

TANDEM PROJECT: VIRTUAL PLATFORM, REAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The advent of Virtual Learning Environments has revolutionised language learning, opening up limitless communication possibilities for tutors and learners. In Belfast Institute the Blackboard VLE has enabled us to provide extensive and flexible learner and tutor support. When exploring ways of supporting communications within International Projects in particular, Blackboard was the obvious solution: the multiple functions it offers and its simplicity of use have led to the creation of virtual communities of learners based in different European states who all have two things in common: their love of languages and a non-IT background. They come from a wide variety of communities and generations and their IT skills vary greatly. This has presented some challenges for the project co-ordinators. Solutions have ranged from hands on sessions to step-by-step documentation. In addition, we have found that by providing meaningful opportunities to the learners to upload their own content, therefore making the platform their own and shaping its focus, has increased participation and activity on the site. The four project languages are reflected in various sections and forums of the Blackboard site. Part multilingual communication tool and multicultural centre, part repository of products and outcomes: the virtual platform has truly become the hub of the project.

Tandem PROJECT : VIRTUAL PLATFORM, REAL COMMUNITY (French partner)

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Abstract

The advent of Virtual Learning Environments has revolutionised language learning, opening up limitless communication possibilities for tutors and learners. In Vesoul the use of the the Blackboard VLE located in Belfast has enabled teachers and learners to benefit extensive and flexible support. When exploring ways of supporting communications within International Projects in particular, we met Babet and discovered the VLE which appeared as the obvious solution. As a partner in the Tandem project we took part to the virtual community of learners. The French students presented the same kind of background than the other European ones, coming from a wide variety of communities and generations with or without IT skills. Having benefited from hands on sessions and step-by-step documentation they are now able to upload their own content, making the platform their own. Motivating and keeping the students together, the virtual platform has truly become the hub of our common project

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Background to Project

Teaching languages is often a challenge but teaching languages in the United Kingdom is an uphill struggle. There are many factors why this is so:

- the British Isles are not only geographically separate from the rest of Europe but there is a constant political tension between the British government and the EU; we remain outside the euro zone and the majority of the British people want to retain our own currency. Some sections of our conservative party would like to see the UK leaving the EU altogether
- at the same time the UK is specially connected to the rest of the world through its ever more universal language: English

So the urge to learn a foreign language is not as widespread as it seems to be in other European states. I look with envy at states where bilingualism or even trilingualism is the norm rather than the exception.

Even in the world of business, UK exporters mostly choose to deal in English.

In fact, the fastest growing foreign language being taught in the UK is English. We have an ever increasing foreign population who need English language skills to survive and thrive in our society.

Educators have to find innovative ways of fostering a thirst for languages and motivating students to persevere in their studies. Learning a language takes time, effort and practice. The best practice is carried out with native speakers and how better to meet them than organizing visits to where they live. For this, funding is needed. This is where European Commission Programmes can help.

Socrates Grundtvig Programme

The Socrates Grundtvig strand of European funding is one of the four sections making up the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme. Grundtvig aims to support adult education projects with a European dimension.

“The aim of the Grundtvig programme is to address the teaching and learning needs of institutions and individuals involved in adult education. In particular, it aims to respond to the challenge of an ageing population and to provide pathways for adults to improve their knowledge and competences.

Through Grundtvig, the European Commission provides funding to promote exchanges of experiences and to improve the quality and accessibility of mobility throughout Europe in the area of adult education. It is open to all kinds of institutions and organisations, whether working in formal, non-formal or informal adult education. It complements and

interacts with other programmes within the Lifelong Learning Programme to cover the whole spectrum of lifelong learning.”¹

Grundtvig - Learning Partnerships

“Learning Partnerships are small-scale cooperation projects involving adult education institutions from at least three European countries. The emphasis is on the process of establishing exchanges between the partners on specific themes and on the active participation of adult learners in the projects.”²

Tandem Plus Learning Partnership

The Belfast Institute wanted to bring together language learners and native speakers both face to face during transnational visits and virtually, through our Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment.

The Tandem Plus Learning Partnership was formed during a partner-finding event organized by the British Council. The partnership is currently made up of organizations from France, Germany, Ireland, Spain and the UK.

Our original aims were simple: getting our learners to form partnerships or “Learning Tandems” to share their love of languages, support each other’s learning and practice their language skills. To give our learners a focus in their exchanges we selected a few topics:

- Famous People from our regions
- Recipes
- Songs
- Tourist Information
- Quizzes
- Transnational Meetings Photos

Next we devised a Communications strategy, based on the tools we had at our disposal, the most important of which being the internet.

Therefore, the project proposal drafted in Stratford was very much centered around the Belfast Institute Virtual Learning Environment: Blackboard. A VLE, to put it simply, is a password-protected website with many easy-to-use, in-built functions.

Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment

The Institute has chosen Blackboard as its VLE. This offers many communications functions such as Announcements, Chat Facility, Email, Digital Drop Box and Discussion Boards.

The Announcements function is used to alert learners about new events or tasks as well as to stimulate interest and guide project participants to different areas of the site.

In theory, the chat facility was initially thought to be the most exciting and promising tool: in practice we ran into technical difficulties which could not be resolved last year. We are still hoping

¹ Europa Portal, European Commission Website, Education and Training, Programmes and Actions, Lifelong Learning Programmes, Grundtvig:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/grundtvig/index_en.html

² Europa Portal, European Commission Website, Education and Training, Programmes and Actions, Lifelong Learning Programmes, Grundtvig, The structure of Grundtvig, Learning Partnerships:
http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/llp/grundtvig/grund2_en.html

to use this tool this year, once the issue has been resolved. It would allow stimulating, real-time communication.

The email facility allows Tandem members to email any other Tandem member enrolled on the site.

The Digital Drop Box allows members to send or receive files or photos.

The Discussion Boards or Forums have proved to be the most popular tool for project members to share files and exchange information and ideas. This is where most of our online communications take place.

Initial Discussion Boards (or Forums) were used to break the ice between participants. Learners introduced themselves and left messages to get to know one another. The most vibrant Discussions occurred when a French evening class in Belfast, Northern Ireland, coincided with an English class in Vesoul, France. Tandems were able to communicate most meaningfully and rewardingly because they were able to get near-instant replies to their posts.

Tandem members have been posting their favourite recipes, jokes, song lyrics, poems, cultural presentations on local artists or regional attractions; they have also been discussing books, films and holidays past and future.

In year two, Discussion Boards were set up to reflect the topics selected for the project. Most Discussion Boards have been very well used especially the recipe-swapping one.

In addition to the Communications functions, Blackboard also gives the possibility of organising all the project content into sections, like a massive filing cabinet.

Communication Challenges and Strategies

Once our partnership was in place, our objectives defined, applications for funding approved, the VLE site organised, our next and biggest challenge was getting Tandem members to start to communicate and return to the site regularly.

Some Tandem groups have been proficient users of Blackboard from the beginning, others have been more reluctant to use it for a variety of reasons:

- Little or no IT skills / no confidence
- No interest in using the internet
- Lack of time
- No access to the internet in class (where the initial sessions should ideally take place)
- No access to the internet at home
- Access to the internet with a slow modem / frustration

The most efficient and productive way to bring people to use any new tool is to organise a few hands on sessions with an enthusiastic and reasonably proficient user. The key points are:

1. A good, patient communicator to lead the sessions
2. Access to a training room
3. Very simple, structured tasks to build confidence
4. Step-by-step handouts for users to practice independently
5. A fast connection (Broadband)
6. Clear objectives and incentives to use the site

The first Forums were general exchanges to get people to become comfortable with the technology. As the project developed we expected more structured, project-focused posts.

In the first year we tended to back up Blackboard Announcements with emails. As we have progressed through the project more and more materials have been added to the site which have not been sent by email.

To stimulate visits to the site we created quizzes and competitions; an example of this was the "Mystery vegetable" competition when the photo a very odd looking vegetable was posted on the site and Tandem members had to guess what it was. This led to some hilarious suggestions but also to a lot of vocabulary-building in the field of exotic vegetables!

In this, our final project year, we will alert members to new content and tasks by email but the actual project objectives, materials, tasks and all transnational meeting details will be posted on Blackboard exclusively. The Blackboard email function makes sending email alerts to all site users extremely easy and quick.

The project partners do communicate outside Blackboard, by email and telephone, to shape the project throughout the year, for transnational meeting planning, to discuss problems and Grundtvig-related administration (applications, reports, finance). Most of the final documents are then posted in the administration section of Blackboard.

Transnational Meetings

The most prolific, enthusiastic and enjoyable communication opportunities in Grundtvig projects are of course the transnational meetings.

We organise project meetings three times per year and between 40 and 80 people take part in each visit.

The host project partner organises a programme of linguistic and cultural activities as well as a refresher hands on Blackboard session where possible.

The meetings are a perfect platform for "Tandems" to form, that is to say Tandem members form or reinforce friendships during the visits; this gives them an extra incentive to keep communications going on the virtual platform once the visit is over.

Offshoots of the Project

The project has had some wonderful and occasionally unforeseen results or offshoots: these include:

- some Tandem members have since visited each other on holiday
- a Tandem Blog has been created by a French Tandem member and he uploads his project visit photos into it
- some very reluctant IT-users are now enthusiastic internet surfers (including one of the project partners)
- Tandem amateur photographers have created slide shows of some of the visits
- a few Tandems are exchanging voice messages in MP3 formats by attachment to text email
- the most adventurous Tandems are using Skype³ to communicate in real time

³ Internet-based communication via microphone-equipped headsets

Conclusion

To create and sustain a viable, productive, virtual community, you need a great variety of strategies and human interaction, clear objectives and an unending supply of energy and enthusiasm. If you can manage to have a face to face dimension, you are more likely to succeed. Human beings are highly motivated by direct meetings. Motivating them to sustain virtual contact needs persistence, dedication and time.

At the end of the day, people have a limited amount of time to carry out any of their activities: if what you offer in the virtual world is not at least as exciting, useful and / or rewarding as what they do in the real world, you have little chance of succeeding.

To be attractive to people, your virtual world must imitate the real world: it must not stand still but innovate, surprise, stimulate, intrigue, inspire.

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In France most people would like to speak English as a second language. They are well aware that English has become a universal language ; it is necessary to speak English to deal with business, find a new job, use a computer, or enjoy travelling abroad. Although many French people have studied basic English at School, very few of them are able to use it satisfactorily enough to communicate with foreigners. When they decide to attend adult classes to study or improve their English, they do not want to have the same, sometimes bad, school experience requirement and we now know that teaching languages to adults means putting communication at the centre of our teaching methods.

Furthermore, the need for genuine communication appears as soon as the basic skills are acquired. We are definitely convinced that the best way to motivate and boost learners in their practise is to offer them the possibility to communicate in English with native speakers or other non-French-speaking English learners.

It was with this thirst for communication in mind that I attended the partner-finding event in England and met Babet. Our organisation, a Training Centre based in an agricultural school, had agreed to take part in a European programme, so I went along to find partners for a project concerned with teaching languages in adult education. I was open to any kind of project except one : I did not want a project involving IT, for several reasons :

- My students are frequently people in their 50s or 60s and they do not belong to the computer generation. Studying a foreign language is a big challenge and getting comfortable with IT is another one, so I did not want to create any additional difficulty, for I knew most of them would be discouraged.
- I had a previous experience of teaching English with computers which seemed to fail because people felt isolated with a machine whereas they needed human help and support.
- Most of my students do not have their own computer.
- As for me, I was not very comfortable with computers either.

But the most important point in our project was not whether or not we would use IT, the real purpose was, according to Babet's quotation "to bring together language learners and native speakers both face to face during transnational visits"... and she goes on in a way which was perfectly obscure for me "and virtually through our Blackboard VLE". My idea at that stage was to observe and see whether or not, and how, that strange animal called a VLE could help contacts and communication to become more regular.

And it did ! We were given usernames and passwords to connect to the Belfast Institute Blackboard and it took us several months to study, understand, try to manipulate, read messages, try to post one... at a very slow pace ; to give you one example : we go to the computer room once every 5th lesson, to help people to become more confident. And step by step, people who were already used to using a computer started to connect from home and practise regularly. Our most important success was when people who were not IT-literate tried to connect from their children's computers, created their own e-mail address, and started to be regular users of the VLE.

The blackboard VLE is now considered as our data bank, hosting all the information about partners profiles, our visits, our common work, our discussion boards. It is now the necessary tool to keep our project alive and keep people we have met within reach at any time. We feel that we belong to two wide communities : a real European one with which we meet three times a year, and a virtual one we can connect to whenever we want. One of my student has become a VLE addict as he says himself.

The VLE benefits not only our students but teachers too. We can share and improve our practices and the languages we teach with a permanent contact with native colleagues. And having partners and friends in different European countries is something really exciting for both students and teachers. In that way our challenge to create international friendships and maintain permanent communication is completely achieved, and this thanks to the VLE which appears as the necessary tool to achieve our target.