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10 years of the LLAS elearning symposium: case studies in good practice
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5 Learning to swim in new waters: A meta-narrative about the design and implementation of a virtual learning environment for language learning and teaching

Teresa MacKinnon[1]

Abstract

In the past 5 years, the Language Centre at the University of Warwick has designed and implemented a blended learning environment in order to meet two important challenges to our Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) language teaching mission. These were to connect teachers and learners together online in order to better support progress where class contact time was limited, and to provide effective support to teaching colleagues with little or no experience of e-learning. Designing the portal, known as Languages@Warwick, involved a complex process of needs analysis, technical and financial understanding and interaction with many stakeholders. Progress in the use of the platform was regularly reviewed and shared with the tutor community in order to inform next steps. This chapter will present an emerging understanding of the nature and impact of the developments set against the rapidly changing technological and pedagogical landscape. One which can perhaps best be described not as a community of practice, as had been expected, but rather as a collection of participatory communities known as collectives.

Keywords: community of practice, collective, CPD, telecollaboration, e-portfolio, VLE, open practice.

1. University of Warwick, United Kingdom; t.mackinnon@warwick.ac.uk.

1.   Context/rationale

> "In the new culture of learning, people learn through their interaction and participation with one another in fluid relationships that are the result of shared interests and opportunity" (Thomas & Seeley Brown, 2011, p. 50).

For Millennials[1], those who have grown up with access to digital communication technologies and who thrive in a culture greatly mediated through the internet, it is unthinkable that their learning would not include use of internet affordances and easy access to important resources wherever they are. It is unsurprising therefore that from 2000 onwards the Warwick Language Centre was increasingly receiving student feedback expressing a need for greater online support beyond the classroom. Few tutors in those early days were meeting those expressed needs, and those who were found trying to exploit the institutional provision (an in-house web text editor) both frustrating and time consuming. The system did not support international character and script use and was very manual in nature requiring considerable time in setup and management. Many tutors were hourly paid or part time and simply did not feel the need to invest additional time in such efforts given that they could show websites in class and email links to their students.

With a new director recently arrived, a decision was taken to investigate the implementation of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for the centre's teaching. This had to be achieved with limited financial and human resources given that such a system was not provided by the institution. The project lead was an early adopter of technologies for learning and, after consulting with the head of IT services, undertook a local needs analysis. Wider information gathering involved the e-learning community through literature reviews, JISCMail and conversations with peers in the sector's language teaching community, such as the Association for University Language Centres, in order to assist the decision making process.

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1. Millenials: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennials

2.   Aims and objectives

An e-learning strategy was put in place, prioritising:

- the provision of suitable, easy to use tools to facilitate language development;

- opportunities for professional development for our language tutors.

It was clear there was a need to provide for blended learning and, as this was a new departure for Centre staff, to support tutor development, both technical and methodological, in a way that did not penalise those already engaged in innovative pedagogical design.

A hosted implementation of Moodle was set up in the summer of 2011 as a pilot for 300 students and a small, enthusiastic number of staff participants. Within the pilot implementation of Languages@Warwick all participating staff were given access to language specific sandbox courses with teacher rights and a course known as *101: Using Moodle for Language Teaching*, moderated by the lead practitioner. Here participants could experience the site as a student, accessing tutor guides and 'how to' resources, connecting to each other through a forum to report any issues or concerns. This phase was vital to informing the next stages of development through the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. The experiences of all involved resulted in greater insights into the activities most tutors felt were significant and the aspects of Moodle that were the most challenging for tutors with little technical experience.

3.   What I did

Subsequent annual iterations of Languages@Warwick continued with this same action research approach. The platform was extended to cover all Language Centre programmes and some external collaborations. There was a user base of around 4,000 people. We were then able to formalise the technical support structure by appointing a Technology Integrator (initially part-time). We replaced

most of our geographically situated technical provision (such as fixed language labs) with online interaction through Languages@Warwick. The project lead and a small group of tutors had been investigating the use of voice over the internet using Wimba[1] tools and presented their findings on tailored listening provision through an online presentation for Edulearn in 2011[2]. The technologies used for audio and video files are generally large files which can be difficult to manage as they affect the functioning of the Moodle course. The complexity of file types and their dependence upon certain codecs and software being available for playback can be confusing for users. Designing opportunities for interaction can also be time consuming and may not get anticipated engagement. Such factors were part of the learning process which informed the tool choices in Languages@ Warwick. The lead found technical help and inspiration through the Association for Learning Technology and completed a professional certification to qualify as a Certified Member of the Association for Learning technologies (CMALT) holder, a professional accreditation scheme for learning technologists.

Other tutors who had been keen to develop their use of technology continued to enhance their course environments using the tools provided in Languages@ Warwick, which by 2012 included an e-portfolio tool (Mahara), collaboration and communication tools (Blackboard Collaborate classrooms, Instant Messenger and voice tools), and from 2013 a streaming media solution (Kaltura). A course review revealed high levels of tutor video use for language learning which merited technical management as described in a Jisc Digital Media case study[3].

A further group of our international tutors were willing to experiment with e-portfolio assessment and the resultant project, which drew on work by Jisc, developed a set of assessment criteria published openly in Scribd which had been created and modified collaboratively. This e-portfolio project is now in its fourth year and involves over 100 students in 5 different languages: Chinese, Japanese, German, French and Spanish. Regular participation in dissemination

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1. Technology provider later acquired by Blackboard, now known as Blackboard Collaborate.

2. Edulearn 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRi0dnSWfKI&feature=youtu.be&list=UUzIsBh-a_JyXNqECzw7PF2g

3. JISC case study http://www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/casestudy/language-centre- university-of-warwick

opportunities presented by LLAS[1] conferences and e-learning symposia facilitated the consolidation of our e-learning networks due to the open nature of the dissemination.

During this development phase, the significance of social networks and informal learning became apparent to the project lead, who began to actively connect with other educators and 'edtech' specialists using Twitter and YouTube channels. Social networking tools provide an efficient way of disseminating teacher tutorials and became a personal learning environment for the lead's professional development as reported in the LLAS journal, Liaison (MacKinnon, 2012). The impact of social networking tools should not be underestimated and was instrumental in further growth, bringing elements of coincidence and serendipity. A virtual exchange (Clavier) emerged from a chance online conversation with an educator based in France and this in turn led to greater involvement in investigation of tools for telecollaboration and asynchronous interaction. The Clavier virtual exchange was included as a case study in the EU funded Intent report[2]. Warwick's virtual exchange is now in its 4th year. Over 900 students were involved last year and the project continues to impact on both physical mobility and curriculum design. This engagement in technology for telecollaboration also led to new opportunities as the project lead was invited by the Higher Education Academy to prepare a report on e-tools for international collaborations[3].

A recent analysis of the role of the online spaces shared by Clavier (the EWC course) available through Languages@Warwick used a tool developed by Mark Childs (2008), the MERM framework, surfacing the aspects of the space that contribute to lowering barriers to engagement and participation. The MERM framework is a conceptual framework which merges the two models available in *activity theory* and *community of practice*, providing a basis for the systematic review of the various aspects of activity through

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1. Language Futures, July 2012; 8th Annual e-learning symposium, January 2013; Reshaping Languages in Higher Education, July 2014, University of Southampton.

2. http://www.intent-project.eu/?q=node/34

3. http://www.ucml.ac.uk/sites/default/files/pages/160/Using_e_tools.pdf

mediated environments (Childs, 2008). Using the descriptors from MERM, it was possible to identify aspects of the environment that could be controlled as part of the design of the environment and those which were dependent upon the attributes of the individual user and therefore would benefit from more personal support from tutors and mentors (see Table 1).

Table 1.   MERM applied to Languages@Warwick EWC course

contributing factors to experience of mediated environment		relevance to Clavier and EWC activity
characteristics of participant	degree of naturalisation	especially difficult for Clermont (France), students, but also unfamiliarity with VLE use at Warwick
	tendency (narrative, immersive etc.)	individual difference
roles and conventions	maximising co-presence	synchronous tools and activities available to reduce this, used mainly by staff
	relationship to environment	access locations differed, French students had access during class time, English students had limited class time and were expected to engage during their own time
	relationship to technology	technology choices appropriate, no significant technological restraints and support was available (e.g. video clip tutorials)
learning activity	teaching approach	greater diversity as team increases, tasks well designed
	teaching technique	greater diversity as team increases, staff familiarity with the purpose of the exchange has evolved over time
	stage in presence development	this was considered in task sequence design, graduating tasks in complexity over time
community	trajectory	launch event at Warwick to raise awareness, institutional publicity in Clermont
	boundaries	open and fluid, this was a fundamental premise
presence (situated experience)	mediated presence (the sense of being somewhere else)	open - synchronous and asynchronous, language use (French/English) not stipulated, students free to communicate however they felt appropriate and to use media such as images and video
	social presence (ability to project oneself)	lots of opportunities for informal connections e.g. Twitter, FB, FIFA tournament, initial activity centres on creation of a profile
	co-presence (sense of being together)	availability of Instant Messenger and online classroom to increase this, sharing of external activity back into EWC builds visibility of interaction

	embodiment	profile creation activity, students not restricted in choice of avatar, supported to reflect on appropriate representation
characteristics of environment	realness	institutional platform but with holes in the walls, acceptance that students may prefer their own tools
	interactivity	tasks designed to promote both formal and informal learning
	unobtrusiveness	French students had to email in English to get technical support
	persistence	increased by using communication channels such as Facebook and Twitter
	communication channels	most effective when communication moves into students' own channels
	navigation	most challenging for French students but also Warwick students had to access Mahara through Languages@Warwick and cope with a new navigation
	narrative	aggregation tools (storify, RSS feeds) used to emphasise this in EWC
identity	concept of self	students were encouraged to discuss as part of setting up profile
	representation of self	most engaged to some extent and had well developed profiles across networks, reports of continued interaction beyond the end of the course
	aspects of self	individual difference

As stated earlier, the project lead embarked upon this learning process with an open mind set. Using social media and curation tools allowed us to share learning online under a Creative Commons licence. This approach has helped in ensuring that peer feedback and support beyond the institution has been incorporated in the design process. Artefacts created during the ongoing developments are shared through a YouTube channel[1], Kaltura galleries[2], a G+ community, slideshare[3] and other social networking tools. From the outset, it was important that our VLE Languages@Warwick should be a walled garden with holes! The notion of rhizomatic[4] learning became central to our international collaborations and has engendered an emerging international

1. Warwick Language YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzIsBh-a_JyXNqECzw7PF2g

2. Warwick Kaltura Galleries: https://warwick.mediaspace.kaltura.com/category/Resources/6610831

3. Slideshare: http://www.slideshare.net/teresamac

4. http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/open-education/content-section-7.5

network of teacher educators, re-purposing the #Clavier name. The nascent network was presented at Eurocall in August 2014. There is still much to realise in order to achieve the vision of openness in education, there are many interests which may resist realisation of openness, but this grass roots example of open practice is a good illustration of Weller's (2011) "Little OER" (p. 109) and the benefits that it can bring.

4.   Discussion

The development of Languages@Warwick has brought with it many unexpected consequences. Local administration of the VLE has facilitated greater flexibility in shared access to courses, allowing wider collaborations beyond our institution which, in turn, have brought helpful connections for our professional development. One should not underestimate the value of such localisation at a time when teachers often feel relegated to mere content providers for an institutional 'e-learning solution'. Languages@Warwick design allows for a wide range of learning scenarios from the minimal to the innovative and this means the tutor or 'lead learner' can experiment with the technologies and implement the best ones for their learning design as and when they are comfortable. Effective practice is recognised and shared in regular institutional and departmental gatherings. The community of practice approach to our development was evaluated recently in a paper delivered at Eurocall Evora in 2013 (MacKinnon, 2013). This highlighted the nature of learning that can be facilitated in flexible spaces such as our 'holey' walled garden, particularly when the affordances of social networks are also exploited offering informal learning. A marriage between structure and freedom, as described by Thomas and Seeley Brown (2011), helps us to embrace change in a rapidly changing context, moving from a teaching-based approach to a learning-based approach. All participants are able to contribute to extending the learning environment beyond the classroom and traditional roles of teacher and learner become irrelevant as all explore together. Further research carried out into the engagement of students through the Clavier course EWC (to be published) also points to behaviour which is better described as that of a collective rather than a community:

"Communities derive their strength from creating a sense of belonging, while collectives derive theirs from participation" (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011, p. 52).

5.   Conclusion

The new waters teaching professionals are navigating are bringing changes and demands we are yet to fully understand. The ever expanding modes of communication and varieties of technologies for learning challenge us to explore them in order to better understand their affordances. We can only hope to swim in these currents if we are prepared to get our feet wet! The past 4 years have seen an increasing adoption of technology for learning by all our tutors and we have been able to analyse the data around these developments in order to inform our next steps. During the summer of 2014 we have migrated our Languages@ Warwick site to a new, more robust implementation of Moodle, Moodlerooms Joule. This has brought many advantages, specifically:

- greater access to data for all users, not just site administrators;

- more sophisticated learning tools such as the Personalised Learning designer to tailor course design to individual users;

- an integrated badging system for Open Badges;

- comprehensive user support through a knowledge base of tutorials and how-to documents.

The new site will continue to be subjected to our user feedback and evaluations as we maintain this constant learning process. Lifelong learning is fundamental to professional development and we continue to prioritise the importance of community engagement, learning from each other in interest driven collectives. The coming year will see broader emphasis upon open educational practice and the value of sharing, working towards mainstreaming this aspect of tutor practice

through the implementation of a central repository (Equella), which helps to make contributed VLE content searchable and available under CC-BY licence both within and beyond our context. Downes' (2009) 'get out of the way' position advocates a focus on removing boundaries to collaboration, and the approach we are adopting draws upon Weller's (2011) "A Pedagogy of Abundance" (p. 85) (see Hoyle, 2009 for an account of Weller's idea). Languages@Warwick has enabled our voyages to new horizons[1] and the dissemination of that learning is an important contribution to meeting the challenges facing the international language teaching community.

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