An ethnographic perspective on teachers-as-designers in Video Conference pedagogy:
a matter of craft, ethics and identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts an ethnographic perspective to explore teachers-as-designers in the use of Video Conferencing technology for the teaching of English as an additional (foreign) language. The research explores the practices of teachers based in England synchronously teaching learners in South America. These colleagues are 'remote teachers' working in England but teaching alongside teachers and pupils in Brazil and Uruguay. The research contributes to debates in the field by framing teachers 'as designers' as issues of identity and ethics as much as issues of the pragmatics of planning and the philosophy of pedagogy. With fieldwork lasting for a six-month period, the mixed-methods ethnography collated data from classroom observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The position taken is that 'designing' technology-enhanced pedagogy is best understood as enacted and embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) within broader teacher practice as a whole. The significance of this is that in exploring the design decisions of teachers this research creates an ethnographically driven space which addresses issues of 'craft', practice, ethics and identity as well as the professional development and support needed for new teachers-as-designers. In adopting a position of 'teacher-as-designer', in terms of the skilful and informed preparation of learning technology, this research re-frames 'design' as a matter of teachers as craft-practitioners. In this reframing, the research adopts the conceptual lens of Sennett (2008) and explores the notion of the pleasure and ethics inherent in craft/design practice. Through this lens, design work is both craft-work and identity-work. This positions teachers-as-designers as agents of global educational change – offering through their 'craft' practices a potential solution to problems of global teacher shortage.

KEYWORDS

Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL)

Craft

Design

Ethics

Agents of change

INTRODUCTION

IThis research explores the use of Video Conferencing (VC) technology in educational settings for the teaching of English as an additional (foreign) language. As such, it contributes to debates around global teaching, effective learning aided through technological vehicles and explores issues of teacher practice and teacher identity. To do this, it locates 'remote teaching' (the synchronous teaching in one global location to pupils in another, adopting VC technology) as a matter of ***teachers-as-designers*** (see Kirschner, 2015; Kali et al., 2015; Persico et al., 2018). However, unlike previous literature on educational technology design (Koehler & Mishra, 2005; Van Merrienboer & Kirschner, 2012; Cviko et al., 2014; Kali et al., 2015), the 'design' of technology-enhanced learning herein is further understood as a matter of '*craft*' (Sennett, 2008).

The research, undertaken over a six-month period, developed a mixed-methods ethnography comprising classroom observation at the east London site of the remote teaching, unstructured interviews with the London-based remote teachers and occasional focus groups with the same teachers, also unstructured. These practices also raise questions around the identity practices of teachers and how they see themselves and their craft (Sennett, 2008). In this way, matters of technology-enhanced learning as 'design' practice and choices can be understood through the exploration of enacted and embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) broader teacher practice as a whole. The schools themselves that receive the English language teaching (in Brazil and Uruguay) are located in socially and educationally disadvantaged areas, and as such the research provides a means to explore the ways in which these VC-based design and craft practices might reach these communities.

CONTEXT

To explore an ethnographic account of teachers-as-designers, data capture was based on-site at the VC provider, effectively a social enterprise, teaching English language 'in-real-time' yet remotely from east London to other parts of the world. This is the 'site' of the ethnographic practice. The sample for the mixed-methods ethnography comprised six teachers of the 'remote' VC method and lasted for over 15 hours of data capture within the London site. Yet this 'single site' is a complex and hybrid space. It is polycontextual and polytemporal – being both 'located' in east London, England, yet connected at the same time to another space in either Brazil or Uruguay, and as such 'located' in both these other sites at the very same time. The teachers in London operate VC equipment to teach classes of children and young adults in other parts of the world (Brazil and Uruguay). These classes take place through the collaboration of the remote teacher of English in London (who is on occasion also a speaker of the host language) and their counterpart inside the physical classroom with the children elsewhere. To explain the practice, in the words of the remote teachers,

> *'So, basically it's like I am a remote teacher from London to South American countries...I am in front of a camera, I teach English to primary school around all the Uruguay country... we have cameras, we can share and show videos and PowerPoint and its like virtual teaching. I have been doing it for a year and I really like it and think it is working. It's like a normal class, but virtual. You can move the camera and you can do groups and activities and individual activities as well.'* (Remote teacher)

The pedagogic practices of the VC teaching, the presence of the 'remote teacher', and the pedagogic 'design' of the use of the technology involved, offer a bridge 'of betweenness' of these two (g)local sites of practice (Bhabha, 1994). This is a unique location, and this VC practice raises questions about the 'craft' (Sennett, 2008) of the role and design of technology in education not fully explored in current literature (Dohn, 2018; Persico et al., 2018; Bondet al., 2019). It also explores the polycontextual presence of the teacher who is both 'remote' and at a distance, yet at the same time present in real-time. In doing so, it also raises questions around methods and techniques of teaching (practice) as well as the presence of the teacher and their relationships with others. In this way the VC practices and their design by the teachers involved the construction of distinctive cybercultures (Guimarães, 2005) which challenge notions of the presence of self in teaching (in the 'classroom') and the wider production of the cultural text of teachers (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007).

The research is threefold: Firstly, it explores the techniques adopted by teachers (both novice and experienced) in their delivery; the methods they use and the tools and techniques they develop. Secondly, it explores how these teachers see the act of teaching, and how they make sense of their own teacher-identity. Finally, the research explores, from the teachers' perspective, how the teachers from London work collaboratively with other colleagues (across great geographical distances) to ensure effective learning and teaching. This is through both the adoption of the VC technology but also through regular communication over email and through the social medium of the *WhatsApp* phone application. In this way, by looking at practice and the interpretation of practice held in the first-order by participants themselves, the research explores the 'design' decisions made, locating these within a discussion of Sennett's (2008) idea of an ethical craft practice. Emerging themes from this six-month data capture are: teacher identity; the performance of the teacher self; the 'location' of global presence; collaboration in design; the nature of 'remote' relationships; the craft of technological manipulation.

DESIGN AND CRAFT

Literature on teachers-as-designers, often situated within broader debates on technology-enhanced learning, notes that

> *'Today, teachers design, re-design, and customize not only analogue, but also technology enhanced learning materials and activities. Here, the term, 'design' is used broadly, to include the process of mapping and/or actually developing specific resources for teaching or learning.'* (Kali et al., 2015: 173).

Within this broad perspective, teachers are designers but, given the above, have always been so. The notion of teachers-as-designers has led to a specialist body of literature exploring this theme (Persico et al., 2018). While the claims of this wide body of knowledge are various, 'design' as understood in this perspective explores the various ways in which teachers practise design through the planning and preparation of learning materials. The adoption of learning technologies for technology-enhanced learning is seen to bring to the fore the need to re-explore 'design' practices and how teachers learn from, own and contribute knowledge to these (Dohn, 2018; Persico et al., 2018). In this way, teachers do not solely design objects used for learning, but contribute to a wider 'design' of our knowledge of pedagogic design (see Cviko et al., 2014). Thus, the 'design' is twofold: teachers design teaching and learning opportunities (using technology) and design knowledge around this. This literature on design explores teachers-as-designers in a variety of ways: as utilising a complex skill (Van Merrienboer and Kirschner, 2012); as evidence of multi-skilled working (Kali et al., 2011); and as a rich potential for teachers' own development of their ongoing professional learning (Koehler & Mishra, 2005). Other literature explores the need for 'integration' of technology pedagogic competence within usual practice for design practices to become embedded over time (van den Dool & Kirschner, 2003). This literature does not, however, recognise the potential relationships between design practices and craft practices.

CRAFT-WORK

The argument here is that in thinking about how teachers design and redesign learning tools within a technology-enhanced learning-rich paradigm (in the case of this research, through VC practices), the practical, ethical and identity-work choices teachers make through their 'craft' become apparent. In this way, VC practices can be understood as craft-work in a Sennettian sense of the term. In exploring teaching as a craft practice, some older literature on craft knowledge (see Leinhardt, 1990; Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006) stands in direct contrast, in the English context, to the neo-liberal use of the term (Gove, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), with the latter resulting in a widespread demonisation of 'craft' as a signpost for reactionary policies in England seeking to decouple teacher education from the work of universities (Orchard & Winch, 2015).

In exploring the craft of the remote teachers in this ethnography, exploring craft as a practice dates back to differences between Plato and Aristotle's uses of the term '*techne*' in distinction to '*episteme*' (Ryle, 1949). If the idea of teachers-as-designers of technology-enhanced pedagogy draws upon notions of skilful and informed practice (Kali et al., 2015), the *techne*, then the argument here is that this broad perspective of 'deign' also needs to recognise the craft nature of this practice (Sennett, 2008). For example, the sociological writings of Sennett (2008) draw our attention to how

> *'... craftsmanship [sic] names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake... craftsmanship cuts a far wider swath than the skilled manual labour; it serves the computer programmer, the doctor, and the artist; parenting improves when it is practiced as a skilled craft, as does citizenship.' (p. 9)*

Sennett describes the sense of 'craft' as a 'skill of making things well' (p. 8). In offering this definition, he in turn explores the links between bodily practices and abstract thinking and presents the doctor, the scientist, the musician, the plumber and builder all as 'craft' practitioners. A similar point, albeit with different conclusions, is made by Kirschner (2015) when exploring the notion of teachers-as-designers. Kirschner, adopting the ideas of Frank et al. (2005), writes,

> *'A doctor needs to be able to: take a medical history (i.e., an anamnesis) of the patient; formulate a diagnosis; determine a course of action or therapy; often carry out that therapy; and finally evaluate the results of the chosen course of action to determine whether the expected results were achieved; and if not, to then enter the cycle again.'* (Kirschner, 2015: 310)

In this way, the teacher engaged with planning, preparing and enacting technology-enhanced learning (the 'designer') is like the clinical practitioner: teachers-as-designers (and then users) of technology tools are skilful manipulators of complex tools, decisions and actions. In the case of the VC remote teachers, they are skilfully manipulating in real-time a multiplicity of tools: cameras, views, visualisers, slides, objects and *realia*, videos, and all this while juggling which camera at the 'other' site to use to focus on the whole class or part of the classroom while speaking to the pupils and often having a more 'meta' conversation with the host teacher about the lesson in the classroom in South America. This requires complex design and decision-making, skilful planning and also very flexible and immediate 'real-time' manipulation of these tools. The argument here is that these are 'craft' practices as well, and as much, as they are 'design' practices. As ethnographic field notes written during a classroom observation suggest,

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> *... the interactive, vocal and dialogic based nature of the class is dependent not as such on the technology and its qualities per se, but on the teacher's craft practices in being able to manipulate the different screenviews and input feeds. The success of the pedagogy is so reliant upon the teacher's ability to manipulate the multi-inputs that the pedagogy is [emphasis original] the management of the inputs and their implementation.'* (Researcher field notes)

Through interview, remote teachers suggest that

> *'especially because the equipment is good so I can zoom the camera, I can know what they are doing, I can see when they do the homework... I can zoom it and see it in the class'. Further, 'I think the first-time it was a bit difficult, because it was always kind of new. Some people think "oh, you are doing classes with video conferencing, it's just your computer", and it's like, no, it's really different. But once you get used to, I mean, the remote and all the buttons its really easy... and we have lots of support when we start working here'* (Remote teacher).

These indicate that the careful manipulation of technology tools and the design of this teaching and learning require remote teachers to develop a skill-set which requires them to successfully manipulate a diverse set of tools and craft practices. Further field notes during observation say, *'if teaching is always multi-variate, and all teachers are multi-taskers, then these VC teachers are multi-taskers par excellence'* [emphasis original]... *the teacher's manipulation of the equipment is seamless all the time remaining contact with the pupils; always interacting and moving the lesson on with pace'* (Researcher field notes).

Plus, while in classroom observation:

> *'the camera can zoom-in, connecting to individuals and groups as needed and as directed by the VC teacher. The class and the video call time is present on the VC teacher's screen; the teacher can toggle between a smaller bottom box showing their own feedback or different camera views of the class or of individuals. At the pupil's end they can see what the VC teacher can see. They are themselves present in the screens shown at the front of their own classrooms.'* (Researcher field notes)

In suggesting that teachers adopting and adapting (i.e. 'designing') VC tools are 'craft practitioners' it is necessary, then, to accommodate a broader idea of 'craft' as related to a sense of skilful practice and ethical practice. As Frayling (2011) suggests,

> *'the commonsense definition of the word "craft" seems clear enough: an activity which involved skill in making things by hand; derived from the old English craeft – meaning strength or skill. But on closer inspection the word becomes more and more difficult to pin down.' (p. 9)*

A better usage of this term is that craft becomes 'the sense of understanding things, experiencing them, learning how to do them and getting tangible results' (p. 16). Or, for Sennett (2008), the sense of 'craft' as a 'skill of making things well' (p. 8) and 'the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (p. 9). In this view, 'the craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged' (p. 20) and as such is an ethical orientation to the practices of work. As one of the remote teachers comments,

> *'I think this is necessary, important work. It is very rewarding and pleasurable. I have a strong sense of commitment to this'* (Remote teacher).

ETHICS AND PRESENCE

The remote teachers are very conscious, ethically, of what they see as a social justice remit to this VC work: they are conscious that the technology enables them to act as agents of change – global actors supporting local environments that are culturally rich but financially poor. This ethical commitment to craft on behalf of the remote teachers is linked to the 'presence' and 'connection' they feel with the class of pupils based on the other side of the camera. In interview with the remote teachers, they note that they *'do feel that I am there with them',* and *'I have been bowled over with the excitement that is generated from within the class. So, the children absolutely love the link with another country and talking to a teacher who is totally different',* and *'the interaction with the new technology and the excitement of the children inspires them, and me'* (Remote teacher). The London-based remote teachers feel 'present' in the classes at the other end of the VC relationship. This relationship, at times, is closely felt: As they say, *'everything is compressed and it is quicker'* (Remote teacher). The technology aids this presence – through the use of movable cameras and an emphasis upon dialogue at the heart of the pedagogic practice. The remote teachers speak enthusiastically about how, despite the distance and mediated nature of the technology, they nonetheless can develop secure and meaningful relationships with learners and groups. Assessments can take place through collaboration with the host teacher, and diagnostic assessment of the prior learning of the class is systematic and informs practice in subsequent lessons. Through collaboration and regular communication with the host teachers in Uruguay and Brazil the lessons delivered are differentiated, tailored and changed to meet the needs and interests of different classes and groups. This is highly relational – the remote teachers are very conscious of the need to develop secure relationships within the social setting the VC tools allow.

Sennett (2008) urges the craftworker to 'not give up on the workshop as a social space' (p. 73) since relationships with others can be essential for growth and development. In the case here these relationships are a source of joy, reward and pride. As Sennett puts it, they are a 'job well done'. However, doing a 'job well done' has a double edge: it is a source of joy but also can be troubling. As one of the remote teachers puts it,

> *'... the technology doesn't fail, but sometimes I fail them. I know I don't get through and it upsets me... after all, the children are so excited to see me. I feel they know me and I want to do my best.'* (Remote teacher)

The context of the (g)local nature of the remote teaching, like any classroom context, has an effect upon how craft practice is seen by those who practise it. Sennett (2008) notes that this can have a significant effect upon practice and identity when he recognises that

> *'the desire to do something well is a personal litmus test; inadequate personal performance hurts in a different way than inequalities of inherited social position or the externals of wealth: it is about you.' (p. 97)*

Equally, this presence and the relationships it generates means the remote teachers see themselves as a very specialist sort of teacher. For example, when asked how they see themselves and the role they have, remote teachers all identify as 'teachers' in the first instance. They note though that this teaching is 'special' for them – they see the design/technology/mode of delivery and the global–local nature of the work as occupying a unique position. They say: *'I don't say I am a teacher, I give them the full, I say "I am a remote teacher, I teach English via VC"'* and *'I think remote teacher as a distinctive category as I think you need other skills'* (Remote teacher). This 'distinctive' category – this 'special location' (of 'design' as much as the teaching skills needed and the ethics involved) – is something that was frequently referred to by the remote teachers in the sample. This reflects Sennett's (2008) view that craft practice is a moral enterprise and moral 'location' for identity and practice. For example, Sennett links morality and desire to 'do a job well' with the basis for agency, since 'the pursuit of quality is also a matter of agency, the craftsman's driving motive' (p. 97). The teachers all speak of the genuine affection they feel towards their classes and the warmth of the relationship they feel they have with these classes. They speak of individuals in the same way – fondly recounting in-jokes, humorous moments and 'breakthrough' moments in pupils' progress.

PRESENCE AND IDENTITY: WHERE IS THE LEARNING IN 'BEING THERE'?

The success of the individual VC lesson is considerably enhanced by the skilful manipulation of the multiple VC devices in real-time by the remote teacher. This seems to be a unique aspect of this pedagogy: that through the manipulation of multiple sources and devices (laptop, internet, PowerPoint, visualiser), as well as multiple options for the images on the screen, the teachers in real-time craft the visual experience of the lesson for those in the host classroom. In this way, the remote teachers are both producers and editors in real-time of the transition of the lesson. This is a meta-level practice not normally engaged with in a more traditional face-to-face classroom and one that is highly significant for the success of these distinctive VC lessons.

This 'distinctiveness' of the practice also requires the remote teachers as 'designers' to undertake complex practice. For example, the remote lessons are highly dialogic in nature – this is central to their pedagogy and practice. The emphasis is upon speaking, interacting and stimulating pupils. At their best, lessons are well structured, tightly focused and learners in these lessons are able to demonstrate their immediate understanding as well as progress over time. The distance and the remote presence do not in any way affect the pace and intimacy of the lesson, while the multiple camera options and input/output sources enable pace and interest to be established. These lessons are 'pacey' due to the skilful manipulation of the technology, not despite it. In this way, the remote teachers 'feel like teachers' and not like detached or remote presenters. They plan and source their own lessons, think about pace and about learners' development over time, develop secure and meaningful relationships with groups and stimulate pupils to enable learning to progress. The remote teachers themselves see their practice and this global educational context as 'special' – they are conscious of the unique opportunity this remote teaching gives them and the transformative potential it has globally.

CONCLUSION

Through interview and focus-group data triangulated against the observational data collected to date, the remote VC teachers reflect upon what they think are the successful and unique aspects of this provision. As an observer I feel the success lies in the unique and complex dynamics between teacher presence (mediated through the technology and 'exaggerated' as a means to overcome distance), the skilful manipulation in real-time of cameras and sources (akin to the real-time editing and production of a televised experience) and the pedagogic emphasis upon dialogue and interaction. This is very much a 'craft location' in a Sennettian sense – the 'desire to do a job well' and along with this a highly ethical orientation to craft practice is revealed. The remote teachers, though, add an extra variable – the polycontextuality of the classes being 'located' and 'present' in London. If asked if the same lesson would be the same lesson if delivered from somewhere else (for example, a different location in the same country as the schools), the remote

teachers are clear: this would make it a different experience. They feel that the distance and 'glocal' boundary-crossing nature of the interaction 'places' the lesson firmly in England (London) – the significance of which is ever present for the pupils. This is not an English language lesson. It is a language lesson from England. This makes how pupils respond to the teachers different and 'special' for all concerned: host teachers, pupils and remote VC teachers alike.

This initial ethnographic data suggests this work is a unique case study that demonstrates the 'glocal' nature of technology-aided teaching. In so doing it adds to the complexity of the notion of 'teachers-as-designers' (Dohn, 2018; Persico et al., 2018), and the highly multi-skilled nature of this design practice (Kali et al., 2011). The remote teaching is global and local at the same time; the provision enhanced through committed craft practitioners adopting the technology as the means and opportunity to have a global reach. In this, they are agents of global educational change.■

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