"Virtually There": Making Online Training 'Real' for Caribbean Literacy Coaches – What Governments Can Do

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Abstract

The paper examines the implications of online training for the effectiveness of literacy instructional coaches being trained to operate in the English-Speaking Caribbean. Prior to the year 2000, no specific training program for literacy professionals at the masters' level was available in the region. Hence, the University of the West Indies' Open Campus' attempt at using the online mode to training reading specialists in the use of research-based practices represents a fairly bold innovation, and research is needed to determine the efficacy of such a venture. Through an analysis of a series of asynchronous learning conversations involving four group facilitators and 77 teacher trainees in an online best practice course in the program, the author reveals the reactions of coaches-in-training to exemplary practices to which they were being exposed. Using a socio-cognitive lens through which to examine such learning conversations, the researcher demonstrates the movement in the cognitive response of trainees from awe and admiration, to skepticism that practices can work in Caribbean settings, and finally, on being presented with images of exemplary practices in Caribbean contexts, to an eagerness to emulate practices observed.

The study reveals that, while Caribbean teachers tend to initially admire depictions of best practice in resources "borrowed from more privileged contexts", they ultimately respond with some psychological distancing and skepticism that may prevent them from applying practices observed to their own instruction. Trainees' suggestions regarding adjustments to be made to the virtual environment become the basis for recommendations for the mounting and maintenance of a teaching resource repository to be used for training and professional development purposes by Caribbean teachers and teacher trainers. It is recommended that a consortium of experts should collaborate to mount, lead, and sustain such an initiative with master teachers and regular teachers supplying recordings from their own classrooms to be vetted and then made available in this repository. The readiness of Caribbean nations to undertake online teacher training and to sustain such a supportive resource is examined.

Key words: online teacher training; multi-media resources; Caribbean consortium; online resource repositories

Introduction

Questions prevail regarding the viability of the online training mode, often referred to as *virtual teacher training*, for preparing effective literacy coaches. Virtual teacher training programs are those that deliver instruction using distance learning technologies, primarily the Internet along with the dissemination, collaborative, and interactive tools it affords.Honawar (2006) indicates that when the Western Governors' University's online teacher training program was first proposed, people "scoffed at the idea that teachers could be trained from scratch virtually" (p. 1). The program has since earned accreditation by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Even with accreditation, some still view virtual training as subpar (Schintz, as cited in Honawar, 2006). Sawchuk (2009) notes that many stakeholders still believe that teacher training delivered online "is less rigorous than that offered face-to-face" (p. 1). Several

studies indicate, however, that the online mode can be successfully employed for teacher training purposes (Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004; Richardson, 2004; Guo, 2009).

Can online programs truly equip literacy coaches with the expert knowledge and skill sets necessary for effective functioning in school and clinical settings? The International Reading Association (IRA, 2004) notes a recent shift in the role of reading specialists "away from direct teaching and toward leadership and professional development" (p. 1). Reading specialists are increasingly being expected to act as literacy leaders and must, during training, gain access to the shared knowledge of the field as well as to practical experiences that will allow them to execute as well as guide others in executing literacy best practices. Coaches must be capable of working alongside teachers to ensure that there is quality 'first teaching' as well as improvement in practice where necessary. They must be excellent reading and writing instructors and ardent believers in the practices they promote (International Reading Association, 2004). Specialists must be able to model best practices as well as foster improvement in the practice of others. In short, they must be instructional leaders.

Can online course delivery ensure that teachers are exposed to the type of training that will prepare them to be effective instructional leaders? Given the potential of online training for increasing the pool of literacy practitioners, what can governments and higher education institutions do to ensure that coaches access high-quality, locally-relevant training that would allow them to be effective? These are some of the concerns that feed into the main research questions to be addressed in the study.

The Online Training of Literacy Coaches in University of the West Indies' Open Campus

One assumption behind online training of literacy coaches in the Open Campus is that teachers, because they are already situated in teaching contexts, will apply practices learned through the virtual environment to their own instructional contexts. Coaches in training are strategically positioned to test the viability of instructional practices, and astutely designed coursework ensures such proofing takes place. For instance, students are required to design and deliver instruction featuring literacy best practices within their own classrooms. They later engage in written and online reflection activities surrounding these trial lessons. One wonders however, whether coursework alone is sufficient to ensure that teachers undertake the requisite testing of strategies learned, and with appropriate levels of enthusiasm and commitment. Honawar (2006) outlines the rigorous process undertaken by Western Governor's University to ensure that trainees are appropriately mentored by experts in their respective fields; that student-teachers are afforded practical experiences in real classrooms; that their teacher-training programs feature essential components and offerings; that programs are competency-driven and assessment-based; that, ultimately, the University provides a "solid foundation" upon which teachers can operate as successful professionals. Kearsley & Blomeyer (2004) provide a list of other programs and organizations that have successfully trained teachers online.

The University of the West Indies Open Campus' (OC's) Masters' in Literacy Education is no less rigorous than those cited. Sawchuk (2009) lauds the facilitated mode employed by the Open Campus (OC) as being aligned with research on effective online training, especially with regard to its emphasis on "continued, sustained engagement in content with peers" and with expert facilitators/mentors, a provision that augers well for positive change in teacher learning and behavior change (p. 2). Richardson (2004), in his report on teacher training in the Caribbean, indicates that the University of the West Indies' Open Campus, under the direction of the Instructional Development Unit, is not only delivering first-class teacher training but also "utilizes cutting-edge technologies in the delivery of programs in teacher education" (p. 33).

Since Koul's (2002) finding that the training infrastructure available in 17 English-speaking Caribbean countries was inadequate to support virtual higher education, the region has progressed considerably. Six countries in the region now rank in the top 58 territories in terms of internet penetration rate: Antigua and Barbuda (17th); Bermuda (21st); St. Lucia (33rd); Barbados (38th); St. Vincent and the Grenadines (43rd); Jamaica (53rd) (Internet World Statistics, 2010). All these territories have accessed training opportunities through the Open Campus (OC) training network.

Additionally, much development has taken place in terms of increasing the region's capacity to offer competitive virtual teacher-training programs, especially since the UWI-UNESCO Caribbean University Project for Integrated Distance Education (CUPIDE), undertaken between 2003 and 2007 (Marrett, 2009). Through CUPIDE's central portal, teacher training institutions can collaborate to provide online programs and can work collectively toward the strengthening of training facilities and institutional research.

Richardson (2004), in summarizing the impact of CUPIDE on OC's online teaching capabilities, indicates that adoption of newer technologies has facilitated more extended conversations between students and facilitators; greater use of new tools such as virtual classrooms with phone-in capacities (as is possible with Elluminate); more frequent use of online conferencing facilities, synchronous chats, wikis, blogs and asynchronous discussion forums used to facilitate meaningful content learning. Augmentation of reading materials with multimedia resources such as videos and podcasts, mostly "borrowed", has given an extra boost to this format. Additionally, greater flexibility in training and increased freedom of student expression has been realized. Students can anonymously comment on the quality of courses and on whether programs meet their needs as practitioners.

As a course proceeds, more frequent problem-solving collaboration can be undertaken by instructors who might be oceans apart, more on-the-spot problem solving can be done by instructors wishing to address student concerns, feedback can be more rapid and frequent, and there is greater peer-to-peer scaffolding as student work in online study groups to collectively meet course expectations. Furthermore, a wider pool of high-quality instructors is available to support courses, and countries need not rely only on expertise "on the ground". Thus, provisions have done much to improve training quality.

Worthy of note is the fact that programs offered through the OC network already draw on the three layers of facilitator expertise proposed by Dodero et al (2007) as being crucial for online training success. Courses are conducted by a group of facilitators comprised of university professors, curriculum and assessment specialists from Ministries of Education, as well as personnel from our regional quality control and professional development group (The Caribbean Centers for Excellence for Teacher Training).

Are such provisions adequate? How can the University ensure continued improvement of the quality of its online teacher training programs, especially those geared at inducting literacy professionals into literacy best practices? How can the OC ensure that it trains competent and enthusiastic instructional coaches? How can the virtual environment be optimized to create the kind of learning space that can truly facilitate a transfer of practices learned? To be effective, instructional coaches must believe that the exemplary practices to which they are being exposed can actually work in their context and that they will be successful at inducting teachers into these practices. Has the program in its first year of delivery been able to accomplish this learning goal? If not, what mechanism can be put in place by the Open Campus and other key players to ensure that teachers are open to and will readily incorporate best practices into their teaching and professional development repertoire?

Allowing students to interact with mentors who possess a high level of expertise in literacy, who are able to foster appropriate dispositions in students, and who spread across the three spheres (teacher trainers; policy makers and curriculum experts) is one method already employed and, certainly, allowing teachers to observe displays of best practices as executed by expert teachers in successful instructional settings is an essential start. The Open Campus Instructional Development Unit (OCIDU) has already proven its worth in terms of overseeing the development of quality text resources that pinpoint key competencies for development in trainees, and the courses developed are quite solid in terms of content. Are these provisions enough? Online conversations between facilitators and trainees indicate that such provisions might not be adequate.

Research Questions

1. What do conversations between facilitators and trainees reveal about trainee willingness and sense of agency in applying literacy best practices?
2. What provisions do trainees believe must be put in place to ensure that they readily transfer best practices learned in virtual environment to real-life teaching and professional development situations?

Sample

The data for this study were drawn from online conversations between four course facilitators and a group of 77 teacher trainees from the various Caribbean territories served by the University of the West Indies' Open Campus. Students enrolled in Best Practices in Literacy (EDLS 6502) were exposed to four learning modules, each comprising 3 units. The course spanned a four-month period (from May to August). Each module was delivered over approximately one month. Key modules centered on best practice linked to key components of emergent and conventional literacy (Modules One and Two) and to exemplary practices in the design of stimulating physical, social and intellectual climate to augment literacy learning (Module Three). A final module focused on literacy instructional design, that is, on pulling the key domains of literacy together using research-based instructional frameworks appropriate for

Caribbean contexts (Module Four). In that last module, students were led to understand how all the instructional pieces explored in previous modules fit together into a comprehensive instructional scheme.

A typical unit comprised two sessions, the first focused on the research foundations of the best practices outlined in the second session. The International Reading Association's (2000) call for a convergence of evidence to support practices promoted in teacher preparation was strictly adhered to in developing each unit, and emphasis was on exemplary "first teaching", with some attention being given to the effective design and delivery of remedial instruction in a three-tier framework linking core (first teaching) with secondary and tertiary/intensive intervention. Students were bombarded with images of successful practices at work in effective classrooms. Under the guidance of renowned literacy icons, mostly through webcasts and podcasts, students learned the principles underlying the practices presented. Learning forums were linked to each unit as were student study group spaces. Hence, students engaged with facilitators in weekly learning dialogues centering on that week's print and multimedia content.

The instructional content and delivery format, as designed, seemed quite solid and coincided with the International Reading Associations (2010) standards for training literacy professionals. It was approved as such by the Open Campus Instructional Development Unit (OCIDU). As the course progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that the exemplars used to demonstrate best practices were not generating the kinds of student reactions desired. Students began to complain that practices could not really work in their schools, and Caribbean-based exemplars had to be brought in when it became evident that merely encouraging students to think positively and creatively would not get them to embrace these practices. What exactly did student comments reveal, and how can such revelations be used to improve training provisions?

Theoretical Framework

A socio-cognitive lens was used to examine the learning conversations engaged in by students as they interacted with instructors and their peers in asynchronous discussions surrounding exemplary literacy practices. The aim was to unearth trainees' reactions to the new content and to examine the extent to which they displayed the kind of agency that could potentially prompt transfer of practices learned to their own teaching and professional development contexts. The research also sought to reveal implied or explicit student critique of course content, feedback that could be used for course improvement.

Much support exists for the kinds of assumptions made in conversational analysis, that is, that examination of conversational propositions during group interaction and learning can provide insights into the thinking processes of individuals and ultimately into their propensity to act (See Bandura, 1986). Additionally, Hill et al (2009) acknowledge a trend toward using social learning perspectives as frames for examining the quality of thinking and learning promoted in web-based environments. Because effective online learning typically utilizes vibrant synchronous and asynchronous interaction during which understandings of content are negotiated and knowledge co-constructed, learning conversations may be viewed as living artifacts that can potentially unveil the thought processes undertaken by coaching trainees as they come to terms with new and innovative literacy best practices in learning/mentoring forums (Florio-Ruane & Morrell, 2004; Mazur, 2004). Mazur (2004) refers to virtual conversations as "potentially rich sources of data about how on-line learning, instruction, or work may occur", indicating that such discourse can reveal much about the cognitive processes involved in the learning process (p. 1081).

Using a social learning lens, the study examined asynchronous learning conversation in order to unveil student reactions to best practices, to illuminate the challenges and opportunities that arose out of attempts at inducting them into cutting-edge literacy best practices online, and to lend freedom to student calls for improvement in attempts at fostering emulation of best practices on their part even with what they deemed an excellent course.

Methodology

Grounded theory along with open coding constituted the primary methodology used in the study. The writer initially explored the literature to identify answers to initial questions regarding whether The University of the West Indies' OC possesses the technological capabilities and requisite expertise to support online training of literacy professionals. The researcher's own prior experience as course developer, instructional designer, course coordinator, and group facilitator for the various courses in the program also fed into this process. Once those initial steps were taken, the researcher proceeded to download conversations threads primarily from the three modules in which skepticism did arise (Modules One, Two and Three). All modules used focused on best practices, whether in fostering development of literacy domains or in designing appropriate learning environments.

Once the data were downloaded, Dressman & McCarthey's (2004) four phase method for open coding was used to analyze the relevant conversational threads. In the pre-analytical phase, the researcher sorted threads by date and according to whether they were made prior to or after the sharing of resources from the Caribbean. Comments were thus divided into two categories, those that were posted prior to the sharing of pictures of exemplary Caribbean classrooms and best practice in action and those that were posted afterwards. In that way pre-sharing comments could be compared with post-sharing comments. Formatting was used to distinguish the two sets of posting. Additionally, comments on teaching practices were separated from those on exemplary environments. The latter sorting (best practices from environment design) occurred naturally since these took place in different learning forums. Still, some natural overlap did occur. See Appendix A for highlights from the data.

Once sorting was done, the research moved to the coding phase. In this phase, key comments that exposed teacher trainees' reactions to video and module content were highlighted. The frequency with which a particular sentiment was articulated (or concurred with) by a student was noted. Based on the frequency of the various sentiments, preliminary hypotheses (insights) regarding common reactions were formulated: skepticism versus open acceptance of practices; negative versus positive reaction regarding applicability of practices to local contexts; eagerness/reluctance/unwillingness to act. Notations such as negative (N), positive (P), mixture of positive and negative P/N, PD suggested action (SA) and action taken (A) were used to pinpoint reactions.

Labeling of reactions was followed by pattern recognition, the third phase. Repetitions of reactions that follow specific patterns were noted across comments and sections, and trends in the movement of reactions noted. The research, for example, looked across pre-sharing and post-sharing reactions to see whether responses grew more positive or remained negative. Preliminary hypotheses regarding trends in reactions were then formulated.

Once hypotheses were formed, the research moved to the fourth phase (triangulation) in which two colleagues viewed the raw data and independently noted patterns. A comparison of interpretations and hypotheses led to a refining of the initial list of hypotheses. Once this list was finalized, a search for other studies with similar findings was conducted. Not many studies have addressed this specific issue, but some were found that mirrored recommendations the researcher had in mind based on findings. Those studies would later serve to strengthen the recommendations made.

To get additional peer feedback, the paper was presented at the Belize Open Campus site for feedback from peers who had congregated for the Belize Country Conference (November, 2010). Findings and conclusions are provided below.

Findings

Question 1: What do conversations between facilitators and trainees reveal about trainee willingness and sense of agency in applying literacy best practices?

Upon examination of the dialogue, it was observed that when exposed to images of innovative best practices in the online environment and even when appropriately mentored by experts, students tended to harbor a sense of disbelief that practices observed can actually work in their context. Even amidst admiration for the utility of such practices, students still communicate a lack of agency and willingness to try new practices. Such reactions seemed propelled by the fact that videos and other media resources tend to be based on classrooms in the United States and United Kingdom. Students acknowledged that practices did mirror exemplary practices encountered in the modules, but doubted the transferability of practices to their own context. (*"It's difficult to carry out"*).

Noteworthy is the fact that reactions to depictions of exemplary environments tended to be more negative than reactions to teaching practices. The former (environmental transformation) tended to be more resistant to peer and instructor encouragement to think positively and creatively, and students needed tangible proof in order to change their perspectives. Even so, doubts still lingered. While reactions to teaching practices reflected a mixture of positive and negative reactions from the outset, reactions to exemplary classroom design tended to be purely pessimistic at the outset and may reflect the de-emphasis of such practices in the region. It might be that teachers feel greater sense of efficacy to change teaching methods and strategies than to alter the physical environment. See notated data in Appendix A.

Reactions tended to move in a particular direction as students came to terms with practices to which they were being exposed. A movement from awe to skepticism or doubt that strategies can work in Caribbean

contexts, given contextual mismatches, was at first evident *("I was very impressed with the organization and sequencing of each of the lessons in the videos. However, I would like to know if…").* Such thinking is also exposed in expressions such as *"…it would be a bit challenging to carry out*" and *"… (we) have to dream about preferred arrangement"*. Upon facilitator prompting, students typically moved toward a ferreting out of possible solutions to address contextual mismatches ("*I am pleased that our facilitators nudge us to find ways to contextualize these ideas.")*. Reactions then transitioned to calls for Caribbean exemplars and, upon students being presented with Caribbean images of successful practices and effective classrooms, a sense of hope and, finally, eagerness to act despite challenges (*"It has inspired me to go beyond…".*; *"I have a deep desire to do the same"; "I am encouraged to create a different class climate")*. Evident also was a new resolve to enjoy the challenges as well as the results (*"So many of the things I learned in that course I have managed to implement and I must say THEY WORK."*; *"By the end of the day I am covered in chalk dust, my voice is gone, my legs are weak and my fingers are blistered. But I rest and my voice returns, my legs are stronger, my blisters heal and I am ready for the day ahead...It's worth it.).*Even the use of the word "managed" in one of the examples above belies lingering doubts.

Question 2: What provisions do trainees believe must be put in place to ensure that they readily transfer best practices learned in virtual environment to real-life teaching and professional development situations?

On at least six occasions students made recommendations for capturing images of Caribbean learning events and environments, and using these as a part of their own training ("*What I would like to see are videos of teachers in our region employing these practices.")*. Students expressed a willingness to capture such images themselves and to engage in learning communities surrounding those images ("…*is it possible that we could post pictures of what exists at our schools and offer suggestions relating to some of the challenges we face in designing environments that support literacy.*"). Quite telling is their repeated call for *"Lights! Camera! Action!"*

To a large extent, students seemed quite reluctant to apply strategies they viewed as being more workable in privileged contexts and which are in *"a sharp contrast to* (their) *own Caribbean experience",* and repeatedly called for Caribbean-based exemplars before attempting to undertake the "risk" of implementation. It is possible that, while "simulated" experiences presented in "borrowed videos" may allow for exposure and reflection (the preliminary steps in observation learning), doubts on the part of trainees regarding the applicability of such practices to Caribbean context will still linger and implementation less likely if practices are depicted in more privileged settings. Thus, conversations illustrate the need for the region to develop its own repository of high-quality, "home-designed" resources illustrating cutting-edge best practices involving Caribbean literacy practitioners working with Caribbean students so that trainees can move beyond being *"impressed"* with depiction of successful classrooms practices to being "*absolutely impressed!"* as one student indicates*.*

Conclusions and Recommendations

As indicated by the data, exposure to cutting-edge best practices creates in teachers a sense of initial disbelief that often results in cognitive distancing from best practices. Such disbelief must be offset by exposure, not only to competent facilitators who can steer teacher thinking, but also to Caribbean-based exemplars of best practices and exemplary classroom environments. It is possible that the online training situation, at present, may not allow students to project themselves into images of best practices viewed in the virtual space and thus to readily superimpose such practices onto their context. Online teacher trainers and course designers may need to seriously consider populating the space with localized resources in much the same way that teachers in face-to-face settings create classroom displays using localized and student-created materials in a bid to foster ownership and personal connections. Bandura's socio-cognitive theory maintains that students must approve of practices and must (due to a desire to minimize anxiety) perceive behaviors as viable and desirable in achieving specific outcomes if they are to readily emulate such behaviors.

It must be made clear that the aim of the study is not to promote blind insularity or what Irvine (2003) refers to as a "not-from-here syndrome", but rather to propose that the learning space should be populated with resources that foster a sense of ownership and identification on the part of students because they see themselves and their students in the images projected. While online courses provide an economically viable way of meeting the training needs of Caribbean territories and can, in fact, place

images of the latest best practices "right at the doorsteps" of Caribbean nations, multi-media resources presented must truly address the teaching demands within the Caribbean context and must acknowledge Caribbean literacy teaching and learning challenges.

Teachers must, as they have clearly articulated, experience images displaying best practices that work in their contexts and with which they can readily identify if they are to truly integrate these experiences into their own repertoire of practices. As long as images reflect more privileged contexts, doubts may continue to linger. Showing a student a "perfect model" estranged from their own context will not necessarily achieve the desired transfer of strategies and methods learned to practice. Teachers in training must view the best and be taught by the best but they must also believe that these practices are best for their context. Potentials for training are enormous; however, funds must be invested in creating resources that illustrate best practices that work for Caribbean teachers working with Caribbean students.

Irvine (2003), in assessing possibilities for optimization of online training in the English-speaking Caribbean, indicates a need for regional cooperation in the development of shareable resources to be used in the long run, even though expedience might dictate the use of "borrowed" resources in the short term. Dodero et al (2007) also underscores the need for a "localization" of resources available to teachers during training, indicating a need to harness local expertise in creating resources to stock a repository (preferably web-based) with which teachers (those practicing as well as those in training) can engage. Such a storehouse can stock searchable resources to be used by teachers in all English-speaking Caribbean territories. With this repository in place, teachers can search for and find activities and practices recommended by experts and their peers. They can then seek to adopt practices in their specific context and report back to the learning community regarding their effectiveness. If the repository is web-based, both students and course developers can pull from this resource in augmenting the content of online courses. Such a provision appears to hold immense potential for changing teacher perception regarding the viability of new practices and can encourage transfer of such practices to actual teaching and professional development situations. Potentially, perceptions of the quality of online teacher training programs could improve.

Of course, such a resource, if provided online, would require a platform to support its operation. Open-source environments such as Moodle can work for such an endeavor as this option would eliminate licensing expenses. CaribNet's capacity to host such a repository can also be explored. Teachers who have already been trained and those being trained are already expected to apply practices in their context. Ministries can request that teachers document best practices as part of their tenure-seeking bid and that the best of these, once vetted by a select group of teacher trainers from designated universities, be uploaded to repositories for the training and mentoring of other teachers. Sessions can also be captured by roving trainers from the Caribbean Centers for Excellence for Teacher Training (CCETT) and similarly vetted for inclusion in this repository. Additionally, assessment data and materials produced by teachers and their pupils can be submitted to this collective storehouse.

Online repositories such as Teachscape and ITeach provide examples of ways in which governments in partnership with teacher training institutions and master teachers can collaborate to make images of best practice in action available to teachers. Other models exist to guide development of such a resource. Weintjes & Karim (2007), for instance, provide a workable structure that can be adjusted to address the specific needs of the region. In this model, the repository comprises two dimensions, one being geared toward resource provisions, the other toward sustaining professional learning communities in which teachers share experiences with specific methods and resources. Each arm would support the other. Having complementary offline learning communities might also be needed so as to support practicing teachers not yet online.

Irvine (2003) maintains that development of shareable regional resources can be executed most effectively using "a systematic approach to cooperation and collaboration" (p. 5). Because any such resource would likely require a consortium to lead its development and maintenance, developers could draw on Dodero et al's (2007) consortium model. A modified version of the consortium model could work for Caribbean purposes so that, instead of having three groups (universities, active/master teachers involved in using practices, and all other teachers) as proposed by Dodero and colleagues, the resource would be support by a team drawing on experts from four groups (our ministries of education's policy makers and curriculum developers, in addition).

The first or inner sphere would comprise teacher-training professionals from higher education institutions. These parties would be, as suggested Dodero et al, the driving force behind the development of the virtual community, "guiding and supporting teachers to be trained, and those wishing to apply the

methodology in classrooms" (p. 352). Given UWI Open Campus' "trailblazing role" is promoting online teacher training, it seems well positioned to lead such a team. The OC would coordinate training activities and would take administrative roles in the supporting technologies since it already has the capacity to do so.

At the second inner sphere would reside master teachers from CCETT. These professionals would, in collaboration with classroom teachers, document instructional events and exemplary environments from classroom in which they work or to which they pay regular visit. CCETT personnel would liaise with lecturers at university level to receive guidance in research-based practices and principles as emanating from the literature so that practices and classrooms documents reflect the research base and are pedagogical sound.

The third inner sphere would comprise regular teachers and teachers-in-training wishing to implement practices within their classes and who may wish to comment on the quality and relevance of resource and ideas pulled from the repository. These teachers would be encouraged to take an active role in web-based or on-the-ground learning communities in which they share experiences in using resources. This is where policy makers in the respective ministries of education (the fourth sphere) would be instrumental. They could put the wheels into motion through incentives and policies that would give teachers the drive to engage in learning communities and to consent to the documentation of their classroom work for potential inclusion in the regional repository.

With such a repository in place, possibilities are boundless. Already, our students are getting ideas ("*Maybe we could do a couple together and forward them to the open campus so they can use them"; "I think I will try to make my own videos in the future").* Thus, students do want what happens in exemplary Caribbean classrooms to make their way into the online training environment and they do want a hand in ensuring that this happens.

Final Words

The University of the West Indies' Open Campus has put much needed infrastructure in place to ensure the effective training of literacy coaches online. Training provisions are available for course developers, instructional designers, and teaching teams. Quality control processes are in place to ensure that students are exposed to sound reading materials and to extensive instructor support. Students enjoy vibrant learning conversations with facilitators, and enjoy much freedom of expression. The data analyzed in this study are a bi-product of such a freedom and reveal much about what student desire to make the online training mode work well for them. They have said quite clearly that they do need Caribbean exemplars connected to their training and that they are willing to participate in the creation and use of such exemplars. The region can and should embark on efforts to create the shareable resources they need.

Several organizations do exist that can help support the development of shareable resources to support practicing teachers and teacher trainees. The manual, *Resource Guide: Programs Related to Strengthening and Financing Higher Education in the Americas* provides a catalogue of other organizations able to provide needed support in material creation. Regional organizations such as the Caribbean Examination Council have shown that it is possible to pull teams together to create teacher support resources. The region does have the expertise and the capacity to create the materials and resources we need. The OC is not entirely where it wants to be, but the prospects do look promising.

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Appendix A

The Data: Highlights from the Conversations

Teacher comments of Video Vignettes – *Teaching Practices*	Date	Insights
I was very impressed with the organization and sequencing of each of the lessons in the videos… **However, I would like to know if these are private schools…** Also, **I noticed the classes are small…** Do you primary school teachers find that class size does play a major role when trying to achieve your objectives or planning your class activities? **Maybe our Ministries of Education need to look at these** factors as part of curriculum planning.	05/10	Teacher is impressed; questions feasibility for public schools; teacher hopes policymakers are cognizant of contextual gaps. P/N
I endorse your sentiments about the sequencing of the teaching in the videos**. The children have at their disposal attractive and appropriate resources…. I am the teacher** of a Standard Two class of 25 students, **with no assistant and inadequate resources to work with** although some effort is made to design my own**.** I sincerely believe that the class size, the appropriateness and the adequacy of resources play a major role in the delivery of the Curriculum. **Am I to believe that this is a Caribbean deficiency that has to be corrected;** although I am fully aware that Caribbean Teachers are very creative in designing some resources, however, this exercise is time-consuming…	05/10	Teacher notes gap; blames contextual issues; notes challenges posed to even the most creative of teachers; hopes for change. P/N
Though I teach at the 1st, 4th and 5th form levels, **seeing the videos has instill in me the desire to want to do more** in terms of being more creative especially with the form one students	5/18	Teacher is inspired to act but questions applicability to students served. P/Q
We cannot allow our lack of, or limited supply of resources, to deter us from reaching within our creative minds to provide exciting, interesting and self rewarding activities for our students. **Has anyone ever tried "Alphabet Checkers"?** You construct a checkers board as for the normal checkers game…	5/19	Teacher is willing to surmount challenges; makes suggestions. P/A
These practices that have been tried tested and proven. I think that with our foundation training and background coupled with other practices, **we can conquer any challenge that arises.**	5/20	Teacher believes practices reflect what works; teachers can surmount challenges. P/Affirmative
I have found the videos to be **very helpful.** I think our **teachers will benefit** from some of these activities.	5/20	Adopts a coaching stance; want to share practices. P/C(coaching) A
The videos are **extremely informative and provide a bank of supplementary teaching material.**	5/22	Videos are crucial coaching materials. A
I found the videos **very inspiring and a sharp contrast to my own Caribbean experience …**	5/24	Images are inspiring but are at odds with the context. P/N
Maybe **we could do a couple together and forward them to the open campus** so they can use them. They are rather interesting.	05/24	We need to create our own and make them available for teachers/trainees. P/N/A/SA
I think **I will try to make my own videos in the future**.	05/26	We need to capture our teaching in action. SA
Teacher comments of Video Vignettes – *Environment*	Date	Insights
As I write this I shudder at the fact that some of **the classrooms in which I taught were pigeon infested…**	7/7	Challenges exist. N

I think one of **our greatest challenges is to find adequate space** to set up our different learning centers.	07/12	Practices are difficult if not impossible to execute given resources. N
It's **difficult to carry out** Morrow's ideas in a Caribbean setting. I said to myself that this could never occur in the Caribbean setting	07/12	Practices are difficult to execute in our contest. N
I believe that it would be **a bit challenging to arrange the physical setting of our Caribbean classrooms in the manner that is suggested** …. particularly as our classrooms are usually overcrowded and some of the facilities and physical structures mentioned are not readily available within our Caribbean context. 13/07	07/12	Practices are difficult to execute; resources are unavailable. N
Our Caribbean classrooms do not have the space and equipment….		Practices are difficult to execute given resources. N
Although it may be a challenge creating such exemplary classroom it is quite feasible.	7/16	Best practices are feasible despite contextual challenges. N but W(willing)
The various techniques for first grade literacy instruction as suggested **might be a bit challenging to arrange the physical settings of our Caribbean classrooms as they are normally overcrowded, lack necessary resources and activity centers are small or non-existent**	7/16	Creating exemplary environments is challenging to execute. N
Despite the challenges of limited classroom space and inadequate resources, **we can still achieve exemplary literacy instruction** within our schools similar to that highlighted	7/16	Exemplary instruction is possible despite challenges. P/N
In looking at **the majority of the videos one had the feeling of very efficient, very well run disciplined classrooms.** There was no crowding of desks or of children. Teachers looked cool, fresh and in control. There was an encouraging arrangement of desks and working space. When the surrounding displays could be viewed. The entire room set up was clean, tidy, and appealing. Neat bulletin boards, black/white boards. Everything seemed to be properly put away. The students' desks appeared uncluttered and tidy. In my county, the focus in most classrooms is in the arrangement of desks. **At the end of the day, it is a matter of pragmatics, the best fit for the most desks wins out. Teachers we have to dream about preferred arrangements….**	17/6	Contextual challenges are still as reality; exemplary classrooms are a dream. N/S(sarcastic)
I very much admire the attractive classrooms in the resources, but the reality is that we are not privy to many of these resources and sometimes lack the finance, creativity or motivation to create them. In this regard, **I am pleased that our facilitators nudge us to find ways to contextualize these ideas.** What **I would like to see are videos of teachers in our region employing these practices** because I am sure there are some of us in this very group who are! **LIGHTS...CAMERA...ACTION!!!!**	7/17	What we are viewing seems to be at odds with our reality. If such practices are possible in our context, let us document them and have these exemplars available. N/SA
As you stated, **perhaps one of our colleagues has such set up and can do such a video clip** (time permitting). **Lights ...camera...action...indeed !!!**	7/7	Whoever is capable and has the resources should document for the rest of us. N/SA

Post Image Sharing Comments
This is a very interesting classroom setting. What grade is it? How many students are in the class? It looks very inviting. 07/10 P/LD (lingering doubt)
Teachers did wonderful work with what they had. 07/10 (Teacher in the Bahamas) P/A
Is this for real? Or are these pictures taken from magazines? Wonderful. **I am encouraged to create a different class climate** so as to enhance learning. 7/10 (Teacher in The Bahamas) P

This is a grade one class and there were about 25-30 students in the class….Yes, her classroom was a bit more spacious but I also have pictures of teachers who worked in a very small classroom setting ... This teacher is still working very hard. (Belizean Facilitator). 7/10 P

Wow!! This is the sort of environment that stimulates students and motivates them to learn. **I have a deep desire to do the same** but .... 7/10 (St. Vincent and The Grenadines) P/A

Quite creative classroom setting. A setting like this motivates children to read and write. (Saint Lucia) P

This classroom looks very inviting; I also like the beach setting the children seemed quite relaxed. **The setting of the classroom shows the creativity of the teacher** in creating an environment that is child friendly and conducive to learning. (Jamaica) P

These are very enticing and motivating settings for learners. **I wish all classrooms could have settings like these**. Students would be more interested in coming to school and in learning.(Grenada) 07/12 P/DA (desire to act)

I am absolutely impressed! This is an environment that any child would read in; it simply says read and enjoy. **I have always wanted to do a theme scene and this has certainly given me some ideas**, so I would really like to see the smaller settings because my area is not as big. 07/13 P/DA/LD

The classroom is certainly stimulating, child friendly and inviting. **This classroom setting is also a testament to the creativity of the teacher** who first conceptualized the space before implementing it. We can take comfort in the fact that **a little creativity can go a long way** and that **every teacher has the capacity to work just such magic in their individual contexts**. (St. Lucia 07/14 P/D

I am very impressed. While looking at the pictures **I was trying to visualize my classroom looking like any one of them**. I love the whale pool reading area, but space does not accommodate for it. The wire wheel with a beach umbrella will definitely hold in my classroom. **I am considering something similar.** P/A

Doing this course makes you anxious to get back to work to try out some new ideas. Now there's a novelty. 07/16

P/DA

I emailed the pics to one of my teachers. She was absolutely thrilled like I was with the level of creativity that was displayed. With a setting like that who would not want to come to school and learn. I was just wondering though, although we are coming to the end of the programme **is it possible that we could post pictures of what exists at our schools and offer suggestions relating to some of the challenges we face in designing environments that support literacy**? 08/05 P/A/LC

This is creativity at its peak! Students look comfortable in the settings. In addition to the support given to the teaching of concepts, the strategies being utilized for small and flexible groupings, student motivation and love for reading must be high. The value of the right environment cannot be overly underscored. What do you think happens to students who come from such environments and later move into secondary school classrooms with bare walls and only chalk and talk and text books? P/LD

This presentation shows how the resources available can be used attractively to meet the needs of students. Just a few days ago before the closing of school, **I took a blank sheet of paper and a pencil hoping to design the model reading classroom**. What I came up with is nothing close to that. Thanks for sharing such inspirational stories. **It has inspired me to go beyond**. 10/01 P/DA/A

Post-Course Actions and Reactions: Insights Gathered

EDLS6502 [the best practice course] continues to inspire me. So many of the things I learned in that

course I have managed to implement and I must say THEY WORK. I even have a word wall--at secondary level this is unheard of. The seniors love it. **[Elation that practices actually work; suspension of disbelief]**

I don't have a permanent classroom, so I am a floater who wishes for a cart. This programme has caused me to be the teacher who lugs around a portable library (seriously...37 books in a book bag), flip charts, computer, speakers, large pieces of paper, crayons, markers, music, movie clips, props, text books, chalk, duster and the list goes on. **[Best practice integration]**

This week, I added a camera to my list. My newest idea is to take pictures of students who are reading during break, print them large and write..." This person got caught reading!" The "culprit" wins a free book. I am also taking pictures mainly to capture the final year I have with my seniors. **[Electronic documentation]**

By the end of the day I am covered in chalk dust, my voice is gone, my legs are weak and my fingers are blistered. But I rest and my voice returns, my legs are stronger, my blisters heal and I am ready for the day ahead...It's worth it. **[Satisfaction]**
Have a great day!