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Reflecting on Video-Enhanced Dialogic Assessment for international teacher training in the wake of Covid-19

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“New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with.” (Postman, 1992, p. 19)

It might seem unusual for an educational technology enthusiast to cite a writer whose work warned of the dangers of ‘technopoly’ (Postman, 1992), but those of us involved in EdTech will be familiar with a range of critical debates. Postman described technological change as ecological – that it creates a new environment. The challenge is to move beyond pedagogy plus a side-order of technology, and towards technologies that are embedded effectively within the educational environment to enhance teaching, learning and the way that education is planned. This has become more significant than ever in the last couple of years.

Living with, or in the wake of, the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us involved in education have experienced dramatic changes to the way that education and schooling takes place. We have experienced school closures, the contraction of face-to-face teaching and an increase in distance, hybrid and blended approaches in school environments that we had never previously imagined at this scale. Recent calls for ‘Covid keepers’ (O’Connell, 2021) and to ‘build back better’ (Riggall, 2020) have resulted in educators seriously considering what we have learned in recent years about our educational ecologies. Have online parents’ evenings become a game-changer? Have snow days become a thing of the past? What are the implications of measures taken during the pandemic and are they worthy of being retained?

During the first year of the pandemic, a range of expedient changes were made in the UK in relation to teacher training and placements when schooling was severely disrupted (DfE, 2021). Virtual placement activities and the accreditation of online teaching and online mentoring were key amendments. In the international initial teacher training sector and the assessment-only route to QTS, many of these amendments also took place, but they varied enormously from country to country, depending on local and regional policy and legislation. With so many variables to consider, the international initial teacher training team at the University of Sunderland focused on consolidating connected practices into a quality-assurable framework to allow successful completion of teacher training and assessment.

Video-enhanced lesson observation was already an established element of the international teacher training programme. Although the programme benefited from in-country tutors who would visit the trainees in their placement schools to observe lessons and provide feedback, a number of trainees would be based in regions where a tutor visit was less practical logistically. Observing remotely, via a recorded lesson or live-streaming, was the standard option in these cases.

Teaching portfolios, historically paper-based and spanning two or three A4 level arch folders during a PGCE, had already been moved to a digital eportfolio platform, organised against the summative Teachers’ Standards (2011) used in England to recommend for Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). However, the programme staff had been trialling a more dialogic process, where the final assessment moved beyond the documentary evidence in the eportfolio. Dialogic assessment instead involved a using

artefacts stored in the eportfolio supplemented by examples from practice, allowing a professional two-way discussion.



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Responding to the variations in international school responses to Covid, the team brought together these practices under a central umbrella: Video-Enhanced Dialogic Assessment. Assuming that teaching practice was able to continue in some practical form: either face-to-face in school or hybrid, with the teacher teaching from school but all or some of the pupils learning from home, video enhanced lesson observation would become the core method of university staff observing lessons and giving feedback. Lessons could either be streamed and recorded live, or recorded and submitted to the university system afterwards. A combination of Microsoft Teams and Panopto (embedded into Canvas, the university's VLE) made the process technically straightforward. Guidance was given for trainees' placement of recording devices and a briefing document for school senior leadership teams was created outlining the way that the university handled the video recordings. A key feature of a trainee's acceptance onto the

programme was for the headteacher to sign to confirm that lesson recording was possible and permissible, so this important hurdle had already been addressed.

With university video-enhanced lesson observation processes in place, attention was focused on assessment of the teaching placement evidence. The teaching portfolio was made up of clusters of evidence from across the placement – lesson plans, teaching resources, assessed work: all giving a snapshot of practice. What the team wanted was a deeper insight into practice and so the online dialogic assessment interview was selected as the mechanism for this. During the meeting, lesson observations and selections from the eportfolio could be discussed. A key benefit of this process was the potential to touch on relevant evidence to demonstrate points being raised and sharing screens to examine specific points. Trainees enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their practice and felt that it gave them the chance to offer additional evidence, that they were not going to get ‘caught out’ for having forgotten to upload a document. They valued the depth of the feedback and the quality of the discussion, with some suggesting that it was actually really good preparation for job interviews.

Downsides and limitations in the process varied from technical glitches to logistical issues working across timezones. Although the technology was being used firstly to overcome issues and then to embrace the potential of looking in depth at the outcomes, this required a time commitment from all involved. Lesson observation, arguably what Shulman might have termed a ‘signature pedagogy’ of the teaching profession (Shulman, 2005) is a time-consuming process whether in person or online. The lesson must be observed in real time, feedback has to be captured (usually formally written up) and shared and discussed. The assessor has to have a good working knowledge of the eportfolio before beginning the viva-style interview. The transparency and rigour involved meant that quality assurance and moderation was integrated. If anything, it was even more rigorous than it had been before because now, all lessons were recorded and could be reviewed by external examiners if necessary. It was also possible to treat this as a piece of action research (Hidson et al., 2021) and explore it from the perspective of scholarship of teaching and learning (Boyer, 1990).

What was learned? Firstly, the technologies used meant that protocols and practices were clearer, and made more sense overall. A blended programme such as this international initial teacher training programme could be truer to itself by embracing the technologies around remote lesson observation, eportfolios and online interviews. Following on from this, notions of ‘evidence’ became more sophisticated and holistic. Trainees could show examples while discussing them. Being able to have professional discussions around evidence and practice ‘raised the bar’. Finally, although the various approaches were consolidated into one overall process – Video-Enhanced Dialogic Assessment (VEDA), they had already existed but were now being fully embraced. This was not just a case of pedagogy for a pandemic and there is no turning back.

As we move forward, all trainees now submit at least two recorded lessons for video-enhanced lesson observation and feedback, in addition to those observed by school-based mentors and visiting university staff. All trainees now participate in the dialogic assessment process as a standard part of their programme. The programme has experienced an ecological shift – embracing the affordances of the technologies means that the things we think about and the things we think with are now different.

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