

Student Engagement in Online Learning

Nathalie Ticheler

Faculty of Humanities, Arts, Languages and Education
London Metropolitan University

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Background Information

Various organisations such as the National Centre for Languages (CILT) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), have reported on the precarious situation of Modern Foreign Languages in Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom, including the Worton's report (2009) commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). At the same time, several initiatives have been launched at national level for Languages, such as "Routes into Languages" to promote the study of languages in HE and e-learning, such as the ten-year e-learning strategy launched in 2005, and revised in 2009, by HEFCE. Higher Education Institutions are seen to make an ever-increasing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are an important feature of these developments. In addition, they operate in a context where the students' experience is placed high on the agenda, and their feedback actively sought.

The Open Language Programme (OLP) at London Metropolitan University operates in this context, by offering its students a package of three hours of lessons each week for twelve weeks per semester, combined with the use of VLE, known locally as "Weblearn". The programme aims to develop all the language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing - and, at beginners' level, includes a range of functional topics such as directions, hotel bookings or shopping, combined with the acquisition of key vocabulary and grammar. In line with a blended learning approach, Weblearn is intended for use in and out of class both by lecturers and students. For French for beginners and post-beginners on the OLP, materials are organised in folders and include "module handbook and weekly programme", "what we do in class", "to do after class", "examinations", "grammar", "pronunciation", "materials to download", "for fun" and "language centre". Communication tools such as the email function, online announcements and discussions are also exploited with various degrees of intensity by lecturers.

Typical activities in class may include the presentation of new vocabulary or grammar by lecturers using materials previously uploaded on Weblearn, the use of video clips to introduce a new topic or the consultation of course documentation such as the module booklet, the weekly syllabus or details of assessment. Students can access whenever they want all the folders and materials placed on Weblearn, according to their own preferences. More specifically, they are asked to access a dedicated homework folder to complete a range of web-based activities designed to reinforce language skills such as listening, reading or writing, revise language points covered in class or prepare activities for the following week.

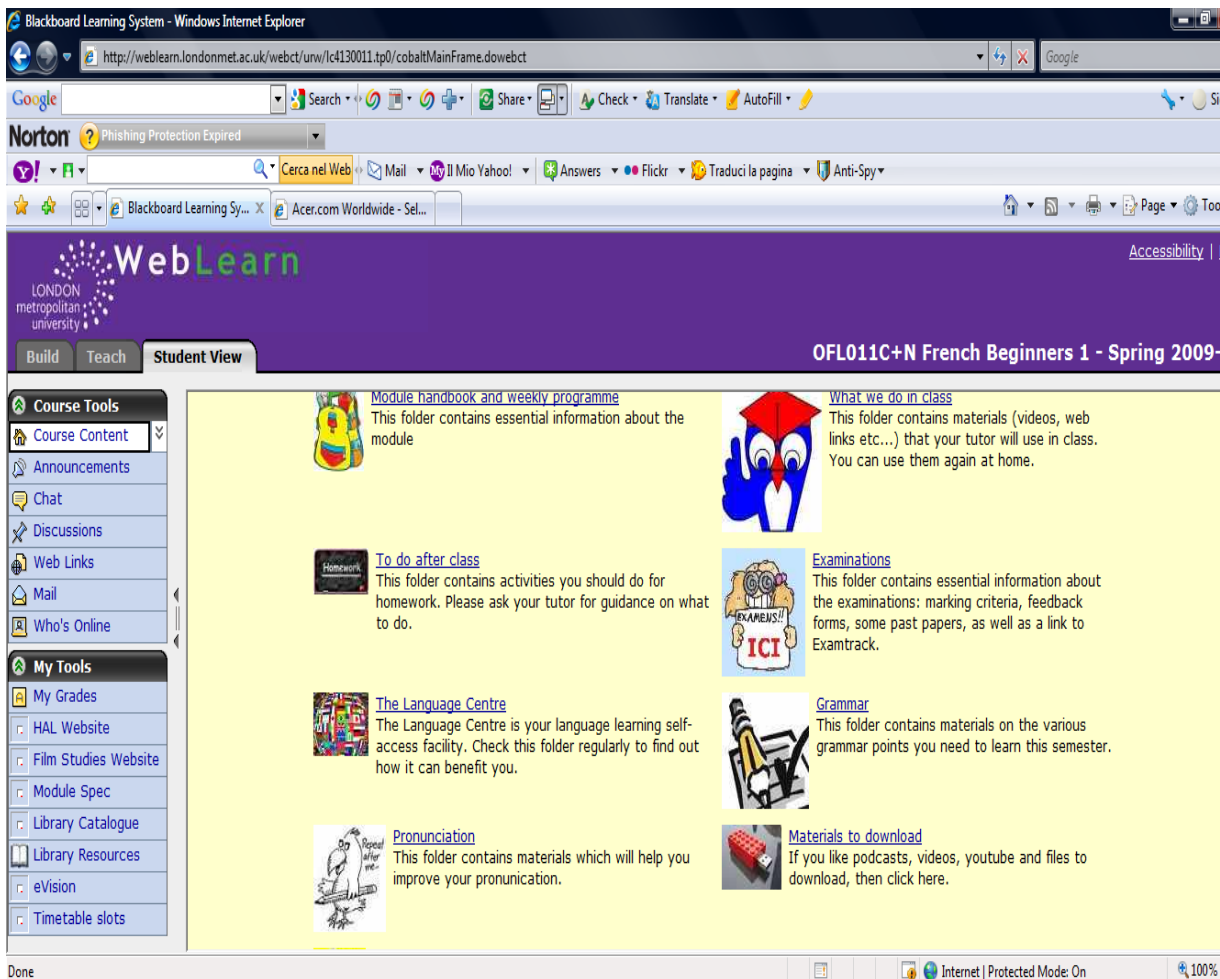


Figure 1: screenshot of Weblearn home page for French beginners

All groups are taught in classrooms with multimedia facilities, which means that all the lecturers have access to Weblearn in lesson time. When data was collected for the survey conducted in this study, all the lecturers teaching French for beginners and post-beginners had designer access rights to Weblearn, which allowed them to use, add to and modify the contents. In addition, students have access to a self-study Language Centre with computer facilities. Both French modules targeted for this study, beginners and post-beginners, follow the same approach regarding Weblearn in terms of use, layout and contents.

Research rationale and objective

OLP students regularly fill in standard university end-of-module questionnaires but these only contain a limited number of questions about Weblearn. Data from these questionnaires indicated that, during the academic year 2009/2010, most beginners (88.2%) and post-beginners (71%) of French viewed Weblearn positively. However, the data contained very little information on how students used Weblearn and what their preferences were.

The survey reported here sought to obtain feedback from beginners and post-beginners specifically about the Weblearn component of their French module, and to gain a greater insight into their likes and dislikes. The objective was to answer the following questions:

- How do beginners and post-beginners of French experience Weblearn?
- Does the students' level, beginners or post-beginners, bear any significance on their experience of Weblearn?
- Does students' status, such as undergraduates, post-graduates or externals, bear any significance on their experience of Weblearn?
- What is the lecturers' role and impact on students' experience?

This article presents preliminary findings of the survey, focusing on beginners and post-beginners, the two groups which participated in the study, as well as the role to be played by lecturers in the necessary normalisation of Weblearn.

Methodology

The study focused on students' perspective and their own accounts of their very own lived experiences regarding Weblearn in connection with the self-study element of their module, from a phenomenological perspective (Creswell 2003:15 ; Creswell 2007:57 ; Crotty 2003:83 ; Creswell & Plano-Clark 2007:39), based on combined interpretive and post-positivist paradigms and data collection tools which lent themselves to a qualitative and quantitative treatment of data.

“Phenomenological research [is an approach] in which the researcher identifies the ‘essence’ of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Understanding the lived experiences marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method.”
(Creswell 2003:15)

It was necessary to obtain a mix of student-generated data, both of a qualitative and quantitative nature, and therefore the following data collection tools were administered: standard university end-of-module questionnaires, as a preliminary source of data, student self-completion questionnaires with open and closed

questions in order to obtain behavioural and attitudinal data, as well as follow-up interviews with open questions to obtain more data on the reasons behind students' reported attitude and behaviour.

In the initial phase of the survey, all the end-of-module questionnaires available (51 from beginners and 32 from post-beginners) were examined and this provided a useful, albeit limited, source of preliminary data, which indicated that most students were positive towards Weblearn and thought it was useful.

The second phase involved the distribution of the self-completion questionnaire (available on <http://tinyurl.com/3adu7xw>). Every student had an equal chance of being included in the sample, by being present at the time of the data collection and by agreeing to participate, in agreement with the phenomenological perspective of the survey. In total, 48 beginners and 48 post-beginners returned the Weblearn questionnaire, with a response rate of 48.48% among beginners and 82.76% among post-beginners, based on evision records. The questionnaire was composed of 3 sections: subject descriptors, closed and open questions about students' use of Weblearn, closed and open questions about their attitude towards Weblearn.

In the last phase, 12 students initially volunteered to take part in follow-up interviews. Six interviews finally took place with beginners and post-beginners in equal proportions (using the interview schedule available on <http://tinyurl.com/2v7jmn>). These interviews served two purposes: they were used as a tool for triangulation of methods and they were particularly useful to gather extra information, especially regarding the reasons behind attitudes and behaviours initially reported in the questionnaire. In addition, interviewees themselves described the activity as useful and interesting, stressing that it had contributed positively to their language learning experience.

Preliminary findings

Classes run by the OLP include undergraduate and post-graduate students from all Faculties, as well as external students. Beginners and post-beginners were present in equal proportions. Overall, students were positive about Weblearn and felt confident about their ability to use it for French (over 88%).

Beginners saw the VLE as user-friendly, with many relevant resources, which they said impacted positively on their learning. They appreciated having self-contained materials, always available on the internet, to use as they wished. Comments included:

“Easy to use and makes it possible to revise any time”

“24/7 access anywhere....the information is always there”

They also mentioned its entertaining and motivational value, as follows:

“Feels more like playing than studying”

“Activities are very entertaining and useful”

Their previous experience of Weblearn in other modules appeared to contribute positively to French. No student reported any confusion or cause for dissatisfaction owing to potentially different practices regarding Weblearn in previous years of study in their own programmes or in other subjects.

“I am in my final year at uni so I know Weblearn perfectly”

“My IT skills are good so it helps”

Overall, post-beginners agreed with beginners on issues such as the user-friendliness, usefulness and flexibility of use, as well as the benefits of previous experience. They added that Weblearn was conducive to independent learning, explaining that “it is easy to use so I can learn a lot in a short space” or “I can manage my own learning....and it is more relaxing and less boring than reading a book”. However, the lack of time was an issue for them, as expressed by an external student: “I don’t think there is anything that would make me spend longer on Weblearn because....you know ... your life is busy and you cannot....even if you make it fantastic, with lots of graphics, you know...you are not going to spend longer there”.

A limited number of participants belonging to both levels reported alternative learning preferences, with comments such as:

“I think that Weblearn contributes to my progress after the book, it is the second mode of study for me”

“I prefer books....You can use them on public transport and study....but you can’t use the internet everywhere”

Despite their positive attitude, students appeared to dedicate less time than expected to Weblearn, with over one half of participants spending less than 2 hours per week on the VLE. Lack of time and other commitments were among issues raised by participants.

Towards a greater normalisation of Weblearn

Statistical tests conducted for this survey highlighted significant connections between lecturers and the students' overall experience of the VLE, between lecturers and the time spent on Weblearn, as well as between lecturers and students' reported satisfaction with the contents.

Regarding communication tools, these seemed to be neglected by students, as only a quarter of them had used any blogs on Weblearn and only one third consulted the online announcements regularly. Here again, lecturers have a role to play in promoting these tools, as significant connections were identified between them and students' participation in blogs, as well as between them and the frequency of consultation of announcements.

Although students declared a potential interest in blogging and announcements, this was coupled with a discernible lack of awareness in this area; only 6 students out of 10 thought that Weblearn was part of the routine in class. Typical comments from participants were as follows:

“online announcements..... I did not even know they were there...”

“Blogs...yes....if I had an incentive... if it is actually part of our work...and the teacher makes it clear what we have to do then...yes”

Only a limited number of participants reported alternative preferences to using the VLE resources, such as speaking to their classmates directly. Most of them appreciated the lecturers' guidance on which materials to use for self-study and how, and the regular use of Weblearn in class.

The integration of taught contents and Weblearn was considered as essential by participants, and this is another area where lecturers should be involved, as explained by students:

“I am quite satisfied with Weblearn, it covers what we do in class and extras”

“I like it because the lecturer uses it all the time in class and tells us what we should do for next time”

“so if the lecturer says in class....do this and that for next week....and actually explains things....then I think it really helps”

Discussion

OLP students had access to Weblearn for two years at the time of the data collection, with an increasing degree of normalisation. Overall, they responded positively and declared they were confident in their ability to use it. However, preliminary findings indicated that students' use of the VLE could be maximised and that they lacked awareness of some functions, especially communication tools. In addition, they welcomed the integration of lectures and self-study or "homework", and also wanted to be guided by their lecturer.

In this context, we take the view that lecturers need to work in tandem with students, show them what to do and ensure that Weblearn and taught contents are fully integrated, leading to a greater normalisation of the VLE. This highlights the importance of *teaching presence* online as well as in the classroom, in order to maximise the students' experience:

"there should be no doubt of the essential role teaching presence plays in integrating the various elements of an educational experience made ever more challenging by the responsibilities of e-learning." (Garrison & Anderson, 2003:66)

Lecturers have a central role to play in students' use of the VLE, both in and out of class, by not only transmitting knowledge, but also by acting as facilitators. This does not mean inventing new pedagogies *per se*, but a shift in pedagogical and learning practices, as explained by Oliver (2006:134):

"The challenge is not to establish new pedagogies for e-learning in the simple sense of coming up with new things to do with learners. Instead, this more complicated picture requires a more conservative approach: finding out what teachers do and why, and then working out how technology can best be used to support that."

Adopting Weblearn as part of the class routine and guiding students every step of the way are steps likely to lead to a greater normalisation among students:

"The key is to embed e-learning in regular learning and teaching activities, to seek feedback from stakeholders at regular intervals and to ensure flexibility of the provision, in hand with careful training." (Ticheler 2009:133)

This can be done in various ways, such as briefing students on the blended nature of the module and organising hands-on demonstrations, focusing not only on the various functions but also on what to do as learners. Giving learning tips as part of the class, showing new materials and ensuring the integration of materials would appear as appropriate steps. In addition, it would seem important to use Weblearn as a preferred tool of communication, with specific reference to these communications in class. Underlying this embedding, Ticheler and Sachdev

(2011:170) point towards socio-constructivist practices and the motivational function of the lecturers' role:

“Clearly, teaching staff need to guide and motivate students to make regular use of resources and materials presented to them.”

Indeed, there is a need for lecturers to integrate this perspective, in a context where digital learning design should facilitate the shift towards learner-focused activities (Laurillard, 2009).

Concluding notes

Preliminary findings of the survey indicate that Weblearn is viewed positively by students, with both beginners and post-beginners welcoming this provision and in particular the integration between taught contents and learning materials available on Weblearn. However, although students displayed a great deal of confidence in their ability to use Weblearn, they also expressed the desire to be guided by their lecturers, in order to boost their experience on the VLE. In this context, the lecturer's role of facilitator regarding language learning also embraces e-learning. Such findings promote the notion that it is essential for lecturers to fully integrate socio-constructivist practices and redefine their role to adapt to ever-changing practices.

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Biographical note

Nathalie Ticheler is currently studying for a professional doctorate in education (EdD) at Greenwich University and her research interests focus on students' experience of Virtual Learning Environments for Modern Foreign Languages in the context of blended learning.

She has taught in a variety of educational settings from primary to Higher Education, including corporate training for major companies and international organisations. She is an experienced e-learning project manager and author of e-learning materials in French, Italian and Spanish. Nathalie is a self-access Language Centre Coordinator on the Open Language Programme at London Metropolitan University, e-learning designer and Senior Lecturer in French. **Email:** n.ticheler@londonmet.ac.uk; **Website :** <http://ticheler.blogspot.com>