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The challenge of distance tutoring and learning using the virtual classroom – adobe acrobat connect pro meeting

Introduction

Marketing knowledge and attending Global Teacher Marketing Classes is gaining importance and a sharp increase in the number of participants attending those sessions is visible. Present conferencing platforms are already designed to host up to five thousand participants. Numerous books, magazines and articles are being published every day to help educators become more versatile and acquainted with powerful tools that have changed the way we think of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, teaching and generally delivering presentations online is radically different from teaching in the physical classroom environment.

I have noticed that companies that provide services of Audio and Video conferencing have taken the matter seriously but, on the other hand, most enterprises and entrepreneurs do not see it as an opportunity for marketing their products. However, among many platforms that provide us (lecturers) with a fully featured tool for hosting virtual classrooms, one is, in my opinion, noticeably better than other platforms. This platform has been developed by a world-renowned company, Adobe, of whose products many of us have heard before. Most e-books are opened in Adobe Acrobat Reader and most people (designers) use Adobe Acrobat Photoshop, as well as Adobe Creative Suite and Adobe Captivate. It should not surprise us to see if their product eventually emerged as the leading and most serious, reliable and flexible platform for business, education and personal use.

1. The first steps

I have always tried to promote communication, collaboration and other IT skills that are a part of our everyday lives now, and that will certainly become a part of the literacy curriculum of all students in the future. I myself am greatly indebted to world projects that have digitalized classics of British and American literature and, therefore, made it possible for me to read them, although my local library did not possess such treasures. Growing up with such projects, undertaken by many countries where lives of millions of people are changed overnight by this, has persuaded me to influence my students in the very same way. Consequently, I have searched through thousands of books uploaded to Google Books that can be of use for my students, so that they too can understand the need for English, and I have promoted audio lectures in English, as well as audio

classics of literature, so that students can use their mp3 players for educational purposes. Finally, after so many years, it has been made possible in Serbia too that a vast majority of students have a stable Internet connection and that they pay for it monthly while being connected permanently.

My students have never before experienced Distance Tutoring and it has been quite a challenge for me to introduce and prepare them for something of the sort when their lecturer himself has had but one year of experience. Determined to confront all obstacles and overcome any problem, I have reviewed all tutorial videos, called the technical support countless of times, dedicated my free time to reading Distance Tutoring books and managed to schedule two Distance Tutoring sessions in a week as a rule. Adobe Connect Pro Meeting has to some extent changed my career and life because I had to, and I still do, prepare for my students from Korea, Saudi Arabia, China, the UK and Africa.

It was an extraordinary experience for me when, for the first time, I entered a virtual classroom one morning and the lecturer addressed me and made me listen attentively to his presentation with various polls, quizzes and documents that enhance interaction among the participants. I have assumed a very serious and scientific frame of thinking from the very beginning and, although overwhelmed and impressed with the intimacy established between me and other university lecturers in the world, I detached myself from taking an active role in those classrooms. I have done this in order to broaden my knowledge of good solutions and practices that many educators employ inside the classroom. Although I have noticed that many university lecturers are Distance Tutoring because students pay for these classes, in order to gain points more easily than by coming to their universities, I am aware that in Serbia points gained through Distance Tutoring will not soon replace the points given to students for their activity in the physical classroom. I have, on the other hand, started to lecture for free of charge on classics of British and American literature in order to become more skilled in using the powerful platform, to meet students who join because they genuinely want to know more, and to meet colleagues from around the world so that one day my students can be lectured by different professors on the same subject right from their living rooms.

2. Taking the challenge

The Challenge Based Approach to learning is presently being implemented in some primary schools in the USA but what it really means is that classroom activities are made lifelike and students have to develop their ideas in order to make changes in the real world. The virtual classroom Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro created the same kind of challenge, or another reality, for me because all my classroom management skills, methodology of English language teaching and lesson planning skills had to be applied online, an environment where not even the word „class” is clearly defined. However, from the very beginning, I perceived

this to be a very effective tool and nothing could deter me from examining it, in order to see how it could assist me in showing my students the benefits of communication in English with students of the world. The only drawback I have found is that, unfortunately, Adobe Connect Pro's entire resource center, with thousands of tutorial videos and many papers and articles presenting case studies (written by other university professors), is to be found only in English. Consequently, I was not able to distribute the research work among my colleagues who have appreciated my indulgences and efforts to make changes in students' lives.

At first, quite naturally, I refrained from scheduling a class with my students thinking that I had better try out the platform with random students of the world, who would eventually read through my class description, requirements and my profile. An astounding fact that left me sorrow-stricken was that only two students from China signed up for my classes to teach them Elementary English, and this I have done most enthusiastically by uploading some content with exercises. Nonetheless, it puzzled me as to why only two of them registered for a free class, when so many participants register for classes that cost a considerable amount of money. In due time I noticed that time zones have to be considered and classes should be scheduled a week in advance, because scheduling a class for the following day usually results in having participants who, although interested in hearing about the topic, are rather determined to enter any classroom that can be accessed for free. Unsure about the way to proceed further, after scheduling the class one week in advance, I sought help and quickly discovered the Teacher Orientation Classes that are provided to newly registered lecturers.

3. Teacher Orientation Classes

Teacher Orientation Classes are not solely visited by teachers who are new to teaching online. Because these classes are conducted with brilliance, naturalness, dedication and patience, many teachers turn to these classes after a while also for the reason of finding colleagues interested in co-authored presentations and classes with two or more lecturers. This works marvelously in an online environment: I have witnessed one session of two hours where the methodology of English language teaching was addressed and more than twenty presenters (university lecturers) delivered presentations on Classroom Procedures and Approaches to Teaching and Learning to more than fifty participants. It was only rather strange to me that lecturers could be engaged in such a heated discussion and debate without seeing the facial expressions of their audience. However, for this one reason, I too turned to Teacher Orientation Classes often to become more acquainted with ways of engaging students to respond in the Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro virtual classroom.

I must point out that Teacher Orientation Classes do enlighten us (the lecturers) with details that should be taken into consideration when embarking on a career of online Distance Tutoring. Before scheduling the class, one should

investigate whether there is another class of the same nature already scheduled, or generally a class where your online students have already registered at the same hour when you want to schedule yours. It is also a good policy to schedule two classes in advance for the reason that, if your online students find your teaching style to their preference, they will for more classes at that very moment and register on the spot for the next one.

Teacher Orientation Classes also advise us as to how best to deliver and plan our Distance Tutoring sessions, in order to gain more students and, of course, for some lecturers to gain more money. It is advised that the lecturer come at least thirty minutes before the class to check and test audio and video, to avoid all possible problems during the session. Lecturers are also advised to use layouts with previously setup pods (windows) in accordance to the stage of their lesson. Upon entering the classroom everybody is introduced to the so-called „Lobby”, where generally we greet our students (some we see for the first time and this will always happen) and, optionally, profile some of them and we also dedicate five to ten minutes to „getting-to-know-you” activities and other activities assigned to the Warm-Up stage of our lesson plan. Proceeding from there, we take our students to yet another default layout called „Presentation” where several pods are already opened. The last layout is rarely used by teachers and has to do with evaluation and therefore is called „Evaluation”.

One interesting fact to be observed is that presenters who conduct Teacher Orientation Classes are more focused on Knowledge Marketing, Teacher Marketing and the prevailing academic spirit of the community, rather than on technical issues concerning the platform. Indeed, they have full right to be so dedicated to the above mentioned issues because the Adobe team has made it simple for anyone to get acquainted with the features of the platform through their extensive and well-organized Resource Center. The Adobe Resource Center can be easily found if we search for „Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro Resource Center”. There one can read more about the ways of using the platform for Kindergarten-to-twelve-year-olds (K12) or for university students and university staff. I shall elaborate more about technical issues as I get to the description of our last and very successful students' conference (Webinar) where students from many universities in Serbia delivered online presentations to their fellow colleagues and to my First-Year students of the vocational school in Subotica.

4. Exploration

The exploration of all those features and options that make Adobe Connect Pro a sophisticated tool for teaching and learning could take hours, days and months and so perhaps it would be best to speak only of the options that have helped me broaden my experience with students and prevailed upon me to write this paper.

Upon entering the classroom a lecturer is welcomed with a default classroom template where pods are arranged in the following way: on the left side we

find the Camera and Voice pod, Attendee List pod, Chat pod and Note pod; on the right side we find a Share pod with the question „What do you want to share?“ Lecturers will usually start by uploading their teaching content. I have noticed that all teachers tend to make a rather homely atmosphere with one or two pods present in the classroom, while other pods are summoned only when needed. This share pod enables us to upload documents and allows our participants to upload content as well, where later we can highlight or point out the important details that all can see. All pods can easily be removed, leaving the classroom empty, perhaps with only an Attendee pod and the lecturers voice to be heard, which essentially turns it into an Audio Conference Learning.

This platform certainly allows us to do much more and I will briefly refer to an online session where I used most of the options to offer students the opportunity of giving presentations. The scheduled session had more than eighty registered participants from around the world and, as a result, more than 25 of us were present at the scheduled time in the classroom, engaging students from different universities of our country. Other registered participants knew that a recording of the session would allow them to review the performance and, indeed, many provided feedback only after the recording was sent.

Some days before the scheduled date, students browsed through books and materials, reflected, evaluated and finally submitted all their photos, notes and even short videos that they needed for their presentation. I encouraged the presenters and, on several occasions, offered „tips and tricks“ that other teachers use when teaching online. Students' mails were over-brimming with anxiety and expectations because their parents would see it as well, and the recording would bear a lasting testimony to their first day of performing online in front of international audience. We had a total of four presenters and each spoke for about 20 minutes in English on topics of their own choosing. For educational purposes, it was quite irrelevant which topics they would choose. The most important issues they had to deal with were their nervousness, learning about the platform and multitasking in skills completely foreign and yet so familiar to them.

Concerning the audience, their enthusiasm arose from knowing they would be attending a conference where many presenters, not only one lecturer, were about to excel in presenting, motivating and engaging them. The audience was largely composed of students from Subotica who did, at moments, encourage our presenters in their mother tongue, before they discovered the option of private messages. After that the mother tongue was avoided in the public chat. They did that happened with good reason, because their own colleagues were rather silent and the students from Russia and Saudi Arabia were very curious, having many unrelated and related questions.

For all four presenters I created four layouts of pods differently arranged around the classroom, with their own content already uploaded some minutes before the session opened. It is never easy to advise, suggest or evaluate stu-

dents' materials (they do not even ask for it) because so much depends upon their participants who might enjoy it just the way they are and offer the best feedback. Spontaneity and not materials was what created bonds between my students and the students who study English in countries as far as Saudi Arabia. I noticed that students had somehow acquired responsiveness and spontaneity from their previous experience of chatting online and so they were very considerate to all classroom participants, which is the key for excellence in teaching online. In addition, I gave some subtle suggestions to the students as well by referring them to a book entitled English for Presentations. The book was originally written for the business sector, and not for education, but some examples of sentences to be used at the start of presentations were embraced, with minor alterations, by all of them.

The scheduled conference with four presenters has utterly failed in terms of English Language Teaching approaches and methods applied and the classroom procedures used in the virtual classroom. Yet, I call it a thorough success because, be that as it may, it has radically changed the way they think of learning, teaching and evaluation. Since then, many have taken courses and classes online and have critically evaluated their own performance and other teachers' performance. Since then, many have started to correspond with to-be-tutors of their own age from around the world on the inexhaustible topic of teaching online and learning in an online environment. Many have noticed that one cannot rely solely on what one is told to do for the educational institution they attend, but one is also to take full advantage of books, professors and faculty facilities in order to develop one's own skills in teaching as soon as possible, as best as it can get. Moreover, many students have even noticed that the clear-cut borders between being a student and being a teacher can merge, and that we are all students and lifelong observers of ever changing realities.

5. Drawing Conclusions?

The project of this paper is rather to un-name all firmly rooted concepts that we so light-heartedly take for granted. Although the title of the paper might seem very practical, alluding to a wealth of know-how and how-to information, it is very far from that. The author is merely ponderous and neither opinionated nor judgmental as to where all this is taking us. The classic Victorian British novelists have shared the same amount of optimism combined with dark visions when talking about the introduction of railways that took them at the unimaginable speed of 50km/h.

I have been conducting classes online on classics of American literature to students from the Kind Saud University in Saudi Arabia, reported to be the most prestigious and the oldest university in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and I was forced to ask myself – Why do they search for classes online? „My lecturers only say how busy they are and so they do not want to be bothered. They make us re-

search like scholars but we need guidance and assistance in our studies” – I still remember this answer and I still reflect on it. Now, what is a classroom today? What is a session? What is a class? Nowadays, it seems to me that the greatest number of „classes” is dedicated to the Arabic language and Qur'an with the Japanese language following in popularity. The way these classes are given is challenging radically the mainstream approaches and methods in language teaching.

Finally, I would like to say that the greatest challenge for me is certainly not the technical side of it or the differences in syllabuses across cultures nor the time zones but it is certainly taking the full measure of it! The full potential of it is perhaps left to IT students, business marketing experts or simply enthusiasts whose efforts are merely rewarded only with money. Probably the full potential of Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro is presently given to language learning and teaching. As people around the world go through an identity crisis, they firmly grasp onto their mother tongue, mother country and national script searching for online tutors to educate their children.

Nevertheless, with language classes being given every day, there are thousands of experts whose credentials have changed to an extensive career of online teaching. Their voices are now heard like women's voices in the sixteenth century rising against the established authoritarian institutions of education. However, an important fact is that their voices are heard and they are rewarded (paid) for their self-improvement and self-education and, therefore, have the means of recruiting thousands more every year, thousands who will give classes from some far and remote cottage where they will possibly enjoy the tranquility and solitude in the society of books or e-books.

„When I detect a beauty in any of the recesses of nature, I am reminded, by the serene and retired spirit in which it requires to be contemplated, of the inexpressible privacy of a life, – how silent and unambitious it is. The beauty there is in mosses must be considered from the holiest, quietest nook. What an admirable training is science for the more active warfare of life” – Walden by Henry David Thoreau.

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Abstract

This paper is my humble contribution to the advancement of Distance Tutoring and e-Learning in Serbia where technical requirements have made it possible for educators to develop their skills in tutoring online. The paper will examine some advantages and disadvantages of the leading industry platform Adobe Connect Pro Meeting and my personal experience in engaging students to develop their skills in presenting content online to other students of the world. The paper will also show that delivering classes online to the students of the world is a great challenge even for those lecturers who are fluent in English and are confident in their teaching approach and classroom management skills in the physical classroom. The experience of Distance Tutoring is certainly rewarding and the students have embraced the new technologies most enthusiastically because it gives them an opportunity to market their knowledge and skills even before they graduate from vocational schools or colleges.

Key words: Distance Tutoring, Knowledge marketing, Adobe Connect Pro, Presenter, Session.

Wyzwania w nauczaniu na odległość i w wirtualnej klasie – zastosowanie programu Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro

Streszczenie

Ten artykuł jest moim skromnym wkładem w rozwój e-learningu w Serbii. Rozwój technologii pozwala nauczycielom rozwijać swoje umiejętności i kompetencje w nauczaniu online. W artykule dokonana została analiza zalet i wad wiodącej platformy Adobe Connect Pro pozwalającej na zarządzanie konferencjami sieciowymi. Opisane zostały także moje doświadczenia w angażowaniu uczniów do rozwijania swoich umiejętności w zakresie prezentowania treści online studentom z krajów całego świata.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie na odległość, marketing wiedzy, Adobe Connect Pro, prezydent, sesja.