

11 Transnational Online Discussions to Foster Open Practices

Klaus-Dieter Rossade¹

Abstract

This case study reports on the outcomes of asynchronous task forums in an advanced language and culture course in the Department of Languages at the Open University (OU). In these task forums, distance learners have the opportunity to discuss a variety of topics that relate to the themes of the course and are closely embedded within the materials. Learners share their understanding and opinions immediately after they have worked through a particular resource or section in the materials. The examples and quotations are based on contributions from the 2011 cohort. One example, a forum discussion about what learners make of the term *Heimat* (homeland), revealed a high level of interaction between participants which was based on authentic personal experiences and required little teaching input. Even learners with lower than required levels of German contributed regularly and used the forums to try out target language discourse in the protected space of the course. The principles and examples presented here point to a successful open educational practice which is transferrable and could be turned into user-generated open educational resources themselves. The case study also discusses some of the technical and structural nuts and bolts of such task-based forums.

Keywords: open educational practice, distance education, language learning, asynchronous task forums, transnational language learning, self-organisation of learners.

1. The Open University, UK; Klaus-Dieter.Rossade@open.ac.uk

How to cite this chapter: Rossade, K-D. (2013). Transnational Online Discussions to Foster Open Practices. In A. Beaven, A. Comas-Quinn, & B. Sawhill (Eds), *Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom* (pp. 137-148). © [Research-publishing.net](https://www.research-publishing.net).

1. Context

The OU, with over 200,000 learners annually, is the largest distance education provider in the UK. The course *L313 Variationen Advanced German* (from now on referred to as L313) is the last of four German courses, which take learners from beginners to advanced language proficiency (level A1 to C1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR). L313 is a 31 week language and culture course and attracts between 120-140 mature learners (the largest segment is 35-55 years). Learners study a blended mix of books, audio, video and web activities on a Moodle Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), all of which are carefully scripted to match their needs.

Generally, distance learners study the materials independently at a place and time of their choice, often alongside work and family commitments. Learners are allocated to what is called a tutor group at the Open University and the teacher (or tutor) marks assignments, gives feedback and provides general study support. The teacher runs face-to-face and online synchronous conferencing tutorials where learners meet and study with their peers. Learners can also communicate via two asynchronous forums, one for their tutor group and one for the whole course cohort. The task forums analysed here are additional to these standard offers and voluntary. The assignments are ultimately the only compulsory element on L313 and time-poor distance learners tend to prioritise compulsory course components and consider carefully whether to interact in task forums or not.

Figure 1 below shows the first of six blocks in the course on the topic of geography and political structures of German speaking countries (*Landschaftliche Vielfalt und politische Strukturen*). Task forums are in week one, two and three and in these, learners discuss their favourite places or regions in German speaking countries, places they would like to visit, how these compare with places or regions in their own countries, what homeland (*Heimat*) means to them and what they think of Wilhelmshaven, a city in north west Germany which they have just studied in the course. On the left

pane of the screen are the general discussion spaces (student forum and tutor group forum).

Figure 1. L313 Variationen VLE
showing the first five weeks of study.

Course News	L313-11B study planner		Current weeks Entire planner
Link to check the date and time slot for your Speaking EMA 8 Sep 2011 This message supersedes any previous advice on this topic...	Your progress ?		
Eliminate link for Speaking Test 6 Sep 2011 The Eliminate link for the Speaking L313-11B EMA is now available in the assessment resources area of this website...			
Eliminate link for Speaking EMA 1 Sep 2011 Please note that the Eliminate link for the L313-11B Speaking EMA is now available in the assessment resources area of...			
View all messages in full			
Forums			
Student forum			
Tutor group forum			
Resources			
Assessment resources			
Module resources			
DoL student website			
Audio/Video			
Long reading texts			
Leute			
Lern- und Sprachtipps			
Vokabular			
	0	Rules for forum discussions 29 January Module Guide (319.2X8) Week 0 FAQ	
	1	5 February Thema 1: Landschaftliche Vielfalt und politische Strukturen Teil 1: Landschaften Forum: Landschaften in deutschsprachigen Ländern	
	2	12 February Teil 2: Identitäten Forum: Heimat	
	3	19 February Teil 3: Regionen Forum: Zukunft in Wilhelmshaven	
	4	26 February Teil 4: Politik Wiki: Politiker in deutschsprachigen Ländern	
	5	5 March Teil 5: Wiederholung und TMA-Vorbereitung Quiz: Konjunktionen Quiz: Deutsche Landschaften	

The course takes learners through the advanced level (CEFR C1), but the actual learners' ability can range from upper-intermediate (B2) to native or near native (C2), a result of the university's open entry policy: learners receive advice about the level required to study the course but ultimately the decision remains theirs: linguistically weaker B2 learners often sign on hoping to catch up over time whereas stronger learners may study for the content or just to get the credits for a degree in Language Studies.

Linguistically stronger learners are often foreign learners who have lived or live temporarily or permanently in German speaking countries, or German speaking foreigners on the British Isles, or perhaps second generation heritage speakers in the UK: the shades and permutations of learners' backstories are infinite and enrich any discussion within the course. Most learners have

studied other courses before with the institution and are therefore experienced distance language learners.

2. Intended outcomes

Four key objectives influenced the design of the task forums:

- to provide spaces where learners can share their knowledge, understanding and opinions about what they have learned;
- to encourage intercultural comparison and reflection by linking tasks to topics and questions that aim to utilise the learners' rich backgrounds and intercultural experiences. These authentic perspectives are generated afresh with every new cohort;
- to support or enhance the transnational teaching strategy by strengthening differentiated perspectives on culture below and above the level of nations;
- to evaluate the level of self-organisation of the group, and, by extension, the teaching resource that is needed to support pedagogically meaningful forums which add value to the learner experience.

The first three objectives took Karen [Risager's \(2007\)](#) proposals for a transnational language and culture pedagogy as a starting point and the forums emulate to some degree her concept of the transnational classroom for distance learners.

Language development and language practice were also expected outcomes but as an additional benefit only. No error correction is offered and learners are not required to communicate in German (weaker learners are encouraged to start in English initially to boost their confidence). The course developers also anticipated socio-affective benefits as distance learning can be a solitary

experience, but again, these benefits are not central and are also covered by other forums.

Selection of communication tool: Simple text forums were considered the appropriate tool for the objectives outlined above. Communicating via text forums is comparatively easy and learners are used to these from their tutor group interactions. With asynchronous forums, learners stay in control of their time and the extent to which they contribute. Such forums allow learners to study other contributions in detail, to reflect, to draft and to revise their own text before they publish it. Forums were also very easy to integrate into the learning materials. This leaves learners just one click away from the (inter)action and offers the choice of pull i.e. accessing the forum to read messages, or push i.e. subscribing to forum message delivery to their email accounts.

3. Nuts and bolts: Integration of forums

The forums are located on the L313 Moodle VLE. The task forum design on L313 is learning object orientated: learners enter discreet discussion spaces for each topic. The discussion is part of a series of linked activities related to just one topic (see [Figure 3](#)), not an activity for which learners have to leave the context of the learning resource. The embedded discussion is more akin to the comments sections attached to, for example, online newspaper articles where readers can immediately comment on what they have just read and share their views instantaneously. This learning *object* metaphor is different from a general discussion or social *space* metaphor, such as the tutor group forums in the course, which learners enter when they want to socialise and then create or participate in threads for a variety of purposes.

[Figure 2](#) shows such a discreet space for a discussion about the increasing use of English words in German. Learners worked through authentic resources and performed some basic web searches before they contributed to the discussion. Most responded to the first strand *Denglish, gut oder schlecht* (mash-up of

German-English, good or bad) but several other strands were started, often without a clear rationale and perhaps by accident. However, the discussion remains bounded to the topical space with the task at the top and the subscription facility at the bottom.






Figure 2. Forum about the increasing use of English in the German language

Schreiben Sie einen Beitrag zu einer der folgenden Fragen und kommentieren Sie auch die Beiträge Ihrer MitsudentInnen.

- Meinen Sie auch, dass die Entwicklung des Denglisch ein Zeichen des Verfalls der deutschen Sprache ist?
- Sollten solche Einflüsse bekämpft werden?
- Wenn ja, welche Initiativen erscheinen Ihnen dazu am sinnvollsten? Wenn nein, sagen Sie warum.

Students can read any posts within this forum, but not submit their own posts since the forum closed on 29/05/12, 00:00. You still have access to submit posts.

[Start a new discussion](#)

Discussion	Started by	Posts
Denglisch, gut oder schlecht?		14
"Russischismus"		1
Man darf die Dinge nicht so eng sehen!		4
Anglizismen		3
Anglizismen im Deutschen		3

The tasks are often adapted from reflection notes which are spread across the printed and online materials and invite learners to consider particular aspects further (*Zum Weiterdenken*). The forums thus transform individual reflection activities into interactive group processes. This transformation is supported by tasks which are seamlessly embedded in the learning path: a click through to a forum discussion does not feel any different from the click to a third party website.

All topics and tasks offer opportunities for intercultural comparison, ranging from tasks that require little or no preparation (e.g. describe your favourite place or region in a target language country or the country of origin, what not to joke about?, what do you think about dual nationality?) to those that rely on

considerable pre-task work (e.g. homeland, emigration, asylum in Germany and Europe).

The moderation of the forums was shared in 2011 by a team of teachers. As the fourth objective was about how the group organises its discussion, each moderator was asked to intervene as little as possible, but was invited to contribute at times to the discussion ‘as participants’ reflecting on their personal intercultural interpretations, attitudes and experiences.

4. In practice

Figure 3 illustrates a sequence of activities that deals with the concept of homeland, a concept that remains heavily charged within German speaking cultures. Having worked through several learning resources about homeland, learners are asked, in activity 1.2.10, to explore a quote (“Only those who know the past, know the present”) in light of their impressions of some local history museum websites that they were asked to visit. They were asked for example to define the term “local history museum” and their mission today, and perhaps relate personal experiences with such museums. In activity 1.2.11, learners then go to the forum *Heimat* and discuss questions from the previous activity with other learners. The more limited questions about local history museums expand to learners’ general attitude towards *Heimat* and learners reflect as a group on all they have learned so far as well as their own personal experiences. Then, in activity 1.2.12, learners return to the individual distance learning mode and work through a cued speaking activity on the topic.

The forum on homeland has been popular every year since the course started in 2010. In 2011, 22 learners from a total of 128 at course start (17.2%) and 101 sitting the exams (21.8%) contributed around 8900 words to this forum, which also included two short moderator posts (150 words). Each of the 51 posts on the topic averaged about 175 words, each learner writing 387 words on average. It seems not unjustified to describe this exchange as very lively and the following summary aims to give a brief flavour of the exchanges.

Figure 3. Forum on *Heimat* (Homeland)
embedded within distance learning tasks

1.2.10 Heimatmuseen

Sie lernen jetzt einige Heimatmuseen kennen. Auf der Webseite des Heimatmuseums Obersdorf steht:

„Nur wer die Vergangenheit kennt, kennt die Gegenwart.“

Lesen Sie die Fragen und sammeln Sie Informationen dazu auf den Webseiten der Heimatmuseen. Klicken Sie entweder auf die Internetadressen oder suchen Sie nach Webseiten von anderen Heimatmuseen, die Sie vielleicht kennen oder interessieren.

- Stimmen Sie der Aussage des Zitates zu?
- Welchen Beitrag können Heimatmuseen dabei leisten?
- Wie könnte man den Begriff „Heimatmuseum“ definieren?
- Welche Aufgaben haben Heimatmuseen heute?
- Waren Sie schon einmal in einem Heimatmuseum? Was hat Ihnen gefallen? Was hat Ihnen nicht gefallen?
- Was halten Sie persönlich von Heimatmuseen?

[Heimatmuseum Obersdorf](#)
[Heimatmuseum Treptow und Köpenick](#)
[Heimatmuseum Falkensee](#)
[Heimatmuseum Berchtesgaden](#)

1.2.11 Forum Heimat

Gehen Sie in das Forum „Heimat“ und diskutieren Sie mit anderen Kursteilnehmern und Kursteilnehmerinnen, was Sie herausgefunden haben. Schreiben Sie auch, was Sie persönlich über Heimatmuseen und den Begriff Heimat denken.

Schreiben Sie mindestens einen Beitrag im Forum und kommentieren Sie einen anderen. Es ist nicht schlimm, wenn Ihr Beitrag sprachlich nicht ganz korrekt ist. Hier geht es darum, mit anderen Teilnehmern und Teilnehmerinnen Informationen und Meinungen auszutauschen.

[Forum „Heimat“](#)

- Stimmen Sie der Aussage des Zitates zu?
- Welchen Beitrag können Heimatmuseen dabei leisten?
- Wie könnte man den Begriff „Heimatmuseum“ definieren?
- Welche Aufgaben haben Heimatmuseen heute?
- Waren Sie schon einmal in einem Heimatmuseum? Was hat Ihnen gefallen? Was hat Ihnen nicht gefallen?
- Was halten Sie persönlich von Heimatmuseen?

Antwort zeigen

1.2.12 Über Heimat sprechen

Sie nehmen jetzt an einem Gespräch mit einem Experten zum Thema Heimat teil. Teil A führt Sie Schritt-für-Schritt durch den Dialog, in Teil B können Sie in Echtzeit sprechen.

A

Nehmen Sie jetzt Ihre Fragen auf (Aufnehmen). Lesen Sie zur Vorbereitung jeweils die Antwort zu Ihrer Frage in Klammern. Vergleichen Sie Ihre Version (Abspielen) mit dem Modellvorschlag (Modell). Hören Sie zum Schluss die Antwort Ihres Gesprächspartners (Hören).

(Guten Tag. Ja, ich habe mich schon seit langem mit diesem Thema befasst und einige Gedanken dazu aufs Papier gebracht.)

Many contributions proposed a variety of definitions from geographical locations that people felt attached to, to emotional perspectives such as “where my heart is”, where one felt secure in the past, of a life people remember

well and happily. However, concerns were voiced, too, for example from a Swiss national (MPZ-C2+)¹, who explained the Swiss citizenship concept of *Bürgerort* (citizen rights tied to a local community, not the nation). He called *Heimat* a delicate, patriotic, nationalistic and even segregationist concept, while an English emigrant in Germany (FRLW-C2) had issues with the concept “‘*Heimat*’ without a plural”. A third learner (MAH-C1) reminded the group of minorities and their need or yearning for a homeland and, on balance, considered emotional attachments to a *Heimat* entirely acceptable and apolitical, but conceded that it had been misused by the Nazis. This was followed by more than 30 posts within eight days on multiple strands, until one learner (FAC-C1) took on the task to provide a summary of the discussion so far. This learner, born and raised in an Eastern European country, now lives in the UK as a dual national, holds a joint English degree and has thirty years of teaching experience in modern languages. She delivered a substantial blog post (1,272 words) which observed academic conventions, organized the discussion around the principle of “homeland – security versus freedom”, quoted and paraphrased key contributions from other learners or course resources, and extended the discussion with references to further relevant resources such as Edgar Reitz’s (1984) TV-series *Heimat*. Taking all these contributions together, the notion of *Heimat* becomes a place that one can call home for a variety of reasons. These need no longer be framed and shaped by nations exclusively but can operate at a transnational level, whether in sub-national geographic categories or extra-national emotional or ideological categories.

The homeland forum demonstrates the collective power of reasoning and the sensitive navigation of a complex concept that a group discussion can deliver, where participants contribute knowledge, experiences and opinions from various geographical, socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. Together they raise the sensitivity of the whole learner cohort, including those learners who do not contribute but simply read the posts, in the case of the homeland forum at a ratio of one active contributor to three read-only participants.

1. The person reference includes <gender><id><CEFR-Level>.

5. Conclusion

This case study revealed a high level of independent learner engagement with the task and self-organisation of the group discussions that required only low levels of teacher intervention. It could therefore be seen as a good example for open educational practice even if, in this case, it took place in a password protected space of some 120-140 learners. It is open to learners' personal and intercultural experiences which they can share, and it is openly supportive of all learners irrespective of their backgrounds and variations in language proficiency. The *Heimat* forum demonstrated how a comparatively simple question can lead to complex outcomes which deliver on all four objectives mentioned in [Section 2](#). This performance was replicated in other task based forums on the course, albeit at different scales and intensities, depending on the nature of the task and the topical preferences of the learners. There was no questionnaire that elicited directly learners' attitudes towards these forums, but based on the analysis of all contributions one might like to suggest five key elements that may have helped to make these forums vibrant and informative:

- **Authenticity:** Learners narrated very personal episodes and emotions and this was frequently acknowledged by others who seemed to be encouraged to share their stories in turn. The summary above masks the richness of experiences and often the rich language with which learners recounted their individual perspectives and reflections. As they considered, confirmed and corroborated each other's experiences in the course of the discussion, they also outlined collective culturally bound attitudes without necessarily ossifying these into national stereotypes.
- **Contextualisation:** Forums are tightly embedded in the flow of learning activities. The timeliness and one-click access to a discussion may support active participation when the thoughts and reflections about a topic are still fresh. In addition, learners are also likely to be influenced by previous discussions: the "*Heimat*" forum is preceded by a forum

on learners' most favourite places and regions which may have primed them to think in sub-national categories. Consider by contrast the potential priming effect if a previous forum had asked them about typical stereotypes about Germans.

- Purpose: Learners were told that the task forums are not primarily for language learning, but for sharing knowledge, understanding and ideas. This was underlined by the invitation to write in English if need be, though no learner took up this offer. On the contrary, many learners who initially had not quite reached the required level of linguistic ability to contribute with ease, continued in German. Rather than switching to English, they appear to have accepted the challenge and used the forum space for experimenting with their language skills.
- Self-organisation: Learners were aware that the forum was moderated, but also realised that teacher interventions were rare. This may have helped participants to take responsibility for their discussion and contribute in ways that are natural to them, e.g. by providing summaries or additional links to resources from time to time.
- Object orientation: Forums are linked to learning objects and not merely a thread amongst others in a generic discussion space, where older discussions are displaced by newer threads. The task forums keep all threads together and can easily be revisited later for example when quotes or ideas are needed in assignments.

The forums are protected spaces for learners to practice discourse before they enter the open world of web forums which have become a standard feature on most content platforms across the internet. The forums in this case study may be seen as the 'sandpits' where learners try and test their readiness to join the world on open online communication. And just like the discussion strands following YouTube or news channel resources are becoming sources of information themselves, the discussions presented here could turn into user-generated content for future foreign language learners.

References

- Reitz, E. (1984). *Heimat: A chronicle of Germany*. Germany: Edgar Reitz Film GmbH.
- Risager, K. (2007). *Language and Culture Pedagogy. From a National to a Transnational Paradigm*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.



Published by Research-publishing.net
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France
info@research-publishing.net

© 2013 by Research-publishing.net
Research-publishing.net is a not-for-profit association

Case Studies of Openness in the Language Classroom
Edited by Ana Beaven, Anna Comas-Quinn and Barbara Sawhill

The moral right of the authors has been asserted

All articles in this book are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. You are free to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

- Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the publisher.
- Noncommercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- No Derivative Works: You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Research-publishing.net has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate. Moreover, Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before (except in the form of an abstract or as part of a published lecture, or thesis), or that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the authors, the editors, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design: © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

Fonts used are licensed under a SIL Open Font License

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-09-4 (Paperback, Print on Demand, Lulu.com)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-10-0 (Ebook, PDF file, Open Access, Research-publishing.net)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-11-7 (Ebook, Kindle Edition, Amazon Media EU S.à r.l.)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: septembre 2013.