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Connecting Across Borders: Exploring the potential of handheld technologies to connect student teachers overseas

Huggins, V

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University of Plymouth

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Project Reference Number:	176
Title:	Connecting Across Borders: Exploring the potential of handheld technologies to connect student teachers overseas
Key Contact:	Valerie Huggins
Department:	Department School of Education, Faculty of Health, Education & Society, Plymouth University
Telephone:	01752 585355
Fax:	
Email:	valerie.huggins@plymouth.ac.uk
Description:	<p>Aims of project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ To diversify the opportunities for students to learn from international experiences; ○ To strengthen links between colleagues and students working in overseas partner institutions through a collaborative small scale project; ○ To create student-generated resources for use on BA Early Childhood Studies/BEd Early Childhood Studies/PGCEYY that encapsulate an aspect of Early Years practice or provision in a particular context, e.g. Plymouth, Plzen (CZ), through the use of digital resources such as video diaries and digital narratives; ○ To compare students' understanding of international perspectives as they access the materials, through feedback questionnaires, written reflections; ○ To rigorously evaluate the resources, identifying areas of strength and areas for development. <p>Background to project</p> <p>School of Education students have opportunities to participate in a number of international experiences including a 1 week study tour of The Gambia, 2 week kindergarten placements in Germany and the Czech Republic, and teaching practices in Finland, USA and Denmark. These experiences have been shown to have a significant positive impact on the personal and professional development of this small number of participants, enhancing students' awareness of globalisation issues and cultural diversity. However, the majority of students are excluded due to family commitments or financial constraints. At present there are occasionally informal opportunities for the rest of the student body to access this learning vicariously, usually through discussion in sessions on some modules. Research (e.g. Wheeler, 2009a; Hramiak, 2009; Lee, 2009; Hui-Chun et al, 2009) clearly showed the potential of using video diaries and blogs to enhance the quality of reflection upon experiences (Qian & Scott, 2007), as well as to</p>

disseminate and share the experiences of a small number of students with a wider range of people (Wheeler, 2009b).

Methods used

A blog and resources portal was established to showcase the resources created by the students while on placement. These were intended to include video diaries, audio and written blogs. A process evaluation was conducted to assess the implementation of the project (both in relation to collecting students' work and the setting up and managing of a website to host the work). A key element of this was to consider if/how student learning has been developed both for those on the trips and those who have not attended. To this end the project involved:

- Focus groups with students who have previously been to The Gambia
- Focus groups with staff who have previously been to The Gambia
- Questionnaires with those who are going to The Gambia during the period of the pilot study
- Focus groups with students on their return from The Gambia
- Setting up of a website to host student work

Results

This project has had some unexpected results.

There were considerable unforeseen technical difficulties in setting up a secure website that could also be accessed by people from outside the University, and this significantly constrained the research. The compromise towards the very end of the project was to use a Facebook site. This is considered to be problematic by the team, as students use Facebook for social networking, and not for professional development. This has yet to be resolved and it is not feasible to extend the project to include staff and students from another university until it is. The faculty's learning technologist, Edd Bolton, discusses the issues in his report, Using Facebook Groups as a Teaching and Learning Site, available at: <http://technologyenhancedlearning.net/edd/2011/04/26/using-facebook-for-tel/>.

There were significant resistances from the students to the sharing of their reflections and experiences, whether by using video cameras or written blogs. There was a sense that the learning had been personal and therefore not of value to others. There were therefore very limited resources to post on the website. This has led to a realisation that we need to support students in understanding that learning is not solely an individual matter but also importantly takes place within a community of practice.

	<p>Most importantly, the research revealed that there were divergent views about the rationale for international experiences among the staff who lead them. This led to some resistance to allowing students to share reflections on a website. The subsequent discussions on this key part of the project resulted in a critical examination of the underpinning philosophies and intentions of the study trip to The Gambia. There is now an appreciation of the need for a much more rigorous framework for reflection, including pre-trip, in-country and post-trip activities in order to maximise the students' personal and professional learning to be gained from studying abroad. A conceptual model, such as De Souza and Andreotti's framework Through Other Eyes project (http://www.throughothereyes.org.uk/about.php) would be a useful tool to support this process.</p>
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Web Site:	http://www.facebook.com/groups/ECSinternational/
Collaborators:	Dr Verity Campbell-Barr Steve Wheeler
Keywords:	student experience; international study; E-learning; evaluation research; video; blogs; transformational learning; Gambia;
Publications:	<p>Details of the project have been disseminated widely at international events around Europe through inclusion in keynote and invited presentations at high profile education and training conferences. The notion of video diaries/video blogging as a support for placement at home and overseas, although not new, is innovative in terms of its scalability and potential reach to similar audiences and international communities of practice.</p> <p>The project has also been featured on http://steve-wheeler.blogspot.com – a blog that has a substantial readership with an average of 50,000 views per month.</p> <p>An article has been drafted by Valerie Huggins and Verity Campbell-Barr 'Enhancing student learning from international study trips: an exploration of the possibilities and difficulties of using digital technology to share experiences', which will be submitted for publication in a relevant journal, following feedback from the TFA team.</p>