Podcasting: The ultimate learning experience and authentic assessment

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Microteaching, designed at the Stanford University in the 1960's (Allen & Ryan, 1969), revised (Ryan & Wang, 1996) has been described as one of the most powerful techniques for improving teaching. It has a longstanding reputation in the professional development of teachers at all levels from schools to universities. This paper reports on an on-going project from the National Institute of Education (NIE) Singapore, on the use of podcasts in the professional preparation of English language teachers (ELTs). One outcome of the project, designed in 5 Stages, will be the creation of an NIE website *Grammar Rules!* The project focuses on the authentic assessment devised for 190 trainee non-specialist primary schools teachers by 5 non-tech-savvy Tutors.

The NIE Grammar in a Pod project differs from established microteaching in a number of important ways. New technologies have opened up new options for teaching and learning. The arrival of the podcast presents teachers in every kind of institution with an invaluable learning resource and assessment opportunity.

The poster will outline a framework for using podcasts as authentic teaching and assessment opportunities. The pedagogic rationale for podcast creation will be outlined, together with a framework for understanding podcasts as an appropriate model of autonomous learning and authentic assessment. It will be demonstrated that using podcasts in teaching, promotes creativity and supports learner autonomy. The process and findings from the project will be of interest to university teachers and other engaged in the professional training of graduates and professionals in the 21st century, including doctors, lawyers, engineers and of course, teachers.

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Podcasts as an appropriate model of autonomous learning and authentic assessment for training teachers

Traditional approaches to the professional preparation of teachers comprise blocks of academic study followed by periods of supervised teaching in schools (practicum). While these seem to be traditionally successful for training teachers for secondary schools and adult learners, there is a sense in which the Academic + Practice approach does not adequately prepare new teachers for life in primary school classrooms because it relies heavily on demonstrations and simulations that are not authentic. Microteaching is an established tradition in many teacher training programmes, particularly intensive, just-in-time training. Based on a cycle of focused observation, the approach is one in which the trainee teachers role-play learners. This established approach provides an interim substitute for real learners and is highly successful for training adult language learners. However, microteaching thus defined and practised is unauthentic for training primary school teachers where the real challenge of the job is to harness the disparate interests and talents of 35-40 highly inquisitive, if unschooled, minds. Further, the traditional approach of a period of university based training followed by school experience or practicum, dichotomises the academic and intellectual from the practical. This is at odds with recent interest in Schön's (1983) *reflective practice* approach to training teachers. Central to reflective practice is the notion of teachers as *thinking professionals.* The status quo suggests a re-consideration of the traditional approach to teacher education is timely. This need coincides with advances in technology that offer two opportunities simultaneously: Firstly, the opportunity to rethink the processes of learning and how this can be supported without being over-directed to specific, narrow ends such as testing; and secondly, the opportunity to use new technologies in the professional preparation of teachers.

Podcasts in English language teacher training

Grammar in a Pod Project began as a learning and assessment task for the 2 year Diploma initial teacher education progamme in the English Language & Literature Academic Group in the National Institute for

Education (NIE), Singapore, preparing new teachers to teach Reading & Writing in Upper Primary School classrooms. The task was to teach a point of grammar. Grammar enjoys an almost notorious reputation as a phobia subject. Grammar is that part of the English curriculum that has extremely *low student appeal* (LSA). It is perceived by students and teachers as difficult to teach, difficult to learn, boring and dry. Podcasting on the other hand enjoys extremely *high student appeal* (HSA). It is associated with leisure, pleasure and fun activities, rather than school learning. It was hoped that by combining pods with grammar, the attraction factor of podcasting would influence student perception of grammar to make it a more fun, activity based learning experience. Reciprocal impact of grammar exerting a negative impact on the image of podcasting was not anticipated!

It was decided to trial this initiative with the 2 year Diploma cohort (DCE) for a number of reasons:

1. These trainees are *Digi-Kids*, the Digital natives (Prensky, 2001), perhaps the first of the generation of *Netizens* and *Thumbsters* to become teachers. Many are already net-savvy and so they have some foundation in using the technology. However, because they are not academically inclined in the traditional sense, it was considered important to build confidence through what they could already do as a foundation for new and more challenging aspects of academic study associated with grammar.
2. The trainees are mature students who have chosen teaching as a second career after some experience working in other employment sectors. Many find their existing skills and expertise plateau during teacher training because they are underused. The Grammar in a Pod Project was one way to disseminate the collective wisdom of the trainees, to prepare all with IT skills in a non-threatening interactive way, where they could learn from and with their peers. Thus providing them with first-hand experience of the social-constructivist approach to learning (Vygotsky, 1978) that they have been studying and encouraged to adopt as the framework for their teaching in schools. The aim was to capitalise on existing strengths in the student group as the foundation for peer-teaching and to bring them to a focus on teaching grammar using new technologies.
3. Many new and even experienced teachers feel insecure about their own grasp of the rules of English grammar. This project provided an opportunity for the trainees to revise and refresh their own personal understandings of English grammar in a non-threatening and purposeful way.
4. The project combined Academic Subject study from modules on Grammar and Text Types with Curriculum Subjects that focus on practical aspects of classroom planning and teaching. It was hoped that this integration would help, in part, to overcome the atomisation of the student experience and help them to make sense of academic subject studies as they relate to actual classroom teaching.
5. A defining and significant difference between teaching lower and upper primary school students is teacher-style and curriculum content. The MOE 2001 English Language (EL) Syllabus requires some points of grammar to be taught explicitly in upper primary school classes with students aged between 10 -12 years. Using podcasts would be an authentic and hence useful task that would produce a bank of cutting-edge teaching materials for the trainees when they became full-time teachers, employed by the MOE, just 8 weeks after completing this module.

In sum, it was considered that using podcasts to teach a point of grammar would provide this cohort of new teachers with a challenging but authentic task that would be of direct relevance, and more importantly, *of use* to them when they became full-time classroom teachers.

Podcasts, grammar and assessment: Unlikely allies?

As a linguist by background and training, now engaged in training new teachers of English to work in primary school classrooms, the notion of Podcasting holds particular attraction. Podcast is a newly created word, coined to describe a new concept. Although the exact origins is still debated (and this only adds to the excitement of the *now-factor*), it combines the notion of technology from iPod together with the media idea of broad*casting*: Pod + Casting = Podcasting. Podcasting: a new word for a new world. Podcasting demonstrates the dynamic and creative uses of language. It is cutting-edge. It encapsulates and epitomises language change in this multilingual, multicultural nation, Singapore.

It demonstrates, somewhat dramatically, one way in which the world where we live is changing. The things we do in school and the English language that we teach is also changing. New technologies require new ways of learning and so we have to prepare new teachers for different ways of teaching. Our project is one small demonstration of the ways in which we are learning and teaching in different ways, using the latest technology. Using Podcasts at NIE means that we are placing our new teachers at the very cutting edge of innovative learning & teaching. We are training teachers for tomorrow. Trainers, trainees and NIE should feel good about that. These changes provide first hand experiences to demonstrate that people can and do learn in different ways. It emphasises the positive, what trainees can already do. One dramatic

change in learning and teaching has been the shift from the collective to the individual. In place of learning in groups, in schools and classrooms, it is now increasingly the case that students learn on their own, in cafes, or in their home, using modern technology, like e-learning, e-mail, internet and other new forms of communication. It was hoped that Grammar in Pod Project e-week experience, would demonstrate the potential of these possibilities for autonomous learning and alternatives to conventional homework and assessment tasks. In short, the new technologies provide new ways to learn and this in turn demands, new ways to teach. Podcasting is innovative & creative. It is so here and so now! It has very high student appeal.

Process-performance assessment tasks

The aim of the Grammar in a Pod Project was to create a collective resource for teaching Grammar in Upper primary School classrooms. The trainees were tasked to create a 3 min podcast to explicitly teach a point of grammar and to select a non-fiction text that modelled the use of the grammar point. These teaching episodes were posted on the NIE Grammar Rules website to become a collective resource for the trainees when they became teachers in schools. They could also be used as autonomous, self-access learning resources for students and teachers to revise and consolidate their prior knowledge.

The peer review and self-reflection tasks

Trainees were tasked to listen to a number of these podcasts and conduct a Peer Review of one. A word limit of 200 words was set for both the review and self-reflection.

Based on http://fdc.fullerton.edu/learning/CASTL/carnegie_microteaching_materials.htm the following ground rules were set for the peer review task:

1. Respect confidentiality and what you learn about each other during this task.
2. Respect each other and the appointments you make.
3. Stay psychologically and physically present and on task.
4. Maintain collegiality. Work together.
5. Respect others' attempts to take risks and be original.
6. Listen rather than speak.
7. Learn from the process!
8. Enjoy!

For the Self-Reflection Task trainees were asked to identify what have they had learned about becoming an EL teacher from this experience and to set 3 specific goals for professional development. It was hoped that by evaluating other podcasts, trainees would develop critical insight & greater self-awareness that would help in future lesson planning and teaching. This is considered to be central to becoming a member of tomorrow's teaching profession, a Thinking–Teacher for the future.

Benefits for the trainee teachers

The Grammar in a Pod Project has a number of benefits for all who participated. Education for the future involves preparing for a world we do not know very much about. As societies develop and economies grow, there is a marked shift away from a skills economy towards a knowledge based economy. This in turn demands a change in the kind of education and learning we need. Teachers are now, more than ever, global citizens. This is particularly true of language teachers. Teachers trained in one country, may find themselves teaching in a variety of different contexts during the 40+ years of their professional working lives. Being tech-savvy is not an additional extra. It is becoming the very core of professional preparation for tomorrow's teachers. They will not merely use the technology but may be involved in designing the future generation of teaching and learning resources with and through new technologies. We need different ways of learning and different way of teaching for the future.

Creative thinking and critical thinking are becoming more important for trainee teachers and for students in schools. The *process performance assessment* devised for the podcast project was designed to address a number of areas of professional preparation.

1. It requires the trainees to develop a critical awareness of other e-media. This is important for critical evaluation and selection of appropriate teaching resources.
2. It requires the trainees to create original teaching materials. This was considered important because teachers in Singapore design a great deal of their own teaching materials. Podcasting provides a sound

platform for developing curriculum materials and for sharing these by creating a collective e-bank of learning resources.

3. Creating a podcast is a micro-teaching experience with built-in autonomy. Each trainee selects the point of grammar to teach. They have unlimited time within the 4 week time-frame, to plan, practise, rehearse, revise and re-record their podcast. Each decides when the podcast is available for public scrutiny, comment and feedback. It is this that distinguishes the podcast project as different from conventional microteaching using video recording. Each trainee enjoys a great degree of autonomy. Each remains in control of the process.

4. Podcasts are a particularly powerful resource for language teachers who are constantly expanding their personal language repertoire. Podcasts provide the opportunity to practise, experiment, innovate, self-correct and improve. In this sense it provides the ultimate microteaching experience. This project focused on English but is equally applicable to all languages and language teachers.

5. There is instant and individualised feedback to the trainee. The opportunity to self-correct and practise is infinite.

6. The podcast relies solely on voice. This is a vital, if rather neglected aspect of professional preparation of beginning and experienced teachers.

7. The podcast nurtures creativity. Recent discussion of student assessment has focused on ways of detecting and preventing inappropriate student behaviour and plagiarism (Ref*). For this assessment task, plagiarism is not possible because it is all about creativity. Voice and styles of speaking are unique.

8. During the process of creating their podcasts trainees learn a lot of other things simultaneously, so as well as being an authentic learning experience, it is SMART LEARNING!

9. Trainees have to Practise Practise Practise when creating the podcast and this is positive experience.

The benefits are not solely for the trainee teachers. From the Tutors' and markers' point of view, podcasts produce more interesting assignments to assess. With increasingly larger number of teachers to train, teach and assess this is no small consideration. Issues with plagiarism are almost eradicated because the nature of the task favours individuality, creativity and innovation. This assessment also has the potential for positive impact on schools and young EL learners.

Benefits for schools and young EL learners

The Grammar Podcasts focus on explicit instruction and expositions that are focused and are linked to authentic texts that teach about matters of direct interests and relevance to young children living in Singapore in the 21st Century. They are of local interest and have the potential for wider regional and international appeal. Each Grammar Pod is interactive, offering an explanation rather than a didactic transmission of knowledge. They provide learner-centred, self-access resources. The Grammar in a Pod Project has created 170+ expositions of grammar points that can be used within *Individualised Planned Interventions* (IPI), providing individualised plan and extra support for learners needs. They are designed as an autonomous resource, to be accessed as needed. They are available as on demand learner resources. They contribute to increasing leaner autonomy and confidence because they provide unlimited reference and practice for learners.

The future

Thinking about the future is almost impossible without reflecting on the past. Thinking back to the time when we were 10 years old, it would have been almost impossible to imagine the high tech e-world we now live in. So it is almost inevitable that the teachers we are training today will be teaching in a world that will change as much and as fast as the one we have experienced. So the challenge for teacher training is to prepare our new teachers for a future that is not easy to predict, except in its unpredictability, or even to imagine. This calls for a reconsideration of how we train teachers. Although established approaches have strong track records of success there is no surety that they provide the best way forward. The time has come for trainers to embrace uncertainly: To nurture creativity and adventurism in new teachers. Notions of the *literate world* are also changing rapidly. The priority is to create a new generation of teachers who can be flexible and who can embrace uncertainly. The professional competences that lay the foundation for that future include personal qualities like independence and confidence. Assessment like the Grammar in a Pod Project described here, is one way in which teacher training programmes can meet the professional and intellectual needs of tomorrow's teachers. It reports an approach to teacher education that promotes autonomy and creativity through the design of authentic assessment process performance tasks. The arrival of the podcast provides an invaluable resource for further creative responses to preparing tomorrow's professionals.

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