

## **IATL final project report:**

**Language Centre Fellowship Teresa MacKinnon.**

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### **1. Project title: 'Using voice in online environments'**

### **2. Activities.**

In a statistical sense, we may one day communicate with each other far more via computer mediation than in direct interaction.

- Crystal (2001, p.241)

The overarching aim of this project was to provide a virtual environment that facilitated the best possible support for language teaching and learning including:

- An effective online language learning environment which can be tailored to a wide range of specialist language teaching needs
- A body of knowledge that develops existing language teaching methodologies into techniques that are fit for the challenges of globalisation and future employability
- An exciting and dynamic learning environment for language learners which supports the Observe-Hypothesise-Experiment cycle (Lewis, 1993)
- A community of language teachers equipped with the research-based insights necessary to lead others in online teaching delivery.

This required the investigation into best possible technical platforms and tools required, testing and piloting of the technical deployment and a process of dissemination and discussion to support continuing development. The Language Centre had already completed some investigations into suitable tools for the provision of an online platform that would be international and flexible using moodle 1.9 which had been piloted with 300 students. The integration of tools for voice and synchronous interaction had also been an area researched by the project leader over an extended period as part of completion of an M.A. in Post-compulsory Education. As the results from this work had been encouraging, it was decided to build on them and choose the latest version of moodle (moodle 2.1 at that stage) for a full deployment of the platform and integrated tools to out 1500 academic student cohort. Language Departments – Italian and French- also wished to experiment in the new Languages@Warwick platform and set up courses for year abroad students using post-graduate students for the development. We chose a hosted open source platform Moodle as it was within our financial reach. The Language Centre had already paid for the voice tools software (Blackboard Collaborate) and their integration was possible although still evolving. We also had the opportunity to include an open source e-portfolio system Mahara and this offered to opportunity to

enhance the social aspects of the platform, giving further opportunities to the course developers involved in the project.

A number of fairly substantial problems were encountered along the way including:

- Challenges posed by developing at the cutting edge: a good deal of linking had to be done between parties to ensure positive outcomes, keeping all aware of software changes and implications to development needs.
- Challenges posed when developing for a specific set of design needs (use of international scripts/accented characters, importance of platform independence, flexibility in roles/permissions, repurposing of audio, creation and deployment of video content, content tagging for easy retrieval etc.) Many of these were not institutional priorities and it was therefore not easy to get appropriate support.
- Challenges of working beyond the institutional boundaries of existing IT support.

These were faced with a good deal of persistence and diplomacy and largely overcome with some support from IATL and the Director of ITS. Some of these challenges are ongoing. If use of the platform is to be optimised it will need a repository underneath to deliver video media without impacting on the reliability of the site. This would also facilitate the re-purposing of resources. So far we have uncovered two promising solutions: Kaltura (open source) Equella (commercial solution offered by Pearson) Current institutional file storage does not allow the labelling of files or folders in anything other than English, this is also problematic.

### 3. Outcomes.

The project outcomes were collected using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The site statistics for this year show:

Number of courses: 105

Number of users: 2127

People logging in every day: 200 -500

The popularity of the tools used for interaction (voice tools, BBIM instant messaging) is clear from the user data:

Instant messaging users: 118; 100 downloads in first week of Virtual French Exchange.

BBIM Users with between 10-30 contacts: 10%

	Number of resources	Total number of Messages
Voice Boards	44	500
Voice Authorings	7	552
Voice E-Mails	13	2
Total	64	1054

We are also using google analytics to monitor the nature and location of site users:

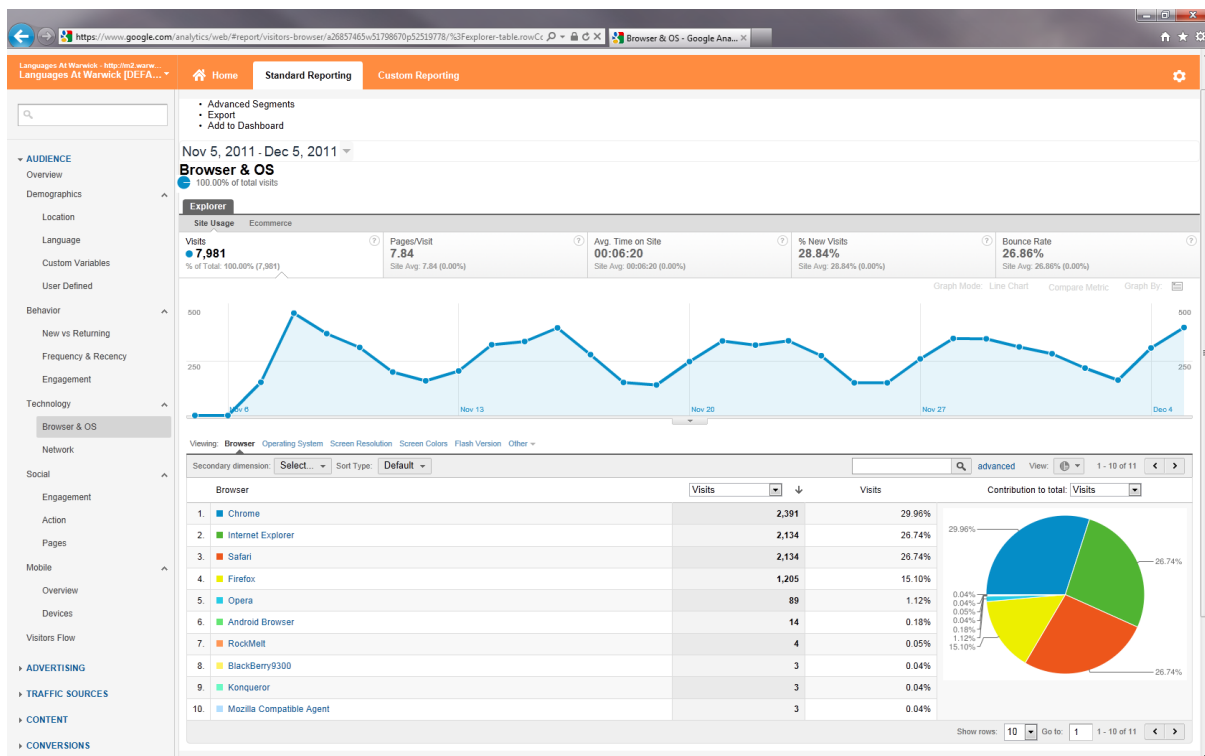


Figure 1: Screenshot of google analytics for our site.

Return visits to the site are over 80% showing that users make regular use of the course resources. From the google data we have been able to get a clear picture of our users and how they access the site. Google Chrome, rather than Internet Explorer is the most popular browser for viewers at present. The data also confirms that students and staff access the study tools over the web both within and outside the UK (top countries beyond UK include China, Belgium and France), using computers with international language settings (after English, most popular surfing languages are French, Chinese and Italian.)

An important aspect of the project has been the discussion and sharing of practice between language teachers in the Language Centre and beyond through a Community of Practice approach. (Wenger, E. 2000) A series of events and many informal meetings and conversations have taken place as part of the deployment of the Languages@Warwick portal. The Virtual Exchange course with Clermont-Ferrand was launched in October with a French breakfast and all day drop-in event which showcased the technologies involved and BBIM, our course based instant messaging system became the tool of choice for many students. A further event held in our open access area as a drop-in gave level 5 students the opportunity to share any concerns about the use of the e-portfolio system Mahara and provided technical support and problem solving. These informal opportunities allowed free access to Language Centre expertise and helpful dialogue with our students to inform our deployment of technologies. We have been able to respond to issues raised directly at these events and user feedback is informing our deployment. Further focus groups and questionnaires are planned for specific target groups.

At a recent staff training event attended by staff of the Language Centre and the Centre for Applied Linguistics held in the Teaching grid we were able to present progress to staff and raise awareness of the impact of the development on teaching and learning in the Language Centre. This presentation can be viewed here:

<http://www.slideshare.net/teresamac/languages-warwick>

The approaches facilitated by the portal are being embedded into our teaching at the Language Centre. In the Italian Department a website has been established that supports the first-year beginners language module IT101, and another which supports the IATL reflective journal network with Monash University. They are eager to take advantage of the site further in the coming years, in order to improve international relations between Warwick and other universities, and to support teaching and learning within the Department, objectives both of which are central to the University's 'Vision 2015' strategy. They would utilize further funding to teach staff to use the learning space competently, and would like to see further websites produced that support the language and content modules in the department: this could be particularly useful in the contemporary media modules, such as those dealing with Italian TV and cinema. In the French Department in addition to the Year Abroad page, the co-ordinator of FR101 first-year language programme, intends to develop Moodle pages for first-year language learners. The potential for enhanced collaborative task- and enquiry-based learning using the Mahara facility is supported by this platform. For a number of years the first-year language programme has sought to develop active, independent language-learning strategies amongst first-year students. The flexibility of task presentation within Moodle, together with the Mahara, voice and other multi-media resources it offers, will allow this kind of learning to be undertaken more successfully. I will draw upon best practice in other university language departments (many of whom use VLEs to this end) in the construction of this site.

The project was commended by the Institutional Teaching and Learning review in November 2011. The following are extracts from the report:

**The Review Group commends the Language Centre on its use of Moodle for academic courses and for adopting a 'community of practice' approach to integration of the technology within the department where staff are encouraged and supported to utilise the tool for their individual requirements and share best practice.**

**The Review Group commends the Language Centre on its use of Moodle in providing online student assessment and feedback.**

**The Review Group recommends that the Language Centre continue to support proactively the incorporation of these technologies and thus further cultivate the community of practice approach.**

#### **4. Implications.**

In finding areas of synergy between departments and the Language Centre we have been able to create a shared platform that supports best practice in our teaching and encourages collaboration between all stakeholders. This has significant implications both for the delivery of language teaching at Warwick and also for cost savings in procurement of specialist technical provision. The inclusion of voice in our virtual environment has increased the interactive nature of what could otherwise be a

learning space centred on transmission of text based information. As it is, Languages@Warwick provides opportunities to share, discuss, listen and improve communication skills, providing a more interactive learning environment for our students and staff. The flexibility of the platform also allows us possibilities for further development of assessment and increased collaborative opportunities.

## **5. Resources.**

The project has produced many courses which can be made available to others. These course areas contain resources such as documents relating to our development of e-portfolio accreditation for language learning and a moodle for language teachers online course. The many links and materials provide access to relevant research into best practice. Access is arranged by email to [t.mackinnon@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:t.mackinnon@warwick.ac.uk). We have already opened our courses to the Language Centre at the University of Exeter and internal colleagues when requested.

## **6. References.**

Crystal, D. (2001), *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge: CUP

Conole, G. and M. Oliver (eds) (2007), *Contemporary perspectives in e-learning research*, Oxen: Routledge

Lewis, M. (1993), *The Lexical approach: The state of ELT and a way forward*, Hove: Language Teaching Publications

Salmon, G. (2002), *E-tivities: the Key to Active Online Learning*, London: Kogan Page

Salmon, G. (2005), 'Flying not flapping: A strategic framework for e-learning and pedagogical innovation in Higher Education Institutions', *ALT-J*, 13 (3), 201-218

Warschauer, M. and R. Kern (eds) (2000), *Networked-based Language Teaching: Concepts and Practice*, Cambridge: CUP

Wenger, E. (2000), 'Community of practice and social learning systems', *Organization*, 7 (2), 225-246

## **7. Contact details.**

For any queries about the Languages@Warwick portal please contact [t.mackinnon@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:t.mackinnon@warwick.ac.uk)

## **8. Supplementary Information.**

The Virtual Exchange (facilitated by our portal) #warcler #clerwar images [available here](#).

Scoop.it is used to share ideas for discussion: <http://www.scoop.it/t/virtual-exchange-warwick-clermont-ferrand>