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Synchronous computer-mediated communication as a peer observation tool

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Peer observation plays a key developmental role in initial teacher education courses. However, potential benefits can be limited due to time constraints and the rigidity of individual observation tasks. This article examines the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) as a peer observation tool on a CELTA course. We analyse SCMC feeds and participant interviews to find out how CELTA trainees and tutors use SCMC during observations and how participants perceive SCMC as an observation tool. SCMC enabled trainees to identify and solve problems, share ideas and opinions, give constructive feedback, and reflect on their own and their peers' teaching. Tutor questions were an important resource in prompting these actions. SCMC helped build rapport and democratise feedback as trainees initiated discussions, chose topics, and interacted with each other and the tutor. Participants found SCMC engaging and useful. Results suggest that SCMC enhanced collaboration, dialogue and reflection during peer observation.

Introduction

This article examines the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC) as a peer observation tool on a CELTA course. Courses such as CELTA and the Trinity Certificate include six hours of teaching practice during which trainees observe each other's lessons. The benefits of peer observation include helping trainees become more aware of classroom issues and how to resolve them, narrowing the gap between trainees' imagined view of teaching and what actually happens in the classroom, and triggering reflection about teaching (Richards and Farrell 2005). These benefits, however, can be limited by the format adopted. Trainees on initial certificate courses are often required to complete written peer observation forms and while these artefacts can provide a useful stimulus for reflection, their generic nature often fails to take into account variations between observers or the unique aspects of the lesson being observed. Trainees are often required to fill in the same form each time they observe, which runs the risk of eliciting mechanical, inauthentic reflection and superficial engagement (Hobbs 2007; Mann and Walsh 2013). In addition, the pressure to complete the form may lead trainees to view the observation as an institutional chore or even to resort to 'faking it' (Hobbs 2007). Trainees rarely have the opportunity to share their observation reflections and questions because of time constraints which means that peer observation notes are often ignored or forgotten. Akbari (2007) views individual inner reflection as problematic, claiming that it can be limited to past events and 'rediscovering what is already known' (p.198). Akbari (ibid.) and Gelfuso and Dennis (2014) also point out that trainees are not always able to identify, describe, analyse and solve classroom problems without help. Brandt

(2008) and Mann and Walsh (2013) recommend rebalancing reflection away from an individual format in favour of more collaborative and cooperative approaches. In line with this recommendation, this article proposes peer/tutor SCMC as an alternative to individual written peer observation tasks. We argue that because SCMC allows tutors to guide, help and prompt trainees, and because SCMC gives trainees the opportunity to engage in dialogue with their peers and tutor while observing a lesson, SCMC enhances peer observation and supports the development of reflective practice.

The literature on technology and teacher education tends to focus on teachers developing the skills and knowledge to incorporate technology into their teaching (e.g. Kessler and Hubbard 2017) but discussion also includes technology facilitated collaborative professional development such as the access to digital content and resources (Lightfoot, 2019) and the use of digital platforms or tools to facilitate interaction and collaboration between teachers (Kiddle and Prince 2019). Teacher learning groups, whether formal or informal, open or closed, local or remote, are made possible by synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communication. There is very little research, however, about the use of SCMC in peer observation. A lone study by Kassner and Cassada (2017) involved in-service teachers observing videos of their peers whilst using online chat rooms. The study reported SCMC to have multiple benefits including space to collaborate and exchange ideas, increased engagement and participation, supporting the construction of knowledge, and promoting student voice and ownership. This article focuses on the use of SCMC for peer observation in a pre-service CELTA context. It aims to answer the following research questions:

- 1 How do CELTA trainees and tutors use SCMC during peer observation?
- 2 How do CELTA trainees and tutors perceive the use of SCMC for peer observation?

Methodology

Setting and participants

This study took place on a part-time CELTA course which ran for 16 weeks in a UK university. Two tutors taught on the course: Tutor A was a course tutor and first researcher/author and Tutor B was the main course tutor. The second researcher/author was not involved in the course. There were eight trainees on the course, ranging in age from 22 to 48, four with previous (but limited) teaching experience and four without. Five were from the UK and the other three from Turkey, Greece and China.

Data collection

Three sources of data were collected for this study: online chat feeds generated from SCMC between a group of trainees and one tutor during a live observation, two audio-recorded focus group interviews with trainees (one with each tutor group), and interviews with the two tutors. The SCMC data collection took place in the second half of the course after trainees changed to:

- teaching a different level class
- a new tutor

- using the chat tool for peer observations, having done written observation tasks in the first half of the course.

The SCMC software (Flock) generated chat feeds stamped with a date and time. These chat feeds were made available to the observed teacher after the live observation.

All interviews took place at the end of the course and were semi-structured in format, which involved using an interview guide with questions and prompts but allowed for flexibility and for other issues not covered in the prompts to be raised and elaborated on.

Data analysis

Analysis of the chat feeds was exploratory and grounded in the data. Following a process described by Holliday (2015) both researchers conducted initial open coding whereby categories (e.g. eliciting, explaining, joking) were identified and labelled. Coding was compared and categories which were common across both researchers were chosen for the next stage of analysis.

Qualitative data analysis software was then used to re-code and format the data. This helped give a clearer idea of the frequency of categories and made the data more retrievable and comparable. We then returned to paper for further analysis of interaction. We used highlighters to mark (1) tutor to trainee and trainee to trainee interactions patterns; (2) question-led interactions and prompts; (3) prompted and unprompted comments. Interview recordings were transcribed and coded to identify main themes within and across both interviews.

Ethical considerations

Informed participant consent was gained, including written consent for recorded data to be used in publications and conference presentations. Participants' anonymity was ensured by replacing names with letters (TA-TH, Tutor A/B). The research institution is not named and the time of data collection is not revealed. The study was subject to a rigorous UK university ethical approval process.

Results

What did observers chat about?

When starting to use SCMC, trainee comments were mainly limited to describing teaching skills such as eliciting, checking understanding, error correction, monitoring, and conducting feedback (for example 'Elicited the correct forms. Clear and simple language, good TTT'; 'TF is monitoring and doing individual feedback nicely'; 'The FB was quick and efficient') and classroom management procedures such as giving instructions, grouping, pace, and timing (for example 'Instructions not very clear'; 'Pace is dropping here'). This is unsurprising as teaching skills and classroom management form a central part of the CELTA criteria for assessment of teaching practice and are often presented as 'non-negotiable techniques' (Hobbs 2007: 4). Although these descriptive comments included

evaluation (usually positive but occasionally negative), this was mostly superficial involving general adjectives such as 'nice', 'quick', 'efficient', 'not very clear'.

As the course progressed and trainees became more experienced, they began, with guidance from tutors, to explain their evaluations e.g.

nice lesson really improved on making it more student centred and reducing TTT
(TG, TP7)

I really like the pace of this lesson TG - enough time for things, and a good number of activities. Learners have been engaged throughout. (TE, TP8)

Trainees also started to identify problems, suggest solutions, and justify/explain their comments e.g.

Instructions needed to be a little louder for the four questions bit or maybe some ICQs just to check. (TB, TP7)

Not sure I understand what the activity is here. Modelling would help. (TC, TP8)

As the course progressed these types of comments increased in frequency, depth and precision, evidencing higher levels of reflection. Trainees also widened their focus beyond teaching skills and classroom management to include discussion of teaching approaches, learners' needs and responses, as well as making links to input. Thus, in terms of content, participants initially used SCMC to describe basic teaching skills but moved, over time, to more reflective talk such and problem solving.

In general, trainees initiated more dialogues than tutors, and trainees often interacted with each other in stretches of dialogue without the tutor. This contrasts with Copland's (2012) findings that in face to face post observation group CELTA feedback, interaction between trainees and multi-party discussions were rare as trainees talked directly to the trainer while the other trainees listened, and trainers typically controlled turns, self-selecting, interrupting, and nominating trainees to speak. SCMC seems to provide an opportunity for a more democratised dynamic as the tutor has less control over who says what and when.

However, tutor questions emerged as playing an important role in developing dialogue, in particular questions that asked for further explanation and clarification e.g.

Extract 1 (TP8)

TA Better to set peer check

Tutor A Why is this important?

TC Make sure they got it right

Tutor A 

TA Otherwise students might not feel confident about the answers, and only the strong students answer the question

Tutor A 

or asking for suggestions or alternatives e.g.

Extract 2 (TP8)

TB Because the class is so small, it's easy to feel like you need to talk more

Tutor A So what would you do differently?

TB They could discuss as a table and then he could just check with each table and give the head nod for correct answers

Tutor A



In terms of interaction, participants used SCMC to interact in various formations (group; trainee to trainee; tutor to trainee; trainee to tutor), allowing multiple voices to be heard.

How did participants chat?

Trainees' comments were mostly positive and constructive. Trainees were mindful of the public nature of the chat and showed awareness of creating a permanent written record that the observed teacher would read:

You have to be more sensitive to other people's feelings because, you know, obviously they're going to read it. (TD, focus group)

However, trainees were also prepared to make negative or critical comments, especially as the teaching practice progressed. Trainees saw critical comments as a positive feature of SCMC:

I really think we felt more comfortable giving feedback to each other, like negative feedback. Like, I think you could do this better because everyone is doing it and it's happening every time, so you get comfortable with it. Yeah. there was a trust. (TC, Focus group)

Humour was also present in the chat, especially in group B, evidencing trainees enjoying the chat:

Extract 3 (TP8)

TH Yo! Grammar queen, are you there?

TF Physically yes

TH: Is 'best' the adjective and better than the comparative?

TF: the best superlative 😊

TF: very good method of feedback

TH: He's really focusing on feedback tonight 😊

TE: 👍

TF: Yes, he has been practising a few feedback techniques.

TH: Good monitoring. Not as creepy as normal (kidding)

TF: he mastered it 😊

TH: Master Creep. Creep. Creepy. Creepier. Creepiest.

TE: 😂😂😂

As well as building rapport, humour softened criticism and made the chat more memorable, thereby supporting learning:

Definitely made you more positive about the criticism. (TF, focus group)

You remember it as well. You know what was said afterwards, so it's adding dimension to it. It reinforces learning if you remember it. I am more likely to remember the feedback because you remember the humour as well, and you remember what was said during feedback. (TG, focus group)

As can be seen, emojis also featured throughout the chat and were used for a variety of purposes.

Our first research question asked how CELTA trainees and tutors use SCMC during peer observation. Analysis shows that SCMC was used to describe, praise, criticise, reflect, give constructive feedback, problem solve, and interact.

How did participants feel about SCMC?

Trainees

Overall, trainees were positive about the use of SCMC and identified as beneficial the opportunity to interact with each other and the tutors:

It was good having that dialogue with people so you could then bounce ideas off each other and I think it produced more feedback than maybe how we'd approached feedback previously. It was good to sort of see what other people were thinking about the session, and then it enabled our tutor to ask us questions about it. (TE, focus group)

The SCMC feed helped trainees to make connections to their own teaching, leading to changes in their own practice:

I think it helps in a way that you can see what other people are writing as well cos I think that was missing in the pen and paper. You think maybe I should do it now because if that's something everyone's picked up on including myself, it's important. (TG, focus group)

This applied not just to reading their own feedback, but also that of their peers:

When you saw Trainee A's lesson, you saw the feedback she was getting on say ICQs it made you think. If everyone's saying, you're giving her a lot of good feedback from that, you should incorporate into your own lesson. It's obviously a really good thing and then it's drilled home. And it's obvious, if you see it's working and you identify why it's working, so you know it's easier to incorporate. And if you know that you need to improve something, and if you see it modelled well, then you think 'I'll do that'. (TD, focus group)

Trainees noted that SCMC had a positive impact on their relationships with each other:

Lots of encouragement, yeah, definitely. Lots of very, very constructive feedback, I would say. So, they were all I think, yeah, we value our opinions. We value our suggestions within the group. We've got that strong relationship. (TC, focus group)

As a result, they felt they were able to offer constructive criticisms and make suggestions about how to change and improve teaching. Trainees recognised the value of tutors' prompts and questions in making them think more deeply about what they were observing and to consider alternative foci and actions:

[Tutor A] joined our discussion and he'd push us ... [Tutor A] asked some questions about 'what do you think about?' 'is it right or wrong?' So in my mind makes us think more deeply about what is going on. (TA, focus group)

If the question is more open-ended, like, you know, you really have to provide an answer, and that's how [Tutor A] did it. So I think it was pretty good as a prompt. [Tutor A] got you to think about what you were observing. (TC, focus group)

We were observing, and then [Tutor B] said, or asked 'what would you do?', 'What alternative ways?', 'What else you could do?'. That sort of thing. It did, it did make me think. (TF, focus group)

However, some trainees felt that they were sometimes pushed to give a specific answer or to be critical of something that perhaps they did not find problematic:

I remember there were a couple of times when you [TB] were like 'no [Tutor A], I think everything is fine'. And I am like, that's good, because if you think that everything is fine, it is a valid opinion and you should say it. (TC, focus group)

This suggests that a more directive tutor style can perhaps limit opportunities for trainees to express themselves more freely. However, TC notes also that disagreement with the tutor is a 'valid' response, suggesting that the SCMC can help trainees feel more comfortable expressing their opinions and create a more democratic environment.

Trainees also valued the written SCMC feed as a tool to aid memory, gain a different perspective, and prompt post lesson reflection:

I'd definitely say [the SCMC feeds] influenced my self-reflection. I think when you're up there as well, you kind of are not aware so much. So if you just read it, you think probably – 'ah I didn't do that' and 'I knew that anyway', but it kind of like prompted you. Because you know, you forget. (TG, focus group)

It was always nice to look back at the feedback when it's already written down so you've got this continuous log of what's happening during your lesson and you don't get that other than your assessor's feedback so you've got it from everyone else so if you could scroll back up you could see what everyone else was saying. (TD, focus group)

TE also describes how there was a qualitative difference between immediate and delayed reading of the feedback:

I did look at it at the weekend and you see it in a different light. I think when I come out of some teaching practices I was thinking 'oh I should've done this this and this'. And then you've read the feed it's like 'Okay, yeah didn't realise that' but then that's still a bit of the heat of the moment, if you like. So, I'm still, my head's not quite back. So then when you look at it again at home, you see more depth to the feedback, I think (TE, focus group)

Other trainees also noted this difference.

Although the response to SCMC was mostly positive, some participants raised negative aspects. One trainee preferred using a private written observation form, feeling it allowed her to be more honest and selective. Two trainees in one group believed that the post lesson feedback discussions were less rich because the tutor did not explore issues that had been discussed in the SCMC as much as they would have liked (although as the move to SCMC occurred with a change of tutor, this could also have been a result of tutor style and/or stage of the course). The fast-moving nature of the SCMC feed meant that trainees sometimes missed the opportunity to comment or add to a discussion:

When I was thinking about making a comment on a certain thing, at that moment, while I was thinking how to phrase it somebody, my peer, moved into something else. Then I was sort of preparing for commenting for the other thing, so the previous one just disappeared or somebody else commented. So I just put a like on it. But, yeah, there were a couple of times I missed the moment, so I had to move on to the next thing. (TF, focus group)

One trainee noted that as a Chinese speaker, she was not used to typing in English and this made it more difficult for her to interact immediately. There were also times when trainees were distracted by their forthcoming lessons and did not participate fully in the chat:

It was very difficult to comment on my peers' teaching while my turn was approaching. You get nervous before your time and I found it very difficult to concentrate and observe and write comments. And once my turn was over, you need some time to calm down. (TF, focus group)

Tutors

Both tutors were positive about the use of SCMC. They valued the interaction between trainees, a feature not possible with written observation tasks. Tutors also noticed trainees' ability to make useful and constructive comments:

Generally the comments were insightful and well-formed and really kind of critical in a good way, but supportive (Tutor B, interview)

It is worth noting, however, that participating in the SCMC added to tutors' workload. During teaching practice, tutors were observing, completing a running commentary, and participating in the SCMC chat. Both felt that they participated less towards the third lesson of each teaching practice as they tried to complete the paperwork for all three of the lessons:

I found that the third person I didn't comment on as much, as I was like I have to get all of this done by the time I finish, so I'd be going back to make sure everything was done. So there weren't as many comments for the third teacher, which is bad because then it looks as though the first two were getting more attention. (Tutor B, interview)

However, Tutor B also felt that as the trainees became familiar with the software and progressed on the course, they didn't need her to participate in the chat:

I could see their comments, they were all really good and really focused so there wasn't a huge need for me to be involved. (Tutor B, Interview)

Interestingly, trainees also suggested having SCMC chats without a tutor towards the end of the course to develop independence and add variety.

The SCMC feeds also provided a readily accessible source of data for tutors to assess and reflect on their own chat contributions and feedback styles. Both tutors were able to make changes over the period of the study, for example changing the types of questions they asked or reducing their comments to allow trainees more space to respond.

Conclusion

An obvious limitation of this study is the sample size. With only eight trainees and two trainers it is only possible to make claims that 'in a particular location at a particular time, certain things *seem* to be the case.' (Holliday 2015: 52-3, original emphasis). In our study, as trainees interacted with peers and tutors, they noticed, identified and solved problems, shared ideas and opinions, gave constructive feedback, and reflected on their own and their peers' teaching. Reflection and learning also occurred when trainees later read the feeds from their observation and there was some evidence of a positive impact on teaching. SCMC helped build rapport and led to more democratised feedback - trainees often initiated discussions, chose topics and interacted with each other as well as with the tutor.

On the whole, trainees and trainers found SCMC engaging and useful. However, areas of concern and challenge included the potentially limiting effect of SMCS on subsequent post observation feedback conferences, difficulties some participants had in reading, processing and typing responses during fast moving chat, especially L2 speakers, the lack of engagement from those just about to teach, and the fact that the SCMC medium did not suit everyone. Although tutors were also positive, they raised concerns over time management and the influence of SCMC on self-reflections.

Recommendations to alleviate these issues and to improve the use of SCMC include

setting clear expectations and modelling by the tutors, using it from beginning of the course and, initially, during observation of tutors or videos of experienced practitioners. Tasks should be kept simple and referred to regularly as they appear at the beginning of the chat feeds. Trainees can also share plans and materials on SCMC and these can be used as points of reference and discussion. As the course progresses, trainees can take the lead, reducing tutor participation and even have sessions without the tutor. Tutors can use a mix of open and closed questions to facilitate and focus discussion. SCMC feeds can also be used as the running commentary, making the process more manageable for tutors. Tutors should also read the feeds and consider the impact of their style and interactions on the chat.

Despite drawbacks, in this location, at this time, and with these participants, SCMC seems to have enabled the collaborative, cooperative, democratic, and trainee-centred feedback environment advocated by Brandt (2008) in which interaction is encouraged and trainees' voices are given as much weight and value as tutors'. Our findings add support to Kassner and Cassada (2017) who found that online communication can enhance collaborative reflection. The findings also add to the calls for collaborative reflection to play a more central role in initial teacher training (Mann and Walsh 2013) and for the use of different modes to aid and support trainees with the development of reflective skills (Greiman & Covington 2007). Given these benefits, SCMC may be a practical idea for pre-service teacher trainers interested in enhancing the potential affordances of peer observation. However, despite SCMC becoming more common in teacher education, research is still scarce. Potentially useful avenues of further study include investigations into the dialogic affordances of SCMC, participant dynamics, patterns of interaction, the role of tutor style and questions, the link between SCMC and improvements in teaching practice and reflective skills, and the use of chat feeds to aid trainer reflection and development.

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