ONLINE EFL WRITING COURSE DESIGN IN LIGHT OF COMPLEXITY THEORY

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Abstract
This paper aims at sharing the experience of a teacher/researcher when designing an online writing course of English as a foreign language for public school teachers in São Paulo, Brazil, in light of the complexity theory. In the first part, the teacher/researcher discusses and articulates the constructs regarding instructional design, the writing practice and complexity theory considered by her in designing the writing course. In the second and third parts, she shares her design experience. By doing so, she expects to contribute aspects for teachers to consider and to reflect on when designing, offering and/or taking language courses online.

Introduction
The number of online courses being offered and taken is increasing day by day. However, special attention should be given to their design and implementation due to the fact that they cannot be a mere reproduction of the non virtual courses once we are dealing with a different environment, patterns of interaction, roles, and tools with knowledge being constructed in a different way.

Taking this into account, this paper has the objective of sharing my experience as a teacher/researcher when designing an online writing course of English as a foreign language for public school teachers in São Paulo, Brazil. Firstly, I will discuss and articulate the constructs I considered which are related to the complexity theory, writing and instructional design. Then I will focus on the design process itself, mentioning its phases and some of the choices made, challenges faced and decisions taken. When sharing and reflecting on the design experience I expect to contribute, as well as raise questions on the topic, for those who are designing, offering and/or taking online language courses.
The Theoretical Constructs

As this work aims at sharing the experience I lived as a teacher/researcher when designing an online writing course of English as a foreign language for public school teachers, it is important to mention the main constructs that support this research in progress.

Complexity
Paradigms are our unconscious view about things and the world (Morin, 2006, p. 10), and they are not permanent because our values, beliefs, concepts and ideas are in constant evolution and result from the dissatisfaction in relation to the predominant existing models (Moraes, 2006, pp. 55–59).

Such dissatisfaction also affects education once there is no more room for the existing paradigm that prioritizes the result and not the process; offers linear and reductionist curricula; ignores dialogue and interactions; fragmentizes, automates, detaches and individualizes, sees the student as an observer whose experience is not considered, and the teacher as the person who detains and transmits knowledge (Behrens & Oliari, 2007, pp. 59–61; Moraes, 2006, p. 43). We need a new educational paradigm that aims at a non compartmentalized, reductive knowledge, and recognizes that any knowledge is incomplete and not finished (Morin, 2005, p. 11; 2006, p. 7). The substitution of a thought that isolates for one that unites, of the disjunctive and reductive thought for a complex one; “complex, in the original sense of the term complexus: what is weaved together” ¹ (Morin, 2005, p. 89).

Complexity is seen as a theory that articulates the integrative thought, allowing a weave between subject and object, order and disorder, stability and movement, teacher and student. It considers events, actions, life interactions, reasons, sensations, emotions, feelings, and intuitions (Behrens & Oliari, 2007, p. 63; Mariotti, 2007, p. 139; Moraes, 2006, pp. 71–73; Morin 2006, pp. 63–105). It is the result of a collection of new conceptions, visions, discoveries and reflections (Morin, 2006, p. 77) in which the physical world is seen as a net of inter-related events and relations and not as a collection of isolated parts presented in a given order.

Seven inter-dependent principles, proposed by Morin (2005, pp. 95–96; 2006, pp. 74–77), help us think about complexity theory:

- The systemic or organizational principle: breaks with the linear idea of cause and effect, product and producer, structure and superstructure

¹ All in-text quotations have been translated by me.
once we are products and producers and everything that is produced goes back to what produces it in a self-constitutive, self-organized and self-productive cycle.

- **The hologrammatic principle**: understands that not only is the part in the whole but the whole is inscribed into the part as well.

- **The retroactive circuit or feedback principle**: the cause acts on the effect and the effect on the cause modifying it.

- **The recursive circuit principle**: products and effects are, themselves, producers and the cause of what is produced.

- **The self-eco-organization principle**: explains *autonomy* and *dependence*. There is an autonomy/dependence relation in which the autonomy of the subject is inseparable of his dependence; that is, there is no possibility of autonomy without multiple dependences.

- **The dialogic principle**: conceives dialogue between order, disorder and organization.

- **The reintroduction of the cognoscente subject principle**: reintegrates the subject, his emotions, motivations, wishes, affections, culture and history in the process of knowledge construction.

Knowledge is perceived and co-produced through our dialogue with the world (Morin, 2008, pp. 204–205), presupposing the participation of the individual and interaction with the object and the physical and social environments (Moraes, 2006, p. 88). According to Morin (2005, p. 24), it comprehends and stands, at the same time operations of linkage and separation work in a circular process. Knowledge is: 1.) constituted by mutable variables by means of mutual, non linear or pre-determined enrichments; 2.) gradually created when exploring connections, relations, integrations, and by living the process; 3.) related to information; and 4.) inserted in a context (Morin, 2005, pp. 11–16).

In view of this new paradigm we need to re-think the focus given to the teaching and learning processes in order to re-dimension or consolidate perspectives and practices and look for directives that would allow us to contemplate the transaction in which we live.

However, as my aim was to design an online course that would provide English teachers the chance to develop their writing skills in English as a foreign language, it was also necessary for me to research about writing practice. Although the authors presented in the next section have not thought about writing in light of complexity theory, I believe the aspects they raise meet the perspective and therefore can be considered.
Writing
Writing is a process that requires generation, formulation and refinement of ideas; commitment; revision and interference during its process; consciousness about a reader; and needs to be perceived as a process of self-negotiation and discovery of meaning(s) (Zamel, 1987, p. 267).

Cox (1994) also sees writing as a process, but with the functions of registering and keeping information and clarifying and sustaining thought (pp. 169–170). The teacher’s role is to be the observer, the facilitator, the model, the reader and sustainer, interfering in the work, structuring the writing context and helping the writer to understand the process (pp. 171–172). Friedlanger (1996) suggests it is important to the writer to create a text, having as a reference his previous experiences, transmitting meaning, using a variety of formal aspects, transferring abilities and strategies from his mother tongue in a continuum that does not begin or finish with a single draft (pp. 109–110). Maybin (1996) emphasizes that, at the end of the process, writers should have a major sense of propriety in relation to the work done, feeling motivated once they have experienced learning opportunities, relating the classroom practice to the needs of the real world (pp. 186–194).

According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996) during the writing process, there is the need to organize information, develop fluency, gain control over the additional vocabulary, use more complex structures, acquire maturity in relation to the style, and reflect on the purpose and audience (pp. 303–304). The authors believe procedures such as cooperative learning; instruction based on content; consciousness about the audience, language and editing; free writing; semantic mapping; and graphics organizers help the writer in the process.

Taking into account that I was designing an online writing course, it was also necessary to focus on instructional design. The authors presented in the following section have not thought about instructional design in light of complexity theory but I believe that the aspects they present should be considered and applied in my online course design.

Instructional Design
When thinking about distance learning and instructional design, Palloff and Pratt (1999) meet the vision of the new educational paradigm once they see learning as an active process with knowledge construction and learning occurring by experimentation, manipulation and gain of abilities. According to them, distance learning allows learners to experience a new environment with new responsibilities, roles, rules, norms, patterns of interaction, and ethical, spiritual, emotional and psychological matters, by means of a collaborative work.

Identifying the participants’ needs in systematic development of course content with technical mediation is crucial as this will lead to the definition of the course objectives, the different phases the learner will go through and the tools to be used (Abbey, 2000; Berge, Collins, & Dougherty, 2000; Driscoll, 1998; Fullmer-Umani, 2000; Horton, 2000). According to Driscoll (1998, p. 9), a “good design” meets the identified needs; requires
interactivity (with the system, other participants and the instructor); non linearity; an easy interface; structured lessons; effective use of the multimedia, attention to technological and educational details (such as clear objective, opportunities of practice and meaningful feedback); control; and an environment in which participants are valued as individuals. It is important to pay attention to the clarity and quality of the materials; define objectives and deadlines; allocate the adequate amount of time to the development of the activities; establish rules and procedures; clarify what is expected from participants (commitment, responsibility, participation); and focus on the course rhythm, the number of participants, and the way in which feedback is provided (Horton, 2000, pp. 26–36, 406–431).

Driscoll (1998, p. 26) indicates that it is also necessary to focus the pertinent program so that includes:

- web/computer-based training: individual learning that features drill and practice, simulations, reading, questioning, and answering;
- web/electronic performance support system: just-in-time training focused on problem-solving; scientific, experiential or project method;
- web/virtual asynchronous classroom: non-real-time group learning that employs experiential tasks, discussions, and team projects; and
- web/virtual synchronous classroom: real-time collaborative group learning that uses discussions, problem solving, and reflection.

When designing an online course we should pay attention to its public, duration and number of participants; objectives; structure and sequencing; the environment required (hybrid or totally virtual); the equipment; how well the teacher and the students deal with the resources; the implicit learning theories and methods; the materials; the content and validity of the instructions; the implementation; the follow up that permeates the entire process; and the evaluation of all the phases that will allow us to revise the course (Abbey, 2000; Berge et al., 2000; Driscoll, 1998; Fullmer-Umari, 2000; Horton, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Summing up, the constructs related to complexity theory, writing practice and instructional design presented were the ones I considered in designing the online writing course of English as a foreign language presented in the following section.

**The Design Experience**

The course design had different phases, not isolated but inter-connected ones, as a phase is the result and depends on the previous ones. Considering the theoretical constructs presented, the objective was to design and provide teachers with a course that would
allow them to develop their writing skills in English as a foreign language. Thus, the course participants were public school English teachers and me, once I had the role of teacher/researcher and was responsible for its design.

In the first phase, prior to the design, public high school English teachers answered a questionnaire I devised asking about their personal and professional needs in relation to writing in English; their relation to this practice; the writing tasks their students needed to accomplish; how familiar they were with the use of technology; previous experiences and feelings in relation to online courses; and their views and expectations in relation to an online course of writing in English as a foreign language. The objective was to gather information about this audience in order to design a course that would suit their needs and expectations, considering their experiences, context and cultural imprinting.

With the course objective as a starting point, consideration of the information collected through the questionnaire and the constructs related to the complexity theory, writing and instructional design initiated a second phase — the design phase. Due to the audience for the course, the amount of time the teachers had for their studies, their relationship to and familiarity with the use of technologies, writing and the theoretical aspects mentioned, I decided upon a six-week asynchronous online course using a platform and not isolated tools available on the Internet. The decision for a platform aimed at providing participants with a digital learning experience and a centralized teaching/learning environment that would provide a space for information, reflections and notes; a space in which activities could be done, displayed and commented upon; and a space in which communication was established. I also believed the platform could promote interaction and reflection as well as an adequate space for the production of writings, negotiation and self-negotiation of meanings.

Then, I had to decide on the course structure, content and organization. The challenge was to design a course that aimed at knowledge construction, with the writing practice seen as a process, considering the principles of the complexity theory (Morin, 2005, pp. 95–96; 2006, pp. 74–77). For me, the teacher/researcher, this was an attempt to face challenges; to deal with the logical, the contradictory, the unpredictable, and the non determinable; to include the observer in the observation, considering the context and cultural imprinting; and to search for pertinent knowledge through means of collaborative work (Morin, 2004; 2006, pp. 63–70; 2008, pp. 196–273).

At this design moment, I felt the need to have contact with courses, even if not online ones, that had the principles of the complexity theory as a referential and I came across Behrens (2006) and Moraes (2008). Behrens (2006, pp. 35–54) proposes the Methodology of Projects which aims at promoting and developing an educational activity with autonomy and critical spirit, resulting in knowledge production. A problem would be a starting point that would allow and initiate the search for answers. This search would require commitment; critical and ethical views; individual and/or group investigations; and, mainly, learning how to learn beyond just memorizing information. Behrens (2006) believes that by problematizing we can create bonds to themes that belong to the
surrounding reality, surpassing certainties, and creating room for reflexive processes, argumentation and the statement of ideas. To Moraes (2008, pp. 159–162) the key elements are contextualized practices, individual and group reflections, cooperation, solidarity, learning circumstances that motivate, and mediating questions—a well-elaborated question can allow dialogy, contextualization, recursivity, self-organization, autonomy and reflection, and regulation of the learners’ development and learning processes. The challenge, though, is to elaborate questions that can start the learning process, not leading to obvious and simplifying explanations or the establishment of certainties or non questionable truths (Moraes, 2008, p. 163).

Considering and reflecting upon the constructs previously mentioned and the methodologies proposed by Behrens (2006) and Moraes (2008), I opted for a co-constructed course, with the teacher/researcher and the participants, together, deciding, working, discovering, and constructing meaning. Therefore, I decided to provide participants with situations that were, are or could be part of their professional or private lives. The objective was to make them reflect upon and discuss the process of writing in English as a foreign language by recalling their theoretical-methodological-experiential background, encouraging them to do research individually or in groups, reinforcing their commitment to the process in which they were engaged with critical and ethical views. I believed this would allow participants to reflect about their contexts, reality, experiences, and teaching practices. However, even if the course was not been completely pre-designed, it had an initial structure that contemplated text planning, drafting, revising, and editing.

With the definition of the course structure, content, theoretical and methodological aspects that would give it support, materials and links selected, it was time to transport things to the platform. Although I expected it to be a simple procedure, I faced some difficulties of a practical nature once I needed time to adjust to the new environment. Not mastering all the tools and not being fully aware of the platform limitations, it was not simple, for example, to name sections, to decide on how and where to group and display information and instructions, files and tasks. Some of the things that had been planned on paper needed to be adjusted to suit the platform and others seemed to work differently in the new environment.

**Final Considerations**

I found designing an online course is a challenge. Experiencing online courses as a student is completely different from being responsible for the design and implementation of one. I faced, for example, operational challenges because it was the first time I was dealing, as a teacher, with the platform and its tools. Secondly, I am used to designing courses for the non virtual environment, and having to do it for and in this new and different environment, with different roles and patterns of interaction, was extremely challenging.
Furthermore, designing an online course in the light of the complexity theory was an even bigger challenge. Looking back at the experience, I can say that there was an attempt to work with knowledge in a non isolated or fragmented way, counting on experiences and feelings, and establishing relations in order to try to contemplate the principles proposed by Morin (2005, pp. 95–96; 2006, pp. 74–77). I believe it was an attempt to offer mutual, non linear or pre-determined enrichments through relations, interactions and connections due to the way it was thought out, structured, proposed and made available in consideration of the theoretical and methodological aspects in order to offer a co-constructed course.

Although I reached my immediate objective, this research cannot stop here. It is, in fact, a work in progress. I believe some important discoveries and achievements have been made but there is room for future attempts, challenges and experiences. There is the need for more studies about courses, especially online ones, considered, designed and implemented in the light of the complexity theory.

References


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