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7 Students as producers and collaborators: exploring the use of padlets and videos in MFL teaching

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Abstract

In today's digital age, Languages graduates need more specific skills than fluency in the foreign language and intercultural competence. Employers expect from all applicants a high level of computer literacy and a set of soft skills such as creativity or the ability to solve problems and work on team projects. Modern Foreign Language (MFL) departments should therefore promote teaching techniques that would enable their graduates to become employable, at the same time ensuring that the students become aware of their own professional and personal development. This article provides an example of projects concentrated specifically on development of technology and media skills.

Keywords: project-based learning, padlets, foreign languages.

1. Introduction

There is widespread agreement in MFL studies that a conception of teaching and learning as knowledge transfer no longer meets the demands of society in the digital age: today, linguistic competence, even when enhanced by intercultural sensitivity, is not sufficient to prepare Language students for the technological complexity and economic competitiveness of life after graduation. What is needed

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are didactic approaches that enable our students to become active participants in a multimedia environment and attractive partners in the global workplace. The question of how to integrate MFL teaching with student production, media orientation and employability has therefore become central to curriculum planning. Against this backdrop, this case study explores the potential of padlets and student-produced videos in a content-based undergraduate (UG) module on German Business, Society and Culture.

2. Curricular context

The projects (padlets and videos) were conducted in the academic year 2014/15 in a content-based UG module German Business, Society and Culture 1 (BSC 1). In the seminar group, there were 15 students. The module's main purpose is to raise cultural and business awareness of German speaking countries and to prepare the students for their study and work placements abroad. The programme of the module encompasses topics in German history, politics, economy and culture. As is the case with all universities in the UK, Sheffield Hallam's language degree programmes offer the third year abroad as part of the degree provision, but Hallam students spend also a compulsory semester studying at a foreign university in semester 2 of the second year. The period of residence abroad is thus extended to 18 months in total, and the BSC 1 module plays a vital role in familiarising the students with contemporary social and cultural issues in Germany, as well as delivering a practical training in cross-cultural awareness.

3. Padlets

A padlet (www.padlet.com) is a virtual pin board where students can upload a variety of files, including Word documents, YouTube videos, PowerPoint presentations, etc. It is a collaborative tool, which means that everyone with a link to the pin board can access it and add their comments. I introduced padlets at the beginning of semester 1 as an alternative to the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Blackboard. The aims and objectives of the project were:

a) to involve students in a collaborative learning project; b) to engage them in a dialogue outside the classroom; c) to allow them to research the course topics in more detail and share the outcomes with the other students; and d) to create a digital module repository.

I started using padlets for homework, i.e. every week, I created a separate padlet with a few questions about the content of the seminar and asked my students to research the topic in more detail at home and answer the questions in a few lines. The padlets are, by default, anonymous, but I asked my students to sign every homework post. This was also a step that reduced the possibility of a misuse of the platform by posting inappropriate comments.

I encouraged the students to attach links to relevant videos, interesting articles or pictures to make the content more appealing (for more complex analysis of the change processes in communicative practices and the shift from writing to image, see [Kress, 2003](#)). The main aim behind this was to create a social platform for a dialogue outside the classroom, where students could interact with each other. The online learning collaboration in this sense can motivate individuals to do more ([Davies, 2010](#)) – research a topic in more depth, but also try to improve the language (grammar and vocabulary), as the posts – answers or comments to other answers – are read by other students in the group, not only by the tutor. After a couple of pilot weeks, I started correcting the grammar and style of the posts, and because all students could see every post including my corrections, they started reading my comments more carefully, and learning from each other's mistakes (as they reiterated informally on several occasions).

This process of familiarising with the online tool and the autonomous research activity in a foreign language led to the next step in the padlet project: I asked my students to create their own padlets after my lecture on German film. They were asked to choose a film from the lecture and, based on the information from the lecture and a chapter from *A New History of German Cinema* ([Kapczynski & Richardson, 2012](#)), create a padlet about this film. The task they were presented with was to create a visually attractive padlet with only partial information about their chosen film: the students received a handout with several questions about

the films. The rationale behind it was to create a module repository with German films, created by the current students for the prospective students. We have now 15 padlets with seminal German films; next year, my new BSC 1 German cohort will receive another set of questions and will continue the work of this year's group. At the moment, it is anticipated that the project will take another two years to complete. The ultimate aim would be to collect the links to the padlets and disseminate them through the German Studies Network after the completion of the project.

4. Videos

In semester 2, I coordinated two workshops on intercultural awareness, during which my students had to design a cultural briefing session for incoming Erasmus students. In preparation for the workshops, the students were asked to make videos in groups of 5. The aims and objectives of this project were: a) to involve students in a collaborative media project; b) to engage them in a discussion about cultural differences; and c) to prepare them for the experience of studying at a foreign university. The videos were meant to serve as an invitation to a discussion about cultural differences and concentrate on the ideas of "British" vs. "Foreign". In the end, my students produced two 2-minute long videos, which were presented at the opening of the workshops. As part of the project, the students wrote the script for their videos, translated the text into German, filmed themselves in different locations and edited the video, adding stills, captures and other elements.

5. Evaluation of the survey and conclusion

After both projects and the workshops, I conducted a survey, which was designed to answer, among others, the following questions:

- Do the students now feel more employable?
- Are they more technologically advanced?

I prepared a questionnaire that would highlight potential benefits or shortcomings of the projects. The results showed that the majority of my students had never worked with padlets before or made or edited a video. The overall rating of the course was very high: on the scale 1-5 where 5 indicated the highest level of enjoyment, six students gave it a 4 and seven marked it with 5.

The problem, however, appeared in the questions about employability and technology skills: the majority of the students answered these questions with “I don’t know” instead of the expected “definitely agree” or “mostly agree”, which brings me to the conclusion and signifies a broader problem: the Languages students are often not aware of the skills and attributes they gain throughout their studies. Jocelyn Wyburd’s (2011) report *The Languages Graduate* lists in a form of a grid all linguistic, cultural (and intercultural), employment-specific and personal skills that MFL students develop throughout their course. It is our role as tutors to make sure that our students are aware of these skills and are able to articulate this knowledge in a job interview. It is more than just a thorough knowledge of the foreign country or its language that the Languages graduates can offer to a future employer. As it was in the case of my students, it is a whole set of skills: the ability to collaborate in an online environment, conduct research in a foreign language, plan and conduct a media-project in a team where time is of the essence, and, last but not least, understand the differences and mediate between cultures. I plan to continue with the padlet projects in the next academic year and I will take the video projects further, but plan to engage my students in a discussion about the key employability skills so that they can fully understand, appreciate and articulate the benefits that come with projects like these in order to gain advantage on the highly competitive job market.

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