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Action Research on Remote Teaching as an Instrument for Reflection on Online and Face-To-Face Teaching

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In this paper we report on an action research project on remote teaching that we designed for students of the preservice graduate teacher education program at the University of Amsterdam when schools closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The students were instructed to keep a teaching diary to record their experiences with online teaching for a period of four weeks, which, they reported, helped them to adjust to their new reality. We have, therefore, decided to build on this task and use it as the starting-point of a more elaborate project. One of the most interesting outcome of the project so far is that a first analysis of the entries in the diaries show that reflection on the constraints and affordances of *remote* teaching have led to reflection on *face-to-face* practices.

Keywords: remote teaching, teaching diary, action research, reflection, classroom research, experiential learning, preservice teachers.

INTRODUCTION

When the Covid-19 pandemic forced the Dutch government to close down all schools in March 2020, the graduate students of the preservice Foreign Language Teacher Education course at the University of Amsterdam ($N=12$) had almost completed their 18 month teaching internship. The lockdown set them a daunting challenge: without any preparation they, as novice teachers, had to adjust to teaching their classes online. Well-established practices for remote teaching large groups of teenage students at middle and high school level were lacking and their supervisors, although experienced teachers, could only offer limited guidance and assistance. This meant that improvisation was key. But this challenge also created a unique opportunity: we could exploit the situation to set our students a task that would invite them to investigate *emerging* practices in remote teaching *in real time*.

INNOVATION

To help them navigate the uncharted territory of remote teaching and to scaffold systematic reflection on their experiences, we instructed our students to keep a teaching diary (e.g. Sá, 2002) for a period of four weeks that they would use to report on all the classes they taught (see Figure 1). The entries could consist of field notes; samples of student work; email/text messages from online conversations with colleagues at school, supervisors, peers, or students.

Instructions Teaching Diary

For the online classes you are teaching in the coming weeks, you take up a participant-observer role: you will simultaneously act as teacher and as researcher of your own practice. To record your experiences we ask you to keep a teaching diary in which you report on all the classes you teach. The entries of your diary may comprise anything that you think is of interest (field notes; samples of student work; email/text messages from online conversations with your colleagues at school, supervisors, peers, or students; etc.).

You should, however, address at least these points in your entries:

- *Lesson preparation: what decisions have you made in terms of learning objectives, pedagogy, learning/teaching activities, classroom organization, etc.?*
- *Teaching: what happened?; did the lesson proceed as you had planned?*
- *Reflection: were there problems?; successes?; what have you learned?; how will this experience inform future planning/teaching?*

Figure 1. Teaching diary assignment.

As they were working on their diaries, the students informed us that the journal writing was helping them to adjust to the new reality and to make sense of the first, often overwhelming, experiences with remote teaching during the initial weeks of the lockdown. Therefore, we decided to build on this task and use the diaries as the starting-point of a more elaborate ‘action research’ project (cf. Burns, 2005; Leitch & Day, 2000). We instructed the students to categorize and analyze the entries (cf. ‘content analysis’, Sá 2002) in order to identify specific patterns and problems that need further exploration. Next, they will triangulate their findings (Green & Wallat, 1981) through consultation of external sources and write a structured, well-motivated plan of action to improve the next series of online classes they are set to teach in their internship schools. The results of their actions will be monitored in a second cycle of journal writing following the same procedure. Due to time constraints the data collection phase will probably end after these two rounds.

RESULTS

The first analysis of the diary entries of our students shows that during the first classes they taught they were immediately confronted with the constraints and affordances of online teaching. They struggle to get to terms with the drastic changes in the organization of the classroom discourse that are triggered by the remote setting (e.g. extended ‘wait time’ between teacher questions and student answers). They also observe that classroom management is more complex in video environments (e.g. Zoom or Microsoft Teams), which only show the upper body. Later entries show a more holistic view of teaching and learning. For instance, one student wrote the following:

I noticed in the student assignments that were handed in that there were lots of issues they had not understood during class. It is really hard to give clear instructions if you get so little student response. Especially the weaker students tend to fall behind because of this.

After the first hectic weeks, as they develop routines and strategies to tackle the organizational and interactional problems, the students begin to make connections between these issues and the cognitive and pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning

IMPLICATIONS

When Dutch schools closed due to the pandemic, our student teachers were not prepared for remote teaching – it is not a topic addressed in the curriculum. This meant that acting and learning needed to go hand in hand (cf. ‘experiential learning’; Girvan et al. 2016) and activities and tasks needed to be devised that scaffolded their professional growth. What we have learned from the intervention reported on in this paper is that teaching diaries indeed can be successfully used as an instrument to promote student teachers’ reflections on classroom practice and help them make sense of their

experiences in situations like this (cf. e.g., Moon 2006). To strengthen this effect we recommend the diary task to be followed by an action research project, since this framework will allow the students to improve on their teaching by systematic investigation of their practice through reiterative cycles of planning, observing, acting and reflecting (Kitchen & Stevens, 2008).

We would propose such a project to consist of the following phases:

- *Phase 1.* Diary writing to gather baseline data; content analysis: organization and analysis of the data to identify emerging patterns and problems;
- *Phase 2.* Triangulation: discussion and comparison of the data with other sources (peers, school and university supervisors, students); consultation of research on remote and online teaching;
- *Phase 3.* Plan of action: changes to be implemented in future remote teaching, based on the data and outcomes of phases 1 and 2;
- *Phase 4.* Diary writing to record implementation of plan of action;
- *Phase 5.* Assessment: evaluation of the effects of the implementation of the plan of action;
- *Phase 6.* Dissemination of results.

In phase 1 the students gather and analyze their baseline data. This is followed by a triangulation component (phase 2). This component is not an essential part of action research per se, but we include it because sharing experiences, practices and problems as well as pooling strategies and solutions, among as many interested parties as possible, is important, particularly in an unprecedented situation such as the pandemic. Also, we propose that the theoretical component of the triangulation phase - the search for research studies on remote and digital teaching and learning - will enable the students to put their personal ideas in a wider perspective and enrich their plan of action (cf. Kitchen & Stevens, 2008). The data collected in phases 1 and 2 feed into a structured plan of action (phase 3). This plan is implemented in their teaching and monitored in their diary during phase 4. The inquiry is completed with an assessment/evaluation of the effects of the changes projected in the plan of action (phase 5). Finally, to round off the project, the individual students can be instructed to write a report on the outcomes of their research and the lessons they have learnt or present these to a wider audience (phase 6).

FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the most interesting results of our intervention so far is the evidence we found in the diary entries that our students' reflection with regard to remote teaching have led to renewed and more refined reflections on face-to-face classroom teaching (e.g. on the importance of verbal and nonverbal student feedback and the role of informal classroom talk). One student shared the following:

Normally, when the students are working on a task individually, I walk around, and then students feel free to just ask me for help if they do not understand something. Or I see students talking to each other and inadvertently catch something like "Well, I don't know either.." or "I haven't got a clue". Then I grab a chair and go and help them. And if I find lots of the students have problems I go back to explaining things once more to the entire group. I try to solve this during the Zoom classes by sending them a private chat message now and then, when I see [in the digital environment they are working in] that they are making lots of mistakes or if I notice that they are not doing any work at all, but it does not work in the same way and I feel I am missing out on much information about how they are doing.

We are planning to further explore this idea in the post-Covid-19 era, when face-to-face teaching has become the 'norm' once again, and create a task as part of the syllabus of the teacher education program that involves remote teaching. The assignment will instruct our student-teachers to design a series of lessons that they will teach online to a group of their internship school students, using a digital platform like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. We hypothesize that the change of perspective involved in this institutional task will allow novice teachers to re-frame, and critically re-think, existing practices in face-to-face teaching (cf. Bannink & Van Dam, 2007) in the same way the real-world change addressed in this paper has done.

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