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Developing a bilingual blog as a platform for language learning in French: A pilot study

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Developing a bilingual blog as a platform for language learning in French: A pilot study

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Abstract:

This paper outlines the preliminary stages of the development of a bilingual blog for use in a third year undergraduate French class with a view to enable asynchronous written communication between students at University of Wollongong and universities in France with whom our university has exchange agreements. The bilingual blog was chosen as an aid to extend the learning experience of students from social, cultural and linguistic perspectives. It also aims at preparing students for their study period abroad more effectively whilst working on their language skills. A social network site was developed with appropriate activities to facilitate discussions and networking in the foreign language. In this paper the rationale behind the choice of a blog is described, the design and development processes are explained followed by an analysis of the problems and issues that arose and possible solutions that could be incorporated in future projects. The paper concludes with a discussion of future development and ways in which this activity could be repurposed for other subjects.

Introduction

This project was initiated by academic staff in the Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong and has also involved a Learning Designer from the University's Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR). This paper describes, from a staff perspective, the experience of designing and implementing a bilingual blog for undergraduate French students with a view to enable asynchronous written communication between students at University of Wollongong and universities in France with whom our university has exchange agreements.

The project is being undertaken following the ADDIE Principle of Instructional Design (Molenda, 2003) - Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation. This paper describes in detail the first three phases of the project and outlines how the final two phases will eventuate.

Rationale and Methodology for using a Blog

Students who study a foreign language at university level often participate in a Study Abroad programme where they live and study in another country for six to twelve months. Although the International Exchange Programme deals with student application and funding issues, there is very little information available to students on the host country or culture. As far as immersion in the target language is concerned, here again the opportunities are limited outside the 3 weekly contact hours in their final year subject. As on-line communication tools are being increasingly used in teaching and learning, technology was an obvious choice to use as a virtual learning environment in our context. Some time was devoted in researching examples by language practitioners involving intercultural exchange in telecollaboration. The most common tools used by educators in language learning and teaching tend to be e-mails, blogs, wikis, videoconferencing, message boards (EUROCALL Review, 2006). The idea of a bilingual blog was retained after much discussion between the academics and learning designers (see section below) as it was crucial to find an appropriate communication tool to allow students to bridge the gap from a social, cultural and linguistic perspective with the added bonus of allowing students to develop social networks with

peers from the country they are about to visit. This would enable them to learn more about the culture before their departure and thus assimilate more readily into the community they are about to visit (Bryant, 2006). Whilst all students who will participate in the blog will not be able to travel abroad as part of the Study Abroad programme, they will nevertheless gain valuable experience from the interaction with native speakers and thus be able to utilise their skills in future careers and/or travel.

Broad, Matthews and McDonalds (2004) have argued that although new technologies of the Web, provide the opportunity for students to become independent learners and make the learning experience more student-centred, their success depends on how academics integrate them to support their own practices. Therefore some research was carried out on how to design an activity suited to the Blog which would facilitate teaching and learning at the same time. Kukulska-Hulme (1999) has pointed to the need to have well-planned activities when using Communication & Information Technology (C & IT) for collaboration between students to work. Arthur (1999 p. 35) on the other hand, highlights the value of creativity in the teaching and learning process as 'being creative is excellent for motivation'. Thus it was decided that students would be required to post a small piece (250 words approx.) in French on the bilingual blog as one of the four Creative Writing exercises they are required to complete over the semester. In this particular exercise also called 'breaking the ice', students have to write two sections: the first one deals with a personal introduction followed by a section requesting information to their French peer on any topic(s) of their choice. Students have to post their piece as well as hand it in by the end of semester one.

Design and development element

Since students from two countries on opposite sides of the world will be communicating with each other a platform was needed that would allow for asynchronous communication in two different languages. Hence an educational technology tool was determined to be the most suitable solution. It was also not possible to use the University of Wollongong's Learning Management System due to access issues for the students from French universities.

Several different wikis and blogs were investigated by the Learning Designer to determine their suitability for this site. Following these investigations it was determined that PBwiki or edublogs would be the most suitable options and a sample site was created in each of these environments. The sites were demonstrated to the team members in a meeting and the benefits and disadvantages of each were discussed. Academic staff had major concerns about the legitimacy of a wiki due to the ease with which these can be edited by any member of the group. It was thus resolved to proceed with an edublogs site and this site was created at <http://uowfrench.edublogs.org/>.

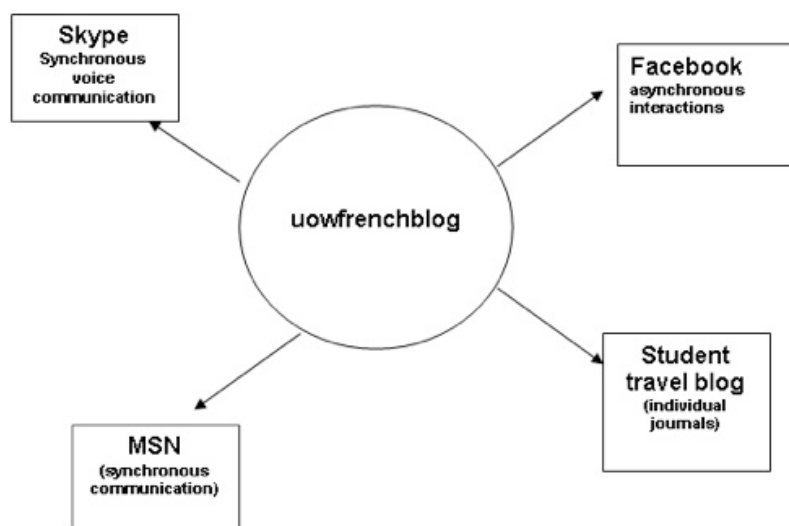
Why a Blog ?

The academic staff involved in the project determined that a blog was preferable to a wiki, mainly as they would be more easily able to track who had contributed to the site. As staff were not very experienced in the use of Web2.0 tools, they wanted something that was simple to use and understand. For these reasons a simple blog was created and other emerging technologies such as mobile blogging and audio

blogging were not introduced to the staff as options. These may though be introduced in the future as staff become more adept and comfortable using blogs. A blog was also seen as providing an easily accessible and manageable tool that promotes communication and discussion amongst students, away from the lecture and tutorial rooms.(Educause Learning Initiative, 2005)

The blog is also seen as a portal and meeting place for the students from where they can branch off to popular social network sites and instant messaging, if they wish, to have private or small group discussions with students who share similar interests, or are studying at the same university whilst abroad. The development team wanted to create an environment in which students felt secure and privacy could be maintained and hence it was not felt appropriate to set up a group in a social network site such as Facebook. Giving students the option of moving to their own groups within these sites after they had established communication with their peers from abroad was though considered an appropriate suggestion. Figure 1 shows how the blog may be utilised by students as a communication hub and a portal to other social network sites and communication tools.

Figure 1 Blog as a portal and communication hub



Implementation of the activity

Training in how to use the technology is always important, for both staff and students. To ensure staff have a thorough understanding of how to work with the blog a demonstration of this was conducted for the academic staff and ongoing training and support will be provided for the process of creating a page and adding users. They will then be able to assume the role of site administrator when it becomes active and will have a more definite ownership of the site.

An information and instruction sheet has been developed for students which outlines why and how the site has been developed and details expectations of their participation. The document also details login and access details and explains how students should contribute. The instruction sheet will be supplemented by a Captivate movie that will demonstrate the processes of logging in to edublogs and adding a

comment to the blog. It was originally hoped that students would begin making contributions in mid October. However, the project has been delayed for several reasons as detailed below and it is now expected that students will begin to use the blog towards the end of May 2008.

Evaluation

There will be two aspects of evaluation of this project namely:

- evaluation of the process of developing the site and implementation of the activity.
- evaluation of the effectiveness of the activity and the impact this has on students' Study Abroad experience and

The first of these evaluations are being conducted through discussion and interview with the academic staff involved in the project. This evaluation is analysed in the following section. The second evaluation will be conducted through student surveys, which have received Ethic clearance. These evaluations will be undertaken later this year after the blog has been in operation for a while. The results of both evaluations will be used to make amendments and improvements to the blog and activities that integrate the blog into the French curriculum and it is anticipated that an analysis of these results and consequent improvements will be published at a later date.

Analysis of Problems and Issues

During the development of this project several issues and problems have arisen and these are now discussed.

Academic staff required and requested ongoing staff development to assist in their understanding of blogs and how to work with the technology as well as pedagogical frameworks. Conflicting priorities and a heavy workload had an impact on the amount of time and effort the academic staff were able to devote to the project. This resulted in the setting of unrealistic timelines which consequently had to be modified. These are indicative of the barriers to elearning, including lack of training, time and support, that are discussed by many authors as being commonly experienced by academic staff when developing elearning initiatives (Berge, 1998; Ertmer, 1999; Hanna, 2000; Olcott & Schmidt, 2000; Bates & Poole, 2003; Billig, Sherry & Havelock, 2005; Covington, Petherbridge & Warren, 2005)

To help overcome some of these problems and ensure that staff involved in future have more realistic expectations and a better understanding of the commitment required a checklist was developed for staff undertaking projects involving the integration of technologies into their curriculum (Figure 2). The aim of this checklist was to give staff a guide to the range of issues that need to be considered when integrating new technologies and associated activities into a curriculum. It is anticipated that this list would be used by staff members in the early planning stages of a project to enable them to ensure they have considered all potential issues. The checklist has recently been utilised by staff in the Learning Design Unit as a template for scoping discussions for new projects.

Figure 2: Checklist for projects involving the integration of technologies into their curriculum

<p>Project Title:</p> <p>Project Description (Analysis of need)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you want to undertake this project? • What are the main learning outcomes? • How are these related to Learning Outcomes in Subject Outline? • How does your project relate to the University's strategic teaching priorities? <p>Design and Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What assistance do you need to initiate this project and who will provide this? • What commitment will be needed by yourself? • How will you integrate this project/activity within the subject and curriculum? • What training will you require? • Are there any other stakeholders who need to be aware of this project and whose input will be required (eg support staff, IT staff, staff at any partner institutions) • Will you need to consider any changes to assessment as a result of this innovation? (You may need to get FEC approval for this) 	<p>Implementation (including any pilot)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What training will be required for students –eg instruction and information sheet explaining what why and how; demonstration of tool • How are you going to engage students in this activity? • What commitment will be needed from students? <p>Evaluation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well did the process of design and development work? • Effectiveness of activity from student perspective (do you need to get HREC approval) • Impact on your workload – in all phases – will this be sustainable? • How do you intend to sharing the outcomes? <p>Adjustment and Improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any aspects of this project/activity that you can improve for future offerings
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The academic staff had little previous experience with using technology and in particular blogs and it was thus resolved that the project would be kept very simple to ensure that they felt at ease with using the blog as well as guiding students through the activity. In addition it was discovered after planning was well underway that the French universities have even less experience with technology. Communication with the academics at the French universities has also been very minimal, although this has improved since a recent visit to our campus by staff from France. During this meeting the blog was introduced and explained to the visiting staff and they have now committed to the project and are keen to see this evolve.

As with all such developments though one of the main issues is finding an appropriate way to integrate the activity into the subject and getting students to engage with the content - this comes back to clear instructions to students of why they are doing this, how the task is to be completed and how this relates to learning outcomes such as: applying foreign language skills to a contemporary French working environment, gaining a broad overview of French cultural and literary tradition, taking the opportunity to include a semester of study abroad to an exchange university as part of the Wollongong undergraduate degree (Undergraduate Handbook, 2007, p. 15) and other sections of the subject the expectations of their involvement and how they are rewarded and/or assessed for their efforts. For this project this will be an on-going process.

The blog has been developed through an Open Source application and content is currently stored on a server provided by an external service provider. As such the university is unable to guarantee this service and procedures have also had to be implemented for students to archive their data.

Future developments

It is envisaged that this blog will continue to evolve and develop as staff and students become familiar with the environment. In its present format this activity is not really using a blog in the true sense of their original intent and is rather a social network site where students can hold discussions about topics of mutual interest. (Downes, 2004). It will only become a true “blog” when students are able to make posts and hence have more control over the direction of the discussion rather than just commenting on posts from staff. It may be that future offerings will use a different tool or software (that may or may not be developed yet); what is, and will remain important is how and why the tool is used to improve the educational experience of our students, from the social, cultural and linguistic perspectives. This is an area that will receive further consideration as the project progresses. The site will also be used as a portal to other social network sites and communication channels that students frequent, such as Facebook and Myspace, thus allowing even more collaboration and discussion amongst the students.

It is hoped that French students will respond to their Australian peers and in their turn post some queries they may have in English thus continuing the social network. The academics in charge of our students abroad will also have access to the blog and will be free to participate if they so wish.

As staff become comfortable working in the blog environment and students start using the site on a regular basis an RSS feed may also be incorporated so that the lecturers easily receive advice when students do contribute, rather than having to access the site to check (Wu, 2005). Although this will require some additional training for the staff in how to set this up, it will help reduce their on-going workloads.

Future developments for this site and activity could include moblogging which is blogging from mobile phones as this adds the convenience of students being able to contribute in their own place as well as their own time (Chinnery, 2006). This will be particularly useful if students complete individual travelblogs whilst overseas (Godwin-Jones, 2005). Audioblogging may also be considered as this has the advantage of students being able to practice their verbal communication in their foreign language as well as written communication.

Reflective journals and ePortfolios are other activities that are being considered to link in to the blog.

Additional Applications

Project members believe there are a number of applications and adaptations of the use of blogs for language study and collaboration between student cohorts at different universities including:

- other foreign language students including Spanish and Japanese
- ESL and EFL students (Wu, 2005)
- all students in Study Abroad programmes
- other collaborative projects with partner universities.

Some preliminary discussions have already been held with staff in the Study Abroad unit who are excited about the prospects.

After extensive searches of specialist databases and journals, very few articles have been located on the educational use of blogs for second language learning and hence an article describing this process could be another outcome of this project.

Conclusion

The blog has been developed to enable students to engage more deeply with the language and culture of a foreign language; namely French for University of Wollongong students and English for French University students. The academic aims of the activity are to extend the learning experience of students from social, cultural and linguistic perspectives which the students will be able to utilise in the Study Abroad Programme and/or future career and travel. Whilst the development process has had some issues and setbacks, many lessons have also been learnt along the way. The project is about to begin the implementation phase and staff involved are looking forward with interest to see how students engage with the blog and each other. An evaluation phase will then be held and results analysed to improve the blog, activity and learning of students.

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