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How to cite:

Comas-Quinn, Anna; Mardomingo, Raquel and Valentine, Chris (2009). Mobile blogs in language learning: making the most of informal and situated learning opportunities. *ReCALL*, 21(1) pp. 96–112.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0958344009000032>

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Mobile blogs in language learning: making the most of informal and situated learning opportunities

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Abstract

The application of mobile technologies to learning has the potential to facilitate the active participation of learners in the creation and delivery of content. They can also provide a powerful connection between a variety of formal and informal learning contexts and can

help to build a community of learners. However these versatile tools present challenges to educators and learners alike. The paper discusses the pedagogical challenges that result from the introduction of mobile technologies in language learning in the context of an intensive week of study abroad. We describe and evaluate a pilot project that uses mobile blogging to promote a constructivist, situated and informal learning experience of the foreign language and culture based on theories of active learning. We aim to encourage interaction and a sense of community among learners outside formal educational environments and in different locations as we ask them to engage with the foreign culture by capturing, sharing and reflecting on their experiences for their peers.

Keywords: mobile learning, language learning, group blogs, user-generated content, informal learning, situated learning

1. Introduction

New technologies have entered most aspects of our lives in the last two decades, and the resulting changes have progressively made their way into teaching and learning.

Although initially these changes may have been practical, involving improvements such as clearer presentation of learning materials or better access to them, the more recent development of mobile technologies and better understanding and application of web technologies, particularly cognitive tools, is set to have a more profound effect on pedagogy. As Traxler (2007) claims “mobile, personal and wireless devices are now radically transforming societal notions of discourse and knowledge, and are responsible for new forms of art, employment, language, commerce, deprivation, and crime, as well as learning”.

Constructivist principles and situated learning assumptions are at the heart of most current work in mobile learning (Jonassen and Land, 2000). Therefore, most mobile learning projects adopt an activity-centred, learner-centred approach (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula and Sharples, 2004), which has also become increasingly widespread in language learning (van Lier, 2007; Felix, 2005; Simina and Hamel, 2005). In section two of this article, we will start by looking at emerging theories of mobile learning, an area that has so far been under-researched as efforts seem to concentrate on exploring the practical uses of the technology in different contexts (some notable exceptions are Sharples, Taylor and Vavoula, 2005, and Sharples, Arnedillo Sánchez, Milrad and Vavoula, 2007). The issue of what makes mobile devices suitable to promote different

kinds of learning will also be examined. We will then review a range of approaches to learning that put the emphasis on the learner as active participant in the learning process, and will examine the basic concepts of some of the general theoretical principles that are often associated with mobile learning: constructivism, learner-centeredness, situated learning and informal learning.

In section three, we will describe how we conceived, designed and piloted a mobile blogging task for language learners at The Open University, UK. The idea behind this project was to explore the potential of online tools to facilitate interaction and engagement in the collaborative construction of meaning within a community of learners, and the potential of mobile technologies to allow learners to engage informally and creatively with the culture in a particular location – in this case the town of Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

In section four we examine the insights gained from piloting this task and reflect on the various issues that had an impact on the success of the pilot as well as the kind of learning it can promote. We believe that the limited data that was generated from piloting the design of this mobile learning task already points at certain issues that have implications for the design of materials in learning environments that incorporate new technologies. As designers of distance language learning materials, operating in a context in which the introduction of new technologies, including mobile technologies, is increasing, we acknowledge the challenges entailed by this rapidly changing learning

environment. This project is our attempt to engage with this challenging new context in order to gauge the impact it may have on language learning pedagogy.

2. Theoretical Background

Although mobile learning projects have proliferated in the last few years, relatively little research has been devoted to the development of a mobile learning theory to support the design of language learning materials that incorporate mobile technologies. In this section we review current thinking on mobile learning and the theoretical principles that underpin most mobile learning projects, with the aim of identifying those principles that can best support and inform our approach.

2.1 Mobile learning

The latest definitions of mobile learning tend to focus on the learner rather than the technology (Winters, 2006; Naismith et al, 2004). An accepted definition of mobile learning is “any sort of learning that happens when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies” (O’Malley, Vavoula, Glew, Taylor, Sharples, and Lefrere, 2003). Vavoula and Sharples (2002, in Naismith et al 2004) point out that mobility is part of learning, as learning happens over time and space and in different areas of our lives. Whilst there is agreement on the fact that mobile technologies are just one of the means through which learning is mediated (Winters, 2006), they do

seem to offer unique affordances (Klopfer, Squire and Jenkins, 2002) which could be very useful to facilitate learning. There is no doubt that “(m)obile devices have opened up a vast range of possibilities for learning in ways that are convenient and suited to the needs of an individual within the context of their lifestyle.” (Kukulka-Hulme, 2006c:128)

Some of the benefits of mobile technologies are that they support situated learning, allow users to access and share information from any location, and can provide support through feedback and reinforcement (Naismith et al, 2004). The use of mobile technologies in education is reported to have a positive impact on learners’ engagement with, understanding of and motivation for the subject, whilst facilitating interaction and collaborative work (Kukulka-Hulme, 2006c). It is not clear what makes mobile devices engaging and motivating, but some of the reasons put forward refer to ownership (understood as integrating the mobile device into the user’s life), increased control over goals, fun, communication, learning in context and continuity between contexts (Jones, Issroff, Scanlon, Clough and McAndrew, 2006b), as well as identity or ‘coolness’, instant sharing, privacy and portability (Jones, Issroff and Scanlon, 2006a). Some of these are powerful concepts which are not always fully understood. For example, sharing is a key activity in the co-construction of knowledge advocated by social constructivism, but whilst it is clear that the proliferation of user-generated content, free sites and software seems to point to a previously untapped human desire for sharing, it has been observed that people are often much more interested in sharing their own experiences than in taking advantage of what others have to share (Jones et al, 2006a).

Ownership of mobile devices is becoming universal and figures for usage of mobile technologies are reported to be higher than for ordinary computers amongst learners (Jones et al, 2006a:15). Certain properties of mobile devices (portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity, connectivity and individuality, as identified by Klopfer et al 2002) produce unique educational affordances which, coupled with their widespread acceptance, have the potential to make them extremely useful for the integration of learning into learners' lives outside traditional learning environments.

Existing mobile learning projects in education focus mainly on the use of mobile devices “to support communication, for content delivery and creation, to encourage personal engagement and in contextual learning” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006c:120). In the context of language learning, initial attempts at using mobile technologies tended to focus on traditional, comfortable and controllable activities such as the delivery of vocabulary or grammar reinforcement. However, the potential of mobile technology for facilitating content creation and delivery, contextual and informal learning, and continuity of learning between different contexts have led researchers and practitioners to experiment with innovative ways of integrating mobile technologies into language learning. In a project that involved ESOL learners at City College, Southampton, UK, Web publishing software was used to collate multimedia files captured with learners' mobile phones whilst exploring their locality (Kukulska-Hulme, 2005a). Petersen, Chabert and Divitini (2006) report on a project that involved setting up a mobile community blog to encourage collaboration and promote a sense of community between language students travelling to France and those remaining in their main institution in Norway. Shao, Crook and Koleva

(2007) describe the creation of a mobile group blog to support cultural learning and the integration into their new environment of Chinese higher education students in Nottingham.

It is interesting to note that all three projects mentioned above aim to engage learners informally with the context, allow them to set their own goals and levels of participation and provide opportunities for learning in an individualised, creative and open-ended manner. Whilst this is very desirable, it can at times produce unexpected results as learners redefine the task or find unanticipated ways of engaging with it. In a project that involved language learners in their residential week abroad at The Open University, UK, Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2006a) found that learners were not using mobile devices in the way they had been asked to, but were finding other uses for them that had not been anticipated by the researchers (recording each other speaking the foreign language rather than interviewing the locals, for example).

The claim that “mobile learning promises to deliver closer integration of language learning with everyday communication needs and cultural experiences” (Kukulska-Hulme, 2006c) hides the very real challenge of incorporating mobile technologies into language learning successfully and effectively. This may involve fundamental changes in our pedagogical approach to learning as new principles might need to be defined to regulate new ways of learning. Since there is not an abundance of research on the use of mobile technologies in language learning, it is essential to undertake a review of the main

theories that we feel should inform task and course design in language learning, namely, constructivism, learner-centeredness, situated learning and informal learning.

2.2 Constructivism

Constructivism, based on John Dewey's experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), maintains that learners need to experience and apply concepts and ideas and relate them to their existing knowledge in order to construct meaning. Learners cannot simply memorise, absorb or copy pre-packaged ideas, but must construct their own versions through actively engaging in personal experimentation.

Two main schools of thought have emerged in constructivist thinking. Cognitive constructivism, based on the work of Jean Piaget (1970), emphasizes the mental processes involved in the individual's construction of knowledge. Social constructivism, following the theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978), focuses on the social and historical context that shapes the construction of knowledge. Vygotsky believes that individuals cannot extricate themselves from the society in which they live, and that language and culture inevitably colour their interpretation of reality. This concept is particularly relevant in language learning as the native language and culture, used as "frameworks through which humans experience, communicate and understand reality" (Simina and Hamel, 2005), are used to make sense of the target language and culture. Felix (2005) suggests that, for the purposes of aiding language acquisition, both the cognitive and the social are equally important. A synthesis of both approaches that recognises that

“knowledge is constructed individually but mediated socially” (Felix, 2005:86) fits well with the nature of language learning.

Sharing, collaboration and interaction with other learners and experts from whom the learner can obtain different perspectives on the problem clearly enhance the opportunities for learning. Since computer and mobile technologies widen the possibilities for interaction with other learners, which is of prime importance in language learning, they are ideally suited to support a social constructivist approach to task and course design.

A shift towards a constructivist paradigm in language learning seems set to inform course design in the 21st century broadening previous approaches such as behaviourist rote learning or the cognitive approach that underpinned the widely used communicative system. It is now acknowledged that neither the mere acquisition of grammar and vocabulary nor their controlled use in communicative situations, are sufficient to achieve language proficiency. For language learning to be successful, learners also need to be able to access information, process it and use it in real situations (Rüschhoff, 2002), hence the emphasis on task or project-based learning which uses, as much as possible, real materials, tasks and situations. Mobile devices have the flexibility to enable learners to carry out these processes in a personalized manner.

2.3 Learner-centered /Activity-centred learning

Learner-centeredness and activity-centered learning evolve from adopting a constructivist approach to learning. In language learning, putting the individual at the centre of learning has become more popular as the focus “has gradually shifted from linguistic inputs and mental information processing to the things that learners do and say while engaged in meaningful activity” (van Lier, 2007). Whatever the label, task-based, project-based, content-based or experiential, these approaches have in common an attempt to engage learners in learning not only with their brains, but “with their hearts, bodies and senses” (Finkbeiner, 2000). Ideally, learners will be engaged in real (rather than role-played) activities which are meaningful, contextual and situated and this will encourage them to take control and responsibility for their own learning

The transfer of responsibility from instructor to learner which comes with learner-centeredness is not without problems. Felix (2005) cites, amongst others, political issues (such as the expectations of funding bodies) and time constraints (set up and monitoring of learner-centered activities need to be carefully designed to avoid them being too time consuming for the instructor). However, Anderson and Wark (2004) claim that an approach to online course delivery that requires students to “take on the major roles of constructing, sharing and teaching the course content” has the potential to save instructor and development time, whilst resulting in lasting resources that can subsequently be reused and improved by other learners.

2.4 Situative / Situated learning

Social constructivism sits well within a situative perspective of learning, which concentrates on the influence of the social and cultural context where the learning takes place. Moreover, the particular circumstances in which the learning occurs make it more unique and meaningful to the learner and thus more likely to be absorbed into the learner's acquired knowledge (as is the case for apprentices who learn on the job, for example).

In language learning, the ideal environment to provide a situated learning experience would be a country where the language is spoken, but that is rarely possible. Alternative context-rich experiences can be provided in the classroom or through learning materials, and computer and mobile technologies can be cost-effective ways of accessing real contexts or recreating more authentic contexts, and facilitating interaction amongst the group.

The multimedia capabilities and portability of mobile devices in particular can be used to support learners whilst they engage with the context, by accessing information about it or gathering information from it. This type of situated learning, or 'context-aware learning' (Naismith et al, 2004:14), allows learners to concentrate on and make the most of the context and encourages them to construct their own representation of it individually.

2.5 Informal learning

Tacit learning is so embedded into our everyday lives that we often do not recognise it as learning (learning a new recipe whilst watching a cookery program) and probably underestimate the amount of time we devote to it (Livingstone, 2001). However, the concept of informal learning is gaining importance as organisations, particularly in the commercial world, realise that individuals learn most about their jobs informally through conversation, observation or trial-and-error.

Livingstone defines informal learning as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria” (Livingstone, 2001). The emphasis in this definition is towards intentional, self-directed learning, where the learner sets out to acquire knowledge. However, there is another type of informal learning which is accidental and unpredictable, and which the phrase “stumble and learn” (Kukulka-Hulme, 2006b) describes very well. It is the knowledge we had not set out to acquire but we chance upon in conversation, listening to the radio or web surfing, for example, (equivalent to the serendipitous kind of learning that results from reading an entry that catches our eye whilst turning the pages of a dictionary or encyclopaedia). Because of their personal and portable nature, mobile technologies are particularly suitable “for recording, reflecting on and sharing this type of informal learning” (Naismith et al, 2004:18).

New technologies increase our access to information empowering learners to pursue knowledge in informal as well as formal educational contexts using web and mobile tools. Scott (2006) remarks that those students who choose to do this are often remarkably

effective at using new technologies informally to manage and direct their own learning and support the learning of others. It is therefore important for task designers not to overlook the potential of informal learning to support and extend formal learning. As Cross points out “formal and informal learning each have important roles to play, and most learning experiences blend both formal and informal aspects” (Cross, 2006).

3. Integrating mobile learning in language learning: the Santiago Mobile Blog

As a result of reviewing how different theories and approaches to learning are implemented in current mobile learning projects, we wanted to design a mobile learning task that would allow our learners to engage with the foreign culture in a more independent and personalised way than had been possible before. We conceived a strongly learner-centered task to promote constructivist, situated and informal learning.

The first phase of our project consisted of developing a webpage and blog which students could use as an interactive repository for sharing examples of their cultural encounter with the location (<http://cnm.open.ac.uk/projects/santiago/index.php>). We also provided a written plan and supporting material to guide students through the task. In this section we will explain in more detail the aims of the task, the rationale behind the choice of technologies, and how the task was piloted in August 2007 with a small number of students to identify any problems with our design and assumptions.

Our reflections on the issues that emerged during the pilot and on the small amount of data that was generated (discussed in section 4) are being currently used to review the design of both the webpage and blog and the mobile learning task itself, with a view to engaging a larger number of students in this task in subsequent residential schools. Our research intentions for the second phase of this project are to concentrate on analysing the learners' experience (through questionnaires and interviews) and the contents of the blog.

3.1 Context

The project was piloted in August 2007 during the last week of the residential experience in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, that Spanish Diploma-level students at The Open University, UK, benefit from. The residential week in Spain takes place in three consecutive weeks, with approximately 100 students per week, and there is an option to complete an alternative learning experience (ALE), delivered either online or via telephone, for those students who are unable to travel to Spain (around 20%).

The course, the first year of a two year Diploma programme, was designed in the mid-nineties as a traditional distance learning course based on printed and audiovisual materials and supported through postal, face to face and telephone tuition. In spite of the addition of a website and an option to have tuition online rather than face to face, thus far students have been able to successfully complete the course with a minimum of ICT skills. This is now set to change as the new version of the course, due in 2010, will involve not only updating the materials and the mode of delivery (the University is now

moving to a blended tuition model), but also incorporating some of the new technologies that we have been reviewing above. With a Virtual Learning Environment at the heart of the course, new tools will be made available such as forums, blogs and wikis that will promote further interaction and collaboration amongst learners, and possibly new types of learning.

As course developers we wanted to gain an insight into the potential of these new tools and technologies to enhance learning, enabling us to achieve things that were simply not possible before. We saw in the residential week abroad a perfect opportunity to try out a situated, informal activity where mobile technologies would play a central role in allowing students to “capture” their encounter with the target culture.

3.2 Aims of the project

The purpose of this project is to engage learners in the creation of an online resource that focuses on the foreign culture, so that both the students who travel to Spain and those who do not can share their cultural experiences and reflections. Students can use their mobile phones, digital cameras and MP3 recorders to select and record samples of their encounter with the foreign culture in situ, and then send them or upload them to the cultural blog to share with the group. The whole cohort of students, through engaging in a dialogue about the content of this online resource, can take part in the process of interpretation and construction of knowledge required to make sense of the foreign culture. The intention is to engage a succession of cohorts in the creation of a reusable

learning object that will encapsulate the “accumulated insights” (Shao et al, 2007) of the community of learners on this course.

In the context of the current Spanish residential school experience, this activity offers a different kind of learning opportunity, with the emphasis on interpretation of data and construction of meaning based on student-generated content, and in sharp contrast with the current format, which focuses on language skills practice, is tutor-led and largely classroom-based. Although the main aim of the residential school is to improve speaking through an intensive experience, language and culture are inextricably linked, and the course also aims to consolidate students’ intercultural awareness and competence. We would expect students who are engaged in the task of identifying material for the cultural mobile blog to become more sensitive to cultural differences and to further develop their cultural awareness (Shao et al, 2007) both in relation to the target culture and to their own.

Extending the learning process over time and including the whole community are two further aims of this project. The blog allows students to share material and reflections, thus reinforcing the sense of community (Petersen et al, 2006), and to engage in an evolving dialogue. The blog’s relative anonymity allows freedom to express oneself, regarded as “critical in engendering a number of positive communication outcomes” (Joinson and Paine, 2007), and this will be particularly relevant during the second phase of this project when we intend to reuse the Santiago mobile blog in the online alternative that those who cannot travel to Santiago have to complete. As an asynchronous tool, the blog allows time to revisit the content and reflect on it (Glogoff, 2005) and students will

be encouraged to return to the blog at different points in time to check for new content and comments that have been posted and to post comments themselves.

Encouraging the learning process to take place in an informal setting (the town itself, where the foreign culture could be experienced without tutor mediation) is another one of our aims. We invite students to be alert to what is happening around them, ready to identify the images, sounds or situations that they find interesting, puzzling, amusing or ‘shocking’, and that they deem worth recording. Mobile devices then provide the means to capture those cultural experiences “on the spot”, as and when they happen. The task would be especially successful if this accidental learning that we were trying to capture turned into knowledge inquiry on the students’ part (Shao et al, 2007).

The concept of an interface between learner and context, developed by White (1999) and defined as “the place *at* which and the means *by* which learner and context meet, interact and affect one another” (White, 2003:91) is a useful one to describe another dimension of this project. Although White claims that the distance learning context allows choice in the way that the learner interacts with the learning environment, the reality is that the choice can be heavily mediated by constraints imposed by the design of the course (in terms of pace and sequence of learning, for example). This is more in evidence in the residential school context where instructors and a tightly planned programme direct and support the learner most of the time. Whilst it is desirable to guide learners in the construction of their own interface with the context (both understood in the sense of learning environment and, in this case, the physical context of the foreign culture), we believe that at some point the instructor needs to allow the learner freedom to tackle this task alone.

Therefore, a further purpose of this project was to allow and encourage learners to interact with and build their own interface for this very specific context with very little instructor mediation.

3.3 Tools

It was decided at an early stage that the technology had to be kept as simple as possible. The reasons for this were: a) pedagogical, as we wanted the technology to enable the project rather than dictate its aims and shape; b) practical, as it is widely acknowledged that lack of familiarity with the device can become a serious barrier to engaging with a mobile learning activity (Jones et al, 2006b) and c) financial, because, with over 100 students in every residential school week, it would be impossible to provide each student with a mobile device.

For the content-gathering part of the activity, which students would be carrying out whilst in Santiago, students would need to use their own mobile phones, digital cameras or MP3 recorders. Mobile phones seem particularly suitable as they afford access and delivery of multimedia content, thus supporting students' preferences for visual, auditive and textual content (Evans, 2005). The other relevant characteristics that make mobile phones appropriate for this learning activity are user control and ubiquitous use (Kukulska-Hulme, 2005b) and the ability to capture data at the location which users can work or reflect on later (Evans, 2005).

It was expected that students would be relatively familiar with the technology as we were asking them to use their own personal devices, but it was acknowledged that they might not be familiar with all their functionalities (hence the need for the support of a tutor on-site)

For the second part of the activity - sharing the content gathered and making sense of it in terms of cultural interpretation and comparison - an interactive webpage and blog were chosen because they afford interaction and collaboration through asynchronous communication and exposure to a diversity of experiences (Conole & Dyke, 2004). This is particularly important for distance students who might go back to working in isolation after the residential week, and blogs can be instrumental in building a community of practice or community of inquiry (Lipman, 2003) around a particular task. As cognitive tools, blogs also afford communication and collaboration in the creation of meaning, and the potential to encourage reflection, common to other asynchronous online communication technologies (Conole & Dyke, 2004; Glogoff, 2005; Seitzinger, 2006; Shao et al, 2007).

3.4 Technical design

The technology required to provide a mobile blog was adapted from that used in the Xtreme Webcasting project developed by the Knowledge Media Institute at The Open University, UK (KMi, 2002). To provide some location information for users to know where in the town the image or recording had been taken, an aerial Google Map of the

town, overlaid with a grid, is displayed on the website and the content that is added is roughly plotted on the map with the help of a grid (Figure 1). The use of GPS to provide more accurate location information was discarded as it would have involved students carrying additional devices.

[insert Figure 1]

Material could be uploaded via a web form with space for the author's name, a title, a comment and the location information (none of these compulsory at the time of the pilot). The entry was then displayed as a pointer on the map which, when clicked, linked to the blog (Figure 2). The webpage could be viewed by all, but to upload content or make comments on entries students and tutors had to log in with their Open University username and password. The web pages worked cross-browser and cross-platform, and a WAP version was also available, although its use was not piloted in the first phase.

[insert Figure 2]

Initially we wanted students to be able to send all data (audio, video, images, short text) captured through their phones to the blog directly from their phones. However this proved problematic as we did not have access to a commercial package such as Mediaboard (Mediaboard, 2008), which allows the collection of multimedia content sent from mobile phones and automatically filters the advertising that mobile phone companies regularly embed into messages. We solved this issue by providing the web

form so that students could upload to the blog any files they had created (images and mp3s only for the pilot, but also short videos for the second phase of the project). Audio files could also be created by phoning a dedicated number where the phone call was recorded and the resulting file automatically converted to MP3 format and added to the blog.

3.5 Pilot implementation

The activity was piloted during the last week of residential school in August 2007. The map and the blog, preloaded with a few sample entries (one audio and a few images with a short explanatory text), were presented to all students during the multimedia session. Students were introduced to the different types of contributions that could be made, both in terms of format and content, and the logistics of the task. They were asked to look at the existing content and to leave comments if they wanted to (in Spanish preferably).

A small group of volunteers (n=8) agreed to take part in the content-gathering part of the pilot. This was scheduled to coincide with another semi-structured activity that would take them to the town centre (a visit to the cathedral), but students were also told that they could continue gathering material for the blog during the rest of the week. Students were provided with detailed instructions, including how to access the blog, upload material and phone their audio contributions in. A tutor on-site was also available at agreed times during the rest of the week to support them with any aspect of the task. Volunteers were asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire (discussed in section 4) to gather

information about their understanding of the concept of intercultural awareness and their familiarity with the technology.

By the end of the week two images and three audio recordings had been uploaded and 25 comments had been added to the blog. A very successful contribution was made by one student who appeared to understand the task particularly well and who recorded himself talking about the atmosphere around the cathedral square and about the visit to the town of Coruña

(audio files uploaded Monday 20th and Tuesday 21st August 2007).

The idea of using the mobile blog with the ALE students in September was not tried during the pilot, but information on the project and an invitation to view the blog and make a contribution was sent to all students in the cohort (just under 400) in September 2007, and by mid-October another twenty images had been added to the blog.

4. Discussion

4.1 Preliminary evaluation of the pilot and future developments

We wanted to give students freedom to select which aspects of their informal interaction with the target culture during their visits to the town they wanted to capture and share with others. They were encouraged to identify aspects that provoked a response in them, which need not be only cognitive, but emotional, affective, etc. The intention was that

students would be engaged throughout in the process of making sense of their surroundings through their choices of significant and relevant examples for sharing with others. Then a further process of construction of meaning would take place when the students uploaded the examples they had selected to the blog and were required to give them a title and annotate them with comments.

Informal feedback gathered by tutors suggests a positive reaction overall from students who were shown the blog and were introduced to the project. Many students found the interface very user-friendly, and were happy to interact with the existing content by leaving comments. However the amount of new entries involving examples gathered in the town during the residential school period was fairly low. In the period between the end of the pilot and the end of the course, a more encouraging number of new entries was added following the invitation to take part in the project that all students in the cohort received.

This indicated that some students were still keen to revisit their residential school experience either by adding comments to existing content or uploading new material to the blog. It is interesting to note that there was a difference in the nature of the entries added during and after the residential school, with the former being more about the cultural experience and interaction of individual learners with the location. After a certain time, the social aspect of that experience seems to have become more prominent and the knowledge and memories that learners have constructed around their cultural experience are strongly linked to the social group within which they lived it.

A number of issues emerged from piloting this project. First, problems with the timing of the activity, as the month between completing residential school and the end of the course is particularly busy and not many of our students (all part-time with many additional personal and professional commitments) will have time to engage with an additional optional task at that stage in the course. Second, our language students might be less familiar with new and mobile technologies than we had anticipated. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions from such a small sample, the information provided in the preliminary questionnaire revealed that only six out of the eight volunteers that took part in the data-gathering part of the task owned a mobile phone, and only two out of the eight was familiar with blogs. Finally, we had probably underestimated the amount of support our students would need to move from the traditional learning system to which they are accustomed (materials-led or tutor-led) to one where they had to take responsibility for setting their own goals and achieving them.

As a result of this preliminary evaluation of the pilot we have concluded that the mobile blog and the kind of learning it promotes might be better understood if not confined to the residential school week. We plan to introduce the idea of the cultural blog to the whole cohort earlier on in the course and encourage them to upload any examples of their cultural encounters with the Spanish-speaking world throughout the whole course. These could take the form of interactions with native speakers (even a summary of the information acquired in that interaction), information found on the web or images taken whilst in a Spanish-speaking country. The idea is to allow students to develop their own interface with the culture of the Spanish-speaking world over time (White, 2003) so that

they are able to make the most of the opportunities for situated, informal learning that the residential school week affords.

4.2 Implications for the context of mobile learning

Learners' perceptions of their own learning will be inevitably altered when changes are introduced, whether those changes involve asking them to use unfamiliar new technologies or working within a different theoretical approach to learning. In this case, the design of the current residential school programme is based on the principle that the context in which the learning is taking place is mediated for the students by the materials and tutors. Even in those activities that take place in the town rather than in the classroom, and that allow them more freedom, there is still a strong element of guidance (an audio tour for their visit to the cathedral or a town quiz). However, with the activity that we have described above we are substantially varying the approach to which they are used to give them more freedom to engage with the activity in their own way. We are no longer mediating the context for them (see White, 1999 and 2003 above), rather we are inviting them to experience it for themselves, concentrating on whatever they find interesting, rather than what *we* think that they will find interesting. We hope that this shall result in a much more personalised experience, more meaningful to the learner and therefore leading to deeper learning.

When we transfer control of the activity to learners we are also making them responsible for that learning and that can generate its own problems. Learners might wonder why we

are no longer taking the lead and guiding them through the learning process, and that might result in scepticism, as reported by Felix (2005). It might also result in insecurity as learners find themselves having to work in an unfamiliar way, so training our learners to operate within the new approach is key to obtaining their cooperation, an essential ingredient if learning is to be successfully achieved. Furthermore, “shifting the balance of power” (Cook and Light, 2006) also has obvious consequences for instructors, as their degree of control over the learning process diminishes and authority is more equally shared between instructor and learner.

With this activity we wanted to provide a space where our students could, as a community, engage with and explore the foreign culture, free to take advantage of it to different degrees according to their interests, ability and disposition. As with all other optional activities that take place during residential school, this task was not formally assessed. Assessing and evaluating the learning that results from this kind of activity is a real challenge, as the creativity and subjectivity involved will result in outcomes which differ enormously from learner to learner, and which are difficult to measure. This is a problem shared by many mobile learning projects, as the learning they enable and pursue is “essentially personal, contextual and situated: this means it is ‘noisy’ and this is problematic both for definition and for evaluation” (Traxler, 2007). The need to adhere to imposed standards (Felix, 2005) and the trend towards further transparency and accountability, which increasingly apply to education, might stand in the way of mainstream adoption of an approach such as that described in this paper.

5 Conclusion

Our predicament as distance language educators is that in our ambition to provide a supportive environment for our learners, we run the risk of turning the learning materials into a straightjacket in which our learners have few opportunities to set their own goals, concentrate on their own interests and engage creatively with the learning experience. With the introduction of new technologies, a more flexible learning environment is made available, one that can extend the potential for learning to new situations and contexts. If we want to capitalise on these new possibilities, we must take especial care to introduce changes progressively and support our learners throughout. We believe that there is an unresolved tension between our desire to involve our learners more actively and centrally in the new learning environment, and their need for reassurance, guidance and direction to allay their anxieties. Kukulska-Hulme points out that attention will need to be paid to “the new ‘literacies’ that learners need to develop to enable them to take full advantage of learning” (2006c:131), which Cobcroft (2006) identifies as critical, creative, collaborative and communicative literacies.

Our Santiago mobile blogging pilot has provided us with first hand experience of an innovative and creative way in which new technologies can be applied to language learning. The insights gained as a result of this pilot will allow us to integrate this activity more fully into the next presentation of the course, and aid us in developing a more coherent strategy for incorporating the type of learning that mobile technologies make possible into our courses.

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