

Conceptions of Personal Learning Environments Among EFL Teachers at Upper Secondary Level in Sweden

Christopher Allen¹

Abstract. In recent years, virtual learning environments (VLEs) or course management systems (CMSs) have become commonplace in European higher education as well as making inroads into primary and secondary schools. VLEs such as *Moodle*, *Blackboard* and *It's Learning* offer educational institutions standardised packages in the form of a range of administrative, pedagogical and communicative tools. Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at secondary and tertiary levels are certainly no exception to this trend, employing VLEs as learning platforms to support a variety of ICT-based learning activities and tasks. VLEs have however attracted criticism from some quarters in that they may sometimes be seen merely as virtual embodiments of the classroom with all the restrictions which the 'physical' classroom has traditionally entailed. Furthermore it has been argued that VLEs have failed to embrace the full advantages of Web 2.0 technologies or acknowledge trends towards informal learning afforded by social media. The response to this criticism has been the envisioning of personal learning environments (PLEs) which utilise the plethora of free, often collaborative online resources and tools now available to teachers and learners. This paper explores the conceptualisation of PLEs among upper secondary school teachers of English in Sweden on the basis of [Dabbagh and Reo's \(2009\)](#) model of social collaboration and interactivity in the educational workplace.

Keywords: personal learning environment, sociocultural, collaborative learning.

1. Department of Languages Linnaeus University Kalmar, Sweden; christopher.allen@lnu.se

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1. Introduction

1.1. General

Over the previous decade, the use of virtual learning environments or learning management systems (LMSs) has become commonplace in universities and schools. Often originating in requirements to deliver course materials on a distance basis, such learning platforms have begun to assume a more central position in the Web 2.0 educational workplace, frequently in the form of blended systems which combine online access with campus/classroom activities.

This dominance has however recently been called into question. Advocates of PLEs have argued that VLEs are merely virtual extensions of the traditional classroom with the pedagogical limitations which this entails. PLEs on the other hand can provide learners with an authentic and more genuinely sociocultural learning experience in the truest Vygotskian sense than that offered by institutionalised learning platforms, mirroring informal learning fostered by digital interaction beyond the classroom (Livingstone, 2001). This paper examines the extent to which a focus group of EFL teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools have been successful in harnessing these freely available resources in providing a collaborative learning experience.

1.2. VLEs

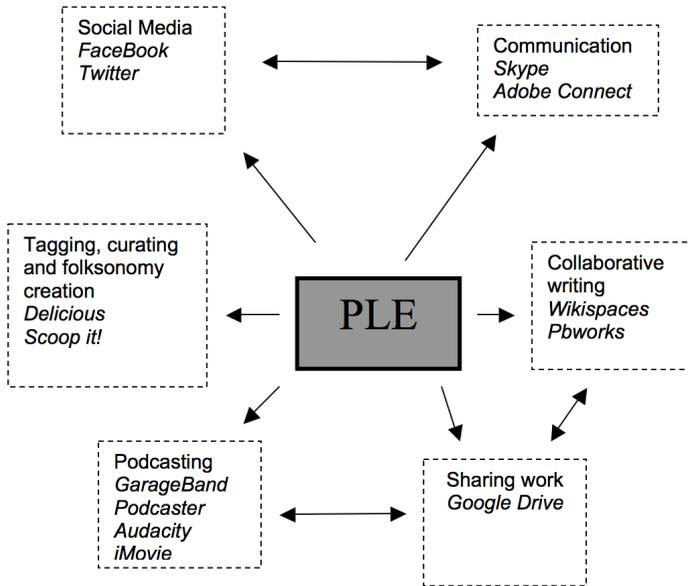
VLEs have been widely adopted by universities and schools and have come to embody the trend towards social interaction, connectivist learning and user-generated content loosely subsumed under the heading of Web 2.0. While these benefits are readily acknowledged, the rise of and over-reliance on VLEs can be seen as a further manifestation of the ongoing confrontation between educational tradition and technology. Weller (2007), cited in Conole (2008), sees VLEs merely as virtual extensions of the traditional ‘bricks and mortar’ classroom with all the constraints which this analogy entails, contriving to perpetuate the behaviouristic model of one-way knowledge transfer.

1.3. VLEs and PLEs in English language teaching

The theoretical underpinnings of the Web 2.0 technologies embodied in VLEs and PLEs lie in the work of Vygotsky (1978) who envisaged learning as a sociocultural activity mediated by psychological or physical tools in a social context. The importance of sociocultural theory in English Language Teaching has been

increasingly recognised and is inherent in collaborative, activity-based approaches such as task-based learning (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; van Lier, 2007; Willis, 1996). Within the decentralised Swedish school system, VLEs such as *Moodle*, *Blackboard* and *It's Learning* are being increasingly adopted as a result of decisions at municipal level.

Figure 1. A sample personal learning environment



Following Dabbagh and Reo (2009), it is possible to characterise digital learning activities in terms of different degrees of social collaboration and interactivity. In their model, level 1 refers to the use of tools for the individual's own private use only with no thought towards sharing or collaboration. Level 2 is characterised as 'basic interaction and sharing' while level 3 encompasses fully-fledged social networking (Figure 1).

2. Method

2.1. Background

In 2012, the Swedish municipality in question introduced a scheme by which all first and second year upper secondary school pupils were provided with a *MacBook Air* for their personal use for the duration of their studies. Typical proficiency levels

in English among pupils in Swedish upper secondary schools range between B1 and C1 in the CEFR system².

2.2. The participants

A focus group of 10 upper secondary school EFL teachers from a single municipality in southern Sweden was interviewed for the study. These teachers all had L1 Swedish with varying degrees of experience, typically combining English with another subject such as Swedish, modern languages, history or social science. Of the teachers interviewed, 8 were aged under 40 years.

2.3. Interviews and data-collection

Interviews were semi-structured with questions focusing on the teacher's use of PLE tools and resources in their language teaching. Teachers were asked to describe their use of PLE tools in terms of a number of loosely-defined ICT domains:

- A: Social media (*FaceBook, Twitter, etc*)
- B: Podcasting and digital media (*GarageBand, Audacity, iMovie, etc*)
- C: Collaborative writing (e.g. wikis, etc)
- D: Information management: tagging, filtering and curation
- E: Video conferencing and real-time communication

Interview respondents were then asked to assess the extent of their involvement in accordance with the following levels based on [Dabbagh and Reo \(2009\)](#), ranging from Level 0 (no use) to level 3 denoting extensive use in teaching ([Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Levels of collaboration

Level	Description
0	No utilisation (I did not make any use of this area of ICT either personally or in my teaching)
1	Private information / management / resource creation / use (I use the tool / resource for my private use and management of information which I do not intend to share with others)
2	Basic interaction / sharing (I enable public views, set up a personal profile, and configure tools for resource sharing)
3	Social networking (I configure resources to pool pupils' knowledge or content via comments, RSS feeds, etc, actively building online networks and communities, enabling information 'push' by subscription, etc).

2. <http://www.skolverket.se/om-skolverket/publikationer>

3. Results

The results of the interviews and questionnaire responses are summarised in Table 2 below, which presents a set of average scores for the level of collaborative learning (on the 0-3 scale described above).

Table 2. Average level scores for the ten respondents for each collaborative ICT domain

Area	Average level	Examples of activities
A: Social Media	1.6	Class and homework instructions, links, sharing of documents, texts and pictorial sources
B. Podcasting and digital media	0.2	2 examples of literature projects using video
C. Collaborative writing and blogs	0.0	Not used in the classroom
D. Information management	0.0	Not used in the classroom
E. Video conferencing and real-time communication	0.0	Not used in the classroom

It was clear from the results of the survey that the teachers in question were increasingly looking towards Area A, Social Media as their conceptualisation of a PLE. The main areas of *FaceBook* usage included the dissemination of links with an English language content, the sharing of documents, general administration and the publication of instructions in preparation for classroom activities.

Only one respondent however described their use of *FaceBook* at level 3. Three participants in the study mentioned their use of *Google Drive* and one participant mentioned *Wikispaces* with a very similar purpose in mind, that of creating a customised ‘mini’ VLE. *Twitter* was an underused resource for teaching although a number of teachers reported using this privately.

Areas B-E were however underexploited in terms of opportunities they presented for collaborative learning. In particular it was noted that teachers had not really come to terms with collaborative writing in the form of wiki tools or blogs. Teachers were unfamiliar with the blogging of leading international EFL practitioners and theorists. Podcasting and video production were mentioned as activities by two of the teachers; all participants in the study expressed their interest in receiving training in the technicalities of podcast and video production using tools such as *GarageBand*, *iMovie* or *Windows Moviemaker*.

As would be expected of teachers with daily classroom contact with their pupils, the use of video conferencing and real-time communication was insignificant although two teachers mentioned the occasional use of *Skype* to come into contact with pupils unable to attend regular classroom lessons.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Within a wider international computer-assisted language learning context, the results of the study are interesting in that they represent a preliminary evaluation, albeit on a very small scale, of a major municipal investment in a relatively resource-rich context, what [Dudeny, Hockly, and Pegrum \(2013\)](#) characterise as a *High-tech (H)* classroom environment. At the time of writing, teachers were approximately one academic year into this investment and perhaps it is a little too early to draw any significant conclusions.

Although developed for a wider e-learning context, [Dabbagh and Reo's \(2009\)](#) four level model has nevertheless shown some potential in the analysis of degrees of social collaboration in EFL learning environments at upper secondary level. While there are some difficulties involved in the demarcation of the learning levels, especially level 2 (basic interaction/sharing) and level 3 (social networking), it is argued that the model can serve as the basis for increasingly sophisticated comparisons of trends as teachers progressively come to terms with the use of Web 2.0 tools in the promotion of collaborative learning in modern languages.

In a wider perspective, the teachers' use of social media and tools such as *Google Drive* marks a clear move away from what [Dudeny et al. \(2013\)](#) see as a coursebook-driven approach (where activities promoting digital literacies are seen as extensions of the traditional EFL textbook). Instead the point of departure would appear to be the planning of activities around a division of digital literacy into four focus areas ([Dudeny et al., 2013](#); [Hockly, 2012](#)). The results of the survey suggest that any ICT in-service training programme needs to go beyond presentations of subject-specific lists of websites and resources, encompassing not only what might be crudely put as 'button pushing' but also a wider social constructivist/collaborative framework.

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