



Developing an Online Learning Environment for Learners, Teachers and Parents

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1. Origins of the project

In 1999 a meeting of ICT co-ordinators in the British Council teaching centre Bilbao discussed the possibility of developing a network of local intranets for teachers in Spain centres. The original concept was a project to connect teachers with a low-cost solution repurposing used PCs. Microsoft server software would convert machines into web-servers, allowing teachers local access, and the WAN (wide area network) allowing administrators to access each other's materials. In pre-Web2.0 days, the primary objective was to create a resource and web repository that teachers could share. Without considering this at the time, we were also laying foundations of a connectivist approach [1], encouraging teachers to build asynchronous connections, albeit at the same location.

2. Foundations

It seemed that there was much potential for supporting learning. In Madrid, development began in 2001, in 2002 we launched the site in HTML built using proprietary web development tools. Our intranet for teachers allowed those on different timetables access to information and resources. A separate student area offered links to web sites, locally-produced 'interactive' resources, and contracted premium content for exams candidates. With no personal data storage issues, generic logins were employed for different areas.

Not all developments were successful. Forums for teachers and chat areas for students were met with indifference, and technologies available to facilitate them at that time made them difficult to manage with limited resources. The budget overall was small and the main investment was the time required to build pages and maintain the site.

3. Web 2.0

In 2004 with the hosting of the first 'web 2.0' conference, the term began to gain currency[2]. The proliferation of client-side technologies meant that with a boom in browser-based tools and multimedia, the notion of 'web as platform' began to emerge. The limitations of network-based static HTML models gave way to a wealth of new possibilities for supporting learning and teaching. Our humble intranet migrated to the web in 2005, hosting the teachers' extranet on a third-party server, allowing reservation of resources from remote locations. A timely development as we established satellite centres and supporting teacher's needs became more challenging. Within twelve months, the student extranet was established. Technologies for content management became cheaper, though at this stage there was still an emphasis on static web pages with some interactive content. We owned various CD-ROM programmes only accessible in our teaching centre so putting this content online seemed attractive, and economical local web development companies made the business case compelling. Over the next three years we migrated repurposed content online with a greater emphasis on learner support. Additionally, we developed a parents' extranet providing materials and guides to support their children's studies. Feedback from users was largely positive: teachers liked being able to remotely access resources; many hours of supplementary materials supported our face-to-face courses; an extra communications channel allowed communicating information about courses to parents.

4. Research

From 2006 – 2009 I was engaged in post-graduate studies in educational technologies and supporting online learning. Focusing on learner support, I was interested in whether the factors of multiple intelligences[3] and learner motivation might have an impact on the kind of support that we offer young learners. I distributed an existing questionnaire designed for EFL students [4] and designed another to explore learner motivation to a robust sample of students. The latter proved inconclusive and perhaps too nebulous a concept to measure meaningfully. The results of samples looking at multiple



intelligences, however, showed markedly lower than average levels of intrapersonal intelligence in both junior and teenage students, particularly the latter. This seemed significant in light of research into EFL text books and multiple intelligences required for the range of tasks that they contain [5]. As most seem to emphasise self-awareness and reflection (intrapersonal intelligence), this seems potentially problematic for teenage learners, so we looked at supporting this[6]. We opted for web2.0 solutions and experimented with Elgg[7], a server-based social network, market research showing our teens overwhelmingly members of similar web sites in 2007 (mainly MySpace and Tuenti – a Spanish Facebook equivalent). Elgg, was open-source software but problematic for our developers so we adopted a Web2.0 solution – Ning[8].

5. Social Networking

The project was set up in parallel with the web platform to allow students to develop personal profiles, greater self-awareness and an ability to reflect about themselves in English. It was hoped this would also aid in development of intrapersonal intelligence and make EFL course book activities more accessible. Students could write about themselves in English and were encouraged to develop personal profiles. Proactive teachers encouraged students to build on what they had written, with numerous writing as much as 1,500 to 2,000 words about themselves. However, despite encouragement, over time participation dwindled as students joined mainstream social networks Facebook[9] and Twitter[10], becoming significant sources of English interaction according to recent data. Ning became a paid commercial service and we migrated to Grou.ps[11], another free service, but this disruption contributed to a decline in participation, so the project was shelved in 2011.

6. A common platform

Our web platform had attracted the attention of other Spain centres and further extranet instances appeared. After discussions with developers, we decided it was time to create a shared platform for all centres using a common server with independent web portal instances[12]. This would allow cost sharing with contributions proportionate to centre income, homogenising the product across Spain. Furthermore, centres could develop 'apps' according to local needs, encouraging innovation and flexibility.

7. Academic data and payment

As we began to experiment with social networking, it became clear that there was potential for developing a database of student academic records. In 2009 we established a system of online academic reports for all courses, allowing teachers remote access to a developing record of student achievement. Teachers found the system more efficient, but there were issues of data management and protection for users requiring attention. Spanish data protection laws are rigorous and much effort has been invested in ensuring sensitive data is not compromised. We contract penetration testing annually, and have up-to-date data protection certificates. There is something of a learning curve in encouraging users to manage their own profiles and access data, but after teething troubles we now have a workable system.

As web portal use expanded (95% of Madrid parents currently register), we saw potential for facilitating administrative tasks. We developed online re-enrolment modules, achieving 50% uptake in the first year, contributing to maintaining high registration levels. Existing customers book courses, track children's academic development and communicate with teachers via the internal messaging module.

8. Portal2.0

Since the pan-Spain web portal was rolled out and we came to terms with the 'web as platform' paradigm[13], we have had time to consider how to transform student learning and support their English studies more effectively online. In 2012 we began to draw up plans to update our platform and incorporate more innovations. We felt that the emphasis in the next iteration should be on connecting learners, further developing their academic records to foster a notion of lifelong learning and encouraging more collaboration and interaction. Furthermore, we were aware that numerous third party technologies were being used by teachers and wanted these interactions to take place in a secure environment for young learners rather than on the open web. Blogs, wikis and learning management tools are now more common, so our plans include similar provisions. Planning and development have taken place throughout 2013 and we anticipate rollout in the last quarter of this year.



8.1 Social network look and feel

In order to develop a community, we decided to change portal design, giving each user a 'homepage' similar in appearance to sites such as Edmodo or Facebook. Users should hopefully feel at home in such environments and homepages with direct links to content will aid navigation. Users can customise their page adding cover and profile images, giving greater ownership over their space.

8.2 Portfolio

Students will have their own portfolio to which they can add examples of their work throughout their time at the British Council, including written and multimedia formats, academic reports being added automatically. The portfolio will be visible to each student, teacher and parents. When students leave the British Council, they will be able to download their portfolio for storage.

8.3 Groups

We are incorporating a wiki engine to allow student collaboration, making it possible to create special interest groups for existing reading and writing circles, for example, as well as giving the same age ranges and ability levels opportunities to collaborate between classes on projects. Administrators can create groups and control levels of interaction.

8.4 Learner diary

The addition of a simple blogging client will allow students to keep a learner diary for reflective self-assessment. Students currently do this in paper-based format, but the online version can be used extensively and made available to learners and teachers for consultation. Initially this will be a simple text-only feature.

8.5 Personal learning environment

Rather than create a wholly prescribed learning management system for our learners, the decision was taken to allow students to choose learning tools that better suit their own learning styles. An area of the web portal will enable them to build a bank of links to such tools available on the web.

8.6 'Edmodo' style class work app

As teachers are increasingly working with sites such as Edmodo, the educational social media platform, or creating wikis to upload class work, it was seen as essential to develop an application allowing this functionality within our secure web portal rather than exposing students to greater risk on the open web. Scheduling of work, feedback and collaboration will be possible on the portal allowing for a degree of classroom flipping where teachers consider it appropriate.

8.7 Activity stream

To enhance the social networking feel and further encourage collaboration, there will be an activity stream on each user's home page. This will display class activity – e.g. entries in the class work app, news from any groups the student belongs to, centre news and information for parents.

9. Conclusion and future plans.

Phase 2.0 rollout will be challenging and it is unclear how successful the new features will be with users. Not all teachers may be willing to engage with the new technologies, for example, and extensive support will be necessary to allow a smooth transition to the new version. As with all bespoke systems, there will be numerous unforeseen problems and it will be necessary to solve problems quickly and support users through these. As the features were largely in response to demands and existing practices of numerous users, we are optimistic that uptake will be positive and that our efforts will help to facilitate learning in teaching centres.

We are looking to the future even before rollout, however, and have plans to adapt our activities to portable devices, looking with interest at how our online support might increasingly enhance face-to-face operations and reflect the interests of our learners.

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