Problem

Disengaged distance learners on a postgraduate course in language education, missing out on the intensive seminar discussions that campus students were having. The prescribed asynchronous forum discussions weren’t taking off.

Action research approach
Invite distance learners to participate in campus classes via Skype, each on an iPad

Action research approach
Cycle 1
Social presence increased
Distance students could ask questions during the class.
Distance students could join in group discussions (one iPad-student per group).
Campus and distance students got to know each other a little.

Filtered sound quality
iPad-students needed help
Background noise in the classroom from other groups
Not all distance students joined the group.
Forum participation declined.
Action research approach
Cycle 2

Move distance learners to a single Skype video conversation
Positive results

• Sound problems were less.
• During group discussions the distance students formed their own group.
• Social presence still fairly strong.

Negative results

• Distance students missed interaction with campus students in group discussions.
• Distance students missed social cues about turn taking.
• Some campus students resented the time given to calling up and sometimes reconnecting calls.
• Some distance students sometimes had children in the background not mastering the mute switch.
• Social presence less when each student didn’t occupy a physical space via the iPad.
Student voice – what was positive about bringing distance students into the campus class?

Campus students

• Distance students as real people
• More ideas and input
• Mainly advantageous for the distance students.
• Make them feel part of the course.

Distance students

• Professional learning relationships
• benefit from hearing the ideas of other students and hearing the lecturer's discussion
Student voice – what was negative about bringing distance students into the campus class?

Campus students

• Noisy
• Screens can become the focal point
• Technical hitches
• They miss social cues
• They get too much attention

Distance students

• They ignore us
• I felt like a fly on the wall
Multiple video calls on iPads

- Distance students needed to be looked after

Single multiuser video call on a laptop

- Easier to hear and have small group discussions
- Distance students their own group, ignored by some campus students
Explaining what happened with activity theory (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki 1999)

Campus students’ activity system

- Campus student
- Classroom and devices
- Instruments
- Discussion and learning
- Object
- Outcome
- Rules
- Community
- Division of Labor
- F2f communication
- Campus students & teacher
- Us and them

Distance students’ activity system

- Distance student
- Skype and own device
- Instruments
- Discussion and learning
- Object
- Outcome
- Rules
- Community
- Division of Labor
- Skype communication
- All students & teacher
- Us & them
Differences

• Campus and distance students are working for the same outcome (discussion and learning) but they are not operating in the same community or according to the same rules.

• The rub is that the distance students believe they are part of the campus students’ community, and the campus students expect them to behave like they do, even though their instruments are different.
References
