Reflections from a Research Project

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Between fall 2010 and Spring 2011, the Centre for Excellence for Intercultural Education (CEIE) at NorQuest College, Edmonton, Alberta, conducted a small research and design project around online education and ESL programs. Specifically, the project set to discover some challenges ESL instructors may face in using online tools and relate these challenges to needs to adapt current ESL courses into online deliveries.

The project used an online survey, a focus group and literary review as the basis to create some tools which instructors can use when planning to adapt face-to-face (F2F) courses into online deliveries. A guide was produced, along with a report and online sites that give readers access to downloads and ongoing reading lists, available through the college website[1]. Three half-day workshops were offered in June 2011 across Alberta to present the results and the tools.

The project was fully funded by Alberta Employment and Immigration.

This article sets to share some of the understandings and reflections based on the work that emerged from the project. A public report and Guide will be made available in the fall of 2011.

"Ultimately, meaningful learning occurs with knowledge construction, not reproduction; conversation, not reception; articulation, not repetition; collaboration, not competition; and reflection, not prescription. [It is this] perspective of meaningful learning [that] guides the design of constructivist learning environments." (Drexler, 2001)

ESL Instructors and their understanding of pedagogical approaches

Some key learnings that emerged from conversations with instructors, results of the survey and the focus group session, reveal that ESL instructors in Alberta feel confident in their knowledge of a variety of pedagogical approaches in language education. The deepest knowledge resides in a variety of methods around vocabulary instruction, but also a sense that constructivist-based methodologies are preferred over direct lectured-

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[1] The resources in usable forms are available as well at the following addresses:
http://esladaptationreadings.blogspot.com/ - A reading blog
https://eslsymposiumtesl2011.wikispaces.com/ - A wiki page

based ones, where knowledge and practice are a socially constructed process and not simply facts delivered through lectures and assimilated passively through note-taking activities.

Research in online learning overwhelmingly supports the idea of social constructivist approaches to learning (Drexel, 2001; Egbert and Thomas, 2001; Garrison and Kanuka 2004). So the realization that ESL instructors are well aware of these approaches becomes a certainty on which to build a new and different discourse for online adaptations.

Additionally research indicates that sound pedagogical approaches work across platforms and delivery modes and what specifically changes, between online and F2F is the deeper understanding of the tools and media used to achieve the goals (Siemens & Tittenberger, 2009). Fundamentally the challenges remain in being ready to adopt new ways of communicating for which, many instructors may have not been trained to do, given one's professional background pre-Web 2.0 technologies.

The understandings that social constructivist directions and sound pedagogy approaches are fundamental to any type of learning became the basis of the tools proposed for the project. This is not to say that pedagogy alone will solve all challenges.

Understanding of technical potentials and limitations of this or that tool remain essential to the overall adoption of online technologies, as well as institutional and administration support also play an important role for the course adaptation successful delivery. The research from the project allowed the team to assume that instructors who may have never adopted technology in their classes, may come to understand the critical ingredients to shift planning and design for online environments based on educational approaches they already share in their everyday classes.

Tools and ideas

Based on a specific experience to adopt one course into an online delivery from a F2F setting, the CEIE based the processes and learnings derived from such experience to design a few tools that ESL instructors, in similar situations may encounter in their own contexts.

Key elements of the process that made the adaptation of a single course a reality into an online delivery included the thorough analysis of the curriculum, resources and the teaching activities of the F2F version of the course. This step alone took a few iterations and brought about the creation of a course overview chart that summarized the key elements of the course. More than a table of content and short of being a full course planning guide, this initial draft tool allowed the adaptation team to identify patterns and categories of content as well as processes that could be easily re-packaged and presented in online effective ways, using available platforms and a number of interactive tools.

The two specific tools that were later proposed as a result of the research of this project are the Planning Tools for Initial Adaptations Steps to Online Deliveries and the Online Delivery Planning Tool[2].

These tools are designed to be practical guiding steps to consider the course elements as a whole, using a bird's eye view of patterns and sequences of activities and learning experiences in the course. The overall view allows instructors to detect moments in the course that may require further breakdown of activities and additional opportunities for practice and self-assessment, which are needed more frequently in online learning environments where the presence of the instructor is not as accessible and constant as in F2F settings (Ryan & Scott, 2008; Diekelmann, Schuster & Nosek, 1998).

The second guidance that the tools provide is at the activity level, with a chart that promotes reflection on daily activities instructors plan for and carry out in F2F and synchronous settings. By creating a detailed list of what tasks are proposed and completed by learners in the regular classrooms and by considering how those tasks have different characteristics is completed in a class in a live situation from similar tasks completed in online settings, instructors can also begin to identify patterns and plan to reach similar instructional goals in different ways. It is maybe most evident at the activity level that instructors begin to see, in front of them, how their own pedagogical assumptions drive their instructional decisions.

The table in the tool provides this opportunity, to categorize activities according to specific moments in the learning, such as input, practice, collaboration, production and assessment. As indicated previously, these moments do not change based on the delivery mode of the course. However, the communication channels are different and the potentials offered by the tools also change. A deep combined understanding of the pedagogy as well as the medium combined can yield the most successful results[3].

In addition to addressing course overall structures and activity level examination and comparisons between F2F and online deliveries of ESL courses, the project proposed a number of other tools that address a few other identified challenges, based one the research.

It emerged from the numerous articles consulted, that discussion posts become a prevalent communication tool that online instructors utilize to set tasks for learners, open channels for asynchronous communication and provide individualized, meaningful and timely feedback (Ryan & Scott, 2008; Kajee, 2004; Tan, 2009).

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[2] The Online Delivery Planning Tool is available at:
https://eslsymposiumtesl2011.wikispaces.com/file/view/onlineDeliveryPlanningTool%20Copy.pdf and Planning Tools for Initial Adaptations Steps to Online Deliveries, available at:
https://eslsymposiumtesl2011.wikispaces.com/05_ToolExamples
[3] Specific to the understanding of the medium to match the message, consider reading about Media Richness Theory (Newberry, 2001)

To begin to support the discussion posting needs and plans for online deliveries, the project designed two specific tools: The Online Discussions Tool and the Learner Planning Tool[4]. These propose questions and charts to know experiences that ESL learners may have had (or not had) with using technology and online learning in general, and how to identify the typologies of learners as they participate in discussion posting activities.

Research supports the idea that written communication, which increases through the use of online-based media, such as discussions and chats, in fact improves the writing skills of learners (Ryan & Scott, 2008; Sauers & Walker, 2004). While the opportunities to write in online learning environments are numerous, it is important that instructors do not forget the need to support, scaffold and effectively interact with learners, to ensure they are on the right track, they feel they can complete assigned tasks and feel confident to continue on with their learning. And this is no easy task.

Additional tools and scenarios for discussion and considerations are available through the links provided. They are not a comprehensive toolkit but they can become the first step towards the complex task of adapting ESL courses into online environments.

As it is often stated, the impact of technology on the education landscape is not only an important one but an inevitable one. This research revealed that it is possible and that it is within the reach of any willing instructor and institution that is willing to considers and work with the many aspects and steps that need to be taken to successfully reach meaningful learning goals.

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[4] Also available at the wiki page address:
https://eslsymposiumtesl2011.wikispaces.com/05_ToolExamples

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