NEW VOICES IN THE CLASSROOM: AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF SKYPE SENIORS ON CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Ulrike Thomas, David Leat, Rob Comber, Samuel Finnigan, Andrew McHugh, Patrick Olivier, Patricia Vicent-Lopez
Newcastle University, Newcastle, UK

Since the inception of the National Curriculum in 1988 in England there has been an increasing focus on measuring student and school/teacher performance. The dominant pedagogy is largely didactic and involves 'teaching to the test'. This focus on tests often reduces learning to a series of simplified steps which need to be mastered. The result is knowledge that is 'decontextualised' or 'proceduralised' and which loses its 'organic' connection to real life (Dewey 1916,1966) - in this context learning is thus not authentic or meaningful.

The Skype Seniors Research Project was a small-scale exploratory case study which built on the Skype Grannies concept created by Sugata Mitra and focussed on developing the local learning ecology. Between March and June 2013, 24 mediators volunteered to Skype with groups of students in three schools in the North-East of England. The aims of the project were threefold: 1) to explore the potential impact that these new 'voices' in the classroom could have on the curriculum, pedagogy and student engagement; 2) to examine the technological infrastructure required 3) to explore the motivations and experiences of the 'Seniors' volunteers. This paper focuses on the first of these aims.

Data was collected through interviews with teachers, pupils and volunteers, video, observation, field notes, e mails and the posts on the project's discussion forum.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (1999) and Bernstein's concept of framing (1975) were used as the basis for analysis. The findings revealed: 1) the four teachers involved in the project each adopted a different approach; 2) the Skype sessions challenged the teachers to change their pedagogy and allow the students and mediators to take control (weak framing); 3) the teachers did not alter their original curriculum plans, but more time was spent on the subject matter; 4) the conflicts and contradictions (Sannino 2008) experienced impacted on the teachers and students in both positive and negative ways and 5) there was evidence of increased student engagement.

References: