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Social media for informal minority language learning: exploring Welsh learners' practices

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Social Media for Informal Minority Language Learning: Exploring Welsh Learners' Practices

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Conole and Alevizou's social media typology (Conole and Alevizou, 2010) includes amongst its ten categories: media sharing; conversational arenas and chat; social networking and blogging. These are all media with which language learners are increasingly engaging (Lamy and Zourou, 2013). Social networking tools, in particular, which encourage informal, social communication have been identified as suitable for supporting language learning and their use is growing quickly.

This paper reviews research on using social media for informal language learning. It will then discuss a small qualitative case study of Welsh learners' practices in using such resources. Welsh is a minority UK language spoken by around a fifth of the population of Wales. Unlike a majority language there is no need for English speakers in Wales to learn Welsh in order to communicate with Welsh speakers as all UK Welsh speakers are bilingual. Nevertheless there is great interest among adults in Wales and from Welsh families across the UK in learning Welsh. However there are two particular challenges: the small numbers of speakers (around 611,000), and their very uneven distribution. These two factors make it difficult for learners outside Welsh speaking "hotspots" to hear and practice Welsh.

Social media has the potential to support Welsh language learning by providing resources wherever the learner is (particularly if they live in a non-Welsh speaking area or outside Wales completely) and by supporting web-based learning communities. The study reported here is concerned with the extent to which this potential is being exploited in practice. It employed interviews and a small survey to study the practices of learners at all stages of their language learning. It was found that learners used social media widely but those at different stages used social media somewhat differently, with beginners browsing to make contacts and gather information, listening to the language and watching Welsh programmes via the internet whilst some advanced learners set up practice groups, lead sub-communities and source and provide resources both on- and off-line.

Introduction

This paper considers the argument for using social media to support informal language learning practices, focusing on a case study of Welsh, a minority UK language. It reviews the use of social media to support informal language learning, and to support Welsh. It then reports on a small case study of learners' practices using digital resources for learning Welsh, focusing on their use of social media. Wales has 3 million residents: 4.8% of the UK population. The Welsh language is spoken by around a fifth of the Welsh population, approximately 611,000 speakers, and so is a minority language. For some learners Welsh may be a heritage language spoken by previous family generations, in which case, they have some familiarity with it, and their identification with the language

and culture can result in high motivation. Although it is not necessary for English speakers to learn Welsh in order to communicate as UK Welsh speakers are Welsh/English bilingual, there are good reasons for learning Welsh, including the benefits of having a second language for further language learning. However, with a small number of speakers who are widely distributed it can be difficult for learners to hear and practice Welsh.

It is suggested therefore that social media can support learning Welsh by providing resources wherever the learner is (especially if they are in a non-Welsh speaking area) and in supporting web-based learning communities. The study reported in the case study section is concerned with whether and how social media is used. Conole and Alevizou's (2010) social media typology is helpful in considering learners' use of social media; including in its categories media sharing; conversational arenas and chat; social networking and blogging: all media that language learners are increasingly engaging with (Lamy and Zourou, 2013). Social networking tools, in particular,

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Social media for language learning	Media sharing	Instant messaging, Conversational arenas and chat	Social networking	Blogging and Microblogging
Example	Peer to peer; link sharing; e.g. Spotify TuneIn radio, Flickr, Youtube Instagram	Paltalk, Oovoo, Skype	Facebook, LinkedIn, Ning	Wordpress BlogSpot Twitter

Table 1: Types of social media relevant to language learning – adapted from Conole and Alevizou's typology (2010).

which encourage informal, social communication have been identified as suitable for supporting language learning, and their use is growing quickly.

Terms and definitions and social media for learning languages

In social media different terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Zourou's review on social media for language learning (Zorou, 2012) provides a helpful discussion of such terms. She cautions that social media in general consists of a set of tools, used differently in particular applications, whilst "Web 2.0" refers to the platform, not the tools. She considers three terms in relation to language learning: social media, social network sites and language learning communities.

Social Media

Conole and Alevizou's social media typology (2010) includes 10 categories where the most important for language learning are likely to be: **media sharing** for downloading and uploading different media objects to the Internet; **instant messaging, conversational arenas and chat** where users can 'post' their contributions to a topic-centred exchange as well as texting, skyping and so on; **social network** sites (SNS) such as Facebook, with facilities for posting profiles and allowing rich communications **and blogging** where a number of web services offer users space and tools to launch their own 'blog', as shown in **Table 1**. So, in this typology, Social Network Sites are one particular category of Social Media.

Social Network Sites

Social Network Sites may have specific spaces on them dedicated to language learning such as Facebook. For example there are a small number of Welsh learning groups on Facebook, such as the one run by Coleg Gwent (Gwent College): one of five regional educational centres providing lessons and resources for adult learners. It is an open group "for anyone interested in the Welsh for Adults…courses run by the centre" and suggests people may want to talk about classes, day schools, summer classes, vocabulary, grammar etc. There is also a group for Welsh learners in England which at the time of writing has 685 members (the Gwent group has 335 members, a group for SSIW (2344 members), which is discussed further below and also a group for Welsh Learners with 817 members. Although these are relatively small numbers, they are sufficient to provide a space for learners to

get answers to questions or to contact other learners and share resources etc.

Language Learning Communities

The third term considered by Zourou (2012, op. cit.) is Web 2.0 language learning communities. Structured spaces such as busuu (www.busuu.com) Babbel (www.babbel.com) and Livemocha (http://livemocha.com) typically include language lessons and support for communities of learners. As Zourou notes, such language learning communities have Web 2.0 technical features but are quite diverse in nature. Most provide feedback on language learning, some of which is peer feedback. For example busuu connects speakers of different native languages and encourages them to give feedback to each other on their target language: an English native speaker will be invited to provide feedback on exercises from an English learner. Few language learning communities include Welsh, but one community, SSIW (Say Something In Welsh) is particularly successful, with 30,000 participants having signed up for courses. It includes:

· Two online courses (so far) with conversation-based lessons
· A forum
· A weekly newsletter
· An online Eisteddfod (a Welsh festival of literature, music and performance)
· "Bootcamps" where learners meet up face to face for intensive speaking practice
· Local meetings

SSIW is a hybrid online/offline language course and community. As learners are largely based in one country, face to face meet-ups and "Bootcamps" (intensive language learning weeks) are arranged. The combination of online and offline opportunities offers:

1. A means of socialising into a new community.
2. Communication with a wide range of peers (who may be widely distributed)
3. Speaking practice in authentic real life situations

Language learners' use of social media

Trosset (who studied Welsh learners) pre-empted the current consensus on the social nature of language learning: "*No one speaks a language in isolation from other people; to learn a language is to enter a community of people who*

speak it. There are many aspects of language learning that exist not in the cognitive processes of learners, but in the social relationships developed between the learners and the members of the speech community which they seek to enter." (Trosset, 1986: 165.) More recently Toetenel (2014) also emphasizes the social nature of second language learning, arguing that a communicative approach is consistent with collaborative learning and a sociocultural approach given that this emphasises meaning making and learning *through* interaction.

The desire to enter the 'speech community' which Trosset refers to above is closely related to the development of identity as a speaker of the target language. Gaved et al. (2012) note the struggle of immigrant language learners trying to acquire the common words and phrases that they need to communicate in their target language, as well as trying to express their personal selves and develop relationships with target language speakers. They refer to Harder's work (1980) on the "reduced personality" of the second language learner whose linguistic repertoire is limited, and to the negotiation of identity that is required. In social networks expressing one's identity, developing an on-line identity and maintaining it through engaging in discussions with others is central.

Examples of structured Web 2.0 language communities (Zourou, 2012) include Livemocha, Busuu and Babbel (see section 1.1.2). Research into such communities has started, but is not yet well developed. A number of studies have focused on the Livemocha language community with varied findings. For example, Zourou and Loiseau (2013)'s study of the Culture section of Livemocha, found that this was not very successful as an interactive space. In an earlier study, Stevenson and Liu (2010) found, perhaps not surprisingly, that providing a way for users to reach their learning goals was rated positively by users. They also found that, unlike SNS such as Facebook, users of Livemocha were establishing new networks *for the sole purpose of language learning*. Lamy and Mangenot (2013) identified two particular foci that emerged from the empirical work on language social networks in Lamy and Zourou's (2013) edited book: identity and community building.

Recently Toetenel (2014) investigated the use of SNS in a small study where she established an asynchronous online environment for English classroom language learners. The project investigated their informal language practices, focusing on the use of a SNS (Ning) to support group cohesion and peer interaction. In her small study she recruited 15 students (144 posts) but 9 students mainly attended. Students with higher linguistic ability posted more. Privacy was not a concern but this may have been because students knew each other and were co-located. The data consisted of posts, student diaries and questionnaires and researcher observation. A small number of students used the website outside class hours, and after the project ended, with one person using the site daily. The data showed that it was the students with a higher linguistic ability that placed the highest number of posts, but we should note that it was a small sample.

Media, Minority languages, and Welsh
Brown and Jongbloed (2013) trace the increase in interest and research into minority languages and media more generally. Whilst research into minority languages and media is still scarce, the increase over the last twenty years is notable. Many of the publications are in English, but of course some are in the minority language concerned.

Clearly, if learners are going to be able to get access to authentic experiences of minority languages via social media, the social media spaces need to be well populated. There has been interest in and work on this for some time: e.g. in an introduction to a special issue on Minority Languages, Multimedia and the Web, Cunliffe and Herring (2005) suggest minority speakers can increase their languages' online presence with content that is aligned to their communities' needs and aspirations.

In a more recent chapter, Cunliffe, Morris and Prys (2013) note "*the possibility of using the internet and electronic technology as a tool to strengthen linguistic communities and revive weakened languages by producing easily accessible content in minority languages, and providing networks of support for fluent speakers and learners alike.*" (Cunliffe, Morris and Prys 2013, p.75). This chapter is in a recent collection (Jones and Uribe-Jongnbloed, 2013) that reports on the position of minority languages, including Welsh, in various media, both traditional and digital (see, e.g. Cunliffe and ap Dyfrig, (2013); Dotowy-Rubinshka (2013); Uidhilin, (2013); Law (2013); and Pavón and Zuberogoitia (2013).

Cunliffe, with colleagues, has researched into Welsh bilinguals' practice in using social media. Cunliffe, Morris and Prys (2013) report on a study that focused on the use of Welsh and English by young bilingual users of SNS (in practice this was almost exclusively Facebook). Their participants were pupils of 4 Welsh medium secondary schools in Wales, two in the North West (NW) and two in the South East (SE). As noted earlier in this paper, Welsh speaking is not spread evenly across Wales: the NW is considered the 'heartland' of Welsh speaking where over 62.5% speak Welsh at home and in the community, according to the last survey. In the SE, Welsh is not currently spoken widely in the community or at home. However, the popularity of Welsh medium schools means that many young people can and do speak Welsh regularly at school, even if their home language is English. Hence these are interesting areas to contrast in terms of online practices. Cunliffe, Morris and Prys (2013) report on findings from focus groups of 54 participants and found that language use online is largely determined by home use: it is an extension of everyday language. So for most of the young participants their Facebook community was similar to their real life community. Whilst in the NW where most participants speak Welsh at home, both languages were used, and Welsh was commonly used, Welsh was not as commonly used in the SE. It was suggested therefore that Facebook could play an important role in maintaining Welsh networks.

Again focusing on Welsh, Johnson (2013) studied the language used by bilingual Twitter users and how this

Learner	Level	Media sharing	Instant messaging Conversational arenas and chat	SNS	Blogging Micro-blogging	SSIW
1 Paul	E	✓		✓	✓	
2 Ann	E			✓	✓	✓
3 Mat	B			✓	✓	
4 Jane	I		✓			
5 June	B/I	✓				
6 Carol	I		✓	✓		✓
7 Jim	E	✓		✓	✓	✓
8 Ian	E	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9 Anna	B/I	✓		✓		
10 Jean	B	✓		✓	✓	✓
11 Sally	B	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12 Sam	I	✓		✓	✓	

Key: All learners' names are pseudonyms. Learners declared their own level as 'beginner' (B), 'intermediate' (I) or experienced (E). SSIW refers to the online Welsh learning course and community 'Say Something In Welsh'.

Table 2: Use of different types of social media by the participants.

varied according to their presumed audience. He found that just under half used Welsh, and where a Welsh audience was in mind, the norm was Welsh. So it seems that Welsh is well represented in the use of Facebook and Twitter; however a study of YouTube led Cunliffe and ap Dyfrig (2013) to say "we cannot argue that there is a coherent welsh language media space" although we should note that they had some methodological issues with sampling language specific videos.

A case study on using digital resources for informal Welsh learning

Although there may be potential advantages for learners in using social media, there is a paucity of empirical studies to confirm whether such potential is being realized. This project therefore aimed to research the use of digital technologies including social media for supporting Welsh language learning, with an emphasis on informal learning, through investigating existing practices.

The research questions were:

1. What use is made of digital technologies and resources to support informal Welsh language learning?
2. How do learners use such resources to support their learning?

Methods and participants

The study employed interviews and a small survey to study the practices of learners at all stages of their language learning. Interviews were chosen as the research question is intended to uncover practices and thus needed a method allowing exploration of such practices. The interview schedules were partly based on Kukulska-Hulme and de los Arcos's research on using *mobile devices* for

informal language learning in order to be able to compare data (Kukulska-Hulme, 2012). Participants filled in a small survey to provide some information on their background and language learning experience and expertise.

Initially, the author asked for volunteer participants at the Welsh National Eisteddfod, a Welsh Arts festival. The Eisteddfod includes a 'Learners' Area' where the author was giving a short talk on the role of blogs in learning Welsh. Further potential participants were obtained via contacts who were teaching Welsh and via two Facebook groups on learning Welsh. Twelve participants took part, and interviews were held either face to face, or more frequently by phone. They lasted from around 40 to 90 minutes.

Analysis approach

The interviews asked participants about their use of digital devices and technologies more generally to support their Welsh learning. Regarding social media, four categories of social media with the potential to support language learning were identified from Conole and Alevizou's (2010) typology. These are: Media sharing; Instant messaging, Conversational arenas and chat, social networks and blogging. Interview transcripts were scrutinized for examples of use of these social media. Additionally, as participants mentioned the Language Learning Community SSIW, described above, use of this site was also considered.

Results: illustrations of different social media use

Table 2 shows the use made of each of these by the 12 participants, drawing on the interview data. The second column shows their language experience, where learners categorized themselves as beginner, intermediate or experienced and this also draws on data from the survey that they filled in. A number of mini case studies or portraits then illustrate how different participants used these media.

Table 2 shows that all participants use some kind of social media for learning Welsh but what they use and how it is used varies considerably. Below, their use of each of the categories in **Table 2** is discussed, followed by 5 portraits each illustrating how one particular learner uses this type of social media.

Media Sharing

Most participants take advantage of media sharing. Beginners and intermediate learners talk about watching programmes from the Welsh channel S4C – which are nearly all available for viewing again via the website, or via an app. One programme, "Hwb" (meaning "boost") is specifically for Welsh learners. Jean, Sally, Sam and Anna all mention watching and enjoying Hwb whilst Jane enjoys watching Welsh children's television with her grandchildren. Some learners also mention listening to Welsh radio, sometimes at work in the background, especially beginners who talked about not understanding enough to be distracted, but feeling that hearing the sound and rhythm of the language was very beneficial.

Portrait 1: Anna

Anna has a desktop computer and an iPad. She downloads music, uses Facebook and watches YouTube videos. She uses her iPad for Facebook and watching television, and playing games with her granddaughter. For her Welsh learning she has accessed specific learning resources available free from the BBC (British Broadcasting Company) website:

> I found a website - BBC website and I started doing some off of that …um…Big Welsh Challenge? and then Catch Phrase … I thought it would be quite nice for my grand-daughter to hear a bit of Welsh so we looked up some children's programmes and I found that really quite good because it was slower and used simpler language with lots of pictures and it was easier to understand and … then I found Cyw (children's television)… I watch them with my grand-daughter, my grandson as well now

She has access to Welsh TV programmes via the app "Clic" - *"so you can get it whenever you want"* but notes the disadvantage for learners of there being no subtitles available – whereas when watching via the website these are available. More recently she has found that as her understanding of Welsh increases she is able to broaden the range of programmes she watches:

> I have started to listen to a few discussion programmes. I listened to one last night and that's quite interesting I actually understood a little bit, they were talking about weight loss and I could understand that.

Instant messaging, conversational arenas and chat

Many participants write in Welsh and some use Web 2.0 tools to support this. For example, Matt, who uses SSIW, covering only spoken Welsh, also wants to read and write Welsh: *I do email a friend in Welsh. I use Google translate,*

and then you learn something. People write back and that extends your vocabulary.

Although they are beginners, Anna and Jean send Welsh emails to friends (who are either Welsh learners or Welsh speakers). Stuart makes limited use of Twitter in Welsh, whilst Ian completes a daily exercise set by SSIW:

> On Twitter I do the daily Welsh word, where you know, they pick a random word and you … have to use it in context.

In Skype, some experienced learners use the text channel to support communication and help others: *Another great feature of Skype – and Google hangout is you can use the texting feature to type in the English if someone is struggling with the Welsh.*

Not all conversations are in Welsh: on the SSIW forums learners discuss issues and share their experience of learning Welsh and so communicate in English. For example, the SSIW common room has a topic on asking questions and within this there are questions on course 1. Here is an example of a question asked by one of the learners and a reply by another (Maired): (names and identifying details have been changed)

1.1.1 RE: QUESTIONS ABOUT COURSE1 LESSON 20

By **Maired** Fri Jan 23, 2014, 3.15 pm

Donald wrote: Please can you explain how the context influences the choice of "i"

It's two different concepts, really, isn't it? As Ioan says.

To "remember doing something"- "I remembered buying a present for St Dwynwen's Day", where "remember" means to *recall, to bring to mind the memory* of having done something previously.

"I must remember to buy a present for St Dwynwen's Day", where "remember" means to *remind* oneself, to *keep something in mind.*

"I remembered buying a present" - "I recalled buying a present the year before."

"I remembered to buy a present" - "I reminded myself to buy a present, I kept in mind the concept that I had to buy a present".

The English "remember" maps onto those two different concepts, using two different forms of the following verb -eg - "to buy" and "buying" as a way of differentiating

Portrait 2: Paul

Paul is an experienced learner, making extensive use of technology to support using Welsh as much as possible and also teaches Welsh once a week. He strongly believes in the importance of using technology in and for the language – and is one of the few participants who has created resources (digital flash cards available on iTunesU). He reads Welsh blogs but does not write them.

Having recently acquired a new Smartphone he is: "*still looking for ways to use [the phone]* ***through*** *the Welsh medium. If texting, I use Welsh but there is not much available. There is a small extent to which we can use Welsh in Google but I'm struggling to find Welsh applications so largely it's a matter of texting and Facebook (available in Welsh). On my desktop I have windows in Welsh, and I have a Mac laptop and a Smartphone. I use Welsh whenever I can: it's a good way of broadening vocabulary.*

It is important that the Welsh language has a place in the development of new technologies. If [it] is seen as relevant to new technologies this will be important especially that young people have the opportunity to use Welsh when they are using new technologies…or Smart Phones.

He uses technological resources to support his Welsh writing (which has a different character set from English). There are also Welsh versions of a number of tools including Google, Facebook and Twitter which he uses. He explains:

The (Cysgliad) software includes a dictionary (Cysgair) and also a proof reading tool (Cysyllt). It is stand alone and can be used with a variety of applications so I use it if sending an email in Welsh.

He makes some use of Facebook and also uses Twitter and through these has connected to Welsh speakers who discuss aspects of the language:

I use the Welsh version (of Facebook) and I use Twitter. I have friends and colleagues who use it. On twitter I have found Ein Cymraeg, a group of Welsh speakers, many of them teachers, who discuss grammatical issues and word origins in the Welsh language.

Social Network Sites
Ten of the participants use social networking – Facebook – in their everyday lives. For Welsh learning their use varies considerably. So for example Karen is very wary about using Facebook in general:

I am a bit worried about putting personal stuff out there. You know people emote say about their nervous breakdowns, and I think, you know millions of people are reading this.

However, she does use Facebook to communicate in Welsh with her cousins:

…my cousins are bilingual of course because they grew up, you know, in Machynlleth … and we are friends on Facebook so they will post up messages in Welsh on my wall … and then you know I have to get my dictionary out.

Whilst users like Karen use the standard English Facebook, some more experienced learners use the Welsh version and have found ways to support their spelling across several different applications. For example Ann (see portrait 4) comments:

I've put the Facebook page into Welsh so the spell checker works on that. If I used Facebook when I was writing my blog that would pick up the spell-checker on the computer, whereas if I used Internet Explorer I would have to run it in Microsoft word to make sure I was spelling everything correctly and then paste it in, whereas if I opened the blog up in FireFox it would use the Microsoft spellchecker which is really odd .

Two learners do not use Facebook (the only SNS mentioned). One, living in Switzerland, might be regarded as an ideal candidate for using SNS but does not currently have a Facebook account. Another participant who does not use SNS for Welsh is Jane, an intermediate level learner who tries to use Welsh whenever she can. As she has Welsh classes three days a week, a Welsh school nearby, and a very active Welsh local community she probably does not need to use online sites.

Portrait 3: Jim
The most active Facebook user for supporting Welsh learning is Jim, who lives in England. Jim is now a fluent Welsh speaker and very active in supporting Welsh learning and learners. He is a proficient and creative IT user, and has been involved in informal activities organized by various organizations for about ten years. He started a local Welsh learning group in his home town (in England) ten years ago, and now runs two local Welsh groups with activities such as monthly Welsh language workshops, regular classes, coffee mornings and occasional scrabble competitions. He has set up Facebook pages for these groups where he advertises events, shares resources and publishes the local (Welsh) newsletter and a Facebook group on learning Welsh in England. One use of social media for him therefore is to support his organization of these groups.

These Facebook pages provide an online presence for the Welsh groups; advertise events, provide useful resources for learners and generally provide information and support for learning Welsh in England. Partly through this network (and also through SSIW) learners from other areas have joined and created their own groups:

Through the publicity and through SSIW we have attracted learners from Manchester, Sheffield and of course Jim Monk from Norwich. Now there is also a group in Solihull and Leeds.

Half of the members found the group through the website – so it would not be viable without it.

Blogs and microblogging
There are few active bloggers, although Paul reads Welsh BBC and political blogs and finds them helpful. Jim (Portrait 3) also writes a Welsh blog, and blogging plays an important role for some more experienced learners.

Portrait 4: Ann

Ann is a very experienced Welsh learner who is now also teaching Welsh and enjoys using technology. She started her blog in July 2008 and last posted in October 2011 when she started training to teach and had written 148 posts and 40,000 words.

Her first blog post says: (author's translation)

At last I have enough time to write a blog. After spending three years taking assessed courses at the local college I've decided enough is enough. I've had a bellyful of exams, although to be honest I have learnt a lot over the last three years and don't regret one day.

Later she comments: After spending hours reading other people's blogs (including one from my friend Elena Rice) I felt the time had arrived for me to start writing one.

She blogs in Welsh and whilst many of her posts concern her "Welsh" life, such as being on the learners' committee for the Eisteddfod she also writes more broadly about everyday life. The 'social' in social media is particularly important; for her learning Welsh has led to a new social life:

It's opened up a complete social life, because we live in a small village, and the village community to some extent has disappeared, and there is no village life as such.

Her connections and network are partly online and partly offline – so, for example she refers to knowing Ned, another blogger:

I spoke to him about the blog a few weeks ago … and he says he just doesn't have time for his blog. … I met Ned through the blog too. And then we met up with a group of other people at the Eisteddfod in the Bala and we just keep in contact – on Facebook – you know I have other Welsh friends on Facebook and we keep in touch

… for me it has opened up a whole community. There is an online community

Her off-line use mirrors her on-line use in that she has created opportunities for learners to interact with each other:

When we started there was just the course and nothing else to do. Now there are loads of things to do. Chat sessions, revision sessions in the summer, different activities to have a go at like games in Welsh and quizzes and things like that.

Ann teaches Welsh and helps other learners - but this is mainly face to face. Learning Welsh has been a very social experience for her and has led to a social life - both on and off line.

Language community sites: SSIW

Seven participants use SSIW, the "Say Something In Welsh" language community site and course; five for learning Welsh and two for their teaching and to support learners. Those learning (and teaching) with SSIW are very enthusiastic. Ian had taught himself Welsh and read old books written in a style of formal Welsh which is not used by contemporary Welsh speakers and so the SSIW lessons help his conversational Welsh and pronunciation. Two participants do all their Welsh learning through the course and one is now actively planning to attend a bootcamp.

As noted in section 1.1.3, SSIW is a lively language learning community, with active interaction by learners and members, and a high level of engagement by the organisers/teachers. For example, the Discussion Board Index lists a number of different sites, including a Common Room, the Six Welsh Centres (for adult learning), the SSIW Classroom (where the lessons can be found), the Online Eisteddfod and Practising Speaking Welsh, amongst others. This last site includes 123 topics and 1698 posts. Other sites within the discussion board are also well supported.

Portrait 5 Matt

Matt is a beginner who is very competent with technology and whose family come from Wales, so Welsh is a heritage language for him. He found the SSIW course whilst in Wales:

… I saw the course Say Something In Welsh, which is influenced by Michelle Thomas's approach… I was in [North Wales] a year ago for a week on my own, and I downloaded it whilst I was there. I found a centre that supported Welsh activities and provided cultural opportunities and went into a drop-in class.

He uses spare or 'dead' time to listen to and practice Welsh:

I am using SSIW mainly on the smartphone. That is my preferred activity when driving and so if I am driving I am looking forward to getting a booster. Before bed is also a good time.

I have used it on a train – where I will talk under my breath… or whilst I am walking.

For him, access to such online course on a mobile device, has been key:

Without it, it would still be something I want to do one day. Finding SSIW was fantastic; that week was brilliant. I went to a beginners' class, I was a bit out of my depth but I enjoyed myself. Also I went to a bookshop and someone asked me something in Welsh, and I was able to say "I can't speak Welsh".

Discussion and conclusions

All participants use social media to support their learning, but the use varies considerably. At the "low" end, learners use sharing facilities to watch Welsh television

programmes or films, video on YouTube or to download music, and use free resources such as those provided on the BBC website. Much of this use is around listening practice, but writing emails in Welsh for example, gives learners writing practice, and is a practice used to some extent even by learners who are not very experienced. Receiving Facebook posts in Welsh provides some reading practice and Skype is also used for conversation to support practice in speaking.

Some experienced learners are intensive and creative users of social media. One such learner uses Facebook (the only SNS mentioned by participants) to develop and sustain communities of Welsh learners. Some experienced learners also blog in Welsh, to practice their Welsh and reflect on their learning – and teaching in one case. The Facebook group sites set up for local groups in England and for Welsh learners in England overall, have been successful in connecting together geographically dispersed learners as suggested in the introduction. Although some Welsh is used in these groups, much of the text is English so as to be accessible to beginners. Hence, such sites do not support language practice, although learners who have met each other through such sites can then contact each other and practice their speaking, sometimes online.

There is little evidence of activity being mainly or only online. Rather, participants gave accounts of both online activities and networks, and meeting up with other learners. This mix works well – especially where online sites serve to connect learners either face to face or online.

The one Welsh language community site and course, SSIW, is popular and seems likely to have an impact on Welsh language learning. Interestingly this is also a blended community, offering local meetings for practice, and an online "Eisteddfod" where learners compete in the areas of poetry and music amongst others.

To summarise and conclude, having suggested that social media might help to address some challenges of learning Welsh, this paper has reported on a small study that investigated learners' social media practices. It found that most learners use tools for sharing media and resources, for chatting and interacting with other learners, social networks and microblogging. Which social media they used and how, varied, so for example only the more experienced learners blogged, although a number used twitter, chat or email.

This small study has revealed some of the social media practices amongst informal Welsh learners. The participants described themselves as learners, but some are now so proficient that it could be argued that they do not represent learners in general, hence future research could focus on beginner and intermediate learners. However, these experienced learners – some of whom now also teach – revealed creative uses of social media to both develop their own learning and to support and connect learners.

Such practices are likely to be relevant to other language learning, particularly minority languages with small populations of speakers who may also be geographically dispersed and could provide useful guides for learners and teachers.

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