Blended Learning as a Means to an End

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Background
Over the last few years the Language Centre has repeatedly had to disappoint students who wanted to learn a lesser-taught language or continue studying a more widely taught language at an advanced level. There were simply not enough participants to make it viable to run such courses. Other HE and FE institutions reported the same problem, which prompted us to investigate whether we could bring together students from a larger geographical area to boost numbers.

Funded by the University of Worcester's Business Partnerships Office the Language Centre piloted two blended learning courses using a combination of face-to-face and synchronous videoconferencing sessions. Our interest in blended learning was not so much motivated by using technology for technology's sake, but as a means of bridging the geographical gap between tutors and students.

Pilot courses
In collaboration with Aston University, the University of Bath, the University of Coventry and Worcester College of Technology and with the full support from the University of Worcester e-learning team we set up a course in Beginner Arabic and one in Advanced French. The Beginner Arabic course filled up quickly, but because of the high entry level it proved more difficult to recruit participants for Advanced French. Although our target was to have eight students on each course, we ended up with eleven people for Beginner Arabic and five for Advanced French. Course participants were located in Worcester, Bath, Birmingham, Bristol and Coventry and Barcelona. Each course consisted of six sessions, two delivered face-to-face at the University of Worcester at the start and finish of the courses and four online lessons in between.

Technology
To enable synchronous and asynchronous online communication we used a collaborative learning software application called Wimba, which we integrated into Moodle, a Virtual Learning Environment comparable to Blackboard. During the first session students received instruction on how to use the software and had the opportunity to practise under the guidance of an e-learning technologist. In the four online sessions students and tutors met in a virtual classroom, in which the remotely located tutor could use a variety of teaching technologies and resources, including an interactive whiteboard, PowerPoint presentations, interactive assignments and video clips. The teaching resources used were by no means all 'high-tech', but ranged from traditional materials such as books to e-resources in the form of Moodle quizzes, for example.

In the virtual classroom the tutor and students were able to see and talk to each other by using webcams and audio headsets, as well as send instantly visible text messages. Students could also use emoticons to indicate that they agreed or disagreed with what had been discussed or show that they were surprised, enjoying themselves or wanted to ask a question. It soon became clear how important it was

to use these communication tools effectively, to prevent everyone talking simultaneously. In particular the emoticons allowed the tutor to quickly gauge the response in a class, the equivalent of glancing around in a 'real' classroom to check whether students have understood an explanation.

Outside lesson times the Moodle VLE provided the students with structured support. Here they could check week by week what subjects had been covered, what homework had been set and practise with additional assignments to consolidate newly acquired knowledge and skills. Each week an archive of the previous Wimba Classroom session was made available, so students could play back the session in whole or in part, which was especially helpful to those who had missed a lesson.

In between the sessions students could also make use of various asynchronous communication tools. Particularly interesting was the Voiceboard, which allowed students and tutors to post voice messages with optional text on a message board and invite others to reply. This proved to be an easy way to record voice messages and listen to replies, thus enabling students to practise their foreign language speaking skills and tutors to assess students' performance.

Caption: Archive screenshot from an online Beginner Arabic session

Feedback

It was by no means the case that the technology worked without a hitch. However, the pilot courses allowed us to identify what problems can occur and how to resolve them efficiently with a sustainable level of technical support. Feedback from students and tutors has been encouraging. The general feeling was that technical issues that presented themselves during the sessions were outweighed by the benefits of using the technology, such as being able to attend the classes from a location of one's choice and having a range of innovative voice and text communication tools at one's disposal. Students commented:

'I think once people are adapted to the way it works there wouldn't be any problems, it's just a case of getting used to it [...].'

'My Arabic definitely improved (the speaking mostly) and I made a couple of good friends. The technology side worked well and I was really impressed with it!'

'I believe online communication can never be as good as face to face communication, especially in a language-learning situation. It is nevertheless important to be able to communicate in another way when face to face communication is impossible, and once one has learned how to use the equipment and gained confidence, it is good to have the ability to learn online.'

The Beginner Arabic group generally felt that the introductory face-to-face session at the start of the course was very important, but that the last session could have been online. As one student remarked:

'I think that first lesson is crucial. To know the people before splitting up is the key aspect in reinforcing your motivation, commitment and willingness to attend every lesson. I could not attend the last face to face lesson or even logging on that last Friday, but I have got the feeling of having finished a language course in Arabic.'

The Advanced French group attached much more importance to the face-to-face contact and most indicated at the end of the course that, given a choice, they would prefer to have 'normal' classes. However, the participants also recognised that this was not a viable option, since most lived too far away to attend classes regularly:

'I would find it difficult to commit to a weekly face-to-face class, particularly if it involved travelling. The beauty of the blended structure was that I could join in the Wimba classroom without leaving my workplace. However, I do feel that the face-to-face sessions were those that gave me the most opportunity to speak French and to interact fully in the language.'

Both tutors felt that teaching via a virtual classroom had presented them with new challenges, but also with new opportunities. They had used material and presented their lessons in ways that they would not have thought of otherwise. They reported that students had made good progress during the course and that the virtual classroom enabled them to teach effectively.

The French tutor initially struggled to come to terms with the technology and had to rely on her considerable experience as a teacher to help her through the first few online sessions. However, she then became more confident and started exploring how she could use Wimba and Moodle to the best effect:

'I really enjoyed the fact that we all communicated, i.e. talked French for quite a while each session, and had fun at the same time. Everyone has to speak too when using breakout rooms, probably more so than in class. The chat box was handy to spell vocabulary or answer odd queries, and the symbols really helped me see to the students and to deliver the lesson in a fair and orderly way. The only problem was the amount of concentration and multi-tasking this required, but I got more used to it as the sessions went on.'
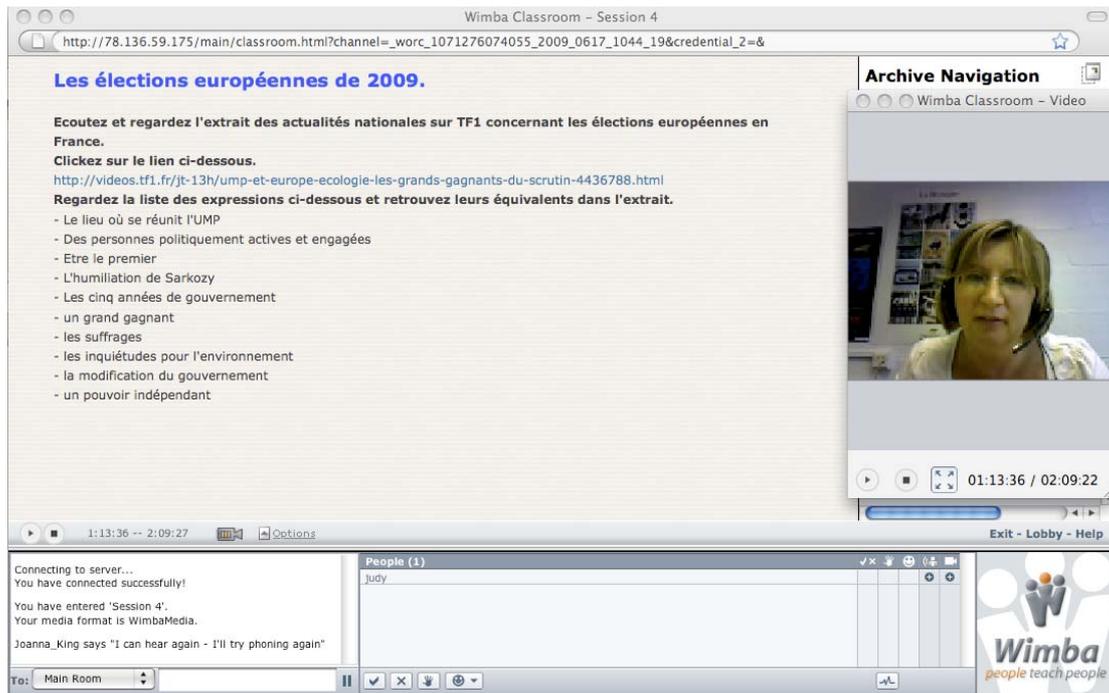
Caption: Archive screenshot from an online Advanced French session

The Arabic tutor was relatively new to teaching, but had more advanced IT skills. She taught the last two online sessions from home, with technical support provided from the UW. Her conclusion was:

'The mix of online and face-to-face contact was very effective and rewarding. Before taking part in this project I was reluctant and reserved about it because I did not know how it would go. But after seeing the results of the first online session I started to have a very positive view about online teaching.'

Looking ahead

On the basis of the experience and feedback we have gained so far, we are planning to run four blended language-learning courses from early 2010, this time on a commercial basis. In the meantime the University of Worcester has purchased an institute-wide licence for Wimba, opening the door for others to explore how they might use the technology to enhance their learning and teaching and offer more flexible access to their courses.

If you would like any further information about the Blended Language Learning Project, please contact either Judy Barker (j.barker@worc.ac.uk) or Paul Snookes (p.snookes@worc.ac.uk), or visit the BLLC website.

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