

5 ITALO (MyLearning Log): a case study in the use of technology-based resources to foster student engagement and autonomy

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Abstract

This paper describes the project ‘ITALO (MyLearning Log)’, introduced as part of the Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) at the University of Manchester. The project aimed to encourage student engagement with the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), monitor usage and effectiveness of the resources deployed, and develop learner autonomy. Three elements were central to the project: the resources on Blackboard, the tutors, and examples of good practice from former students. Learners tried out and commented on online resources, and shared their findings and best practice in a learning log, thereby also helping the tutor monitor learners’ progress. The paper first describes the background to the project and the rationale behind it. It then describes the project in detail and the methods used to evaluate the results. An analysis of the key findings shows how the project has benefited current students. Finally, in the conclusion, we evaluate the success of the project and discuss the potential for further research.

Keywords: student engagement, technology-based resources, learning community, learner autonomy.

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1. Introduction

The project 'ITALO (MyLearning Log)' was developed as part of the IWLP at the University of Manchester and piloted with three groups of students from the Italian beginners' module in the academic year 2014-2015. The project was then refined and extended to the Italian pre-intermediate group the following academic year.

The project's primary aim was to address poor student engagement with the resources available on Blackboard, the institutional VLE. Previous end-of-year student evaluations of IWLP courses showed that students did not believe the resources available online significantly enhanced their learning. The ITALO project sought to monitor usage and effectiveness of resources deployed on the VLE and encourage learner autonomy.

Three elements were identified as central to the project: the resources on Blackboard, the tutors, and examples of good practice from former students.

Resources were grouped in categories, and students were free to explore them independently². The tutor, however, played an active role in “[co-opting] the student into the learning process, encouraging active participation in their own development” (Berdrow & Evers, 2011, p. 407). Testimonials from previous learners, who had distinguished themselves for their extensive use of resources on Blackboard, provided further incentive and guidance for students.

In the second iteration of ITALO (2015-2016), special emphasis was placed on interaction and exchange of information among users, pivotal components of autonomy, in line with recent scholarly findings: “the development of autonomy necessarily implies collaboration and interdependence” (Benson, 2001, p. 12)³.

2. Resources were grouped under two main headings, 'Materials prepared by tutors' and 'External resources', which included: 'Generic language websites for Italian', 'Grammar and revision', 'Vocabulary and pronunciation', 'Radio, TV, and newspapers', and 'Music, hobbies, and tourism'.

3. See also Ivanovska (2015, p. 353) on the value of interdependence for the development of autonomy.

ITALO was therefore a resource-based project, which combined two of the approaches to independent learning: directed independent learning, “in which students are guided by curriculum content, pedagogy and assessment, and supported by staff and the learning environment, and in which students play an active role in their learning experience” (Thomas, Jones, & Ottaway, 2015, p. 4), and the e-learning community, “where a group of learners communicate and share knowledge with each other with the assistance of an e-moderator” (Sloman & Reynolds, 2003, p. 261).

To monitor usage and effectiveness of the VLE resources, learners were asked to keep a ‘learning log’ (using the Blackboard journal tool), where they would record their exploration of the VLE and their learning strategies. The dual purpose of the journal was therefore to contribute towards student engagement with Blackboard and indirectly provide feedback to tutors on the resources.

Together with the independent exploration of the VLE resources and the sharing of knowledge via the learning logs, we used questions to attract students to the resources available on Blackboard and to prompt an inquiring and therefore more autonomous attitude to the learning process⁴.

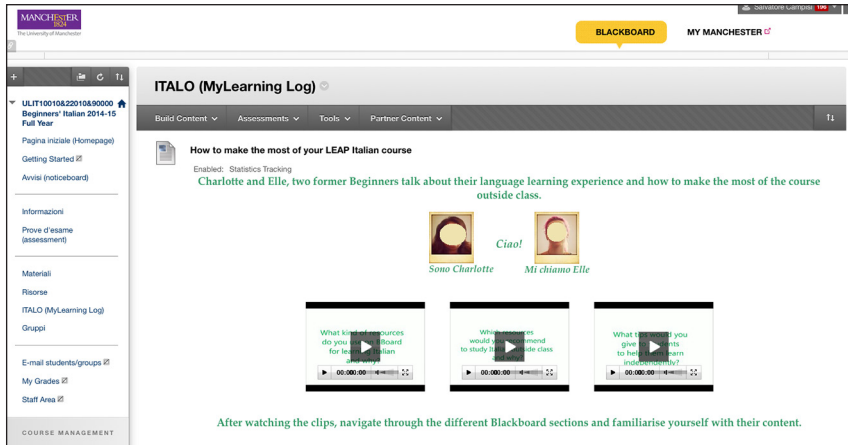
2. Methodology

Of the three key components of ITALO (resources, tutors, and testimonials), the testimonials required longer elaboration, as they were central in arousing curiosity in students about Blackboard resources and triggering thoughts on the learning process. We opted to have three short videos, where two former beginner students, who had achieved a high level of linguistic competence as well as learner autonomy, answered three key questions on how they had developed as independent learners: (1) ‘What kind of resources do you use on Blackboard for learning Italian and why?’, (2) ‘Which resources would you recommend to study Italian outside class and why?’, and (3) ‘What tips would

4. Reflection and questioning are important in the development of an autonomous learner: “Self-directed learning means learners engaging in inquiry. Inquiry means getting answers to questions” (Knowles, 1975, p. 99).

you give students to help them learn independently?'. The three video clips were posted on a dedicated section of the VLE, and students were asked to watch them at the beginning of the course before starting their own exploration of the existing materials and resources on Blackboard (Figure 1).

Figure 1. ITALO's starting page with introductory videos

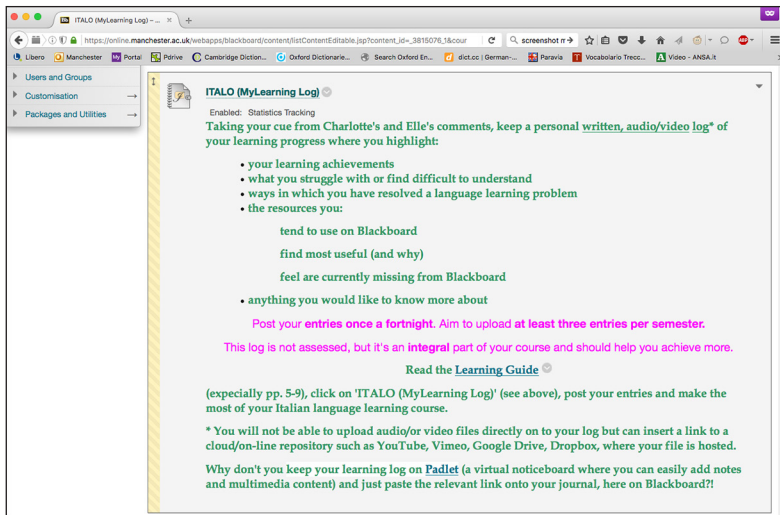


After the first three-four weeks of lessons (9-12 hours of instruction), students were invited to reflect on their learning progress and periodically (at least three times per semester) record their reflections in their individual journal (ITALO, MyLearning Log). They were asked to outline their achievements, difficulties, ways in which they had overcome a learning problem, and the resources they used (Figure 2). Students could type their entries into their journal, add audio/video recordings or, alternatively, link their journal to a Padlet (<https://padlet.com/>), a virtual noticeboard where multimedia content can easily be added.

The learning logs were not assessed; however, students were strongly encouraged to take part in the exercise, as an integral part of the learning process. During the first year of implementation (2014-2015), journals were kept 'private' (students could view only their own entries), to avoid self-comparison with peers and the risk that learners might feel intimidated by their

fellow students' scrutiny. The following year, however, tutors took the decision to trial the logs in 'public' mode so that users could view and comment on their peers' entries.

Figure 2. Outline of the project and its objectives for students



Tutors reviewed students' entries halfway through the semester, collated those which appeared most innovative or effective, and showed them in class as a means of giving feedback to those who had participated, encouraging those who had not, and disseminating examples of good practice. The role of the tutor was therefore to facilitate the exchange of information, especially during the first year when journals were 'private', and motivate students. Journals also provided tutors with valuable feedback on the users' learning progress and on the overall effectiveness of the resources deployed on the VLE.

Given ITALO's practical focus on student engagement, we concentrated our attention on student participation and journal contributions in our evaluation of the project outcomes, leaving other forms of evaluation such as eliciting student views on the project or on learner autonomy for later iterations of the project.

3. Results and discussion

Despite the initial uncertainty over student engagement, as learning logs were not going to be formally assessed, students positively responded to ITALO as an opportunity to exploit the VLE to its full potential and maximise their learning opportunities. Half the students across the three groups of beginners contributed posts to their learning log during the year the project was piloted, and two-fifths actively participated the following year (see [Table 1](#)). Students tended to contribute more during the first semester, when they were still becoming familiar with the course and the resources available on the VLE⁵. Although these numbers may not suggest a high participation rate, they are in fact very positive, as all e-learning communities typically include a number of ‘lurkers’; “people who are willing to read [...] messages and documents but not to make contributions” ([Sloman & Reynolds, 2003](#), p. 270)⁶.

All ITALO contributors chose to type posts in their learning log, occasionally adding hyperlinks to resources located outside the VLE. None opted for audio/video entries or the use of Padlet.

Table 1. Number and length of student contributions per year

	No. of students (3 groups)	Contributors (total)	Contributions (total)	No. of words (total)	No. of words per contributor (average)
2014-15	28	14	22	2655	190
2015-16	47	20	41	7459	373

Most users broke down their reflections into sections, whose main headings were often the points they were asked to consider before starting their log (learning

5. There is also a further factor to take into account, a natural decline in motivation in the second semester, when students may easily feel “tired of keeping the learning log” ([Hu & Zhang, 2017](#), p. 154) or perceive the exercise as “too time consuming” ([Coomey & Stephenson, 2001](#), p. 39).

6. This definition draws on Gilly Salmon’s investigation of ‘lurking’ in online learning ([Salmon, 2011](#), see especially pp. 175-178).

achievements, ongoing difficulties, solved problems, and resources used; see Figure 3), and only a few adopted a more discursive, diary-style approach, generally signalled by the informal tone of their opening line (e.g. “Greetings all, I thought I’d let people know what online resources I’ve found useful”).

Figure 3. Student entry with personal learning achievements, difficulties, and resources used on Blackboard

The screenshot shows a Blackboard LMS interface. The main content area displays a student entry titled "Entry one" posted on Tuesday, 27 October 2015 at 22:33:19. The entry is organized into four distinct sections, each with a red heading:

- My learning achievements:**
 - I feel like I am becoming more confident in my speaking ability as we practice more in class, especially pronunciation and intonation.
 - I am trying to remember individual words rather than the phrase as a whole to test if I can construct different sentences with the same vocabulary. I also like to learn the literal translation into English as I feel this increases my understanding.
- Aspects which I struggle with:**
 - Remembering which verbs take essere and which take avere.
 - Remembering the set phrases for all 6 pronouns.

(This is just a case of revision).
- Ways in which I have solved a language problem:**
 - When I struggle with a particular pronunciation, after attempting to say the word myself, I will enter it into a programme which will read it back to me so that I can understand how it is spoken, for example google translate or natural reader.
- The resources which I have utilised:**
 - Audio files are particularly useful when I can map the sound onto written words in front of me.
 - I have not looked into all of the resources on blackboard but I will look more into the music and TV section as I feel this will interest me and help me to learn in an interactive way.
 - I feel that maybe a link to the Italian music charts would help to direct me to the genre of music I would like to listen to, as I feel as if I am stabbing in the dark at the moment when I YouTube search.
 - As well as utilising the University resources I have also been using Duolingo and I have recently made a Livemocha account as well as joining the Italian society. My Facebook is also in Italian and has been for a while. I also follow a few famous Italians on twitter so that I have Italian tweets as well as English on my timeline.

The data and insights into students’ learning processes that ITALO posts have provided can be broadly divided into four categories: (1) learning strategies, (2) learning difficulties, (3) use of resources, and (4) instances of interaction and collaboration⁷. In many cases, entries provided information on more than one category at the same time, as shown by some of the examples in the remaining part of this section. Learning strategies ranged from traditional ones (“I have coloured stickers around the house to remind me of the words, and I try to rehearse them when I am out and about”), to those aided by technology (“setting

7. The four categories resonate with Mynard’s (2012) analysis of student blogs in her case study, where entries showed evidence of ‘critical reflection’, ‘metacognition’, ‘decision-making’, and ‘problem-solving’ (p. 6). Indeed, ITALO students evaluated and recommended resources, assessed how they learnt best, indicated reasons for using given tools or strategies, and explained how they had overcome a learning problem.

my phone to Italian is weird at first but it does help with keeping me in the mindset”). The entries have also pointed to students’ preferred learning styles:

“tried to learn the numbers better. I did this by watching videos on YouTube... I feel like it helped a lot more than just looking at a sheet of paper!”.

Students have also described their stumbling blocks:

“So far I mostly struggle to remove an ‘English’ frame of mind when writing Italian. Getting used to saying ‘the my parents’ took some time, though through much practice it’s becoming [...] easier”.

Other entries have indicated how learners have solved a learning problem:

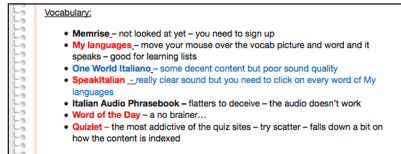
“When I struggle with a particular pronunciation, after attempting to say the word myself, I will enter it into a programme which will read it back to me so that I can understand how it is spoken, for example google translate or natural reader”.

The use students have made of the VLE resources has brought their learning strategies to the fore too:

“Everyday I spend ten minutes on Memrise learning Italian vocab, ten minutes on DuoLingo doing the same thing, ten minutes on an app like Padlet called MentalCase to learn verbs and then around five minutes on an app called Lingualy”.

In some cases, users have extensively reviewed the resources they tried (see [Figure 4](#)). Although students have not replied to their peers’ posts with comments, even when journals were ‘public’, ITALO contributions show clear evidence of collaboration and cross-fertilisation among its users: “I watched Peppa Pig in Italian on YouTube after seeing it on someone else’s ITALO log”, and “I have discovered the addictive world of Quizlet! Am sharing folders with [A.] and [C.]”.

Figure 4. Student entry evaluating resources available on Blackboard



4. Conclusion

The project has evolved and improved over the past two years. Fewer students contributed posts during the second year: 20 out of 47 compared to 14 out of 28 in 2014-2015 (see [Table 1](#)). The average number of entries per contributor, however, increased from 1.59 in 2014-2015 to 2.05 the following year, and the average number of words each contributor wrote almost doubled. Moreover, entries in the second year were generally more structured and substantial than those appearing in 2014-2015 (see [Figure 3](#)). The project has undergone refinements since its initial trial. Capitalising on the first year's pilot, tutors were able to guide students with more targeted interventions and examples; for instance, selected entries from the previous year were visible to users while they were writing their posts. Moreover, making the journals 'public' has encouraged interaction, making the VLE a learning community rather than just a repository of resources.

In future research, it would be useful to: engage in a quantitative analysis of Blackboard real-time usage reports to measure the impact of the project on overall student engagement with the VLE; assess the effect of ITALO on student linguistic attainment and final grades by involving only two groups and using the third group as a control; and investigate the learners' perspective on ITALO and its influence on their attitudes to independent learning, with questionnaires administered at the end of the academic year.

The design of ITALO reflects the latest evolution of CALL, "the integrative phase [...] characterised by the use of multimedia, hypermedia and interactive

technologies to promote integration of skills” (Benson, 2001, p. 138). It displays instances of the “four major features of online learning widely identified as essential to good practice[:] dialogue, involvement, support, control” (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001, p. 38)⁸, and has promoted “autonomy [by taking] learners beyond the provision of their teachers and [engaging] with a greater variety of materials, learners, [and] support tools” (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001, p. 49).

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8. The learner independently explores the VLE resources in ITALO (control) and can interact with other users (dialogue), whereas tutors encourage active participation (involvement) and monitor and direct exchanges (support).

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