

IN-EX case study AMR - LSE

VLE supported mentoring scheme between pupils and university students in MFL (French)

Summary

Originally the project started between AMR sixth-formers and LSE students. At AMR students were taking the AVCE in Business French. A virtual learning environment (VLE) shared by the two groups of students was created and designed to integrate the business course and the mentoring scheme between January and September 2004. However, due to a lack of 6th form intake in the Autumn 2004, the project had to evolve. It was still based on the original principles of the Innovation-Exchange project: innovative collaboration between school and universities and innovative use of ICT to promote foreign language teaching. In addition, our project contributed to the widening participation initiative in higher education. A Year 9 class was chosen to carry on with the VLE supported mentoring scheme. Although our project only ran for a term, it was successful in improving the performance and motivation of secondary pupils learning languages.

Project

The aim of our pilot scheme was to support secondary schools pupils in developing their confidence to communicate in French and to encourage to further study of it through the original use of ICT, a key transferable skill for students in both institutions. Another objective of the scheme was to explore, share and test the use of a common virtual learning environment (VLE) between the two institutions.

Since language has become optional at AMR, student intake has significantly decreased both at KS4 and KS5. In an attempt to encourage students to carry on studying languages, a Year 9 class was chosen for this pilot. This class included 28 pupils of average ability (National Curriculum level between 2 and 5). They would not normally have regular access to a computer room during language lessons.

LSE students registered for BSc/ BA in social sciences have the opportunity to take a French Language and Society course as part of their degree. The 15 students involved in this project came from three different courses, based on their language ability (Post A level, Post A level +1, Post A level +2). Aged between 18 and 21, they all volunteered to take part in this pilot. Some were prepared to give half a day a week as a face-to-face mentor (F2F), whereas others known as virtual tutors, could only commit themselves for half an hour a week. LSE students have 24-hour access to computer facilities within the University and some Halls of Residence.

AMR students were assisted and supported by LSE face-to-face mentors who visited the school in Camberwell once a week. They spent the 50 minute session in a computer room, together on a one-to-two / one-to-three basis. With the help of their F2F mentors, AMR students wrote in the target language and posted messages online, which were related to curriculum topics studied in class. LSE students always worked with the same allocated Year 9 pupils.

Topics such as personal presentation, place of study, future plans, tags and graffiti were listed as specific discussion lists on the VLE. Another team of LSE students, the virtual tutors, had the responsibility to interact with AMR students on the VLE responding to the messages posted and to topics presented.

WebCT is a secure environment, enabling asynchronous communication and interaction. It is only accessible with specific username and password. The teachers in charge, as course designers, oversee all messages sent and received. Any misuse of the system can be instantly addressed. The teachers responsible for the course can remove messages and postings.

Furthermore, access to specific discussion lists or forums can also be controlled, i.e. members are manually selected. This tool enabled us to create three distinct types of forums. Discussion lists on topics were open to all participants to discuss opinions and exchange views on set themes. The mentors' forum was designed for communication between teachers, mentors and virtual tutors. WebCT also allowed us to create private zones within the VLE to further the feeling of intimacy and community amongst each mentoring group (2/3 AMR students + F2F mentor + virtual tutors). These helped both groups to develop trust, confidence and even friendship. The table below illustrates the different levels of access to the forums for each set of members.

Members \ Access to	Discussion lists on set topics	Private zones	Mentors forum	VLE management and control
AMR students	yes	yes	no	no
Mentors/tutors	yes	yes	yes	no
Teachers	yes	yes	yes	yes

The online interaction was enriched by the addition of digital pictures (but sound bites could also be included) to illustrate topics. For example, students took pictures of their respective institutions and commented upon them. From

horrible toilets to gloomy classrooms, AMR students could give a personal flavour of their learning environment. LSE students included pictures of the student union bar and the latest demonstrations in town. Communication and mutual understanding were significantly enhanced.

Each pupil was given an exercise book dedicated to the project. This meant that all participants kept a paper trace of each session. It included a copy of their username and password for WebCT access, draft messages, key personal documents such as their tags and printouts of postings to illustrate interactions that took place. Each session, writing frames were given out in an attempt to support the mentors by giving them guidelines on the kind of vocabulary and grammatical structures previously covered in class. These would help to formulate in French their discussions and messages

Aims

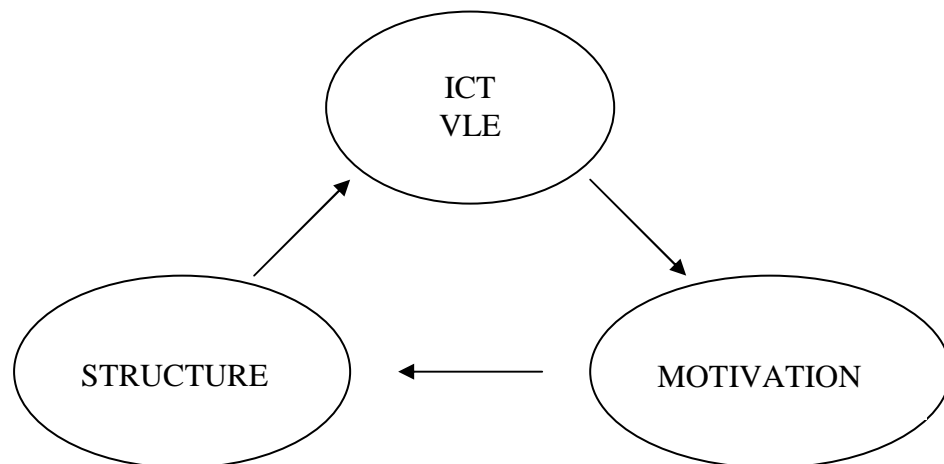
The project aimed to satisfy a number of goals:

At AMR, the aim was to increase the students' level of confidence and the intake at KS4. More precisely, it was hoped that their French language skills would improve, especially in reading and writing. The use of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) would develop their ICT skills. Working with LSE students, they would also get an insight into university study and life.

For the LSE students, the aim was to gain an insight into an inner city school from one of the most disadvantaged London boroughs. Social exclusion and ethnic segregation in France are studied as part their French course at LSE, comparing France and the UK is compelling. From the students' point of view, their experience as a volunteer adds value to their CV as it is recognised by employers. For example at LSE, the multinational BP sponsors the largest mentoring scheme with several hundreds participating students. For LSE, the aim was to develop the portfolio of outreach activities in line with the widening participation agenda put in place by the government.

Achievements and lessons learned

The graph below illustrates the three key elements for the successful delivery of a VLE supported mentoring scheme between Secondary Schools and Universities. These are namely: ICT, structure and motivation.



ICT/ VLE

The first step to start a VLE supported mentoring project is the allocation of e-mail addresses. This should prove easy enough in most schools but this step cannot be taken for granted as it proved unexpectedly very time consuming on the two occasions it was required from the secondary school.

The school IT network should be fully audited before the start of the project to ensure that the VLE can be used to its full potential. Had we been aware of this earlier on in the project, as well as posting written messages and digital pictures on the forum, students would also have been able to post their own recordings (with Wimba) as well as audio files (MP3).

The adequate provision of an ICT room is essential. We were fortunate to have a weekly booking in a large ICT room offering standard seating (tables and chairs) as well as a PC for each mentoring group. Unfortunately, outside

lesson times, AMR students have very limited access to computers and could not independently access the VLE.

Motivation

The launch of the second phase of the project, took place thanks to the commitment of a LSE student, who was appointed mentoring coordinator. She was a key link between the teachers involved and the LSE students. She organised meetings to recruit LSE students, oversaw the CRB checks with the appropriate university office and compiled a LSE students tutor Handbook. She was the voice of the LSE students, liaising regularly with the secondary school teacher to discuss progress and issues, which may have risen during the sessions.

The full involvement of both tutors and mentors is essential for the running of the project. Communication between all the parties concerned is paramount. The position of virtual tutor coordinator was created to make sure virtual tutors were not disconnected from what happened during the F2F meetings. More importantly his key task was to monitor that every single AMR student received a reply to his posting. This was critical to avoid frustration and disenchantment when using electronic communication.

As teachers leading this project, we attribute its success to the fact that we both share the same vision, we have a total understanding of each other's perspective and we accept each other's distinct professional environment and limitations. Weekly communication via e-mails or phone calls allowed us to overcome institutional constraints as well as unexpected events beyond our control.

The "pulling power" that computers exert on teenagers is a defining factor in the running of this project. Week after week their focus and attention did not fade away. Easier access to computer rooms would probably have meant spontaneous and independent use of the VLE. Unfortunately we were unable to verify this.

Structure

Forward and careful planning is essential before any student interaction takes place. A calendar needs to be drawn up detailing the topics to be covered and a realistic timeframe leaving room for flexibility. Different academic calendars, whole school events (citizenship day, Easter service...) as well as school trips have to be taken into account as they will take some of the participants away from the VLE. These restrictions will limit the volume of messages and affect the strength of the interaction from time to time.

Despite a visible increase in confidence and language skills, the intake at KS4 was not significantly affected. The three months time frame was too short to alter option choices at the end of Year 9. We feel this programme could even be started with Year 7 and 8 to have a more lasting impact.

This project provided both institutions not only with activities and topics relevant to both curricula but it also significantly enhanced the realm of study. It connected academic studies with society through multiple snapshots of life in another part of London. This was especially true as both sets of students come from a wide range of social and ethnic backgrounds.

Visual and graphic modes of communication are studied as part of one of the French courses at LSE. Michel Herreria, a visual artist based in Bordeaux, contributes to the VLE with graphic animations related to political and social issues of the moment. AMR and LSE students with their own digital pictures contributed to the development of visual interaction, taking communication beyond words.

Students' voices

AMR: "decent", "happy", "Great"... "working on computers it's good instead of writing all the time"

"I improved my French because I had individual attention which made me improve my vocabulary"

“I have developed a relationship with one of them [*F2F mentors*] because we talked about other things than French”

“*[first reply]* I thought it was a fast reply and this project must be important”

“I discussed it [*learning French*] with my mentor and he explained it could help with my future job”

LSE: “ The AMR students are fantastic: a joy!”

“helped my French skills by communicating with students”

“developed confidence in myself, experience about to reach out to students”

“chance for me to interact with people with different backgrounds”

“learning about reality of British Education, doing something positive, acquiring new skills (especially patience!)”

Conclusion and further plans

Our major achievement was the successful move from an online interface supporting asynchronous communication to the development of genuine human and personal relationships in which the VLE was just a tool and framework provider. However technology was key in weaving an extensive network of interaction.

We are planning to carry on with this current scheme until the end of the academic year. As we are entering the examination period at LSE at the time of writing, we will have to reduce the frequency of the F2F interaction. However we are confident we can maintain regular online communication as all LSE students involved requested this.

We are also looking into developing similar projects including other languages like Spanish, which is offered at AMR. We would like to disseminate our scheme to other local schools. To this effect we will present our project at the Association for Language Learning annual conference at Canterbury, 1st-3rd July 2005.

References

Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College

<http://www.amrtc.southwark.sch.uk>

Innovation-Exchange

<http://www.in-ex.net/>

Le français @ LSE: Mentoring scheme & Artist in residence project

http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/language/French_main/LSE_FrenchMain.htm

Acronyms

AMR	Archbishop Michael Ramsey Technology College
AVCE	Advanced Vocational Course
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
CRB	Criminal Record Bureau
F2F	Face-to-face
IN-EX	Innovation-Exchange project
MP3	Digital audio file
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment (WebCT, Blackboard, Lyceum...)
WebCT	Online learning platform
Wimba	Voice recording software