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Circling the globe: fostering experiential language learning

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Abstract

This paper describes a Computer Supported Experiential Learning project at the University of Central England (UCE), for which a bid has been successful to the UK Higher Education Funding Councils' learning and teaching fund to develop innovative teaching and learning strategies. The project is based upon a well-established curriculum model (Kolb, 1984) which has been adapted by the Learning Methods Unit (LMU) at UCE to include technologies each addressing a particular stage in Kolb's learning cycle. The model recognises that it is insufficient simply to learn new concepts, just as it is insufficient to have an experience in isolation. The learner must make the link between theory and practice through active experimentation and through reflection on the learning process.

1 Introduction

The Computer-Supported Experiential Learning project (CSEL) was launched at UCE in March 1998 by the Learning Methods Unit (LMU). It aims to investigate and evaluate the appropriate use of information and communications technology to improve the quality of student learning. Various projects in different faculties and subject areas have been carried out since the inception of the CSEL project. The Centre for Research into Quality (CRQ), an independent research unit based at UCE, was commissioned to undertake an analysis of the use of information technology for learning and teaching. This paper describes a pilot project in German that took place in the summer semester 2000.

2 Extending Kolb's learning cycle

The project is based upon a well-established curriculum model (Kolb, 1984) which has been adapted by the Learning Methods Unit (LMU) at UCE to include technologies each addressing a particular stage in Kolb's learning cycle (Staley & Eastcott, 1999). Students learn experientially by systematically performing learning activities at each stage of the cycle identified by Kolb as planning, experience, reflection and conceptualisation (Figure 1).

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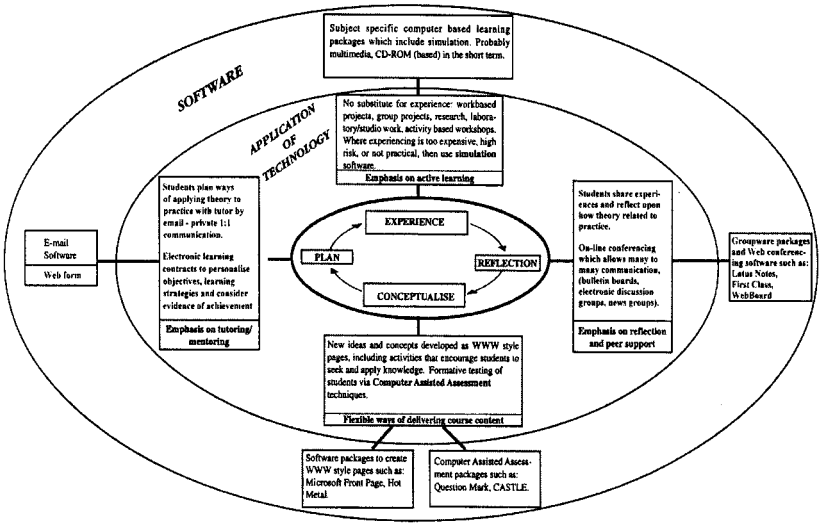


Fig. 1. Kolb's learning cycle.

2.1 Planning for experience

Planning for experience is essential in increasing the awareness of the learning experience. This stage is concerned with methods for preparing learners prior to experiences so that they make the most of those experiences (Kolb, 1984). Traditionally, methods used include guided questions, observation checklists and, most commonly in Higher Education, assessment criteria.

The extension of Kolb's cycle to include technology can be achieved through the use of email in which students plan ways of applying theory to practice with a tutor by private email communication (Staley & Eastcott, 1999). The CSEL project is also investigating the use of electronic learning agreements to encourage the setting of learning objectives, monitoring and evaluating progress.

2.2 Experience

The experience stage in Kolb's original model was concerned with ways of providing classroom-based experiences as substitutes for work or other experience (Kolb, 1984). Staley and MacKenzie (1999) have developed the model further in considering different kinds of experience and their values for the learning process. Real-world experiences, e.g. work-based learning, are seen as providing the best opportunities where theories can be tested and concepts applied to real situations. However, as real life experiences are not normally available to foreign language students in this country, learners need to be provided with 'substitute artificial experiences' that closely mirror tasks they will encounter in real life and develop skills needed in future professional roles. In this model, tutors need to design learning activities that promote 'learning by doing'.

Learning activities based in the virtual world can also help make the 'learning experience' more real. Technologies available in this category include multimedia simulations or games. The CSEL project has employed the use of video clips to bring case studies

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'to life'. Video clips are also used to provide shareable representations of real world practices that can provide the basis for reflection and discussion in the next stage of the model (Goodyear & Steeples 1998).

In German we have made audio and video clips available on-line to provide realistic scenarios and to simulate 'real-life' interactions. Some of the video clips have been recorded on site in Germany, thus providing opportunities for intercultural reflection and language use. Tasks involve group discussions of cultural differences and language strategies employed by native speakers. Open-ended situations require the students to 'take part' in language learning activities. Tasks can be carried out individually or by groups of students via the Website, on campus or at home at a time convenient to students.

2.3 Reflecting upon experience

Reflecting on the learning process has traditionally been achieved through the use of logbooks to record and discuss previous learning experiences. The introduction of Communications and Information Technology (C&IT) has made collaborative reflection possible through the use of asynchronous facilities, such as discussion lists and public folders. These facilities promote discussion, reflection and collaborative learning between tutor and students or between peers. We have favoured the use of WebBoard, which provides a very structured way for reflection as discussion threads can be followed easily. Moderation and assessment of contributions is made easy through extensive tracking facilities. Assessment criteria have been drawn up to encourage initiative and support during the discussions. In German, WebBoard has been used to support students on their residence abroad, as part of the discussion of current topics and as a focus on language forms.

2.4 Conceptualisation

This stage is concerned with how a problem-based curriculum would encourage learners to actively seek appropriate and relevant knowledge to solve a problem. The CSEL project is using mind maps (`http://lmu.uce.ac.uk.crumpton/curriculum-design.htm`) to provide overviews of subject content and pointers towards how to investigate further. Adding technology at this stage of the cycle also means providing self-assessment opportunities for learners so that they can receive immediate feedback. Software packages like Question Mark, Castle or Hot Potatoes provide these opportunities but put the onus onto the tutor to create exercise banks. We have been experimenting with giving students control over this aspect, i.e. through the development of exercises by the students themselves, who create and monitor 'their' own exercises after they have been checked by tutors. Examples of this can be viewed in the 'student zone' of the Website.

3 The pilot project in German

In the Division of Languages and International Business, we have designed a Web-based environment to foster experiential language learning through the provision of learning opportunities at each stage of Kolb's cycle. The Website, at `http://bsstudents.uce.ac.uk/dlib`, provides a vehicle for a problem-centred curriculum that sets

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learning contexts and promotes active learning. Students will undertake learning activities that foster the application of language learnt in life-like artificial situations. Some of these activities will take place at the computer screen (e.g. Internet searches, email communication). However, it is important to break free from the computer and perform some tasks in very applied situations, such as role-plays, simulations etc. (Staley & MacKenzie 1999). The project is fully integrated into the existing curriculum through an integrated approach to teaching, learning and assessment. Motivation and ownership of the project will be encouraged through the publication of students' work in the Web-based environment. It is anticipated that students will become more independent, take more control of their learning and work more continuously during the project.

The project included three levels of competence in German, from beginners (level 1) to intermediate (level 3) to advanced final year (level 6) students. At beginners and intermediate levels, students were encouraged to plan for the experience by being guided through a set of tasks in order to prepare life-like communications and a visit to Germany. In order to complete the tasks students used email and voicemail communication and Internet searches. By adding technology the tasks were made more authentic and motivating for the students. The work students produced was published on the Website, thus providing a sense of ownership and a source for reflection, as language strategies employed and language used to carry out tasks were discussed in class.

Advanced students were introduced to electronic learning contracts as part of a language portfolio of independent work. Students are required to submit a simple on-line form for each chosen task outlining their learning objectives, identifying learning strategies and evaluating outcomes. Thus students will not only learn to prepare better for

Language Learning Contract

1. **Save this document onto disk.**
2. **Complete only the white boxes. Make sure that you write full answers.**
3. **Save your completed document.**
4. **Email your completed document AS AN ATTACHMENT to your language tutor.**

First name		**Last name**	
Degree Course			
Learning Task			

Which language skills or general skills are you hoping to develop, and why?	How will you go about these tasks? Which resources will you use?	Evaluate how well you think you performed. What would you do differently next time

`http://bsstudents.uce.ac.uk/dlib/langs/port/pfcontract.doc`

Fig. 2. Language learning contract.

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learning experiences, but also learn to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and will be expected to take more control of their learning, please see Figure 2.

Advanced students also took part in a collaborative on-line translation task. Students prepared for the experience by focusing on translation strategies during class and WebBoard discussions, after they had carried out collaborative small group translations using Altavista's *Bablefish* translation tool. The computer tool enabled students to contrast their own translations with that of the computer, focusing on the process and product of translations. Each group had to submit a final 'communal' translation on which all members of the group agreed as the end result of a process of planning, doing and re-evaluating their work. The process finished with an individual assessed translation, but students felt that they greatly benefited from the work done in the collaborative environment. It is also the author's view that the addition of technology in the form of the translation program and WebBoard discussions helped the students tremendously to focus on their learning strategies and led to improved end products. An example of a WebBoard conference that focused on vocabulary and grammar is included here (Figure 3).

4 Evaluation

A systematic evaluation of the project has been carried out independently by the Centre

Conferences

Conferences | 0 New Messages

Deutsch 2000 (0)
☐☐**Level 5&**6 (36)
Learning German (Jaqui Bennett) 10/11
☐Sich vorstellen (Kirsten Sontgens) 10/12
Sich Vorstellen (Barry Hall) 10/13
No Topic (Annette Bristol) 10/13
Deiner antwort Racheal!!! (Rubina Begum) 10/19
☐Ubungen : Murdochs Wurgegriff Vokabeln (Sarah De Pollak) 10/20
Meningitis Impfungen (Caroline Williams) 10/20
Caroline's Übung (Caroline Williams) 10/26
Vokabellernen (Katarina Chaviarli) 10/26
Grammatikübung (Caroline Williams) 11/05
Vokabellernen (Rachel Burns) 11/09
☐No Topic (Rachel Burns) 11/09
Grammatikubung (Jolie Smith) 11/09
Grammatikuebung (Annette Bristol) 11/09
Grammatikübung (Rubina Begum) 11/09
Grammatikubung (Sarah De Pollak) 11/12
Grammatikubung (Barry Hall) 11/16
Grammatikubung (Emma Ward) 11/24
Sich vorstellen (Emma Ward) 11/24
Frohe Weihnachten! (Caroline Williams) 12/13
☐Next ☐Bottom

Fig. 3. Example of WebBoard contributions.

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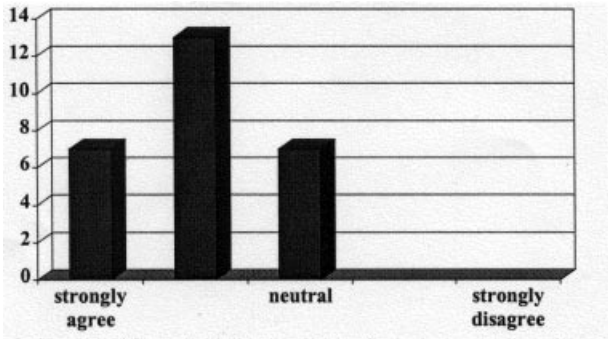


Fig. 4. I expected to do a lot of learning for myself on this module: ALL students.

of Research into Quality (CRQ) at UCE, using a student survey that aims to assess the quality of student learning. The student survey contained a sample of 27 students from three ability levels, beginners, first year and third year post A-level students of German. All students were full-time undergraduates in the 18–25 age group. 59% were home students, the rest from Europe and elsewhere.

The survey entailed 50 questions that elicit answers from the following categories: learning styles, expectations, motivation, learning and flexibility. The questions elicit answers using the Likert scale. The surveys were administered in the last week of semester two and analysed subsequently.

As it was the explicit aim of the project to encourage independent learning, I will focus in this brief analysis on related aspects. In particular, I wanted to find out if the use of technology was able to foster positive attitudes towards self-study in German. In response to the statement 'I expected to do a lot of learning for myself on this module', Figure 4 reveals that the project was successful in promoting self-study as the majority of students expected to do a lot of learning by independent learning.

It is also interesting to compare results for the beginners group (predominantly year one) and the results for the post A-level groups who even more strongly expected to do a lot of learning for themselves, possibly pointing at a more 'mature' attitude towards language learning at A-level as well as an appreciation of the importance of self-study skills by the final year, as shown in Figures 5 and 6.

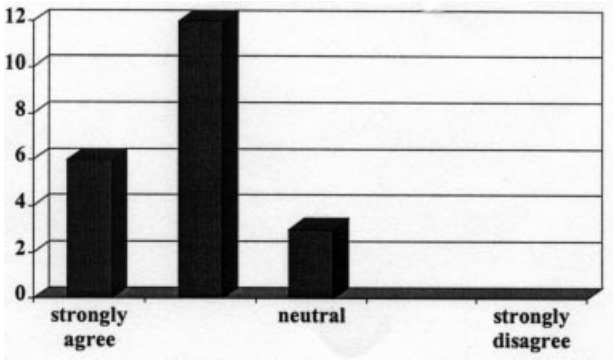


Fig. 5. I expected to do a lot of learning for myself on this module: A-levels only.

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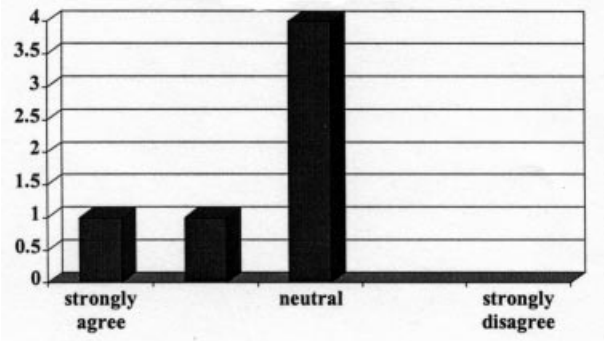


Fig. 6. I expected to do a lot of learning for myself on this module: Beginners.

It is the author's strong belief that this encouraging view on self-study has been brought about by the thoughtful integration of technology into the curriculum. The results from the survey support this view (Figure 7).

The 'student zone' of the Website provided space for the publication of students' work and was designed to encourage involvement and motivation. Many students did find the use of technology enjoyable, but many others seem to sit on the fence and have no clear view, as yet, of the impact of technology on their learning (Figure 8).

However, the standard module questionnaires which are also administered every year revealed in the open answer sections that students found that C&IT made learning "faster, easier, more fun, more interesting, more real, more up-to-date, helps identify mistakes better and helps to learn from each other".

5 Future

Although the initial results are encouraging we need to make the benefits of using C&IT for language learning much clearer to the students and encourage them to plan and evaluate their learning experience much more carefully in order to become more 'autonomous' learners. An online portfolio of independent work has subsequently been introduced to facilitate this process.

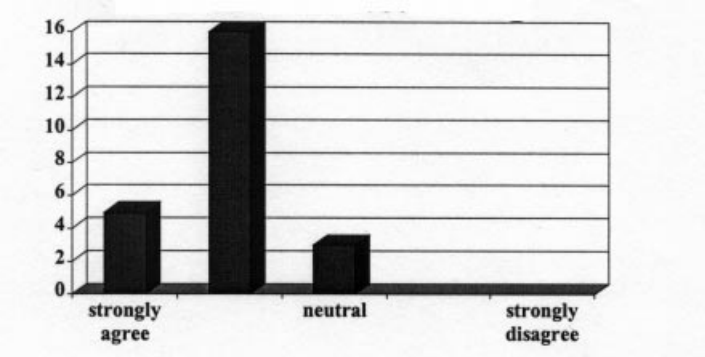


Fig. 7. The use of technology has been well-integrated with other methods of teaching.

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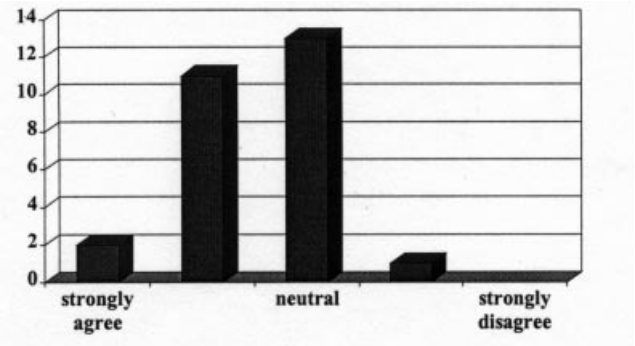


Fig. 8. I have enjoyed using the technology to learn this subject.

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