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Social media as an alternative to Moodle in EFL teaching practice forums

Christopher Allen[1]

Abstract. This paper reports on the preferences among a group of pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher trainees for social media rather than *Moodle*, an institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), as a forum for support during a recent five week teaching practice in southern Sweden. The teacher trainees responded to a questionnaire relating to preferences for their own *Facebook* group as opposed to the *Moodle* forum set up specifically by the course tutor for the purpose of sharing observations and discussing lesson planning, aspects of reflective practice and resources while on teaching practice. Their reflections shed interesting light on the importance of student EFL teacher ownership and 'student centricity' in the learning space. These concepts emerge from a consideration of the learning space at the intersection of pedagogical, technological and content knowledge and the nature of forum discussions when faced with the alternative between social media and institutionalized learning platforms under the direction of teacher trainers and course managers.

Keywords: teaching practice, online forums, VLE, social media.

1. Introduction

1.1. General

In recent years, VLEs or Learning Management Systems (LMSs) such as *Moodle*, *It's Learning* and *Blackboard* have become ubiquitous in higher education. However it is not always the case that institutionally-administered learning platforms can satisfy both the pedagogical and administrative demands of students especially in the collaborative era entailed by Web 2.0 (Weller, 2007a). This point is especially

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pertinent with regards to vocationally-orientated degree programmes involving periods of professional practice away from the campus environment of the training institution.

A period of teaching practice or practicum is an integral part of EFL teaching training courses all over the world, forming an essential component of international courses in teacher certification such as the *CELTA*, *DELTA* and *TKT* administered by Cambridge ESOL as well as programmes leading to qualified teacher status in the state systems of many countries. This paper looks at the role of social media and VLEs such as *Moodle* in providing support and fostering a sense of community among pre-service teacher trainees.

1.2. VLEs in higher education

Despite their widespread popularity in universities and schools, VLEs have been criticized as being mere embodiments of a traditional, institutionalized pedagogy based on a teacher-centred classroom model (Weller, 2006, 2007b). More recently in the light of social media however, critical voices have been raised about VLEs as purveyors of static, unimaginative content, leaving students to go elsewhere to do their learning (Weller, 2006, 2007a). Another important criticism is that behind the institutionalized walls of the VLE, students cannot easily share learning experiences with outsiders.

The use of VLEs has not of course been restricted to purely academic degree programmes and modules. Vocationally-orientated programmes such as teacher training and nursing have also made increasing use of VLEs such as *Moodle* to provide pre-course tasks, course materials and assignments, videos and information about post-course job opportunities. It is suggested here that VLEs can play an important part in the development of a form of transient 'community of practice' in Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms or learning space while students are away from the host institution engaged in professional training.

1.3. Moodle forums

Although the current generation of VLEs typically incorporate a variety of tools and functions for teacher-student and student-student communication, the main function in focus in this article is the *forum function*. VLE forums provide the opportunity for students to participate in online discussions under the direction of the tutors, to initiate discussions themselves or alternatively to respond to postings from their fellow student teachers.

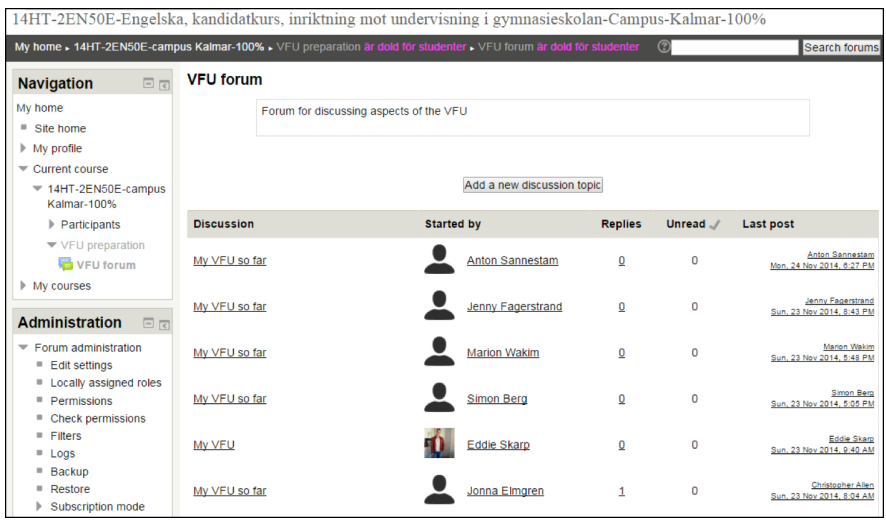
1.4. Facebook and other social media forums

While many university and teacher training college programmes increasingly rely on institutional VLE forums for the delivery of course content, student teachers are perhaps more likely to regularly access the online forums of social media such as *Facebook* and other virtual communities outside of their formal education. With the massive impact of smartphone and 4G technology permitting 'on the fly' postings via social media apps, this trend in the digital behaviour of many young people has become increasingly well-established.

2. Method

The ten student teachers (seven women, three men) who responded to the questionnaire in this study were aged between 20 and 27 and in their fourth term of studying English language didactics. An integral part of the teacher training programme in English is the use of *Moodle* as a VLE (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Screenshot from the *Moodle* forum set up for the student group for their teaching practice period (in Swedish, *verksamhetsförlagd utbildning* or *VFU*)



The questionnaire was distributed via the *Moodle* platform and was made up of three parts. *Part A* (3 questions) asked about general ICT skills among the teachers and use of social media and VLEs in their previous studies at upper secondary

school level. *Part B* (8 questions) focused more specifically on the importance of internet forums within the teaching practice, while finally *Part C* (8 questions) invited a more detailed comparison between social media (e.g. *Facebook*) and *Moodle* as a forum for reflection and support during the five weeks of teaching practice.

3. Results

3.1. Part A: previous experience of social media and VLEs in educational contexts

All of the respondents rated their knowledge of ICT skills and resources relatively highly, with an average score of 6.7 on the scale of 1 (beginner) and 10 (expert). In Prensky's (2001) terms, respondents were all digital natives, making extensive use of social media with extensive personal learning environments both in private and as part of their studies.

3.2. Part B: online forums for teaching practice support

The results from *Part B* of the survey confirmed the general picture of the importance given to online forums among teacher trainees. These results are summarized in Table 1 below. Ratings of importance were given on the scale of 7 (very important) to 1 (not important); the circle • indicated a mean scoring for each of the forum usage areas. Thus for question (1), the use of forums for exchanging lesson plan tips, the average score among the respondents was 5.9 out of 7. The results indicated the greatest importance attached to exchanging teaching resource tips as well as posing questions to the tutor about language (grammar, lexis, phonology etc) or use of literature in the classroom. Interestingly, forums were seen as less important for reflecting on lesson planning goals and achievement and classroom management.

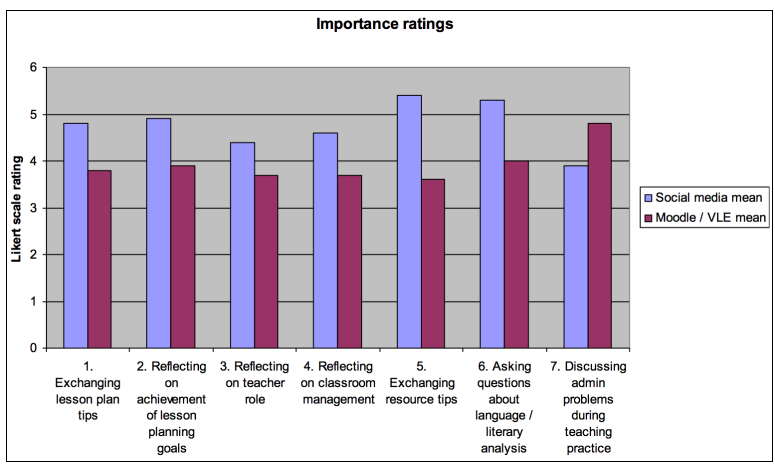
3.3. Part C: comparison between social media and *Moodle* for teaching practice support

In the final part of the questionnaire, student teachers were asked to compare social media and *Moodle* as a VLE in terms of the usage areas outlined above. The results across these areas of usage confirmed the preference (with one significant exception) for forums within social media such as *Facebook* or *Edmodo* rather than the institutional *Moodle*. These results are shown below in Figure 2. The one significant departure from this overall finding was question 7, the use of the forum for the discussion of administrative problems during the teaching practice period.

Table 1. Average ratings for the importance of usage domains in online forums among student teachers on teaching practice

1. Exchanging lesson plan tips						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	o					
2. Reflecting on achievement of lesson planning goals						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
		o				
3. Reflecting on teacher role						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
		o				
4.Reflecting on classroom management						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
		o				
5. Exchanging resource tips						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	o					
6. Asking questions about language / literary analysis						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	o					
7. Discussing administrative problems during teaching practice						
Very important						not important
7	6	5	4	3	2	1
		o				

Figure 2. A comparison between social media and *Moodle* as forums for teaching practice



Here there was a clear preference for the use of *Moodle* when bringing up problems such as how many hours should be taught by the teacher, communication with school supervisors, etc.

4. Discussion

A number of factors regarding the preference for social media emerged in the final open question. A significant factor was the presence or absence of the course tutor in the online forum discussions. The closed *Facebook* group was preferred by a number of students as it permitted the 'ventilation' of both positive and negative aspects of the teaching practice and the course in general without the presence of the tutor. In addition, students mentioned familiarity with the *Facebook* interface from their private spheres which they saw as being more user-friendly than the VLE. Students also mentioned the ease with which they could submit and reply to postings via mobile devices, while *Moodle* was frequently seen in terms of more intermittent access via stationary computers.Moodle forums were increasingly seen by the majority of respondents as an institutionally 'owned' platform belonging to their professional development while *Facebook* seamlessly integrates with their 'private' sphere of personal learning environment. *Facebook* in this respect was seen as more 'student-centric'. Nevertheless, some critical voices were raised towards the use of social media as a teaching practice discussion medium; several respondents pointed to the tendency for discussion threads to be 'swamped' by irrelevant postings with little connection to the practice period in school.

5. Conclusions

There is a clear preference for social media rather than an institutional VLE as a forum for the discussion of teaching practice questions with the exception of purely administrative matters relating to the school internship. This state of affairs is problematic for tutors wishing to provide formative feedback over the duration of the practice period. It is intended that future research arising from this conference paper could seek to evaluate the suitability of virtual learning environments such as *Edmodo*, which attempt to incorporate the user-friendliness and integration possibilities of social media in a more institutionally-controlled learning environment.

6. Acknowledgements

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