



Newcastle University Research



Centre for Learning and Teaching

The Skype Grannies Project

Final Report

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Executive Summary

- E-mediators were generally upbeat about their participation in the ‘Skype Grannies project with 91% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they enjoy the Skype sessions and Eighty-eight percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that Skype sessions were stimulating and thought provoking.
- Concerns were raised by some e-mediators that students didn’t have a sufficient grasp of the English language and felt that this would make it difficult for them to fully appreciate exchanges between themselves and the e-mediators. Some e-mediators felt that Indian students are very polite and smile a lot and that this may give e-mediators the impression that they actually understood what was being said or done.
- While e-mediators, especially with teaching backgrounds, tended to plan for sessions the level of planning appears to decline rapidly after the first session. Teachers become aware that future sessions probably won’t go as they planned. If students fail to turn up or a different group attends the session any planning is wasted. It appears that as a result of uncertainty about ‘where Skype sessions may go’ e-mediators develop a body of resources that is ready to hand. A number of E-mediators mentioned falling back onto talk about their homes, families and the area they lived in as a result of finding themselves ‘on the spot’ or ‘in the spotlight’. There is a sense of e-mediators and students negotiating a direction for the sessions through recourse to what might be called ‘common ground’ issues such as family, home, etc.
- We only have self-reports about Skype sessions and no observations or recordings to verify what happened during sessions. However, e-mediators reported that sessions were, in some cases, the result of negotiations between themselves and students.
- The evolution and development of Skype sessions is made difficult by: students not turning up to sessions or getting different students for every session. It is difficult to step beyond ‘introductory phases’ of relationships into deeper levels when there are different groups of students for each session. Those e-mediators who had regular contact with the same groups of students appear to be more satisfied with Skype sessions than those with different groups.
- E-mediators reported that it was sometimes difficult to communicate in the broadest possible sense of the word e.g. in terms of body language but also in terms of showing students sections or images out of books. E-mediators mentioned having to hold books up to the webcam in order to show students an image or poem in the book.
- E-mediators reported no contact with teaching staff at the India end other than brief glimpses of teachers sitting in the background. E-mediators would like more contact and involvement with teaching staff.
- E-mediators feel that having a ‘mediator’ or other adult at the India end would be helpful in making things go more smoothly. A number of e-mediators mentioned the presence of a technician at the India end helped in terms of dealing with technical problems but was also helpful in facilitating sessions where, for instance, there was misunderstanding due to language difficulties.

- One e-mediator felt that teachers might not be the ideal e-mediator since their training, skills and experiences may be a hindrance in Skype sessions which are apparently very unstructured, spontaneous and uncertain. One teacher equated the experience of running Skype sessions to that of a tight rope walker operating without a safety net. Clearly, teachers in the West have been trained to plan teaching and learning sessions and this may be a habit difficult to discard. Teachers in the West have been trained to expect a structured teaching and learning experience and apparently find the spontaneity and uncertainty of Skype sessions difficult to deal with. It should be said, however, that they do adapt quickly especially after the first session and then tend to build up a library of resources close to hand in order to react to the uncertainties of Skype sessions.
- There seems to be a ‘feeling’ among e-mediators that further SOLEs work should consider the purpose and intention of the Skype sessions. If they are to be formal teaching and learning sessions then an exchange of information about students at the India end would be necessary in order to make planned sessions possible. This all depends on whether the Skype sessions are to continue as informal exchanges between e-mediators and students or whether they are to become more formal and structured teaching and learning sessions. How Skype sessions proceed in the future will depend on decisions made about their purpose.
- E-mediators found it difficult to go beyond speculation to identify any outcomes or impacts on the students as a result of their participation in Skype sessions. Some felt that while students might be impressed by the technology and especially the fact that someone in the UK or another country wanted to talk to them, impacts of participation may be immediate or long term. One e-mediator suggested that perhaps a survey of students at the India end might be more revealing in this respect.
- E-mediators are not interested in awards and recognition. They are motivated by the desire to be useful to society, to continue applying the skills, knowledge and experience acquired over many years to help young people learn.
- It is important to mention that while data were collected from participants in the Skype Grannies project, there are no observations of the Skype sessions. Participants’ views about the Skype sessions may be partial in the sense that in some cases they thought they went well or went badly. We only have feedback from participants in regard to how the sessions went.

Introduction

Professor Sugata Mitra is well known for his work on using ‘Hole-in-the-Wall’ computers in India. This innovation has evolved into Self Organised Learning Environments (SOLES), in which 4 children work with one computer (linked to the internet) to answer ‘hard’ questions set by a ‘curious’ facilitator. This has been trialled in India and NE England and educational improvements are eye-catching. To enrich the SOLES, Sugata has recruited 50+ mediators or ‘Skype grannies’, mainly retired people (nearly all women) from the UK and beyond who work with the school students in supervised mediating sessions (SOMES). See website below for more SOLE/SOME detail:

<http://solesandsomes.wikispaces.com/A+bit+about+SOLE+%26+SOME>

These ‘Skype grannies’ (SGs) are volunteers and they offer to revolutionise the concept of education, especially in ‘remote’ and disadvantaged areas (both geographically and culturally) which exist in all countries. There are plans to recruit many more volunteers as the SOLE concept is developed. CfLaT is working with Professor Mitra to marry the SOLE concept with enquiry-based learning and he has asked CfLaT to develop a support structure for the mediators. This proposed project will communicate with these Skype mediators and having found out more about them, work with them to develop ideas and plans for how best to support their continued and developing commitment to online mediation.

The ‘Skype grannies’ do not yet constitute a formal group – they are out there, somewhat ad hoc and unconnected to each other. As the numbers are growing, we are uncertain of ultimate numbers but we know that over 200 have volunteered and about 50 are fully registered. We will interact at a web-based level in two ways: firstly through an online survey and secondly through the expansion of a dedicated web-based community area. This virtual space will have facilities and functions such as weblogs to enable regular reflection, message boards for the sharing of good practice, etc., etc. This area and the survey will involve *all* the volunteers (approximately 200). We will also interact more intensely with a sample of 30 fully operational mediators via telephone (or Skype) interviews (worldwide) and at a face-to-face seminar with 20 UK-based mediators.

You can ‘meet’ the mediators at:

<http://solesandsomes.wikispaces.com/Meet+the+Mediators>

Project Aims

The project aims progressively:

1. To find out more about this vital population - their characteristics, motivation, qualifications, experience and ambitions;
2. To work with them to identify and overcome barriers to their participation in educational facilitation especially in ‘remote’ and ‘disadvantaged’ areas;

3. To explore with them what infrastructure they need to support, reward and extend their engagement work;
4. To identify the training needs of the SGs
5. To publicise their existence and their work in order to encourage more 50+ citizens to volunteer.
6. Through the web-based community area and the seminar we intend to create the beginnings of a community of SGs, which can be pursued if further funding becomes available;
7. To present the findings from the project to the Faculty EBs and University EB, with some suggestions, in order to stimulate strategic thinking about the infrastructure and any 'accreditation' that might be offered;
8. To consider a new name – does Skype Grannies offend or reinforce?

The project is an important stepping stone in a fast moving context. SOLES are attracting a lot of interest. Other bids (to European funding bodies) are being made to develop the technology, develop organisational logistics and research the students' educational outcomes. Through these funds an infrastructure can be developed to sustain the role of SGs in SOLES – but importantly we need to place the SGs at the heart of the project and consult with them to know what support they need and what barriers they face. This proposed project will allow us to do that.

Newcastle University's Draft Engagement Strategy states:

'Experienced engagement practitioners have identified a need to acknowledge and encourage those individuals who, whilst not being members of the University, make important and sustained contributions to the success of major engagement-based research, teaching and service activities. It is proposed that a mechanism be created to formally recognise such people as 'Public Associates' of Newcastle University, perhaps accompanied by some degree of privileged access to the University's libraries and other facilities'.

We would intend to use this university policy intention to build the sustainability of a support structure for the mediators.

Project Plan

We have put a significant resource into this project (35 days of RA time). To justify this time and money we need to make this project work for us in terms of publicity, publication and creating a vital building block for the development of SOLES. Therefore our work will, by design and necessity, generate data and information that will play an important role in evaluation.

The online survey, telephone interviews, web-based area and the seminar all provide data that gives immediate success in delineating the characteristics, experiences and ambitions of the

SGs. A significant measurement of success will be validation by the SGs when this report is sent to them for comment, and their active participation in the seminar.

At a practical level the outcomes will be fed into funding bids for the SOLE concept and research and these bids provide a further outcome measure. A significant outcome indicator is the response from Faculty and University Executive Boards. Will they be persuaded of the value of mediators both to school and potentially university education? Will they permit and support a reward system for mediators which fits with their aspirations and needs?

The project will profile retired people in a very positive light – making use of technology in the process of making a difference to disadvantaged and remote communities (geographically and culturally) overcoming some barriers to social exclusion. It also provides a chance for one or both universities to develop infrastructures and rewards that can advance a very innovative and effective form of public engagement that improves social, economic and cultural life, thus achieving one of the aims of the Beacon partnership.

Data collection

A survey was designed and administered online to all e-mediators to find out about their experiences. Twenty-four e-mediators responded to the survey. Survey data were then used to inform telephone interviews which were carried out with 15 of the e-mediators who had indicated in the survey that they were willing to participate in further research. The results of the survey and the telephone interviews are presented below.

Findings

Findings are presented from both the survey and the telephone interviews throughout the report. An online survey was sent out to all e-mediators involved in the Skype Granny project. Twenty-four e-mediators completed the survey.

The average age of the e-mediators, perhaps not surprisingly given the title of the project, was 59.5 with a minimum aged of 39 and a maximum of 73. All the e-mediators but one were female.

Most of the e-mediators are based in the UK (19). The remaining 5 e-mediators reside in the following countries (one in each): Russia, The USA, Belgium, Portugal and Australia.

Thirteen of the e-mediators said they had an undergraduate degree. Six had Master's level degrees. Three had a Vocational Certificate or Diploma. Of the remaining two, one had a teaching certificate and the other had a certificate of education.

At the time of the survey, nine e-mediators were retired, seven were working part-time, six were working full-time and two were doing voluntary work.

Eighteen of the e-mediators said they had a teaching qualification. The remaining 6 said they did not.

Fifteen of the e-mediators, with a teaching qualification, indicated that they had taught, in some cases, across all sectors i.e. primary to HE (1); one had taught in Primary, Secondary and FE; one in FE and HE; Three in secondary and FE; Two had taught exclusively in primary; Two had taught exclusively in Secondary; Two in primary and secondary; One in primary and FE; One in secondary and HE and one exclusively in FE.

The mean number of years taught by the eighteen e-mediators with a teaching qualification was 28.7 with a minimum of 5 years and a maximum 46 years.

Fourteen of the e-mediators said they had lived abroad and the remaining 10 said they had not.

The minimum number of Skype sessions carried out, based on the figures provided by 23 of the e-mediators, was 1 and the maximum was 52 (two mediators claiming 1 each week for an entire year). The mean number of Skype sessions was 12 and the median was 8.

Fourteen of the e-mediators claimed to be active while the remaining 10 said they were not.

Motivations

E-mediators are not interested in awards and recognition. They are motivated by the desire to be useful to society, to continue applying the skills, knowledge and experience acquired over many years to help young people learn. As one Skype Granny put it:

“I am retired and miss the interaction with the kids and that is the reason I first got involved with Skype Grannies”.

Another e-mediator said:

“What drew me to the project was, I love children’s literature, I love reading to my children. I’ve produced four avid readers and I hope my grandchildren will be the same.”

E-mediators valued the following factors highly in their involvement with the SG Project:

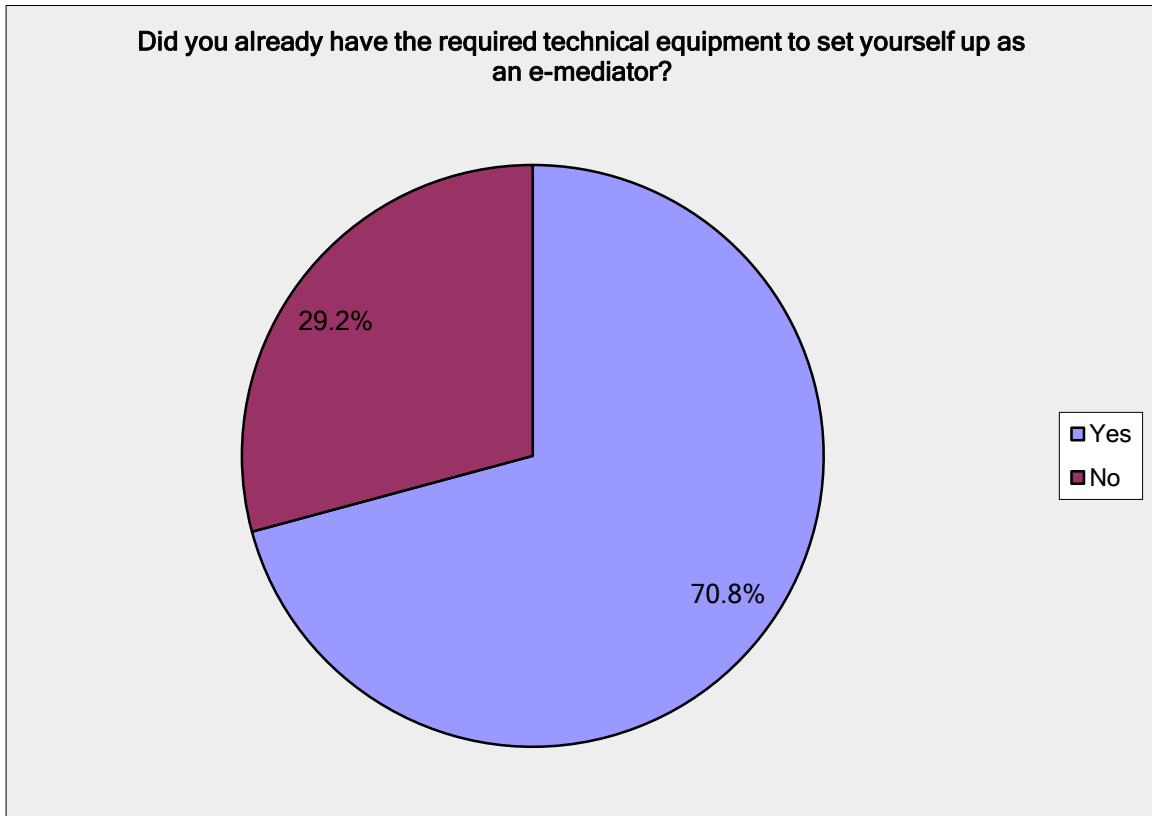
- Being involved in contact with the education of young people.
- Being part of a significant social movement
- Feeling generally useful to society
- Satisfaction of teaching young people English
- Feeling that I am still learning Communicating with other cultures.

E-mediators eschewed what might be called status and kudos type factors in their decision to participate in the project.

Advice, support and training

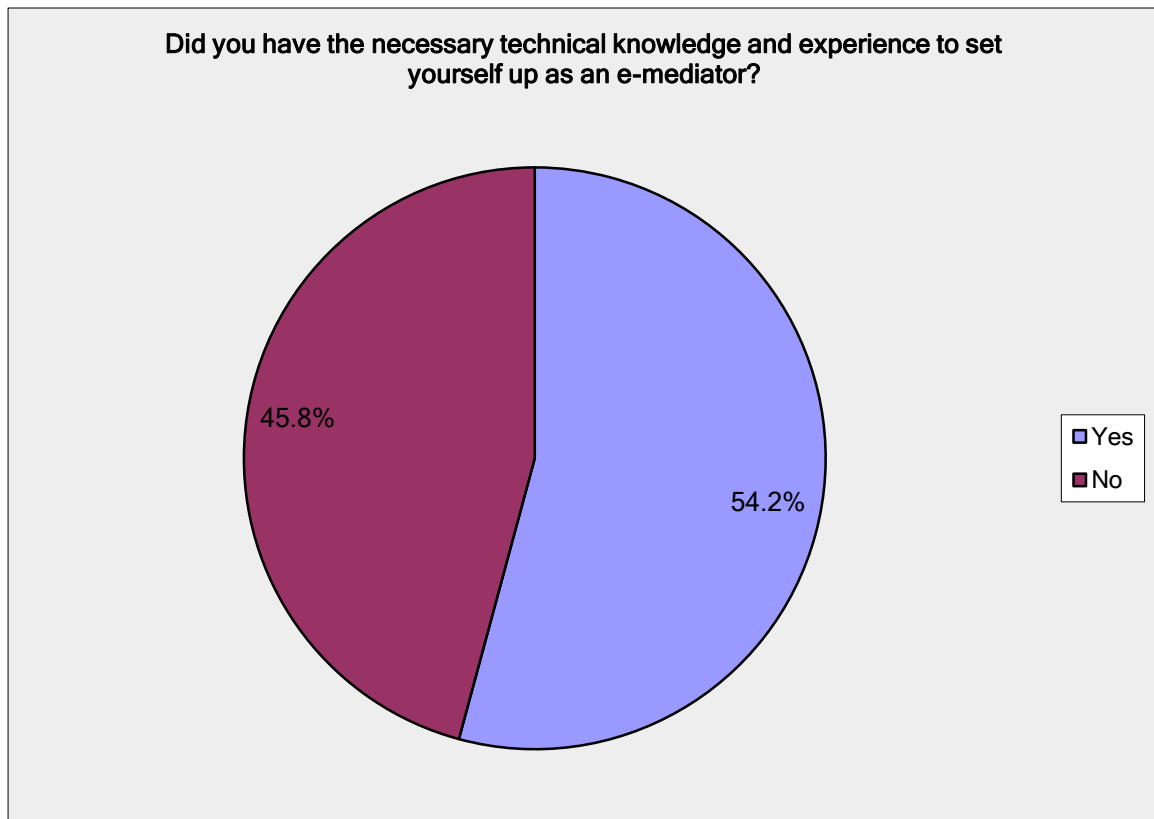
Just under three-quarters of e-mediators claimed to have the technical equipment to set themselves up as an e-mediator. Just under 30% felt they did not.

Chart 1: Did e-mediators have the technical equipment?



In regard to technical knowledge, over half of respondents said yes, they had the necessary knowledge and expertise to set themselves up as e-mediators.

Chart 2: e-mediators technical knowledge and experience.



E-mediators relied on informal support networks including husbands, family and friends when it came to dealing with technical issues as the following selection of survey comments suggests:

Help from my son who is in his 20s and more able technically!

Friends and family

My husband works in I.T.

My daughter and a young friend helped me install Skype and all that I needed

Initially I had not used Skype except with family on a few occasions

My husband sorted it all out for me.

E-mediators mentioned, in the survey and during interviews, contacting Suneeta in regard to help with technical issues:

Suneeta and her colleagues sent instructions and are available on e-mail which I can use OK to help. This was important as I am not as computer literate as I need to be eg. I cannot always access suggested ideas and ways to work interactively with the

children. I can't paste photos and pictures or worksheet ideas. This is rather frustrating but I manage without. Also my husband helped me sort out SKYPE.

In regard to technical issues, one respondent wrote:

“The technical aspects can be hard, eg if the picture freezes or disappears. It just shows us how much we use eye contact to communicate as it is really hard to carry on talking without it. And sometimes weeks have passed with no connection for various reasons which is very frustrating. The whole experience can verge from exhilarating and exciting to extremely frustrating!!!”

While having informal support networks available is clearly useful for e-mediators, one is left wondering whether this might result in less than optimal performance in technical terms during Skype sessions. Having said that, the possibility of group training sessions is clearly limited by the dispersed nature of e-mediators. This should not prevent Skype based training sessions for e-mediators.

Skype sessions

Table 1: e-mediator responses to Likert statements: sessions, children and experiences

17. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. Select one answer in each row.						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Response Count
The children are very interested in learning	41.7% (10)	45.8% (11)	12.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
There are too many children	0.0% (0)	37.5% (9)	37.5% (9)	20.8% (5)	4.2% (1)	24
I enjoy the sessions	50.0% (11)	40.9% (9)	9.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	22
I have found the sessions stimulating and thought-provoking	41.7% (10)	45.8% (11)	12.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
The sessions flow easily	0.0% (0)	34.8% (8)	43.5% (10)	17.4% (4)	4.3% (1)	23
The children need more structure and guidance	4.2% (1)	50.0% (12)	29.2% (7)	16.7% (4)	0.0% (0)	24
You cannot predict where sessions will go	29.2% (7)	62.5% (15)	8.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
The children respond well in the sessions	20.8% (5)	66.7% (16)	12.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
It is important for e-mediators to prepare for sessions	37.5% (9)	50.0% (12)	12.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
I would recommend becoming an e-mediator to others	39.1% (9)	52.2% (12)	8.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	23
You need teaching experience to be an e-mediator	4.2% (1)	20.8% (5)	37.5% (9)	25.0% (6)	12.5% (3)	24
Regular sessions with the same children is useful	39.1% (9)	52.2% (12)	8.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	23
I would like to share my experiences with other e-mediators	21.7% (5)	60.9% (14)	8.7% (2)	8.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	23
The teachers/facilitators at the sessions should be more involved.	14.3% (3)	57.1% (12)	23.8% (5)	4.8% (1)	0.0% (0)	21

The e-mediators are generally positive about their experiences so far. Eighty-eight percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that children are interested in learning.

E-mediators were generally upbeat about their participation in the ‘Skype Grannies project. However, it may be difficult to maintain this positive attitude if students fail to turn up for sessions.

“When the children did come on all the frustration is forgotten because you realise why you are doing it. I do enjoy it because I suppose that’s what I enjoyed about teaching; planning what you are going to do so the children will enjoy it and enjoy learning. And also what I learned from them as well. It’s amazing what I learned from them.” (Female, Teacher).

There is clearly an issue about the number of children present at sessions since 37.5% agreed with the statement and another 37.5% neither agreed nor disagreed. One respondent wrote:

“The background noise (sometimes from more than one pupil trying to engage at the same time makes it very hard to hear the response especially when I am trying to become used to the voices. Pupils so often bend forward to look at the camera and then I am deprived of the chance to lip read as well as to hear so that makes communication tricky at times. I found that the girls in a group of three turn take much better than the boys in a similar group. Until I asked for a group of three it was not possible to develop any real conversation as there were too many pupils and some dominated. I have tried to communicate some ideas before the session based on what I think the pupils have been studying but have not found it easy to develop a continuity even when there have been successive sessions without a break. All contact has been met with such enthusiasm that I would like to be able to contribute more than I feel I am doing at the moment”.

One e-mediator said about her first session:

“Suneeta was there in the first one mediating and talking and helping me to get across to them and to know about who was who. I never got to know their names but recognised their faces. That was easier in the sense that it set us up because she would tell me what they were saying. As sessions progressed I felt more and more despondent about my ability to make meaningful contact.”

E-mediators overwhelmingly enjoy the sessions with 91% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Eighty-eight percent of e-mediators agreed or strongly agreed that Skype sessions were stimulating and thought provoking. There is, however, less agreement for the statement: *Sessions flow easily* with no one strongly agreeing to this statement and only 34.8% agreeing. Over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that children needed more structure and guidance in the Skype sessions.

Ninety-two percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *You cannot predict where sessions will go*, suggesting a certain degree of uncertainty for e-mediators but also perhaps an open space for both e-mediators and children to negotiate a direction.

“It is a most unusual experience to sit in front of a screen and talk or read to a group about whom you know very little but if you put your own feelings to one side and go

with the flow as best you can you eventually get used to it. If you try to control it you are just being what they have enough of already - an adult telling them what to do. My experiences are quite varied. I always try to have a book to read but sometimes think what I am reading is not understood. I look for jokes because they ask for them but finding jokes which work well for another culture is not easy. I answer questions about my house, show them the garden, etc. But so far I have seldom met the same children - or maybe not recognised them. I did try a session in the kitchen which I think went OK”.

Another wrote:

“You cannot predict, so I've found it useful to have options which the children enjoy, remember it's fun and 'go with the flow'. I don't think you need teaching experience, but it's helpful to have empathy, be flexible and enjoy people”.

Most e-mediators (87.5%) agreed or strongly agreed that children respond well in sessions.

Suneeta pointed out that:

“As they've become more familiar with the e-mediators they know they are not going to be scolded and they know there is a lot of humour in the whole thing and they feel free to say, 'Can we talk about this?'. Often times they actively suggest what they would like to talk about in subsequent sessions”.

Language difficulties

Concerns were raised by some e-mediators that students didn't have a sufficient grasp of the English language and felt that this would make it difficult for them to fully appreciate exchanges between themselves and the e-mediators. Some e-mediators felt that Indian students are very polite and smile a lot and that this may give e-mediators the impression that they actually understood what was being said or done. As one e-mediator explained it:

“In the end I decided to forget about the books and not read them a story because they couldn't understand it. So we just sang songs and they just seemed to adore that.”

Another e-mediator felt that Skype wasn't the way to teach English to students in India saying:

“I don't think this is the way to do it (learn English) quite honestly. It might enhance what they've already got but they need to be better before they start it (participating in Skype sessions).”

One said during interview:

“I found it really hard to find anything that really struck a chord with them. I thought the children were lovely. I really liked the look of them. I never thought they were understanding me very well. The children would say, 'Yes Mam, Yes, Mam', but never

came back with something that would make me feel that they had understood and been interested and wanted to find out more. Session by session I toned myself down until I was almost just winging it with conversation. I always had something to build on but mostly pictures of places I've been to, pictures I've seen, so they could actually see something and understand what I was talking about. Reading over the Internet it was a non-starter. I was going to start with Jane Eyre but could see at once (during the first session) that it wasn't going to work so as much as anything it was as good to chat and the most successful way of chatting was typing because I could understand them and they could understand me.

Planning and preparation

Preparing for sessions was seen as important for e-mediators with 87.5% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. One said in this respect:

"I had a whole lot of different books at different levels, culminating in Jane Eyre, fairy stories, but I quickly realised I wouldn't be able to do anything without pictures, that unmediated prose would be hopeless, it would just be a sound coming at them. If we'd had a text between us of course, if they'd had a book which they could then follow but then that would be pointless in a different way because they could do that themselves. Every week I was thinking ahead to the next week but would pin the session onto whatever I'd been doing and collect together visual aids accordingly. Sometimes pictures of my grandchildren. That was good, especially ones nearer their age."

One respondent said, during interview:

"What I found a little daunting was not knowing who I was going to be talking to so that took a little bit of self-management on my side to let that not be a problem and the whole idea of being on the screen, tongue tied, was a bit challenging so what I did was, I didn't want to over prepare because I didn't think there was much point because I didn't know who I was going to be talking to and I had no idea if they had much English so I had lots of pictures ready, lots of photographs of my family I then thought what I'll do is I'll take the laptop and show them around the house and I realised, you know, just the simplest things were of interest and then what I found worked well with this particular group in Hyderabad, they were 10 year olds and their English was very limited, I found they enjoyed singing songs. And when I tried to do other stuff, I'd go and get books from the library and that kind of thing, they'd start yawning and say can we have a song".

Another respondent wrote:

“Yes, preparation is very important so the session 'flows' but, even with this it is often a struggle as they are so keen and there are so many of them sometimes. But I have worked ways out to cope with this”.

Another wrote:

“I thought the children were lovely, and I was interested in them especially in the faithful group of girls who appeared every week; but I never really got beyond chatting - their English was not good enough for them to listen to any sustained reading. I always prepared a poem and a picture to talk about, often of a place I had recently visited. They were polite, but not responsive - whereas they liked to answer my questions about themselves”.

Another wrote:

“It isn't always possible to prepare if you are getting different groups of children and sometimes the sessions flow away from what you have prepared, but part of the pleasure is following where the children lead and looking at what they want to find out. Some groups are very keen to learn - others not so much”.

While e-mediators, especially with teaching backgrounds, tended to plan for sessions initially, this seems to evolve as more and more sessions take place. It appears that after the first session e-mediators realise that there is an element of uncertainty and spontaneity involved and take this into consideration for subsequent sessions by building up a body of resources from which they can pick or choose depending on the outcome of negotiations between themselves and the students. As one e-mediator explained:

“I had the 'Wheels on the Bus' and after about 5 minutes I had got through that and then realised I had to be a bit more thoughtful than I originally thought. I then chose to work with the secondary school children because that's my background. I trawled around looking for picture books and of course you get the Ladybird books with pictures on one page and writing on the other. I wondered whether this would be too young for them and decided to go for the Jolly Postman, the Alan Ahlberg thing, and then I thought I'd introduce the idea of postmen and letters and all sorts of stuff like that. I got birthday cards and all sorts of stuff like that and then envelopes with stamps on. I know the postal service in India is very big and 'who is the person on the stamp' trying to draw things out like that and then going to a story like that and show them the pictures and that seemed to work quite well. Then I started introducing quizzes and things but the problem with that was when I started asking their names I couldn't remember them because I couldn't quite catch it on Skype. Then I felt I was in their position in terms of them not understanding me and it then became a more equal situation.

One e-mediator suggested that there may be a problem with the very polite natures of Indian people and children generally and their reluctance to say 'no'. She felt that having the same group on a regular basis may have made it possible for students to overcome this politeness:

“I was lucky in the sense that I had the same group. I’m aware that some people didn’t always get the same group you see. I had the same group so at least there was progression and at least I knew what we’d done last time and they grew in confidence in that they were prepared to tell me what they’d like to do. Shall we do this, oh, no, we’ll do that never mind about the story.”

Knowledge, skills and experience

E-mediators appear to fall back onto a wide range of knowledge, skills and experience including personal interests, parenting and their professional knowledge and training when engaging in the planning and the conduct of Skype sessions. One e-mediator said in this respect:

“Ideas with the TEFL of having lots of visuals when you are talking to an audience that doesn’t have the language, yes, that sort of thing, yes I think that definitely came into it”.

Another said:

“My own interests, my own life the sort of awareness of growing children. Nothing more specific than that. I have got an enormous library of children’s books. I could have told them all sorts of stories if I thought their language was up to it.”

It is clear, too, that e-mediators were not afraid to experiment and adapt their sessions when required. A number of e-mediators mentioned falling back onto talk about their homes, families and the area they lived in as a result of finding themselves ‘on the spot’ or ‘in the spotlight’. There is a sense of e-mediators and students negotiating a direction for the sessions through recourse to what might be called ‘common ground’ issues such as family, home, etc.

“Then I got onto taking pictures and downloading them so I could talk about the seasons. But the best thing that they enjoyed was the local fair that comes to the town every November for donkeys years, medieval times, and took pictures of the fair and explained about the rides then also asked them what they knew what they could see that they could recognize. Stuffed tigers and penguins and all sorts of stuff, beef burgers and hot dogs, ketchup and candy floss you know all sorts of exciting things like that. It was becoming more interactive I suppose because of that and the quizzes we did I was afraid of doing 'Hangman' in case it wasn't PC because at one point I was thinking, right, we'll sing nursery rhymes and then I could explain the background of the nursery rhymes and ran this past Suneeta but she wasn't keen with 'Cut off their tales with a carving knife' because she thought it was violent. Another thing that went down well was Origami.”

E-mediators reported that it was sometimes difficult to communicate in the broadest possible sense of the word e.g. in terms of body language but also in terms of showing students sections or images out of books. E-mediators mentioned having to hold books up to the webcam in order to show students an image or poem in the book.

Virtually all of the e-mediators (91.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend becoming an e-mediator to others.

There was a less agreement among respondents to the statement: *You need teaching experience to be an e-mediator*, with a quarter of respondents (25%) agreeing or strongly agreeing and 37.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement. The remaining 37.5% of respondents chose the neither agree nor disagree option. One respondent wrote:

“Teaching experience is advantageous if not necessary”.

A respondent from a non-teaching background wrote:

“I am a social worker and I found, I felt, a strong expectation to 'teach' which I was not prepared for”.

Ninety-three percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *Regular sessions with the same children is useful*. This was mentioned by respondents during interviews too with e-mediators suggesting that sessions with the same children were more satisfactory than sessions where different children turned up each time. This meant having to go through the initial stages of introductions again and again. Comments in regard to this statement include:

“I certainly think it would be good to get to know a small group of children really well. In this way you would be able to make more progress by planning a programme of activities and asking the children to carry out tasks between sessions. This would give feedback as to the success of the content one is using”.

The evolution and development of Skype sessions is difficult when students don't turn up for sessions or different students turn up for every session. It appears to be difficult in such circumstances to establish a sense of continuity and rapport when there are different groups of students for each session. Those e-mediators who had regular contact with the same groups of students appear to be more satisfied with Skype sessions than those with different groups.

“This is where it was very frustrating (children failing to turn up). They didn't connect (turn up) and the next week they didn't connect. Every week the day before I would e-mail the Head and say: 'Looking forward to meeting with the children again' in other words, nudge, nudge, I'm going to be there at such and such a time...and for various reasons I'm not sure how much the Head thought it was important or whatever... but I made that commitment”. (Female, Teacher).

Another respondent wrote:

“Only met the same children once”.

Most e-mediators (83%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *I would like to share my experiences with other e-mediators.* While this may be the case where people are from a similar background i.e. teaching, it may be more difficult for those from a non-teaching background. Most e-mediators had a teaching qualification while six did not and one is left wondering whether this would result in difficulties for non-teachers in regard to communication and sharing of experiences where the group comprises more teachers than non-teachers. One respondent wrote:

“I am really pleased there is a conference day but would really very much like it to include some training ideas. Not just to reflect on what we have done but how we can work better in the future. Without support and some real input I can see that the struggle to keep going may eventually cause me to decide to leave it to others who are more computer literate. I am still persevering for now though!”

Outcomes and involvement

Involvement with adults in India

Just under three-quarters of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: *The teachers/facilitators at the sessions should be more involved.* This statement referred to the teachers at the India end of the sessions who were frequently present during the sessions but were not actively involved. One e-mediator said:

“I would love more contact with the teachers at the schools, as I feel as if I am 'doing my thing' without much knowledge of the children. E-mail contact or a short chat at the beginning or end of the session would be great. It would help too in choosing stories and songs and making them relevant to the children”.

Another wrote:

“I felt the absence of a supporting adult in the classroom. We had great goodwill between us, but a gap of incomprehension”.

E-mediators reported no contact with teaching staff at the India end other than brief glimpses of teachers sitting in the background. One e-mediator said, in regard to contact with staff in India’

“No contact. I’ve had two e-mails from the Head of the school I worked with and I wondered whether one of the problems was she wasn’t very confident in speaking or writing in English. I’m not sure why but I suspect a lack of confidence. It would be very helpful if I did [have more contact with staff in India]. I invited her always, if she had the time, because I was mindful of the fact that they are busy people, to sit in on any session and any feedback if she wanted and to talk to me or anything that would have been great. I would have loved that.”(Female, Teacher).

E-mediators feel that having a ‘mediator’ or other adult at the India end would be helpful in making things go more smoothly. One said in this respect:

“The times when Suneeta was there, it was much, much easier because she mediated.”

In regard to the non-participation of teachers at the India end, Suneeta said:

“Many of these teachers themselves are not trained. Their own competencies are very, very, low. They are just slightly beyond the children themselves. Many of them are well meaning but they do feel intimidated and don’t want to come too close to the computers. So, unlike the children who were willing to play around with the technology and figure it out, they [the teachers] didn’t want to come to the SOLES despite many, many invitations”.

Suneeta’s counselling skills and knowledge of Indian culture were an essential resource in making the project a success. She was able to provide background information about the schools, the children and explanations where words were used that e-mediators did not understand. It is clear too that Suneeta played a key role in coordinating the programme in India. As she said herself: *“I put my whole being into the project”.*

A number of e-mediators mentioned the presence of a technician at the India end helped in terms of dealing with technical problems but was also helpful in facilitating sessions where, for instance, there was misunderstanding due to language difficulties.

Table 2: e-mediator responses to Likert statements: SOLES experiences

18. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements. Select one answer in each row.						
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Response Count
I have learned a great deal myself	25.0% (6)	70.8% (17)	4.2% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
The experience has exceeded my expectations	16.7% (4)	37.5% (9)	33.3% (8)	12.5% (3)	0.0% (0)	24
The experience has been disappointing	0.0% (0)	21.7% (5)	21.7% (5)	30.4% (7)	26.1% (6)	23
SOLES should be used more within my home country	8.7% (2)	47.8% (11)	34.8% (8)	8.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	23
SOLES would not work with younger students, e.g. under 10 years old	4.2% (1)	0.0% (0)	25.0% (6)	54.2% (13)	16.7% (4)	24
SOLES would not work with older students, e.g. over 15 years old	4.3% (1)	0.0% (0)	13.0% (3)	56.5% (13)	26.1% (6)	23
It has been a rewarding experience for me	50.0% (12)	33.3% (8)	16.7% (4)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	24
I think the children have learned something in my sessions	8.3% (2)	58.3% (14)	29.2% (7)	4.2% (1)	0.0% (0)	24
Being an e-mediator is something anyone can do	4.2% (1)	16.7% (4)	33.3% (8)	37.5% (9)	8.3% (2)	24
You need particular skills to be an e-mediator.	4.3% (1)	65.2% (15)	21.7% (5)	8.7% (2)	0.0% (0)	23
SOLES needs more central organisation	0.0% (0)	50.0% (12)	41.7% (10)	8.3% (2)	0.0% (0)	24

Most of the e-mediators (96%) agreed or strongly agreed that they had learned something from their experiences in the project.

There is wider spread of responses for the statement: *The experience has exceeded my expectations* although just over half (54%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

A small percentage agreed that the Skype Granny experience had been disappointing (22%) while 56% disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement. Some of the respondents' comments provide reasons for the disappointment:

“Disappointment comes when you have prepared and are excited about the session and no one comes on line!! Obviously knowing in advance has been excellent when possible”.

Another wrote:

“I found I was more interested in exploring mentoring type relationships with small groups or individuals and the 'teaching' element was not my strong suit. I found the regular disruption to the Skype reception a big problem. I would like to praise the help offered by Suneeta”.

Perhaps one of the most demotivating aspects was highlighted by one respondent who wrote:

“The worst thing is when I get up early in the morning, especially for the session, and then, no one is there, that is very de-motivating as I feel the need to stay around a while in case they are late, as they have been a couple of times”.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents agreed or agreed strongly with the statement: *SOLES should be used more within my home country*, another 35% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

There was strong disagreement with the statement: *SOLES would not work with younger students e.g. under 10 years old*, with 71% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly and greater disagreement with the following statement: *SOLES would not work with older students e.g. over 15 years old*, suggesting that there may be some scope for using the technology with a broad range of students.

Most e-mediators (83%) found the experience to be a rewarding one.

Impact on students

Sixty-seven percent of respondents agreed or agreed strongly with the statement: *I think the children have learned something in my sessions*.

E-mediators found it difficult to go beyond speculation to identify any outcomes or impacts on the students as a result of their participation in Skype sessions. Some felt that while students might be impressed by the technology and especially the fact that someone in the UK or another country wanted to talk to them, impacts of participation may be immediate or long term. One e-mediator suggested that perhaps a survey of students at the India end might be more revealing in this respect.

“Hopefully, the biggest thing they gained was in confidence and hopefully they would gain in speaking and writing English, particularly speaking English. So you'd hope that. Perhaps just talking with an adult, you know, and I think that is actually quite a skill for a young person, not all of them can do it. But I think mainly the growth in confidence and self-assurance and obviously speaking English and I suppose finding out about this country like the customs and the seasons and the Fair and the Pantomime we talked about. Explaining that the principal dame is always a man, you know.” (Female, Teacher).

Another E-mediator said during interview:

“Well, I think they get a lot of fun out of it and they seem to enjoy it. I seem to have my regulars with their little faces beaming at me, you know. I’m slightly concerned that not everyone got a look in but certainly the people who were keen, who were there every week, seemed to get a lot out of it. They seem to enjoy the connection and they found it fun. They enjoyed singing. I’m not sure if it helped much with their language skills but the experience of someone from another country being interested in them and being prepared to give up some time to talk to them I used to think, gosh, if that was me, as a kid in a classroom, it would be terrific”.

Another e-mediator felt the Skype sessions must have had an impact on the students because:

“Otherwise they wouldn’t have returned.”

Suneeta highlighted a number of differences she had noticed among students since they started participating in Skype Grannies:

“One is in the confidence. That is very, very clear. Just the way they hold themselves the ease with which they interact.”

“In India, quite often, it is not considered polite to tell somebody that you need to go away even if you do actually need to go. So these girls would sit there in a session and I could see they were getting jittery because they would have another class coming up and usually their teachers were not very understanding. They would need to go but wouldn’t tell the e-mediator they would need to go. Over a period of three or four months they began to be able to say to the e-mediator, ‘you know, we need to go now’. Part of the problem was they were really enjoying themselves and didn’t really want to go”.

“Many of them have learned a lot of very basic Internet etiquette. So when they are chatting with me over the Internet they say, I’ll be right back so they know to say they are going off completely or they are going to be back so those kinds of thing began to come in.”

“The children are interested in the e-mediators’ families so they would want to ask and they would go, ‘Brother!’, ‘Sister!’, ‘Father!’ and that’s exactly how they would go, you know. And now they can make a full question. They can phrase it that way.”

“Another thing I noticed with those children who’d managed to have a few sessions with e-mediators was that they would look for things on Google or searching the Internet whenever they got a chance.”

“The kinds of benefits I am seeing include the mutual understanding that is beginning to develop especially where there are sessions taking place between children. They are able to talk about sensitive issues such as religion very easily. They talk about money, amenities etc.”

Clearly, there have been immediate impacts on the children and over a longer time period other interesting changes and differences may emerge. Access to the Internet has literally opened up a new world for many of the children giving them access to a variety of resources and generally making them more aware of the world beyond their own locality.

The ideal e-mediator

There was some disagreement (46%) among e-mediators with the statement: *Being an e-mediator is something that anyone can do*, with about a third of respondents choosing the neither agree nor disagree option.

There is strong agreement with the statement: *You need particular skills to be an e-mediator*, with 69% of respondents either agreeing or disagreeing with this statement.

“I believe that an e-mediator needs basic tech skills and have control of the tools being used. There's also a need for the "human touch", be understanding, open to any questions that may arise and be flexible if the kids want to follow a different path than the one you were considering. I like not having an agenda, but having something up my sleeve (like an online story) if need be. I found the children in Hyderabad to be highly motivated, very curious about my country and very persistent when there were tech glitches. It's been an amazing experience”.

Another wrote:

“Skills are helpful but I believe an open and creative mind is more helpful”.

And another wrote:

“I feel the most important qualities an e-mediator should have are patience and flexibility, and responding to the children's needs”.

One e-mediator felt that teachers might not be the ideal e-mediator since their training, skills and experiences may be a hindrance in Skype sessions which are apparently very unstructured, spontaneous and uncertain. One teacher equated the experience of running Skype sessions to that of a tight rope walker operating without a safety net. Clearly, teachers in the West have been trained to plan teaching and learning sessions and this may be a habit difficult to discard. Teachers in the West have been trained to expect a structured teaching and learning experience and apparently find the spontaneity and uncertainty of Skype sessions difficult to deal with. It should be said, however, that they do adapt quickly especially after the first session and then tend to build up a library of resources close to hand in order to react to the uncertainties of Skype sessions. Another e-mediator said during a telephone interview:

“The ability to communicate and to listen to the kids.”

The future

There seems to be a ‘feeling’ among e-mediators that further SOLEs work should consider the purpose and intention of the Skype sessions. If they are to be formal teaching and learning sessions then an exchange of information about students at the India end would be necessary in order to make planned sessions possible. This all depends on whether the Skype sessions are to continue as informal exchanges between e-mediators and students or whether they are to become more formal and structured teaching and learning sessions. How Skype sessions proceed in the future will depend on decisions made about their purpose. As one e-mediator expressed the view that she could have gone much further with the sessions focusing on her speciality in English but:

*“I wasn’t sure how serious or academic they (the students) wanted it to become.”
(Female, Teacher).*

It is important to mention that while data were collected from participants in the Skype Grannies project, there are no observations of the Skype sessions. We only have self-reports about Skype sessions and no observations or recordings to verify what happened during sessions. However, e-mediators reported that sessions were, in some cases, the result of negotiations between themselves and students. Participants’ views about the Skype sessions may be partial in the sense that they thought they went well or went badly. We only have feedback from participants in regard to how the sessions went.

Half of the e-mediators agreed with the statement: *SOLES needs more central organisation*, while 42% chose the neither agree nor disagree option. One respondent wrote in response to this statement:

“In many ways I think ideally that there should not be more central organisation but if there were some clear principles laid down that both mediator and linked teacher knew about at the beginning then I think more useful communication could take place and the experience could then be transferable more to pupils learning needs in their education. However if the rationale was more explicitly to make social contact and to layer this in a gradual and pleasant way each week that should also be made explicit. The original article was for people to read to pupils and this could be helpful if it was an explicit and shared aim between mediator and school”.

Another suggested, during interview:

“Some kind of direction or arrangement or agreement...Having something more regular and scheduled is probably better”.

The future looks bright for Skype Grannies but perhaps under a different name, in different formats in different parts of the world, as Suneeta said:

“In the past two or three months, we’ve had places [in India] that have come up on their own and said, ‘we want to do this’.”

Interested parties in Colombia wrote in and said:

“We’d like to have this (Skype Grannies) and can you help out?”

Suneeta is keen to carry on with the work in Colombia:

“What I’d like to do with Columbia is to start a small study asking the e-mediators to keep a transcript of the Skype chat because all these are beginner learners and they rely on text chat as much as they do a conversation. I’ve asked the Columbia people to send me the transcripts of the text chat because there is quite a bit you can figure out from that as well.”

When asked whether the Skype sessions should evolve into a more formal teaching and learning session, Suneeta said:

I think that should evolve depending on the need of the particular centre where it is. It is also something, I think, that will emerge if the children are given a free hand they will ask for what they want. There have been many times where the children have specifically said, ‘This is what we want to talk about’, sometimes even very specifically, ‘We want to have a story, ‘We’d like to have a puzzle’, ‘Can we do one more of those quizzes that you did last time’. It could evolve into a fairly structured teaching session if need be. One of the e-mediator’s has fairly structured sessions and yet the children enjoy them completely. If you let it happen in that sense the right blend between structure and whatever you feel like talking about today”. The reason I’m not stressing one particular kind of structure is because the children are really, really, deprived of any kind of stimulatory input”.

Conclusions

Survey responses suggest that the e-mediators are *au fait* with the technical aspects of the Programme and use, when they have difficulties, a wide range of informal support systems including family and other e-mediators. It may be useful to consider ways in which new e-mediators can engage in online training courses that can bring them up to speed in regard to all the features of Skype since it seems there was to a certain extent some on the job learning. Some instruction in managing technology breakdowns including, for example, freezing and connection issues, may be useful for new e-mediators.

E-mediators were remarkably upbeat about their participation in the Programme even in light of some of the difficulties such as children not turning up or technical issues. When things did ‘come together’ the e-mediators appear to have been re-invigorated and re-inspired.

It is perhaps necessary to ask the questions: are there too many children in attendance during sessions and should there be more certainty or direction in where sessions go?

One or two e-mediators questioned whether the children had a sufficient grasp of the English Language given ‘warnings’ that Indian children are very polite and smile a lot and may in fact, while doing this, have no understanding of what is happening.

The majority of the e-mediators came from teaching backgrounds and this is evident in the ways they went about gathering resources and planning sessions. There appears to have been for most of these e-mediators something of a ‘rude-awakening’ when conducting their first session in the sense that it didn’t always go as they had planned. However, their training,

communication skills, work and personal experience have apparently stood them in good stead in terms of enabling them to adapt themselves quickly and efficiently to new and unpredictable situations.

There is an awareness among the e-mediators that while Skype has many useful features it is lacking in some respects. Some e-mediators mentioned that communication in the broadest possible terms i.e. body language, visual and verbal exchanges, was in some respects limited by the technology. Some e-mediators mentioned, for instance, the visual capacity and range of the webcams. Those from a teaching background may be used to standing in front of a classroom moving and pointing at a whiteboard or blackboard. This is apparently constrained by the use of a webcam.

While teaching experience is clearly an advantage in some respects i.e. communication skills etc., is there a sense that it might also hinder e-mediators in terms of constraining them or pre-determining their actions and choices before during and after Skype sessions? At least one e-mediator from a non-teaching background felt a pressure to run sessions along teaching lines. Coming from the same profession i.e. teaching, may help to create a collegial spirit among e-mediators when it comes to exchanging ideas, knowledge and experiences via the e-mediator site, it should also be borne in mind that this can produce negative, non-inclusive, effects for non-teachers.

E-mediators expressed the view that they would like more regular contact with the same groups of children in order to deepen relationships and enhance understanding. It appears that a sense of continuity may be something that comes from teachers' background knowledge and experiences in Western schools which may, if desired or encouraged, lead to more formal and structured Western style Skype sessions?

E-mediators felt that engaging staff at the India end might enhance Skype sessions with Indian staff being able to guide and perhaps explain to the children, where there may be language difficulties, but also help to prepare and structure sessions.

There is a perception among the e-mediators that the title of the Programme, Skype Grannies, has been useful in terms of promoting the Programme in the media although a number made comments along the lines of, *"I don't think it is that great actually. I think there is a wide ranging group of people [involved in the project] and it didn't suit me but I don't mind"*.

The Skype Grannies project is still evolving. Perhaps the next stage in its evolution is to decide where it should go next. Comments from the e-mediators themselves seem to suggest that decisions should be made at the 'executive' level as to where it should go, that is, whether it should continue as an informal project or develop into a more formal teaching and learning programme. The usefulness of the pilot may lie in the lessons learned for future e-mediators but also in the ways that the knowledge and experience gained may provide the foundations for distance learning courses in formal educational institutions such as schools and universities.

Recommendations

Looking at the data, there are some clear messages:

- Limits on the number of children per class may be helpful and perhaps necessary given the technological restrictions of Skype.
- More structure in the Skype sessions may be desirable but may depend on the broader aims of the Skype Grannies Project. Should sessions continue to be spontaneous and negotiated or should they be organized and structured?
- There may be some scope for involving e-mediators who are not teachers if some decision can be reached as to the future aims and purpose of the Programme.
- Regular sessions with the same children if the aims and purposes are to be structured educational sessions rather than spontaneous, negotiated sessions.

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