Student voices

Reflections of a technological journey in teacher education at a distance (and some advice too)

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I have worked in the early childhood field on and off since 1999 when my current boss set up her own centre. Prior to that I helped in the office and played mother helper at my oldest daughter's preschool. I have now been in the early childhood field so long and like it so much that I really can't see myself do anything else.

Although my boss had been urging me to train for a long time I never really thought that the time was right for me to retrain (again - when I arrived from Holland I had to redo my laboratory training resulting in a two year course in immunoheamatology for laboratory assistants at the blood transfusion centre). Despite my boss' urging I kept postponing enrolling in an early childhood teacher education programme: Keatley my youngest was too young, there just wasn't the time, I was too old, and so on. In hindsight I wish I had taken up that offer right at the beginning for I now see that there is never a 'right' time and that the 'right time' is something you have to make happen. Actually I started my studies when the New Zealand Government changed its requirements for qualified staff.

Returning to study after 20 something years, I was petrified, and not only because it had been a long time, but also because English is my second language. The fact that my sister-in-law wanted to study was for me the final push, because it is good to have someone to share the highs and lows with, and with both of us working at the same centre, we could really support each other.

Distant learning for me was the only way I could even consider going back to studying. It allowed me more time at home with the kids and that is, after all, my first priority. Being there for them, albeit in the office, is a great comfort.

Distance learning used to be done via hand written reports or essays. It involved a lot of books and paper work sitting around the office, often lost or very difficult to locate. I guess technology has done away with all of that. However this really worried me because I had to acquire a computer before I commenced my studies. We had been holding Danielle, my oldest daughter, back because we believed that she needed to learn to research from books rather than the internet. Needless to say she is now doing even better in her studies since we got the internet.

At the start of my study, knowing nothing about computers and the internet, I actually wrote things out long hand before typing it in for an assignment. I find the computer much easier now. It has taken however almost two years to get over the two fingered typing which made writing essays a most time consuming job, but at least everybody can read my writing! Now I have progressed to using six fingers; three on each hand. It is much faster but I still hit the wrong key sometimes. No problem though, as you don't have to be able to spell … there is spell check! Great only some spellings are different in American and English, and some things may be spelled correctly but have a completely different

meaning, so beware! I still use my husband as proof reader. He is very reliable and picks up things the computer does not. I had to use every willing person around me for help. I am sure they got sick of me hounding them. I think if I had really realized the extent to which I would be using the computer I would have taken some time to familiarize myself with it before I started studying. However tutors, friends, and of course my children have helped me through.

Through their help I have become 'slightly' computer literate and have an understanding of how to save work so it is easy to locate files, where information has been collected and recorded for use at a later date (doing lots of work only to lose it is very frustrating as I found out the hard way: make a habit to save your work regularly, and certainly before leaving the computer). Cutting and pasting also now involves no mess. No more bits of paper to stack on essays to see which sentence fits where best. No involved long re -writing of documents, just a simple push of a button. As long as it is the right one! It can be very devastating if you hit the DELETE key by mistake. Once I got the hang of typing and 'cutting and pasting' I found the computer very handy indeed, and I am still finding out more as time goes on.

Now I sit at the computer and type my thoughts straight in. I have also discovered that you can speak through a microphone and the computer will type it out for you. Hands free! However my accent seems to get in the way and I have to edit it quite thoroughly. Not really worth the effort yet, but may work well for others. I am still trying to refine it.

So I found myself all of a sudden with my feet firmly planted in the 21st century. It was a shock, but I couldn't do without it now. The internet has made the world much smaller. Information is at your finger tips. It does pay to remain slightly critical though, as not all information on the internet is relevant, up to date or to be believed. Authentic I guess is the word I am after. There are lots of files to look through if you happen to not type in the right information. It can take many hours of trying before you get the right file up. This can be a bit of a time waster, but I must say that you can also look in the wrong isle at the library in vain for the required information.

The internet is also a great way of finding support with your fellow students. Distance studying can be a very lonely thing and knowing that I can just quickly e-mail students is great, and for me it is also a fast and easy way to keep in contact with tutors, administrators and librarians. This is an aspect I like about the internet; you can get help fairly quickly by way of e-mailing the relevant people. That is if there is a responsive person at the receiving end (someone willing to respond). E-mail is really what is helping me through my studies best. Through it I have been able to build and maintain relationships with fellow students, colleagues and tutors alike. Very handy for bouncing ideas of one and other and so increasing your understanding and knowledge not only of the material studied but also of other peoples' perspectives. I have discovered that this is just as important, if maybe not more, as understanding the required readings. Being able to see things from other peoples' points of view helps to create a support system that is immensely valuable in times of high stress or disappointment.

So I recommend building up relationships with fellow student, in your year or not, if only for the support and understanding they can offer. I have been e-

mailing with students I have never even met, but who have known someone I know. Block courses have also been great for building relationships, just knowing that someone is in the same predicament helps to lighten the burden.

I have now installed broadband and have found this much easier still because it does not tie up the phone line. I can now talk to my tutor on the phone while accessing information or sending e-mails over the net. I know the children can reach me on the phone if they are away and that has taken a lot of stress out of my life.

I use the internet frequently not only to research for my studies but also to get new ideas for resources for work. I find it easier than going to the library. For my work I use the internet at least several times a week researching topics or themes for the children in my care. I find I don't have to leave home to find information which frees up more time for my children and if I want to leave things half finished I save my work and carry on at a later time. No books or papers to put away, just a button to press. It would be even easier if I could e-mail my assignments instead of using snail mail. As I frequently run out of time and end up hand delivering them anyway.

The college website is also great and I find and order text books from the college library like that. As a matter of fact I had not visited the college library until last week, and then I nearly missed it because I wasn't looking for it.

Looking back the only thing I would have liked upon commencement of my studies, would have been to have some help learning to use this very powerful tool. PC for Dummies did not do the job for me; it is much easier to have someone guide you through. Had I known I might have tried the free computer technology courses that are on offer. As it was I have relied largely on my tutor and my children and still everyday I find out new 'tricks' and shortcuts. It keeps it interesting I suppose.