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The wiki – a virtual home base for constructivist blended learning courses

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Abstract

The primary objectives of the “Learning English with Films” experimental blended course were the promotion of films as multi-functional language learning aids and the encouragement of collaborative online learning. Groups of 3-4 students highlighted, analysed, and explained the language content of a 5 minute film excerpt of their choice. The wiki tool in the Moodle open source learning management system (LMS) was utilised as both the group database management and project presentation tool. Despite initial difficulties in adapting to ICT based learning, a notable increase in classroom interaction and improvement in output organising skills were evident throughout the course as several peer teaching and language practice opportunities presented themselves in the form of language analysis, wiki planning, and problem solving.

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1. Introduction

In November 2008 Kore University Language Centre (CLIK) installed the open source Moodle LMS offering its students the opportunity to improve their language study skills with the support of technology (M.O.O.D.L.E. is the acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment). The LMS tool of choice for this experiment, the wiki, which can be any number of interlinked web pages where members can add and edit content at any given moment, is only one of a range of learning instruments available to the user within the Moodle LMS.

2. The background and purpose of the wiki experiment

The opportunity to produce blended learning courses, which were not simply one part traditional face to face (F2F) lessons and one part virtual repository, was quite evident when scrolling down the Moodle list of tools and plug-ins available to the educator user. As Kirkwood (2006) affirms, low participation rates in first generation e-learning sites indicate: if you build it, they may not come. Cede control, however, and let them do the building, and – as some of the most popular websites today indicate – they will not only come, they may build a Babel that is both architecturally and pedagogically innovative.

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This, albeit brief, six week course offered the students a first time opportunity to build, if not exactly a ‘Babel’, then at least create a virtual language laboratory and test the wiki as the study group database management and presentation tool. For the teacher, the wiki appeared the most suitable tool for a group project study of this kind acting as a vehicle for promoting a more collaborative approach to language learning.

The decision to use films as the primary study object was influenced by the responses received to an informal language learning resources survey conducted during an English teaching experiment in the virtual world of Second Life in early 2008. When asked who, or what, they would acknowledge as having been the most positive and productive influence on their English studies, the majority of B2+ students cited films as their primary language learning source.

2.1 Objectives

1. Present films as multi-functional language learning resources and aids.
2. Give students greater decision making power in the choice of study materials.
3. Promote LBT as a language learning and confidence building strategy
4. Embed the most natural application of L2 communication skills.
5. Provide a constructivist-driven blended learning experience
6. Test the wiki as a group project database organiser and presentation tool
7. Familiarise students with the basic functions of LMS activities and wiki editing tools.

3. Method and supporting tools

During the course, 35 first year undergraduate students of Modern Languages formed 10 wiki groups to analyse key language areas (grammar, pronunciation and new vocabulary) from their chosen film excerpts. Once the students had enrolled on the course and were allocated their group wikis, they were sent a wiki group project instructions and procedures notice via the LMS message service. For those students who were not on line at the time of delivery, the system sent the message via the email addresses in their profiles.

3.1 The wiki editing and history tabs; student self-correction following teacher online intervention.

Figure 1 shows a group member’s initial grammar analysis and explanation of the monologue in the group’s chosen film excerpt. The tracking of student editing is greatly aided by the ‘history tab’ function which chronologically records each saved modification of the wiki pages. The modified versions are also reversible at any stage of the project. Below, we can see where the teacher has highlighted some areas in need of attention. Most students had revisited their wiki page within 24 hours and almost all had edited, and partially corrected, their work within 72 hours of their teacher’s intervention. The constant teacher-student interaction between F2F lessons meant that the learning process was notably accelerated. This clearly demonstrates an important difference between traditional group project work correction and on line wiki-based correction inasmuch as, with the latter case, the student had produced, corrected, and acquired new language items before, rather than during or after, the following lesson, thus saving further precious F2F teaching and/or student speaking practice time.

Figure 1. Section from a student’s wiki page with teacher’s highlighting of structural and functional errors
Figure 2 illustrates a later version of figure 1 wiki page during the same group member's step-by-step self-correction of certain grammar structures and function explanations after a limited number of interventions by the teacher. The wiki would not be described the perfect teaching environment or support tool for (re)teaching subtle grammar functions, however, most language difficulties were overcome on line and before the following lesson. The problems which had not been resolved provided stimulating material for classroom language analysis and peer teaching opportunities as the students had already reflected on the problem before the lesson itself. There were also several instances of students ‘looking in’ on rival group wikis between lessons. Whether this was merely a result of natural curiosity or students searching for ideas and solutions, cannot easily be established from the data available - the brief duration of the course did not allow for such in-depth investigation.

3.2 Wiki editing toolbar enhancement of language content analysis and presentation

Figure 3 shows an example of a student’s use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) fonts and the contribution of that particular tool towards the enhancement of study content analysis and presentation. Having highlighted words and phrases from the film excerpt which the student found particularly difficult to understand, the phonetic transcription was presented using IPA fonts which had been inserted into the "special characters" field in the editing toolbar. The IPA fonts - not a default Moodle wiki tool - were used with varying degrees of skill, but gave the students a chance to demonstrate and apply their knowledge of a particularly difficult language study area. As we can see in the example below, in the pronunciation analysis of the word ‘that’, the student has shown considerable awareness and understanding of two important characteristics of spoken English; the weak form and, at least, one key function of the glottal stop.
4. Results

In relation to:

4.1 Objective 2 “Give students greater decision making power in the choice of study materials”

The freedom for the students to decide on the study content of the projects was greeted positively by the class and sense of responsibility to produce high quality group work of their own choosing and design was clearly demonstrated by the large majority of students. The exposure to peer scrutiny, instead, was considered an inhibiting influence by some students who far from welcomed the extra freedom, and open attention that the wiki provides their work. Depending on a student’s degree of responsiveness to a ‘learning by discovery’ approach, the short wiki project-based blended course was seen as an ‘open and creatively liberating study environment’ whilst for other students it seemed more like ‘unstructured and minimally guided, liberal chaos’ or even ‘abandonment’.

4.2 Objective 6 “Test the wiki as a group project database organiser and presentation tool”

With only one 3 hour F2F lesson per week, time proved to be a precious commodity and therefore 24 hour access, to what would always be the most recent version of their wiki, gave the students greater independence and freedom to work collaboratively, and at the most suitable times and places, sure in the knowledge that they would not be absent or excluded from any important phase in the development of the group project. Such permanent availability also proved to be of high practical value to students who commuted to lessons and often lived too far from one another to be able to work on the project face to face. From a didactic point of view, the added flexibility and accessibility allowed for a step-by-step tracking and assessment of student and group output - without the teacher having to wait until the next F2F lesson - thereby providing the students with closer and more constant guidance and helping the teacher to avoid any potential ‘cooling down’ of the projects during the week.

4.3 Objectives 3, 5 and 7 “Promote LBT as a language learning and confidence building strategy” “Provide a constructivist-driven blended learning experience” and “Familiarise students with the basic functions of LMS activities and wiki editing tools”

Classroom discussion received significant extra impetus from the need, initially to understand, and then to plan and organise the wikis themselves. Both during the F2F discussion and at home online, a large proportion of the year’s grammar and pronunciation lessons were reviewed and applied, with a significant number of new words and idioms being discovered through the close analysis of the language features present in the chosen film excerpts. Intra and intergroup communication steadily increased throughout the course, intensifying notably as the projects neared conclusion and students began interacting to analyse and compare one another’s wikis and wiki pages, creating several spontaneous F2F peer teaching opportunities and problem solving debates. Indeed, a small number of students with more ICT experience, but who had often remained silent during conventional language practice lessons that year, were particularly animated and vocal as they attempted to help the class resolve LMS technical issues. Such help, however, was at times insufficient for the Internet beginners who would probably need basic pre-course ICT tuition before starting similar intensive LMS-centred collaborative study courses.

5. Conclusion

As the term ‘home base’ suggests, during project-based blended courses, the wiki can act as a ‘central operations headquarters’; a secure location the students will go back to, at any stage of a course or time of day, assured of finding the latest version of an ongoing project. During the “Learning English with Films” course, as the students gradually familiarised themselves with concept of the wiki work and the functionality of the main editing tools, the wiki itself proved to be a reliable and efficient study organiser and presenter. Nothing was lost between group members, no endless and complex chains of emails scattered throughout the internet, and no group members wondering who had the most recent version of the project. The wiki is a single, shared document, sometimes simple, or certain case much more complex with an infinite number of linked pages, as for instance with Wikipedia,
however, the relative ease with which the user is able to add and edit content (without the need to know html code) and remain in contact with the teacher and group members allowed for a more closely guided and smoothly organised group study output. Furthermore, the fact that the teacher can monitor and comment on the wikis between lessons also means that the students will have already resolved several issues and have something new and of substance to bring to the next lesson thus saving precious F2F lesson time and providing classroom debate and analysis with the most difficult language issues to be resolved. The open source design of the Moodle wiki also means that it can be customised to suit the teaching/learning requirements of a particular course by integrating extra tools such as IPA fonts and the Nanogong voice recorder so as to offer the students greater creative freedom than might usually be afforded during paper-based language study.

Throughout the course, a gradual increase in a more natural and meaningful interaction was witnessed during F2F lessons as the students exchanged ideas and advice on the best approaches regarding wiki content, layout and functionality, contributing to the stimulation of problem solving debates. Also, the linguistically weaker students, yet at times technologically more knowledgeable, had a rare opportunity to ‘play teacher’ using the language with more confidence when explaining wiki tool functions. The strategy of embedding language learning and practice in collaborative task-based activities, both in the classroom and online, proved beneficial, not only didactically but also on a social front, as students showed more willing than usual to collaborate and discuss issues during F2F lessons.

Nevertheless, wikis alone are weak dialogical teaching instruments. Indeed most LMS tools lend themselves to a limited number of specific learning activities and may be of little use in other e-learning situations. Just as SMS would not be the instrument of choice for auditioning actors, each teaching environment or tool also possesses its own particular degree of efficiency and suitability for the required learning task. Many such roles may still be undiscovered. However, without additional support from both synchronous and asynchronous communication tools such as fora, messages and chat - especially where F2F hours are restricted - the power of the wiki as an effective ‘home base’ for collaborative study may be somewhat restricted. The teacher should test each tool that the LMS has to offer, whether singularly or in an intersupporting combination of tools.

To sum up, we can say that the Moodle LMS wiki tool, when used in a constructivist blended learning course, is a reliable and flexible database organiser and an effective project presentation tool which significantly stimulates meaningful online and classroom interaction.

References


