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The Flipped Classroom: Scaffolding Community Online

Susan Barduhn, *SIT Graduate Institute*

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Susan Barduhn

SIT Graduate Institute, Vermont

Katrina Baran

Al Yamamah University, Riyadh

Jaime Durham

SIT Graduate Institute, Vermont

Problematizing the online curriculum design

SIT Graduate Institute has been running its highly acclaimed face-to-face MA TESOL (MAT) program for 45 years. This year we designed an additional format of this degree in order to meet the needs of today's working teachers. The new design is a blended version, in which participants only come to campus twice, for three weeks each, with the rest of the program taking place online. This meant "flipping the classroom" so that reading and writing activities would take place online, and the precious time together could focus on interaction. The ideal would have been to start face-to-face, in order to introduce peer mentoring and to develop the deep connections, trust and community amongst participants which are the foundation of our other successful program. However, because of the varied schedules of our international and expat participants, the only option was to start online first, with a seven-week module.

Our IATEFL presentation described the process of designing and executing this "Foundations of Learning and Teaching" module, and brought together the program director; one recent SIT graduate who wrote her MA thesis on planning for this module; the program coordinator (also an SIT student) who collaborated in the design and execution of the online activities; and the voices of the participants.

Our approach

The SIT program is a unique program that relies on students' relationships with each other to co-construct knowledge. It is a cohort-based, experiential and humanistic program. This philosophy affects every facet of the courses and the overall program design.

Good online learning practices share much with SIT's MAT program philosophy. Solid online learning is based on constructivist theory. The learners construct meaning and they learn through this construction. SIT's MAT program is based on the *Experiential Learning Cycle* and *Discovery Learning* – both constructivist learning theories.

Solid online learning builds community so that learners feel supported and engaged, and so they co-construct knowledge. SIT's MAT program builds and utilizes community to teach skills like active listening and peer mentoring. In solid online learning practice, the instructor is the “guide on the side”, not the “sage on the stage”, and in SIT's MAT program, the instructor takes on the role of facilitator, guiding but not prescribing.

The key to successful online learning is pre-planning and organization. Because you can't see your students' faces to gauge understanding and learning, the planning cycle needs to anticipate needs and issues, and set everything up in advance with maximum clarity and organization.

One important part of the pre-planning cycle, identified by Tina Stavredes (2011), is Procedural Scaffolding. This is comprised of *Orientation*, *Expectation* and *Resource Scaffolding*. *Orientation Scaffolding* familiarizes students to the course, including a technical orientation. *Expectation Scaffolding* suggests that policies and procedures need to be made clear. *Resource Scaffolding* addresses how resources are dealt with. These three types of scaffolding were fundamental guiding principles in the design of the Foundations course.

Solutions discovered

The Foundations course was designed to create a safe place where trust, connections and community could be fostered online. In addition to the scaffolding mentioned above, two key additional principles were to have fun with the design and be visually appealing, so the course was a welcoming and enjoyable place to learn. The other design principle was to keep the class in the Moodle classroom. Originally we had looked to outside software sources for activities to use in this course, but as the design developed, we realized that our Learning Management System, Moodle, actually had all kinds of tools for organizing the students and for activity creation. By using Moodle as much as possible to do what we wanted, and by planning to enrol the students in only one Moodle course at a time, we were able to reduce the technological knowhow necessary for the students to succeed in this program.

These design principles, again, meant to foster trust in the technology, have continued to inform all of the course designs. In fact this Foundations course purposefully acted as a wholistic orientation for the entire program.

Student feedback

Regular feedback from our first group of participants (they call themselves “The Pioneers”) has been invaluable in shaping our program and contributing to its success.

"I thought I would miss a lot by not being person to person. Now I think I am getting a whole new and different dimension that is very enriching...I am glad for the seven weeks before the residency as it gives me a chance to figure out how to manage my time and how to do the technology"- Arline Saturdayborn, MAT Pioneer.

References

Stavredes, T. 2011. *Effective Online Teaching, Foundations and Strategies for Student Success*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

susan.barduhn@sit.edu

jaime.durham@sit.edu

katrinabaran@yahoo.com