

CREATING ONLINE LEARNING SPACES FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: A MACEDONIAN-USA COLLABORATION

Elena Ončevska Ager (PhD)

Blaže Koneski Faculty of Philology, Saints Cyril and Methodius University – Skopje, Macedonia

elena.oncevska@flf.ukim.edu.mk

North Macedonia

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an exploratory study of a 7-week pre-service online teaching course between a Macedonian and a USA university. The main aim of the project was to explore teaching from new perspectives, enable networking between prospective teachers from the two cultures and promote teacher research among the students, while developing their global competences. The course employed two online environments and a video-conferencing platform to facilitate interaction. It was moderated by the students' instructors, one from each culture. This paper outlines the structure of the course and presents a selection of the materials which were specifically designed for the purposes of the course. It then goes on to review the students' learning experiences on the course. A preliminary thematic analysis of the Macedonian students' reflective entries revealed that they enjoyed juxtaposing their local teaching contexts to their counterparts', while learning about how the two contexts compared with regard to the teaching methodologies used and the kinds of learning spaces created. The students also benefited from learning about each other's cultures more generally, including adjusting to each other's time zones. This paper rounds off with suggestions about how international online collaborative endeavours like the one described here could be improved.

Keywords: online learning, pre-service teacher education, international collaboration, global competences.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9633-5862>

1. INTRODUCTION

Living in a digitalised and globalising world necessitates adjustments in the educational system, especially with learners nowadays being digitally native, i.e. increasingly turning to online environments for learning and eventually seeking career opportunities in the global marketplace. Educators are, therefore, expected to develop global competences in themselves and in their learners, e.g. by exposing the learners to other languages and cultures, in order to help them develop into proficient communicators and constructive members of future globalised communities.

To be able to achieve these by no means straightforward goals, teachers need to be adequately supported by teacher education programmes which contain a focus on such global competences:

Teacher educators are challenged to [...] begin preparing educators for the globally interdependent world in which they will work and their students will live, by opening the world to students through international experience and integrating a global perspective throughout the curriculum. [...] (Kissock and Richardson, 2010: 89).

Indeed, global competence is widely considered to be a “21st century imperative” (National Education Association, 2010). The online course which I review in this paper was inspired by such calls for developing global competences in teachers in order to help them include global perspectives in their teaching, so that they can, in turn, support their learners to do exactly the same, i.e. to become confident global communicators themselves.

2. GLOBAL COMPETENCES

First, though, what exactly are global competences? Generally speaking, global competences refer to speaking the language of another culture and demonstrating an awareness of the specific features of the given culture. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2014) breaks down the above skills in the following abilities to:

1. “Communicate in the language of the people with whom one is interacting.
2. Interact with awareness, sensitivity, empathy, and knowledge of the perspectives of others.
3. Withhold judgment, examining one’s own perspectives as similar to or different from the perspectives of people with whom one is interacting.
4. Be alert to cultural differences in situations outside of one’s culture, including noticing cues indicating miscommunication or causing an inappropriate action or response in a situation.
5. Act respectfully according to what is appropriate in the culture and the situation where everyone is not of the same culture or language background, including gestures, expressions, and behaviors.
6. Increase knowledge about the products, practices, and perspectives of other cultures.”

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2014) goes on to suggest that different people will go about developing their global competences in different ways, often relying on informal education to do so. Yet, conceivably not all students will be given such informal learning opportunities. To avoid disadvantaging such students, the American Council recommend that global competences should be targeted formally, too, starting from kindergarten and all the way to university contexts. Educational programmes designed to support students in this endeavour will, therefore, offer formal opportunities for students to:

1. “Recognize the multiplicity of factors that influence who people are and how they communicate.

2. Investigate and explain cultural differences as well as similarities, looking beneath the surface of stereotypes.
3. Examine events through the lens of media from different countries and cultures.
4. Collaborate to share ideas, discuss topics of common interest, and solve mutual problems.
5. Reflect on one's personal experiences across cultures to evaluate personal feelings, thoughts, perceptions, and reactions" (The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2014).

The American educational system increasingly responds to these recommendations to develop global competences in their teachers and students alike, and at all levels. This commitment is illustrated well in the mission statement of The Ottawa University School of Education, the institution which was involved in the online course I review in this paper. The following excerpt from their syllabus on student teaching (a module which is part of their pre-service teacher programme) testifies to the institution's commitment to: "educating innovative, adaptable, and involved professionals in mind, body, and spirit. These individuals will promote holistic learning, global awareness, and cultural competency as responsible contributors to a diverse, pluralistic world" (Ottawa University, 2017).

One effective way to achieve these objectives would be by establishing global partnerships between institutions based in different cultures – a strategy believed to benefit learners across ages and contexts (Larson and Brown, 2017). This is the format of collaboration that myself and my American project partner opted for. I now go on to describe the aims, structure and content of the online course which we jointly put together in order to develop our student teachers' global competences.

3. THE ONLINE COURSE: AIMS, STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

Our 7-week (22nd October 2017 to 2nd December 2017) online course was entitled *Exploring and analysing learning contexts for professional development*. By 'learning contexts' we mean various 'artefacts' (e.g. pictures, objects, recordings, sounds, silence, etc.) related to learning. The idea to use the construct of learning context was inspired by Shohamy's (2016) linguistic landscaping, i.e. systematic analysis of texts in public spaces. She similarly understands 'texts' broadly, to include road signs, billboards, smells, sounds, silence, etc. and strives to ascertain what messages they emit about the cities that they are found in. Spaces regularly send out messages to us and my colleague and I felt that in our busy day-to-day lives we rarely find time to stop and 'listen'. This course was an opportunity to slow down and reflect on what learning artefacts suggest about various, cross-cultural learning spaces and how such messages could inform our teaching practice.

The main aim of the project was for the student teachers (all pre-service teachers, i.e. 9 from Ss Cyril and Methodius University, Republic of Macedonia, and 6 from Ottawa University, Kansas, USA) to learn about teaching while developing their global citizenship skills. We also aimed to help our students develop research skills by getting them to analyse various learning artefacts – a skill they could continue honing beyond their studies, as a professional development strategy. Finally, we hoped to enable valuable professional and personal networking among the students from the two cultures.

We used three project technologies on the course: two online environments (one belonging to the Macedonian, and one belonging to the US context) and Zoom, a video-conferencing platform. The course was moderated by us, the two student teachers' course instructors, each from the respective culture.

The project was structured in discrete weeks, with separate group tasks offered in each. Before and after the project, we had video conferencing meetings in Zoom. These real-time sessions enabled us to get to know each other better and take stock of the learning that took place on the course, respectively. Working in groups of 3-4, the students analysed artefacts of their choice from their local contexts, following our broad instructions about what artefacts to bring along to their discussion sessions: e.g. pictures of (a)typical

classrooms, pictures of (a)typical school assignment or homework assignment, a short excerpt from a(n) (a)typical lesson, as well as artefacts of their own choice. These included text messages related to teaching and/or learning, pictures of (a)typical celebrations taking places at school, pictures of (a)typical methods of rewarding and/or punishing student behaviour, etc.

To do their group tasks, the students met virtually in Zoom on four separate occasions, analysing the artefacts that each of them contributed and preparing a group summary, which they then shared with the rest of the groups, on an online platform. The groups were invited to engage with the other groups' contributions, leaving comments on their work and/or asking questions. In order to provide structure for the students' work, my colleague and I prepared a guide, which contained suggestions for the structure of the students' group summaries:

- a short description of the artefacts
- a short analysis of the artefacts
- a short discussion of what the students have learned from their discussion.

This document also contained questions inspired by (Wedell and Malderez, 2013) to guide the students' analyses:

Question 1: What does the text suggest with regard to each of the following?

- a) Teaching methodologies (e.g. What teaching methods seem to be in use?; What kind of learning seems to be encouraged - e.g., memorisation, drilling, creation, collaboration? What makes you think that?)
- b) Learning environment and social justice (e.g. What patterns of class interaction are used?; Who appears to hold positions of power? What kind of power is it? What makes you think so?).

Question 2: What have you learnt from our discussion?

My colleague and I used our own task instructions and guidelines to prepare a sample response to the first group task (analysing pictures of (a)typical classrooms) and shared this with the group to further clarify our expectations and support them in their work.

4. STUDENT RESPONSE TO THE COURSE TASKS

In this section, I present excerpts from two students' course responses (Artefacts 1 and 2, and an excerpt from the discussion of what the group learnt from the task) to illustrate the kinds of the learning taking place on the course.

Artefact 1: Picture of student punishment method

Situation: Punishment/detention, e.g. a student standing in the corner facing the wall

Location: Macedonia, elementary school

Analysis:

- Outdated method of detention
- Dehumanizing, humiliating (teacher abusing his/her authority?)
- Could even be considered unethical

- Have inquired and it is still used [in that school] on occasion
- Not a constructive way of trying to maintain someone's behaviour as it does not benefit students in any way (it destroys the students' self-esteem rather than nourish[ing] and build[ing] it, as it evokes negative emotions, especially insecurity and a feeling of inferiority).

Artefact 2: Picture of student discipline chart

Situation: Classroom management pocket chart entitled “How am I doing today?”, with students' names listed and cards displayed to indicate their discipline levels for the day

Location: USA, elementary school, 3rd Grade

Analysis:

- “How am I doing today?” comes off as friendly and inviting, despite being a discipline tool
- Shows the classroom may be organized and have strict rules
- Easy way for students to understand how they are doing
- Rewarding for students who do well
- Can be fun because students can earn prizes
- Could be embarrassing because all the students can see [each other's discipline marks]

Artefacts 1 and 2: What have we learnt from our discussion? [Excerpt]

“In our last discussion, we were able to compare and contrast the teaching methods both in America and in Macedonia. We concluded that [...] detention in Macedonia is used often and it has proved to be very unproductive and embarrassing in some way, especially the old-fashioned method, which does not help students. Detention in America, however, is very rare.”

This exercise enabled the student teachers to meaningfully, with the support of artefacts of their own choice, discuss aspects of their respective educational systems. This is in contrast with discussing educational issues in general terms and out of context, which could be argued to be less conducive to learning due to being less personalised. Discussions prompted by artefacts like the above have the potential, provided appropriate supports are in place, to create many of the opportunities for developing global competences, as outlined by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2014):

- raising awareness about the complex web of factors which are at play when it comes to how educational systems are set up and run
- researching and accounting for cultural similarities and differences, problematising stereotypes
- sharing ideas about how things are/can be done differently (in the example above, how discipline issues are taken care of in the two respective cultures)
- reflecting on how the above sharing shapes one's own attitudes towards education locally and globally.

Further, exercises like the above provided important practice opportunities for our student teachers to work with data from the classroom, making sense of what it ‘says’ to them and how what it ‘says’ can inform their future teaching practices. We hoped that exposing students to opportunities for such systematic, data-driven reflection would give them a taste of the benefits of reflecting on their own practice – a professional development strategy they might decide to take further in their professional lives. Finally, meeting up

regularly with representatives of another culture, exposed the students to important cultural information not necessarily linked to education (e.g. awareness of time zones) and hopefully paved the way for future personal and professional partnerships.

5. STUDENT RESPONSE TO COURSE

In this section I will review some of the student teachers' reflections on the course overall, as evidenced in their course reflections following the course. These are insights from a preliminary thematic analysis involving only the Macedonian part of the student cohort. In the next stage of the research, my colleague and I are planning on involving the full cohort and analysing their participation and reflections in more depth.

The most enjoyable aspect of the course for the Macedonian students seemed to be the opportunity to compare and contrast the two educational systems, learning in the process more about both:

“[I] really enjoyed reading all the summaries which offered a great deal of insight not only in the American school system, but also in some aspects of the Macedonian school system that I myself had not experienced.”

One student noticed that even though there may be significant differences in the educational systems on the surface, their underlying principles may not be that different:

“My main learning take-away from the course is realizing that our educational systems are not as different as we believe them to be.”

Some students felt that the course helped prepare them for their future careers in teaching, by improving their global, as well as IT competences:

“Learning about the classrooms in America will really help me in my career as a teacher in the future.”

“Using all the [course] tools like Zoom was a very good learning experience. It's something I'm going to take with me further in my career.”

Finally, the students also enjoyed interacting with peers from a different culture:

“One aspect of the course I really liked was the opportunity to meet new people and at the same time get to know their culture,”

and practising their English language skills.

When asked about the aspects of the course that they found to be most challenging for them, the students chose to write about the time zones difficulties they experienced when it came to scheduling meetings. Further, due to students dropping out, some groups were left with more representatives of one culture than the other – this is another area that the students wished to see improved to maximise cross-cultural exchanges. Other students would have appreciated more guidance on the course tasks. Despite us, moderators, preparing what we felt were detailed guidelines and sample responses, it transpired that some students needed more support. Last but not least, some students wished to interact more often via Zoom, perhaps even to replace the forum interactions on the online platform following the completion of the group tasks:

“[...] Maybe there could be more whole group meetings which would allow all the participants to ask about how their project for that week went [,] although I understand that it could not be possible with the scheduling issues in mind.”

These are all points for us, course moderators and designers, to take further when planning similar online courses for improved participant experience.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have outlined how, working collaboratively on an online course with my American project partner, we attempted to establish cross-cultural professional partnerships between our respective groups of student teachers. We set out to support the development of their global competences while providing opportunities for them to learn about teaching and engage in data-driven reflection. The students generally appreciated the ensuing learning, though they also reported learning benefits that we hadn't initially planned for, such as more general learning about each other's respective cultures, including adjusting to each other's time zones.

The design of the course and the selection of course materials shared in this paper will hopefully inspire other educators to embark on similar teacher education and/or general English education enterprises to give their students opportunities to develop their global competences, since the principles discussed in this paper are easily replicable not only across disciplines within a subject, but also across subjects.

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