



The Community Café: creating and sharing open educational resources with community-based language teachers

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The Community Café project ran from 2010 – 2011 and was a collaboration between Southampton City Council and two universities in the UK. The project's aim was to create, publish online and share a collection of open access digital resources for community-based language teachers in the Southampton area. The project addressed a particular problem: the scarcity of up-to-date, online resources for community languages. These languages are often learnt in informal situations, and teachers are often reliant on creating their own materials but have limited access to training. Engaging with open practice offers this group the potential benefits of improving their access to resources, enhancing digital literacy and practice, and gaining insights into alternative pedagogical approaches through using existing online repositories. The project used a mix of informal 'café' sessions and formal training to successfully engage the local community languages group in creating and sharing OERs. The group reported that there were real benefits to their

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pedagogical practice through working on the project and engaging with open practice: knowledge and skills gained continue to inform their teaching. The paper concludes that while community-based languages teachers are enthusiastic learners and benefits of open practice can be significant, they need encouragement, training and a neutral environment to engage fully with the open movement.

1 Introduction and background

This article describes the Community Café project, which ran from 2010 to 2011 and was a collaboration between Southampton City Council, the University of Southampton and Manchester Metropolitan University. The project was funded by JISC¹ to create, publish online and share a collection of digital resources for community languages teachers in the Southampton area. For this project ‘community languages’ were defined as «...*languages spoken by members of minority groups or communities within a majority language context*» (CILT)². The Southampton area, for example, is home to a wide range of community languages, including Gujarati, Bengali, Chinese, Afghan Farsi, Persian, Punjabi, Polish and Urdu.

Historically, community languages in the UK have been undervalued by society in favour of English and other modern European languages (CILT, 2005) which are seen to have more prestige or usefulness (for example, in gaining access to university or opening up job opportunities in the UK and abroad) and the most commonly taught languages in the UK are French, German and Spanish (CILT, 2011). Community languages are often taught in informal, community-based situations (e.g. in the home or in supplementary schools) rather than within the mainstream education system. In recent years qualifications in many community languages have become available, e.g. GCSEs or assessment through the Asset Languages scheme³, for example: in Hampshire, 17 such languages are taught by more than 150 teachers to GCSE level. The acquisition of such skills and qualifications has economic and social benefits, for the individuals, the communities and the UK as a whole (McPake & Sachdev, 2008). In addition, the general benefits of plurilingualism to an individual’s educational and linguistic development have been widely demonstrated (CILT, *op. cit.*).

1.1 Issue to be addressed

The professional life of a community-based language teacher is challenging: most teach out of love for their language and culture and have no formal tea-

¹ The Joint Information Systems Committee (UK) www.jisc.ac.uk

² National Centre for Languages: http://www.cilt.org.uk/community_languages.aspx

³ <http://www.assetlanguages.org.uk/>

cher training. They often work full-time in professions unrelated to teaching and have family commitments, so they have very little time for preparation, resource development and professional development, despite reporting a strong desire to improve their practice and enhance their students' learning experience (McPake *et al.*, 2007). In addition, there is often very little appropriate language learning material available for the languages that they teach and what is available is outdated. Their student groups are frequently diverse in age and ability, and so the teachers are constantly required to create their own materials. There are a considerable number of community languages teachers working across the UK (*ibidem*), but few mechanisms for them to share their work, support each other or work collaboratively.

The project team sought to address these issues and open practice presented an ideal way to do this. The open content movement emphasises crossing-boundaries and engaging with a wider public beyond the established education sector. It encourages the creation and sharing of teaching resources in open access repositories and the use of online networks for sharing good practice (for example, see Borthwick, 2011; Comas-Quinn *et al.*, 2011). One of the central tenets in the OER movement is that resources should be licensed to allow re-use and adaptation by others, enabling material to be widely and effectively used in different contexts (e.g. Mendonça *et al.*, 2011; Hewlett Foundation, 2012). The benefits of engaging with the open content movement for professional development and resource sharing are already well-known in the Higher Education sector in the UK (JISC, 2012) and are currently being explored with enthusiasm in all mainstream educational sectors. These aspects of open practice aligned strongly with the project's aim to support a group of teachers working outside mainstream education in creating and sharing their own digital materials; widening the pool of resources available, and offering access to a global online teaching community.

1.2 Aims and objectives

Our primary aim was to use expertise and tools developed within the higher education sector to collect and co-create digital resources for community languages. There were other objectives:

- to build a self-managed community-based group to support community language speakers engaged in teaching;
- to improve the pedagogy of existing materials through peer review and discussion, and encourage general reflective practice;
- to provide bespoke and incremental training in using, creating, publishing and sharing digital content;

- to contribute to the enhancement of the profile and provision of community language learning through adding resources to an online repository hosting a wide range of language resources;
- to open up connections and strengthen existing relationships between academic departments and the local community.

2 Method

The project team made use of the existing Community Languages support network, coordinated by Southampton City Council, to introduce local teachers to the project. The team employed a mix of informal and formal methods to successfully engage the group in Southampton.

2.1 Informal Methods

The first strand of project activity was to establish regular ‘café-style’ sessions for the teachers, and the project team used a model of community engagement developed as part of an award-winning⁴ EU-funded project, *The Language Café*⁵ to do this. That project responded to a demand for informal and socially-situated language learning and created over 20 Language Cafés across Europe. The benefit of the Language Café model is in its informal, user-centred nature, an aspect that we felt would be particularly important for this project as participants would be likely to lack confidence in using or sharing digital resources, be reluctant to share resources they may feel are not suitably ‘professional’, or simply reticent about sharing their existing practice with others outside of their language groups. The intention was that the Café meetings would provide a forum for ‘offline’ discussion and would supplement a series of workshops offering training in the use of technology for resource creation and sharing.

Café sessions were held monthly, at a local school in Southampton. Meetings were necessarily held ‘out-of-hours’ because this was when teachers were available. Sessions were designed to encourage teachers to have input into the shape of future meetings. The project team felt that this was essential to the success and sustainability of the project, because it was felt that if participants had input into the programme of activities, they would feel a sense of ownership in the project and activities would be directly relevant to them and their teaching.

Café meetings had a loose structure involving discussion and ideas/practice sharing. Meetings were led by members of the project team, who typically introduced a theme (e.g. ‘using authentic materials in teaching’) and encour-

⁴ European Award for Languages 2008, Lifelong Learning Programme

⁵ <http://www.languagecafe.eu>

rated participants to mix with new acquaintances across language groupings. Meetings were informal and social in tone. The themes covered in cafe sessions were chosen to complement the training workshops which ran in parallel, so for example, prior to a workshop on creating podcasts, the cafe session was used to talk through ideas about how to use audio recordings in class and the kinds of elements to consider when creating a podcast. This meant that participants were prepared for the practical workshops.

2.2 Formal methods

The second, parallel strand of activity was to run six evening workshops in the use of technology over the course of the year. These workshops were held in a computing classroom on the Southampton university campus and were facilitated either by the project team or by specifically commissioned trainers. Topics were negotiated with the participants at the outset of the project and featured: using and sharing material on an online repository; creating podcasts; using powerpoint for language teaching; creating online activities using Hot Potatoes – part 1; creating online activities using Hot Potatoes – part 2; and tips for teaching diverse groups of learners.

All workshops were practical and offered all participants the opportunity for hands-on experience using technology to create materials. This ensured that each teacher could work on a resource individually and build up her/his digital portfolio. Workshops were also structured around an achievable task: each participant was able to complete a digital item by the end of the workshop and this encouraged a sense of achievement and empowerment in the group (see Figure 1 for an example).

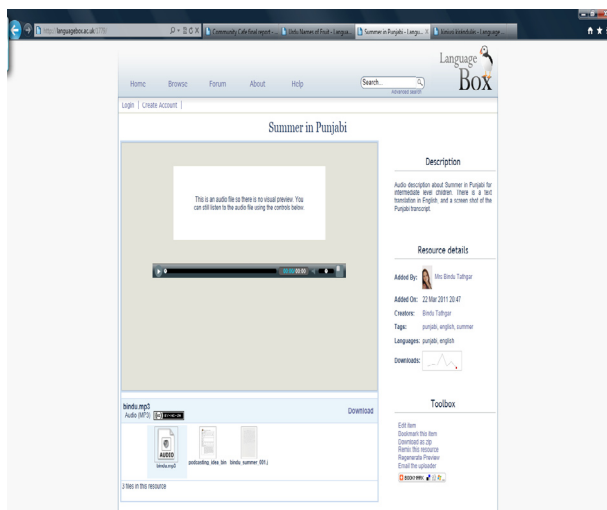


Fig. 1 - An audio activity with lesson plan, transcript and translation for Punjabi
<http://languagebox.ac.uk/1779/>

2.3 Online space for sharing

An existing open repository, the *LanguageBox*⁶, was used to store the materials created and re-purposed for the project. A key aspect of this repository is its simplicity: it is very easy to use and does not represent a barrier for non-technical individuals. It has an appealing interface and offers some Web 2.0-style features such as the facility to comment on others' resources. LanguageBox was developed in collaboration with language tutors (Borthwick *et al.*, 2009) and contains materials for a wide variety of languages at various levels, which provided a source of inspiration for teaching methods and ideas for learning activities, as well fostering a sense of joining a broader language-teaching community.

The LanguageBox also offers a space on the internet to put individually created material where students can access it and use it directly (each resource has a unique URL), and this is a tangible benefit for teachers who do not have access to institutional Virtual Learning Environments or websites.

3 Findings

An evaluation was carried out at the close of the project by the project team and a group of external evaluators from Manchester Metropolitan University. The project was found to have been successful in exciting the enthusiasm

⁶ www.languagebox.ac.uk

of a particular community group about creating effective teaching resources, sharing ideas with others and publishing teaching resources openly online. It succeeded in enabling a group of teachers to reflect on their own practice, learn and implement new skills, and learn more about how technology can be used in the language classroom. Tangible achievements included:

- the creation of a pack of workshop materials which other groups can use in working with community-based language teachers to deliver ICT training and to create an informal community group to share teaching ideas/practice (this pack is available as an open educational resource through the LanguageBox⁷);
- a training method and model for engaging language teachers which empowered and attracted participants and which meant that they were not intimidated by the technology used or the project's approach to community-building;
- a modest bank of resources for the teaching of community languages, published openly and created by community-based language teachers in Hampshire and Manchester;
- active engagement from locally-based community language teachers - café meetings attracted an average of 30 participants, with about 22 attending workshops, and extension workshops in Manchester and Portsmouth were attended by approximately 60 additional teachers.

Case study of a Community Café participant:

A Hungarian teacher living and working in Southampton

“I teach Hungarian on Sundays, to learners aged four-ten years. Students come from all over Hampshire, as there are not many Hungarian teachers. I started doing it because no-one else was willing and I wanted to preserve some cultural knowledge for my daughter and other Hungarian children. I have two groups working on different things during each two-hour class and there are not many suitable resources available, so you have to be quite creative in finding and making resources. I enjoy it but it is very time-consuming. I usually use my own CD player to play songs, etc. and I get students to use the computer for homework. I use the Internet to help me plan lessons. The children are more willing to do things if they can use computers.

The best thing about the project for me has been hearing different experiences - as each teacher has different issues. I have got some teaching ideas from other colleagues during Café meetings. I have also become familiar with new things: using PowerPoint, podcasts, Hot Potatoes software. I'm looking forward to using them.”

⁷ <http://languagebox.ac.uk/1846/>

All participants in the project were given a closing questionnaire and interviewed informally about their experiences during the course of the project. There was an overwhelmingly positive response: 100% of those who completed the survey rated the whole experience at 'good' or better, and 84% as 'excellent.' Other responses indicated that:

- The group learnt new skills. All of the participants testified to this, for example, «*I didn't really think of using computer software before, but I learned that it can really help learning in the classroom.*» – (Polish teacher)
- Meetings were found to be useful in overcoming fear of technology. «*[Using technology in teaching] is not as hard as it first seems. It just requires a lot of planning.*» - (Punjabi teacher); «*I have grown in confidence in using computers, making my own handouts, and in talking with other people about my teaching situation.*» – (Urdu teacher)
- Project activities will have an impact on future teaching. «*Sometimes it is difficult to find a good podcast for your lesson. Now I'm able to do it on my own!*» – (Hungarian teacher)
- Sharing resources online is a good idea. «*I have found the LanguageBox to be very useful as inspiration for my own lesson planning because I can get ideas from other teachers' lesson plans and from their teaching resources. I have been publishing a series of lesson materials for Polish on the LanguageBox, and I hope to make contact with other Polish teachers in the UK by doing this.*» – (Polish teacher)
- It is beneficial to share ideas with colleagues. «*Each teacher has different issues so it is interesting to hear different experiences. I have got some teaching ideas from other colleagues during café meetings.*» – (Hungarian teacher)

The external evaluators of the project highlighted the value of sharing resources online and indicated that this could be highly beneficial to other community-based language teachers. They noted that the Community Café model could be a cost-effective and appealing way of actively creating useful networks which would have the potential to sustain in the longer term.

3.1 Lessons learned

It was immediately evident from contact with the community-based language teachers that they are extremely enthusiastic learners and are not intimidated by new ideas, approaches and technologies, in keeping with McPake *et al.*'s findings (*op. cit.*). This was a characteristic of all participants in the project

and meant that training fell on fertile ground. This situation means that small amounts of training have the potential for a large impact on practice in a way that can keep costs to a minimum.

The team also found that open access can be an ideal vehicle for assisting the work of community-based language teachers. There is a shortage of existing community languages resources that are appropriate for a UK context. The proliferation of OER repositories broadens the pool of resources available and spreads good practice. However, in order for such teachers to have access to the benefits of OERs, further IT training and awareness-raising about OERs is essential, particularly in the area of copyright and the use of third party content, as well as effective metadata description for increased discoverability of resources.

There needs to be greater knowledge transfer between higher education and other sectors such as schools and the supplementary schools sector to enable such community-based language teachers to reflect upon and improve their own practice, and engage with open access freely. In the higher education sector, practitioners are constantly involved in reflection and criticism of their practice and it is also a part of mainstream educational practice in schools; however, it was an alien practice to most of our community-based teacher group, many of whom were educated in more traditional education educational systems. An ability to ‘stand outside’ of your work, reflect upon it and view its value objectively as an open resource for others to use and adapt, is essential in effective OER sharing.

In order to feel comfortable with working openly, neutral environments are necessary to enable cross-linguistic, cross-cultural sharing to take place. It became clear during café sessions that sharing of ideas and practice does happen within linguistic and cultural groups offline but there is very little cross-linguistic and cross-cultural sharing taking place. Online repositories offer a neutral space for such sharing of knowledge and resources, and our project group proved to be undaunted by the concept of sharing their resources with the world.

At the same time, the informal, social meetings that we held were a crucial element in the project because they enabled useful networking opportunities: most teachers had not met each other before and had not socialised outside of their ethnic/linguistic groups. The café sessions allowed the teachers to share ideas and experiences, and to build confidence in their work. Such meetings also overcame teachers’ feelings of working in isolation and the connections

that they made during the project have endured.

Conclusion

Community-based language teachers are an enthusiastic and motivated group of people who would benefit greatly from increased opportunities for training and access to networks and models current in mainstream education. The motivation amongst these teachers is such that a small amount of training and resource would have a large impact although time is needed to absorb ideas and new ways of working. This dedicated group of teachers is an important resource to nurture and support particularly in the UK, where there is low uptake for language learning in general, and poor recognition of the worth of community language skills to society.

This finding sits alongside the fact that there has never been a greater need to support community-based language teachers, as provision for learning community languages across the UK is currently subject to drastic cuts in government funding. In this context, open practice offers an opportunity: a low-cost, effective method of transferring knowledge between education sectors, enhancing practice and enabling networking for the benefit of professional development. In addition, the public nature of open practice enables the promotion of languages and of language learning. The Community Café project has addressed these issues in a fledgling way through the promotion of online community sharing, and has laid real foundations for future development in this area. However, it is an opportunity that will be lost unless more work is done to reach and support the hundreds of other community-based language teachers working across the UK, to give them the opportunity to access the same benefits offered by open practice that are available to educators in more mainstream settings.

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