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## CHAPTER TEN

# TASK-BASED DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGES STUDENTS' CRITICAL DIGITAL MULTILITERACIES AND CYBERGENRE AWARENESS

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### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses the need for both undergraduate languages students and the staff who teach them to engage with digital literacies and cybergenres with particular reference to the Higher Education sector in the United Kingdom (UK). Such engagement can promote critical and academic literacy in students and help them to 'read' and decode a complex and globally connected world.

The chapter also explores the tensions that can arise between the academic and the social uses of the various e-learning platforms available at the beginning of the new millennium and proposes that for the purpose of developing critical academic digital literacy and cybergenre awareness, a compromise must be reached. It would be difficult to integrate the experience of all the (ever-changing) cybertextualities available on the World Wide Web into the academic curriculum. It is suggested that teachers could maximise the use of institutional proprietary systems (like Virtual Learning Environments – VLEs - and e-portfolios) to develop students' hypertextual awareness. This is because proprietary systems make formal socio-collaborative assessment, metacognition and coherent curriculum delivery more manageable. However, teachers should also allow for students to be creative and make use of other e-tools available on the World

Wide Web to explore new multiliteracies and textualities (both oral and written) via carefully designed e-tasks.

## 1. Introduction

In April 2009 an official video message by the then UK Prime Minister (PM) Gordon Brown was uploaded on *YouTube* by the press office of the government, number 10 Downing Street. In it, Mr Brown was trying to defuse the scandal of the lavish and sometimes extravagant expenses claimed by Members of Parliament. However, those 3 minutes and 28 seconds of video-cast badly backfired on his already low popularity as it was obvious that the PM, to put it in Prenski's words (2001), was not a "digital native". He obviously did not know how to engage with this new medium and his "screen literacy" and "electric rhetoric" (Welch 1999) were poor. The Press Office at Downing Street also demonstrated a certain level of naivety in terms of digital literacy as it miscalculated the amount of negative feedback that the video-cast would attract and the fact that such negative feedback would be available there for everybody in the world to see. For this reason the unusual measure of blocking all comments to the video-cast was imposed (see *YouTube*, MPs Expenses 2009). The incident caused some political commentators to ponder whether *YouTube* would be the last nail on the beleaguered Labour government's coffin and to ask: "Does YouTube have the power to finish off Gordon Brown?" (Sparrow 2009).

Higher education professionals who engage with e-learning innovation and digital multiliteracies can at times make mistakes similar to the one illustrated above in order to follow trends rather than adhering to pedagogical principles. A certain tension can arise between staff and students with reference to the traditional written and oral academic genres needed for university and the social-networking use of the cybergenres available online today. However, a mastery of the new genres is necessary to operate effectively in higher education and both staff and students must therefore engage with the new digital tools available to maximise their educational potential.

With reference to the need to engage with digital multiliteracies, this study will not side with either the optimists – for example Negroponte (1995), whose digital enthusiasm is amply documented on the web – nor the apocalyptic – for example the French philosopher Virilio, who talks about the irreversible and noxious pollution caused by all things digital to our sensory ecology (1998). Nor, in terms of new linguistic genres, will it side with the enthusiasts, who are already classifying what they see as new varieties of English on the net: "Netspeak" (Crystal 2006).

This chapter attempts a balanced approach to the acquisition of digital multiliteracies, that aims at identifying higher education languages students' modes of engagement with e-learning environments in an academic setting. It evaluates how dedicated courses and tasks were designed to help them with becoming critical and learning to maximize the technology available to them to enhance both their learning experience while at university and their professional opportunities after graduation. It explores how carefully selected e-learning tools, such as the e-portfolio *PebblePad* and the *Wimba* voice tools, can be used to encourage students to reflect on the learning process and develop autonomous and metacognitive abilities as advocated by Villanueva Alfonso (2006, 10). There is evidence that metacognition can enhance learning, be conducive to the understanding of difficult concepts and support students' autonomy (Mason and Rennie 2008, 136–9; Moon 2004, 86; Orsini-Jones 2008). It is also important to stress that digital literacy is “about mastering ideas, not key-strokes” (Gilster 1997, 1, quoted in Martin and Madigan 2006, XXVII) and that it requires a certain mastery of different and emerging digital “genres”.

This paper however sides with the optimists on one point: educators should be aware of the fact that the acquisition of multiliteracies and the ability to move across different genres (digital and not digital) can be empowering for students. Freire and Macedo (1987), quoted in Hokstad and Dons 2007, maintain that literacy is “the ability, the possibility and will to read the world”. Warschauer and Ware quoting Castells (2008, 228) highlight that digital competences can enable all learners to be “interacting” rather than be passively “interacted”. The development of critical thinking and autonomous learning can be fostered in an educational environment that makes effective use of the available technology while at the same time raising students' awareness of the new digital genres that are emerging.

## **2. Developing students' digital critical literacy: themes and issues**

Recent studies have come to the conclusion that the Prenski's “digital native” is more a myth than a reality and that although undergraduate students are used to utilising a variety of e-tools, many lack the analytical skills required to process the information retrieved in a critical way (Mason and Rennie 2008, 134-5). Students have ICT technical skills, but lack in academic digital literacy. Also, there still are students who do not want to engage with technology in a critical way in an educational setting (Atwood 2009). This is not a new issue, however in the UK it has been exacerbated by the widening participation/widening access agenda intro-

duced by the British government in the late 1990s (HEA, Widening Participation). This is because there is a greater diversification amongst the students who are entering Higher Education in comparison with previous decades. Current students have differing levels of prior knowledge and varying attitudes and motivation towards both learning in general and e-learning in particular.

The previously mentioned need to engage with new media to “read the world” is the driver for the integration of technology into the higher education curriculum and, as stressed above, there is robust evidence that it can empower the learners and foster autonomy. Two examples that stand out are reported by Warschauer (2006) and Warschauer and Grimes (2007). In the first one, Warschauer illustrates how students can be engaged in new literacies with the FRESA (strawberry) project (Warschauer 2006, 6). In this project students had to work on a real setting which was very close to the socio-economic reality in which they were living, as many of their parents were strawberry pickers. They had real motivation to carry out interviews and research on the socio-economic reality explored and then also started a distant e-learning supported language exchange with students in Puerto Rico to compare the socio-economic situation for coffee and strawberry pickers in the two countries. The use of digital technology enhanced both their level of “traditional” literacies and their autonomous learning skills.

In the second case study, Warschauer and Grimes refer to an example illustrated by Bloch (Bloch 2007, in Warschauer and Grimes 2007, 8). They discuss how the use of blogs helped Abdullah, a Somali refugee student who had emigrated to the United States, to improve his academic writing skills in a composition class. Metacognition is one of the motivational drivers highlighted in this study that also stressed how blogging:

should be seen as not only a pathway to academic writing for students but also as an important new literacy act in its own regard, enabling students to become “contributors and not just consumers of information on the World Wide Web” (Bloch 2007, 138 in Warschauer and Grimes 2007, 9).

The importance of the integration of technology into the higher education curriculum has moreover been highlighted in the context of providing students not only with academic literacy, but also to make them aware of the requirements of the world of work. Examples of how the use of technology can be maximized to enhance languages students’ academic and professional skills are illustrated for example in Orsini-Jones (2004), a study that also proposes that metacognition and reflective practice sup-

ported by e-learning tools are conducive to critical thinking and autonomy for learners.

It could be argued that the advent of Web 2.0 technology is making the development of digital critical literacies more urgent as students, now exposed to a multitude of new information, must quickly take decisions on the value of that information. Siemens (2004, quoted in Mason and Rennie 2008,19) maintains that we are now moving away from “constructivism” and into “connectivism”. Connectivism requires rapid response and the abilities to synthesise and find connections and patterns:

Decision making is itself a learning process. Choosing what to learn and the meaning of incoming information is seen through the lens of a shifting reality. While there is a right answer now, it may be wrong tomorrow due to the alterations in the information climate affecting the decision (Siemens 2004, in Mason and Rennie 2008, 19).

Web 2.0 has also brought about another variable: the private/social engagement of students with platforms such as *Facebook*. So, while between 1995-2005 educators could still motivate their students with new e-tools students had not encountered before (as illustrated in Orsini-Jones 2004 with the VLE WebCT), the situation is now reversed. It is educators who have to keep up with the tools the students already use in every-day life. Research carried out for JISC by Conole (2008) indicates that students can “resent” what they perceive to be institutional e-tools. The tensions that are emerging in the way students position themselves towards the acquisition of critical digital literacies in higher education in the UK (see for example Orsini-Jones 2010, 352 and Holt and Koehler-Ridley 2010) reflect the content of a talk given by Hartley (2007) and well summarised by Samuels (2008). Hartley suggests that the students’ learning experience has become a “collision of learning spaces”, as students these days have to journey amongst three main e-learning zones:

- The formal, public, controlled. The institutional world of control and individual assessment, the VLE (*the museum*);
- The collaborative, informal, exploratory. The world of facilitation and enquiry, Google, wikis, *Facebook* and *MySpace* (*the playground*); and
- The personal, private and exclusive. The iPod (*the refuge*).

Hartley sees education as the “new fight in the playground” (2007). One of the main problems encountered by educators in the second decade of the new millennium is that some students associate personalisation and autonomous learning only with leisure, rather than with professional and academic development planning and struggle to grasp the differences amongst the “discourses” of each e-learning space used. This confusion al-

so results in an inability to handle the different “genres” of academic literacy (both digital and not) required at university level.

It is argued here that because of these tensions amongst the various learning zones available to students and the need for academic staff to promote students’ critical skills and digital literacies while at the same time delivering a coherent academic programme with clear learning outcomes, staff need to make clear choices. It is proposed that learning at university level takes place more in an “interactive museum” and in a “secret garden” than in a “playground”. The need to assess the students’ work requires lectures to adopt suitable e-tools to support this. Also, contrary to what Hartley is advocating, the will of undergraduate students to keep their academic learning spaces separate from their playgrounds (which is amply documented in the literature, including in Hartley 2007) should be respected. The examples illustrated below show how various software and network tools were used to enhance students’ digital literacies and genre awareness.

### **3. Developing “connectivism” and genre awareness amongst languages students at university level**

Practising a genre is almost like playing a game, with its own rules and conventions. Established genre participants, both writers and readers, are like skilled players, who succeed by their manipulation and exploitation of, rather than a strict compliance with, the rules of the game. It is not simply a matter of learning the language or even learning the rules of the game, it is more like acquiring the rules of the game in order to be able to exploit and manipulate them to fulfil professional and disciplinary purposes. (Bhatia 1999, 25-6 in Paltridge 2006, 86).

In this section a variety of e-learning tasks aimed at maximising digital tools to enhance students’ professional and academic skills and literacies will be illustrated. The tasks also show how new digital “genres” can be practised in the foreign language studied, with the support of technology. All the tasks described here are built around the affordances of the software used bearing in mind the overall principles below (Orsini-Jones and Sinclair 2008, 76):

An e-learning activity must be very carefully designed and is defined as a *specific interaction of learner(s) with other(s) using specific tools and resources, orientated towards specific outcomes*”. (Beetham 2007, 28, italics in original)

As implied by McLuhan (1967) the medium (or media) chosen for the task affects the students' learning experience and cognitive journey.

Learning, as argued by Vigotsky, "is a socially mediated activity in the first instance, with concepts and skills being internalized only after they have been mastered in a collaborative context". (Vigotsky 1986, cited in Beetham 2007, 36).

The e-tools discussed are mainly proprietary systems acquired by the institution – Coventry University -, as opposed to freeware available on-line like *Facebook* or the various blogging tools on the World Wide Web. This was a conscious and deliberate choice as the process of assessment would become unmanageable if students were to submit work for formative or summative feedback in a range of different tools/styles. The latter would be even more problematic if the work were intended to be "private" in some way as a multitude of passwords would be required by both the students and the assessor to be able to access and comment upon each others' work (on this point see Sutherland 2009, quoted in Orsini-Jones 2010, 346). However, these proprietary tools can be linked to the World Wide Web and students can access variety of "cybertexts", both oral and written and/or move in and out of the VLE, as illustrated below with the *YouTube* video that students created and attached to a page in the webfolio written within a proprietary e-portfolio.

The e-learning tasks illustrated below have all been developed via cycles of action-research carried out between academic years 2002-2009 (McNiff 1988; Orsini-Jones and Jones 2007). The students involved were studying languages on a Bachelor of Art Honours Degree at Coventry University in the UK (three years in Coventry and one abroad in the country(ies) of the target language(s) studied).

#### **4. Designing e-learning tasks to foster autonomy and multiliteracy awareness amongst learners**

This section illustrates tailor-made e-learning tasks that proved to be successful to foster learners' autonomy and multiliteracy awareness. Both qualitative and quantitative data (mixed method approach) were collected to measure success, with a stronger stress on qualitative data ("QUAL-quant" model, see Dörnyei 2007). Focus group interviews and semi-structured interviews were carried out with the relevant students at the end of each academic year. The interview transcripts were coded and these results were "triangulated" with the students' marks. Students also provided feedback via anonymous module evaluation questionnaires.



The three proprietary systems used were the VLE Blackboard Vista (formerly WebCT Campus), the Wimba Voice Tools and the e-portfolio *PebblePad*, the latter two being both distributed from within the VLE.

#### **4.1. VLEs and the genre of the hypertextual text analysis for translation purposes**

As previously discussed (Orsini-Jones and De 2007), VLEs are subject to a lot of criticism these days, possibly because they are being mainly used as tools for the uploading of administration-related information and as static content repositories (see Beetham and Sharpe 2007 on this point). The fact that they facilitated a major interactive change in the Higher Education learning landscape in the late 90s is being overlooked nowadays. Asynchronous discussion forums, constructivist individual and group project work and live chats were pioneered with VLEs. As stressed in Beetham (2007, 33), technology will enhance the learning environment only if skilled practitioners can put in place the necessary support measures for learners to make the most of it. Students should therefore be supported in:

Taking responsibility—thinking about what they are doing and why.  
 Planning—setting targets and identifying the means to achieve them.  
 Reflecting—thinking about what they have done, are doing and are aiming to do.

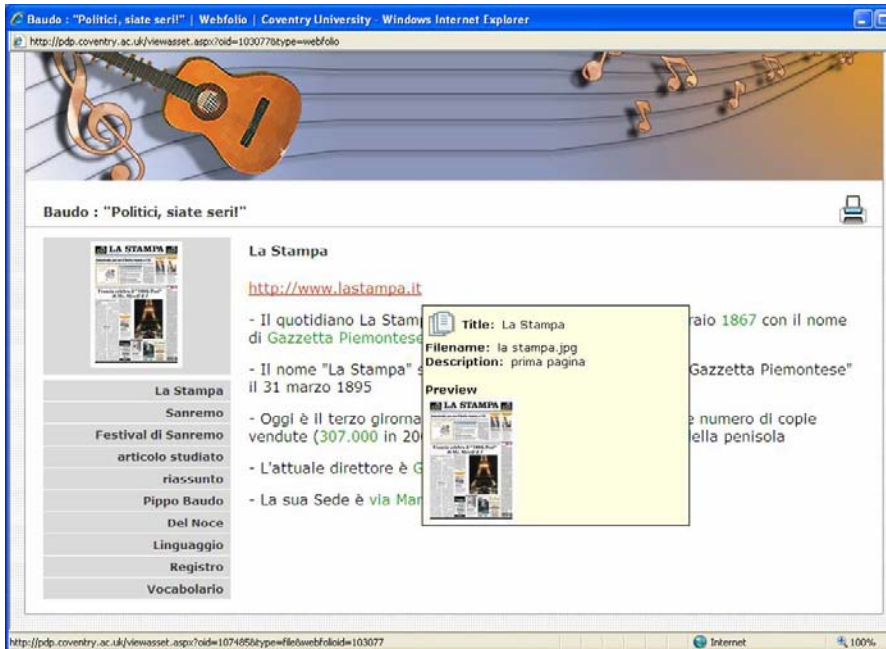
Even if rudimentary when compared with the more advanced forms of socio-collaborative software available these days (e.g. *Facebook*) a VLE allows students to (Orsini-Jones 2004, 194):

Find more opportunities to plan their discourse.  
 Reflect on their production.  
 Compare their production with that of their peers and their lecturers.  
 Share electronic knowledge (students have suggested useful sites to each other with direct links in discussion forum).  
 Feel that they share a more democratic setting with their lecturers who become their peers in discussion forum.  
 Acquire useful digital and transferable skills.

It was in fact thanks to the affordances offered via the VLE that it was possible to introduce students to collaborative hypertextual analysis in their Italian translation module between academic years 1998-2009. Following the example set by Landow (e.g. Landow 1994, 2006), at Coventry

University students were encouraged to “reconfigure texts” in a digital way in order to understand and deconstruct their discourse for translation purposes. Students first of all studied issues relating to the translation of texts from Italian into English and vice-versa. Such discussion was underpinned by the analysis of extracts from theoretical books about translation studies (for example Ulrych 1992) and face-to-face translation practice/seminars. In addition, students could make use of a resource area created within the VLE with direct links to Italian and English websites and to online dictionaries and corpora. Groups were formed early in the academic year so that the students could start to engage in their hypertextual translation project. The minutes for the seminar discussions about translation, in Italian, were typed directly onto the VLE’s discussion forum by each group of students, so that both lecturers and students could have a record of what had been said and students could swap translation versions online. Students had subsequently to create assessed group “hypertext translation artefacts” analysing comparative issues in translation into the shared content area of the VLE and to present such artefacts to each other in micro-teaching assessed translation sessions. The difference between Figures 10-1 and 10-2 consists mainly in the fact that while students needed the help of a technologist for their translation projects between 1998-2004 (Figure 10-2), their technology awareness together with the adoption of easier web creation tools mean that they can create their own hypertexts in a relatively easy way without any technical assistance (Figure 10-1).

Students commented positively on experiencing the text in a hypertextual version that they had created collaboratively. The process had enabled them to actively engage with its layers and choose their reading and analysis path through it. Students also commented that the shared hypertextual analysis had enabled them to identify linguistic features that they would not otherwise have noticed.



**Figure 10-1.** Translation Final Year Hypertextual Group Project created by students with the e-portfolio *PebblePad* (webfolio tool)

Blackboard Vista Enterprise License

Build Teach Student View 340LAI - Italian Language (Double) 2008 - 2009

Your location: Home Page > Jack

Jack Frusciante è uscito dal gruppo (di E. Brizzi)

[stile/registro]

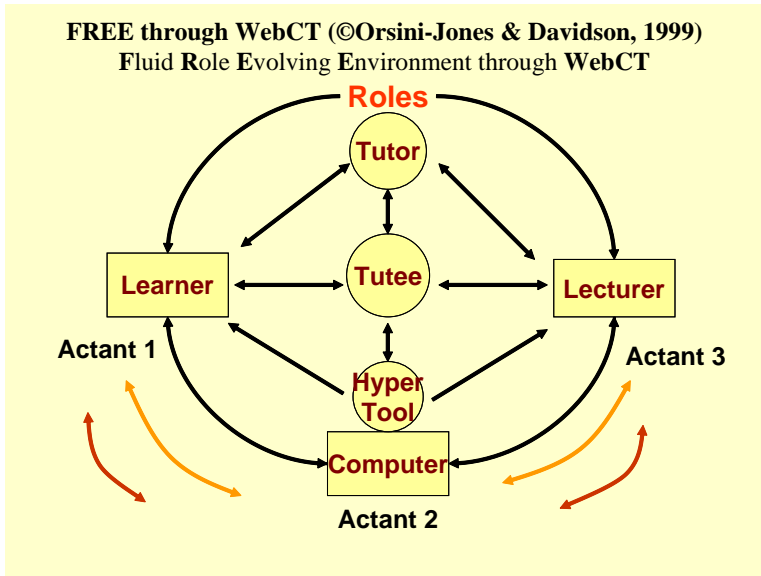
Intro: presto sarebbe volato via pure quello stupido febbraio

presto sarebbe volato via pure quello [stupido febbraio](#) e il [vecchio Alex](#) si sentiva profondamente infelice ma in modo distaccato, come se la sua vita appartenesse - sensazione fin troppo tipica e cruda [ne convengo](#) - a qualcun altro ma [non ghignate](#), per favore, poiché all'epoca [il vecchio Alex non aveva ancora compiuto diciott'anni](#) e in quei giorni il cielo di Bologna era espressivo come un blocco di [ghisa sorda](#) e da [simili espressività non avreste potuto aspettarvi](#) niente di esaltante, neppure uno di quei bei [temporaloni definitivi](#) che lavano le strade e da quasi due settimane la città giaceva tramortita sotto una [pioggia esangue senza nome](#) quale conoscente del vecchio Alex e persona informata dei fatti mi limiterò ad aggiungere che una certa storia con una ragazza gli appariva ormai sfumata nel ricordo, qualcita dallo [squallore sbalorditivo](#) della vita di tutti i giorni:

soggettività e confidenzialità del testo "non ghignate", "ne convengo", "non avreste potuto aspettarvi" rendono di nuovo il rapporto diretto col lettore.

**Figure 10-2. Translation Final Year Hypertextual Project created by students in HTML with the help of a learning technologist**

The above task reflected a learning model where the PC was at the centre of the students' experience, as illustrated in the FREE (Fluid Role Exchange Environment) model developed in the late 90s (Figure 10-3):



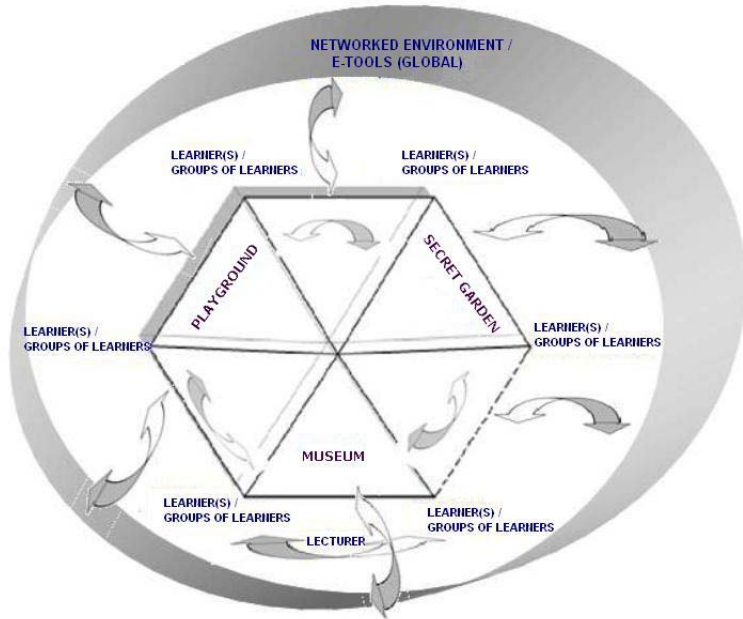
**Figure 10-3. The FREE**

The FREE – Fluid Role Evolving Environment – through WebCT Model (© Orsini-Jones and Davidson 1999)

The FREE model above is constructivist as there is a permanent contribution to both design and learning process brought in by learners’ feedback. The FREE is also a “fluid pool” where main actors (learner, lecturer and computer) exchange roles. The computer is a “pedagogic tool” (Papert 1980), but also a “tutee” (moulded by students and staff inputs) AND tutor (autonomous learning/self-access). The lecturer is a “tutor”, but also a “tutee”: learning from students’ feedback/inputs, reflecting upon feedback.

It can be argued that the cyberspace of the Web 2.0 tools (see Warschauer and Grimes 2007 for a good explanation of the transition from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 technology for language learning) has caused a change in the model, in so far as the amount of texts available to students have multiplied and have also become hybrid in nature. The hypertextual interaction is therefore not limited to the classroom (whether real or virtual) any longer, it has taken global dimensions, as illustrated in the revised FREEE (Fluid Role-Evolving E-learning Environment) below (Figure 10-4 that aims at reflecting better the new age of connectivity

(Siemens 2004). Moreover, the boundaries between private and public areas have become blurred and this can sometimes cause academic literacy issues amongst students (Hartley 2007 and Mason and Rennie 2008).



**Figure 10-4. The FREEE – Fluid Role Evolving Elearning Environment (© Orsini-Jones 2009, in Orsini-Jones 2010, 357)**

#### **4.2. The Wimba tools and the genre of oral/written digital discourse**

The Wimba tools are embedded into the VLE at Coventry University but could also be used as stand-alone web tools. They are supported by VoIP (Voice-over Internet Protocol) technology and allow staff and students to engage in a variety of online spoken activities. The creation of these tools (originally by a French firm in 2000) opened up the welcome opportunity for language teachers to engage students in the practice of collaborative spoken discourse both at a distance and in the classroom. This is made possible by tools such as “Voice Board” for asynchronous audio discussion and “Voice Email” (both with added text box facility, see

Orsini-Jones 2006). “Wimba classroom” has moreover given a new “spin” to video-conferencing as it allows students to interact in real-time at a distance in a classroom setting. The tutor and the students can also display material or websites on a split screen that all participants can view even on different sites and in different countries.

#### **4.2.1. Beginners e-learning tasks: practising “spoken texts” – Unit 1**

The first example of multiliteracy practice facilitated by the voice tools is that of the “reflective” beginners’ class, unit 1: “Greetings, getting to know each other and reflection on task”. The outcomes of this unit are that students first of all learn how to introduce themselves in the target language (Italian in the example provided). Secondly they engage in socio-collaborative oral reflection—in English—about the new skills acquired in the unit (“learning how to learn a language”). They can choose to keep their blog private or to publish it to a shared “gateway” that everybody can see either in the VLE or in the e-portfolio *PebblePad* (more details on this piece of software are provided below). The Italian teaching unit has been regularly tested with level 1 beginner students of Italian on the university-wide languages programme at Coventry University.

Summary of the e-learning tasks delivered via the VLE with Wimba and *PebblePad*. Students:

- Listen to the audio instructions containing information on the activities to carry out (voice message created by the teacher using Voice Authoring/Recorder);
- Read blogs written by famous people on themselves (pre-selected by the tutor);
- Practise speaking in Italian about themselves (with Voice Board);
- Practise reflecting in English about the skills learned (with Voice Board/Voice Direct and written discussion board);
- Share audio-discussion postings and engage in peer-learning with peers both on campus and on remote site—tandem learning with students at a university in Italy learning English and or Socrates exchange students on campus (with Voice Board and written discussion board).
- Assess their understanding of the new vocabulary learned with the relevant, tailor-made audio multiple-choice quiz.
- Learn how to turn-take and improve their listening and speaking skills both in English and in the target language.

Control Panel | 170101 Italian Language Ab Initio (Double) | View | Designer Options

Course Menu | Homepage | Prima settimana - Audio con Marina

These are the voice tool activities for week 1 - Queste sono le attività audio per la prima settimana

Listen to the instructions for this task - introduzioni: Presentatevi: Come ti chiami? Di dove sei? Dove abiti?

Now record your short introduction about yourself here in voice discussion - discussione

ciattiamo

Please listen to the instructions about this week's activity in the announcement, then record the presentation about yourself (in Italian) and the thoughts about the task on voice board (in English). Listen to all recordings before Friday at 10, in preparation for the live conference to discuss them.

Topic 1. Greetings/Reflections on task

**Figure 10-5. E-learning tasks for beginners unit 1**

With the above activity students learn how to engage with the new genre of the digital spoken discourse in an academic setting both in their native language and in the target language studied (Figure 10-5 above). Staff and students have then access to recordings that can be analysed again to highlight relevant features of the target language studied. These tools offer new ways of studying a rather neglected area of foreign language discourse: that of spoken grammar (for further information on the discourse of spoken grammar see McCarthy and Carter 1995).

Moreover, by engaging in the above e-learning tasks students develop the following academic and professional skills:

- Communication (both target language and English).
- Digital literacy.
- Learning to learn (reflectiveness).
- Peer learning/team work.

#### **4.2.2. Advanced level e-learning task: the journalist's report**

The second example of activity carried out with the Wimba tools is for advanced level students studying Italian language and Society in their final year of a BA Honours four year degree (with one year spent abroad). The course covers both socio-political issues relating to Italy



and translation skills. The class is normally a mixed one, as half of the students are native speakers of English and half are Socrates students in exchange from Italian universities. The activity was designed bearing this in mind.

Prior activities involve studying the style and register of different daily newspapers in both Italy and the UK. Students must read online articles on the set subject in preparation for the task. Other online links and World Wide Web tools are used too, such as academic electronic journal articles on the topic being discussed.

Each student is told that they are a journalist from different English newspapers and that they have to report on a lecture by a famous professor in the style of that newspaper. Students then attend a one-hour face-to-face lecture on Berlusconi—the Italian Prime Minister—delivered in Italian by a member of staff (the “famous professor”).

Students are subsequently given thirty minutes to summarise the lecture into English in the appropriate journalistic style and work in pairs (one English student and one Italian student). The English students then record their “reportage” on Wimba voice board as a “mock” telephone call to the editor but providing bullet points in writing on the voice board writing pad.

All students can then listen to the news reports and record their comments on their style and register in “Voice board”. English students speak in Italian and Italian students in English. The activities can also be viewed and commented upon by students in the partner universities in Italy. The whole oral thread can moreover be exported and used for staff development/error analysis/discourse analysis purposes by the staff involved. Students can also download the discussion thread to their iPods (or equivalent devices).



**Figure 10-6. The “journalist’s report” on Wimba Voice Board**

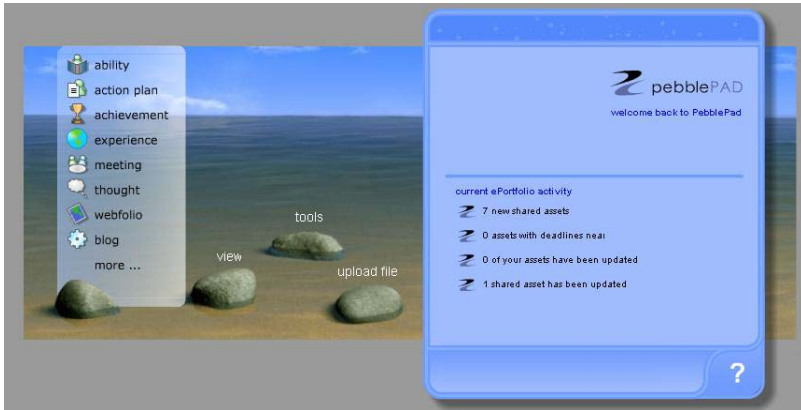
With the above activity students practise the following (Figure 10-6 above):

- Listening and comprehension.
- Speaking.
- Interpreting and translating.
- Summary.
- Critical and analytical thinking.
- Self-and peer-evaluation.
- Digital oral and written discourse.
- Style/register.
- Tandem learning.

#### **4.2.3. The “genre” of metacognitive cyber learning: the Group Grammar Project for first year students with the e-portfolio *PebblePad***

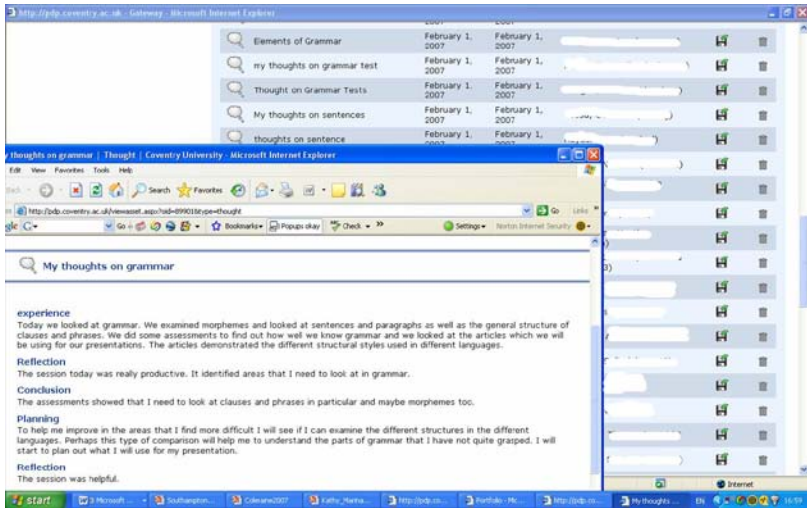
The e-portfolio *PebblePad* was developed in the University of Wolverhampton (UK) in partnership with *Pebble Learning* (2005). It allows users (students and staff) to build a diverse collection of content related to their studies, personal development or continuing professional development. The system provides various structured entry forms designed to accommodate the recording of a range of skills, experiences and reflections such as a record of “thought”, “achievement”, and “action plan” (Figure 10-7). Additionally, students can store a wide range of external file types

in the system. These records and files can be further aggregated into *Webfolios* (personalised websites) that can be shared with an external audience using user-defined permissions to facilitate the gathering of feedback or assessment (Orsini-Jones and De 2007; *PebbleLearning* 2005).



**Figure 10-7. The *PebblePad* interface**

*PebblePAD* facilitates reflection and “metareflection” in various ways. For example, when students create a record of a learning experience, the system requires them to write a title and description for it (so, to reflect on their entry; entries are called “assets” in *PebblePAD*). Secondly, the system provides various structured reflective entry forms. See for example the shared reflections on grammar analysis in the gateway in Figure 10-8.



**Figure 10-8.** “Metareflections” on grammar learning in the *PebblePad* “gateway”

Amongst its many features, *PebblePAD* also provides a blog facility, and allows for the integration of audio-visual content that can be hyper-linked to any entry. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to comment on entries which can be used for peer review, discussion and collaboration providing opportunities for group reflective practice.

The e-portfolio is managed individually by the student, it is private to him or her, but s(he) can choose to share some of her/his entries with peers/tutors. And/or the teacher can ask for some entries to be shared in a web-based “gateway”, which can be public or restricted to the users only. It is this aspect of student-centred control that differentiates *PebblePAD* from a VLE. Tracking of students’ work is not possible in *PebblePAD*. This can be frustrating in terms of research needs of the staff involved, but it is quite empowering for the students.

For all the above reasons, *PebblePAD* was particularly suited, as a piece of software, to encourage students to reflect upon the academic and professional skills developed in mandatory module *Academic and Professional Methods and Approaches*, which counts for 10 ECTS credits at level 1 of the undergraduate programme. It is a module designed to develop both generic and academic digital literacies.

In the first part of the module (term 1) students cover a set of generic academic skills. These include:

- Essay writing.
- Book review writing.
- Referencing using the Harvard style.
- Information retrieval.
- Interpreting and evaluating data.
- Research strategies and associated methodological issues.
- Avoidance of Plagiarism and use of the anti-plagiarism software Turnitin.
- Presentation skills.
- Working in a team.

In the second part (term 2), students focus on the development of languages specific skills. e.g.:

- Language learning skills.
- Grammar (refer to Table 10-3).
- Vocabulary (learning vocabulary, use of corpora and dictionaries/online dictionaries).
- Reading, listening, speaking and writing in the target language.

The module is assessed as follows:

- Coursework 1 (20%), Information retrieval and academic writing online in-class test.
- Coursework 2 (50%) - Group grammar project/webfolio and presentation.
- Coursework 3 (30%) Individual reflective report on the group grammar project.

*The Group Grammar Project* is a rather complex attempt to develop subject-specific skills while consolidating the generic ones covered in the first term in module *Academic Methods and Approaches* (Orsini-Jones and Sinclair 2008). Between academic years 2006-2008, the task involved an analysis of the structure of sentences, clauses, phrases and words in terms of the item immediately below each one on the rank scale and a taxonomy of clauses, phrases, words and morphemes in selected texts (Table 10-1, Crystal 2006).

sentences	morphemes
which are analysed into	which are used to build
clauses	words
which are analysed into	which are used to build
phrases	phrases
which are analysed into	which are used to build
words	clauses
which are analysed into	which are used to build
morphemes	sentences

**Table 10-1. (Crystal 2006, 251). The hierarchical structure of a sentence**

Working in groups, students had to create a website containing linked web pages. In each page they had to analyse a text and deconstruct its grammatical features using the *Webfolio* tool in *PebblePAD* and share it with the rest of the group and tutors via the module’s *Gateway*. Each *Webfolio* had to be presented to the rest of the class by the group which had created it. The same constructivists principles illustrated via the FREE model were applied, with the difference that students could swap files privately.

After the presentation had taken place, students had to write an individual reflective report on the project. The task required students to develop a variety of skills, both academic and professional:

- ICT (web management, file management, discussion tools, importing pictures/audio and video files).
- Language (metagrammatical analysis)
- Presentation.
- Team work.
- Problem solving.

Time management/coping under pressure.

Learning to learn (weekly progress logs on the project; oral group reflective report on the day of the presentation; individual reflective report after the presentation).

Information retrieval and accurate referencing according to the Harvard Style.

The success of the task in terms of effective student learning confirmed that the use of hypertext must be a requirement for “ict-artefacts” created by students. The ability to create and select hypertextual nodes is now both an academic and professional requirement and can encourage students to engage with a critical evaluation of texts at a deeper level (Landow 2006, 44). An example of the students’ work is provided in Figure 10-9: the “Wordies” group’s grammar presentation.



Figure 10-9. The Wordies Grammar Presentation

Most students involved in the Group Grammar Project found the task challenging, but rewarding. However, the less independent students appeared to need further support with becoming better acquainted with the different “discourses” inherent to each of the e-learning spaces that they used and sometimes also struggled with the multitudes of “genres”—digital and not—that they encountered in their first year at university.

There were also interesting developments that illustrated that many students know more about digital literacies and digital genres than their lecturers and appeared to be real “digital natives”. One group in academic year 2007-2008 (“Beauty and no Brains” was the name they chose) produced an outstanding level of reflective entries in their *Webfolio* and had the original idea of adding a hyperlink to a reflective video-diary in the “Big Brother” house style that they recorded in the Languages Centre studio (Beauty and No Brains 2008): Figures 10-10 and 10-11.

In this presentation the Coventry University students demonstrated a better understanding of the digital genre of the *YouTube* video-cast than the Prime Minister Gordon Brown in the example illustrated at the beginning of this chapter.

Grammar project

Group meetings and reflection

At the beginning we decided to make a set of **group rules**, these would help us to get to know each other better. Each member had a chance to add or disagree with the rules, this was important to ensure that everybody took ownership of the project (Corey and Corey 2006).

Also the group met on several occasions to plan and **prepare the grammar presentation** of meetings b

**Meeting on the 30/01/08**

Working together

Beauty not Brains Home Page

English Sentence

Spanish Sentence

French Sentence

Group meetings and reflection

References and Bibliography

Title: Planning 30.01.08

Description: The meeting was the initial meeting for the group. The aim was discuss the logistics of planning meetings and to start to consider an effective work plan.

**Figure 10-10. Extract from the reflective screen-shot of the “Beauty and not Brains” group presentation**





**Figure 10-11. The Big Brother “Grammar House”**

## 5. Conclusion

As discussed at a symposium on digital literacies that took place at the Open University in May 2009 (Digital Literacies in Higher Education 2009), staff who are *www* enthusiasts have to realise that students have to cope with many more academic “genres” and literacies than their pre-*www* predecessors. There is no doubt that equipping students with multiliteracies and genre awareness is a necessity, but all tasks must be carefully structured to avoid information overload and to foster the development of critical hypertextual analysis. At the same time the new cybergenres offer staff and students alike the opportunity to engage with texts—and a variety of new “texts” —in novel ways. What is becoming apparent is that there is now a shift towards the personalisation in a multi-functional way of the e-learning zones that students inhabit. Carefully structured activities that also allow students to be creative and to personalise the e-learning environment can help them both with coping with the various hypertextual dimensions they face in every-day life and to enhance their academic multiliteracy and genre awareness.

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