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10 years of the LLAS elearning symposium: case studies in good practice
Edited by Kate Borthwick, Erika Corradini, & Alison Dickens

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10 Collaborative production of learning objects on French literary works using the LOC software

Christine Penman¹

Abstract

This case study situates the collaborative design of learning objects (interactive online learning material) using the LOC (Learning Object Creator)² software in the context of language activities external to the core learning activities of language students at a UK university. It describes the creative and pedagogical processes leading to the creation of a series of learning objects on French literary works by and for students who do not formally study literature as part of their language degree. The study documents the initial set-up of projects and pragmatic constraints and affordances to team-based design. It reports on perception of this work by students and academic staff and reflects on the journey to building an open source library of discovery tools for a programme-based community of learners.

Keywords: authoring software, literature and language learning, collaborative design.

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2. <http://loc.llas.ac.uk>

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1. Context/rationale

Language degrees in Higher Education are often associated with the teaching and learning of literature. This is due to the potential of literature to carry cultural codes and to lend itself to critical and stylistic appraisal and debate, although the definition of the literary canon and the role that literature can play in second language acquisition are constantly under reappraisal (Carter, 2007). In the UK, literature on such courses is usually taught in English and tends to sit alongside language learning units. Conversely, university courses which do not offer literature as part of their language curriculum put forward applied practice which appeals in particular to the non-literary minded. This concerns more specifically joint honours degrees with, for example, business, law and tourism-related subject areas in their titles (e.g. BA Hons French with Marketing). However, among such cohorts of students there are also individuals who enjoy reading and while wanting to focus in the main on their communicative ability in the language, are interested in tapping into the wider discursive field that literature offers.

This case study relates the evolution of my thoughts as a university teacher on how contributions from literature could be made available to students for whom the study of literature is not a constituent part of their curriculum through the production of interactive learning materials (e-learning objects) using the LOC software. It touches upon the content of language teaching, on the place and contribution of technology in student learning and on issues of student motivation.

2. Aims and objectives

The aim of this case study is to present the processes behind the production and use in a blended mode of learning objects based on extracts from French literary works for university language students. It traces back various steps: what initiated my interest in the LOC tool from an academic perspective, the different phases of a subsidised project to involve students in the production of

learning objects (subsequently referred to as LOs) and subsequent initiatives. It therefore charts the evolution of the locus of authorial control and discusses, in the process, pedagogical, technological and interactional issues throughout these different phases.

3. What I did

My first direct contact with the LOC software had occurred through response to a call for a training workshop which was facilitated by staff from LLAS¹ in 2010. Following my gradual involvement with the tool, I subsequently organised another workshop, in 2013, which widened access to colleagues from different academic fields throughout my university. The LOC can have applications well beyond the linguistic arena.

The LOC tool was developed by LLAS with the eLanguages² group at the University of Southampton to provide educators with user-friendly authoring software designed with a robust pedagogical approach based on a constructivist approach to learning. The tool can support a variety of media supports (text, images, sound, video, hyperlinks) and provides a scaffolded approach through non-graded (i.e. not formally assessed) activities with the learning objectives made clear to the learner as they progress through the learning object. The interactional activities occur through the provision of open and/or closed questions to which the learner responds through the approach selected by the LO creator (who can select from the following range: radio buttons, check boxes, drop down list, text entry box, gap fill, tick/cross column). Learners can check their answers against formative feedback which, depending on the type of questions asked, can be more or less comprehensive and open-ended. The possibilities afforded by learners through use of this tool are aptly captured by [Hamilton-Hart \(2010\)](#) who points to the usefulness of the feedback feature, especially when learners keep a record of their initial responses (since there is no

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2. www.elanguages.ac.uk

track recording facility on the tool) if they repeat the activities. This is facilitated by the fact that LOs are made available as standalone resources for students to access when they wish to.

The first learning objects I created were designed for formative feedback, to help language students revise aspects of grammar (e.g. on the formation of different levels of questions in French, which some students have issues with right up to the final year of their degree; on choice of tenses in the past (perfect vs. imperfect); on the use of complex pronouns). The LOs I initially created were based on a series of discrete questions rather than based on a primary document and were scheduled either in class or set in revision in directed learning activities.

3.1. First set of literary LOs: single authorship

The first LO based on a French literary extract which I created used two short extracts from a 19th century novel by Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames*. This is a novel set against the background of the creation of a department store in Paris, a commercial enterprise which heralded a revolution in consumer terms. The reason I selected this extract was because I had been struck by the modern appeal of the references to a range of marketing and advertising techniques which were very novel for the time but which still have resonance more than a century later. Since part of the material which we used in tutorials had a business angle, I felt that the extracts detailing the psychological manipulation of targeted female consumers (Extract 1) and the carefully planned positioning of goods in the store and various marketing and advertising strategies in place (Extract 2) had relevance for students studying in a business school and could stimulate reflection and discussions. In this instance one of the ancillary aims was to sensitise students to the contribution of literature to the recording of cultural processes. The activities which I designed were built upon the following sequence:

- a very short introduction to the work highlighting the focus on marketing techniques in the extracts i.e. bypassing in particular the romantic narrative and complexities of the novel;

- the textual extracts (under 250 words in both cases) with hyperlinks providing a translation into English of more complex words and phrases, followed by a recording of the extract;
- two staged activities: the first based on comprehension of the extracts, the second asking for interpretation of the techniques listed and personal evaluation in relation to modern time practices.

The feedback included the ‘right’ answer to binary questions or those based on a selection of possible answers and guiding formulations leaving space for personal appropriation of the content. All the metalanguage and questions were in French and pitched between levels B1 and B2 of the European Framework for languages. As the LOs are published as open source and accessible through a URL, these have been embedded in the institutional learning environment and set as directed learning to students on a number of occasions. The LOs have been well received and informal feedback from students on the learning activities has generally been positive, although some have found the 19th century language a barrier in spite of the linguistic scaffolding provided.

3.2. Second set of literary LOs: students and staff co-production in a funded project

Following reflection on ways to address a perceived need on some students’ part for extension material and activities to expand cultural knowledge, and given the time constraints in lecturing slots, I successfully submitted a bid to an internal pedagogical fund to create more materials. The project proposed to compile a ‘library’ of culturally-oriented learning resources for language learners based on the active involvement of students and two academic staff. The process acknowledged the agency of learners in the compilation of relevant e-learning resources. Besides the benefit of an inclusive process (Ellis & Goodyear, 2009), at the end of the project the created resources were to be made available not only to the participants, to other French language learners at the university, but also to the wider community as open learning resources. Funding was granted for

a research assistant¹ and for vouchers for student participants. The project was advertised to second year students working within Level B2 of the European Framework, later widened to further participants in fourth year and eventually involved six students. The initial plan was to work on a series of literary extracts from various authors and time periods to have a sample corpus on a timeline but after discussions with students and proposal of a range of texts, it was agreed to concentrate on one 19th-century text, *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. The work had resonance with the student group given the worldwide success of the English adaptation in the musical and film. This text also offers rich possibilities for linguistic and cultural explorations and provides a number of self-contained vignettes which can be extracted from the main text.

The students were briefed on the pedagogical remit of the learning objects and were invited to reflect and comment on existing resources prior to turning their hand to the creation of their own resource. They were subsequently allocated an extract from the 5 volumes of this lengthy and complex novel. The extracts were selected by the teaching assistant for their ability to encapsulate the historical background (such as Part 1 which provides a historical description, with a focus on prison population), to focus on the life and development of key characters (for instance Part 2 on Jean Valjean's childhood,) or on a pivotal moment in the narrative (such as Part 6 which relates the encounter between Cosette and Jean Valjean). All extracts provide opportunities for cultural readings. The students had to provide a series of linguistic and socio-cultural questions followed by feedback in a text-based format. They were invited to move from a detailed analysis to more open questions which would help situate the extract in a social, political and historical perspective and widen its relevance beyond the novel. The initial plan was to have group working sessions but as it proved difficult to find mutually suitable times, the students opted in the main for one-to-one interactions with the teaching assistant, initially in weekly personal contacts and later, once the teaching semester was over, by emails. This is reflected in the acknowledgements in the copyright section of the six resulting LOs which list one student and the project coordinators, apart from the first one which was the

1. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Dr Ana Zerón for all the work she did on this project.

product of more collaborative student work. The content produced by each student was negotiated with the assistant who subsequently carried out a substantial amount of editing. All students were offered the opportunity to transfer the text-based version to the LOC software but most declined it. Additional resources (such as pictures and audio sounds) and further editing were provided by myself as the project leader. The finished learning objects were disseminated among the student authors who provided positive informal feedback on their experience on creating this learning material. The LOs on *Les Misérables* were subsequently made available to the following cohort of second-year French language students.

3.3. Third set of literary LOs [in preparation]: dual authorship arising from student involvement in a reading group (supported by a blog)

The following year, the reflection which had provided the impetus to start building a ‘library’ of literature-based learning objects led me to organise a reading group for all interested students from Year 1 to 4. The book group was advertised on all French modules on the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and twelve students volunteered, three of whom had previously worked on the LO project.

The students were offered a choice of two titles and opted for *Une année studieuse*, an autobiographical narrative published by Anne Wiazemsky in 2012, which revolves around the year 1967 when she met her husband-to-be, the film director Jean-Luc Godard. This book was selected for its cultural background of pre-May 1968 France, the central casting of a young woman close in age to the student group, and the potential for cultural comparisons over time and across cultural boundaries. References to prominent writers and artists of the time abound. I set up a blog for the reading group which met once a week over several weeks in the spring semester. The blog attracted contributions (in the form of questions and comments) from the students and a language assistant, and included vocabulary items and help to decipher some of the cultural references. The most protracted pieces of writing from students responded to a call for description of life in the 60s in their respective

countries. The students reacted very positively to the book and to the reading group activities. To take this further a number of key passages which had stimulated lively discussions based on cultural interest have been identified by the language assistant¹ and myself for the creation of a new series of LOs. The extracts are based around central themes in the book: university teaching in 1967 and family relationships, both highlighting greater degrees of formality than modern day practices. The layout of the LOs is to follow the same pattern as that previously described, moving from close reading of the text to questions testing comprehension to an appreciation of the wider cultural implications and a reflection on their relation to contemporary issues. At the time of writing, around three learning objects are currently planned and once ready, these will be sent to the initial book group participants for comments and feedback before final editing.

4. Discussion

The LOs described above form part of a growing collection of literary capsules made available to learners of French through the institutional VLE. The resources are progressively published and made available as open resources for the wider community. Beyond the qualities of the scaffolded approach that the LOC design affords for the end users, there are a number of inherent benefits to having a series of activities available through a web link, related to availability, ease of reference and of embedding into learning environments.

The process, the preparation and production of these objects, has highlighted a number of recurring issues in terms of:

- selection of content: the challenge to identify literary extracts which, while offering scope for rich interpretations, can also be used as stand-alone units which do not require substantial embedding explanations;

1. I wish to thank Simona Camillini, our Leonardo language assistant, for the enthusiasm with which she took on this project.

- student participation: for collaborative production of material, the difficulty to identify times to meet, to sustain participation and ensure consistency in quality of content;
- staff involvement: the process requires substantial time investment, although productivity improves with practice.

The pedagogical funded projects brought to the fore a number of benefits as the development of material calls for creative, critical and analytical skills, and engages the students involved in a cumulative and constructive learning process. Those who have participated in that process have indicated that it was a positive and enjoyable learning experience in spite of demands on time. An indication of how students may perceive the relevance of this type of academic involvement in terms of transferable skills was provided by an email alert from LinkedIn. Co-authorship on one of the LOs on [Les Misérables](#) was presented by one student on his site in the following terms: “mixing up the French language skills with the web development”, which indicates that for that particular student both the content and technological sides of the product present valuable learning experiences and can be presented as such.

5. Conclusion

The creation of literary-based learning objects through a variety of approaches has been a creative response to the provision of additional resources for language students and to enable student involvement at different stages of the process. The e-learning objects compiled so far have been very well received by students interested in developing their linguistic and cultural knowledge through exposure to literary extracts. The format adopted in the third phase (i.e. the creation of two or three learning objects arising from discussions facilitated in a book group in a blended mode, subsequently tested and critiqued by the participants) seems to be a more sustainable way of continuing to develop material. Further development could be provided by researching more formally through interviews and focus groups students’ responses to different types of material and scaffolded activities.

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Links to LOCS

Au Bonheur des Dames

Partie 1 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/250/standalone/index.html>

Partie 2 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/256/standalone/index.html>

A la découverte de “Les Misérables”

Partie 1 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/1310/standalone/index.html>

Partie 2 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/1316/standalone/index.html>

Partie 3 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/1365/standalone/index.html>

Partie 4 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/1372/standalone/index.html>

Partie 5 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/1376/standalone/index.html>

Partie 6 : <http://loc.llas.ac.uk/lob/1377/standalone/index.html>