

The Possibility of an In-service MA Program for Junior and Senior High School English Teachers Utilizing Email Seminars

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Introduction

In addition to the natural desire of teachers to up grade their qualifications, changes in Ministry of Education rules have made it desirable for junior and senior high school teachers to obtain a masters degree. However, at present, it is quite difficult for in-service teachers to find the time to pursue a quality graduate program. This paper argues that it would be possible to open the way for in-service teachers to do graduate level work if some of the course work required for an MA could be done using email. It specifically proposes a program in which in-service junior and senior high school English could earn up to half of the required units by taking email seminars and then complete the requirements in a year of residence.

First, the present possibilities for pursuing graduate study while teaching full-time are presented and the drawbacks of the available programs are mentioned. Next, the concept of an email seminar is introduced and the advantages of such an approach to graduate level education are discussed. After presenting a possible model of an MA program in which part of the work is done via email, the problems that must be overcome before such a program can

become a reality are listed. The paper concludes with the claim that such a program is both desirable and possible.

Present possibilities

In-service teachers who desire an advanced degree have basically two choices. Resign their position and become full-time graduate students or continue teaching and take graduate courses in the evenings, on weekends, or during the summer break. We have had a number of students in the GSE ETD who have taken the first option but, in a majority of the cases, such students have had a spouse who was willing to support them while they undertook their graduate study. The second option has been selected by many more students but the present choices of part-time students are limited. One is concentrated weekend seminars. The MA program offered by Temple University in Japan is of this type. Another possibility is evening classes and/or regular weekend classes. Several graduate schools in major metropolitan areas in Japan have such programs. A third possibility is a concentrated program of study in late July and August. Some programs offer a combination of these possibilities. However, all require the student to block out a portion of time, not of his or her own choosing, for taking the classes. Unfortunately, this is what in-service teachers find most difficult to do. It is particularly difficult for junior members of staff, often the ones desiring advanced degrees.

Another difficulty facing part-time students is getting to the place where the classes are offered. Evening classes are only an option for those who work within commuting distance of the place where the classes are held. Weekend and summer break classes might be possible for students living at a greater distance but often the cost of lodging must be added to the cost of the classes themselves.

Concentrated classes, by their very nature, are less than ideal educational vehicles. There is little or no time for students to digest material that has been presented earlier before having to face the material that is presented next. Time to write papers or reports is usually lacking. And the course is usually over before the teacher has gotten to know the students and the students to know each other. Hardly a healthy environment for teaching and learning.

A New Alternative

A way to overcome the difficulties of present programs for part-time students mentioned above is to offer some graduate level courses via email. The concept of an email seminar is easy to grasp. Instead of students and professor meeting together at an appointed time and place once each week, the participants are connected electronically. What the professor would normally present as a lecture is delivered to the students in written form. This material can be copied and distributed in hard copy form or simply sent to each student via email. Any discussion questions or assignments are distributed in the same way. The students use email to ask questions, respond to the professor's questions, submit assignments or join in discussions. Since all members of an email seminar are joined electronically, each student can read and respond to the comments of any other student and, of course, to what comes from the professor. The professor is also able to communicate with all the students or with students individually.

A typical session would involve the professor assigning a reading to the students and posing several discussion questions. The students then respond to the discussion questions. These responses usually precipitate responses to the responses, most likely by the professor but also from other students. Often the professor picks up on a particular student's response and asks for comments on this point from the other students. At some point, the professor sums up the

discussion and begins the whole process over again by announcing the next topic.

Testing and submission of required papers or reports are also done electronically. The only change when the seminar switches to the testing mode is that students are asked to send their responses, not to the whole group, but only to the professor. But since all students are expected to join each discussion, there is little need for formal testing. As is often the case in face to face seminars, the professor has a good idea of how well each student understands the material and his or her level of participation in the class.

A possible model for an in-service MA program in the GSE ETD

Ideally it would be good to open the way for Junior and Senior High School teachers to pursue an MA program without having to resign their position in order to spend two years as full-time students and yet provide the sort of education that is not possible in the concentrated weekend seminars and summer programs. It would also be good if this possibility could be made available to interested teachers throughout Japan. I believe that such an MA program would be possible if we could offer a number of our seminars via email. My idea is to allow students to complete part of the 30 units required for graduation by taking courses offered as email seminars and requiring only one year of residence for more traditional sort of course work, direct access to the library and work with an MA thesis advisor. If, in this way, the time a student must be in residence could be greatly reduced, in-service teachers should be able to fulfill the resident requirements during a study leave period or during an unpaid leave that could be taken without loss of their job.

A possible pattern would be having the student complete half of the required units via email. The remaining 15 units could be completed during two terms of residence. The third term in residence could be devoted to intensive

preparation for the MA thesis. The actual writing of the thesis could be done after the student returns to his or her teaching duties and the supervision of drafts could be done via email. A possible variation on this basic pattern might be arranged for those teachers planning to do classroom research for their MA thesis. Such students might most profitably return to their teaching duties for the data collection phase of their research and then come to campus to be in close contact with their advisor during the data analysis and interpretation stage.

Advantages

To in-service teachers

The advantages of such a program to in-service teachers should be obvious.

The opportunity to work towards an advanced degree without having to quit their job and, at the same time, to get the educational advantages of courses taught over a term is a clear plus. If the email seminar approach is compared to the evening classes presently available at some graduate schools, I believe email seminars would be preferred by most Junior and Senior High School teachers. Evening classes are difficult to fit into busy schedules and there is always the danger of having to miss a class because of unexpected school responsibilities.

In the case of the email seminar, the student is free to do the necessary work anytime within the time framework provided by the instructor (usually one week). Morning people and night people can both be equally well accommodated. The students and the instructor can open their email any time they wish and can respond at any time. This freedom to access the system whenever one wishes means that both students and the teacher can work according to their own schedule or desires and, as long as the work gets done within the prescribed framework, no one inconveniences the other members of the class.

The fact that communication via email is by writing, means that students can take time to compose their responses and edit them before sending them out.

They also have a written record of not only their own responses but the responses of the instructor and the other students. The advantage of the written mode over the primarily spoken mode of traditional seminars is particularly great for Japanese speaking students taking courses offered in English.

To faculty teaching such email seminars

Faculty also gain the same flexibility of schedule that the students do. This may seem less important to teachers than to students who are also working full-time, but compared to the options of teaching evening classes or concentrated weekend or summer classes, email seminars offer a clear advantage. The fact that an electronic record of all exchanges in such seminars remains, means that teachers can more easily use the experience of one year to improve the seminar in future years. This record might even be mined for research purposes.

To ICU

I believe that using email seminars to allow in-service teachers a chance to work toward an advanced degree is an opportunity for ICU to demonstrate its leadership in the field of graduate education. If it also reverses the downward trend in student enrollment, so much the better.

To traditional ETD graduate students

Since such seminars would be open to both resident and non-resident students, students without teaching experience, a large percentage of resident students, would certainly profit from having discussions with students who are at the same time in-service teachers.

Problems to be overcome

Ministry of Education approval of teaching via email

The first task in the realization of this sort of MA program is to gain Ministry of Education acceptance of the concept of email seminars.

Correspondence classes have a reputation for not being very demanding and the initial reaction to the idea of conducting a seminar via email is often that the quality would fall. But this is not the case. Running a seminar by email demands a level of preparation by the professor and involves more interaction between the professor and the students than a typical face to face seminar does. The experimental email seminar that we conducted in the spring term 1996 involving Professor David Taylor of the Education Graduate School of the University of Leeds in the UK and the author (Thrasher and Taylor 1996) presented solid evidence of the rigor that can be achieved in such email seminars.

Conversion of existing seminars into an email format

David Taylor reported (Thrasher and Taylor 1996 pg. 202-3) that, although he expected the conversion process to be time consuming, he found it to be one of the easiest parts of offering a traditional seminar in an email format.

Student reluctance to use email

We had initially expected that students would find the experience difficult but we were happily mistaken. Not only did the students participate fully in the seminar, their comments on the evaluation questionnaire were quite positive. The most surprising comment from the students was that they found it easier to respond in English via email than they did in a face to face situation with native English speaking teachers.

Technical problems

Of the few problems that were encountered in the experimental email seminar offered last spring, most were technical in nature. The most troublesome one we encountered was problems with the level of the students' email software. Material had to be delivered to the students as hard copy because their software did not allow us to attach documents to them. So, before such an email seminar could be offered to non-resident students, such technical problems would have to be carefully considered.

Possible conflicts with existing graduate school regulations

The graduate school regulations, as well as, Ministry of Education regulations, would have to be carefully checked to make certain that such email seminars can be offered. However, even if problems are found, the advantages of such seminars seem great enough to consider modifications in the regulations that would allow us to offer the sort of program I have outlined above.

Conclusion

The possibility of offering a quality seminar via email has been demonstrated. The advantages of being able to offer such seminars to in-service teachers are obvious, and the difficulties in making this option available to non-resident students seem to be resolvable. Therefore I would like to urge ICU to consider introducing such a program.

Bibliography

Taylor, David and Randy Thrasher, "Teaching a Graduate School Seminar Via

Email”

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