

6 From autonomous to peer e-learning – How the FReE Team turned ePortfolio into a social network between first and final-year modern languages students

Jean-Christophe Penet¹

Abstract

In this case study, I will show how I redesigned the curriculum of a post-A Level French module in order to improve students' career awareness and their soft –interpersonal and transferable– skills through autonomous e-learning. In the first phase of the project (2012/13), students were encouraged to start thinking in French about their career ambitions by making use of the University's ePortfolio. The feedback from this phase showed that the dual objective to boost students' linguistic progress while making them more career aware had been reached, but that their motivation, however, tended to flag over time, especially in semester 2. A second phase of the project (2013/14) therefore aimed to remedy this by turning ePortfolio into a social networking site between first- and final-year students. Blending peer-learning with e-learning, the team of final-years was tasked with giving the project a real presence on ePortfolio by replying to the first-year's posts on employability. It is believed that FRE1071 students' motivation was increased by the team of final-year students' open dialogue with first-years about their employability tasks on ePortfolio.

Keywords: e-learning , employability, autonomy, motivation, peer learning, mentoring.

1. University of Newcastle, United Kingdom; jean-christophe.penet@newcastle.ac.uk.

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1. Context/rationale

This case study takes place in the context of FRE1071, a first-year post-A Level French module (level B1-B2 ECFRL¹) offered by Newcastle University's School of Modern Languages (SML). This module presents two main pedagogical challenges. First of all, it consists of students from different academic backgrounds as it welcomes both SML students reading French and students from other Schools –mostly Business and Politics– who would like to pursue their studies of the language. What is more, FRE1071 is a large module with some 100 students joining it every year. To cater for such an audience, FRE1071 comprises of a weekly lecture followed by a two-hour seminar where listening and speaking skills are practised in small groups. As a result of this, weekly homework is the main way for students to improve their French written skills. This implies that students learn to negotiate the transition from small A-Level language groups in which they received a lot of individualised feedback to a more autonomous way of learning French in a less controlled environment.

For many students, such a shift can prove challenging. However, to language instructors, it can represent an opportunity to increase their students' motivation for language learning. Indeed, second language (L2) acquisition researcher Ema Ushioda (2011) makes the point that, until recently, “L2 motivation research has been more concerned with idealised language learners as theoretical abstractions [...] rather than with learners as uniquely complex individual ‘people’ with particular social identities, situated in particular contexts” (p. 222). This goes against education psychology that has shown that “motivation is not necessarily achievement oriented but value-based and identity-oriented” (Ushioda, 2011, p. 221). Hence the need to “move away from achievement-oriented analyses of motivation to *identity-oriented analyses of personal motivational trajectories*” (Ushioda, 2011, p. 222). Hence, too, the pivotal role played by autonomy in language learning as it constitutes “a way of encouraging students to experience that sense of personal agency and

1. European Common Framework of Reference for Languages

self-determination that is vital to developing their motivation from within” (Ushioda, 2011, p. 224).

It is easy to see the appeal of Ushioda’s (2011) theory in the context of FRE1071, as it encourages autonomy not as a result of limited resources but as a way of better catering for students from varied backgrounds by increasing their motivation for language learning. In the first phase of the project (2012/13), I therefore decided to review the syllabus so as to give students a greater sense of agency through the completion of autonomous, value-based and identity-oriented tasks in French. To do so, I designed autonomous tasks focusing on students’ –projected– professional identity in collaboration with the University’s Careers Service. These tasks, which linked with some of the module activities and school-wide career events, represented an opportunity for students to start thinking in French about potential future career paths and reflect on how the skills they were developing through their language studies could help them achieve their objectives. This followed recommendation eight of the Worton Review on languages, according to which “Modern Foreign Language Departments should work more proactively on skills development and careers advice and guidance” (HEFCE, 2009, p. 37). To try and make them engaging, I decided to ask students to complete the employability tasks on what was then a new platform launched by the University to help students increase their employability, ePortfolio. ePortfolio was first set up with the objective of encouraging students to log and exemplify all the graduate skills they develop during the course of their studies at Newcastle University and it therefore appeared to be the perfect platform for the project.

The impact of this first phase of the project on students was assessed by two end-of-semester questionnaires, Q1 and Q2. They achieved response rates of 78% and 70% respectively. In Q1 and Q2, 89% and 84% of students respectively found the opportunity to reflect critically on how some course activities may have contributed to their professional development ‘useful’ or ‘very useful.’ The slight drop between Q1 and Q2 could be explained by the fact that the employability tasks students had to complete on ePortfolio in semester two no longer related directly to in-class activities. This was in the hope that it

would encourage students to work more autonomously. What is more, 96% (Q1) and 90% (Q2) of students said that the tasks were ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’ in terms of language development. Here again, however, we can see a slight drop between both semesters which may be explained by the greater autonomy given to students concerning the tasks in semester two. Even though 78% of respondents agreed that the project was a ‘positive development’ for FRE1071 (Q1 and Q2), the questionnaires showed that students found it easier to grasp the linguistic benefit of the tasks than their benefit in terms of career awareness and that motivation tended to drop in the second semester.

I shared these results at the 8th Annual LLAS eLearning Symposium in January 2013 and the discussion that ensued with colleagues confirmed the need to turn ePortfolio into a social network by integrating an element of peer learning to e-learning in the second phase of the project.

2. Aims and objectives

Funded by Newcastle University’s Innovation Fund and launched in June 2013, this new phase aimed to increase first-year students’ motivation by setting up a team of three final-year students in charge of giving first-year students individualised feedback on their ePortfolio tasks that would address both language and content. The aims and objectives were to:

- enhance FRE1071 students’ motivation by improving the feedback received on their ePortfolio tasks both quantitatively and qualitatively;
- develop FRE1071 students’ awareness of the importance of engaging with career-related issues early on in their studies through online interaction with final-year students;
- enhance the motivation of final-year students by giving them some agency in the SML and enhance their employability through their role in the project.

3. What I did

I first recruited three final-year students and asked them to review all of the tasks, the use of ePortfolio and create a sense of community for the project. Choosing final-years to act as mentors on the project looked like the best option despite their heavy workload. First of all, they were all already familiar with ePortfolio as they had to use it to communicate with their personal tutors in the School during their third year abroad. What is more, they had all spent their year abroad working either as British Council teaching assistants or on work placements. They had thus gained invaluable work experience, which made them more conscious of employability issues.

The Team Leader was employed through the University's work experience scheme and was tasked with setting up and organising the team. Once in place, the team unanimously decided to keep ePortfolio as the platform for the tasks as they recognised that its functionalities allowed for a real exchange among peers. By then, ePortfolio was no longer just a repository of graduates' skill development but, much more, an online tool through which students are encouraged to reinforce their reflective practice through personal blogs which they can share with others and by setting up specific communities to share and support group work and discussion with other students and staff (NUVision, 2014). Once it was confirmed that ePortfolio remained the best platform for the project, the team came up with a new name for the tasks and the team, namely "FReE" (French ePortfolio Employability) Tasks and "FReE Team" respectively. They designed a logo to help give the project more visibility and a stronger sense of community and they spent the summer working on a "FReE Tasks User Guide" and an "ePortfolio Technical Guide" so that first-year students would know exactly what was expected of them and would not encounter too many technical problems. They also reviewed the tasks in light of the 2012/13 cohort's feedback so as to tailor them better to students' needs and came up with a new set of tasks that signposted to students the skills they were practicing such as, for example, FReE Tasks 2 and 4¹ (Table 1).

1. Originally in French; my own translation.

Table 1. FReE Tasks 2 and 4

<p>Skills you are practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation skills • Analytical skills • Group discussion <p>What we are looking for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precise examples • Grammar, language and structure • Improvements on the points the FReE Team gave in their feedback 	<p>FReE Task 2: 150-200 words in French</p> <p>Reviewing the Dragon Den-style presentation you gave in last week’s seminar (or the ones you saw if you were a Dragon) and integrating the advice given in the video on Blackboard (‘How to give a good pitch’), please say what makes, according to you, a good professional presentation and how you could/would improve on your performance in future presentations.</p>
<p>Skills you are practising:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended writing in French • Analytical skills • Increased awareness of professional strengths and areas for improvement <p>What we are looking for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement of points raised by FReE Team • Focussed responses to points • Improvement in grammar, language and structure. 	<p>FReE Task 4: Value Exercise - 200 words minimum in French</p> <p>The objective of this FReE Task is for you to get to know your professional selves better. Answer the following questions in French and in a minimum of 200 words:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professionally, what kind of person am I? What are my strengths and weaknesses? • What do I excel at (e.g. sorting or thinking on my feet in difficult circumstances etc.)? • What am I interested in and what bores me the most? • Which career path(s) am I particularly keen on?

Finally, as feedback is a sensitive issue, the whole team received training and guidance on best practice in the field with the help of the University’s Centre for Quality in Learning and Teaching. Concerning language accuracy, FReE Team members were asked not to correct every single mistake but to point out error patterns that individual students should address. They were also asked to encourage their peers to become more career aware in the process. The feedback was posted on ePortfolio as a reply to first-years’ blog entries, as in the following example originally posted in French (FReE Task 4):

“Hi X. It looks like you are well aware of your own strengths and weaknesses. You have very useful skills for the job market –mostly your ability to work both independently and in a team. If you’d like a career in journalism, why not get some experience already by writing for the

University's paper *The Courier*? For your next blog, please try to mind accents and not to use too many commas, especially in front of 'et'. Concerning your difficulties with French vocabulary, I'd say that reading lots in French is the way to go –that's perfect for you considering that you love French literature! [...]. X"¹.

4. Discussion

As you can see from the above post, the informal tone used by final-year students to give feedback on students' blogs on ePortfolio paved the way for a real dialogue among students. The objective was, indeed, to boost first-year students' motivation for the tasks while encouraging autonomy.

The evaluation questionnaire for this phase of the project (Q3), which was returned by 64% of FRE1071 students, can give us a better idea as to whether this objective was achieved or not. First of all, 73% of respondents said that ePortfolio worked well as a place on which to upload their tasks. This was a huge increase on Q2, where only 42% of respondents thought so. This may be due to the fact that the FReE Team gave first-year students more guidance on how to use ePortfolio and turned it into a social network. This seems confirmed by the fact that 77% of respondents said it was 'useful' or 'very useful' to get feedback from their peers (Q3). 69% of them also claimed that they had tried to improve based on this feedback (Q3). From these results, one could argue that the FReE Team successfully motivated students to try and improve the quality of their autonomous work on ePortfolio. Surprisingly enough, however, only 57% of students saw the tasks as linguistically 'useful' or 'very useful' in Q3 as opposed to 90% in Q2. Similarly, only 31% of respondents agreed 'completely' or 'mostly' with the idea that the FReE Tasks encouraged their independent learning when 52% of them agreed 'somewhat' with the statement (Q3). It is difficult to explain such results. Could it be that the FReE Team's feedback made first-year students more aware of the improvements

1. Posted on ePortfolio on 16th December 2013 as a reply to a first-year's student blog entry answering FReE Task 4; my own translation.

they still needed to make and discouraged some of them in the process? Did students feel that the interaction with the FReE Team no longer made it truly independent work? This perception would be perfectly legitimate as with the introduction of the FReE Team the tasks still encouraged students to work autonomously but not as independently as in the earlier phases of the project. Whatever the reasons, it should be noted that students' overall appreciation of the project in Q3 did not drop significantly. Indeed, 70% of respondents still rated the project as 'positive' in Q3. This is substantiated by positive qualitative feedback students gave on the project ("Positive as I am able to improve the quality of my written language whilst simultaneously learning about career-related issues" (Q3)) and to the FReE Team members ("Thank you very much for my feedback regarding my FReE Task. It has certainly improved my confidence"¹).

The benefits of the project, however, were not just for first-year students but also for the three finalists who made up the FReE Team. When asked to comment on the project in a separate questionnaire (Q4), all commented positively on the impact the project had on their own linguistic development: "I have certainly improved throughout the tasks (as looking back I have noticed a few errors in my earlier posts). It has also encouraged me to revise certain things [...] in order that I gave the students the correct advice" (Q4). All of them also commented on the project's impact on their employability, such as the Team Leader: "The career experience has been invaluable in securing my place with Teach First as it meant I could talk about all manner of things in the application and interview –employing a team, structuring feedback, supporting learning. It has definitely helped tenfold" (Q4).

5. Conclusion

Quite a few first-year students felt that the project was not beneficial for their linguistic development and their career awareness. Similarly, very few of them

1. Posted on ePortfolio on 18th February 2014 as a reply to a final-year student feedback on FReE Task 6.

took full advantage of the opportunity opened up by ePortfolio to interact fully with the FReE Team by, say, answering to the feedback provided and starting a real conversation. This does not mean, however, that progress was not made towards achieving the first two objectives of the project. Indeed, qualitative feedback collected in Q3 hints to the fact that some first-year students felt very motivated by the interaction with their peers. The fact, too, that so many of the respondents in Q3 claimed to have engaged with the feedback given by final-year students has to be seen as a positive sign, too.

More importantly, the project appears to be successful if we consider all students involved in it. Final-year students have clearly grown through their role: “I felt as though I was becoming a type of mentor as I was encouraging the students to join new clubs or apply for jobs and trying to make them more confident with their French. This was a part of the project that I really enjoyed as I found it rewarding to try and bolster their spirits if they were down” (Q4). Blending peer-learning to e-learning allowed for new bridges to be built between first- and final-year students that were conducive to greater motivation among all students. When this generation of first year students reach their final year in three years’ time and take on the role of mentors in the project, these bridges will grow stronger and give the whole project even greater coherence. This, in turn, should boost first year students’ motivation and secure their engagement with the project.

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