Reimagining Learning in a Language Education Course Thrust Online: Social Constructivism in Times of Social Isolation

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A campus-based initial teacher education module in nine units was quickly redesigned within the existing syllabus to run online following the Swedish Government's recommendation on 17 March 2020 to move university teaching online. We used a flipped approach: asynchronous preparatory activity (set reading with study questions, pre-recorded lectures and other podcasts or videos) was followed up by non-mandatory online synchronous workshops and mandatory written unit tasks to be completed individually or in a group, and handed in individually. The unit tasks were designed as active learning, and entailed the application of knowledge and understanding gained in the preparatory activities, deepening the learning of each individual with co-constructed insights. This flipped pedagogy was complemented by collaborative active learning activities for the students who participated in the workshops. The workshop participants were encouraged to complete their hand-in work together during the workshop, collaboratively building understanding. Thus, a social constructivist view of learning was modelled and implemented.

Keywords: Social constructivism, preservice teacher education, online teaching, flipped learning, active learning, English language education, engagement tasks, course design

INTRODUCTION

The teaching context is preservice teacher education in a module focused on teaching English as a foreign language in Swedish secondary schools. There are around 75-80 students who come to us after almost two semesters of studying English language, literature and linguistics. Before COVID-19, this course was to be the object of an innovation project, implementing problem-based learning in a newly installed active learning classroom (ALC) where students would discuss authentic English teaching dilemmas. As part of the move to the ALC, lecture content was pre-recorded in 15-20-minute video lectures, with an introduction showing the instructor followed by a narrated PowerPoint. The idea was to implement flipped pedagogy (Bergmann & Sams, 2014; Cunningham, 2016), offering non-transient lecture content as well as guided reading (using study questions) of the course literature before seminars, leaving seminar time for discussion and student activity.

INNOVATION

The traditional lecture followed by seminar format as well as the planned ALC-format required students to be in stable groups for timetabling and room-booking purposes. Moving online we were freed of these constraints and moved to whole group teaching in Zoom with breakout rooms for collaborative work. We were not able to mandate participation in the workshops, but we implemented a written hand-in Unit task for each unit to oblige students to engage with the course material. In this way we wanted to retain active learning to force student engagement, as suggested by Deslauriers, McCarty, Miller, Callaghan, and Kestin (2019).

Each of the nine units offered input in the form of reading and short pre-recorded lectures, and collaborative processing of the material in breakout groups. Less reading than previously was made compulsory, acknowledging that students may not have had optimal study conditions, however, additional reading was provided for those interested in learning more about each of the unit topics. Pre-recorded lectures have previously been found useful as they are non-transient and can be paused and revisited several times (Cunningham, 2016). Here such lectures were intended to be used before or after the reading as well as while working on the unit tasks and the assessment tasks.

Unit tasks were obligatory but unassessed, to be done during workshops in the arbitrarily assigned groups, or in another collaborative group of the students' own choice elsewhere, or independently. They were intended to require the students to apply knowledge gained in their reading, the lecture or otherwise, moving along Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

We wanted to seize the opportunity, what Salmon (2020, April 28) calls a pivot to quality online provision, provided by Covid-19 to bring best practice in online learning and teaching to our course rather than simply holding our seminars in Zoom as "emergency remote teaching" (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020; Salmon, 2020). The problem-based teaching and active-learning design we had planned for our ALC was re-imagined, using Zoom workshops with breakout rooms to replace and perhaps exceed (Vonderwell & Turner, 2005) the affordances of the ALC in a synchronous element. Nine obligatory hand-in unit tasks forced student-active engagement with the material, what Vonderwell and Turner (2005) term "learner engagement and involvement with the instructional content and learning processes such as thinking, questioning, reflection, metacognition, collaborative, and cooperative activities" (p. 67). Mindful of the difficulty some students may have been experiencing in their study arrangements, we wanted to allow independent work, but encourage collaborative completion of the unit tasks during the workshops. Table 1 shows how the course morphed to incorporate active learning and then to move online.

Table 1

English language education course as offered in Autumn 2019 (Traditional campus), as planned for Spring 2020 (Planned campus), and as actually taught Spring 2020 (Re-imagined online).

	A. **Traditional campus**	B. **Planned campus**	C. **Re-imagined online**
Venue	Lecture hall and seminar room in three groups	ALC in three groups. Six students sit round each of four technology-rich tables.	Zoom workshops in one group with breakout rooms
Course literature	Two course books and additional articles; study questions to guide reading	Two course books and additional articles	One main course book and additional articles, with reading from the second course book recommended but not obligatory; study questions to guide reading
Lectures	Nine 90-minute lectures in whole group in lecture hall	Two live 90-minute lectures in whole group in lecture hall; others pre-recorded (12-20 mins)	Two live 90-minute lectures in whole group in Zoom; others pre-recorded (12-20 mins)
Classes (all with non-mandatory attendance)	Lecture and seminar for each unit	Some lectures in lecture halls and problem-based workshops in the ALC.	Zoom in whole group with breakout room activity to first discuss the study questions, and second work on the unit tasks.

	A. **Traditional campus**	B. **Planned campus**	C. **Re-imagined online**
Examination	1. Justified lesson plan task with student-recorded microteaching and peer review 2. Course paper on one of three topics 3. Oral presentation on paper topic		1. Justified lesson plan task with peer review 2. Take-home exam with three of eight questions 3. Oral presentation on an authentic teacher problem 4. Nine non-assessed unit tasks

The design of the course was informed by theories of social constructivism including key principles that knowledge is constructed by learners, that knowledge is experience-based, and that learning is social (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). Moving online, workshops replaced ALC seminars. Students in breakout rooms first worked together with the study questions, while teachers supported them. After a break, students returned to the same breakout rooms to complete the unit tasks during the last 45 minutes of the workshops. There was no requirement to attend workshops, or to work in groups, but the unit tasks were to be submitted by each student at the latest by the end of the course. There was a recommendation, but no requirement to have prepared before the workshop. Breakout groups of six to eight students were created arbitrarily by Zoom for each workshop. Our hope was that hearing the discussion in the group would serve as some input even for those who had not read and listened ahead of time, and that there may be social pressure from peers to prepare better next time.

RESULTS

Using Zoom's polling function, anonymous student input was secured. Figure 1 shows that half or more of the 30 students who responded to a poll in the fourth workshop agreed with the statements that "breakout rooms are good" and offered "good discussions that help me understand", while there were indications that some students were not well prepared for the workshops.

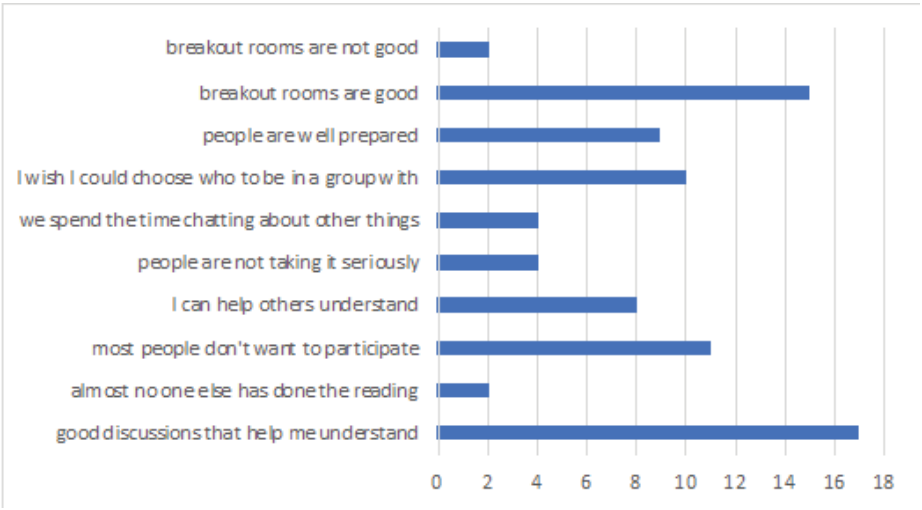

Figure 1. Poll on breakout rooms in workshop 4.

Figure 2 shows the results of a poll about the pre-recorded lectures. Most of the 29 responding students agreed with the statement "I find them helpful", but not all students watched the lectures through. Many students also reported using the lectures intensively, watching them through, rewinding and pausing and taking notes.

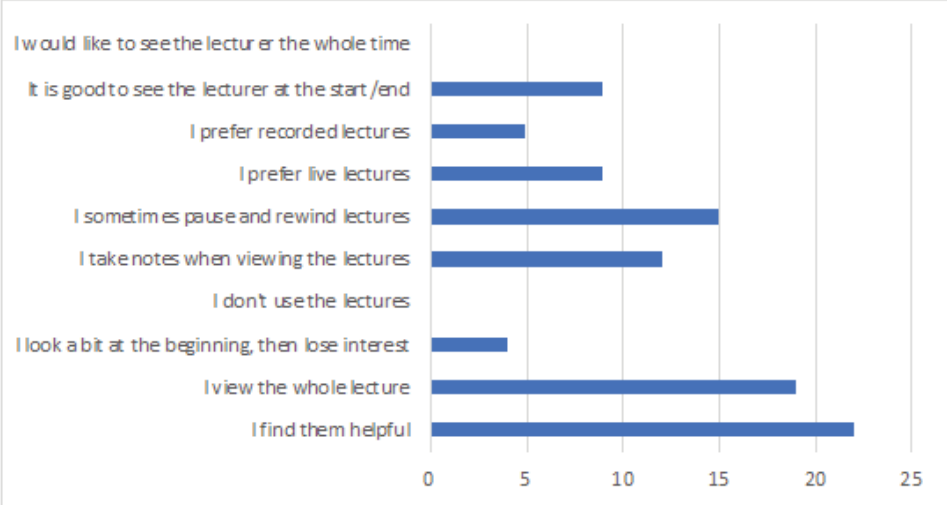

Figure 2. Poll on lectures in Workshop 5.

The workshop attendance dwindled as the course progressed, leaving the students who were keen to work together on the unit tasks. Figure 3 shows the decline from 71 at Workshop 1 on 4 May to 36 at Workshop 9 on 20 May. The last two workshops had yet to occur at the time of writing.

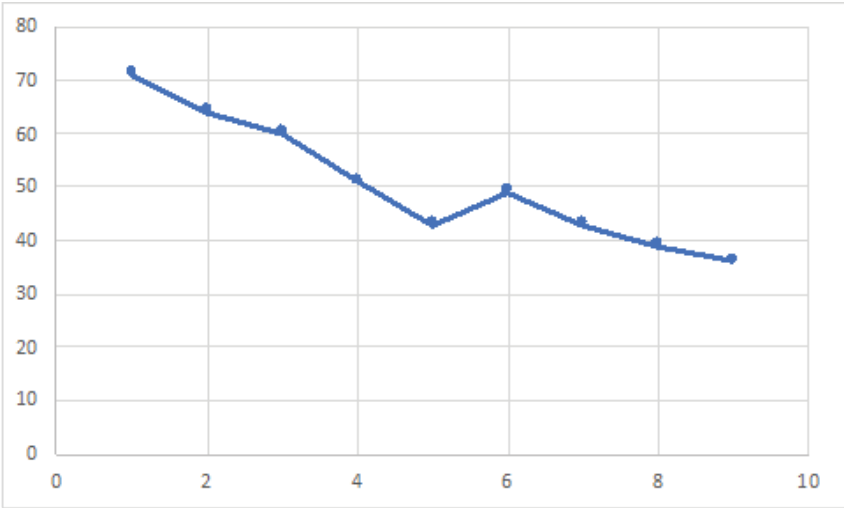

Figure 3. Workshop attendance.

The results of the polls do not represent the views of the students who did not attend workshops. These non-attendees represented both those who preferred to work independently, and those who were not on top of their studies. The former group were likely to find the current course design, with all material available in advance for each unit worked well for them, giving them control of their studies. These independent learners could work ahead if they chose, though we decided to have just two units beyond the current unit open, so as not to overwhelm other groups of students. The non-attendees who were not on top of their studies included disengaged students and procrastinators as well as those whose personal circumstances during the Corona restrictions were not conducive to study success. This group was disadvantaged by the lack of campus teaching, and by the lack of an attendance requirement for the course.

Students who chose to attend workshops also belonged to several groups. Those who were well prepared were the drivers of the breakout discussions and thrived in this social constructivist design. The less well-prepared attendees may have hoped to glide through in group completion of unit tasks without really engaging with the material, but at least heard others discussing concepts, and should also have been be winners in this model. The nine obligatory unit tasks were expected to be useful for well-prepared workshop attendees to guide their learning, and should have ensured that

the independently working students engaged with the course material and came further in their understanding of the concepts than they would have by reading and viewing alone. By the mid-point of the course, when the first major assignment was due, just half of the students were up to date with the unit tasks. Others may have been overwhelmed by the number of tasks they needed to complete, falling behind even though the unit tasks were direct preparation for the end-of-course take-home exam. These students were not able to take advantage of the collaborative work in the workshops, designed to get the unit tasks completed during the workshops. Again, this group was disadvantaged by attendance not being mandatory.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Workshop attendance is important

The declining attendance shown in Figure 3 was not a result of our move online, but was also observed in previous iterations of the course. Dolnicar (2005) explains this as a trend towards attendance pragmatism where some students attend classes only to get the information they need to succeed in the subject. For students who did not understand or believe in our social constructivist approach, attending class would have appeared to be pointless since all the information they needed was already available in the learning platform.

We would advise others in our situation to make attendance mandatory if possible. A strategy to get sceptics onboard would be to explain the social constructivist approach as a model for the students' own teaching practice, and to include a unit task requiring students to reflect upon their own learning in collaboration with their peers.

2. Seeing each other helps build social presence

Many of our students were unwilling to turn on their webcams or microphones. Larsen Damsgaard (2020, April 27), writing in Norwegian, tells of teaching a sea of black screens and trying to engage people who are neither seen nor heard. Many of our students were actually there and yet chose to lurk rather than contribute. We made it clear that we would not join the breakout rooms unless invited, and encouraged students to have their cameras on in the breakout to facilitate collaboration. It is well established that social presence, the sense that the other is a real person, is enhanced by the use of audio and video (Cunningham, 2014; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; King & Ellis, 2009; Lipman 2003), and that if a community of inquiry can be established, students can together learn more than each could alone. The use of breakout rooms to afford learners a more intimate environment for interaction than the full-group Zoom where everyone can observe everyone else was important to our social constructivist approach (Creelman, 2020).

Our recommendation is to encourage the use of webcams in breakout rooms to foster a sense of belonging (Peacock, Cowan, Irvine, & Williams, 2020) while tolerating their non-use. A strategy to build social presence despite student reluctance is to encourage the use of webcams when students are working in smaller groups.

3. Students need to be able to find the course material

A third recommendation from our experience stresses the importance of an accessible and clearly structured course (Salmon, n.d.). Figure 4 shows the division of our course into nine units with hand-in assignments clearly placed in the order of events, and Figure 5 shows the details of what a unit on vocabulary contained, with links onwards to the pre-recorded unit lecture, study questions, the unit task, and further reading. Examples of this lecture, the study questions and the unit task are shared online at https://tinyurl.com/y8zr7ogs .

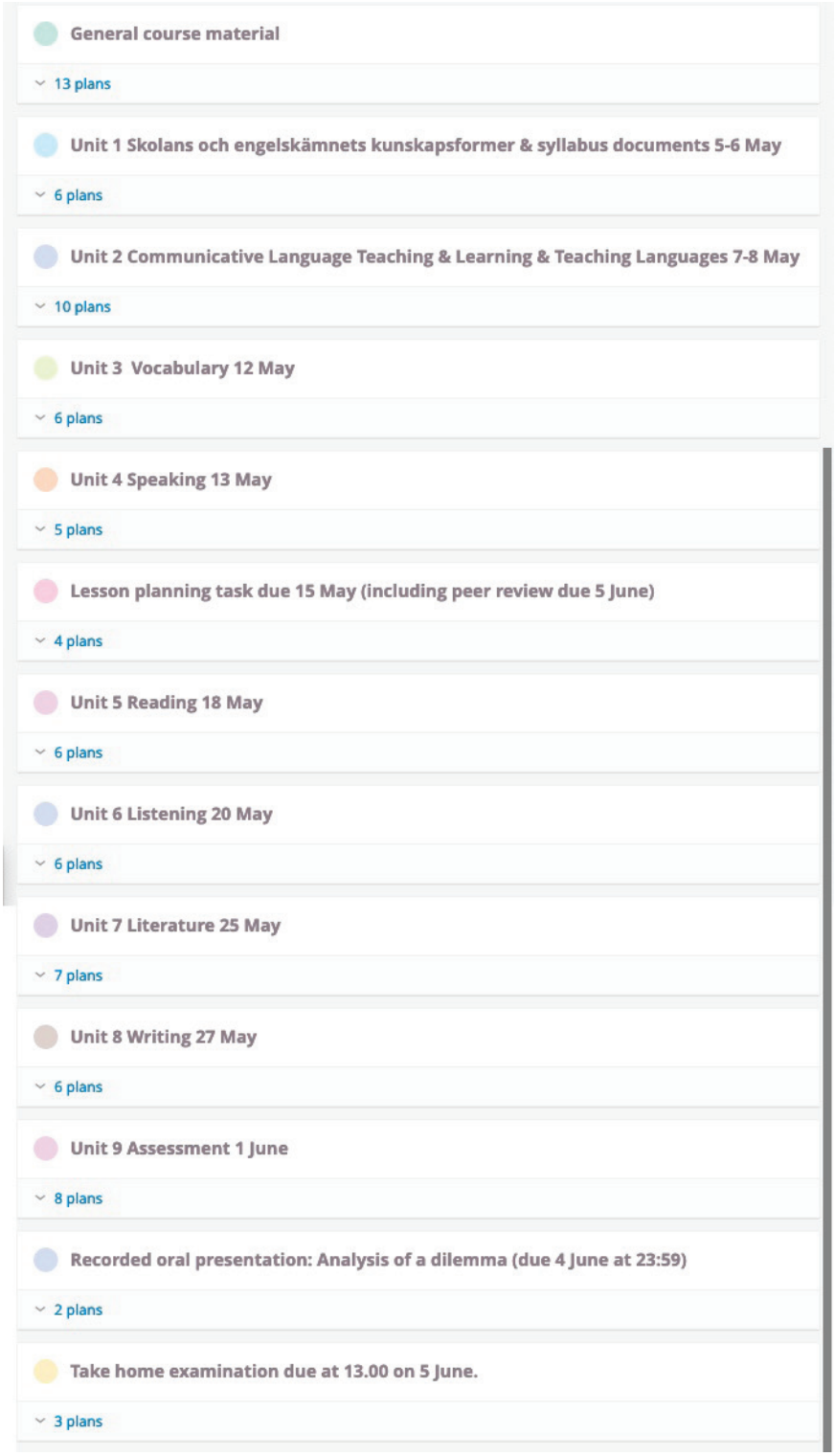

Figure 4. Course structure in nine units.

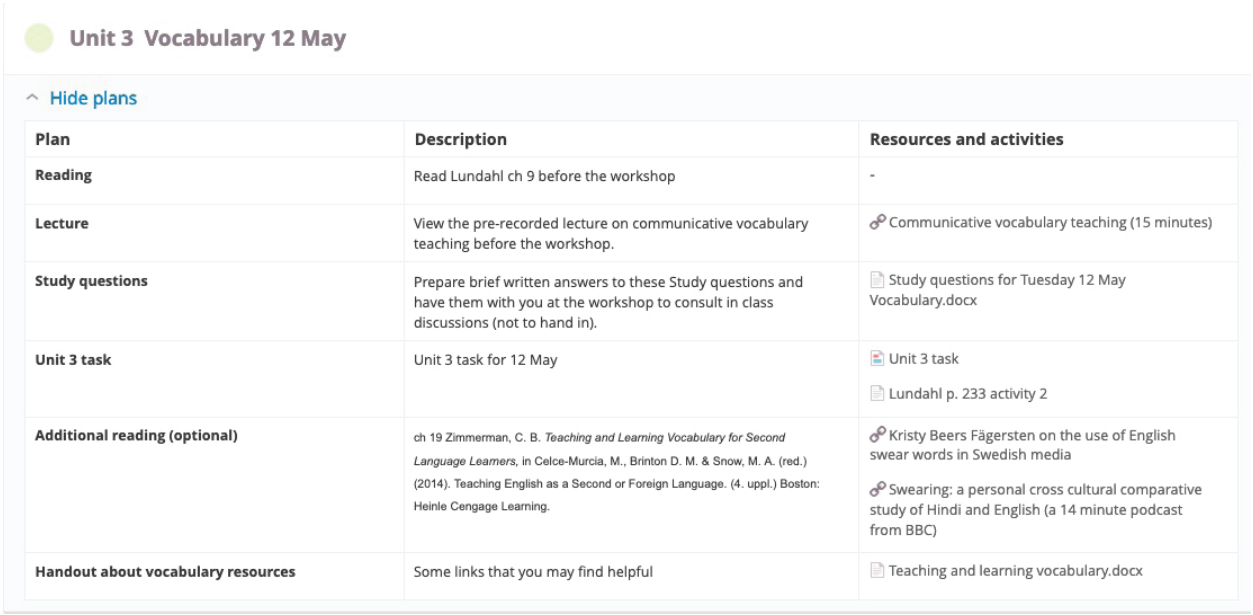

Figure 5. The structure of a unit on the teaching and learning of vocabulary. The lecture, study questions and unit task are shared at https://tinyurl.com/y8zr7ogs.

Salmon (n.d.) offers a helpful five-stage model for online course design, pointing out the need for accessible information, online socialization, information exchange, knowledge construction and development. Our course followed these strategies, and we had no questions from students about where to find material. We recommend following Salmon's five-stage model to ensure that the course meets the needs of the students.

In conclusion, we recommend a combination of clear structure, non-transient resources, flexibility (Delfino & Persico, 2007), understanding of the students' learning situation and responsiveness regarding technical troubleshooting. A course design informed by social constructivist theory is suitable for many categories of students, as long as they attend workshops. If they do not attend, they are left alone to complete unit tasks and to interpret readings and lectures. We recommend attendance requirements in synchronous elements of online preservice teacher education courses, and also mandatory engagement tasks.

FUTURE RESEARCH

We will continue to monitor course results and the learning analytic data provided by our learning platform, to look at the relationship between student activity and course completion. We will also attempt to relate course evaluation data to our pedagogical choices in this teaching approach. We are keen to apply our insights to new online iterations of this course and to other similar courses at our institution and beyond.

Further research is needed to better understand the learning of students who do not buy in to a social constructive view of learning, but rather prefer to work entirely asynchronously and independently. In addition, the effects on students and teachers of some students choosing not be seen or heard in synchronous video teaching sessions are not yet well understood. It seems likely that a student being invisible will affect teacher-student and student-student relationships. We may need to continue to teach our campus programmes online for some time, and we need to meet the needs of students who have not chosen online study.

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