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Connecting experiences – telling stories through a networked environment

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Abstract

Modern language students have always reported that residence abroad is one of the most gratifying and often life-changing components of their educational experience. Placement in a foreign country puts students in direct contact with other cultures and networks, encourages them to immerse in the target languages, and provides opportunities for maturing at both personal and professional levels. Such opportunities also stimulate learner autonomy. Living and studying, or working, abroad represent a totally different routine from their domestic and academic lives at home. Their personal and professional development is also noticeable in their performance after they return to the university. However, the course of that development was not often reflected in the assignment, the only piece of assessment they had to provide on their return.

With this in mind, the Residence Abroad programme at Salford was revisited and redesigned to provide students with a more supportive environment, using networked technologies to connect students and tutors in a single space. The other critical aspect of this rethinking of Residence Abroad was to introduce an assessment strategy which would be more congruent with students' learning and experiences whilst abroad. The single summative assessment in the form of a report was transformed into a continuous assessment strategy, which, consisting in several small tasks, aims to capture students' experiences through shared reflective blog posts and other digital artefacts (photo stories).

This paper will provide an overview of how networked technologies have been embedded in the residence abroad curriculum to provide a more integrative approach to student assessment, and how communication with the home institution and tutors, and peers in other countries has become more effective. Considerations regarding the advantages and implications of moving towards a networked learning approach are also presented.

1. Introduction

Modern language students at UK universities have traditionally spent the third year of their studies on residence abroad in the countries where their languages of study are spoken. Indeed, students have always reported that residence abroad is one of the most gratifying and often life-changing components of their experience as a language student at university.

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networks, encourages them to immerse themselves in the target languages, and provides opportunities for maturing at both personal and professional levels. Such opportunities also stimulate learner autonomy. Living and studying, or working, abroad represent a totally different routine from their domestic and academic lives at home. Their personal and professional development is also noticeable in their performance after they return to the university – and a frequent subject of comment by colleagues at university. However, the course of that development was often not reflected in their Residence Abroad report, the only piece of assessment they had to provide on their return. Neither was it the subject of any serious investigation until relatively recently.

Following the findings of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Teaching Quality Assessment in 1995/96, in which Residence Abroad was identified as an area of concern, three FDTL (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning) funded projects addressed relevant issues from 1997 to 2001: the [LARA Project](#) (Learning and Residence Abroad) at Oxford Brookes, the RAPPART Project (Residence Abroad @ Portsmouth) at the University of Portsmouth and the [Interculture Project](#) (ICP) based at the University of Lancaster from 1997 to 2000. Something of the importance of these projects for the HE languages community may be gauged from the fact that two of the websites are still available ten years later. ICP alone has received over 20 000 hits since its inception in 1999, despite not having been updated since 2002. As Professor Jim Coleman has noted the focus of these projects and most research on the topic of Residence Abroad – with the possible exception of ICP - was largely on the linguistic gains (Coleman, n.d.).

This leaves a central paradox that has still failed to attract significant research. As Coleman puts it in another context: “for most language graduates - and especially recent graduates - the experiential learning during a year abroad is more highly valued than the cognitive, content learning of three years in the UK university” (Coleman, n.d.). As we have just mentioned, ICP may have been something of an exception here. Alongside invaluable case studies, ICP explored issues of how to prepare students for Residence Abroad and developed materials to assist colleagues in this process – materials which have been used fruitfully, if fitfully, by Salford students and others.

To some extent, ICP can also take credit for popularising the idea of ‘intercultural competence’ among languages staff. Intercultural competence was coined to describe as Coleman puts it “the amalgam of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, skills, behaviours” that permit us to recognise the relative nature of our own cultural position, that culture is socially constructed not given, and this has necessary implications for interacting effectively with individuals from another culture, even where one has already acquired the necessary linguistic skills. In short, ‘intercultural competence’ became a shorthand for the qualities that the languages community had always recognised in its students and which accounted for the excellent employability record of language graduates.

Since the three FDTL projects were completed, technology has of course moved on considerably. Today’s 18 to 25 year-olds are not just digital natives in the glib sense that they are able to use technological devices quickly and easily with apparently little formal training, more importantly, they come to university with a strong sense of connectedness to others through mobile phones and social media and the like (Roberts, 2005). They also bring the expectation that this connectedness will be maintained during their studies (Ramanau et

al, 2010), and, for language students, during their period of Residence Abroad.

2. Revisiting Residence Abroad

With these factors in mind, both the broader context of our lack of real knowledge about the development of the much-prized intercultural competence and the knowledge that our students literally experienced the world in a new way, we revisited the Residence Abroad programme and redesigned our assessment strategy to provide students with a more supportive environment, using networked technologies to connect students and tutors in a single space. Another critical aspect of this rethinking of Residence Abroad was to introduce an assessment strategy which would be more congruent with students' learning and experiences whilst abroad. The single summative assessment was transformed into a continuous assessment strategy, which, consisting in several small tasks, aims to capture students' experiences through shared reflective blog posts and other digital artefacts. All of these tasks were to be carried out in the students' target languages. It is important to understand our pedagogical intention here. Even the most well-trained non-native speaker will seldom be able to write completely convincingly and effectively in a foreign language. Our aim for students is not, however, comprehensive foreign language writing skills (which is more in the nature of a *fata morgana*). Our explicit aim is 'communicative competence'. The quality of the foreign language writing produced by students in response to the stimulus of the photo story or blog post would inevitably be uneven, perhaps even problematic as a vehicle for self-expression in the first months of a student's stay, but it would also provide an opportunity for authentic writing on a subject that could not be prescribed or predicted other than in very general terms.

The pilot group for the new assessment consisted of 68 third-year undergraduate students studying 7 different languages (French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese and Arabic). During the academic year 2010-11, this group would spend extended periods of between 4 and 12 months abroad, with the largest group completing typically two six month placements. Placements would in some cases be paid work placements at specific companies, at times arranged with the support of SoL, in other cases the placements would consist of study at a foreign higher education institution.

As a first component for the assessment, weighted as 15% of the overall mark, the team selected the medium of the "photo story". Photo stories are short narrative sequences of still images played back on a computer like a slide show with captions. We set the students the challenge of telling a story about an aspect of their first few weeks in the new country by using images and words in the foreign language. The notion behind this task was that it would require students to engage creatively with the material presented by everyday life in the new situation. Typically, the early weeks of a student's stay abroad are characterised by significant levels of anxiety and even by a degree of 'culture shock'. The requirement is to produce a sequence of images that tells a story – the focus is on producing something that will be seen by others. One virtue of this form is that it bypasses conscious resistance to engage with issues that may produce cultural clichés or snap responses when posed as a direct question – what was different? new? We have some evidence already in the work that has been produced so far in this pilot year that the photo story has been highly effective in stimulating students to produce original and striking series of images - using both their own digital cameras and phones and 'found material'.

The sheer variety and complexity of the narratives that the students in the pilot group produced in the initial period immediately dispelled any doubts Residence Abroad Tutors participating in the new assessment might have had about the viability or technological appropriateness of the photo story as a potential medium for student learning and assessment. Students combined their own images with graphical material found on the internet or obtained from their workplace. With very little prompting they addressed issues of copyright in emails to tutors and incorporated acknowledgements and disclaimers into their submissions. Some even added music.

Another key aspect of the approach we took is that we did not dictate any specific form of image capture to be preferred. Nor did we specify software to be used. We did offer a brief training session on [MS Photo Story](#) (a free download for Microsoft Windows users), but also said we would accept PowerPoint and other slide-show software. Partly, this was out of a desire to encourage student autonomy.

In practice, during the pilot year 2010-11 (still ongoing at the date of writing) the majority of students used MS Photo Story without any problems. The results were uploaded by the students to a Blackboard Residence Abroad Module using the digital drop box tool. Only two students opted to use MS Powerpoint. A small number of students required additional support in uploading the correct file – MS Photo Story exports the photo story to Window Video format to play on any PC, but also offers an option to save a (much larger) project file. This was a source of confusion at times.

The second aspect of our revised assessment strategy was to introduce a student blog, to account for 40% of the assessment mark. We had always asked students to set themselves personal developmental goals during their period of Residence Abroad. These were originally primarily linguistic and professional targets – closely linked to the students' everyday experience. We chose to retain and refine these developmental goals as a way of structuring the content of the blogs. As many would-be bloggers have realised, having a blog is one thing, having something to say another. For the pilot year, the blogs were written and stored online via the Blog tool in Blackboard. While this tool does have a number of limitations (scope for personalising the look and feel of content is very limited, for example) it does offer a secure and stable platform.

For the student blogs we defined four distinct areas in which goals were to be set. These are:

- language
- personal development
- professional or academic development
- intercultural and social knowledge

We asked students to state their goals explicitly in an early blog post and afterwards to refer clearly to activities they were undertaking in order to achieve that goal. Residence Abroad tutors were asked to read the goals and provide brief feedback. Students were also permitted to revise and improve the goals as they went along.

In the final part of the redesigned assessment we retained a short written report (now to be worth 45% of the assessment) – to be presented as a continuous text. The idea was to give students a chance to explore one topic in greater depth and also to reflect their newly attained

linguistic level at the end of the period spent in the country concerned.

3. Building in Creativity

Up to this point, our deployment of the new assessment offered greater scope for student creative input and reflection, but did not really engage with broader questions of online identity and social networking. Yet, this is a critical aspect of this project; one that is currently starting to be approached as we prepare students and tutors to move into our new networked environment which will bring together all parties involved in the Residence Abroad scheme.

As part of redefining the Residence Abroad module, attention was not only given to the redesign of assessment. We also revisited the learning environment as a whole with the aim of providing a space in which students and tutors could co-exist and share activities as a way of creating cohesion with the new assessment strategy. To fulfil this aim, the social networking site was customised to bridge the physical distance between students, and between students and tutors. Our approach is designed to foment continuous communication with the home institution and enable the creation of joint activities between students placed in different countries and regions. Furthermore, hosting the Residence Abroad module in a networked environment will ultimately provide its members with both collective and personal spaces, in which the sharing of reflections and practice, and interpersonal communication could be aggregated in a single place, and also deployed at different levels of privacy. For this reason, Buddypress, an open source networking platform supported by the same international community behind the Wordpress blogging technology, was chosen to host the project. Open source technology was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it meant we could commission the customisation of the environment as part of an ongoing process to meet users' needs, and benefit from the constant technological developments the Buddypress community offers. Secondly, it would provide members with technologies identical to the ones being currently used by external organisations. The goal was to provide students and staff with a more integrative system, which encompasses both collective and personal shared spaces, and introduce them to tools and approaches which are likely to be in use at their future work places. See <http://abroad.salford.ac.uk> for examples of some of the publicly available content.

The residence abroad network offers the following features:

- Personal (shared) space
 - Open profile page
 - Photo album
 - Exchange of visible messages with other members
 - befriending option
 - Blogs
 - Open and closed blog sites (for their socio-professional presence)
 - Open and restricted to selected readers blogposts (to accommodate assessment and the public and private debate)
- Groups
 - Thematic discussions with three levels of permission [open membership, membership by request, and membership by invitation (hidden groups)]

- Group wiki
- Group blog
- Group mail
- Group document folder
- Communication
 - collective private messaging
 - individual private messaging
 - Open messaging

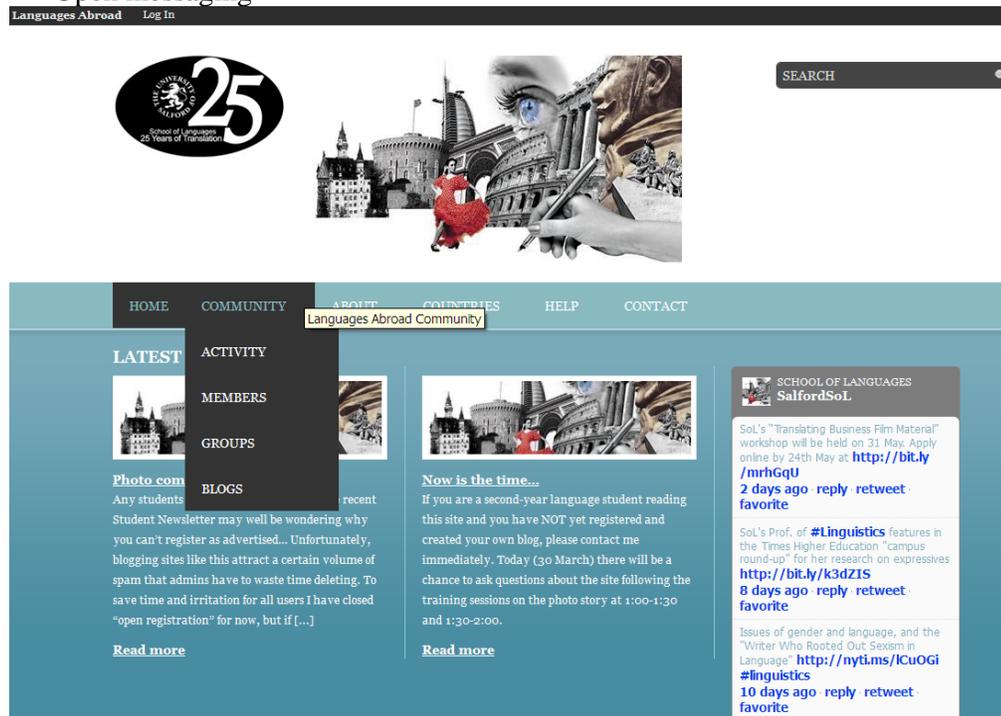


Figure 1 - Print screen of the Residence Abroad social network

All the features mentioned are offered to both students and staff. This technological move is in itself another paradigm shift in terms of the interactions and permission levels students have access to. By promoting students to administrators of their personal spaces, as well as of any groups they find relevant and create, we are encouraging their autonomy as learners and knowledge workers at the same time we yield the responsibility of learning to them (Ellis, 2009).

This kind of technology supported by a pedagogical stance on user-centred and user-generated content can provide an environment that is conducive to autonomous and contextual learning. The approach, however, is not as linear or easy to implement as it may seem. It challenges preconceptions of teaching and established practices, which can present issues both for students and staff (Hirsh and Killion, 2009). The former are asked to take control of their learning and the responsibility that comes with it, and the latter are required to yield a greater degree of control. Moreover, there is a new set of skills to learn and discussions to engage in when starting to use participatory media as part of one's practice. Below, we provide an overview on two of these topics: negotiating private and public presence, emblematic of one's digital footprint, and documentation and reflection of practice

as a component of one's professional digital identity.

4. Private vs Public Communication Worker's dilemmas

Negotiating private and public presence online is something that both educators and students struggle to come to terms with for various reasons. There is an assumption that students are proficient users of technology. Indeed, in most cases, they are very technically capable, but that does not necessarily mean they have the skills they need to be digitally savvy when it comes to constructing and curating their online footprint (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Jenkins, 2009). There is also the assumption that, for the most part, lecturers and tutors lag behind in the adoption of web technologies, especially participatory media, as part of their teaching activity. Although research shows that the take up of participatory media to support learning in institutional settings has been slower than predicted (JISC, 2009), making such generalisations can be a rather frail way of describing the digital phenomena which currently pervade our society.

The participatory web is to a great extent an essential 'gadget' in our students' daily lives. Through their mobile phones and their personal computers, students of today are constantly connected to their peers and friends through various social network sites which allow for instantaneous contact and interaction. Students' use of these virtual interactive environments and their communication with their peers online bear little resemblance to the scholarly practices academia has typically required of them (Wesch, 2008). In this context, there is a huge discrepancy between technologies for informal interaction and technologies used "for institutional learning", not only regarding their user interface, i.e., look and feel, but also the way the technologies themselves are used and approached. Whereas typical institutional tools display a less attractive design, they are also closed environments, and offer a more hierarchical structure, the freely available web tools used by students present higher levels of personalisation and yield more control to the single user within the collective space. Responsibility is given back to the individual (McLoughin & Lee, 2007). Users become accountable for the content they produce, the interactions they engage in, as well as for the privacy settings they choose, i.e, when, where and to whom they display the information they create.

This new level of autonomy can however raise questions and concerns for both students and educators, as management of personal information in interactive environments online is a skill which most of us are still trying to make sense of (OCDL, 2007). From the student side, the decision of where to draw boundaries can be subtle. As an example, we cite the following blog post from a student "Sarah Brown". Sarah was employed as an intern at a large German company. She wrote:

I find German people very polite and nice and they are always happy to get to know an Englishwoman. But I feel as if no-one really wants to be my friend. After two months at the company they still all call me "Frau Brown". I find this very impersonal and I have said that they should call me "Sarah". I understand that this is the German way of doing things but they all call each by their first names and I find it strange. I did go to the cinema with a woman from the office but normally people at the office are too busy with their families and so on. One day I sat at work and cried. I said that I am lonely and they just asked why I did not go home at the weekend. I think they are thinking of German interns who are used to going home every

weekend. [...] Everything shuts at 2pm on Saturday and on Sunday everything is closed. I think there is very little to do in a small town in German without family and friends.

[The original was in German and the content has been manipulated to preserve anonymity.] For the tutor, this was a clear case where a personal email was more appropriate than public communication on the blog via a comment added to the posting. Clearly, the student was struggling to cope with a significant degree of cultural adjustment. Ideally, one would not want this type of information to be publicly visible. The ability to preserve the invisibility of some blog posts and the opportunity to communicate private via email and personal messaging are among the most vital aspects of the project as a whole.

In more general terms, anecdotal evidence concerning the misuse of technology and the effects of misinformation in the public domain that can then damage an individual's reputation may drive some to not to engage with the technology at all. The issue of 'public' versus private communication is central to the debate of using the new generation of technologies, as individuals tend to feel more vulnerable towards the possibilities that the new tools offer.

Open, publicly available communication with and amongst students is therefore probably one of the main issues of concerns for educators, as it implies a greater degree of exposure of the communication process established with the students, a practice they have grown used to conducting in closed environments. Furthermore, there is an understandable anxiety in keeping personal and professional spaces clearly separated. Participatory media and networked technologies can all too easily be seen as destroyers of privacy. Yet, as Boyd (2010) points out "while public and private are certainly in flux, it is unlikely that privacy will simply be disregarded" (p.45). Although this is a pertinent issue to raise, and one, which in our opinion, should be observed, such concern should not hinder the socialising process inherent to teaching and learning practices. Indeed, as shown by Boyd (2007), younger generations, especially teenagers, do show critical understanding regarding how they use these tools, the contexts in which they choose to use them and with which levels of privacy they select. There is also research that underlines the need to mentor individuals in acquiring and developing their digital literacy in order to better exploit the potential of these technologies for both teaching and learning, and also reputation management and profile raising (Arntzen, 2007). Social Networking Sites are extremely popular examples of online interaction. The social network Facebook is the most prominent platform for online interaction between young adults and older generations in the English-speaking world. However, the examples and news that make the headlines regarding participation in this network unfortunately tend to focus on its misuse by given individuals or issues regarding copyright, which make it a place to avoid when it comes to providing any kind of institutional support.

It is in this sense that the social network for the language abroad project was set up. The purpose was both to bring together an innovative assessment strategy and to provide a neutral space for students and staff where their private and professional careers would not collide, or where they would not have any control over the copyright of their own content. We aimed to design a shared space developing towards personalisation and congregation of collective intelligence in a socio-professional environment, using some features similar to the ones displayed in mainstream environments such as Facebook. For instance, each member, independent of their role, is given a personal space, can freely create new interest groups, partake in existing ones, provided these groups are open or individuals are allowed in.

Moreover, every single member can choose how to communicate with tutors and peers by being able to establish their own privacy settings for each message they produce.

As such, the Languages Abroad network aims to improve retention of students during their period abroad, to provide new opportunities for students and tutors to communicate amongst themselves in a sustained way, to create a space for reflection and evidence of their experiences, and also provide them with new digital skills which will help them make critical use of technologies to promote their own employability.

The debate about private and public communication is important because both students and educators need to understand the advantages and implications of working and learning online, and thus create strategies that benefit their digital footprint and reputation in their field of knowledge and expertise. Moreover, raising such issues also becomes crucial as a form of fostering participants' critical thinking regarding the use and misuse of such environments, thus promoting their digital literacy, a set of skills increasingly important for knowledge workers.

5. Fostering reflective learners through continuous assessment via an interactive e-portfolio

Reflection is a key area of the knowledge economy; one that is also directly linked with the idea of continuous professional development, and also personal and intellectual growth. In the context of our residence abroad project reflection becomes not only a tool for assessment of learning as a process, but also a mechanism that creates a record of practice in progress, representative of individuals' experiences and skills in real learning situations.

One of the main goals of providing students with the opportunity of living, working and studying abroad is to enable them to develop proficiency in the languages they are learning. Equally, if not more important is also the circumstances that meet them when going abroad, as they are encouraged to interact with the reality that is the language and the country that hosts them. Mastering a foreign language involves more than acquiring linguistic proficiency. The socio-cultural aspects of a language are every bit as important. For future language professionals being placed in real learning contexts presents therefore a pertinent opportunity to cultivate those additional skills which are difficult to capture in their home country. It has long been observed that much of the research on Second Language Acquisition with its typical focus on migrant workers, or English as a Foreign Language settings, simply does not apply to the Residence Abroad programmes of UK university students (Coleman, 1997). Practising the language in authentic contexts is of course important for such learners, but equally critical is the reflection that accompanies the experiential trajectory the individual makes whilst abroad.

Frequently, in practice, the skills and understanding acquired in the contexts in which they are produced become almost unconscious units of understanding which are codified as tacit knowledge. Unspoken awareness of the minutiae of a language and culture is something that is progressively inculcated upon the individual as they unconsciously interact in and with the environment they are inserted into. These are invaluable competences. Yet, in promoting deeper learning and the maturing of practices it becomes vital to bring that invisible acquired knowledge to a conscious level, as tangible evidence of personal and professional development. i.e. the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. Thus,

reflection becomes a useful tool as well as an effective conduit to translate practice into documented knowledge.

According to Schön (1991) there are two types of reflection: reflection in action and reflection on action. The former relates to reflection on situations the individual is confronted with as they happen. This type of reflection comprehends levels of unexpected actions which mark the practice of the individual and which makes them broaden their scope of experience. The latter however focus on reflection a posteriori, as part of the individual's introspective journey in thinking through what happened, how they reacted and what the outcomes of it were. This second type of reflection can also be materialized in different forms of content from conversations with mentors to the recording of the practitioners' considerations in a journal, a letter, an audio file etc. It is reflection in action that the Residence abroad project aims to promote through the use of photostories, shared blogs and the final report. The three activities were designed to stimulate personal reflection and engagement with one's learning in more dynamic and engaging ways. It has equally sought to promote diversity, and creative forms of student interaction with their ongoing learning experience by allowing them to shape learning environments with a personal touch. In the context of residence abroad, the photostories are used as a technique to capture reflection through imagery and prompt an experimental approach to course work. Such an assessment strategy also helps place learning in context, as photography is a medium common to travellers across cultures. Moreover, the use of photography is also relevant in the sense it discloses the world of the learner through their own lens. This has the advantage of prompting creative practice and therefore boosting learners' motivation to share their experiences through ways meaningful to them. The personalisation of learning through reflection and active engagement are key elements of the Residence Abroad's curriculum redesign and assessment strategy.

In Residence Abroad, shared blogs are used as a tool for assessment of learning in an interactive way. They serve three purposes: (1) to record ongoing reflection of learners' practices and experiences; (2) to create a space for communication amongst peers and/or tutors; and (3) create a portfolio of practice showcasing the enhancement and acquisition of relevant skills and competences. The practice of blogging is known and valued in the context of knowledge production and management, and learning as a tool for the presentation and representation of one's practice. As such, a blog can become an interactive portfolio which aggregates real examples of one's practice through personal reflection. It is also a form of capturing thinking in progress, i.e., the process of learning. Moreover, it can be used as a strategy to develop a reflexive voice in a more visible way and show evidence of it whilst providing opportunities for feedback and discussion. That, in itself, provides another opportunity to take the individual's reflection a step further, into a quasi-public sphere or shared environment where they will benefit from the input their peers and mentors might be able to provide. Reflecting in public is not always an easy act, especially for beginners, who not accustomed to such practices and may view blogging as an activity that exposes them to discomfort more than it helps them advance their reflection. Therefore, students and tutors are explicitly enjoined to negotiate the levels of privacy of their reflective pieces and consequent feedback. Providing this kind of choice gives the learner a higher level of ownership.

Lastly, there is a final assessment tool: a reflective report which aims to summarize the residence abroad experience in retrospect and capture the result of such experiences through the eyes of the learner. This final piece of assessment is determinant in providing tangible

evidence of students' progress and intellectual maturity. Furthermore, it stimulates the refinement of the reflection activity through a personal narrative which encapsulates their growth and progress as language students and future workers.

In short, by inviting students to reflect on their own practice, we are inviting them to look inwards on given experiences as to prompt them to make sense of them and identify what they have gained from it (Drew & Bingham, 2001). By doing so, we are encouraging individuals to enter a cycle of autonomous, self-directed lifelong learning to which reflection is a key element.

6. Conclusions and outlook

This paper introduces readers to the redesign of the Residence Abroad module and the pedagogical and technological implications. It focuses on the transformation of the assessment strategy, proposing a more interactive approach to the way students capture their learning and how that learning is assessed.

There has been a shift in the way assessment is regarded by both students and tutors, and how reflection is exercised. In practice, this change has been made concrete by adopting a continuous assessment strategy which encompasses several assessment 'tools' to stimulate reflection of learning as an ongoing process. Furthermore, the use of participatory media has been introduced to dynamise both the recording of the learning process abroad and the communicative link with tutors and amongst peers. The redesign has provided an opportunity to transform both the practices of students and tutors regarding the way the former engages in reflection and showcases their learning, and the way the latter provides support from a physical distance. The new strategy caters for creativity, autonomy and personalisation of learning. It also provides a network of support which was usually missing when students went abroad. However, this is work in progress. The project is currently running its first pilot phase. So far, the feedback provided from students is positive; their engagement with their reflections and assessment work also seems to have become more stimulating and interesting. From informal observations, there is also a sense that the reflective work of the students seems to offer a new level of depth not seen in the former assessment strategy. All in all, the project seems to be bearing positive outcomes in terms of student engagement with their own learning. The next obvious step of this project is to study the students' and staff's attitudes in more detail. Our main research focus will be on the following aspects:

- Student motivation
- Assessment effectiveness
- The impact of participatory media on students' approach to reflection

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