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Facilitating Collaborative Foreign Language Learning using the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment)

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Abstract

Learning a second language takes time and many university students in their evaluation of language modules indicate that they would like to have more teaching “contact hours”. The Bologna Process has established that 1 ECTS requires approximately 25 hours of student work, including teaching, learning and assessment activities. Thus, a module worth 5 ECTS entails approximately 125 hours of student engagement. Generally, in my institution students are offered 2 hours of classes per week for language modules. Therefore, a significant number of hours have to be planned for students to learn outside the classroom. Digital technologies afford students the support needed to increase the time they spend on learning a language and, more importantly, these technologies provide opportunities to facilitate learning with others in a supported learning environment.

This paper explains a number of e-learning tasks undertaken by university students of Spanish using tools that are available on Blackboard, the Virtual Learning Environment used by the university, to complement classroom activities. The paper also identifies the skills (e.g. language specific and transferable) that students have developed by completing the learning tasks. Reflections from the students and the teacher provide insights about the advantages of using collaborative learning tasks to increase learning time. Some limitations are also outlined so that future iterations of similar e-learning tasks can be even more successful in terms of student learning experience.

Keywords	<i>Collaborative learning, blended learning, VLE, autonomous learning</i>
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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades or so, the way learning is facilitated in higher education institutions has dramatically changed. Student collaboration and teamwork, as well as e-learning, are becoming integral components in the facilitation of learning, even when a significant amount of teaching takes place in a face-to-face context. Collaborative learning epitomises the social constructivist perspective on learning, emphasising the importance of others as mediators of

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learning (Vygotsky, 1978) [1]. The term “blended learning” is used often to indicate a mixture of teaching and learning in a physical environment complemented with e-learning activities. Slevin (2008) [2] argues that e-learning is more than an alternative way of delivering information. One of the strengths of e-learning is that it provides opportunities for students and teachers to interact in a variety of ways as it allows collaboration among students as well as independent learning. Studies on collaborative learning supported by technology have concluded that the e-learning environment provides learners with a personal space in which they feel safe to express themselves and to interact with each other (Alm, 2009) [3]. Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are web-based systems and tools which provide for educational interaction between teachers and learners. The VLE tools can be used to support learning through collaboration between learners and among learners and teachers (Lameras *et al.* 2012; Rourke & Coleman, 2009) [4] [5].

Foreign language learning in a university context requires teaching being facilitated either in a physical and/or in a virtual environment. Learners of foreign languages also need to spend a significant amount of time outside the classroom in order to develop their listening, reading, oral, and written language skills. Teaching in a face-to-face context often involves collaborative activities while e-learning and learning outside the classroom tends to be oriented to individual learning, despite the potential that e-learning has to facilitate collaborative learning. In order to increase the amount of time spent by students on learning outside the classroom in a collaborative way, the university VLE, Blackboard, has been used. More specifically, the VLE has been used to develop foreign language learning skills, mainly writing, to foster learning activities outside the classroom in a collaborative way. In the past, the students individually completed all written tasks set for assessment purposes, using a computer Word document, and submitted them to the teacher to be graded.

This paper presents the rationale for introducing collaborative learning that is facilitated by the university virtual learning environment. A number of e-learning tasks undertaken by university students of Spanish are described. The paper also identifies the skills (e.g. language specific and transferable) that students have developed by completing the learning tasks. The advantages and limitations of using the VLE to facilitate collaborative learning are also outlined in terms of the student learning experience.

2. Programme of studies

Students at University College Dublin, who are completing a Degree in Arts and Humanities, or in Business with Languages, undertake two Spanish language modules in the last year of their degree, one in semester 1 and one in semester 2. These are part of a suite of core language modules that students undertake every year of their degree. Students take a total of 6 language modules over their three years of study. They also study modules on literature, culture and history of Spain and the Hispanic world. Spanish makes up 50% of the undergraduate studies for students of Arts and Humanities and approximately 45% for students of Business and

Languages. Students of Arts and Humanities combine Spanish with another language or with another subject such as History or Music, while Business students focus on business subjects. Ninety students approximately are registered for the core language modules in final year every year. Four groups of about 23 students are formed at the start of each semester to be taught by four teachers. The groups are established following the alphabetical surnames of the students. About 65% of them have spent time abroad in a Hispanic speaking country while a minority of students have never been to Spain or South America. All the Business students spend a year abroad in a Spanish university while some students of Arts and Humanities also go on the year abroad programme to Spain or South America while others spend a year teaching English in Spain, usually after their second year at university. This presents a number of challenges for teaching as levels in final year vary significantly, from a lower B1 to a C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference.

Each language module is taught two hours per week over 12 weeks. The four language skills are covered in both modules. However, more weighting is given to aural tasks in semester 1 while oral skills are predominantly developed in semester 2. Reading and writing are taught in both semesters.

While the VLE has been used for over 10 years for the teaching of Spanish language modules as a means of communication with students and tutors and to upload learning materials for students, the potential that the VLE has for collaborative learning has been explored in the last few years by developing collaborative learning tasks using a number of VLE-specific tools. The discussion board had previously been used to create some collaborative learning space among students, mainly to express their views on a given topic. However, the threads in the discussion boards could be difficult to follow and participation can be hard to track. Furthermore, discussion boards do not offer as much reflective learning space as other tools do. During the academic year 2016-17, the use of the VLE tools was expanded with a view to further developing collaboration between students; for this purpose regular writing of blogs became a feature of the two language modules. The VLE is now regarded as a collaborative learning space in which students have to actively participate.

3. Online language learning tasks

Small groups of 3 students were created on Blackboard by the module coordinator at the start of semester 1 to facilitate the collaborative space. Only the 3 students in the group and the teacher could see the work produced by the students. The decision to create such small groups was strategic as the module coordinator thought that students would be less intimidated when participating in small groups. Furthermore, the amount of reading and writing they could do in small groups allowed them to manage their learning outside the classroom more efficiently.

A number of writing tasks were set during the semester, based on content covered in class. Students were asked to write personal blogs on a given topic, having received the instructions in Spanish in class as well as via Blackboard. Each blog was about 300 words long and they had to be submitted by a given date. Afterwards, each student had to write a short comment

(100 words approximately) on the blogs written by the other two students in their group. The participation was excellent as all students wrote the blogs required and the majority of the students also wrote a comment for the other members of the group by the date set by the module coordinator.

In semester 2, the VLE groups were larger, each collaborative space comprising about 22 students, and were formed based on the 4 teaching groups. Group presentations on current affairs take place every week in semester 2 as part of this core language module and the collaborative learning space for semester 2 was linked to the oral presentations. Each week, after the presentation, students were given a number of questions to consider (i.e. What do you think was the best aspect of the presentation? What advice would you give the group to improve their presentation?). Each individual student was asked to express his or her views to the presenters via the collaborative space on Blackboard. Each member of the group that had presented had an opportunity to reflect on the posts written by their classmates and had to write a short reflective piece to be sent to the teacher. As all students had to do a similar presentation for their oral exam at the end of the semester, the presentations that took place during the semester and the views of the audience were important in order to improve students' presentation skills. This task also increased the amount of writing and reading that students had to do during the semester and the VLE provided the opportunity to learn collaboratively.

4. Student learning experience

The use of blogs in final year language modules had the aims in mind:

1. To facilitate collaborative learning using the VLE.
2. To provide extra time outside class to improve foreign language skills and other transferable skills.

In the evaluation of the module, the majority of the students named the blogs as one of the three aspects of the module that most helped their learning. Furthermore, during the staff-student forum, students pointed out that the blogs had a positive impact on their learning both, as a collaborative tool and regarding their language skills. Blogs, as one of the students put it, "provide a good opportunity to use grammar learned in class and to improve vocabulary, as the students are encouraged to look for synonyms and other expressions in Spanish". It also became apparent that the blogs provided students with ownership of the writing process as they took more responsibility and self-direction in their learning. Students also commented that the blogs were demanding and encouraged them to work harder as [blogs] were part of the assessment for the final grade. Six per cent of the overall grade for the module was allocated to the blogs. However, students stated that they would have liked the blogs to be given a greater percentage.

5. Conclusion

The use of blogs as an integral component of the final year language modules has provided a collaborative and safe learning space that students need to develop their language skills outside the classroom, as argued by Alm (2009). Corroborating Rourke and Coleman's findings (2009), blogs in this module have been an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing collaborative learning. Feedback from students has been mostly positive and further research will be undertaken to ascertain how blogs can further enhance student learning in a collaborative way.

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