

The Community Café project: sharing tea, cake and online teaching resources

The Community Café project has recently begun in Southampton and is nearly half-way through its year-long run. It is a collaboration between the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) at the University of Southampton; Southampton City Council and the COLT project¹ at Manchester Metropolitan University, and is funded under the JISC Developing Community Content programme². The broad aim of the project is to combine university expertise and community-based knowledge and work together to co-create a collection of online language and cultural materials for use by those engaged in the teaching and learning of community languages within the local Southampton area. This online collection will be open for sharing, re-use and re-purposing by the wider educational community.

This is a project which seeks to bring the world of online open resource sharing that is gripping UK higher education to a local community group: teachers of community languages. ‘Community languages’ are defined as “...languages spoken by members of minority groups or communities within a majority language context” (Cilt)³. The Southampton area, for example, is home to a wide range of such languages, including Gujarati, Bengali, Chinese, Afghan Farsi, Hindi, Malay, Malayalam, Persian, Punjabi, Polish and Urdu. These languages are often learnt in informal situations (e.g. in the home, in supplementary schools or in the community) rather than within the mainstream education system and have historically been undervalued by society in favour of English and other modern European languages. This is despite the fact that research indicates that plurilingualism is of benefit to the individual and to wider society⁴.

The project addresses a particular problem: the scarcity of up-to-date, online resources for community languages. Such material is much needed as in recent years qualifications in many community languages have become available, e.g. GCSEs or assessment through the Asset Languages scheme;⁵ however pathways to learning tend to rely on low-paid or voluntary teachers operating outside the mainstream educational system, for example: in Hampshire, 17 languages are taught by more than 150 teachers to GCSE level. The acquisition of such skills and qualifications has economic and social benefits,⁶ for the individuals, the communities and the UK as a whole.

The project’s primary aims are:

- to use expertise and tools developed at the University of Southampton to collect and co-create digital resources for community languages
- to build a self-managed community based group to support community language speakers engaged in teaching and learning the range of community languages available locally

¹ <http://www.routesintolanguages.ac.uk/northwest>

² <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/digitisation/communitycontent.aspx>

³ National Centre for Languages: http://www.cilt.org.uk/community_languages.aspx

⁴ Community Languages in Higher Education: Towards realising the potential, (2008) a report by Joanna McPake and Itesh Sachdev for the Routes into Languages project

⁵ <http://www.assetlanguages.org.uk/>

⁶ *ibid.*

- to improve the pedagogy of existing materials through peer review and discussion
- to provide bespoke and incremental training in using and creating digital content
- to contribute to the enhancement of the profile and provision of community language learning through adding resources to a repository hosting a wide range of language resources and thereby improving access to digital resources

The project team also has some secondary aims, which we hope will be brought about through the work of the project:

- raise awareness about the work of community languages teachers in the community and beyond
- to upskill community languages teachers through engagement with elearning and consideration of pedagogic practice
- to provide a model of community engagement and training which could be run elsewhere in the UK

There are three strands to our method for creating content: the holding of informal café-style meetings for discussion and the informal exchange of ideas; training workshops, and the use of an online space, called the LanguageBox (www.languagebox.ac.uk).

The café sessions are held monthly and have an informal, user-centred nature. This suits the participants in the Community Café project as it provides them with a non-threatening forum for discussion of pedagogical ideas and resources. The café sessions which have been held so far have been attended by over 40 teachers and have been enjoyable, social, gatherings, at which attendees have been encouraged to exchange teaching ideas and methods with colleagues from varying language backgrounds while chatting over tea and cake! The Café meetings provide a forum for ‘offline’ discussion and supplement the more formal workshops by allowing time to talk through ideas, identify materials, prepare resources, and offer follow-up guidance.

The second strand of the project method is to run training workshops (every month on average), in parallel to the cafés, in the use of technology for resource creation and on how technology can be used in language teaching. These workshops are delivered by university staff and are short training sessions of 1.5 hours and cover topics such as ‘creating and using podcasts,’ ‘using powerpoint in teaching’, ‘using Smartboards/the internet’, and ‘using simple, free software to create online activities’. The resources created during the workshops will form the core part of the collection of materials for this project. The project team intend to release a workshop tutor pack through the LanguageBox which will be available to cascade materials and methods to other trainers across the country for use with their community groups.

The project is making use of an existing open repository, the LanguageBox, as an online space to store and publish the materials created and re-purposed for this project. However, the LanguageBox website is more than simply an online storage space: is it integral to the development of our community of creators and sharers as it is a site which has social networking properties. Thus it allows users to engage with it in a dynamic way: each user has a personal profile page containing their photo and professional information and interests; it allows comments to be put on all resources;

users can book mark 'favourite' resources or monitor downloads/views of their own materials, and they can contact other site users through the site itself. Our local community group will primarily use it to publish, share and review each other's work; however, the site is open to the world and this will enable users at distance to share ideas and resources, and will spread project outcomes and aims beyond the Southampton area.

A key aspect of the LanguageBox is its simplicity: it is very easy to use and does not represent a barrier for technophobes and non-technical individuals. This has proved important, as our community group of teachers have varying levels of IT literacy. The LanguageBox also contains materials for a wide variety of languages and these materials provide inspiration in terms of teaching methods and ideas for learning activities.

Thus far in the project, we have experienced some immediate successes and challenges. The project aims have been embraced wholeheartedly by the members of the community languages network in Southampton and they have shown great enthusiasm to talk about their pedagogic practice, share existing resources and methods with each other, interact with colleagues teaching different languages, and to learn new skills. The successful completion of tasks in the initial workshops has produced some gratifying achievements in the use of IT for a group that are not particularly IT literate.

Some of the challenges we continue to grapple with are the varying levels of IT literacy in the group which makes resource creation time-consuming; varying perceptions of how technology can be used with students, and a general lack of awareness about the implications of publishing work on the open web (e.g. copyright issues and appropriate metadata descriptions). The project team is working on these issues with the group as the project progresses.

The final months of the project will see us begin to check and collate materials and extend the community to groups in other geographical locations. Our hope and intention is that our community will continue to share knowledge and information, and thrive beyond the life of the project, through continued cafe meetings and in the online open world of the LanguageBox.

Kate Borthwick
Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies
University of Southampton
Southampton