

Dialogic Teacher Development in the Internet Age: Tools and Opportunities

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This article makes the case for the centrality of dialogue in EFL teacher development, and then introduces three digitally dialogic platforms that allow teachers to continue their professional development without requiring large blocks of time, as is necessary for traditional coursework. Finally, the opportunities that current technologies provide for empowering teacher development that is tailored to local needs in specific contexts are discussed.

Foundations of Dialogic Interactions in Education

After cave-painting, there may be no older pedagogical device for teaching than dialogue. Plato believed that truth itself was only to be found in dialogic interactions (rather than untrustworthy things like books). Plato's dialogues form a foundation of Western thought, and though today we see truth as emerging by way of various forms of inquiry, something like the so-called Socratic method remains a popular tool in both formal and informal forms of teacher education. As teachers, who among us has not felt invigorated by a good conversation with a colleague about theory, pedagogy, or classroom practice? The perspective offered by the voice of another—perhaps more experienced teacher—dealing with issues similar to our own can

outweigh anything we read in academic articles and books.

The Dialogic in Teacher Education

Lev Vygotsky—forefather of sociocultural theory—praised the power of dialogic verbal interaction this way:

In conversation, every sentence is prompted by a motive. Desire or need lead to request, question to answer, bewilderment to explanation. The changing motives of the interlocutors determine at every moment the turn oral speech will take. It does not have to be consciously directed—dynamic situation takes care of that (Vygotsky, 1962, p.99).

As teachers in conversation with other teachers, we discuss individual students, we explore what works and what doesn't work in the classroom, we describe the specifics of our teaching contexts, and we try to connect theory to practice or vice versa. We have these conversations, that is, when we can find opportunities for them. In the meantime, we continue with the everyday grind of lesson planning, materials development, teaching, and whatever administrative duties are demanded of us by our institutions.

But to keep the conversation going, we also read and write. These two activities represent more reflective types of dialogue than the back and forth of verbal communication. In reading, we engage in an intimate conversation with a chosen author. Writing, on the other hand, involves a dialogue between ourselves and a more vaguely imagined other. The writing of reflective practice may be addressed to our future selves, whereas in academic writing it is the imagined readership (you!) and/or editor of a given publication that shapes our voice.

The primary differences between textual dialogues and face-to-face verbal interaction relate to time and space. Traditionally, verbal conversations have always been both local and ephemeral. They involve negotiations of meaning with a particular interlocutor in a particular place at a particular point in time. Text, however, is more permanent, allowing asynchronous interaction on more expansive time scales. You can revisit a great book or article over time, and as you change and grow, so can the conversation you have with the work's author (though her words remain the same).

Digital Tools for Teacher Development

It is only relatively recently that we are starting to see, online, new avenues for dialogic teacher development that mix the conversational nature of face-to-face interaction with the reflective potential of textual interaction. As Gee and Hayes (2011) point out "When digital media carry language, language can be interactive, . . . but also permanent" (p.1). Examples abound: there are online forums and bulletin boards, blogs, podcasts, Facebook groups, and hashtag conversations on Twitter. And though the internet and its myriad digital conversations have been around for more than two decades, it is only recently that educators have started to take full advantage of the medium's great potential for dialogic teacher development that combines the interactive nature of conversational interactions with the permanence of digital storage.

There are a very wide variety of digital tools available for online teacher development, but here I would like to highlight just three platforms that seem rich in potential for ongoing teacher development by offering affordances for dialogic learning.

Joining a Digital Conversation

The first digital conversation I would like to look at is #eltchat on twitter. Twitter, as most readers probably know, is a microblogging and social networking platform that limits text posts (tweets) to 140 characters. That is about the length of a sentence like this one: similar to the length of a typical "conversational turn unit" in normal spoken discourse. So even though twitter is a text-based medium, its design characteristics create affordances that encourage conversational interaction. #Eltchat is a live and archived hashtag conversation about various

issues relevant to EFL and ESL teachers around the world. It takes place every Wednesday at 12pm and 9pm, British Standard Time (BST). Teachers from around the world participate in the discussion by noting the topic that is posted on the eltchat.org website beforehand, and then commenting and/or responding to each other with relevant tweets. For the chat to be visible anyone, participants include the #eltchat within their message. This allows for others to follow the conversation on twitter in real-time, and it also allows the eltchat administrators to consolidate a written transcript for publication afterwards at eltchat.org. Topics vary by week, and run the gamut of issues relevant to teachers in a variety of teaching contexts. This week, for example, the topic is lesson planning. The eltchat.org website provided a prompt that asked participants to read a short blog post about lesson planning, and to respond with comments and reactions. Shortly after the twitter conversations are complete volunteers post summaries and transcripts (in easy-to-follow graphic formats). Here are some examples from the website of recent chat transcripts and summaries:

1st May, first chat, Coursebook Authors Fight Back

1st May, second chat, Criteria for evaluating web based tools

15th May, first chat, Motivation á la Hadfield and Mackay

15th May, second chat, The Power of Questions

17th April, first chat, Six Abilities to be a Competent Teacher Part One

17th April, second chat, Six Abilities to be a Competent Teacher Part Two

24th April, first chat, The Flipped Classroom

24th April, second chat, Oral Correction –

Reflections from a Recovering Recaster

These chats, and others, are available at

<http://eltchat.org/wordpress/eltchat-summaries-index/>

Even if you cannot (or would rather not) participate in the live #eltchat on twitter, scrolling through the transcripts and summaries is a nice way to tune into current conversations in our field.

The second digitally dialogic forum for teacher development I'll introduce is Scott Thornbury's long-running blog (now back from hiatus), *An A-Z of ELT*. This Wordpress blog is located at

scottthornbury.wordpress.com

and features occasional posts on a variety of topics related to English language teaching. Scott is a leading voice in our field, and he is involved in teacher training through the New School's MA-TESOL program. As the blog's title suggests, Scott writes about an incredibly broad range of topics related to ELT, both theoretical and practical. His writing is eloquent, pithy, and at times contrarian, but it is always informed by a broadly-informed perspective on old and new issues in our field. But *An A-Z of ELT* offers much more than Scott's edifying essays. Every post triggers a rich international conversation in the blog's open comments section. Thornbury frequently chimes in himself to respond to criticisms and insights offered by the community, and commenters also dialogue with each other about issues in the original post and others that emerge in the ensuing discussion. All blog posts (essays, really) and discussions are archived and available on the site. I very frequently return to

these posts and discussions because they are so rich and engaging.

Podcasts are another digital medium well-suited to dialogic teacher development. Podcasts, as most readers also know, are essentially pre-recorded radio programs that are placed on the internet for download instead of, or in addition to being broadcast terrestrially. Using the internet for distribution allows listeners to listen on their own schedules, rather than at a pre-determined time of broadcast (as with traditional radio). Podcasts are available as streaming audio on the internet as well, but most users “subscribe” to shows they like through itunes or other platforms, then listen to them on their smartphones, mp3 players, or other digital devices. Though monologic podcasts exist on a variety of topics, shows that feature interviews or other forms of dialogue between multiple voices are more common.

Several podcasts exist that focus on conversations relevant to EFL teachers development. In addition to its twitter conversations, #ELTchat also hosts a podcast that can be found on itunes. The ELTchat podcast features conversations with prominent teachers and educators, usually in extended interview formats. Topics vary in accordance with the specialty of those being interviewed. Occasionally, presentations or panel discussions from recent professional conferences such as IATEFL are posted as well. Another, more practically focused podcast is ESL Teacher Talk. This podcast features conversations with teachers around the world about lesson ideas, teaching techniques, and classroom activities. The show’s regular host is a teacher residing in Japan, but co-hosts, guest-hosts, and interviewees from throughout the world provide the show with a

truly international perspective. Finally, one of my favorite podcasts is the occasional audio and video interview series entitled The Lives of Teachers, run by Darren Elliot. This series features intelligently informed interviews with some of the most prominent voices in TESOL. Darren is also based in Japan, and he frequently interviews featured and plenary speakers while they are present at conferences here. Some recent interviews available as audio podcasts and also as videos at <http://www.livesofteachers.com/> include conversations with Diane Hawley Nagatomo, Alan Firth, Junko Yamanaka, Stephen Krashen, and Jeannette Littlemore.

New Technology to Continue the Conversation

Here I have presented several online platforms for teacher development that are dialogic or conversational in nature. They present rich conversations between educators in our field that are informed by a common desire to solve problems and improve teaching practice. Because EFL teachers teach in a very wide variety of contexts throughout the world, these platforms do not offer something for everyone, but many of them are small enough in scale that the administrators would likely respond to the interests of users. Platforms such as Scott Thornbury’s blog, and #ELTchat are relatively open in nature, encouraging participation rather than just consumption. When EFL teachers are able to use web technology to engage conversations they would otherwise never have, digital technology shows its true potential for teacher development that is truly dialogic in nature.

One final consideration about localization and customization: in researching teacher development podcasts, I came across one focused specifically on Japan's university teaching context, and immediately subscribed. This was ELT Podcast: The Teacher's Lounge, authored by Bill Pellowe, Robert Chartrand, and Kevin Ryan. I was struck by how refreshing it was to hear colleagues in similar teaching contexts speaking candidly about their classroom practices. I listened to a few episodes with interest before I realized that they were recorded in 2007 and 2008! When I contacted Bill Pellowe to ask him about why the podcast is no longer active, he told me that the process of recording and editing was simply too time-consuming to sustain long-term. This is unfortunate, but its understandable of course.

Things went the other way though when I was researching #ELTchat on twitter. There, I was pleasantly surprised to come across another version of the same kind of discussion, but one localized for teachers working in Korea. This discussion is marked #KELTchat on twitter and takes up similar issues, but with reference to teaching conditions in Korea. In this

case, achieving localization of a professional development discussion was as simple as finding some teachers interested in having a conversation and agreeing on a hashtag (#KELTchat) to mark their conversation with. This showed me that though digital technologies are certainly not a cure-all for EFL teacher development, they can in fact offer unique affordances for conversational exchanges between teachers who might not otherwise meet.

References

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TED SIG Information

The Teacher Education and Development SIG is a network of foreign language instructors dedicated to becoming better teachers and helping others teach more effectively. Active since 1993, our members teach at primary and secondary schools, universities, language schools, and in various other contexts. For further information, contact

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