How might online technologies be used to improve learners' performance through fostering understanding, reflection, collaboration, and inquiry?

All statements below are with reference to the Wide World TFU 1 online course.

1. Platform for interactions & collaborations

The workspace for teams was user-friendly and was where the reporter for the session could pick up the posts from team members and collate his report. Team members could read each others’ posts before they went public. This was where we could respond to each other in private and reversion our posts until we were ready for it to be posted publicly.

More than that, we were pleasantly surprised at how quickly our coach responded. We close the day by making a public post and next morning, we get a response that shapes our thinking and provokes further thought without us meeting our coaches face to face.

2. Fosters understanding of each other

Induction - The initial online induction was through interaction and was great as we began to realize that there were others beyond our little island state in far away places like Scotland & Europe who were interested in the same professional learning as we were. Simple short introductions generated responses which built up the beginnings of camaraderie and online relationships. What struck home was the virtual reality in which we learnt when different ones informed about the snowy weather in contrast to the damp rainy season of December in our country at that time of the year. They were working in such different lands yet through the Internet seemed so near in time.

Through the course interactions, we began to realize that teaching is not done very differently in other countries too; that there were common areas for improvement in the way we teach. This awareness helped us realize that we could be open about our interactions. Interestingly enough, we seem to approach lessons sometimes in similar ways (such as when we fail to take advantage of our students’ profiles to design a lesson that they can relate better to). At times, we realized that they had practices we could learn from. That became the common underlying understanding upon which we could be more open about our discussions.

In this virtual reality, the online platform has enabled course participants to develop some trust among ourselves, so that we were freer with our interactions despite not having met each other. The photograph of course participants next to their posts made the interaction more real as the face told us who we were interacting with.

3. Fosters understanding of the course

The course design
The TfU course design has deepened our understanding of what TfU is about – how we can develop a deeper understanding of what we teach. The way the course unfolds is an example of how we can develop understanding of TfU. The online platform allows for messing about activities,
followed by individual, then group discussions and then the self reflections. The very design as an example is a very powerful tool to develop understanding in an authentic way.

One ‘cultural’ factor of interest was that there was some discomfort as course participants attempted the first ‘messing about’ activity at the beginning of the course. The question that they had to attempt was “what is understanding and how does it develop?” We were told, “Don’t worry if you are unclear about a lot and want to say ‘I don’t know’ Just think onto the page”. No Asian would want to expose their inner thoughts by thinking onto the page lest they make a mistake and ‘lose face.’ It will take a lot to salvage such a shameful situation. Perhaps Americans are freer in their expressions and course participants had to break out of their mental frames and to adjust according to do the assignment.

Being efficient and wanting to get on with the right thing (there isn’t much tolerance for failure in a society based on meritocracy) is very much a trait of the society we come from and the impatience we felt with this ‘messing about’ activity left us wondering whether the assignment was with the effort. It was only those of us who had read ahead the course book began to fathom what this messing about activity was about and that it was alright if you are not altogether correct, but you need to be thoughtful about what the assignment requires.

Some assignments such as one messing about activity was somewhat like an online forum where all were requested to make posts in the forum and at the same time it incorporated elements such as using thinking skills with instructions such as ‘compare’ and ‘synthesize.’

4. Develops communities of practice

Teachers work in isolation in the classroom. Developing online communities challenges traditional ways of developing lessons. By going online, the teacher can now communicate his insights & private questions & test them against the views of his peers at the click of a button. The technology allows us to transcend physical space and in this very convenient manner facilitates the scope of practice as he taps into the shared thinking of others.

Barriers are further broken down with the online technology as it crosses international boundaries and reaches communities of practice in other countries through the course. Taken a step further, this provides the platform for tapping into global communities of practice.

5. Encourages collaborations

Alternatively, he could work in a team and collaborate with others online. By rotating the team reporter, each would have been given the opportunity to lead and hone leadership skills. Analysis and synthesis are required, taking into consideration all points of view and adding value to the team’s work. We surely could not have got to our level of thinking and the level of development of ideas and understanding if we had worked in isolation. We leveraged on each other’s creativity ad strengths. Among ourselves, we were thinking at many levels; there were many layers of thinking – in all, we were highly engaged.

All these have far reaching effect on our students as by benefiting from communities of practice made available through the TfU course, we can make our students aware of how online collaboration with their peers through guided inquiry can extend their learning beyond the classroom and school.

6. Develops reflective practice

It has not yet become a habit of mind to reflect on what we do and to bring to full circle our thought processes. Often we are just too busy and in this busyness we lose a lot. However, through the online platform, teacher capacity was developed best through reflective practice. This is where the
learning gets down to the individual. It helps develop teacher capacity by bringing to the surface knowledge from within. Sometimes it is to discover new dimensions of understanding.

Reflective practice serves to correct and make us critical of ourselves so that we can revise our thinking and teaching practices. It helps us construct new descriptions, to make new sense of situations of uncertainty by reflective inquiry, finding a new way of setting the problem. That which is intuitive can now be articulated. Like a scientific art of research, it develops in one the ability to discover the new, through firstly, the peer review where we are instructed to “respond” and then through self review.

One outcome of reflective inquiry of the TfU course is that teachers began to rework their approaches to teaching practices upon believing its benefits of engaged learning. They accept that changes are necessary although they agonise over using more time to get through a unit. Although initial time to adjust is heavy, in the long term, time is saved. (Time lost is time saved)

Another outcome of reflective inquiry is that teachers are more willing to experiment and explore to make lessons more creative and exciting for the students. Teachers are more willing to conduct demonstrations in class although it consumes more time and to discuss and work on a project over a sustained period of time. Overall they make learning more effective.

7. Assessment of online learning

The assessment of online learning gave the whole course a rigour that looked from back to front-backwards to performances of understanding and understanding goals. The ongoing assessments were supported by the assessment funnel framework, describing the paths we took for ongoing assessments. Having put the connections of the whole unit in place with the ongoing assessments, our teachers have begun introducing a portfolio of students’ work in which they can see their development of thinking as they reversion their work. This is a new practice that we are trying out, particularly with student reflections as students are not familiar with the practice of reflective inquiry. So they are given another chance to improve on their marked answers using the teachers’ comments. This is because in primary school, teachers rely heavily on the drill and practice method as they prepare students for the national exam.

Teachers have begun to use rubrics to assess students work and found that it was too difficult for them. We would like to move forward by developing the assessment criteria with our students so that they set for themselves standards which are achievable without the teacher imposing her standards on them. The teacher will then moderate their criteria. In this way, teachers begin to adopt more strongly the constructivist practices in their classroom practices.

8. Offers flexibility of time in our busy schedule.

As there are individual assignments and team assignments, upon agreeing on a schedule, we work in our own time, catering to our own time preferences & schedules. We designate a time best to ourselves to attend to the assignments so that it is not a rushed job. There is time for reading, reflection and enjoyment of learning.