Blended Learning – from a student's perspective

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The Blended Language Learning Consortium led by the Language Centre at the University of Worcester ran a course in Advanced French for six weeks in early summer 2009. My e-learning awareness had previously all been from a tutor's perspective, so this was an opportunity for me to see things from a different angle by signing up as a student on the course. It consisted of two face-to-face group sessions held at the University of Worcester, and four online sessions in the Wimba Virtual Classroom, with each student and the tutor simultaneously logged on at their own computer for a fixed time. Between the taught sessions, there were tasks for us to complete independently in our own time online using Moodle, a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). I kept a journal to record my thoughts during the course.

The first face-to-face introductory session was central to the success of the course as we met the other participants and, above all, had plenty of time to chat in French and regain some linguistic confidence before we turned to the computers. In the following weeks we met in the Wimba Virtual Classroom. The first challenge was pressing the "Talk" button when you wanted to speak. It felt a bit chaotic at first as we were all talking at once and the slight time delay was tricky. There is a "raise hand" button within the Classroom to signal when you have something to say, and then the tutor can nominate you directly. We got more adept at using this button, and taking our turn, responding to the tutor's invitations to speak. The tutor has to act like the conductor of an orchestra, and direct the flow of conversation in a far more interventionist way than usual.

Wimba Virtual Classroom has several other symbols that can be used as non-verbal signals. I found it quite challenging to use and process the symbols that appeared on the Classroom screen, for example a "thumbs up" symbol from someone to show approval, or a "tick" to indicate agreement. I was used to operating in a language classroom based on spoken language and body language (eg a smile or frown), but interpreting icons on a screen was new to me. It adds a new layer of language to the interaction.

Our confidence at manipulating the symbols grew during the course. After session 5 I wrote in my journal "We have definitely got better at indicating when we've understood the instructions, and are using the green ticks more consistently. Annemarie asks 'Vous avez compris?' and then we all tick if we have understood the instructions."

Something I found difficult in the Virtual Classroom was my loss of control over my computer at times. I found it disconcerting when the slide changed on my computer (as the tutor was controlling it). It took me aback when I was just reading something and it suddenly disappeared. This was a significant part of the experience of being the student instead of the tutor. It made me realise that classroom management is even more crucial online, and that is important for tutors to alert students in advance if they are going to do something to students' screens.

Working independently on Moodle was an important part of the course. I liked listening to the video clips and repeating them until I was confident that I'd got the gist. This seems to me to be a big advantage of using a VLE. The tutor had found us two different clips on the same general topic and I felt I learnt a lot of new vocabulary and improved my listening skills. I now

understand more fully some of the comments made by students in module evaluation when they have said that they like having links to video clips on Blackboard.

Being a student on Moodle made me think more about my use of Blackboard as a tutor. For example, I went onto the Advanced French Moodle course one evening and found interesting material only to discover later that it had vanished. It made me realise that I as a tutor have probably caused some frustrations by putting material on Blackboard, then removing or hiding it. The message to me as a tutor is that you just don't know when a student will log on and work. Once I've made an item visible, I'll try not to remove it without warning.

The course also made me realise that using a VLE heightens students' expectations of getting responses from the tutor. When I submitted work to the tutor online, I was eager to receive my feedback. I have moaned in the past when students have emailed me at weekends or late at night expecting instant replies, but I realise now that studying online does create an aura of the tutor always being available.

The linguistic demands felt greater in a discussion in the Virtual Classroom than when we met face-to-face. I felt under pressure to speak quickly and not hesitate over words. In a normal conversation we use so many murmurs of agreement or disagreement, and little noises of encouragement to show that we are actively listening to the speaker, which is lost in an online discussion. I couldn't tell if the others were listening to me when I was speaking or if they'd switched off.

This did not diminish as the course progressed. In session 5 I wrote: "I still find it disconcerting when I have to speak and can't see anyone's reaction to what I am saying. And it's also hard to share humour – another student said something funny and I was laughing, but realised she didn't know that I was laughing! And I do a lot of pointless nodding when I agree with someone."

One valuable feature of the Wimba Classroom was the archive. Each session was recorded, so if you'd missed something, you could go back later and listen again. That made me realise how useful it is to students to have any PowerPoint presentations or audio recordings of lectures put onto Blackboard. It was also interesting to experiment with other features such as voice emails.

One of the course organisers said that her intention was for participants to feel that it was first and foremost a language course. It shouldn't all be about the technology. This proved true for me when I worked on my review of a French film. I was developing my listening skills, and above all thinking about how to express my ideas in French. Then I moved on to preparing a PowerPoint, and used YouTube to find clips from the film. I felt at that point that I was blending my language skills with my growing technological confidence. A year ago I would not have known how to do this. And it was the same with Moodle and Wimba: what started as new and time-consuming soon became less daunting. The experience of being a student on the blended learning course showed me that it is worth experiencing new developments from a fresh viewpoint. At the end of the course everyone wanted to continue, by meeting up and having more French conversation. It shows that we did gel as a group, even though we only met face-to-face twice. Whether we do actually manage to meet, given our busy schedules and commitments, is another matter, but it's a measure of the success of the course that we want to do so.