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Training language teachers to sustain self-directed language learning: an exploration of advisers' experiences on a web-based open virtual learning environment

Sophie Bailly*, Maud Ciekanski and Eglantine Guély-Costa***
***Université de Lorraine (France), ** Université Paris 8 (France)**

*{sophie.bailly, eglantine.guely}@univ-lorraine.fr, ** maud.ciekanski@univ-paris8.fr

Abstract

This article describes the rationale for pedagogical, technological and organizational choices in the design of a web-based and open virtual learning environment (VLE) promoting and sustaining self-directed language learning. Based on the last forty years of research on learner autonomy at the CRAPEL according to Holec's definition (1988), we designed a global VLE for researchers working on language learning autonomy, teachers with various degrees of practice and experience in self-directed learning, and language learners. The VLE is thus divided into three spaces for the different types of participant, each offering dedicated social networking possibilities and resources to enrich the others.

Our study focuses on the space dedicated to teacher training, the main objective being to help them build knowledge and skills for a new educational role in the paradigm of language learning autonomy (LLA). This space contains specially created Web-TV resources and audio podcasts of self-directed learning advising sessions, is based on reflective analysis and relies on a professional social network, following the principles of the "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998). In line with the principles of self-directed learning, teachers acting as trainers in the VLE mainly enact supportive and facilitative functions as advisers do in face-to-face interactions. We explore how training for advisers is organized in this online environment characterized by a high degree of openness (Jézégou, 2010). We report on findings from the way teachers within their dedicated space, using quantitative and qualitative data collected from interviews, questionnaires and analysis of logs. We look at the tensions that emerge as teachers conceive their new role and engage in new training practices given the opportunities afforded by the environment. The data provide insights to how the VLE can support training practices based on reflection, participation and collaboration.

Keywords: Virtual learning environment, computer-mediated communication, online collaboration, self-directed learning and training, advising practices, community of practice.

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has been a cornerstone of language learning policy in Europe for the last forty years. Although little is said about computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the main publications which contributed to building the paradigm in Europe, there are close relationships between learner autonomy and technology, as highlighted by Blin (2005) – in part due to the still “growing role of technology in education” (Benson & Voller, 1997: 6) in general, but also because technology provides a favourable context within which autonomy (mainly understood as independent learning) can be promoted and supported (Warschauer, 1996; Benson, 1998). The development can be characterized in two stages. Firstly, the 1990s were characterized by the development of resource centres promoting learner autonomy through the use of a variety of technologies embedded into the physical learning space where resources and contents were previously chosen by the educational institution (technologies were seen as learning resources). The 2000s offered new learning possibilities, via the Internet with its abundant supply of resources, and by implementing Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) (e.g. ELE for Reinders, 2006; VELA for Toogood, 2006). Internet and VLE multiplied the possibilities of self-access to resources but also added new complications as they require specific e-literacy abilities (technologies as a framework for learning). Nevertheless, the context these technologies afforded to learner autonomy has also helped to hide the challenges and issues by overestimating the capacity of technologies (e.g. free navigation, flexible use, etc.) to develop learner autonomy as pointed by several researchers (e.g. Demaizière & Foucher, 1998; Boulton, 2006). Some of these challenges from the last twenty years are still relevant today: access or excess of online resources (Barbot, 1998), autonomy as the *possibility* to learn vs autonomy as the *capacity* to learn via detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (Little, 1991), the curation of online resources as a key element to develop learner autonomy through the competence of selecting (Cembalo, 1995), isolation vs collaboration to enhance autonomy (Eneau & Develotte, 2012), to cite but a few.

From this general context, the article describes the rationale for pedagogical, technological and organizational choices in the design of a web-based and open virtual learning environment (VLE) promoting and sustaining self-directed language learning. Based on the CRAPEL's research on learner autonomy and according to Holec's definitions (1979, 1988), we designed a global VLE whose purpose is to bring together researchers on language learning autonomy (LLA), experienced or less-experienced teachers in self-directed learning and advising, and experienced or less-experienced learners in self-directed learning. We argue that in order to promote effective interaction through VLE for enhancing the comprehension of self-directed learning, the VLE design should privilege new hierarchies and relationships based on the Web2.0 learning philosophy (social networking, knowledge and exchange of resources, symmetrical relationships, collaboration, etc.). Moreover, previous work has shown how much the availability of human support and being a member of a learning community are crucial to successful self-access language learning (Reinders, 2006; Eneau & Develotte, 2012).

The paper provides a detailed description of the design and the implementation of the VLE and its evaluation. The study draws on a body of information gathered as part of a two-week online test session for seven professional advisers interested in developing their abilities to advise language learners in resources centres. The adviser training format is based on the CRAPEL's experience of face-to-face (F2F) adviser training (Bailly, 1995). It allows a blend of various professional cultures and viewpoints about advising practices, perceived as crucial to enhance reflection upon and transformation of practices. The data consist of information collected from pre- and post-questionnaires

and from activity tracks (logs), as well as from analysis of the discourses that participants exchanged inside the peer forum. They help trace the evolution of the training activity of each participant in the VLE and also provide insights into the capacity of the VLE to support training practices based on reflection, participation and collaboration. The results outline the interest of such environment for adviser training and shed new light on the crucial notion of "community of practice" (CoP) for professional development.

2. Theoretical framework and research context

2.1. Learner autonomy and self-directed learning: from institutional settings to the Internet

Learner autonomy in language learning has been studied in the field of research on self-directed learning for over 40 years and is generally understood in terms of both freedom and control. Firstly, learners need some kind of freedom to use their autonomy, so autonomy is in some way linked to syllabus and institutional setting. Nowadays, this point of view is undergoing further developments and analysis under the concept of openness, highlighting the extent to which learners, or trainees, can make decisions about their own learning (Moore, 1997; Jézégou, 2002, 2010). Secondly, autonomy has been defined as a capacity to take control over the learning process, as learners may or may not be able to learn independently and might need to learn how to learn and to be supported in their learning process.

Self-directed learning is a specific way of learning which can be supported, designed and organized by institutions who decide to promote learner autonomy. One of its manifestations is the self-access centre (SAC) (Gardner & Miller 1999), where learners can learn by themselves using a range of resources and different kinds of help. Since the 90s, such centres have spread all over the world, especially in universities and now, along with the development of computer technologies (ICT), interest for learner autonomy has also spread towards online learning environments (Pemberton et al., 2009; Toogood et al., 2004). Today the Internet addresses new questions about learner autonomy in language learning as it provides a context where affordances for language learning are hugely increased. Never before have language learning resources and opportunities to communicate in a L2 been so easily accessible. But learners' ability to successfully use the Internet to learn by themselves is still a delicate issue. They might have the opportunity, the possibility and the freedom to do so, but what about control?

Control in learning refers to the learners' responsibility for their own learning, which means that they take charge of defining their own learning goals and choosing relevant resources and methods both for learning and assessment, as well as having to manage their learning space and time. In order to take on those responsibilities, some learners need a certain kind of meta-cognitive awareness oriented towards language learning, and specific meta-skills such as: the capacity to reflect critically on their learning process and on themselves in the role of learner (including acts, attitudes, habits, behaviour); the capacity to adjust to learning situations (by negotiation with the environment and with themselves), and to deal with their feelings, especially negative ones such shame, fear, frustration, anger, etc. (Gremmo, 1995a). One way to support self-directed learning and to enhance metacognitive awareness of language learning, besides designing specific learning environments dedicated to self-directed learning, is through providing specific human help.

2.2. Teacher training 3 Cs: congruence, community of practice, conversation

Advising is a specific teaching role especially designed to help learners deal with their own learning, and understand their learning experience and themselves as learners. To

do so, advisers help learners with all the questions and obstacles they might encounter. According to Ciekanski (2005), they:

- help learners to sustain their language learning project;
- help them find the most effective way of learning within a variety of learning resources and in particular learning environments;
- support development of awareness of their language learning.

Advising is based on reflection on practices, negotiation of meanings and values, and adaptation to the learner's objectives. SACs or other self-directed learning systems often feature one-to-one discussions with an adviser. These discussions or "advising sessions" have been described as symmetrical interactional relationships (Gremmo, 1995b), and as a space for co-construction of knowledge and action, a transitory space for learners to build their autonomy with the help, advice and close attention from the adviser. As Mozzon-McPherson notes, in terms of skills and knowledge, advisers need a "strong conceptual and methodological knowledge" about language learning and acquisition, but also "active listening skills", as "dialogue is a key pedagogic tool of advising" (2007: 76-77).

As advising skills are rather different from the ones needed by teachers, whose role is to organize learning rather than support it in a very different kind of pedagogical situation based on a different distribution of roles, it is important to design specific content and training modalities to train advisers. Previous research has established the importance of congruence between the content of the teacher training and the design of teacher training environments, especially in online environments (e.g. Comas-Quinn, 2012). As far as self-directed learning is concerned, congruence between content and environment entails designing a training environment and training resources which enable teachers to become advisers by practicing self-directed learning or advising. This is why the training session organised for our research follows the self-directed learning principles described above: trainees work on their own professional or personal computer in the workplace or at home; there is an alternation between individual self-training phases, moments of reflection upon their own practices and communication about that reflection to others. In congruence with these principles, the reflective dimension is at the heart of our pedagogical tenets.

As self-directed learning is still an innovation in most educational institutions (at least in France), advising can be considered as a new professional role and identity that teachers may want or will have to assume. Training practices should focus on knowledge and skills development as well as professional transformation. The acquisition of this new identity is likely to be favoured by interactions with other advisers inside a community of practice that Wenger has defined as "the social fabric of learning" (1989: 251). For Wenger (1989: 214):

A community of practice is a living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation. When these conditions are in place, communities of practice are a privileged locus for the acquisition of knowledge.

Thus interaction through conversation with other members of one community, whether from the core or its periphery, can lead to acquisition of skills and knowledge in line with various learning theories in the constructivism paradigm which assume that learners learn by restructuring their experience and constructing knowledge, and not by having the teacher's knowledge transferred to them: the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), the activity theory (Leontiev, 1978) and the scaffolding theory (Bruner, 1996). This has implications for the design of training environments as they should allow space and time for dialogue amongst peers or with experts.

The general design of our training methodology draws on these theoretical assumptions about learning: congruence between the content and the form of the training, learning by conversation and communities of practices as a locus for learning. The training session begins with individual advising sessions where trainees define their training goals with the help of an adviser. Then trainees are invited to visit the website contents to gather the information needed to reach their training goals. Meanwhile, they are invited to communicate via a forum about their own advising practices and training processes, either to ask for support from participants (whether trainers or the other trainees) or to provide support.

2.3. Specificities of the web-based open virtual language learning environment for self-directed learning: the Coalea Project

Coalea is based upon the idea that participants must be able to make their own choices, to reflect on how they learn and to assess their progress. It provides support in a learner-centred approach which fosters self-paced instruction and encourages individual choice: what to learn, where to begin and how to proceed. Such decisions may thus be informed by each learner's own interests and needs. The rich content resources as well as individual support sustained by communication and collaboration with peers and experts are meant to help the users develop meta-cognitive ability and learning awareness.

2.3.1. Aims and approach in the VLE

The global aim of the Coalea (1) project is, as we said above, to promote self-directed language learning through a three-fold VLE dedicated to different participants (language learners, language teachers and LLA researchers) of all levels of experience in self-directed language learning. Coalea was designed to address the question of the evolution of the training of advisers for self-directed learning. Since the 90s, the increasing growth of SAC or hybrid training including self-directed learning has generated needs for adviser training. In the past, adviser training was mainly accomplished in F2F interaction for all the advisers-to-be from a given SAC or institution. Nowadays, (i) it is often economically difficult for one centre to allow the training of their entire staff, and (ii) the staff working in a SAC often includes experienced and less-experienced advisers with different needs in terms of training. Moreover, occasional F2F training often fails to provide support that novice advisers may still need after the training session, once they are actually practicing advising with learners in their SAC. Finally, advising is a situated practice that, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), draws on the experience of encountering and working with language learners in the SAC. To enrich the advisers' repertoire, it is crucial to deal with a variety of learners, advisers and contexts, which can be difficult within a single institution.

The VLE map and contents are specifically designed to respond to the needs of each public.

- The teachers' space provides training possibilities in order to help teachers manage new roles – as advisers or as native speakers – and improve their on-going advising practices.
- The learners' space provides resources, help, advice, opportunities for interaction for language learning and support for learning how to learn. Resources offer the possibility either to complete in-class learning or to facilitate out-of-class learning, at home or in the SAC, addressing different levels of autonomy.
- The LLA researchers' space aims at sharing pre-existent corpora (advising sessions, native speaker / learner interactions), references and research projects, and to create and share new data from the use of the VLE, such as logs and corpora of forum or chat discussions.

These three spaces are interconnected so as to give to participants of various identities the option to consult or create content related to research, teaching or language learning.

The whole VLE project and the interactions between the three spaces are illustrated in figure 1, where the sections and tools already in place for the testing period are colored in grey.

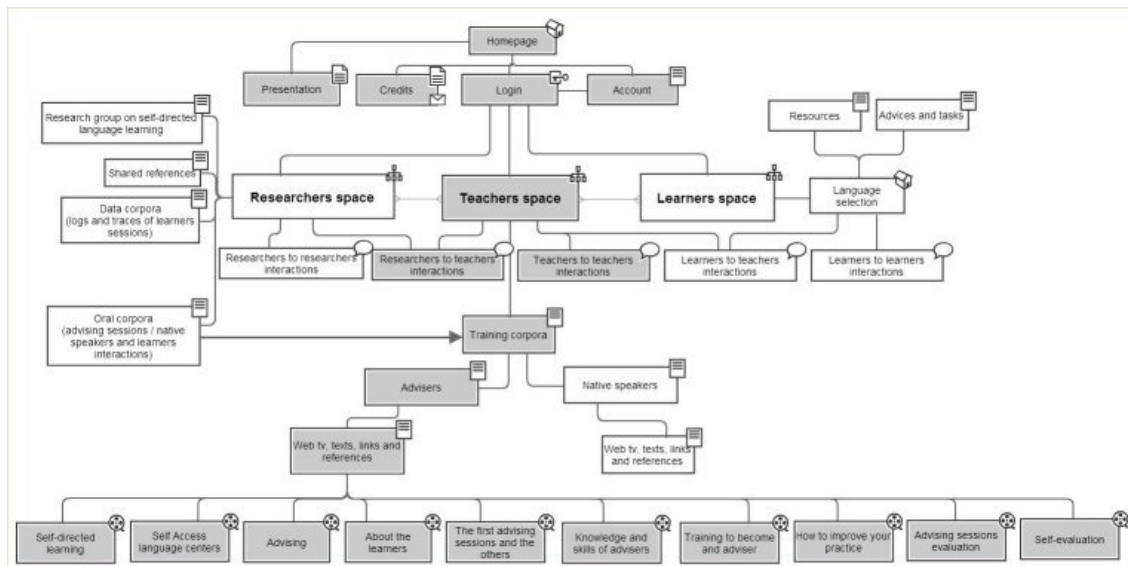


Figure 1. Map of the VLE.

The first step in development concerned the implementation of the space dedicated to teachers willing to develop their advising practices, as described in the following section.

2.3.2. e-advisers' training in Coalea

The space dedicated to teachers provides original resources responding to three different training objectives: How to become a language adviser? How to improve one's advising practices? What place for native speakers in self-directed schemes, and how does their input fit with the advisers' work? The purpose is to propose an open-access companion website which allows regular updates and increased interactivity via a forum enabling online advising. Each participant can tailor the program in advising skills to their individual needs and choose how long, how often, how fast they work with the various resources and activities. The resources and tools created for the website have three objectives. They aim firstly to provide information about the general roles of advisers in a SAC through theoretical material; secondly to illustrate advisers' practices with examples taken from a corpus of authentic advising sessions; and thirdly to support advisers' reflection and awareness of their own practices through a peer forum.

Presenting a new pedagogical role

To help teachers construct knowledge about the new pedagogical role, we created nine different pages, focusing on specific aspects of advising. Those informative sections contain:

- Web-TV resources, specifically created by interviewing experts in the field (researchers and experienced advisers). These videos are scripted and represent almost two hours of content;
- texts and references which broaden and deepen the information given by the videos;
- specific documentation, useful for self-directed learning tutoring (samples of learning diaries, objectives or evaluation grids, case studies, etc.).

All this content can also be accessed via a search engine. This function opens the possibilities for trainees to create a personal pathway which is of utmost importance in order to allow the development of autonomy.



Figure 2. Sample page of the VLE.

Modelling practices and awareness raising

The VLE provides audio and video files of two series of advising sessions with different advisers and learners. Examples of practice are presented in the form of excerpts of five minutes maximum, for a total duration amounting to five hours of recorded data. The excerpts are also searchable by keywords through the abstracts and scripts. This sort of material allows users to draw inspiration from other practices they might find useful and also to construct assessment criteria or standards that can guide them when reflecting on their own advising practice.

Encouraging reflection upon self-practices

It is now widely recognised that learners need support to engage in the process of autonomous learning and transformation of practices. Coalea encourages reflective learning and provides social support for interaction and the sharing of ideas (Eneau & Develotte, 2012; McLoughlin, 2002) as well as feedback through a peer forum for teacher-to-teacher interactions (see Fig. 1). Asynchronous forums are, according to Lamy and Hampel (2007: 107) "the oldest tool in the panoply of CMCL". This "old school" CMC tool however responds to four salient features: (i) it makes low-tech demands on users and can thus be easily adopted by all kinds of participants without technical support; (ii) it allows networked learning through posts exchanged between different individuals, which correspond to the SAC public; (iii) its interaction characteristics fit the communication objective (namely, questions and answers), and posts are displayed to contributors as well as "bystanders" (Goffman, 1981), thus allowing different levels of commitment; (iv) it is a written asynchronous CMC tool particularly well adapted to a refined self-reflection (post length, complexity, formality) also characterized by its reviewability and its revisibility.

In addition, encouraging reflection upon practices may take into account individual dispositions, goals and life histories (Billet & Somerville, 2004). Participants in the training were given three different opportunities for self-reflection:

- at the very beginning of the training, a pre-questionnaire and an online pre-training interview with an adviser helped trainees to set their own goals, diagnose their

- strengths and limitations, and select themes or activities provided by the VLE that seem compatible with their goals;
- during the training, participants were invited to use the forum on a regular basis and to write about their own advising experience;
 - at the end of the experimental training session, participants were proposed to fill in a post-questionnaire for self-assessment of their progress in terms of themes, resources, activities, strategies and skills to develop. Since teachers' self-reflection takes place through a dialogic approach, the peer dialogues also provide opportunities for interaction to negotiate meaning, and possibilities for optimal feedback.

3. Research methodology

3.1. The research experiment context

The training session was launched in 2012 involving a group of seven in-service language teachers already involved in self-access centres or self-directed learning systems. This community of practice involved a heterogeneous network of individual teachers from different institutions (high-schools, universities, life-long learning institutions) and from different countries (France and Mozambique), sharing the same pedagogical goal of disseminating self-directed language learning practices, whether for English (n=4) or French (n=3). The training was provided at distance over a period of two weeks (2). The learning environment functioned as an e-SAC where participants could work on their own and interact with other trainees about advising practices. The self-training was scaffolded by three trainers, all researchers in self-directed language learning, who were also experienced advisers (from five to twenty years of advising practice, mainly in F2F encounters). Trainees were free to use the VLE at their discretion, with no constraint of time or frequency; only the trainers were encouraged to connect to the VLE at least every two days.

The session aimed at professional improvement, exposing trainees to a variety of theoretical and practical resources in order to allow each of them to find their own place in the new pedagogical role. The transformation of pedagogical practices was at the core of the training. In addition, the originality of the training was to provide a specific locus for professional exchanges to share knowledge of advising practices and to reflect upon one's own practices. As in any self-directed training session, there was no pre-programmed syllabus, but rather resources that trainees had to match with their own goals and needs. To do so, the trainees were asked to complete a pre-questionnaire in order to help them analyse their own advising practices before starting the session (see section 2). Again, they were asked at the end of the session to fill in a self-assessment form to review their strengths and weaknesses in advising skills.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from the seven trainees enrolled in the session and the three trainers. They consist of:

- declarative data from individual pre-questionnaires and final self-assessments, included in the training, and from post-questionnaires about the quality of the learning environment and the way it might help them achieve their professional goals;
- tracking of activity within the VLE; as the VLE contents were developed with DRUPAL (3), we used the integrated PIWIK (4) web analysis software to provide logs and statistics about the participants' actions (e.g. downloads or posts to the forum), screen pages consulted and time spent;
- interactions between participants through the different threads of the forum.

The study reports on a preliminary assessment of the usefulness and the affordances of the VLE for teachers willing to develop and improve their advising skills. The analysis was essentially a qualitative process as the aim was to identify individual patterns of

participation in the VLE related to individual training goals, resources and tools used, and changes over time. Focusing first on the forum, the conversational analysis identified themes that emerged in participants' posts related to the type of contributors (trainee or trainer), the type of posts and the type of interaction (in pairs or in group). In addition, to study the forum interaction, we used Walther's (1996) typology and the discourse functions which Sotillo (2000: 84) adopted to explore synchronous and asynchronous written communication, which she defines as "categories of behaviour in electronic discourse, such as requests, responses, apologies, greetings, complaints and reprimands". For the analysis of social interaction and negotiation of meaning, we also looked at the tensions that might emerge as teachers conceive their new educational role and engage in new training practices.

4. Improving advising practices through Coalea

For the purposes of this article, we focus on the use teachers made of the resources and tools available in the environment to improve their advising practices. We concentrate on the affordances of the VLE related to the setting of individual learning in a shared learning environment and to the support that was provided, in particular via the peer forum. To achieve these aims, we analysed each individual's motivations, participation patterns, evaluation of the VLE, and the nature of learning through social interaction on the forum.

4.1. The trainees' background and objectives

One of the specificities of Coalea as an e-SAC for autonomous learning is to allow the achievement of a variety of learning goals through the use of one single environment.

The volunteer participants varied in age (30 to 50 years old), sex (five women and two men), target language (English or French as a foreign language) and professional status (language teacher or language adviser). The trainees were particularly interested in improving their advising skills and in promoting autonomous learning in their professional environment. The session involved trainees with an experience in advising from two to twenty years and who were still feeling a lack of competence while advising. They were working or had worked as language learning advisers in different institutional settings (university, private language learning centre, high-school) in France or in foreign countries, following different advising modalities. All had followed previous F2F training sessions for autonomous learning and advising based on the CRAPEL methodological principles. Some of them were colleagues of the same institution. The majority of them had previous experience in distance learning, whether as a teacher or as a learner. They all had already developed ICT and CMC skills through their daily practices in an ICT-rich learning environment (for a further description of ICT-rich self-directed learning environments, see Ismaïl & Bailly (2011) and Carette et al. (2011)). In short, the participants may be seen as advanced trainees in learner advising who were familiar with ICT or online learning. In addition, the post-questionnaire shows that they shared similar visions on language, language learning and autonomous learning. However, as shown in Table 2, they had different training goals: to improve the social adviser-learner relationship in the advising sessions, methodological support, advising skills, and out-of-class language learning practices, among others.

4.2. Global participation outcomes

The analysis of the users' logs shows the number of connections, the number and the type of actions on the VLE per screen page (e.g. the page displayed, resources downloaded or posts to the forum) and the total amount of time spent whether on the VLE or on each page per participant, whether trainees and trainers. As displayed in Table 1, in which minimum and maximum values per column are outlined in bold, for all participants (trainees and trainers), global working time over the two weeks amounts to 53 hours. The trainees (L1 to L7) spent a total of about 26 hours (from 30 minutes for L1 to 11 hours for L7) in the VLE, the three trainers (T1 to T3) about 27 hours (from 8 hours for T1 to 10 hours for T3); that is, as much time as the seven trainees did. The number of actions per connection shows that the trainees adopted similar behaviours as language learners in a SAC browsing many resources or focusing on one or two resources related to their training objectives. The trainers acted as moderators (checking new messages on the forum, participation statistics, etc.). Time spent by action shows occasional intervention from 1 to 3 minutes.

	Participant	Total time (in mins.)	Number of connections	Number of actions	Average (action per connection)	Average (mins. per action)
Trainees	L1	30	2	26	13	1.2
	L2	60	10	26	2.6	2.3
	L3	73	10	43	4.3	1.7
	L4	154	4	51	12.8	3
	L5	202	20	94	4.7	2.1
	L6	353	13	213	16.4	1.6
	L7	660	37	314	8.5	2.1
	Average	219	14	109	9	2
Trainers	T1	465	23	400	17.4	1.2
	T2	588	36	614	17	1
	T3	620	18	311	17.3	2
	Average	558	26	442	17.2	1.4

Table 1. Global use of the VLE by trainers and trainees.

The forum was used three and a half times more than the other training contents (resources, videos, articles, etc.), which highlights a strong preference for collaborative activities like the forum over reading information or watching or listening activities.

The three trainers used the VLE almost as much as the seven in-training advisers, which would make the replication of this model very costly for public institutions (trainers spent twice as much time on the website as trainees). But this figure has to be treated with caution as it may have been affected by the strong implication of the trainers who

are also the creators of the web site. Part of the time they spent on the platform may not have been linked to their actions as trainers but rather as researchers and developers. Once the website development is stabilised, it will become possible to assess trainers' activity more accurately.

Finally, information gathered through the PIWIK software shows that participants spent from thirty minutes to twelve hours on the website, revealing different degrees of involvement in the training session. The triangulation of these data with the analysis of pre- and post-questionnaires and the analysis of forum use suggests several reasons for such differences. It appears that the trainees who spent most time on the website were also advisers in practice at their SAC at the period when the training session took place. Those who spent the least time on the website were on holiday and did not have on-going encounters with learners at that time. One of the least involved trainees (L2) was also a teacher who does not work in a SAC, unlike all the other trainees.

4.3. Satisfaction outcomes

Post-questionnaires reveal the trainees' attitudes towards the VLE at the end of the training session. The first thing to notice is that the trainees positively assessed the global relevance of the environment and declared they would all go on using it after the training period expired. Four of them explicitly justified this answer by pointing out their interest in the forum, explaining they would like to pursue the conversations they had started, or use it when faced with a new question or problem in their everyday practice. The post-questionnaire also revealed that the trainees overall found the VLE and the experience interesting and useful. They rated highly positively the forum section, as both useful and interesting. However, two sections of the website were assessed as less relevant than others: the descriptive sections of self-directed learning and self-access language centres (see Figure3). This result reflects the type of participant, globally already well-informed about self-directed learning and supportive of it. For the same reason, they evaluated as highly relevant the sections dealing the practical topics ("advisers' knowledge and skills", "evaluation of advising sessions", "self-evaluation" and "resources"), which is also in line with the trainees' objectives elicited in the pre-questionnaire and the pre-training interview. Because the trainees were already advanced advisers, they were more interested in finding ways to improve their practices than in discovering afresh the paradigm of self-directed learning theory.

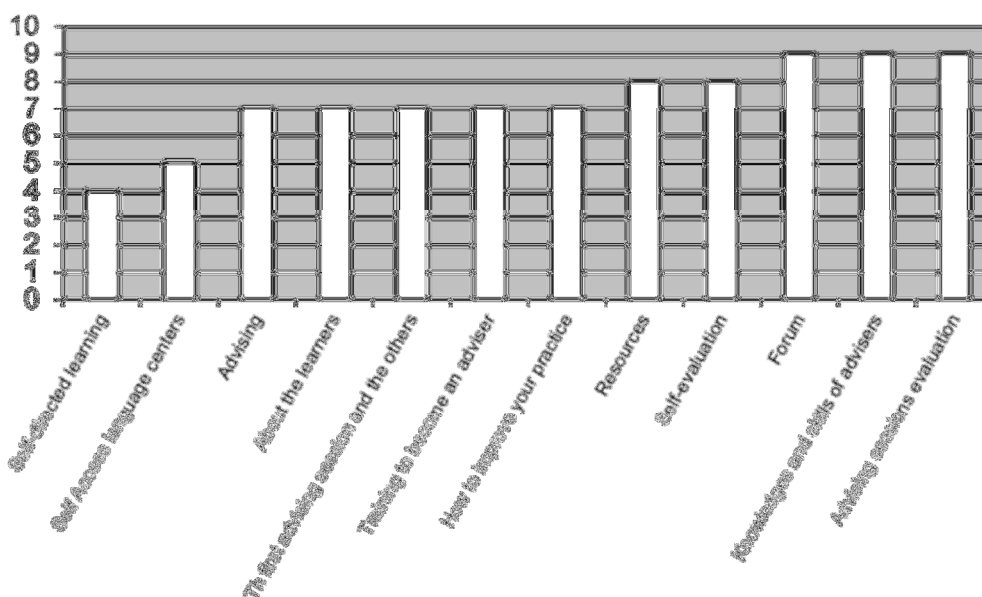


Figure 3. Panel evaluation of relevance of the VLE contents.

4.4. Individual learning paths

One of our assumptions while designing the VLE was that the modular organization of the contents in the website would favor individual paths, depending on the training objectives each participant had fixed. Table 2 synthesizes the trainees' objectives and the types of webpages consulted (forum webpages or content webpages). For each trainee, we also checked the nature of the content webpages visited to determine whether it concerned a variety of subjects or a specific one, and to what extent it matched with individual objectives.

Trainees	Stated objectives	Nature and frequency of web pages visited (forum or content)
L1	Reflecting on one specific methodological question (learner's efficacy and advising).	Mainly forum pages.
L2	Correcting practices, improving efficacy of the sessions on one specific methodological question (learners with specific language purposes).	Almost exclusively forum pages.
L3	Self-evaluation and improvement of advising practices.	Mainly content pages, focused on his objective.
L4	Reflecting on two specific problems linked to her practice (beginners, follow-up of students).	Both forum and content pages.
L5	Developing knowledge about language learning and advising.	Both forum and content pages, with a majority of forum pages.
L6	Correcting practices.	First content pages then only forum pages.
L7	Reflecting on a specific methodological question (learner's evaluation).	Both forum and content pages, with a large majority of forum pages.

Table 2. Trainees' objectives related to preferred webpages (forum or content).

As Table 2 shows, the trainees' objectives are varied and correspond to four types: (i) reflecting on practice, (ii) problems or methodological questions, (iii) self-evaluation, (iv) improving practice or development of knowledge.

A closer look at the kind of actions made by the trainees reveals that only L4 used the forum only once, despite a total of 4 connections and 51 actions (see Table 1). Most trainees shared a similar behaviour during their exploring period of the VLE, choosing the content pages following the vertical order of the list proposed on the home page of the VLE. However, some of them, like L3 for instance, specifically chose to visit content pages related to their training objectives, adopting a more self-directed learning behaviour. It is interesting to note that L3 scarcely participated in the forum, focusing on his own objectives in a relatively independent way from the rest of the trainees. Then, for the majority of trainees, subsequent visits were exclusively dedicated to the forum. L7 is the only one who went on using content webpages throughout her training, but still substantially less than forum pages. Figure 4 displays how she navigated the VLE, taking into account the length of her connection time (in minutes), according to the type of page visited (forum pages appear in white and content pages in grey).

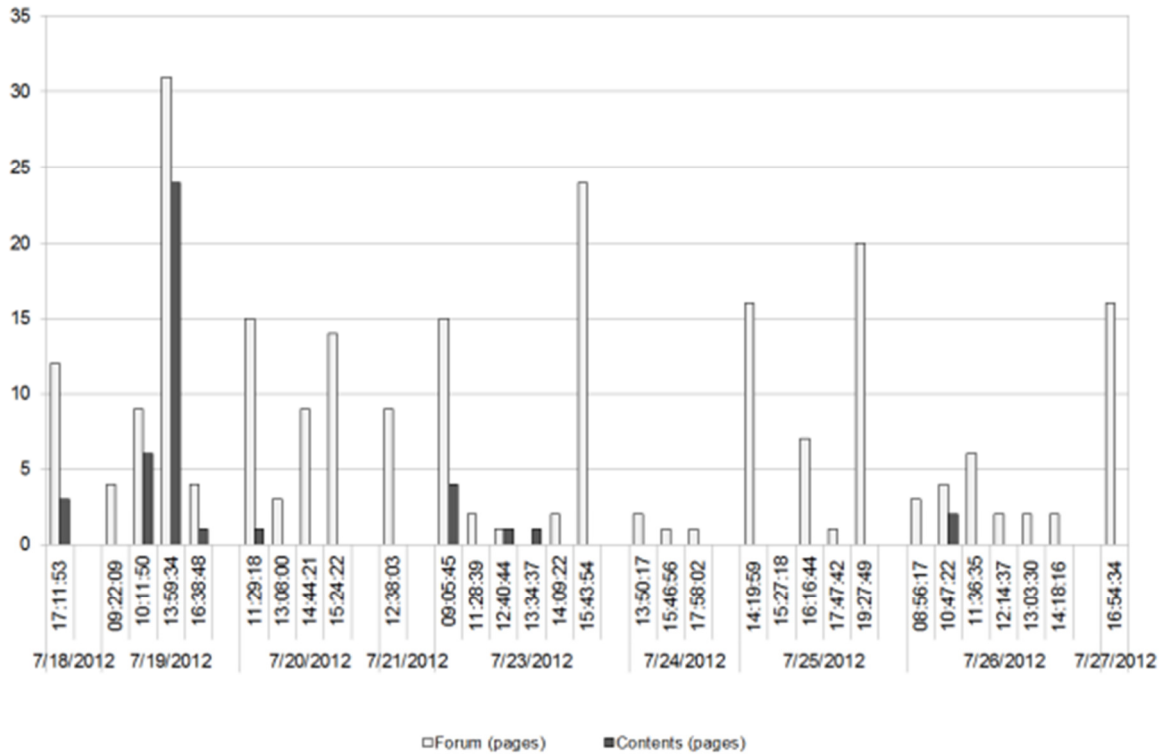


Figure 4. L7's training pathway: forum and content pages consultation.

L7 consulted few content pages (9 connections out of 38), compared to the frequency she used the forum (29 out of 38), but went on consulting them even after her exploratory period at the beginning of the training.

Even though the design of the VLE limited the possibilities for each trainee to build a personal learning path, traces of individual interests and preferences were observed. This tends to indicate a possible personal ownership of the learning environment which may lead to more autonomous learning uses.

4.5. Peer forum as social fabric of learning

This section analyses the use of the discussion forum by trainees and trainers and the nature of their participation so as to characterize the nature of learning and support through this specific CMC tool. Much has already been written about forums. Our approach is slightly different as we will analyse interactions according to the trainees' professional context.

The forum was composed of fourteen threads; the topics corresponding to the previous learning objectives defined by the trainees at the beginning of the training (see Table 2). The participants were free to participate in a thread according to their needs and interests. The forum comprised two main tasks: production and support for others. It also included a convergence task which was to support the development by trainees of a shared understanding of advising practices. Eighty messages were posted during the two-week session by eight active contributors out of the ten participants initially involved in the experiment (the two others mostly behaved as bystanders). The threads developed professional topics such as dealing with one's own emotions or the learners' emotions, how to advise beginners, how to advise during short advising sessions, or how to help learners evaluate their learning. More than 71% of threads show explicit elements of dialogue between participants (names of the trainees are mentioned, citations from previous posts, answers to previous posts, comments on previous posts, etc.). The forum is characterized by a high degree of re-processability which underlines

an improved understanding between contributors, probably due to the short duration of the session which created conditions for high grounding (Clark & Brennan, 1991). Forum discussions attest to an efficient one-to-many communication as well as many-to-many communication. The small number of participants renders coherence easy to maintain, without the visible intervention of a moderator, despite of the large number of threads.

One of the particularities of the forum is that the topic choice clearly shows that participation was content-centred rather than relation-centred (Walther, 1996). There is no friendship-driven exchange here, in contrast to previous studies on pedagogical communication through forums (e.g. Mangenot & Célik, 2004). All participants posted messages in two main domains: defining advising practices and sharing experience. The messages respond to two main functions: to express and disseminate opinions and attitudes on practices, and to provide testimony of advising practices. As far as participation distribution is concerned, 48% of messages were posted by the three trainers whereas 52 % were by five trainees, so the forum may be characterized as a "peer forum":

- less than 1% of the posts were exclusively addressed to the trainers;
- the study of the forms of address highlights symmetrical communicative relationships between participants;
- participants asked for practical rather than theoretical exchanges; no participant answered messages with a strong theoretical orientation, whether they were posted by trainers or by trainees.

The exchange patterns on the forum (mostly question and answer patterns) support the nature of a vicarious learning (Light & Light, 1999). As Light and Light point out, the forum may be seen as a locus for (support-oriented) cooperation more than competition. An important element in peer feedback is that it provides the trainees with assessment criteria or standards that can guide them when examining each other's work.

To conclude, the analysis of the forum exchanges compared against the final self-evaluation report highlights three aspects of how learning via the peer forum was perceived by the trainees:

- it helped them to define and negotiate their new educational role; for example, L7 wrote about the legitimacy of her practices in regards to the definition of the role of adviser;
- they valued sharing experiences as an effective training modality; L2 felt confident and empowered in his new role after having compared his advising practices with those of his peers;
- they valued the social and reflective dimension of the forum so as to sustain both self-reflective practices and help them engage in expanded learning opportunities; L4, who had 20 years of advising experience, felt the forum fulfilled what she still considered as lack of competence in her advising practice, and especially appreciated the way the forum made her explore new issues and opportunities.

5. Discussion and future prospects

Despite certain limitations, in particular due to the choice of participants (all were experienced advisers already familiar with self-directed learning) which sheds little light on the relevance of the pedagogical proposals for beginners, this study led us to several conclusions and many directions for the improvement of Coalea. As Kato (2012) notes, little is known about the specificities of training advanced advisers, despite growing demand. The originality of our study is to work with advisers with varying degrees of experience and from a variety of advising schemes in terms of public, language, setting and country. Our findings have highlighted some of the needs and particularities of

advanced advisers, and pinpoint two main affordances: (i) Coalea allows and supports individual learning paths; (ii) Coalea promotes goal-directed and collaborative action between experts and less-experts, based on the learning dynamic of the CoP.

In short, the results show that participants may work autonomously, coming up with their own objectives and personal learning paths through the various situations offered by the environment. The resources selected may suit diverse degrees of experience. In addition, the online sociability allowed by the forum may answer a specific demand for feedback on practices. Even if the quantitative analysis of each participant's interaction with the environment and with the other participants shows that there is still a certain "danger" of trainers dominating the whole procedure, their behaviour had no incidence on the way trainees perceived the role of the three trainers: they saw them as one kind of support amongst others. Trainees are eager not so much to be "corrected" as to share and construct norms and rules of advising practices through their own testimonies. Advising practice is thus perceived as an on-going transformative process which concerns skills and knowledge (the trainees noted the importance of enriching their repertoire by being confronted with a variety of situations and learners, even through the discourses of others; e.g. L4), as well as role and identity. In line with these conclusions, Brockbank and McGill (2006) mention that self-reflection is not enough to promote transformatory learning, as learning is limited to the insight of individuals, and observing oneself critically is difficult. Dialogue with others offers opportunities to restructure one's established assumptions and beliefs which can lead to further professional development.

The notion of transformatory learning puts the emphasis on the relevance of the CoP as a framework to enrich and improve professional practices. The originality of our study is to focus on a group of participants who share the same vision of language learning and autonomy but who work on diverse settings. Certainly, because the trainees were experienced advisers who had already developed a strong sense of belonging to the professional community of advisers, they succeeded in recognizing themselves as peers in a very short period of time (two weeks). However, as Herring (2005) remarks, an online group is not *de facto* a community. It is interesting to note that the forum threads helped trainees develop key incidents from previous practice which led them to negotiate and articulate norms and rules that they perceived as good conditions for advising. Thus some features of Wenger's (1998) definition of the CoP are of utmost importance in our study: the *participation* and the *reification* through which identity is formed (Wenger, 1998). For Wenger (1998: 55), participation is: "a process of taking part and also the relations with others that reflect this process. It suggests both action and connection". Interestingly, the cases of L2 and L3 show that they may develop a sense of community despite rare contributions to the forum. Participation does not mean doing the same tasks, but rather participating in a common space. For them, having access to a specific environment dedicated to advisers strengthens their feeling of belonging to this professional community. Second, the process of reification –defined as "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'" (Wenger, 1998: 58)– casts light on the specific role played by the peer forum during the training. The forum allows trainees to be connected to each other, at their discretion. It offers the opportunity for each to (re)define what advising is and what being an adviser means through the production of thoughts and the story of their experience so as to develop and promote shared knowledge (as opposed to 'common knowledge') issuing from the personal experiences that trainees may transfer to new situations (Barbier, 2000).

This exploratory study also raises a certain number of new practical questions, especially in terms of further technical developments. Because of the high interest for

testimonies, we intend to transform the data from the forum into resources for future training. Further technical improvements are under development: embedding language learning modules created with Telos in Moodle courses would open up possibilities for combining a corpus-based focus to content activities with online collaboration and communication. Synchronous tools such as chat and wiki could also easily be combined in the VLE and enrich the social communication offered by the forum, in addition to other Web 2.0 tools. Networks of researchers in language learning autonomy based on web 2.0 tools already exist. It would be of great interest to adapt them to practitioners and to combine them within a training environment.

This preliminary study shows that Coalea is relevant for in-service advisers. To what extent would it be relevant for beginners and advisers less familiar with the language learning autonomy paradigm? To conclude, we have learned that advisers whose listening skills are crucial in the advising sessions were enthusiastic to share a space where they could be heard, probably to offset the often lonely exercise of advising practices. One again, our study highlights the importance of the role of others in the process of autonomy development.

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[2] The usual length of the advising sessions provided by the CRAPEL varies from 3 days to 2 weeks according to the needs and means.

[3] <http://drupal.org>

[4] <http://fr.piwik.org>

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