur in a classroom setting as well. In other words, as far as the setting is concerned, learning and acquisition are not mutually exclusive.
- It is very difficult to say when language performance of the learner is the result of conscious attention and when it is the result of subconscious processes.
- It seems that learning can turn into acquisition, in the sense that language knowledge learnt in the classroom setting can be utilised and applied in communicative situations.

Figure 3.1 Sample task and feedback from previous module

'Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category.'

Task: Based on your readings of sociocultural theory – how can we make sense of the famous quote from Vygotsky and the picture together? Post your ideas and work together to understand the key relationship between these two texts.

Figure 3.2 Example of a redesigned task from the sociocultural theory unit