

Design Project Proposal

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**Design Project Proposal for course on the Art of Reflection for Adult Ed ESL Educators**

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Design of Technology – Supported Learning Environments

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## **Educators**

### **Part I**

#### **Key Frameworks**

The focus of our design project is to create a six-module course to guide and help ESL educators to reflect on their classroom teaching. The learning goals of the design project are for ESL educators to engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions, and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners. (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999) By the end of the course, participants should have a better grasp of how to use journaling as a tool, not necessarily to address a specific problem or question defined at the outset as in practitioner research, but to observe and refine practice in general on an ongoing basis.

#### **Overview of Lesson Modules and Framing of Primary Activities**

This project will offer a platform with various tools where participants are accompanied along the journaling process, and encouraged to share their reflective experiences. The platform will be hosted on Moodle, and offer links to blogs, synchronous and asynchronous discussion forums and voice tools. Each module will offer examples and provide participants with guidance to hone their reflection skills. Module 1 will begin by introducing journaling, and then participants will be encouraged to:

- Collect data by observing classroom activities and reflecting on observations through journaling
- Analyze data through the reflective practice of journaling, as well as through discussion with a facilitator and/or peers

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- Reflect on how the situation or activity could have been different through Skype or other synchronous means of communication
- Choose a platform(s) to reflect journal writing over a weekly period via a blog, by providing a Wiki or sharing their experience by other means with a partner
- Create a plan that incorporates new insights based on sharing their reflective experience and providing a synthesis of their learning experience via a blog or discussion forum
- Continue to share their experiences and thoughts on reflective practice through various means of communication, in order to promote the use of journaling as a reflective tool within their teaching practice

## **Academic Literature**

This design project platform will be based in part on John Dewey's (1930) principles (as cited in Stanley, 1998), who defined reflection as a proactive, ongoing examination of beliefs and practices, their origins and their impacts; as well as a transformational approach, based on Mezirow's (2000) initial theory (as cited in Merriam and Caffarella, 2001), adopting a format that fosters experiential content, the integration of concepts, as well as the development of critical thinking skills while encouraging personal growth, as supported by Wang and Sarbo (2004), Torosyan (2001), Cranton (2002) and Baumgartner (2001).

This project is also based on various literature supporting journaling: Hubbs & Brand (2005) guide our understanding with how journaling helps reflect on one's practice; while Boud (2001) helps determine how journaling can enhance teaching practices; and Fenwick (2001) offers guidance with how to respond to journaling, both as a facilitator and peer. It was also necessary to look at literature that examines the more

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challenging aspects of reflective practice. Fenwick (2001) reminds us that responding to a journal accordingly carries high responsibility; While Florez, (2001) reminds us some practitioners may also not be ready for facing changes in their teaching philosophies.

In order to support the role of the teacher as a reflective and instructional decision maker (Carrasquillo & Feng, 1994), it was important to peruse literature that explores the role of journaling for Adult ESL educators. Schon (1987) and Silva (2003) support journaling as a tool that can help ESL educators by offering them a broader overview of their teaching. Gebhard (1996) and Stanley (1998) provide ways to guide practitioners to examine the choices they have made and reflect beyond the data collected. Since this project is presented as a way to attain professional development, it was important to explore literature that guides us in creating a professional and feasible development activity. Lamprinou and Boyle (2005) support the idea of research inquiry as a professional and effective development activity.

In order to best support this project, it was also necessary to peruse literature that supports the online learning environment chosen. According to Orem (2001), communicating via Web-based discussions and online journaling can be beneficial for ESL educators, who often feel isolated in their practice. Elias (2010) supports the idea that the easy accessibility of Moodle is convenient to most participants due to its “anywhere, anytime” features. The learning environment will be based on Cranton & Wright’s (2008) principles, who believe a safe and trusting environment should be provided where participants can freely reflect their thoughts and experiences. However, Rakap (2010) reminds us that many factors can adversely affect participants’ self-confidence, these factors need to be taken into consideration when designing this project.

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### **Theoretical Insights and Perspectives with Adult ESL Educators**

The participants targeted in this project are adult educators of ESL originating from various environments. The theoretical insights that will guide this project are Constructivism and the Social learning Theory based on Humanism. Affordances will need to be created to reflect the idea that participants will likely have various levels of computer skills. Modules will need to take into account learner characteristics, including interests, level of experience, and need for integrating reflection within their teaching practice. Participants could be asked to fill-in a survey concerning their level of expertise with technology and previous experience with journaling; this type of information would prove valuable in adjusting the course accordingly. A good model to follow for course designing could be the ADDIE model (analyze, design, develop, implement, evaluate), offering flexibility to adjust as needed along the way.

## **Part II**

### **Intentions and Positions**

The purpose of this design project is to help participants take part in an online professional development program. As a growing body of professionals, teachers have the onus to educate themselves on current practices and strategies. One means to accomplish this responsibility is to attend conferences, workshops, and professional development activities; however, the cost of travel and time commitment required to participate in these activities are not always viable or convenient. This design project is a result of the need to provide teachers, especially those with limited opportunities, to attend professional development programs, as well as an opportunity to attend a course directed at refining their classroom teaching. At the same time participants are likely to further develop their online technology skills.

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Professional development programs allow individuals to improve their practice through self-directed activities and through collective interaction, and as such can be described as a process for personal growth. Although there are several discrepancies of what constitutes “effective” professional development (Guskey, 2003), “coaching” and “research inquiry” were found to be the most effective professional development activities. (Boyle et al. 2005) The same research indicates that on-going and long-term professional development also leads to the implementation of suggested practices. (Boyle et al. 2005)

One practice supported by several educators (Florez, 2001) as well as many theorists (Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Fenwick, 2001 ), is the concept of reflective practice. Although this practice requires an on-going and consistent commitment to record, analyze, compare and experiment with various strategies based on insights gained, there are many benefits if participants are properly instructed and trained. The advantages of implementing reflective practice are often immediate and adaptable to the diverse needs of instructors and their classes. This being said, there remain areas of reflective practice that are more challenging; for example, journaling requires a commitment to continuous self-development and the time to achieve it. Although practitioners can greatly benefit from a professional development program in the art of reflection, they need the necessary time to experiment with reflective practice in order to master the general process. Reflective practice may also prove emotionally challenging, for some practitioners may not be ready to confront the uncertainty about their teaching philosophies and competence, which is often part of the process. (Florez, 2001) Fenwick (2001) reminds us that as a facilitator it is a privilege to read and respond to journaling effectively, and

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guidelines also need to be established and used when peers respond to each other's journal - in all cases responses should be done delicately.

Working in an online environment also presents different challenges to participants. Factors such as previous knowledge, computers skills, learning styles and self-confidence all have an effect on what will be gained by participants. (Rakap, 2010) Training, practice and support should in time help users become more familiar and comfortable with the copious amount of online technology available.

### **Technology Selection**

The predominant technology used in this design project is Moodle. This learning platform is an open-source course management system (CMS) also known as a virtual learning environment (VLE). Several factors make Moodle an ideal choice for this project, including shared philosophy, easy accessibility, simplicity and flexibility of use. As stated on their website Moodle.org, the concept and design of Moodle is based on a constructivist philosophy (Moodle, 2011). Five key principles govern its further development:

- We are all potential teachers as well as learners
- We learn well by creating and expressing for others
- We learn a lot by watching others
- Understanding others transforms us
- We learn well when the learning environment is flexible and adaptable to suit our needs

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The aforementioned principles reflect the objectives and learning outcomes for participants, as they engage in the modules.

Furthermore, Moodle's interface is simple to navigate and intuitive in nature. The organization of the menu bars, tabs, buttons and links provide a shorter learning curve for both beginner and experienced users of web-based technology. As the infrastructure continues to improve, access to the Internet in remote parts of the world is becoming more accessible, thus allowing practitioners from all over the world to take part in this learning activity. In addition, since Internet users in more developed areas continue to grow each year (Internet World Stats, 2011), this means more teachers can have access to this type of online learning project. Inadvertently, these two facts will lead to continued growth, demand, and availability for such dynamic and inexpensive websites as Moodle, confirming the chosen learning platform is a viable choice.

Moreover, according to the 43,182,766 registered users in 211 countries, 1,118,416 are teachers (Moodle, 2011). Using an existing platform to host and develop a design project such as this one is beneficial when there is already a sizable and established support network. The instant access, and "anywhere, anytime" availability of Moodle makes it convenient for participants in diverse areas, in different time zones, as well as with different schedules (Elias, 2010). Other features in development and ones currently available in Moodle, such as a mobile interface and offline resources, add to its accessibility.

There are many features in Moodle that are flexible and adaptive. Learning can become more personal and meaningful through simple customizations, such as changing the font size and colour scheme. Different tools such as graphics, audio clips, slide-show presentations, videos and text captions can aid participants with different learning styles.



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The flexibility of Moodle is further enhanced when used in conjunction with other compatible technologies such as Skype and VOKI. When additional assistance or clarification is needed, help menus, discussion forums, manuals, and reference books are readily available.

Finally, there are several standard technical aspects that help to minimize user error and reduce frustration by users, such as: the ability to edit after posting; confirmation messages when sending files; warning messages before leaving the course site; and the option to resume at a previous session. Many simple elements of web design, which are often taken for granted, are continually being added or improved to create a more positive experience for all users, making Moodle the best overall learning environment to host this type of project.

### **Part III**

#### **Key Concepts and Contexts**

The concept of our design project is to provide a platform that encourages ESL educators to engage and practice self-observation and self-evaluation. By linking past, present and future experiences, participants will likely develop the necessary critical thinking skills to examine their teaching practice. Our belief that ESL educators should reflect on their practices stems from the role of the teacher as a reflective and instructional decision maker; a domain that has evolved since the 1980's. (Carrasquillo and Feng, 1994) ESL educators share a number of characteristics: they are expected to be competent in the language taught; they are also expected to develop and maintain skills relevant to teaching, taking instant decisions while facing classroom challenges and maintaining rapport with students. As such, reflective practice could prove to be a valuable tool with which ESL educators can improve their teaching. By journaling their

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teaching experiences, ESL educators can move beyond the development of students' grammatical English proficiency, to a broader perspective of teaching as a creative problem-solving endeavor. (Schon, 1987)

The context of our design project is based on Constructivism and Social Learning, whereby ESL educators will be encouraged to become aware of their own classroom teaching, as well as reflect upon their current and past knowledge and experiences, which will likely generate new ideas and practice. This project will provide various opportunities to get and provide feedback from peers, colleagues and facilitators. It will also provide a sense of support and at the same time a challenge, as the participant envisions conceptual changes to his or her practice. Jonassen (1999) reinforces this idea, when stating that Constructivist conceptions of learning assume that knowledge is individually constructed and socially constructed by learners, based on their interpretations of experiences in the world.

Our learning environment context is in a Moodle where participants will be able to interact freely in a trusting learning community. Moodle will be used as a platform to allow participants to connect to various resources, as well as participate in active discussions with their peers on current issues in learning and teaching English, while guiding participants in their reflective process.

### **Reflective Process**

Our modules will be based on the following reflective process and academic scholarships:

The ESL educator participants will be encouraged to gather information on what is happening in the classroom, and reflect on their practice through journal writing using blogs. With the development of interactive computer-based technology, ESL educators

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will have the opportunity to engage with each other in Web-based discussions and through online journaling. As Orem (2001) explains, this type of sharing activity can offset physical isolation often felt by ESL educators. Silva (2003) also supports this idea by affirming that journaling is a powerful method for documenting and learning from one's experience, and in this way it becomes a powerful tool for self-reflection. Feedback from facilitators, as well as examples from peer journaling or websites, should provide the necessary guidance for starting to journal. Peers could then provide examples or even become journaling mentors.

After data have been collected, the findings can be analyzed in terms of the attitudes, assumptions, goals, and consequences they reveal. The questions below can provide a guideline for participants to organize their findings.

- What happened that was expected or unexpected?
- What theories about teaching or personal experiences with learning are revealed in the data?
- How do these theories relate to your stated beliefs and attitudes?
- What is revealed about the relationships among the participants?
- What are the consequences of your actions? (Grandall, 2000; Gebhard,1996; Stanley,1998)

Practitioners can then examine alternatives to the choices they have made, as well as reflect on the beliefs behind them (Stanley, 1998). Considering how other practitioners address similar situations, generating alternatives and asking "what if" questions push practitioners to broaden their reflection beyond the data they have collected. (Gebhard,1996).

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Practitioners could then create a plan that incorporates new insights via a blog or discussion forum. The changes need not be huge—small changes can have an impact on teaching and learning (Gebhard, 1996). The important thing is that practitioners incorporate their new insights in their ongoing planning and decision making, observe the impact, and continue the reflective cycle.

## Part IV

### Interactivities

The group will create the primary platform using Moodle. The web address for our site is <http://moodle.met.ubc.ca/course/view.php?id=326>. The site is free and easy to access so that even ESL educator participants from around the world could register for the course. Moodle has many functions that allow the instructors/facilitators to link to online resources and textbooks, external websites for further readings, and a space for assignment submissions. The ESL educator participants can use the site as a social networking tool where many links can be provided, such as Skype and VOKI. Participants can share files, videos and pictures, as well as their ideas and practices within the discussion forum in Moodle. We will also introduce and promote the use of blogs for journal writing. The following are some of the blogging services commonly used in higher education: Blogger: <http://www.blogger.com/> Edublogs: <http://edublogs.org/> and WordPress: <http://wordpress.com>. ESL educator participants could use the blog as a platform to reflect their ideas, share their reflections, as well as classroom experiences with other teachers. At the same time, the participants will be encouraged to create a Delicious site <http://www.delicious.com> for the sharing of resources and pertinent websites between ESL educators, the link to Delicious posted on Moodle for easy access.

We are also planning to use VOKI Avatars. This site will allow participants to

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reflect on their learning in a fun way by creating an avatar and have it talk, or use other voicing sites that encourage audio reflection. The Wimba voice and classroom feature, provided in our ETEC 510 course, could be an interesting feature to add within our six-week course, where a facilitator could host various presentations about journaling with the opportunity for students to voice their opinions. These sites could easily be embedded in Moodle. We will encourage the use of Skype for participants to synchronously discuss their classroom practice and experiences with other participants as well as the instructor.

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