

Insights on ESL Student Teachers Reflecting Collaboratively Online

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a collaborative based reflective practice approach is grounded within the theoretical argument that critical reflection can be fostered through the presence of the “knowledgeable other” (Vygotsky, 1978). The present study was a pilot initiative in utilizing EDMODO (a closed educational learning management system) as a platform to explore reflection in a communal approach within a group of pre-service ESL teachers and their teacher educator mentor during a teaching practice placement in the context of the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) degree programme in an institute of teacher education (ITE) in Malaysia. The aims of the study are: (1) to examine the nature of the online reflection posts; and (2) to explore the nature of interactions that occurred online and the extent it supported collaborative reflection practices. The study employed a qualitative case study design in which five pre-service teachers (n=5) and their teacher educator mentor used EDMODO to post their reflections and carry out discussions for four weeks (n=4). The sources of data were the online reflection posts, the threaded discussion posts and a semi-structured group interview. Despite initial ambiguities and constraints, the EDMODO learning site as a platform for reflective practice showed positive results in that it allowed collaboration and dialogue to take place. Nevertheless, the facilitation of the reflection process requires further inquiry. The findings of the study suggest the need to establish a more systematic and structured approach when fostering critical reflection practices in a communal setting.

KEYWORDS: reflective practice, pre-service teachers, EDMODO, collaborative and dialogue based approach.

Introduction

The past decade has witnessed the ever evolving trend of the Web 2.0 technology in which emphasis is now placed on participation and involvement over presentation and dissemination. Traditional practices and methods are becoming increasingly extraneous in this era of the digital wave. The advent of the Web 2.0 in the landscape of education or in this context the field of teacher education has provided a platform in which professional development activities can be meaningfully supported. Opportunities to connect and share with other teachers is now made possible with online learning spaces such as social networking sites that harness the affordances of Web 2.0 tools (Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia & Chang, 2015).

Reflective practice has long been the foundation of quality teacher education programmes. Nonetheless common practices of written reflection in teacher education programmes in institutes of teacher education in Malaysia which are individualistic in nature and mostly carried out in isolation are becoming increasingly irrelevant as teacher educators contemplate how best to prepare our pre service teachers for today's dynamic and shifting educational environment. In view of this, the present study explored a more communal approach to reflective practice utilizing an online educational platform within a group of pre-service teachers during their teaching practice at placement schools and their teacher educator as the mentor in an institute of teacher education (ITE) in Malaysia.

Reflective Practice

The notion of reflective practice as a valuable instrument in teacher development has entrenched itself firmly in the past decade and in years to come. John Dewey (1933), one of the earliest proponents of reflective practice, conceded that the act of reflecting requires, "active, persistent and careful consideration" (p: 9) of a subject. His view has since been further expanded on by many advocates of reflective practice, one in particular Donald Schön (1987) who introduced the concept of reflection-in action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action. The literature on reflective practice has also branched out into categorizing reflections into different stages/levels in which technical-rationality is the most basic form of reflecting to critical reflection, the ideal/aspired stage of the reflection process (Collins, Karsenti & Komis, 2013; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Nelson & Saddler, 2013; Russell, 2013; Van Manen 1977; Valli 1977).

Although the concept of reflective practice established itself as a major component in teacher education, it is not without criticisms based on various aspects. Finlayson (2015) supports this argument by stating that the establishment of reflective practice in teacher education programmes has created more contradictions, tensions and dilemma. Arguments based on the vagueness of its concept (Akbari, 2007; Jay & Johnson, 2002), the dominance of written forms of reflective practice (Hobbs; 2007; Mann & Walsh, 2013), its solitary nature and a concept and practice that may be too challenging for pre service teachers (Akbari, 2007; Moore & Ash, 2002) are some of the concerns highlighted in view of both the theoretical and practical approaches of reflective practice in teacher education.

Collaborative online approaches to reflective practice

In light of the mounting criticisms against reflective practice, researchers in the field have now begun exploring other alternatives in making the reflection process more purposeful and engaging. One such approach is the utilization of online constructs as a way to facilitate reflection through collaboration, interaction and dialogue. The concept of collaborative reflection is slowly gaining momentum in pre service teacher education as a means of addressing the issues of the inexperienced pre service teacher when it comes to doing reflections as well as moving reflective practice from a solitary to a more communal nature. Numerous studies globally have reported on the benefits of collaborative reflection through online means with pre service teachers in which it was reported that individual reflections, knowledge and teaching views displayed positive development within a communal reflective practice approach (Mauri, Clará, Colomina & Onrubia, 2017; Rashid, 2017).

Literature Review

The foundations of the current study are grounded on the pillars of the Vygotsky's social constructivist learning theory and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) concept, Schön (1983) reflection-on-action thinking process, and Nelson and Saddler (2013) orientations of reflective thinking. Advocates of social constructivism regard learning as a social process in which meaning and knowledge construction undergo a negotiation process as purported by Vygotsky (1978). The process of negotiated meaning and knowledge construction form the core of the collaborative reflection approach in the present study. It has been widely established in the literature that critical reflection can be better facilitated through a more social setting which involves the perspectives of others (Black & Plowwright, 2010; Rashid, 2017). Open deliberation or reflection in a communal setting allows for questioning, clearing underlying assumptions, linking of theories and practices to build on one's professional knowledge (Stenberg, Rajala & Hilppo, 2016).

Vygotsky (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) is another theoretical concept that lends support in the present study. The ZPD according to Vygotsky is defined as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving in collaboration with more capable peers and the "knowledgeable other" (p. 86), thus lending claim that individuals learn better with others in a social setting. The EDMODO online learning platform utilized in the study allowed the pre service teachers to participate in a collective setting in which the reflection process was made public enabling them to interact and carry out discussions among themselves and their teacher educator.

Schön (1983) *reflection-on-action* is the primary reflection adopted in the context of the current study within the context of a teaching practice experience. Although arguments in regards to the limited scope of *reflection-on-action* have been highlighted by researchers (Akbari, 2007), nevertheless, other practitioners have supported the use of *reflection-on-action* claiming that such practice in the field enables teachers to initiate the problem solving process through collaboration which lead them to think critically about their practice (Boulton & Hramiak, 2012).

In examining the outcomes of the collaborative reflective practice approach, which were the online reflective posts, Nelson and Saddler (2013) framework was adopted to provide the theoretical lens in examining the orientations of the reflections. The framework has identified five orientations of reflections drawn from the work of seminal scholars of reflective practice (Valli, 1997; Schon, 1987; Van Manen, 1977) that interprets the conceptualization of the reflective thinking process. The five orientations are:

- Technical reflection (the efficiency and precision of a teacher's own performance in an established method or teaching strategy);
- Reflection-in and on-action (Schön, 1983;1987);
- Deliberative reflection (multiple perspectives and sources considered in decision making);
- Personalistic reflection (personal and professional development as a teacher);
- Critical reflections (moral and ethical considerations) (Nelson and Saddler, 2013 p. 48).

Methodology

Although the advent rise of technology has provided many opportunities for collaboration and shared learning to take place, institutes of teacher education (ITE) in Malaysia still subscribe to the solitary, individualistic and product-oriented approach of reflective practice (Suppiah & Lee, 2016). Individual approaches to reflective practice delimits potentials for knowledge construction which is especially important in reflective practice as novice teachers try to make sense of both the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching. Studies have shown that student teachers involved in the collaborative reflection process under the guidance of knowledgeable others have shown improvements in the way they reflect and think about their practices (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Mauri, Clará, Colomina & Onrubia, 2017).

In this study, collaborative reflection involves the communal interaction between a group of pre service ESL teachers and their teacher educator mentor using the online social learning platform EDMODO as they share their reflective thinking process, post comments and responses, and construct meaning and knowledge from the exchanges online. The study took place within a teaching practice context in an institute of teacher education (ITE) in Malaysia. Moving away from the conventional reflective practice approach in teacher education programmes in Malaysia, findings from the study shed some insights into collaboration in reflective practice through online mediums specifically in the context of pre service teacher education programmes in an ITE. The online platform used in this study is EDMODO, an educational learning platform (Borg and O'Hara, 2008). The appealing features of EDMODO, which enables its members to share information and engage with others in a safe and secure learning community (Anbe, 2013; Mokhtar & Dzakiria, 2015; Sasidharan, 2018), were the reasons this medium was selected in the present study. Therefore, the main aims of the study are to examine the nature of the online reflection posts and interactions as well as the extent of support in collaborative reflection.

Methods and Procedures

An exploratory case study research design was adopted for the purpose of this study. The participants of the study were five pre-service ESL teachers who were on their four-week teaching practice placement and their teacher educator who was both the supervisor and mentor to the pre service teachers during their teaching practice phase. Pre service teachers under this programme are required to complete a four year degree requirement which includes three phases of teaching practice and an internship programme. Reflective practice forms a pertinent segment in the professional practice component in which the pre service teachers are required to demonstrate reflective thinking and reflective writing through reflective journals. For the purpose of anonymity, pseudonyms were used in place of their real names. The participants were addressed as PST1 (Pre Service Teacher 1), PST2, PST3, PST4 and PST5 respectively. The teacher educator mentor was referred as TEM (Teacher Educator Mentor).

Prior to the study, the participants were introduced to the EDMODO online platform focusing on its features and functions. The pre service teachers were encouraged to post one self-reflection a day based on their classroom teaching experience. The online self-reflections were guided by the following questions:

- (i) What aspects worked well in your classroom today? Why do you think it worked well?-support with learning theories.
- (ii) What aspects did not work well in your classroom today? Why do you think it did not work?-support with learning theories.
- (iii) How did you feel about today's lesson on the whole? Would you do it differently?
- (iv) What was your learning point today as an English language teacher? Support with theory.

In the course of the study, the pre service teachers in the group were required to select two to three of the reflections posted online by their peers and to read and provide comments based on them. The teacher educator mentor was requested to read and comment on the online reflection posts throughout the study. No specific instructions were given on what and how to comment as the purpose of the study was to allow the interaction to unfold in its natural course.

Three sources of data were used which were the online reflection posts, and the threaded discussion posts to examine the nature of the interactions between the pre service teachers and their teacher educator, and to examine the extent it supported collaborative reflection practices. A semi structured interview was carried out at the end of the four week study to explore the views of the participants. In the course of the four week study, there were twenty (n=20) online self- reflection posts and fifty seven (n=57) posts from the threaded discussions which were then segregated into comments and responses. In adopting the constant comparison qualitative data analysis method, the online reflection posts were collated, coded, categorised and given an initial theme. The initial themes were then further compared and categorised using Nelson and Saddler (2013) reflection orientation framework in determining the nature of the online reflections. Content analysis approach was adopted to determine the nature of the online

interactions and the semi structured interviews. Table 1 below indicates a data analysis code reference which was created for ease of reading and reference.

Table 1: Data Analysis Code Reference

Data Analysis Code (s)	Description
ORP	Online Reflection Post
TD1	Threaded Discussion 1
TD2	Threaded Discussion 2
TD3	Threaded Discussion 3
TD4	Threaded Discussion 4
TD5	Threaded Discussion 5
TD6	Threaded Discussion 6
TD7	Threaded Discussion 7
TD8	Threaded Discussion 8
TD9	Threaded Discussion 9
TD10	Threaded Discussion 10
TD11	Threaded Discussion 11
TD12	Threaded Discussion 12
TD13	Threaded Discussion 13
TD14	Threaded Discussion 14
INT	Interview
PST	Pre Service Teacher
TEM	Teacher Educator Mentor
20160414	Date

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In addressing the main aims of the study, the findings and discussion are organised in accordance to the research questions. Pertinent excerpts from the data sources are highlighted to support interpretation in understanding the outcomes a collaborative reflective practice approach in this study context. In the course of the four week study, the total contributions from the pre service teachers are indicated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: The online contributions of the pre service teachers

No	Online Reflections Posts	Comments/Responses	Total
PST 1	7	19	26
PST 2	3	9	12
PST 3	2	18	20
PST 4	4	6	10
PST 5	4	5	9
Total	20	57	77

Nature of the online reflection posts

The themes that were derived from the online reflection posts were examined using Nelson and Saddler (2013) framework for understanding the orientations of reflections. The framework provided a theoretical lens into analysing the nature of the reflections posts to determine the pre service teachers' reflective thinking process in the course of the four week study. The prevalent themes that were gleaned from the online reflection posts were expressions of pedagogical concerns and seeking solutions to the pedagogical issue and problems of practice to personal growth as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Nature of the online reflection posts

No of Reflection Posts	Themes	Reflective Orientation
17	Expressions of pedagogical concerns and seeking solutions to the concerns	Technical/Reflection-In/On Action (Nelson & Saddler, 2013)
3	Problems of practice to own personal growth	Personalistic (Nelson & Saddler, 2013)

Expressions of pedagogical concerns and seeking solutions to the concern

Issues concerning the teaching and learning (pedagogical) process appear to dominate the nature of the online reflection posts with a total of seventeen (n=17) posts. Various concerns experienced during their teaching practice were expressed through the reflections posted online. PST3, for example, expressed her concern on having to constantly use the L1 (mother tongue) to translate words and meaning in L2 (target language):

“I am currently teaching in a class consisted with pupils who are weak in English. Most of them have problem to understand English words which made me to conduct my lesson in dual language. Every time I give any instructions or explaining the lesson in English, I need to translate it in Malay language. I realized that this kind of strategy help them to understand the lesson better, however, it took me a lot of time to explain in two different language and most of the time I struggle to reach production stage of my lesson. Moreover, I am afraid that they are used to the translation without making effort to understand the targeted language itself.”

(PST3/OR/20160917)

Other examples of pedagogical concerns that were expressed included the use of ICT as highlighted by PST4, during one of her teaching session in the classroom:

“One of the issues that I have always encountered was the ICT implementation in the school. Most schools have the equipment, but they still prefer the traditional method. I noticed that the pupils were actually more eager to learn when we have this kind of things integrated in the lesson. So during one of my lesson, I decided to utilise them. It was hard initially since the school that I went to claimed that their LCD projector was broken. So I had asked to borrow another from one of the teacher. Though it was a last minute decision, the pupils had enjoyed the lesson”

(PST4/OR/20160915)

In addition to expressing the pedagogical concerns in the form of descriptive statements as the two examples indicated, the online reflection posts also appeared in the form of identification of the problem of practice and seeking other perspectives on the concern. PST1, for example, encountered an issue with the way she carried out evaluation on listening and speaking activities and wanted some suggestions from the online group:

“When I was teaching listening and speaking lesson, I usually asked my pupils to practice their dialogue in pairs and then present it in front of the classmates. However, I could not let every pair to come in front due to the big amount of pupils. Therefore, I was facing problem in checking language in terms of their usage of words, grammar or even sentence structure when they were communicating in their pairs. Anyone has better suggestion on how we should evaluate or check our pupils' listening and speaking skills so that they can improve”

(PST1/OR/20160913)

In Nelson and Saddler (2013) reflection framework, the self-reflection stage aligns itself within the orientations of technical and *reflection-in* and *on-action*. Identifying the problem area, which in PST2's case was the use of translation and for PST4, the implementation of ICT, sets the scene for the *reflection-on-action* process in accordance to Schön first stage of the reflective thinking cycle which is the “retrospective thinking of a problem” (Nelson & Saddler, 2013: 48). In a traditional solitary and individualistic approach to reflective practice, this problem identification of a self-reflection process would remain a problem, however, in an online setting, they could provide the source or stimulus for open dialogue (Schön, 1987; Valli, 1997). Correspondingly, the reflection posts, which seek for other perspectives to the pedagogical concerns, are still identified as self-retrospective reflective thinking of the problem in practice, while actively seeking for solutions from the online group to address the concerns. PST3's online reflection post, as an example, has sought other views from the members of the community in regards to carrying out effective listening and speaking evaluation. This allowed for interaction and collaboration to occur between her peers and the teacher educator.

Considering different perspectives of others can assist the pre service teachers in the reframing and resolving stage as in Schön (1987) reflective thinking cycle.

Problems of practice to own personal growth as a teacher

In the course of the four week study, there were only three (n=3) of the online reflection posts that illustrated reflections that indicated a change in perspective of the pedagogical concerns. PST4, for example, had initially shared her predicament in her reflective post on her students lacking the confidence to communicate in English:

“I am teaching in a classroom that has a big number of students in it. To be exact, 46 students in the class. I am able to determine that the students are of mixed abilities. A few of them are able to understand and communicate in English. Most of them understand but struggled to communicate in English. Thus, most of them prefer it if I only talk to them in Malay instead of English. But I want to teach them in English and encourage them more to use English in the classroom. They understand it but lack the confidence to communicate in English.”

(PST4/OR/20160917)

Her subsequent reflection post in week four displayed some elements of personalistic reflection (Nelson & Saddler, 2013) in which she expressed a feeling of self-satisfaction at her students’ ability to complete a difficult task and relating the experience to her own personal growth as a teacher as illustrated below:

“Seeing 4 of my pupils were able to complete what once was a difficult task for them. Truly blessed becoming a teacher for these kids. Will keep trying to improve and be a better teacher. It is a very difficult and time-consuming process but it can be very satisfying if they can achieve something at the end. I learnt a lot about myself at the end as a teacher and a person”

(PST4/OR/20160925)

Similarly, PST2 in one of her reflection posts demonstrated some extent of personal growth as well when she reflected on an area of concern with the interest to investigate more into the area for her own personal growth as a language teacher:

“I think it’s the idea of researching into something and along the way I got to learn more, new things. It’s not just for the purpose of simply because it’s a coursework anymore. Instead I found it very interesting, and I like how these things would bring change to the way I view education as well...”

(PST2/OR/20160923)

There was less number of online reflection posts which demonstrate growth from a more technically oriented reflective thinking to relating the technical aspect to their own personal development as a language teacher. The contributions were mostly associated with their success with the learners and their own personal views on their development as a teacher without being able to explicitly connect these developments to any underlying principles or theories despite doing reflections in a communal and interactive setting.

Nature of the online interactions and the extent it supported collaborative reflective practices

Close examination of the interactive exchanges between the pre service teachers among themselves and the teacher educator in the four week study which was then followed by a semi structured group interview revealed two themes that illustrated the nature of the interactions that occurred online as Figure 2 would indicate:

Figure 2: Analysis of the online interaction

Number of comments/responses	(%)	Themes
31	54.3%	Technical based pedagogical support
26	45.6%	Personal and emotional connectedness

Technical based pedagogical support

A common theme that prevailed in the online exchanges between the pre service teachers was collaboration in terms of offering technical based pedagogical support to each other with a total of 54.3% or thirty one (n=31) posts. The majority of the online reflections were based on pedagogical concerns. The form of interaction that occurred between the five pre service teachers was providing alternative technical suggestions to address the problem of practice mentioned in the reflection. A case in point would be in one of PST5’s online reflection in which she expressed her concern about using too much of the L1 in the L2 classroom. In the threaded discussion, one of her peers, PST2 suggested using “positive and negative reinforcement”, (PST2/TD6/20160913) which was then followed by an agreement to the suggestion by PST3 who commented that “it may become their motivation to learn and prioritize L2 instead” (PST3/TD6/20160913). Other instances of support of this nature occurred when PST4 reflected on student control in the classroom and some of the suggestions from her peers included “reminding the class of the class rules that set with them earlier...” (PST4/TD11/20160920) and “a reward system for good behaviour...” (PST 2/TD11/20160920). When interviewed as to whether the comments from their peers were useful, some of the responses included:

“Well some I can actually use...some are not very...it is a good suggestion but it doesn't really apply to my case or my students”

(PST2/INT/20160930)

“I can use the suggestions when I face the same problems in my class..”

(PST5/INT/20160930)

Personal and emotional connectedness

Another striking attribute in the interactive exchanges between the five pre service ESL teachers who participated in this study is the sense of personal and emotional connectedness that was established between the five of them in the course of the study with 45.6% or twenty six (n=26) comments and responses depicting this theme in the online interactions . The comments and responses gathered from the threaded discussions demonstrated the way the pre service teachers built this rapport with comments, such as “hi, how are you doing there?”, “feeling stressed!!!”, as well as the use of emoticons; “☺”.

Data from the interview confirmed that the participants felt that the online interactions provided emotional support as PST1 remarked of the type of support gained from an approach of this nature:

“emotional support because maybe sometimes you feel so down we cannot carry out that lesson well and your friends support you...like oh I feel the same way...maybe you can do like this way to actually improve.”

(PST1/INT/20160930)

The pre service teachers also felt that reading the comments from their friends lessened feelings of isolation and being alone during teaching practice as PST 2 stated:

“...and you feel like you are not the only one facing the problem”

(PST2/INT/20160930)

Social camaraderie is a common element in building and establishing online communities. Studies examining the success of online learning communities (Krutka, Bergman, Flores, Mason & Jack, 2014; Wang & Quek, 2015) claim that building social rapport between members of the community is essential in establishing a foundation for online interactions. In addition to cognitive development, which in this case is reflective practice, the social aspects of the online

approach must also be nurtured and encouraged for the participants to feel safe in order to share, collaborate and discuss which was clearly established between the pre service teachers and their peers in this study.

The findings corroborates with studies in regards to pre service teacher reflection and peer support in that the need for immediate solutions to problems of practice encountered during the teaching practice are of the highest priority for pre service teachers (Akbari, 2007; Mann & Walsh, 2013). In understanding the dilemma of their fellow teachers, providing alternative suggestions appeared to be the way the pre service teachers collaborated in solving these concerns together. Jones and Ryan (2013), in their study on pre service teachers' online discussion forums to facilitate critical reflection, reported that their participants also displayed tendencies to share "experiences relevant to the individual's specific practice-based situations" (p. 143). Similarly, studies have also shown that peer support in terms of cognitive input is limited due to experience and the content knowledge. Transformational and critical change in the reflective thinking process can take place with the presence of the knowledgeable other in the learning community.

Interactions with teacher educator

The current study examined the nature of the interactive exchanges that occurred between the five pre service teachers and their teacher educator mentor within this online reflective practice approach. The theme that was derived from the threaded discussions between the pre service teachers and their teacher educator mentor indicated that the teacher educator took on the role of a mediator of cognitive and content knowledge instruction.

The teacher educator in the present study who was also the practicum supervisor of the pre service teachers had demonstrated efforts in engaging the pre service teachers towards thinking more critically about their practice. Some of the attempts made by the teacher educator included posing relevant questions, uploading additional sources like reading materials and videos on the problems of practice highlighted in the reflective posts and to mediate discussions on linking the problems of practice to theory.

In order to exemplify the role of the teacher educator as a mediator of cognitive and knowledge instructions, a reflective post by one of the pre service teachers on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the language classroom is demonstrated. In one of her reflective entries, PST2 who was teaching in a school in the outskirts of a small town, reflected on wanting to incorporate technology in the classroom despite the lack of support from the school she was doing her teaching practice:

"One of the issues that I have always encountered was the ICT implementation in the school. Most schools have the equipment, but they still prefer the traditional method. I noticed that the pupils were actually more eager to learn when we have this kind of things integrated in the lesson. So during one of my lesson, I decided to utilise them.

It was hard initially since the school that I went to claimed that their LCD projector was broken. So I had asked to borrow another from one of the teacher. Though it was a last minute decision, the pupils had enjoyed the lesson”

(PST2/OR/20160917)

This reflection post generated a discussion thread between the other pre service teachers who voiced out similar predicaments they faced in regards to the use of ICT in the classroom. In the discussion, PST3 commented on resorting to using books in the classroom because the students were used to it:

“I agree with the use of ICT in T&L, pupils are more eager to learn and they are certainly far more interested to listen. But what I had encountered in my class, was that my pupils preferred books because they were trained and used to books. In simpler words, they preferred familiarized methods instead of ICT. Hence I did not use ICT during my lesson.”

(PST3/TD12/20160917)

PST5, in her response to PST2’s reflective post and PST3’s comment expressed a similar dilemma in which she stated her own experience on the unpredictability of internet services and her preference for using teaching aids instead:

“My experience of using ICT is that it is unpredictable. Something might happen in the middle of the lesson such as no electricity, computer/laptop problem, video cannot be played and etc. Hence, we need to come out with backup plan, which I think it is quite troublesome (as I think technology should make work easier, but seems like it's not), hence I prefer to use teaching aids during my lesson.”

(PST5/TD12/20160916)

The teacher educator’s contributions in that discussion group was focused on affirming the concern raised and at the same time to get the pre service teachers to think about ways to overcome the constraints faced when using ICT. There were also attempts to draw the pre service teachers into linking the issue at hand to learning theories as illustrated in the extract below:

“I think it is important to keep up with trends to ensure student engagement. If the way to capture the students' attention is through the use of ICT then you should just stick to that approach. It certainly requires more planning. What are some of the ways you can avoid these constraints? Can you link any learning theories with the use of

incorporating technology in the language classroom and student engagement?”

(TEM/TD12/20160917)

In response to the question posed by the teacher educator in regards to PST2's reflective entry and the comments and responses from the pre service teachers that followed were mostly in agreement with the teacher educator's comments.

“Thanks for the suggestions. 😊 apart from that, if using ICT consumes a lot of time for preparation, I think we could use it after recess so that we have enough time to set up everything. But then that means we could not always use it since not all of our classes are after recess ☐”

(PST2/TD12/20160917)

The interview data reaffirmed the nature of the online exchanges between the pre service teachers and their teacher educator in that the pre service teachers were of the opinion that her comments and responses were more towards helping them to solve their immediate concerns in their classroom as depicted in the interview extracts below:

“I have to wait until my mentor reads my reflection before or when I see her after my teaching practice, but here online, I can get her response immediately especially when I have problems with my class or teaching”

(PST5/INT/20160930)

“I look forward to reading my mentor's comments to help me solve my issues in the classroom”

(PST3/INT/20160930)

Although there were numerous attempts made by the teacher educator to encourage deeper thinking of the problems of practice faced during teaching practice, they were not successfully translated into the subsequent online reflective entries or the interactions. The role of the knowledgeable other is crucial in providing scaffolds in supporting pre service teachers to reflect more critically about their practice. Many studies suggest the need for teachers to moderate, facilitate or direct when necessary, the communication that takes place in a collaborative learning environment (Foong, Md Nor & Nolan, 2017; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). In this study, regardless of the efforts from the teacher educator to direct the discussion towards a more critical stance, the comments and responses from the pre service teachers remained at a more social and informational nature.

The findings validates the argument put forward by Husu, Toom and Patrikainen (2008) who discovered that reflective conversations between pre service teachers and their university supervisors tend to be more descriptive and introspective in nature. Teaching/Instructor presence (Swan, Richardson, Ice, Garrison, Cleveland & Arbaugh, 2008) is a vital component in

any online learning community to facilitate an inquiry based approach to learning. In the present study, despite the interactive presence of the teacher educator in the group, the reflective entries did not go beyond an introspective personalistic orientation (Nelson & Saddler, 2013). In view of this, Jones and Ryan (2013) proposed “assessment, modelling and monitoring” (p: 144) as an approach in instructor facilitation of reflections. In the same vein, Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia and Jones (2010) have suggested that facilitators usually focused more comments on individuals within the communal setting as opposed to giving comments directed to the group.

Conclusion, Limitations and Suggestions

This exploratory case study was aimed at exploring the outcomes of an online collaborative approach to reflective practice between a group of pre service ESL teachers and their teacher educator during a four week teaching practice context in an institute of teacher education. The findings which are limited by the small sample size and short time frame are not in any way meant to generalize the issues raised but more towards providing insights into the concept of collaborative reflection within specific contexts.

In exploring the nature of the online reflections, it can be concluded that problems of practice in regards to key matters during the teaching practice such as student learning, effective teaching and learning strategies and classroom management were the main focus of the online reflections. The pre service teachers tendency to highlight the more technical aspects faced in the teaching classroom in their reflection posts throughout the study, only serves to fortify claims that the reflection is still an elusive concept to pre service teachers who have limited professional and teaching experience (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Poom-Valickis & Mathews, 2013).

The results also indicated that the interactive exchanges that took place on the online platform were generally centred on establishing and supporting social and emotional connections, providing pedagogical support, exchanging similar teaching predicaments and experiences and offering alternative suggestions to address the problem of practice. In spite of the presence of the teacher educator, who made attempts to encourage deeper thinking of the issues by asking the pre service teachers to articulate and justify decisions from a theoretical perspective, the responses were far from critical as the pre service teachers tend to post responses that were more of affirmations than justifications and reasoning (critical debate) (Kuswando, 2014; McGarr & McCormack, 2014).

The findings of the study have highlighted the complexities in supporting a collaborative online approach to reflective practice. While the platform has been used to successfully build positive relationships between its participants, nevertheless, facilitating critical reflection communally in online spaces would require a more systematic and structured approach that would include delineating the concept of collaborative reflection practices online and the roles and contributions of its key participants. Implications from the study also points towards the need for further exploration into the nature and level of expert facilitation online to support critical reflection through collaborative reflection practices.

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