15 Connected language learning: A tutor's perspective

Benoît Guilbaud[1]

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1. How did you become interested in using technology in your professional life?

My professional interest in digital technology stemmed from a long-lasting personal interest in the subject. I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family that could be described as 'early adopters' and started playing and creating digitally at a rather early age. While my formal education was overwhelmingly 'chalk and talk', digital technology was omnipresent in my personal life the entire time. Informally, I learnt word-processing, some audio and video editing, and some basic graphic and web design skills.

Later when I studied for my teacher training, I often opted for the technology-oriented modules, seminars or assignment topics that were available. I enjoyed this greatly as I was able to put into practice the skills and knowledge which I had acquired by myself over the years and which I now felt benefited my creativity and personal productivity greatly. It also gave me a feeling of belonging to a group of people sharing a common interest, which was very motivating. In a way, this was my first professional experience of being part of a learning community.

When I began to teach, once again it felt natural to use in my practice the tools I had been using for myself for some time. Creating different document layouts was something I was confident with, as I had been doing it when designing comic strips as a teenager. Furthermore, the skills I learnt recording music as a

1. University of Manchester, United Kingdom; benoit.guilbaud@manchester.ac.uk.

twenty-something were applied to the way I approached recording and editing listening examinations. Lastly, the skills I had acquired developing my personal website helped me create online resources for Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs).

2. How has your use and knowledge of technology in language learning and teaching developed over time?

In my early career, my use of digital technology was influenced by the functional approach favoured during my teacher training, consisting of teaching IT skills as one of the key skills, alongside numeracy and literacy, and aimed at equipping learners with practical skills they could later reuse in their personal and professional lives. This approach focuses heavily on students acquiring a general fluency and comfort in navigating around and using a computer, which Warschauer (2003) identifies as the most basic component of digital literacy. It allows learners to familiarise themselves with the tools used in class, such as an interactive whiteboard, or outside the class, such as a VLE, but this contact with technology remains for the most part passive (e.g. accessing documents) and very controlled (e.g. writing a few words on the interactive whiteboard).

However, as my practice developed, using this approach to technology began to feel like I was superimposing new tools on a traditional teaching model. Little use was made of the affordances of networked technologies. The short pieces students wrote on the VLE could have well been written on paper, and pair work in the language lab seemed to offer little benefit, if any, over face-to-face interaction.

Overall, I often felt that I was only using technology for an added motivation bonus, or even just sometimes for the sake of it. From there, my views began to change as I started considering how networked technologies could help define the way I should approach my teaching.

3. How has contact with colleagues impacted on the way you use technology in language learning and teaching?

Since I began teaching French language in higher education, I have been fortunate enough to attend a number of conferences to help develop my practice.

After attending the LLAS e-learning symposium in 2013, I wrote a blog post entitled 'A sense of community', in which I described how the event made me feel like I belonged to a group (Guilbaud, 2013). I felt useful and engaged, and was able to make connections. I later realised how this echoed what McMillan and Chavis (1986) identify as the four criteria defining a learning community: membership, influence, fulfilment of individual needs and shared events of emotional connections. The fellow practitioners I have met at this event have been a tremendous help in developing my practice, acting as a sounding board, suggesting ideas, praising or critiquing my work and views.

4. How do you use technology in your professional practice now?

The ways I use technology in my professional practice can be broadly divided into two categories, depending on whether I use them for teaching or for my own professional development. Firstly, I use the following tools in my teaching practice:

- digital resources: most of the resources I use are digital or digitised. I enjoy the duplicability this affords and I normally make all resources (AV, hand-outs) available to my students after class. It has been argued that giving away all class materials can discourage attendance, however this has not been the case in my experience;

- my personal laptop: I rarely teach a class without it. I particularly like the predictability associated with using my own computer. Audio-visual

materials always look the way they were meant too, and I can use a variety of software packages which do not come as standard on institutional machines: contextual dictionaries (defining words directly from any document or web page), my French dictionary (I use the digital edition of *Le Petit Robert 2011* and prefer it to most free online platforms), some mind-mapping and presentation software (MindNode Pro, Keynote). It also saves me several minutes a day from logging to various web services;

- online platforms and software: vocabulary apps (Quizlet), online dictionaries (WordReference.com, Linguee.fr), text-to-speech software, dictation software, audio and video capture software (Camtasia, WM Capture, Audio Hijack Pro);

- communication tools: discussion forums and collaborative documents (Google Drive), some web 2.0 platforms (Ning, Quizlet).

Secondly, these are the tools I frequently use in order to further my professional development:

- the web 2.0 platform Twitter has had a tremendous impact on my professional life. I will return to this in the next section of this article;

- I also use a number of other social platforms in my professional life including WordPress (for hosting my blog), Flickr (for finding and sharing pictures on Creative Commons licences) and SlideShare (for posting and embedding slides from presentations I give).

5. How does your knowledge and experience in social media and web 2.0 technologies impact on your professional and teaching life?

Social media and web 2.0 technologies have had a significant impact on my teaching practice over the past few years. Whilst my interest in technology in

general has contributed to shape my teaching on a practical level, social media and web 2.0 technologies, or networked technologies as I will refer to them, have had a more profound impact on how I perceive my role as an educator and how I go about performing this role. In this section, I will outline how the growing importance of networked technologies in my professional life has informed and influenced my teaching.

5.1. From Twitter user to life-long learner

The best example of the influence of web 2.0 technologies on my professional development is how I became a Twitter user. I joined Twitter in 2010 but didn't really use or see the point of this platform for about a year. In 2011, I attended two conferences, the 7th LLAS e-learning Symposium in Southampton and the 6th International Conference "Education in a Changing Environment: Creativity and Engagement in Higher Education" in Salford. At these conferences, for the first time, I saw Twitter being used for a constructive purpose: it allowed delegates to communicate among themselves, comment on the talks and easily access slides and resources from the presentations they had missed. Several 'tweet walls' were up and displaying thoughts and comments that speakers and delegates had been posting throughout the conference. I felt really engaged in the intellectual discussions taking place during these events, and I have been using Twitter ever since to share my own thoughts and views on the language teaching profession as well as various intellectual issues. I have shared and accessed teaching resources, made connections with fellow practitioners, some of which I later had the pleasure to meet and work with in person.

I now endeavour to maintain and develop my Personal Learning Network (PLN) (Couros, 2010). A PLN can be defined as an ensemble of connections, people and tools (web 2.0 platforms for the most part) which a person can draw upon for intellectual and professional development. Networked practitioners communicate and collaborate through the medium of their PLNs. In order to maintain a healthy give-and-take relationship with the learning community formed by my PLN, I have chosen to share some of the information I access,

curate or produce: I regularly post my presentations on SlideShare, I post links to my readings on Twitter, and I share tips and teaching resources on my WordPress blog, or occasionally on community platforms such as humbox. ac.uk.

As part of this process, I have developed a semi-public online identity. This process can be challenging as it implies letting go of some of the control that one would naturally try and retain in terms of privacy or intellectual property. Constructing a digital identity took time and effort but it has benefited me greatly. More than a technique or a means to an end, this approach to learning, networked learning (Couros, 2011), has been a way to further my own intellectual development as a life-long learner.

5.2.   Teaching principles:
from constructivism to connectivism

My training as a language tutor was largely influenced by constructivist learning theories, which pose knowledge as a social construction generated, in part, by learners through their interactions with each other. In concrete terms, this means that students learn to use the language with the assistance of their peers and tutor, as well as class materials and self-study materials in the library. For the sake of this argument, I will compare Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development to a local network. In this network, students establish connections with the people and resources that are physically present. Some of the knowledge acquired through these connections can persist beyond the classroom (e.g. through class notes) but some of it will no longer be accessible once the class has ended.

Connectivist learning theories (Siemens, 2005) build upon these constructivist principles and suggest that using networked technologies, such as web 2.0 and social media, allows learners to expand on their zone of proximal development. By making and sustaining connections outside the classroom, students become more independent learners. By developing their own PLNs, they can make connections to wider learning communities. They can select and share with

others resources representing an interest to their own learning, and access and evaluate those shared by others in order to gradually develop more independent learning habits.

Connectivist learning theories argue that the connections created by a learner are more valuable than the resulting knowledge. It's not about possessing information, it's about knowing how and where to find information. Making connections can help learners become much more resourceful, keep their knowledge current and relevant and face new learning challenges with greater ease. It can be argued that this approach to learning is particularly relevant in the current economic climate, where change management and adaptability are seen as core skills to secure employment.

5.3.   Learning in the open:
the example of discussion forums for translation

In order to explain how these principles have influenced my teaching, I will first draw upon an example from a translation class which I taught for several years. I initially recommended to my students to use offline and online dictionaries, including the translation website and discussion forum WordReference. com. The discussions found on the website offer a lot of value over regular dictionaries in terms of contextualisation and semantic disambiguation. When we discussed the possibility of students contributing to these forums, everyone agreed that they were very useful, yet few seemed willing to take the plunge and participate to public online discussions, mainly for lack of confidence in their language skills.

In order to take steps towards addressing this issue, I decided to start weekly discussions around the translation homework using a web 2.0 platform, Ning. com. Without being public, this platform was open to all students currently enrolled on the degree programme. The learning community was therefore potentially much larger than the translation class itself. All content would also be preserved over time, unlike on the VLE's discussion boards, which would get reset every academic year. The uptake for this new platform was good and some

very constructive discussions took place around the homework, and over time students became more confident in sharing and critiquing not only part of their work, but also the resources they had used.

Using these semi-open discussion forums was a modest but arguably successful first step in encouraging my students to establish two-way connections with a learning community wider than their classroom, and to take an active role in their learning process by producing content and offering suggestions on other learners' content. I later had the pleasure to see that one of my students had gone and posted a very useful contribution on the forums of WordReference. com.

5.4. Learning as a participatory process: the example of collaborative vocabulary lists

In order to further illustrate the benefits and risks associated with connectivism in language teaching and learning, I will take the example of the collaborative vocabulary application Quizlet.com, which I recently started using in my teaching practice.

Two years ago, I started looking for a new way for students to study vocabulary. I have taught on specialist language courses including medical and business French, and whilst the specificity of this type of language teaching extends beyond the lexical element, vocabulary learning remains a central part of it. I wanted to find a way for students to be engaged with their learning process and participate in the design of the materials rather than to be memorising vocabulary lists that would be provided to them.

Someone in my PLN recommended Quizlet.com. The specificity of this platform is that user-generated vocabulary lists are available publicly on the website. I thought it would be interesting if our students collaboratively compiled vocabulary lists relating to their weekly course topics and made them available on the internet for other medical students potentially interested in learning

French. So a system was set in place for students from a few different classes to collaboratively generate, as homework, their own online vocabulary lists. Every week, each student added five words to a list on a given topic. Once proofread and curated by the course tutors, these lists were made available on Quizlet for our students, and many others, to learn from.

This approach helped our students get in the drivers' seat. They now had to decide which words or phrases would be the most useful to them, depending on the context. It took a few weeks for each class to fine tune the length, format and content of their lists but the overall results were very satisfactory. A survey carried out at the end of the semester showed that students were very pleased that they created and shared what was, in fact, an open educational resource. Most agreed that the result of the common effort was better than what each of them could have produced on their own. Overall, this was a fruitful learning experience.

However, contrary to expectations, letting students write their own vocabulary lists did not lighten the burden placed on the tutor, but rather shifted it. Correcting entries proved a very time-consuming task, along with chasing late contributions and removing duplicates. Curating content requiring specialist knowledge (particularly in the case of medical French) was also challenging at times.

This echoes some of the issues which may be encountered in a communicative language teaching context. In this configuration, the tutor becomes a facilitator and curator of knowledge rather than a dispenser of content. Some tutors may find this change of situation threatening or stressful, and may be reluctant to relinquish control over their classroom. I would argue that enabling learners to complete tasks semi-autonomously and letting them take charge of their learning process is valuable and worth the risk. An individual contribution of five words per week to a list is a small step, but the fact that the rest of the group, as well as many other learners on the internet may potentially be learning these five words should hopefully encourage our students to engage with their own learning on a scale greater than that within the classroom walls.

5.5.   Conclusion

Through these examples, I have reflected upon the impact that networked technologies have had on my professional life and teaching practice. Using these tools has undoubtedly helped shape the way I look at my own professional development and they have certainly contributed to the fact that I view myself as a life-long learner. My online participation, modest as it may be, is an act of civic engagement and social responsibility. Engaging with learning communities on a give-and-take basis is an ethic which, as a teacher, I feel I must transmit to my students, to help them embrace participation over consumption, and become life-long learners –of French, preferably.

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