

Tailoring the Traditional and Testing the Technological: The Trials and Tribulations of a Tentative Teacher

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Abstract

This paper will look at accessible yet effective ways to integrate technology into traditional teaching approaches in order to promote greater learner autonomy and encourage diversity of materials as well as student-student and student-teacher interaction. This paper hopes to illustrate how even the most technologically tentative teacher can go some way to meeting the needs of the twenty-first century graduate.

Key Words

Moodle, On-line Fora, Screencasting, Facebook, Learner Autonomy

Introduction and Motivation

As a lecturer in the Arts, specialising in French Literature and Language, a subject which tends to be taught in adherence with 'traditional' methods (that is, a combination of old-style lecturing where the teacher acts as the 'sage on the stage' and the students listen passively and take notes rather than interact and the grammar-translation approach to language learning which prioritises rote-learning and deductive application of rules), the idea of introducing technology into my lesson plans seemed, at first, completely misplaced. What could technology bring to my teaching that old style lecturing and working from a textbook could not? Furthermore, given my own 'traditional' educational background and limited exposure to technology during my studies, I was reluctant to move into an area in which I felt out of my depth. At the same time however, I had a sense that a change of some sort needed to be introduced to the 'troubled discipline' (Klapper, 2006) of Foreign Languages, and, in my particular case, French Studies, a subject increasingly at danger in the twenty-first century, where educational authorities and even students seem to favour what they consider more 'economically viable' disciplines such as business and science. As a result, French departments find themselves facing falling student numbers and a fight for survival. Alongside the issue that French, as a subject, was beginning to look 'out-of-date' in the new millennium were a number of other, perhaps more immediate, issues that I had identified over the course of the last few years such as declining student performance and student motivation. The burning question, therefore, was the following: could blending technology with the traditional provide the solution to these problems? This paper hopes to provide 'tentative teachers' of traditional disciplines like myself with a few ideas as to how to introduce technology effectively into the domain of teaching and learning without overwhelming the student or the teacher. For those who come from a discipline where technology already has a strong presence, many of the ideas proposed in this paper may seem obvious, but for those who come from areas where technology has remained in the background of teaching and learning, the possibilities raised here will provide just enough experimentation and innovation to allow teachers and students to move forward without getting lost.

Getting the Project Started

Before suddenly introducing technology into my teaching, which, up until now, had relied mostly on books and lecturing, and devoting time to re-planning my classes, I decided to gather some initial feedback from the students on whether or not they felt this initiative would actually be of any use to them. In the first week of Semester One therefore, I set aside 10 minutes at the end of each lecture/tutorial to ask students to note on a post-it how technology could enhance their learning experience. Every single student across all three undergraduate year groups (first year, second year and final year) felt that blending the technological into their learning experience would be of great benefit. From this brief survey, five main points emerged with regard to how technology could benefit them:

1. In lectures there is no opportunity to discuss – online fora could help with this;
2. Having on line access to lecturers and lecture content would allow them greater flexibility of study;
3. Technology could be used to create revision tools for the exams;
4. Lecturers could make better use of technology for assessment;
5. Technology would help to introduce variety in their learning.

As a result, I set about trying to address these needs by focusing on introducing three key innovations into my teaching practice. These were: Using Moodle to facilitate reflection in large-group environments; Screencasting for enhanced learning; and, 'Facebook' for interactive learning. Of these three ideas, the one that I have worked most on is the use of Moodle for reflective learning. The latter two innovations are projects that I am currently working on this semester, thus the final results are yet to be seen.

In this paper, I intend to illustrate how the blending of these technological tools into traditional delivery can lead to greater learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is understood as the capacity for self-management and the ability to accept responsibility for one's own learning, taking initiative in the executing of learning activities and regularly engaging in a review of one's learning. However, as this paper will illustrate, promoting learner autonomy in no way diminishes the role of the teacher, nor does it entail students working in isolation from one another. On the contrary, where learner autonomy is at play so too is a greater level of student-student and student-teacher interaction (Little, Ridley and Ushioda, 2002).

Using Moodle to facilitate reflection in large groups.

The first of the three initiatives that I will look at in this paper is the use of Moodle to facilitate reflection in large-group situations. The main point of this innovation was to transform an environment that is traditionally passive (from the student perspective) into an active learning situation. Getting students to speak out while in a large lecture hall surrounded by over one hundred peers can indeed prove challenging for a number of reasons. On a practical level, it can be difficult to see or hear who is talking and, on a psychological level, it can be extremely intimidating for students. It is my experience that when a lecturer simply throws out questions to a large audience, student response is minimal. Getting students to form themselves into pairs or small groups is much more conducive to discussion in a large group setting. However, the drawback of this is that the debate is not open to the whole class, but, rather, confined to the groupings that the students find themselves in. While the teacher could, of course, get a spokesperson from each of these individual groups to feedback to the larger group, this can be difficult to complete within the allocated time-frame, without taking up time for other planned activities. What I wanted to achieve in my large group teaching was an exchange of ideas at full class-level, where everyone could participate in a range of discussions at their own ease and having had time to reflect, thus encouraging peer-learning and rendering the learning environment more enriching and expansive. Having already tried the small groups within the large group in the actual lecture hall but finding that, while it works for brief exchanges of ideas, when it comes to promoting in-depth discussion it is too time-consuming, I decided that my next avenue of exploration would be on-line discussions via Moodle.

To address the problem of active learning and reflection in large group situations, I used Moodle to supplement and complement my lectures by posting weekly discussion topics/questions based on the material covered in class on the given online module page. The class that I chose to test this initiative on was a group of 120 first year students from the academic year 2009-2010 and the course title was 'An Introduction to French Literature'. Students were made aware at the end of the lecture that there would be a follow-up activity on Moodle and they were encouraged (but not obliged) to participate in order to enhance their understanding of a certain aspect of the module. The discussions took the form of prompt questions and as their teacher, I logged in to the discussion for approximately 15 minutes two to three times per week to follow their progress, to help with any problems or queries that were emerging and to contribute to the debate myself. By initiating the discussions, I was able to ensure we were addressing the required course material, but, on the other hand, the very open nature of these online fora meant that there was ample opportunity to delve a bit deeper into certain topics and consider further related issues (that may not have been able to be dealt with in class given the time constraints of a lecture).

On the whole, student response to these online discussion fora was positive. This does not mean to say, however, that their response was instant. As many of them were not doing similar online discussions in other subjects/modules, they were initially unsure as to how to proceed. Furthermore, it took them a while to feel at ease interacting on a direct level with their lecturer and they were unsure of register – should they employ formal or informal language? However, while the uptake at the very beginning was quite low (20% of the class), by the middle of the module this had risen to almost 50% of the group and again to 70% in the last few weeks of the course. Of those who persistently declined to participate, heavy workloads, internet problems and a fear of ‘saying the wrong thing’ online were cited in the feedback as key factors influencing their non-participation.

The positive effects of these online fora designed to supplement and complement large group literature lectures became evident in the end of course feedback forms. Students mentioned increased confidence (this was also noted by myself in lectures), due to the fact that they felt more ‘on top of material’ and in control of their learning. They stated that it brought the course ‘to life’, they enjoyed interacting with their peers and they felt less pressure at the end of the course when revising for the exam as they had been working steadily all along. They also claimed that by feeling less ‘lost’ in French literature than expected when they first saw the course descriptor and that they might now feel more inclined to pursue French in second year. On the other hand, students were disappointed to find that no credit was accorded to the online discussions (the assessment criteria for the module had already been established before I had the idea to introduce Moodle fora) and annoyed that some students appeared to be doing all the work while others were just sitting back and reaping the benefits of the material that they were posting without contributing anything themselves.

Screen-casting

The second initiative that I embarked on in a bid to blend technology with traditional methods of teaching and learning was the creation of a series of screencasts. This project was born out of a call for proposals from the Centre for Teaching and Learning at NUI Maynooth for small e-learning projects to be funded by the NDLR. The proposal I put forward to create a series of screencasts to enhance student language learning was successful in its bid for funding. The publishing of the results of this projects as well as the launching of the resource will take place in December 2010.

The aim of this initiative which is currently underway is to produce a series of comprehensive screencasts for undergraduate students of French focusing on a selection of difficult grammar points as identified by the students themselves as problematic. During the academic year of 2009-2010, I regularly asked students in my language tutorials (at all levels of the degree) to record their muddiest grammar

point on post-its that I collected. From these post-its I was able to draw up a list of the top six grammar points regularly causing problems across the board, from first year to final year.

A common student complaint is that these problematic language points are covered only once in the course of the three years and that they are expected to grasp them almost instantly without enough revisiting. Furthermore, students find the language and the format of grammar books difficult to engage with so, when they try to revise grammar points independently with just a book, they do not feel that they are successful.

The core incentive for this project, therefore, is to provide students with an alternative and innovative way to study French grammar by creating a set of screencasts where the teacher guides the students through these problematic language areas. The fact that the teacher's voice can be heard and that the teacher plays organisational role in how the points are presented instantly renders this method more supportive to the student than simply studying a chapter in a grammar book. Secondly, the use of visuals and sound will appeal to visual and auditory learners as well as verbal learners (there will be written material appearing on the screen too). Thirdly, the students will be able to revisit these screen-casts as many times as they wish and also download them onto their own electronic devices for consultation as their own convenience.

Facebook

The third and final initiative that I wish to discuss in this paper is the integration of the social networking site, 'Facebook', into my teaching and learning. When one hears the word 'Facebook', the first idea that springs to mind is not studying but, rather, chatting and socialising with friends, and, for teachers, the huge amount of time that their students spend on this site while they could and should be doing academic work. It is for this very reason, that is, the high level of usage of this site by our students, that 'Facebook' is a potential educational resource, but one that, until recently, has gone unnoticed by teachers (Ellison, 2008). As a teacher aware of how regularly my students logged on to Facebook, I wanted to tap into this resource and repurpose it for language teaching and learning. In collaboration with a colleague from the University of Brest, I am in the process of launching a Facebook page where students of French at NUI Maynooth and students of English and Irish at the University of Brest will have the opportunity to meet online and practice their language skills in an environment that is familiar to them and that they enjoy. As teachers, we will also log on to this page to give guidance from time to time, but the key aim is that they will learn from each other and help each other out with vocabulary and grammar. As the main goal is for the students to communicate in their target language, discussions can range from the serious to the trivial, from politics to television programmes. The 'Facebook' page will therefore serve not

simply as a language learning resource but as a place of cultural exchange. The idea is that the French students will post comments in Irish and the Irish students in French and they will help each other out with vocabulary and grammar difficulties. One potential problem that may emerge, however, is a discrepancy in levels, with the Irish students having been learners of French for almost 8 years, whereas the French students are complete beginners in Irish.

Conclusion and Future Work

The main points that I learned from these innovations is that integrating technology into one's teaching is not simply another way of getting material covered, but, rather, a key means of encouraging active, reflective and independent student learning. Using technology to support one's teaching outside of the classroom promotes

- Continued learning outside of lectures/tutorials
- Reflection and discussion
- Student-student and student-teacher contact
- Flexible and remote learning
- Revision of material
- Variety in learning materials
- Initiative on the part of the students
- Student confidence, retention and motivation

These alternative activities were also an effective means of meeting one's module learning outcomes. For example, many of the module learning outcomes for French include verbs of communication such as 'discuss', 'critique', 'compare', 'contrast', 'express', 'argue' and 'evaluate', among others. Such learning outcomes are difficult to achieve in the traditional classroom where the students listen and the teacher explains. However, as I have outlined in this paper, by integrating very simple technological resources into one's teaching, it is possible to encourage a more active form of learning on the part of the students.

While the overall aim is indeed to encourage learner autonomy by integrating these technological resources into traditional teaching and learning, it is vital, nonetheless, that the teacher 'guide from the side'. In order to ensure effective learning, the students need direction. Often they want to be given word limits and deadlines for fora participation, so that all students do their fair share of the work and to help them to motivate themselves to work continuously as opposed to leaving all of the online

discussions to the end of the semester. It is also important to consider these online activities as possible forms of assessment. If we are going to ask our students to devote time and energy to participating in such tasks, then we need to consider awarding credit for this work and thereby convince them of its educational value. This is an area that I would like to further investigate in the future, that is, how to evaluate students for their participation in online activities. Furthermore, as the screencasting and 'Facebook' initiatives are very much in the early stages of development, although the initial benefits are already evident, there is much work to be done on student feedback to these resources examining the extent to which they have been successful and, of course, how these resources could be further developed. Finally, the last point that I would like to stress is that even the most tentative of teachers can tailor their traditional teaching approaches to integrate technology. The initiatives that I have described in this paper are all very accessible and yet they go some way to meeting the needs of the 21st century graduate.

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