Learning Management Systems (LMS) in foreign language teaching

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http://web.plu.ntnu.no/ansatte/leihok/kontakt2.htm

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The previous semester I have been teaching one course in which I have been using a Learning Management System with on-campus students. Due to causes beyond my influence my original teaching plan were changed, and I instead submit a report from another course I have been teaching the previous semester. Since I have been giving this course over a number of years I have tried to focus upon the differences and difficulties when moving a well-established course into a new setting. As I mentioned in Graz, at least to some of you, my dissertation on the use of internet in the English classroom, will be available on the net the coming fall. The relevant link will be provided to the group.

In the following I submit the experiences and reflections I have from the previous semester's work.

Some background:

The university here (http://www.ntnu.no/indexe.php) has not really decided upon which system to introduce to all students, so at this point a variety of systems are in use.

The systems tried out have been:

> BSCW (http://ideteam.itea.ntnu.no/bscw/ - the NTNU implementation)
> CourseKeeper (www.coursekeeper.com , info page)
> ClassFronter (used at several universities in Norway:
> > (http://fronter.info/index.phtml?set_lang=en, info page in English).
> > Primary and secondary schools do not pay a licence, but only a maintenance
> > fee per year).
> It's learning (http://www.itsolutions.no/ info page)

The same evaluation process seems to be the case for the rest of the universities in Norway, so no "national standard" seems to come about any time soon.

A rather general introduction to LMS in English is found here:
http://www.nettskolen.com/forskning/Diploma%20project.pdf

The status for the university in Trondheim is now that *It's learning* will be tried out for next term, along with the present use of BSCW. A group at the university working with problem based learning (PBL) at several faculties, known as Experts in Teams, have since the mid-1990s been using BSCW as their main LMS, and have established quite a longstanding use of the platform. This is also how I came to know BSCW, and used it in several courses here since 1999. There have also been some use of TeamWave, but only in some small projects. Previously I have been using BSCW, TeamWave and Fronter in courses held at the institute for applied linguistics at the university here (http://www.hf.ntnu.no/anv/).

The previous semester:

However, the previous term I have been using the Blackboard LMS, that in many ways is similar to BSCW, so this report will deal with the aspects that are not specific to any platform, from the point of view of the practitioner. Decisions regarding platforms and the like are usually taken Somewhere Else, and usually Out Of Reach to the practitioner. However, one should not subscribe too religiously to any platform for the sake of the platform, but focus on what it can do, the experiences that can be generalized, and the uptime. In my experience, based on using the platforms mentioned in the above over the last few years, the uptime for BSCW has been outstanding, with Blackboard as a good second.

All of my usage of the LMS here can easily be applied in BSCW, and I think that the observations and reflections made have general relevance. I will focus on general aspects of LMS, what experiences that are relevant from the teacher perspective, and what experiences I have observing the students response, in addition to talking a lot to them about the use of the LMS.

The course I have been giving this term is called *Intercultural Communication in English*, and will thus have a broader relevance to this group than the courses I have held at the institute of applied linguistics. This course is held at the Norwegian School of Management (http://web.bi.no/www/biramme.nsf/eduportal?Openform). We are a group of some 20 teachers who teach this course at different campuses all over Norway. The LMS also provides a discussion board for teachers where we have both had an arena for discussion non-ICT, subject-matter related topics only, and an area where we published different teaching material specific to this course for each other. This course also have a national coordinator who from time to time makes precisions with regards to what is the curriculum, and provides updates through PP-slides for us to incorporate if we feel it is relevant to how we conduct our course.

In the following I will sketch how the affordances of this particular LMS have been structured for this course, hopefully with a clear reference to how this may be applied in BSCW.

The course stretches over 13 weeks, so I established a folder for each week, labelling them week 1, week 2, etc, as the main organizing structure. In addition I had a folder called *Introduction to the course,* a general information folder that contained the overview of the course, the relevant books and articles in the curriculum, info about exam date and the like. Since the folder structure in Blackboard, or in BSCW, cannot be expanded, as the folder structure in the Windows file manager (in the sense that a folder dos not contain a plus or minus sign to indicate levels), I decided *not* to use sub-folders. I found it more convenient both visually and in terms of organization structure, that the main structure was established in the introductory screen, under the main folder, thereby hopefully giving no hidden surprises. BSCW also allows for a description to each folder that can be changed if the content is changed or updated, a facility I used quite a lot.

In my case, the students are automatically appointed to the course by the administration system, so that this is not done manually as in BSCW. However, as in BSCW, I could send a mail to all registered students, as well as to individual systems. The facility to send mail from within the system is something I really like, since this "*inside*" functionality makes it easier to use than to launch an outside application.

These weekly folders have some common ingredients each week. Since my lectures have been on Wednesdays, I made an agreement to upload the coming week's notes no later than Monday before lunch. One common ingredient is a PowerPoint-slide for the lecture to be given. Here, I after one week decided to turn the PP-slides into PDF-files. I decided to use PDF-files since this gave me an opportunity to standardize the files the students received. In PP, you may print a file either as slide or as handouts, and for handouts you may decide how many slides per page. I usually use 2 or most commonly 3 slides a page in the handout. This also allows for free space for notes during the lecture part of the session. Using this as a standard, I knew that all the students who took out the printed version in advance could use this as a basis for their notes. Since I had the full version of Acrobat, I needed only to inform students how to install the Acrobat Reader, which is a free download (http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep.html). To the best of my knowledge, there is not yet any known virus that may be spread using PDF-files (If there are, I'd like to stay within the bliss of ignorance as long as possible). The last few years have seen a tremendous spread in viruses, and distributing doc-files, or ppt-files to a large number of people is not without hazards these days. In the same manner of caution, I have tried to instruct by students only to distribute only RTF-files if using Word. This fall we had some problems with a particularly pernicious virus that caused a lot of problems until we found a better virus protection, and that the students turned to the PDF and RTF formats for distribution. Since then, we have had very few virus problems. Again, a paradox or ambiguity with the use of the internet is that the very convenience of the medium also adds to how we have to deal with an extended complexity, in order to achieve the simplicity and convenience we seek in the use of this technology.

Both in the week folder and in the general information folder I have added page and book references to the literature of the lecture. To some, but not all lectures I have added exercises for comprehension of the material. These are of the types as 'closed' questions, with a given answer to be found in the literature, as well as more 'open-ended' questions for debate and discussion both for written hand-ins and as preparations for debate in class. The latter has been "successful" in the sense that students are more willing to discuss when they have had the opportunity to prepare, and with a clear expectancy to part take. Also it saves time in that I have avoided spending time in class reading this material that now could be read in advance.

By utilizing the time in between classes I could use more material like this and also keeping my material more up to date, and include more recent material as well. The next step in the development of the course is to add these activities as "obligatory activities" in the course.

During the course, after the second or third week, I also made a folder to include links to relevant articles in the daily press, what newspapers to read and the like. I did this because some students argued that they spent too much time wandering the net in order to find relevant reading material. Also, the English course represents only one of several courses they take this semester. Some students thus prefer to have their material 'ready-made', and given some kind of 'authority'. This is an interesting observation, in my opinion, since we here may see the one of the many contradictions and paradoxes regarding the use of the internet in education. On the one hand, many students cherish the ideas of freely floating around on the net, whereas they in other instances know that they do not know what to look for. I have seen the same in all the age groups I have worked with. One of the aspects of this is to stress the importance of the competence of the teacher. In such learning environments the need for the authority of the teacher does not diminish, on the contrary; but it will take on other forms and manifestations in the classroom. Indeed, this is contrary to the fear many teachers have, the fear of becoming superfluous or redundant in the classroom. My key argument with regards to learning in ICT-rich learning environments is The Opposite. (!!)

The difficulty here is the lack of presence in the critical moment. Thus, applying these learning resources frequently requires some kind of feedback session, in which material found on the internet, is put forward to the group and the teacher, and is debated or discussed in depth. In the research I'm doing myself now, as well as the research which is being done by others, this turns out to be a central and critical point of view: to scaffold a stage or setting upon which the learners are invited into and part take. Since the sources and references are more varied and multiple in this learning environment, an important part of the learning process is devoted to training the students in different kind of reading skills, and also with regards to summarize or articulate their findings, in spoken or written contexts.

In terms of methods, this realisation opens up for a large number of didactic possibilities and affordances, where the net resources in not in the centre of the activities but has more of a trigger role, as a part of the infrastructure of the learning process and as a provider of virtual language realia. One of the main problems stemming form the situation sketched in the

above, is how to deal with the lack of "authority", as it were, to the material found on the net. More so than form any other information source the information is frequently out of context, in the sense that students (and also teachers) frequently do not know much about the provider of the information, his purposes, etc. Thus, information needs to be contextualized more than previously. This process of contextualization opens up for a large number of language activities, oral, written, individual and group. (An example may clarify this).

Such contextualization need to contain something about who the sender is, what purposes he might have, etc. Also, some knowledge with regards to search engines and their use is required.

This fall I have provided my students with a limited number of websites for information, and a didactic narrowing down is perhaps lesson number one in applying the net. However, it is necessary to explain the students why this is done, and the purpose. Providing the students with different tasks, f.ex. what the response to a given speech or statement from the Bush administration in different parts of the world. (On a more beginner's level one might think tasks like: weather forecasts, the first snow, Christmas traditions, what are the headlines in different countries). The point here is to apply a comparative approach as a basis for discussion, rather than a purely descriptive approach. The difference is quite crucial, since the former opens more for a dialogic approach with open ended results, whereas the latter is more monologic and close ended. In the former, the discussion may be more easily based upon 'up-take' of student replies, and the number of sentence types and argument types are broader. During such sessions I usually use a part of the blackboard to list new words/phrases they don't' know but need in order to continue, etc. The open ended nature of such sessions, without a clear "authority" on the part of the teacher, in the sense that it is the participants who decides to a large extent the course and content of the discussion, usually gives students the courage to part take. This goes for presenting their own material as well as discussing each others contributions. My role as a teacher is usually to initiate and to design language practice settings, and to design some "outer limits" in the practice setting, within which the students conduct their exploratory and dialogically oriented language activities. In addition I provide parts of the initiating material, either through a limiting number of links or direct references to a number of

As the above shows I have here emphasized upon one of several possible ways of applying the internet as a resource for the language classroom, within the framework of an LMS. My main concern here is to show how the net might open up for activities that without the net might be more difficult to achieve, in the sense that it would require more time and effort on behalf of the teacher. Also, the very amount of material to be found opens up for a way out of the some of the restrictions of the IRF-structure (initiative – response – feedback) so common in the language practice setting, and that by many is seen to inhibit language development. The IRF is expanded to include IRDF, where D stands for dialogue., and that may dominate the session.

Some concluding remarks:

As indicated in the above the turning of an established practice into a "new" course in a new setting is quite time-consuming and involves a lot of work. One should not underestimate the time aspect in the establishing of new practices among teachers and learners. One of the things that took the most time the previous semester, was to make sure that the students used the LMS, since this was their only source of material, and information. In a sense it made them more dependent on the lectures, which is a surprising effect in my opinion, given the high "no-show" frequency among some students. The very presence of the LMS as a central part of the course seemed to have a disciplining effect, but it remains naturally to see if this is a long term effect or not. The weekly updating of the website and the messages given through the site or the mail, had the effect of connecting the students closer to the course, to the teacher and to each other, it seems. The effect is thus one of dialogue. However, most of the course at BI are now based on the LMS, but not all teachers have applied it to their teaching yet. By next ,year the aim is that some 75 % of the teachers of all courses should use the LMS on a regular basis for the communication with their students. Thus, the use of an LMS will be a *sine qua non* for all students in the very near future.

However, the way communication process I have described in the above represents a one-way communication model, representing ways in which the teacher may organize their work and forward material to the students. As far as I can see, this seem to be a common way of entering into the field. With regards to BSCW, it allows the teacher to establish folder that can be accessed and utilized to a full extent by the students. In previous courses using BSCW

I have always done this, with rather interesting results. The present implementation of Blackboard, as it has been made available to the course described here, does not have this facility, which is a strong short-coming. The use of an LMS should, in my opinion, include an affordance for the learner to publish and present their work, both formal writing and the less formal inquiries, discussions and mail, to cater for real collaboration between the learners and the teaches and any combination thereof. The use of folders and subfolders, that may be started by learners opens up for more flexible approach the present description of Blackboard described here.

I clearly look upon this as a fist stage in the development of the course, the second being at least two different additional usages of the LMS. One is the collaboration between the students themselves, a second is the developing and publishing of material for common usage. What remains here, is to develop an overall approach to how to work design relevant assignments to this effect. What assignments are suited to this way of working is a big issue in using net-rich learning environments, and one that is to a large extent is not addressed in fully addressed yet in the reports and literature have looked at. In the books in the literature list I have provided at the end of this document there is a strong tendency to focus upon the following characteristics of (language) learning in net-rich learning environments.

Briefly and condensed, the following are among the central topics for the years to come. As you may observe, the influences are from rather different sources and several sciences are represented:

Focus upon understanding the affordances of technology; how may technology change the ways in which we learn, what are the possibilities inherent in these technologies?

Focus upon the appropriation of technology; how is technology being included into the cultural practices of young people.

How does the technology change and develop the language practices among users of technology, and how does the educational system accommodate to this development.

An emphasis and concern that language learning should emphasize more upon production than reproduction, that language and learning implies externalization more than internalization, knowledge exists only when it is externalized in a social setting.

A general emphasis upon theories of learning collectively labelled somewhat loosely the "socio cultural perspective upon learning" building upon traditions going back to J.M. Baldwin, Vygotsky and Bahktin, and to recent contributions to activity theory from f.ex. Engestrøm, and ecological perspectives upon learning.

A reconsideration of what language is when it is contextualized in a digital setting. The influence of social practices revolving around language use in mail, chat, SMS, and the like, have it seems clear influence upon most language practices. How to we as language teachers approach this development?

As a consequence of the previous item, an increased understanding that the class room and schools provide a decreasing amount of the language learning the students take part in.

A focus upon digital literacy, or literacy for the digital age. What are the literacies we see being developed in the language practices that young people take part in, and how should the educational system deal with this.

An emerging concern and interest in the *Buildung* aspects of learning and education in general. What are the central and relevant *Bildung* questions to be addressed in a net-rich learning environment.

Some relevant links and books:

Since this is a topic also discussed in Graz, I include some references to material I have found particularly relevant for (foreign) language teaching

Links:

This link provides an interesting way of writing poetry:

http://home.online.no/~anlun/gram-po.htm

Suggestions and examples as to how to use newspapers in education at different levels:

http://nieonline.com/

40 free tips, if you like this subscribe:

http://www.handsonenglish.com/40tips.html

Loads of resources and activities here:

http://learning.turner.com/newsroom/

An English grammar online:

http://www.edufind.com/english/grammar/index.cfm

A good (the best?) online dictionary and thesaurus, note that you might also listen to the words:

http://www.webster.com/

For the theoretically inclined, Marin Ryder's page for theories and isms:

http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/constructivism.html

A very good online magazine for language learning and technology:

http://llt.msu.edu/

Another good online magazine:

http://iteslj.org/

Elisabeth Murphy's doctoral dissertation, my strongest recommendation!! Contains a teacher centered approach:

http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~emurphy/strangers/toc.html

Rita Raley: What Is Global English?

http://english.ucsb.edu/faculty/rraley/research/global-English.html

Rhinegold, Howard(1993). *Virtual Communities- Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* Published on the word wide web: http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/

Smith, Bryan(1997): *Virtual Realia*. The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. III, No. 7, July 1997. Also: http://iteslj.org/Articles/Smith-Realia.html

Browser in different language versions:
The much acclaimed Opera web Browser now supports a large number of languages. This page contains an update of language versions available . Note that both Catalan, Czech and Estonian is suppored:

http://www.opera.com/download/languagefiles/index.dml

Books:

Some very central books that in many respects represent the "state of the art" regarding language teaching and technology, that debate at length what kind of future perspectives will be necessary to develop. The first and second focuses on the "why", the "what" and "how" (i.e. the main didactic questions) of the new kinds of literacy that need to be developed on the background of a more multi cultural and technological world. The fourth and fifth is part of a series called Teaching English Language Worldwide.

1:
Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (eds.) (2000):
Multiliteracies. Literacy Design and the design of Social Futures.
London and New York: Routledge.

2:
Mark Warschauer (1999).
Electronic Literacies. Language, culture and Power in Online Education.
Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
See also: http://www.gse.uci.edu/markw/

3:

Mark Warschauer and Richard Kern (eds.) (2000*): Networked-based Language Teaching: Concept and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4:

Christoffer N. Candlin and Neil Mercer (eds.) (2001): *English Language teaching in its Social Context. A Reader* . London : Routledge.

5:

David Hall and Ann Hewings (eds.) (2001): *Innovation in English Language Teaching. A Reader.* London: Routledge.

6:

James P. Lantolf (2000): *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Esp. articles by van Lier and Thorne).

See also: http://language.la.psu.edu/~thorne/

And : http://maxkade.miis.edu/Faculty_Pages/lvanlier/index.html

7:

Murray, Janet H. (1997), *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* MIT Press.

Se also : http://web.mit.edu/jhmurray/www/HOH.html

This book gives an interesting insight into changes in narratives when the internet is applied. The book discuss how narrative forms are interpreted and adapted to the applications available on the internet, and also as how narratives and languages are influenced and changed by the net. The website gives a good introduction to this topic and provides quite a few examples.