Teresa MacKinnon
July 2011

Using voice in online environments

Interim report

Despite the challenges of implementing a new moodle environment (1.9 to 2.1) and integrating our voice tools and live classroom in a very short period of time, I am pleased to say that we are now ready for roll out in September 2011. with a significantly improved user interface. The Language Centre has funded staff training for 20 staff who are new to technology from training providers "HowtoMoodle" , completed a programme of support and resource development for other staff and our technology integrator has completed his administrator training so that he can fully support the IATL project requirements.

Outputs to date.

We have achieved the following planned milestones:

- Established the user base and made provision for user support in the environment.
- Created sitebuilder signposting for student support, this will be mirrored on French and Italian departmental websites.
- Set up the required student sites and staff permissions. Assigned involved staff to a shared course to facilitate the sharing of practice. A further "Using moodle for language teaching" course is also open to all our staff on moodle.
- Reviewed pilot courses for Language Centre (details attached) and put in place plans for further developments for Italian and French departments.
- Tutor user community has expanded from 10 teachers at start of project to 50 since we have moved into Moodle 2.1
- The platform was presented at the Teaching and Learning showcase 11.
- A paper "Towards best practice for use of Computer Mediated Communication in Virtual Learning Environments" was delivered at Edulearn 11 in Barcelona in July.

Additionally the leading edge nature of the platform has allowed us to secure further innovative projects:

- An innovative virtual exchange for students of French at the Language Centre and those learning English at the Université Blaise Pascale in Clermont Ferrand, sharing a course area and using a new voice instant messaging tool which facilitates international collaborative learning.
- The deployment of an e-portfolio solution, Mahara, which will be piloted by level 5 courses at the Language Centre during the coming academic year. This is available to all users of the platform and provides social networking provision and opportunities for reflection, developing awareness of learning strategies. The tool facilitates interaction and greater awareness of language skills for employability.

These are undertaken as part of our commitment to enhancing the student experience of language learning at Warwick.

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As we move into the next phase of our project, we intend to continue to work towards the remaining milestones:

- Agreeing and undertaking further dissemination
- Bringing forward the next stage of planning to begin in September 2011 in order to maximise the outputs.

Project expenditure:

Costs claimed so far for course development time should stand at £3,000 as of financial year end 2010-11.

Project evaluation to date.

Language Centre.

We have both quantitative and qualitative data from our evaluations. The following usage reports are taken from moodle v1.9. Firstly visits to the site:
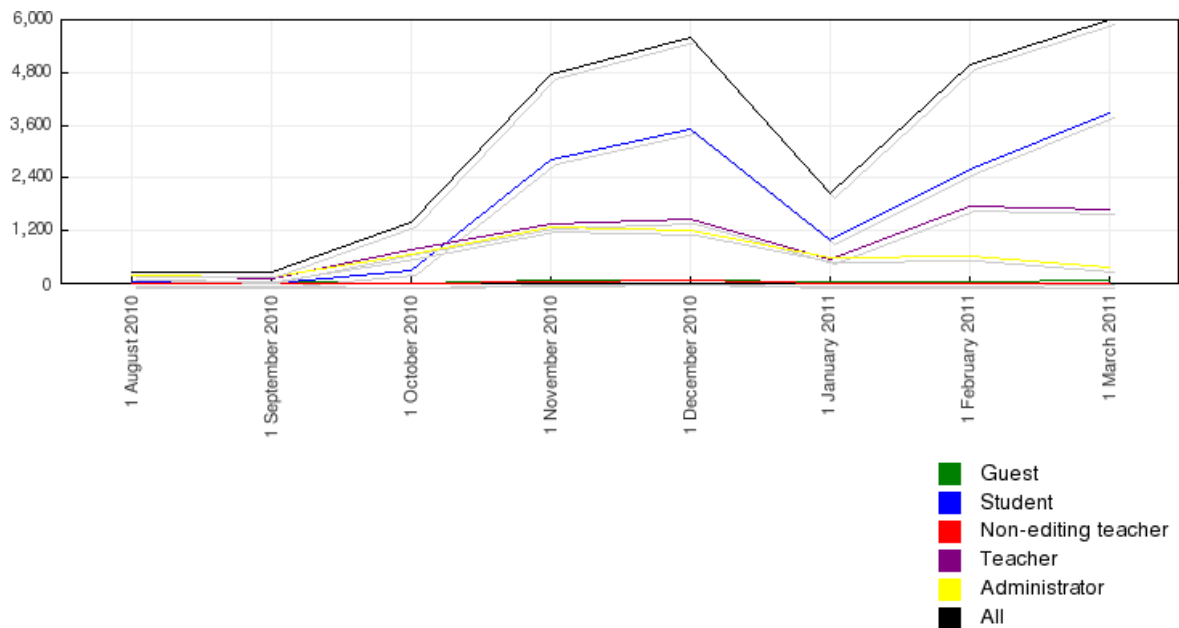

Figure 1: Site views

It is particularly encouraging to see that student usage took off as soon as they were given access to the site, and despite an understandable dip over the Christmas period, the access by both tutors and students maintains a good level whereas the necessity for admin access diminishes. This seems to indicate that the site is both user friendly and reliable.

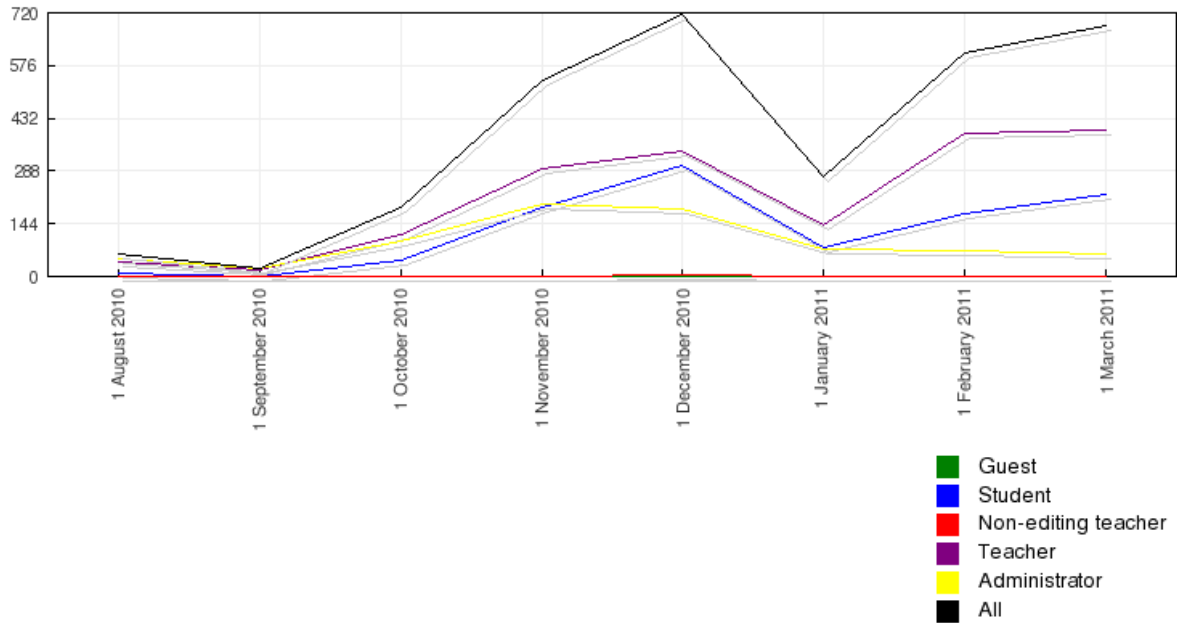The following graphic deals with interaction, reporting on number of the posts made to the site:

Figure 2: posts to site.

The initial version of our moodle had approximately 300 students and this report reflects an average 1 post a day per student once the site is up and running. This was achieved before tutor training on increasing participation. Again it is clear that the admin. role diminishes over time and that the teacher and student engagement are closely connected.

The use of the voice tools increased significantly once integrated within the moodle environment (summer 2010), with the asynchronous voice board for posting and recording spoken language being the most popular tool. This could be explained by the way the tool is suitable to support a range of teaching approaches. The online podcast tool is just starting to grow in popularity as tutors begin to understand the potential for collaborative group work carried out at a distance.
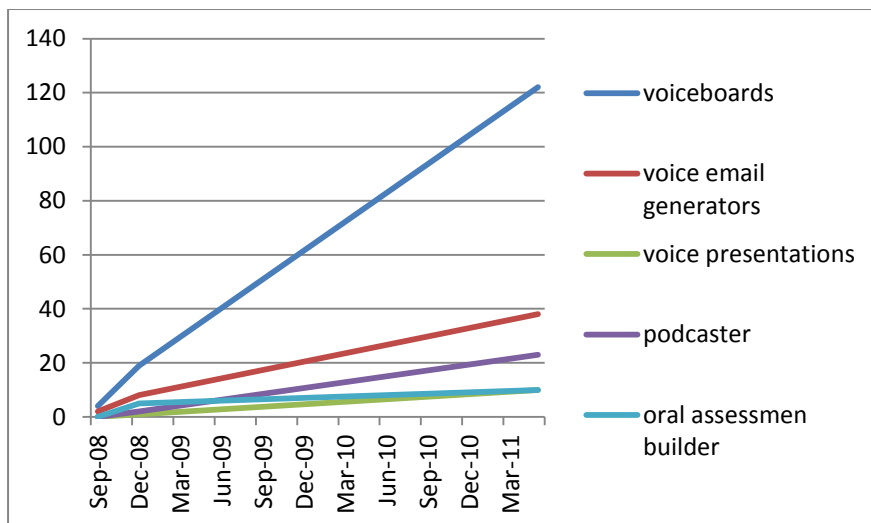

Figure 3: voice tools creation

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Student feedback.

Student evaluation forms were analysed and were overwhelmingly positive. They reflected appreciation of the accessibility of learning resources off campus, the use of the voice tools and live classroom, and the ease of interaction. The pilot courses included French, Japanese, Chinese, German and Russian. 95% of Language Centre French students using our voice enhanced moodle reported being satisfied - very satisfied with the technology provided. Individual comments included:

"I think it is a brilliant idea for oral practice – really excellent"

"A very impressive form of technology and very useful"

"It was very easy and great for one on one practice"

"I listened in and got some ideas about material and pronunciation of words"

Japanese students had been able to access archived live classroom sessions and they reported:

"It helped with revision and getting used to the sound"

"I liked being able to hear the audio whilst reading the slides"

"It was useful to have a chance to review the material from classes and practice listening."

"Good to hear feedback regarding pronunciation and articulation."

It is important to note that a few students (3 out of a survey size of 150) pointed to feeling embarrassed about recording their voice or fear of being judged by others. This reflects our shared understanding as teachers of the relevance of affect in language learning (and technology use) and underlines the importance of the framing of the tasks and the level of skill required by tutors. Moving students out of their comfort zone is a necessary part of our role but we must do so with care.

Italian Department courses:

Punto d'incontro.

This course was developed with the support of a postgraduate student and provides a meeting place for Italian students. Designed for use by home students on their year abroad and international students at Warwick in order to keep in touch with the Italian department, this is a social hub which includes chat and voiceboard spaces as well as online assignment submission. Now the course has been copied across for version 1.9, there will be some more work done to maximise the potential of the moodle 2.1 implementation which offers better functionality in the wiki and fora. A second course Beginners' Italian is in development. All Italian staff have access to the moodle and interest has been expressed in using the live classroom for meetings when faculty members are abroad. Students will be uploaded to the courses during the summer.

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French Department courses:

FR 1011 first-year language classes.
 A trial project with Cathy's language class using moodle as a base for distributing tasks and course materials, submission of student work, marking and re-distribution of student work. The space will also incorporate a forum, a space for students to upload resources to share with the group, a space for recording and possibly for synchronous chat. Student names will be uploaded when available at the beginning of the Autumn term, the page is being designed over the summer.

Year Abroad page.
This will include detailed information about formative tasks to be completed during the year, space for submission, marking and re-distribution of student work, space for the building of individual dossiers, space for recording personal experiences (using oral, visual and written media). This space will be developed by a postgraduate student in the course of the first term 2011 and maintained by him over the course of the year. The French department lecteurs will also be trained in the use of the page, since they will be assessing and marking the uploaded work.

The way forward.

The discussions, experimentation and collaboration fostered by this project has been very valuable in moving the technical support for language provision at Warwick forward. In so doing we have begun to see further possibilities for development and new exciting opportunities have started to take shape. Now we have an international platform that is both flexible enough to support a range of teaching approaches and tailored to provide optimum language learning experiences, we are finding new ways of sharing our expertise and opening up to deeper dialogue with our students. I would anticipate the possibility of further development of this initiative in the future if we are fortunate enough to be able to continue with support from IATL.