**Synchronous Telecommunications**

# Introduction

For our telecommunication class part 1 we had to have an online chat with our group of four. My group was comprised of Karena, an ESL teacher who is currently working as a park ranger/instructor in California, Ashley, a high school math teacher, Valorie, an elementary school teacher, and myself, a high and middle school German teacher. I was the assigned group leader and as such in charge of setting up the online meet and functioning as moderator to ensure we stayed on task and kept the conversation flowing. We were to read three articles on reflective practice (see references), all of which referred to Donald Schön who first invented the term and the theory. The goal of the chat was to have our responses reflect the readings, and to respond both to the questions as well as to other participants comments. We were also to weave other participants’ postings into our own. We had a choice of chat room from an approved list. I suggested “tapped-in”, first because it automatically e-mails a transcript to the attendants, and second because a tutorial was in our weekly package which took the guess work out of the game. I prepared for the chat by reading the articles, taking notes and typing up a list of interesting topics, knowing that in the heat of the conversation it might be easier to stay focused that way. I also contacted the other three participants and suggested a time for a meet, which was accepted.

Next, I logged onto tapped-in to register. I found out that I needed approval by the professor, a fact that I had not been aware of. The helpdesk pointed out that I could bypass approval by holding the chat in my virtual office which I instantly proceeded to create. Considering the challenge of working in an unknown environment with one out-of-state participant in a different time zone, I e-mailed all participants other ways to contact me, including messenger, home and cell phone. In retrospect I believe that had I not done that we would not have been able to hold our chat that night.

Considering our challenges of different time zones, emetic canines, teething infants, an incubus of viral plague and approaching deadlines, we made a mutual ad hoc decision to proceed and turn our trial run into the real chat.

# The Chat

After saying our welcomes Karena mentioned that she was intrigued by the article about reflective practitioners. Ashley and I agreed while Valorie considered Schön to be an author who is hard to follow. I asked if anyone had experience with peer or supervisor reflection. Karena responded that on-action reflection was used on her job a lot. Ashley mentioned that her school requires reflection for self evaluations. Valorie mentioned that her first experience with reflective writing occurred during her college years. I shared my experience of reflecting with my supervisor on ways to handle difficult students and on sharing instructional techniques.

“BeaP: Yes, we will have some crossing of the minds here.  I reflected with my supervisor and  explored ways how to reach children.  We discovered that between the two of us we reached most.  We have both expanded out repertoire of techniques.”

We all agreed that on-action reflection whether done formally or informally was a good way to broaden one’s horizon.

Next, I put a question to the group:

BeaP: Do you think that reflection would help your students?  I am thinking of moving warm-ups to a reflection log.
Karena liked that idea.

The group trailed back to discussing teacher conversations about students and how discussing students’ home lives, performance or behavior in other classes can convey a better picture and understanding of the students, although. Valorie added that in her school students are discussed without name mentioning, more as case studies. I contributed that our Foreign Language Department discusses individual students who have swapped one language for another. It is interesting to see some of the students perform better with another teacher just because of a different teaching style, while some display the same unproductive behavior in both classes. Karena wondered whether on-action reflection would help her with her daily different student population and shared that many of these students came from troubled homes as her supervisor told her. I agreed that it was important to know when there is trouble at home. Karena regretted only having the students for one day.

I tried to move the conversation to double-loop learning but my question got lost in the dialogue as there were no responses. The conversation continued a bit along the lines of troubled kids which was not our subject. Determined to get back on track but having learned from asking questions that went unanswered, I gave an example of in-action reflection, a subject be had not breached yet.

“BeaP: On reflection in-action: I was subbing as an inclusion teacher in Algebra II and, normally being a German teacher, was just half an hour ahead of the students as far as understanding the material goes.  I could see the lost look on many students faces when the teacher explained negative and fractional exponents.  I knew exactly where they were lost and why because 30 minutes earlier when I skimmed the paper I had felt the same, but overcame the problem by mentally color-coding the problem.  I asked the teacher if I could explain because she was becoming frustrated.  Using the SMART Board I color–coded the problem and it became instantly clear to everyone which exponent ended up where and why.”

The other group members commented and the conversation flew easily to the subject of Schön’s quote: “The thing I find hardest … to do is to teach a student what I know how to do best.” Ashley, our math teacher really connected at this point. A good exchange about how to get a message across ensued, from explaining with different methods, having students explain either to each other or back to the teacher and other variables. I commented that teaching one subject too often or too long might take the edge of being able to effectively teach the subject. Valorie agreed and mentioned that she likes elementary school because she has a variety of subjects. Karena also seemed to like some variety, while Ashley enjoyed teaching the same class over and over saying that she could better fine tune her teaching skills by repeating her work. I disagreed saying that the article and my experience have taught me that we teach better when the subject is fresh. (I can see her point, though. she is at the beginning of her career and probably does not have the routine of someone who has been teaching the same class four blocks every day for thirty years).

Karena introduced the “giving kids a reason” concept. We all agreed that it was a good idea to give students the benefit of the doubt. I added that as teachers we need to especially consider cultural differences when it comes to interpreting students’ actions.

The conversation then moved on to students complaining about too much homework and how lazy students are which lead to the question of schools in Germany. Citing the possibility that I might go off on a tangent on the subject I tried to redirect the conversation to the articles by asking for comments on another quote:

BeaP: Have another quote: : “The professionalization of everything?  The professionalization of every one.”
 Since no comments were forthcoming I suggested trade schools and vocational schools as an alternative to college as a way to make young people feel a sense of accomplishment even without a college education. This lead to a discussion of the pros and cons of college education as a goal for every student, and the ups and downs – and the “when” – of entering a track in school that will definitely not lead to a college education but rather a trade school. Ashley realized the impact of international competition as I explained the German high school which is really more like governor’s school plus an associate degree with lots of classes for many years including multiple foreign languages; as opposed to the non-academic track which resembles the curriculum of an American high school. The conversation then shifted to discussing motivation (or lack thereof) among students.

I brought up the last point:

BeaP: I have one more subject but if you are tiredit's ok
KarenaJ: I can stay on
BeaP "There is also, in this view of school knowledge, the notion that the more general and the more theoretical the knowledge, the higher it is".
BeaP: I am sooo guilty of that
BeaP: had to pipe down my language for the local kids
KarenaJ: I liked that too, it kind of explains how some teachers react to their students.

"There is also, in this view of school knowledge, the notion that the more general and the more theoretical the knowledge, the higher it is". I admitted immediately that I am very guilty of that and have alienated my first class in my first year here (although let it be said in my defense that being a foreigner, higher level conversation is actually easier because of its international truism than everyday jargon). Karena made the poignant remark of “sage in the stage” which I had never heard before and the other participants started to reminisce about their experience in college and high school. I cited an incident where I insisted that the students’ educational level had to be at a certain level when it was not and how difficult it is to assess a new situation based on other standards. We then decided that all interesting parts of the three articles had been discussed. We signed off.

# Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that while synchronous telecommunication certainly has its place I find the asynchronous method much more effective. The synchronous method requires participants to think on the spot, be concise and while thinking and writing also pay attention to what others are writing. This can be very frustrating. I noticed that by the time I had typed up a perfect comment the conversation had moved on to another subject. In other cases my comments as they appeared on the screen seemed to respond to the previous comment, but I was actually responding to someone else five comments ago a fact that sometimes made my remarks sound rather out of place – which they were. In another case the opposite happened. I asked if everyone was ready to move on, waited thirty seconds or so with no one answering. As a result, I posted another question. As soon as my question showed, three other comments appeared, all of them relating to the previous subject. Not seeing what others are doing can sometimes lead to the wrong conclusion. Another observation was that apparently no other fellow student seemed to have researched the other classmates before entering the conversation. Subsequently, we spent a lot of time explaining what it was we were doing. I had looked at the stats cards and the discussion board before entering the chat so this would not happen. I assumed other students would be more interested in their group.

In a classroom setting this type of communication would be hard to imagine since all students might as well just talk to each other rather than sit in a circle with laptops. At this point in time computer use has not penetrated far enough into the population that this could be a homework assignment. Just the fact that three or four students would need to coordinate their reading, log-on techniques and evening time with each other and their families is well out reach of their capabilities. It was hard to do for us adults.

However, I do see a way to use the technique in two other settings. One setting for German would be an online class which, as rumor has it, might be the future for many foreign languages. If I were to teach a class with students from three different high schools then synchronous telecommunication would definitely be a part of the program.

Another setting, maybe in combination with the virtual class or in a regular class with warm bodies, would be a jigsaw-type exercise with three or four groups who each have a certain piece of information. Then the students regroup with one student each from the previous group. Together they need to piece together information to create a set document containing specific info. Some would be overlapping. Students would really have to listen to each other and the person who had the information would have to explain to the others until everyone had all the information. Students are more likely to listen to one another than to a teacher. Therefore synchronous telecommunication would be a great way to accomplish that. I can visualize these students actually having different teachers (English, history, geography, music, government, or art) and true cross-teaching could occur with students sitting with their laptops in different classrooms (or even in different schools). A variant of this would be to have a German school and an American school work together to clarify differences in say, the school system or government structure of the two countries. One problem that may occur of course could be that students do have the information but plainly run out of language. Such a project would require extremely careful scaffolding by the teachers.

As far as the subject of our synchronous chat is concerned, I believe that our chat is comparable to the in-action reflection, as it requires on-your-feet thinking that may be imperfect but definitely is a skill that teachers must have while the asynchronous discussion board is the on-action reflection, as it allows participants to step back and take their time to consider more options and take more care in how to phrase their posts and their responses. As the article said, it is not always necessary to use high level language to give a good answer. Today’s students may have a shorter attention span than students even five years ago. Without catering to their constant need of “here and now” on a regular basis a teacher should be open to the possibility that a synchronous chat, if set up with care, just may produce the results everyone has been hoping for.