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A Virtual Variation

Jeremy Harmer clicks on a new way to access professional development

Almost all teacher educators and methodologists talk with enthusiasm about the need for teacher development. As teachers we only really operate best, it is argued, when we learn from our experiences, and in learning, we change in both subtle and more obvious ways. Teaching, like any other human activity, should be an occupation in which we grow constantly, always moving forward, getting better and more experienced as we continue.

A desire to develop

It is not difficult to see why this view of teaching as a process of continual personal evolution is to become stale – to ‘burn out’ – and lose the ability to engage and inspire learners. That is unfortunate in an occupation which is, at every level, profoundly human and humanistic. But when teachers are forever looking at ways of doing things better and are themselves engaged in the whole process of lifelong learning, they do not seem to suffer this kind of ‘teacher’s block’ in the same way. As Penny Ur points out, the difference is, perhaps, between teachers ‘with 20 years’ experience and those with one year’s experience repeated 20 times’.

There are many ways of developing as teachers: we can enrol on in-service courses (such as the DELTA) or attend a wide range of teacher conferences and seminars. We can help organise in-service discussion groups or set up our own support meetings and we can read the wide range of methodology books and articles that are published every year.

Problems of access

It is not always easy to read all the journals and books we want to, however. Sometimes we just don’t have the time or energy. It is also possible that our school does not subscribe to journals such as *English Teaching Professional*, *Modern English Teacher* or *The ELT Journal* (to name three prominent British-based examples). Methodology books are usually quite expensive, and many teachers are unlikely to have the resources to build up their own collection.

All these problems can be overcome if there is a good ELT library nearby. But even if there is, searching for a range of articles and books can be time-consuming and frustrating.

Also, teachers often find it quite difficult to get together in groups for discussion. This can be because of time constraints and timetable clashes, or because they do not have the money to attend workshops and conferences (money is often not set aside by schools for such development opportunities).

Virtual solutions

Since the arrival of the internet, some of the problems discussed above have been partially overcome. Teachers can now join a whole range of discussion groups where they can post messages on issues that concern them*. They can access a number of websites which offer online journals. *Humanising Language Teaching* (www.hltmag.co.uk/index.htm), for example is a monthly journal edited by Mario Rinvolucri for the Pilgrims organisation in which a wide range of articles, exercises, reviews and other materials are offered for teachers’ enjoyment and interest. *The Internet TESL Journal* (<http://iteslj.org>), too, offers a range of articles, and print journals usually have accompanying websites (such as www.etprofessional.com and www.onlinemet.com). Association websites (such as IATEFL’s at www.iatefl.org) offer news, links and contacts and some individuals have set up their own sites to expound their own views or offer their own suggestions – see, for example, Scott Thornbury’s ‘teaching unplugged’ web pages (www.teaching-unplugged.com), or Dave Eastment’s computer-related site at www.eastment.com.



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Given the kinds of sites mentioned above, and there are many more out there, the challenge for anyone wishing to provide material specifically aimed at teacher education and development is to offer something complementary rather than as competition for all the wonderful riches that exist in cyberspace already.

An ELT forum

When setting up the TD website which I host (at www.eltforum.com), the two questions I sought to answer were:

1. How can we bring a selection of articles and book extracts to the teacher (instead of the teaching having to go and try to find them)?
2. How can we offer teachers a chance to discuss what they have read – or are thinking – about a certain topic?

The answer was to create the *ELT Forum* in which a different topic (eg correction, writing, learner autonomy) is offered every month. For each topic we provide the following:

- A straightforward statement of the issues surrounding a certain topic.
- A downloadable 'development pack'. This is a collection of articles and books extracts which exemplify the issues raised about a certain topic. Each article or extract is preceded and followed by tasks to help the reader tease out main points and meanings.
- Suggested answers for the tasks.
- An archive of previous topics and their accompanying materials.
- Bibliographies by topic

Once a month there is alive forum in which members can discuss key issues within the topic with a participating 'expert'.

Articles

In the reading development pack which accompanies the topic, members can download published articles and book extracts from a variety of authors and sources.

Before reading an article (in the example here 'Open your books' by Philip Prowse, originally published in ETP Issue 14), users are asked to complete a series of tasks:

"Before reading 'Open your books', complete the following tasks:

1. How enthusiastic are students when it is suggested that they should read in English for pleasure?
2. What ways can you of for provoking in them a desire to read?

Now read 'Open your books'. Does the author agree with your answer to the first question? How similar are your ideas for making students want to read?"

And when they have read it, this is what they see:

"Now that you have read 'Open your books', complete the following tasks:

3. What is the single most important things a teacher can do, according to the author?
4. How can teachers help students to read?
5. Without looking back at the article, see if you can write brief note-like descriptions of the various activities suggested:

Using the cover Using the title Using the chapter headings Using the pictures
Using the text

6. Have you tried any of these activities? If so, what happened? If not, how would you score each activity from 0 (= I don't like it at all) to 5 (= I love it and will use it as soon as possible)?"



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Live debate

The live forums, which have been run since the site's inception have provided lively exchanges. The following extract is from the live forum on pronunciation (March 6, 2002) in which Gerald Kelly, author of a book on pronunciation, is the main guest speaker, Jaio and Susie are two of the teachers 'attending' the session and Georgina is the moderator:

Jaio What are the basic first steps you need to take with learners?

Gerald Kelly I always try to see how much a class knows when I start teaching them. Say, for example, you take on a new intermediate class who've had lots of different teachers up to that point. Some will know of the phonemes, for example, others might not know any of them.

Susie Do you always start teaching pronunciation from the beginning of a course?

Gerald Kelly Usually, yes, though it depends on the class.

Georgina So how would you alter and to what sort of groups?

Gerald Kelly I try to find a starting point through whatever I am teaching in class. With some advanced groups (I teach students for IELTS preparation), I find that it might not be a priority."

In this way teachers can keep in touch with a range of opinions about teaching, even if they cannot access any other means of development.

The best place

In the end, however, any material, whether 'actual' or 'virtual', is no substitute for what we can do for ourselves. Any teacher who watches and listens to his or her students understand more and more about what works in classrooms and what does not. Action research is the term used to describe a process where teachers seek answers to questions or solutions to problems by trying things out in class and assessing how well the trial succeeded**. Virtual solutions, such as ELT Forum, can never aspire to match this kind of evidence-gathering. Perhaps, however, by offering topics (and readings and exercises around those topics) together with opportunities for live discussion, they can give teachers ideas about where to start or how to proceed.

Teachers as learners

So there it is. When we continue to develop, listening to our students, learning from our colleagues, attending conferences and visiting appropriate websites, we continue to grow, and there seems to be some point to it all. When we are learners too, it seems that we become better teachers.

Kelly, G *How to Teach Pronunciation* Pearson Education 2002
Ur, P *A Course in Language Teaching* CUP 1996

* See, for example, the English Language Teachers Contacts Scheme run by the British Council at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/english/eltecs/index.htm>, the TESL-L discussion group (<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/~tesl-l/>), the messageboard for teachers at Dave's ESL café (<http://eslcafe.com/discussion/dz1/>) or look at the links page of the *Internet TESOL Journal* at <http://iteslj.org/links/TESL/Discussion/>.

** See, for example, Wallace, M *Action Research for Language Teachers* CUP 1997.

Jeremy Harmer has written *How to Teach English* and *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, both for Longman. He is the general editor of the Longman methodology list. He currently teaches at Anglia Polytechnic University, UK and he is author of the new *Just* series, published by Marshall Cavendish.