

Chapter 11

Meeting in the virtual middle: blending online and human resources to generate a year abroad community

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This paper is interested in exploring two concepts that currently have a significant bearing on the epistemological experiences of modern foreign language (MFL) students: study abroad, and the digital learning environment. It seeks to study the extent to which their confluence can provide those students with the kind of pedagogical encounters that higher education institutions should be offering in the 21st century. These two concepts are both credited with offering radical potential for change and agency, not least because in different ways they offer the possibility of acting in a global environment. When British MFL students return from their required year abroad, “something has happened to them” (Kristensen, 2004, p. 97, quoted in Meier & Daniels, 2013, p. 2); Killick (2011) documents in similar terms the horizon shifting that takes place in the mind of the alert traveller in global spaces, digital and otherwise; Garrison speaks of e-learning as a “disruptive technology” that is currently destabilizing traditional modes of teaching and learning and sowing the seeds for different modes of interaction (2011, p. 125). Year abroad students, meanwhile, are also disrupted learners, since they are engaged in a liminal activity operating at the edge of the formal, institutionalised university system, in terms of pedagogy but also in terms of space. The multi-directional interventions made possible in a virtual learning environment offered the French Department at Warwick University the opportunity to explore formal and informal learning events for these students in intimate detail. Our project sought, then, to examine the new pedagogical possibilities that might emerge from tying a physical experience of movement abroad, prompting acute self- and intercultural awareness, to a learning medium that in its plural, transactional and interactive nature privileges “cognitive and experiential disturbance” (Barnett, 2000, p. 155). Could the appropriate synthesis of these two spaces generate a new kind of learning currently unaccounted for, and thus unarticulated, in the pedagogical vision we had for our students?

1. Language and abroad: spaces of disturbance

If we read the work of those academics currently reflecting on the state of scholarship and the experience of learning in higher education, the semantic field is one of flux: students must learn to cope with a veritable Babel tower of competing discourses; there are no longer any absolutes, and the university must learn how to prepare them for this. “The challenge facing students and teachers is that ‘the world of knowledge is overwhelming, a vast ocean, horizonless, plunging to impossible depths’ (Achenbach, 1999, p. 23)”, says Garrison (2011, p. 30). Barnett uses the term “supercomplexity” to define the epistemological state of the present; pedagogy in this context must reflect the “uncertainty, unpredictability, contestability and changeability” of the world of knowledge (2000, p. 159). Sarnivaara, Ellis and Kinnunen speak of ours as “an age of uncertainty and strangeness [that] should not be understood in terms of knowledge and skills, but rather as a matter of human qualities and dispositions” (2012, p. 308). Such thinkers underscore the necessity for universities to embrace the challenge of teaching differently in this environment, and stress above all the notion of partnership of students and teachers in the process. This emphasis on the transactional is seen in the vocabularies used to characterise the desired forms of knowledge exchange: community of inquiry (Garrison); collaborative learning; socio-cultural knowledge (Tynjälä & Gijbels, 2012). These new learning models aim to inculcate high-level meta-cognition and reflections amongst student learners (so that they are aware of learning *processes*, the limitations of their own position and the relationship between the self and the world that might give rise to such a position). They also take as a given the notion that learning spaces stretch well beyond the four walls of any academic institution.

These are exciting propositions, and, if we can borrow the language of Sarnivaara et al. concerning “human qualities and dispositions”, we might want to suggest that students studying languages are extremely well disposed to fulfil these new criteria, and *a fortiori* when they are abroad. Like other students of the Humanities, they may well have covered a corpus of postmodern materials raising questions of this kind in their “content” modules, but above all students of languages are practically aware of the slippage inherent in any definition and transmission of meaning because they practise the act of translation, where an awareness of the cultural and epistemological standpoint of translator and audience is vital (Bellos, 2011). This relationship of the self to language, culture and environment is particularly brought home to students during their year abroad, where their very identity is challenged by the requirement to represent themselves in a language that is not their mother tongue. In *Study Abroad and Second Language Use: Constructing the self*, Valerie Pellegrino Aveni notes:

The balance learners gain between the culture from which they come and the culture into which they enter gives them greater insight into their own self-construction between the two worlds. [...] the frustrations of limited communicative abilities force learners to develop alternative means of interaction, not only with others, but with their own self-identity. The result is a new sense of personality and purpose. (2005, pp. 147, 150)

This is precisely the kind of affective response Barnett asks of the ideal learner in the supercomplex world:

A dual task incumbent on the lifewide learner is that of maintaining their learning in [...] various learning sites and of sustaining a more or less coherent self across those learning sites. (2012, p. 17)

Furthermore, students of languages abroad must be natural networkers if they are to learn. Meier and Daniels speak of the importance of social capital for language learners abroad: “participation in the social environment in the host country is a key objective of the year abroad” (2013, p. 233). The linguistic benefits that come from the ability to collaborate are obvious, but the attendant willingness to risk the self by existing in a third space in between two cultures (i.e. the year abroad space) could permit the dispositions expected of the productive 21st century learner to flourish. It was the intention of our year abroad project that these experiences be quantified and reflected upon in a parallel online area that would give a clear but open-ended pedagogical framework for the metacognitive processes we wished to encourage.

Going on a year abroad involves taking a step into the unknown. In designing the year abroad virtual learning environment (VLE) we sought theoretical models that also favoured productive risk taking. Over the past few years, Warwick University has innovated in the area of collaborative learning in its development of the “open space learning” model. Open space learning (OSL) dethrones the lecturer as expert and takes a social constructivist approach to learning that asks students to draw on personal experience in tackling areas of the curriculum, typically in improvisatory spaces involving peer and group work that leads the student from individual to collaborative reflection. The vocabulary of open space learning celebrates imaginative play and creativity, i.e. a kind of journeying narrative:

The notion that “failure” should be honoured is [...] transgressive, as is the idea of adults “playing” in open spaces. Related to this is the idea that proposes the transitional nature of OSL: the work exists between clearly defined spaces and, as such, is always in the process of dialectically forming and reforming so is always provisional and never closed. [...] OSL becomes, thereby, transactional, in the sense of an open and free exchange of ideas. (Monk, Chillington-Rutter, Neelands & Heron, 2011, pp. 127-128)

This description seemed particularly apposite for the betwixt and between status of the year abroad, which might be considered the ultimate in open space learning requiring improvisation. Crucially, the virtual elements of the year abroad experience for our students could allow for the “transactional” dimension to this learning to be put in place despite the geographical distance between individual learners.

Allied to this experiential model, Barnett’s metaphor of the modern learner as “liquid” helpfully quantifies the flexible dispositions that allow modern learners to learn best. Such learners show “a preparedness to encounter the unexpected, a willingness to go on even though one does not know what might be round the next bend, [...] a desire to voyage further and develop in the process a will to listen to the world” (Barnett, 2012, p. 10). In our project it was important to use the VLE to probe how such dispositions might allow linguistic competencies to grow whilst offering a learning experience altogether more rounded than the acquisition of language alone. Finally, we sought to acknowledge the disruptive qualities of the year abroad and sought to help students explore the beneficial aspects of this disruption collaboratively. As Cathy Davidson argues in *Now You See It*, disturbance is vital to intellectual growth:

We learn our patterns of attention so efficiently that we don’t even know they are patterns. We believe they are the world, not a limited pattern representing the part of the world that has been made meaningful to us at a given time. Only when we are disrupted by something different from our expectations do we become aware of the blind spots we cannot see on our own. (Davidson, 2011, p. 56)

Barnett speaks in similar terms: “part of the responsibility of higher education in a supercomplex age [...] is that of creating disturbance in the minds *and being* of the students” (2008, p. 155). Since, as Garrison has argued, learning is maximised when students are obliged to acquire a “metacognitive awareness” of such processes and to generate “critical discourses” in response to them (pp. 28, 31, 61), one of the key goals of the VLE was to provide a space to critique intercultural and linguistic encounters in two stages, firstly by requiring that students recount individual experiences of the self in its new world, and secondly by soliciting shared responses potentially unearthing other “blind spots” or presenting new ways of viewing. Garrison notes that: “The demands of an evolving knowledge society create expectations for individuals to be independent thinkers and, at the same time, interdependent, collaborative learners” (p. 53), and reminds us that digital learning, dependent on written (and, in the case of our VLE, asynchronous) exchanges of information, offers the possibility for reflection “at a higher cognitive level than in a face-to-face verbal context” as

“students have more time to reflect, to be more explicit and to order content and issues” (p. 33). This is particularly pertinent in the year abroad context, where for many students the emphasis is placed squarely on oral communication, involving intimate negotiations between interlocutors and contexts that remain ephemeral and often go entirely undiscussed.

2. Designing the site

The above discussion articulates our belief that the disjunctive nature of the year abroad within an otherwise formal degree programme offers students the possibility to hone dispositions invaluable to their development as successful lifelong learners, according to the notion that “the student’s being in the world is more important for her learning than her interests in developing knowledge and understanding in a particular field” (Saarnivaara et al., 2012, p. 308). That said, as language teachers we also had particular objectives in place for advancing the students’ language expertise in preparation for a taxing final-year language programme. It is an entry requirement for students studying French at Warwick to have passed the A Level (school leaving) examination in the language; the annual cohort numbers approximately 100 students, who normally complete their year abroad in the third year of their degree (the cohort numbers approximately 100 students). The year abroad is mandatory, but, as in most university language departments, the range of activities undertaken by students is diverse. Students studying French jointly with another language (Italian or German) generally elect to spend the academic year in one country and the summer vacation in another, so exposure to French in the cohort varies when measured temporally. Of those students in France or a francophone country, approximately 70% are employed as language assistants, 25% are Erasmus students and the remainder undertake a range of paid or unpaid work placements. Of those joint language students residing in Italy and German-speaking countries, almost all take up Erasmus placements. Here again, then, we see huge variety in the students’ exposure to written and spoken French. All these students, whether based in a French-speaking country or elsewhere, must participate in the virtual learning activities set up by the French department.

The challenge, therefore, was to design a site that set out specific tasks with mapped linguistic objectives guiding the students towards particular cognitive, curriculum-focussed goals that nevertheless included open-endedness and explicitly drew on students’ individual experiences. Ideally, we sought to engender interplay between formal and informal activities, so that dispositions honed in one might have a discernible impact on the other. The site we developed in

conjunction with Warwick Language Centre was a hybrid of Moodle and Mahara (what the Language Centre terms “a talking Mahoodle”).

Our site had three clear areas:

- A formatively-assessed work area for the preparation, submission and return of 2-3 formative essays. Targets set and feedback given were largely teacher-led. All factual information (aims, objectives, submission requirements) was given in English to ensure absolute clarity of expectations; all written work was produced, marked and discussed in French.
- A collaboration area (used by staff and students) with a number of forums. The language of staff threads varied between French and English according to the nature of the activity being promoted. Students were free to use either language in their response, with French encouraged for certain activities.
- A personal reflection and dossier building area, largely, but not exclusively student led, constructed in Mahara. This area was almost exclusively in French.

3. The formative essay task

The essay task (numbering two to three assignments depending on the student’s degree programme) came with quite specific cognitive and linguistic criteria, but was constructivist in that students were required to devise their own topic area and title, based on experiences and encounters. Students were also required to create an electronic dossier of resources on the chosen topic, intended both to inform the essay and to be used subsequently during final-year essay and oral classes. The essay was marked by native speaker *lecteurs* in the French department, following a period of training in assessment, levelling, and marking electronically. Students received detailed individual feedback in French, including colour coding of both mistakes and felicitous expressions / constructions, a detailed response to content, and feed-forward guidance for improving written language. An essay-writing forum was created for students to raise questions in advance of the task submission deadline, and to respond to marked work.

This pattern of learning corresponds to Laudrillard’s Conversational Framework (see Laudrillard, 2009, in Kear, 2011, pp. 46-7.) Specific task requirements generated questions on referencing correctly, finding and using sources and presenting work appropriately, to which both staff and fellow students responded in the forum space. However, the most productive community of inquiry sprang up when several students independently voiced concerns about how to construct

an essay title in correct French. For staff, this raised questions about pedagogy (none of the prepared online resources had addressed this question),¹ but in advance of our posting a response, another student (Andrew) had embraced the teacher role:

Jazz: DONC, quelqu'un pourrait m'aider à penser à un titre pour ma dissertation? Je voudrais parler de l'homosexualité en France (l'égalité maritale en particulière) et expliquer la situation en France par rapport à celle en Angleterre. Je ne suis pas certaine concernant ce que je dois mettre comme titre.

Andrew: En plus, on peut utiliser des citations. Alors, si tu veux encore traiter l'homosexualité et faire une comparaison entre l'Angleterre et la France n'est-ce pas possible d'aborder le thème avec une citation? Peut-être tu peux choisir deux: une d'un ressource anglais traduit en français, l'autre en français, et la suivre avec une question générique du genre: "Qu'est-ce que ces deux citations veulent-elles dire au sujet de la perception de l'homosexualité en France et en Angleterre?"

We had sought to build faith in the site as a space of *mutual* inquiry from the beginning of the academic year by employing a native French speaker postgraduate student, Laure, to staff the collaborative forum and seed it with informal activities (discussed in more detail below). Laure was herself a student overseas and her capacity for empathy established trust. On the basis of this mutuality, imparting advice and building helpful feed-forward material from the first assignment became a shared endeavour. Selected students assented to their essays being used as examples of good practice; the *lectrice* (teaching assistant) team created a document on title building; targeted advice sheets on discrete language difficulties (use of tenses, articles, pronouns and so forth) were constructed and disseminated on the

1 The online resources setting out the relationship between dossier-building and essay stipulated: "Each of your three dossiers should relate to a particular aspect of French (francophone) culture and society in the broadest sense of the word: your dossiers may relate to literature, history, art, current affairs (politics, economics, education, media, science and technology...) Mix and match according to your own interests. [...] The key thing is that the topics you choose really interest you and can be examined in-depth and rigorously. [...] Based on the material of each of your three dossiers, you are required to submit TWO / THREE essays of 1000—1200 words. [...] There are no set topics for the essays. Instead, you are asked to formulate your own titles. When formulating the title, however, bear in mind that the essay should produce an argument and not present a topic that is merely descriptive."

site, with the instruction that errors covered here would be penalized more strongly in subsequent assignments.

This multi-layered feedback system seemed to generate a much more focussed interest in the benefits of these formative assignments than had hitherto been the case when students submitted and had marks returned by post. Students were proactive in maximising the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism, by, for instance, requesting (via the forum) a change of date for the final assignment in order to have more time to digest and act on feedback from the second.

The percentage of students who failed to complete these assignments was very low, despite their solely formative nature (the first assignment achieved an 88% submission rate, for instance). Of course they did not suit a minority of students. For some, any link to the centre was anathema for an independent year abroad; for others, more formal assessment was desirable: "I feel that when the year abroad does not count towards your degree whatsoever it's difficult to motivate yourselves at times." More students, however, exhibited quite advanced metacognitive awareness of the creative pedagogical potential on offer in the balance of space and structure offered by the year abroad programme:

Rose: I totally champion the French department's decision NOT to make the year abroad count towards our degrees. [...] As Cathy's questionnaire suggests, the year abroad gives us the time and the space to get to know ourselves – our strengths, weaknesses, motivations and ambitions – and to make our own decisions based on our own, individual interests.

Kathryn: I would like to say that the year abroad should most definitely not just be about improving academically, it should be about developing yourself in a variety of ways; predominately [sic], of course, in terms of language ability but I feel that this covers many skills, not just writing essays. I enjoy the fact that I now have enough time to read books in German at my own leisure, something I never have time for at Warwick as there are so many other compulsory books to read. Additionally, for Erasmus students, having the year abroad not count towards our degree gives us the freedom to take advantage of the many different courses on offer at European universities.

Clare and Matthew went further in linking the freedom to explore their status as global citizens in an assessment-neutral environment with the intellectual "play" and risk taking that can inspire academic advancement:

Matthew: I chose [my] title because after having read several bouquins about mountaineering and the guides of Chamonix, I just really wanted to write about it! Roger Frison-Roche was my inspiration, and then I researched using accident results from the Club Alpin Suisse, Mountain Rescue, and some

mountaineering discussion forums. [...] I should probably have chosen a subject a little more France specific, but seeing as these essays don't count towards my degree mark I thought the risk was worth it and I allowed my heart to rule my head.

Clare: Chosing [sic] the titles was hard but at the same time the complete liberty was wonderful and I actually ended up writing and researching topics which originally I would never had contemplated if the titles had been given to me, and therefore I discovered more about France.

4. The dossier building task

The essay assignments' combination of, on the one hand, highly specific objectives and feedback mechanisms and, on the other, research-driven, open content, proved highly effective. The accompanying dossiers were much harder to embed in the learning process. Although students gathered material, many did not use the suggested Mahara format to do so, and many of those who did use Mahara found it hard to organise their content effectively. Mahara is an extremely flexible online space, giving students the opportunity to source and arrange text, video, web material and photos using a drag and drop system. Students were provided with instructions for use in the form of screen captures, videos and word documents, as well as examples from a previous pilot study for the VLE. They also received some training in usage of the site prior to their year abroad. Nevertheless, once abroad many students felt that Mahara was not intuitive enough to be readily usable (see also O'Toole, 2013)²; there was also a tendency for users to see the pages as something of a "scrap book" for resources (O'Toole, p. 14). Mahara offers the facility for students to share their pages with others, and we encouraged critical appraisal of pages through a comments facility. However, only 16 students in a cohort of about 120 shared their pages, allowing staff to offer advice on copyright issues and the web, on layout and on reflective appraisal of content, distributed to individual students and, more gen-

2 Facebook postings revealed problems with logging in and confusion about the different discrete areas of the combined Moodle / Mahara platform that dovetail with Robert O'Toole's analysis of the challenge of a Mahara-style e-portfolio: "to achieve a single reflective task in the e-portfolio, the student needs to successfully understand and use, in combination, different functions in different parts of the interface. They might even have to choose, find, initiate, complete and find their way out off [sic] several distinct workflows (with series of web pages), not immediately connected to the task in hand" (O'Toole, p. 11).

erally, through the Moodle forums. The best of the pages, responding to advice given, showed an excellent level of reflection, incorporating critical discourse on the choice of content, a sifting and sorting of materials through target language summaries and key vocabulary lists, and a sensitivity to presentation.

In summary, though the dossier task itself had been broken down into a number of objectives, many of these were more directly focussed on the process of choosing topics; it was clear that in order to engender high level critical engagement with the material chosen we needed to do more to help students organise and analyse their work. Basing our revisions upon best student practice, we have worked with Warwick e-learning adviser Rob O'Toole to devise a new dossier area on the Warwick Sitebuilder interface that ties the uploading of content directly to critical appraisal of it through a mandatory web form setting explicit tasks (including: "draw up a list of new vocabulary"; "explain why you have chosen this article"). This "what you see is what you get approach" relieves students of the "high extraneous cognitive load" associated with using the more open-ended Mahara platform (O'Toole, 2013, p. 11), which our students, already carrying a heavy load of new cognitive responsibilities in their individual year abroad contexts, were not ready to assume. Further research will be needed to assess how the dossiers, in the older and newer formats, are re-used by students in final-year language classes.

5. Informal collaborative learning: the forums

The Moodle forums saw the most productive combination of teacher-led scaffolding and student driven activity in which students clearly "internaliz[ed] the teaching role" (Kear, 2011, p. 43). In order to galvanize the disparate community at the beginning of the academic year, the decision was taken to have a programme of seeded activities which students could opt into, combined with a termly compulsory posting. The seedings ranged from the very informal (virtual cinema and reading clubs, recipe sharing, description of regions) to those requiring reflection on language and interculture, and others focussing clearly on professional and academic skills building. English was the language of interaction in the academic and reflective postings, whilst other, more informal threads were set in French, with the option of answering in either French or English. The compulsory forum tasks elicited a participation rate of around 66%, and showed many students eager to engage in reflection on their working roles and to adopt a transactional approach to problems and questions. A body of about 20 students participated readily in other, voluntary, forum discussions and, indeed, initiated discussions of their own; it was this group that made the transition from the role of active respondent to that

of facilitator. In what follows, I analyse the responsibilities and dispositions that these different levels of participation elicited.

5.1 Student as task manager

Pellegrino Aveni (2005) and Killick (2011) have noted the anxiety that can beset new year abroaders seeking to establish an identity in a foreign-language setting. The earliest student-generated interventions on the forum reflect this anxiety:

Stephanie: I don't know about you [speaking to the general audience] but this first two months has been a steep learning curve. This should be reassuring and even satisfying but, apart from still being alive and relatively healthy, I don't really feel that the results are showing. [...] What I feel I am picking up is short cuts. My greatest fear is that, if I don't hurry up and make myself understood sharpish, my locutor will quickly get bored and either interrupt me, ask me to speak in English or walk away. As a result, my speech has accelerated but articulation still lags woefully behind, making it harder for people to understand me.

Andrew's response clearly holds the forum space to be pastoral. This allows him to probe the problem of identity and language in a sophisticated way:

Thank you so much for posting this - I was beginning to wonder if I was the only person to have this same awkward feeling that my French is resting at more or less at the same level and not progressing.

The slow progression of my ability to communicate orally is now becoming quite alarming (particularly as I have been out here for just over a month). I think, in part, it's actually because we're thinking too much about what to say (afraid of making mistakes, trying to think ahead, trying to crystallise ideas about what to say in our heads). [...]

We're [...] used – in the UK – to speaking a language fluently. I know that if I talk to another native English speaker, even if I don't quite express myself well, I will nevertheless have been successful in communicating the concept or idea that I wanted to say. We don't have that luxury in a different country (and culture) such as France.

Naturally staff offered encouragement and reassurance in response to this, but another student chose a rather different tack, offering a friendly telling off to the students for having persisted in communicating in English:

Chers Stefanie et Andrew, Tout dabord, je ne crois pas qu'écrire en anglais vous aidera à améliorer votre français ; [...] A mon avis, il faut pratiquer, pra-

tiquer, PRATIQUER, même si vous faites pas mal d'erreurs au début. [...] J'espère que vous ayez trouvé mon conseil à peu près utile et que ce n'était pas trop (pour utiliser un peu d'anglais) "Thank you, Captain Obvious"

The response was well received and these students began to express themselves in French on the site as a result. Communication in French on the site was optional, and not necessarily the desired outcome even in this situation, where students might feel they need to voice anxieties in their own tongue. Nevertheless, this discussion did a lot to foster confidence in using French.

5.2. *Student as producer*

At regular intervals the forums were seeded with questions in English that asked students to consider changes in intercultural understanding. While staff had a tendency to solicit introspection in their question types, a group of students offered, unsolicited, a more practical contribution. Tom, recalling that the meeting for new outgoing students was about to take place at Warwick, set the following challenge for his co-year abroaders:

I thought maybe it would be a good idea to have a forum where we could post things that could be of particular interest to next year's YAers [sic]. Think about things that we wanted to know last year: Phones, Housing, Second jobs etc etc and it could help David in term 3 when he has a billion 2nd years asking him what the best available phone tariffs are?

The response was seven very detailed posts on the topics Tom had raised. This posting anticipated a need also articulated in questionnaires and demonstrated students' willingness to assume the status of expert, even to the extent of intervening in the organisational processes of the year (Kear, 2011). This had been encouraged elsewhere on the site in the establishment of three "professional" forums (the Assistantship forum, the Erasmus forum and the Paid Work forum). Contributions to these forums were compulsory, and students asked to reflect on their work role, by offering sample material (lesson plans, assessment of pupil need; how to integrate at university, which courses to recommend; reflection on expectations in the workplace). Some posts produced in-depth analyses of intercultural exchange, learning dispositions and classroom, university and workplace behaviours, which showed students "negotiat[ing] peer social discourses, overcome[ing] their own resistances [...] and acquiring more responsibility (agency)" (Meier & Daniels, p. 234). I list some examples below:

Despite being paid for only 12 hours of work per week, I was asked to do all sorts of extra stuff for free. And when I say asked, I mean I didn't really have

a choice. I found myself caught between whether to just say yes to everything (this has been my motto since working here, especially in social situations) or to stick up for myself.³

The social aspect of uni here (or lack of) is what we were warned about/expected, but seeing it in action is different from hearsay. It's a shame they don't have as much of a student community here as campus unis tend to, [...], but I think this is due to the entirely different systems, for example the fact that students here tend to have at least 20 hour weeks regardless of subject, that mean that such involved extra curricular activity isn't really possible.

When I began my year abroad I felt like I had all the time in the world to get settled and start making the most of the opportunity. However, the sooner you realise that isn't the case the better off you'll be. That is the best advice I could give anyone about to undertake their year abroad, and also what I would tell the former version of myself if I could time travel.

I have now managed to instill [sic] confidence in them [my pupils] merely by telling them how impressed I am with them when they speak. If they say something correctly, I believe it is important to give them positive feedback, not only to reward them but to make them feel happy about themselves having got something correct.

6. Conclusions: no more them and us?

This online community was advantaged by having interacted in the real world in years 1 and 2 prior to the year abroad. Nevertheless, the team saw it as essential to establish a *group online* identity that was transactional, playful, exploratory and cohesive, but rigorous in its academic standards (Garrison, 2011, pp. 46-50). Affective posts revealing staff dispositions sat alongside academic posts, and the students responded by cementing social cohesion through humour. Whilst we had been busy seeding the site with pedagogical prompts and nudges, the students had agreed on Facebook to seed it with secret code words around the topic of cheese (chosen because "it is typical of a French equivalent which is SO different"). It was only when I reviewed all forum entries that I spied a trend of which this is one example: "It turned out that I had acute appendicitis so what

3 This student's end-of-year review suggests the benefits of this difficult learning curve: "Teaching in Germany has made me far more confident. Before, I found it nerve-racking to speak to a group of 20 people I already knew, now a group of 30 is fine."

followed was a laparoscopic appendectomy [...] I spent 5 days [in hospital] recuperating. Luckily I'm feeling much cheddar now - cheese things happen!" The eventual sharing of the joke between staff and students elicited real conviviality ("Haha well caught on!!!!"; "You gouda love a good pun") both on this site and the cohort's Facebook page,⁴ growing to have "group or dyad-level affect" and "to build stronger relationships within the social context" (Robert & Wilbanks, 2012, p. 1075). Of course, this joke would not have worked if there had been no "them" and "us", and the departmental site was clearly credited with a distinctive pastoral and pedagogical role, as these questionnaire responses indicate:

The department's VLE focuses on the cultural and educational side of living in France and encourages us to share and compare our experiences with other students all over France.

It is a place to ask academic questions and to gain reputable advice (either from other students experiences, or in terms of recommendations).

I have so many Facebook groups for various year abroad criterion [sic] it's comforting to know that there is a direct link to all other Warwick students and teachers.

This position of trust is, I believe, a product of the decision to give "strong leadership" and a high level of task scaffolding to the site (Garrison, 2011, p. 62).

Garrison's generalist approach to the online pedagogical space and Meier and Daniel's linguist-focussed approach to the year abroad space offer complementary models of how students' deep learning might be sustained in the long term. Garrison's practical inquiry model envisages a 4 stage process for online tasks: "trigger, exploration, integration, and resolution" (p. 60). Meier and Daniels describe three metaphors that characterise the year abroad learning process: the acquisition, participation and contribution metaphors, where contribution involves the deepest, most beneficial level of immersion in a foreign social context (pp. 233-234). This chapter has emphasized particularly the life-long learning dispositions that can be developed during the year abroad. In this context, we wish to acknowledge that any resolution will be partial, and will perhaps uncover triggers for a new learning endeavour. We sought to encourage awareness of this process through the creation of a Mahara page that formally

⁴ I was granted permission to participate in this page once I discovered its existence through questionnaires on the students' use of virtual spaces.

introduces students to some of the meta-cognitive perspectives explored above and asks them to respond with personalised reflections. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Using Mahara for post-YA reflections

The screenshot shows a Mahara portfolio page for Cathy Hampton. The page title is "Building on your Year Abroad: what have you learned?". The content is organized into several sections:

- Employability:** A section titled "Skills employers are looking for" with a list of skills: communication, teamwork, leadership, negotiation, initiative, time management, organisation, problem solving, customer skills, and commercial awareness.
- Another perspective: 'professional expertise':** A section with a quote from Tinjälä, Pääksä et al. (2012) and a list of three points: 1. Expertise consists of tightly integrated components of theoretical, practical, and sociocultural knowledge; 2. Progressive problem solving is a key characteristic of true experts; 3. Expert work is highly collaborative and transformative in nature.
- Sample jobs showing skills needed:** A section with a link to "Vacancies...ton.docx" dated 21/04/13.
- Your future: how useful is what you have learned?:** A section with a reflection on the Year Abroad site, a quote about "Knowledge in the modern world" from Saamivaara et al. (2012), and a quote from Barnett (2007) about "liquid learning".

We intend to support this with an improvisatory workshop addressing the issue of returning to the institution using the metaphor of the fairy tale,⁵ which incorporates the stages of departure, exploration and reintegration:

"Il y avait une fois..."

- The fairy tale. Brainstorm: what is characteristic of this genre? How does it work? Why might it be a good analogy for the year abroad?
- TASK: Imagine your year abroad experience as a fairy tale. Examine each stage of the process in detail. Think about:
 - Feelings
 - characters
 - space / geographies

⁵ This approach echoes Killick's assessment of placement abroad as initiating a process of becoming that has mythic properties (p. 267).

It is hoped that this improvisation will complement and extend written online reflections, as well as encouraging students intuitively to feel the imaginative leap that may be necessary to take their serendipitous year abroad experiences forward to the world beyond the placement.

In addition, we intend to add to Meier and Daniel's target-language contribution metaphor the additional requirement that students contribute something of their acquired linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge to their home community on their return; Killick has noted the "broader socio-cultural skills and perspectives gained on mobility" that can usefully be fed back (p. 261). Currently, the Mahoodle has been remodelled for the summer transitional period to include fact files of information summarising key forum discussions of interest to newly outgoing students, and allowing volunteer students to act as online consultants for this next cohort. From the following academic year, one assessment task will require students to write online resources in French for the students that will follow them. Additionally, a pilot widening participation project will see 15 volunteer students gather and peer review artefacts that might profitably be used to stimulate learning in the year 9 French classroom (using Moodle forums and other online spaces to compare materials), to be developed for use in local schools on their return.

Just as language-learning is grounded in the contextual, the shifting and collaborative, so too are the worlds, virtual and actual, of the 21st-century learner, and the synergies are worth pursuing, in order to stress that students of languages are particularly astute, prescient learners for this current time. Such initiatives as those set out above offer our students frames for thinking about how the year abroad has the potential to transform, and seek to bring to the fore the value of being mindful of such transformation. Global citizenship, facilitated by the infinite possibility of new online encounters, demands such mindfulness. The encounter with the other has produced such reflections before, but now, unlike in previous ages, we can all be travellers. As Montaigne would have it: "Le monde n'est qu'un branloire pérenne. Toutes les choses y branlent sans cesse. [...] Je ne puis assurer mon objet. Il va trouble et chancelant, d'une ivresse naturelle. Je le prends en ce point, comme il est, en l'instant que je m'amuse à lui. Je ne peins pas l'être. Je peins le passage". (1998 [1595], p. 267)⁶.

6 "The world is but a perennial see-saw. Everything in it [...] waver[s] with a common motion [...] I am unable to stabilize my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming" (Screech, 1991, p. 207).

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