Vicarious learning—the role of teachers' TV in modelling classroom practice

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Abstract

This short paper explores the use of video clips from the teachers' TV website with Secondary PGCE students at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria. The video was made available to students via Blackboard and was used to engage students in on-line discussion prior to college-based sessions relating to classroom practice. In the workshop, the technology and the process used were described and student feedback was used to indicate the usefulness of this approach. The workshop encouraged discussion from participants in order to generate ideas as to how this teaching approach might be taken forward.

Introduction

Trainee teachers often find it difficult to focus on what is happening when they go in to school classrooms. There are so many different dynamics at work that they can struggle to pick out both what is actually happening and also the main factors that influence how the class behave and how the teacher manages the classroom environment. As McAlpine, Brown, McIntyre and Hagger (1988) indicate '…. *the more skilful the teaching the easier everything looks, … the more difficult it is to understand how success is achieved.'*

(Communicating the practical knowledge of teachers to student-teachers. 1988. p1)

One well used method of orientating trainees to the classroom environment is to use video footage of teachers and pupils. In recent years, the DfES has released a considerable body of video material to support the Key Stage 3 Strategy resources it has produced. However, the majority of these video clips are 'scripted' and 'rehearsed' rather than spontaneous, capturing what happens in 'real' classrooms. This has the tendency to produce an 'artificial' impression of classroom interaction. Whilst this material has been helpful in providing models of classroom practice, the 'staged' nature of the classroom interaction means that the video clips rarely look like the classrooms that trainees encounter in their teaching practice schools.

The recent emergence of the Teachers' TV channel in the UK has added a large store of video material to the bank of resources available to the field. Many of these video clips are taken from real classrooms and thus accurately represent the challenges and constraints that can be encountered in the school setting.

This paper describes the use of one such Teachers' TV programme with a cohort of students on a Secondary ICT PGCE Course at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria, during the Autumn of 2005. The PGCE course was delivered on two campuses—Lancaster and Carlisle, and the total number of students in the cohort was 30. The focus of this part of the course was on issues of classroom management for ICT teachers and so it was important that the video material provided as realistic a view of a typical classroom as possible. The aim of the activity was to provide resources that would encourage students to consider and reflect on typical classroom management challenges that might be faced by an ICT teacher in secondary school.

Using video

The use of video programmes has been long established in education. As far back as 1984, Bates (1984) indicated that in the early 1980's virtually all UK schools and HE institutions made educational use of television technologies. Although, more often than not, these technologies are used in a one-way, one-shot manner, where the student watches the TV or video programme once, usually in the classroom, and then undertakes learning activities designed to follow on from the programme that has been viewed.

This does not necessarily imply a lack of effectiveness in learning in these circumstances. As Collis (1996) acknowledges

> *"Learners can be in a face-to-face setting, and for reasons of personality or class size or teacher characteristics, rarely ask the teacher direct questions and rarely engage in structured group discussions; yet learning can and does still occur"* (Telelearning in a Digital World 1996, p49)

However, there are good reasons for looking at alternative models of practice using video. For example, Skiera and Stirling (2003), in a study of training teachers in the US acknowledge the value of video-based material to orient the training teacher to the classroom environment and also to develop their reflective practices through the provision of real exemplars.

Some of these reasons underpinning the decision to use video at this point in the course were

- previous use of video in face to face sessions where the level of student engagement was poor and student feedback on the sessions was (at best) neutral

- an intention to shift the balance of 'meaning making' from tutor to student and thus increase independence in the student learning experience

- a desire to introduce cohesive and progressive pre-session activities allowing students time to reflect on the subject before a scheduled face-to-face session

- a requirement to develop student observational skills related to classroom dynamics prior to them going into school as trained teachers for the first time

- to enable students from two geographically dispersed campuses to engage collectively in the debate surrounding this issue.

Teachers' TV
Teachers' TV was launched in the UK in 2003 as a digital TV Channel specifically focusing on the commissioning and broadcast of TV programmes related to teaching, schools and education related issues. In addition to its presence as a broadcast channel, Teachers' TV also has a website www.teacherstv.co.uk where, among other things, the TV programmes can be viewed and downloaded.

For the purposes of this activity, the copyright regulations related to programmes from this site are particularly helpful. For example the licence allows educational establishments to

> *"...copy and/or Share the Work and/or create, copy and/or Share Derivative Works on any platform in any media*.'

Provided that the user

> *"make(s) reference to this Licence (by URL/URI, spoken word or as appropriate to the media used) on all copies of the Work and/or Derivative Works Shared by You and keep intact all notices that refer to this Licence."* (Teachers' TV Copyright Licence, 2003).

In terms of this particular project, this meant that the chosen video programme could be edited and cut into smaller clips without any restriction other than the requirement to acknowledge the source of the original material.

Method
A suitable 15 minute video programme was identified and downloaded from the Teachers' TV website. The programme was about a newly qualified ITC teacher in a Secondary School in Bradford and it was particularly suitable because it highlighted issues related to the size and layout of the classroom, the management of the class, how to gain and keep attention and how to focus the class on planned tasks.

The programme was converted from the downloaded format into MPEG format so that the clips could be accessed by any computer hardware. This was felt to be important as it was intended that students would access this material at home or outside of college.

Using a video editing package, the programme was divided into sections and 2 still images were 'captured' from the video for use to stimulate an initial discussion. These images were of poor quality because they had been captured from a video programme, but it was felt that the lack of clarity of the images didn't prevent

them from being used. The student feedback relating to these images confirmed their value in the overall progression of tasks.

A progressive series of tasks was created to stimulate thought and reflection. The images, video clips and associated tasks were then placed onto the college Blackboard VLE for students to access. The discussion related to the tasks was hosted on the course Blackboard on-line discussion area.

Five activities with associated video clips and resources were included, although the students were only asked to respond in the discussion area to 3 of these; the others were meant to stimulate personal reflection and engagement. The activities progressed from focusing on observation of the classroom interaction, to questions where the trainee was encouraged to consider how they might apply certain techniques or ideas to their own teaching.

The initial activities were loaded onto the VLE just over 2 weeks before scheduled college face-to-face sessions relating to classroom management although not all activities were released at the same time. The later activities and video clips were released after about 1 week so that students had time to reflect on the issues that were preventing effective classroom management and interaction, before they had chance to see the resolution and more effective practice at the end of the programme.

Findings
The discussion forum received 60 contributions over the period that the issue was 'live' in the timetable of the course. That is the equivalent of 2 posts per student.

Inevitably, a small number of students did not respond at all (in this case, 2 students) whilst some students contributed more frequently. The largest number of contributions from a single student was 5.

In terms of number of 'hits' on the forum, the discussion received 983 visits during the whole period of the course - the majority of these being during the 3 weeks when the activities were running.

More significantly, the nature of the responses from students developed as the activities progressed. As an example, here is an early response from one student (spellings and grammar are left as in the original)

> Yes, I would agree. There definately needed to be some variation as "Be quiet" seemed to work at the beginning, but lost its effectiveness the more it was used...

In the early posts to the discussion, a number of responses were similar to this, particularly in relation to way in which the respondent is 'agreeing' with something that has been said earlier. The average word count of the first 5 postings to the discussion board was 60, illustrating that responses were fairly short.

Later, the quantity and nature of response changed as in this extract (again the English is original)

> ...The final video clip shows a really marked improvement in the classes' behaviour (and Paddy's). He really has taken on board the advice from the consultant and the difference is amazing.

> Points I noticed as a tutor...

• *Paddy laid down the ground rules from the start of the lesson and stipulated that this was the way it was going to be from now on*

• *He was not shouting and made eye contact with the pupils and I think he actually smiled!*

• *When presenting on the whiteboard he was facing the class, rather than standing behind or among them, so that he could maintain eye contact and attention from the class*

• *The use of the horn signal was excellent and injected a bit of humour the first time it was used*

• *Paddy ensured that he lined up the class outside before commencing the lesson and guided them out of the classroom at the end of the lesson*

• *Switching off screens and looking his way was also a good move towards better discipline and control*

• *The merit system had been introduced and looked to be appreciated by the class...*

...I will certainly be taking all of these points on board...

The average length of response in the last 5 posts to the forum was 140 words, more than double that of the first set of responses.

What is also noticeable from the later responses is that there is less of the 'I agree' type of comment and much more personal reflection on what has been observed. The comments of the student above are typical in that they indicate how the trainee intends to put into practice things that they have learnt from the activities.

Overall student feedback about the use of video in this way was very positive. Students liked the fact that they could engage with the material at a distance and more than once. A number of students said that being able to go back to the video clip and watch it again meant that they identified aspects of the classroom interaction that they missed first time round. The students also appreciated the way in which the tasks focused their thinking. They confirmed that the tasks represented a progression of development over the time they engaged with them.

In the face-to-face sessions that followed, it became clear that the video-based pre-session activities provided an effective contextual and theoretical framework which enabled the students to contribute to the class discussion. The sophistication, quality and length of this discussion was much greater than in previous years when the video activity was not in existence.

In terms of engaging the students and providing opportunities for them to reflect on classroom management issues, the activity appears to have been successful.

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