

15 Looking beyond language skills – integrating digital skills into language teaching

Amanda Deacon¹, Lucy Parkin², and Carolin Schneider³

Abstract

The traditional focus of the language elective has been to give students the skills to communicate in the foreign language which has also been their main selling point. However, language graduates need more specific and wide-ranging skills if they are to compete in the current and future job markets. It is now widely accepted that universities have a direct responsibility to prepare students for employment and, in the 21st century, this preparation needs to include digital literacy and competencies. But how can students not only learn these skills, but also find ways to evidence them for a future employer? At Leeds we decided to explore these issues by designing a new ‘Professional French’ module, linking digital competencies to assessment through participation on a blog together with supported use of digital media to create presentation videos. This article will discuss how we addressed, with our project, some of these questions and met student demand for more applied options on the French degree programme. We present our experience from the perspectives of the different players: tutor, students, learning technologist, and self-access centre manager, whose Master of Arts (MA) dissertation in technology, education and learning provided the data for the evaluation of this project.

Keywords: employability, collaboration, assessment, digital literacy, digital skills.

1. University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom; a.deacon@leeds.ac.uk

2. University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom; l.parkin@leeds.ac.uk

3. University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom; c.schneider@leeds.ac.uk

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1. Background

“Students must start to *live* their CVs before they need to write and market them” (Anyangwe, 2011, para. 5, our emphasis).

Portfolio assessment has been for some time, and still is, part of the French degree and language elective programme at the University of Leeds. The intended advantages are well documented elsewhere: enhancing motivation, building up skills over time and developing student capacity to reflect on their own learning (British Council, 2009).

However, in our experience, students tend to produce work, at best, in the last few weeks of the course and, at worst, just before the deadline. Some students may also adopt a *what-do-I-have-to-do-to-pass?* mentality, possibly reinforced by quality assurance constraints which encourage us to produce ever more transparent and detailed assessment criteria. To counter this, we decided to provide a space where students could take creative risks and address a real audience, opening up the dialogue through broader collaborative engagement within a ‘community of practice’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In concrete terms, this meant that students were required to upload drafts of work to a blog (documents, video and audio recordings) and receive feedback from their tutor and peers in preparation for the final submission of the end-of-semester portfolio.

2. Mandy (module tutor)

The project involved 11 students, enrolled on a new level 2 undergraduate French elective module, ‘Introduction to Professional French’, designed to widen the offer of applied language modules and to embed employability skills. Assessment was by portfolio, presentation, written task, and speaking examination. The blog, hosted on WordPress, was the vehicle used to share written and spoken student drafts and advice on business correspondence: CVs, professional profiles, business letters, telephone calls, and reflections on progress.

In addition to the general project aims stated earlier, we had two primary motivations in designing this module:

- to encourage regular participation and engagement throughout the semester;
- to simulate work practices through on-line collaboration.

To do so effectively, we felt we needed to move away from the limitations of the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) collaborative tools, which only allow plain text comments to blog entries with no facility for hyperlinks or attachments. To do this, we decided to migrate to WordPress, a more user friendly, flexible and visually attractive platform.

We found that student feedback collected in interviews and through surveys (Schneider, 2016a) evidenced the success of our project on several levels.

Students participated and posted regularly, motivated by the assessment criteria which rewarded blog participation, and noted that ongoing feedback could lead directly to improved grades.

There were other interesting findings:

- The blog was seen as a novelty, or as one student put it: “All modules have a VLE but this was different so sometimes I’d just have a look to see what was going on”.
- Our students seemed to fear making their work public and were reticent about commenting on each others’ posts. This was described variously, in interviews, as being a “bold move” and “not our role”. In itself, this was not surprising and in line with other studies focusing on blogging (Bowles, 2016), but interview transcripts also reveal that students dealt with the required peer feedback by negotiating a “sort of agreement” via Facebook so as to avoid the risk of offending each other.

As the tutor, I was learning alongside the students and, on occasion, this caused organisational problems which later had to be rectified by my colleagues. We also discovered, however, that the students themselves were not as technical or digitally literate as we had assumed (Schneider, 2016a). This had advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, as discussed, the blog had the novelty factor, but on the other, they felt they would have benefitted from some technology specific training. The blog was time-consuming. The very speed of response, which the students valued, and the in-between class participation, which I had hoped for, also meant a fast turnaround for all, with feedback occurring several times a week rather than in a traditional marking cycle. In retrospect, managing student expectations by clarifying when feedback would be posted could have alleviated such pressures.

We had, therefore, achieved our objective of encouraging on-going participation and collaborative work, and also, as intended, enhanced the students' employability. However, as with De Berg's (2016) study, whilst our students recognised and articulated their appreciation of the applied tasks, they did not equate digital literacy and competencies (posting on the blog or making videos) with employability. Nor did they recognise their work as an exportable product that they could show to employers or transfer to other projects (Schneider, 2016a). These soft, or employability, skills and dispositions, sometimes referred to as "wicked competencies", are skills which resist definition and are difficult to assess (Knight, 2007, p. 1). Students, on this module, clearly exhibited these skills through teamwork, negotiation and problem solving, but did not recognise them as such.

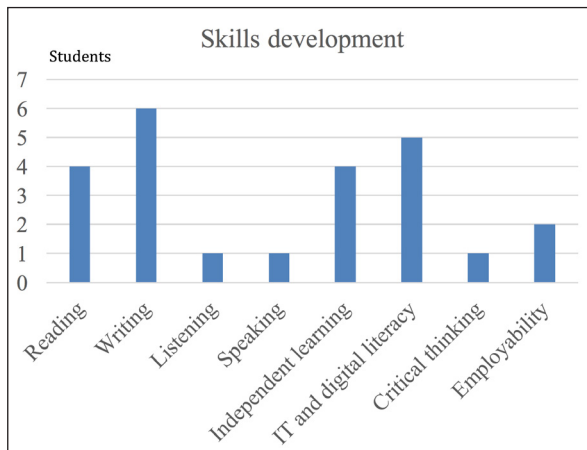
3. Carolin (MA student)

My Master's dissertation in technology, education and learning investigated the impact of the blog on writing and independent learning skills, motivation, and support mechanisms. Data was primarily collected through student questionnaires administered online and on paper, and regular semi-structured interviews with Mandy and three students. Data analysis was carried out using a

mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative instruments to investigate the data for recurring patterns and to ensure relevance, reliability and validity. This allowed me to fully examine the impact the blog had on students' and the tutor's skills development and motivation.

In line with existing literature on the use of blogs in language learning, such as Neira-Piñeiro (2015), Fageeh (2011) and Dippold (2009), my research (Schneider, 2016b) found that the students felt they had developed their language skills and confidence. These were developed alongside other skills (Figure 1). Most students felt that the main skills they had developed were writing and digital literacy skills, while some interviews showed that they did not immediately recognise the skills developed during the module as linked to employability.

Figure 1. Student skills developed during the module (Schneider, 2016b, p. 36)



Students stated that they felt motivated to use the WordPress platform to submit homework to their tutor, in part because participation was included in the assessment criteria, but also because they wanted to learn by interacting with each other's work. They saw the platform as an innovative tool, and were aware that the tutor was learning alongside them.

It appears that Mandy and the students, although appreciating the mutual support mechanisms developed during the module, required more structured and ongoing assistance to fully benefit from using a blogging platform for language learning. With this in mind, I suggest that adequate technical support needs to be put in place to allow the tutor to develop her digital skills, so that in the future she will be able, in turn, to support her students and to facilitate the use of technology for learning more effectively. Similarly, it is suggested that the students' skills and needs are assessed in the module induction.

4. Lucy (learning technologist)

I am member of the blended learning team, and have a Master of Science (MSc) in multimedia and e-learning. My perspective is also that of a former language learner. I feel that, since my own undergraduate degree in 1999, little has changed and that language teaching and learning has not kept pace with digital advances and technology. I would like to see the language electives draw students away from a limited horizon of linguistic competence to developing a portable and transferable product; something they can 'show off' or showcase in the next stage of their career. My vision is that the blog would become a simulation of a Francophone business magazine with a wider audience rather than just a tutor and their students. The mode of delivery would, then, move from the current tutor led version to one where students themselves research and present articles on how to approach the required tasks for the portfolio and publish their findings as blog posts.

As discussed, the project was successful. However, looking to the future, we need to address the three most surprising student responses revealed by Carolin's research:

- initial low level of digital competence;
- failure to recognise digital and soft skills as valuable for their professional profiles;

- reticence to critique each other's work due to a perceived risk to the group dynamic.

To achieve this, technical support for tutors and students needs to be put in place by our blended learning team. In addition, the students' digital skills should be audited at the start of the module and a skills workshop, tailored to their needs, should be scheduled for the first week of the course. Activities will be planned to help students to recognise and evidence their less tangible employability skills to future employers. Finally, we will explore on-line socialisation (Salmon, n.d.) as a tool to facilitate constructive peer feedback.

5. Conclusion

Working together has allowed us to exchange ideas, resources and skills from academic and non-academic viewpoints. Through this project we have participated in several overlapping but distinct forums or communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) involving students, a tutor, a learning technologist, and a researcher, all of which have allowed us to develop our own practice while enhancing the learning and teaching experience.

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