

The JOYN 2.0 Project – Social Networking and Language Learning: Some Preliminary Insights

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Abstract

The introduction of social networking in language learning is becoming increasingly important, and as a result, teachers require new skills in their newfound roles as moderators of informal online learning. This paper presents details about a two-year EU Lifelong Learning funded project, namely JOYN 2.0, which aims to promote language learning through social networking <http://www.joynlanguages.eu/>. The JOYN 2.0 projects examines the process of moderating language learning through the use of social networking by effectively using on-line tools, collaborative learning and autonomous learning opportunities; by enhancing the role of media, particularly on-line media and social media, in language learning; by strengthening cooperation between social media/networks, commercial providers of on-line learning opportunities and language teaching professionals; and by using more fully the potential of (a) on-line learning resources (b) collaborative learning in social networks; (c) tools such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP).

There are six partners involved in this project stemming from Ireland, UK, Lithuania, Latvia and Greece. Our task in the UK was to train language teachers for the role as moderators in an informal online learning environment. This was achieved by means of a two-day training event. The next step was for the partner institutions to set up social networks in their respective languages for online learning. To this end, this paper presents the processes involved in this project and some preliminary findings regarding student/moderator reactions towards the use of social networks for language learning.

1. Introduction

Since the emergence of the Web, we have shifted from the world of Web 1.0 to that of 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005 [1]; O'Reilly and Battelle, 2009 [2]), where we now have diverse types of social networking (Facebook, Myspace), new authoring tools (Blogs, Wikis), and other types of social media (Twitter (microblogging), Second Life, and social bookmarking). It appears that technology is part and parcel of everyday life, and it has been argued that the use of such technological innovations in all aspects of life (not only education) 'shows no signs of abating' (Conole, 2008: 124 [3]; see also Arnold and Ducate, 2006 [4], and for an excellent overview of current technologies for second language learning, see Levy, 2009 [5]). Inherent in such innovations is the notion of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which has been described as '[o]ne of the most promising forums for fostering dialogue' (Wade and Fauske, 2004: 134 [6]), and is celebrated for offering a great deal of information on the behaviour of humans as well as language use (Herring, 2007) [7]. Through online learning environments, there are possibilities for informal and autonomous learning, and the literature suggests that with the manifestation of Web 2.0 tools, the move into the social side of learning and interacting has become common (Meskill, 2009) [8]. With this in mind, the introduction of social networking in language learning is becoming increasingly important, and as a result, teachers require new skills in their newfound roles as moderators of informal online learning. To this end, this paper details the JOYN 2.0 project, which aims to facilitate language learning and moderating via social networks and social media.

2. The JOYN 2.0 project

The JOYN 2.0 project is a two-year EU Lifelong Learning funded project (for the period November 2010 to April 2013), which aims to promote language learning through social networking <http://www.joynlanguages.eu/>. There are six partners involved in this project, namely Latvian Television (LTV); Baltic Bright Consulting and Training (Latvia); The Social Innovation Fund (Lithuania); AAC Global (Finland); AEOLIS-Cultural Development Society (Greece); The Granary Language Learning Institute (Ireland); and the University of Hull (UK). The JOYN 2.0 project examines the process of moderating language learning through the use of social networking by effectively using on-line tools, collaborative learning and autonomous learning opportunities; by enhancing the role of media, particularly on-line media and social media, in language learning; by strengthening cooperation between social media/networks, commercial providers of on-line learning opportunities and language teaching professionals; and by using more fully the potential of (a) on-line learning resources (b) collaborative learning in social networks; (c) tools such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP).

The target groups include language learners who wish to communicate with on-line tutors and other learners in social networks to support their learning process, as well as language teachers and trainers who wish to gain experience as on-line tutors and informal facilitators of language learning (See <http://www.joynlanguages.eu/>).

3. Project goals

One of the proposed outputs for this project was to develop and publish guidelines for language tutors who act as on-line moderators. These guidelines have been drafted, and allocated to the language teachers involved. Another key goal was to train language teachers (representing English, Russian, Latvian, Swedish, Finnish, and Lithuanian languages) for the role of learning facilitators, which was achieved by means of a two-day training event held in the Department of Modern Languages, at the University of Hull. The third phase of the project was to organise groups of language learners in different social networks and provide on-line tutoring for these learners. This stage of the project is currently under way, and will be briefly returned to in the following section. The final stage includes describing and publishing the experiences of language learning through social networks based on feedback from learners and tutors, which is due towards the end of the project. As well as this, the project will provide new on-line language learning resources made up of silent videos produced by LTV (a snapshot of which can be seen below) and applicable to any language, and also learner success stories and experiences in language learning through social networking.

Figure 1: LTV Video for language learning (tourism)



The following section briefly outlines the preliminary results of two of the key outputs, namely the moderator training session, and the social networks currently in use.

4. Preliminary findings

4.1 Moderator training

As was noted, a training event was held for fifteen teachers from JOYN 2.0 partner countries. This event included sessions on Web 2.0 and language learning, language learning within social networking sites, advising for language learning, and monitoring and evaluating online learning, and was facilitated by members of the University of Hull team. The main aim of these sessions was to provide the teachers with sufficient information so they could explore the tools from a pedagogical stance, and offer and share suggestions and advice with each other for their future adoption of the tools for language advising and facilitating. The workshops aimed to find a balance between the theory behind the use of online tools, the practical element of using such tools, and a space for critical appraisal and reflection, as well offering advice on being a facilitator within an online environment. All workshops were interactive and hands-on in order to facilitate debate, discussion and investigation. From the questionnaires distributed after the training event, variance was noted in the teachers' technological skills and competencies, for example one rated their computer skills as 'poor'; three as 'adequate'; five as 'good'; three as 'very good'; and two as 'excellent'. Moreover, when asked what their expectations of the workshop were, the use of technology was the most prominent, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Teacher expectations

Expectations	No. of participants
To learn how to use social networking and Web 2.0 tools for teaching and learning	13
To gain new ideas for teaching and learning	1
To experience the usefulness of technologies for language teaching and learning	1
To understand the tools in terms of their application	1
To share knowledge and experience between teachers	1

When asked whether these expectations were met, 71% agreed that they had been met in that they were offered theoretical and practical experience; however, 29% noted that the expectations were partly met, as they felt they needed more practice to fully appreciate the tools. This thus highlights the importance of this stage of the project, while it also stresses the need for teachers, educators and moderators to not only understand the rationale and implications of using Web 2.0 tools, but also gain practical experience in using them. Furthermore, when asked which of the sessions were most relevant to them, there were mixed reactions, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Reactions to seminars

Seminars ¹	Very useful	Useful	Neutral	Less useful	Not useful
What do you know about Web 2.0?	3	6	6	-	-
Web 2.0: A new way of constructing knowledge	7	4	4	-	-
Exploring Web 2.0 tools for language learning	10	4	-	-	-
Social networking sites and language learning	11	4	-	-	-
The CEFR and ELP, and Web 2.0 tools	5	6	3	1	-
Teaching languages online: Previous experience	5	6	1	-	3
Advising skills	6	4	3	1	-
Planning for learning: Needs analysis	8	2	3	2	-
Monitoring learning	8	2	3	1	-
Evaluating learning	9	2	3	1	-

Clearly, the majority of teachers found the sessions related to using technologies useful and very useful, while the sessions concerning the skills needed for online moderating generated more varied reactions. This could be due to the fact that the teachers are slightly more comfortable in their roles as

¹ Some teachers did not complete the questionnaire in full, therefore totals do not always amount to fifteen.

teachers and moderators, and find the learning of the different tools more worthwhile, which is also reinforced by the expectations presented earlier. Once the training sessions were complete, the teachers then began setting up their own social networks, details of which are outlined in the following section.

4.2 Social networks²

At this stage of the project, not all partner institutions have established social networks, however, this section provides a brief overview of the work being done thus far. The teachers/moderators have chosen to use a number of tools with their students, namely Facebook, Blogs, Skype, Livemocha, Edmodo, and Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). The main uses of these tools were to contact, communicate and have discussions with students; to share resources and activities; to share links for students to follow and then discuss; and to make announcements, an example of which can be seen below.

Figure 2: Facebook page for sharing activities (The Social Innovation Fund (SIF))



From the initial feedback from those involved, the following table presents the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using social networking for moderating language learning.

Table 3: Preliminary reactions to social networking for language learning/moderating

Pros	Cons
Allow for communication outside the class	Students use these tools for socialising (not learning)
Promote autonomous learning	Some students do not want to study publically
Less pressure online	Lack of knowledge on the use of the tools
Facilitate easy and direct communication	Moderator lack of confidence
Flexibile	Different time zone issues
Authenticity of language learning contexts	Technical aspects (language characters)
Engaging and entertaining environments	Information overload
Promote continuity after lessons	Maintaining motivation
Allow inclusion of various media	F2F contact is also required (blended learning)
	Lack of quality in student posts/discussions

² Many thanks to all the partners involved in this project (Latvian Television; Baltic Bright Consulting and Training; The Social Innovation Fund; AAC Global; AEOLIS-Cultural Development Society; and The Granary Language Learning Institute) for providing feedback from the initial stages of their teachers’ social networking endeavours.

As can be seen, there are both advantages and disadvantages for the moderators, and those which appear to cause problems are related to technological skills, and motivation. From these preliminary findings, it becomes apparent that we need to explore ways to further advise both students and moderators on the optimal employment of these tools for learning purposes, which could in turn increase motivation, and confidence.

5. Conclusions

While this project is still ongoing, we can state that thus far the training sessions proved fruitful, and the social networking groups are working well, with both learners and teachers/moderators gaining practice and experience. Furthermore, it has been suggested that for language professionals it became apparent 'that CMC could potentially answer two needs at once: it could be the means through which teaching occurred, and it could be an end in itself. Learners could engage with the communicative aspect of their study by exchanging language online rather than in conversation classes, as they had done hitherto' (Lamy and Hampel, 2007: 7) [9], something which is indeed evident in the feedback from teachers/moderators presented in Table 3. What this project offers is a pedagogical focus on tools that are often being used outside of education. This is deemed important because 'The reality is that computer technology is very much part of students' lives, and therefore, the challenge for teachers is to help them make the best use of the technology as lifelong [...] language learners' (Chapelle and Jamieson, 2008: 214) [10], something which this project endeavours to promote. It is for these reasons that a project of this kind is both worthwhile and exciting.

References

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