Introduction

There have been many significant advances in educational technology over the last decade and several of these transformations have the potential to transform the way pupils learn. However it is not simply enough to imagine that the use of technology in the teaching of Classics is a panacea for all of our problems. I know this from first-hand experience as I have constructed a website for the teaching and learning of Latin, named CyberCaesar.

The Problem

I have been trying to implement the use of technology into my classroom routine for the last ten years but it is only recently that I have started to make significant gains, not only in improved learning but also in winning over hearts and minds. In the past when I have tried to implement digital approaches to learning, I have experienced resistance from many parties – pupils, parents and staff. They felt, perhaps with good reason, that insisting upon the completion of all work on computer was arbitrary, that there was no significant advantage to working online. Initially, like many teachers who first embraced ICT in their teaching, perhaps I was doing it solely for the purpose of using the technology. I was trying to shoehorn a traditional approach to teaching into a new shiny machine. Some of you may have experienced this. As Steve Wheeler puts it, ‘Many teachers, when forced to use something as complex as an institutional VLE, tend to take the short cut and simply dump their content into it (a kind of ‘shovelware’). They then expect it to work in a similar manner to content delivered in a face to face classroom setting, which of course, it doesn’t.’ (Wheeler, 2013)

Blended Learning

CyberCaesar is an example of blended learning. This means that the website is meant to be used as part of a school curriculum and not as an independent guide to learning. It is a resource designed as much for teachers as for students. It is not meant to replace the traditional classroom setting but instead to augment it. Blended learning means that digital learning is just one extra aspect to the entire learning experience.

‘A blended learning approach combines face to face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach. In the past, digital materials have served in a supplementary role, helping to support face to face instruction. For example, a blended approach to a traditional, face to face course might mean that the class meets once per week instead of the usual three-session format. Learning activities that otherwise would have taken place during classroom time can be moved online.’

Blended learning means that the teacher uses the potential of new technologies to create new activities, not simply to cram existing teaching and learning styles into new boxes.

Flipped Classroom

One of the key features of CyberCaesar is its use of the concept of the flipped classroom. This may sound quite geeky and impressive but essentially the flipped classroom can just be a video lesson that pupils study as homework. Why bother? Does this not subvert the traditional place of the teacher as instructor, as fount of all information? Absolutely not! The teacher is still instructing the pupils, just not in the classroom. What are the advantages of doing this? Simply it prepares learners better for discussing the new topic currently under investigation. For example, a pupil will understand the dative case more easily if she has seen a video lesson on it, before the teacher asks her about it in the classroom.

Online lessons are a staple of what are commonly known as MOOCs, perhaps the most famous being Khan Academy, a collection of over three-thousand online video tutorials. The main problem one encounters with MOOCs is the sense of engagement. There are
varying statistics but many people who begin an online course don’t complete it, because they are not sufficiently engaged. This is not a problem with CyberCaesar, because it is part of a blended learning experience, not an online course of its own right.

The video lessons that I use on CyberCaesar are a development of the PowerPoint slides that I found we were working on the VLE, although these have been refined and developed considerably. I use a program by Adobe called Captivate to construct these lessons. It is not cheap. However the advantage of programs like Captivate over ordinary video-casts is the level of interactivity – and it is the interactivity that makes CyberCaesar work. The pupils love these lessons. I have used other packages to create video lessons but the pupils always prefer Captivate. Why? Captivate doesn’t just “show and tell stuff” but also enables the teacher to ask questions in the video to gauge how well something has been understood. The video will ask a question and the answer will determine by which route the video will continue; if a pupil gets the question correct, the video proceeds as normal, if they get it wrong they are taken to a video explanation of why it is wrong. From a formal point of view, learning can be seen to happen as they progress through these lessons. These interactive lessons make learning more fun and efficient. However they are not a replacement for the traditional classroom lesson. Nothing could be. The flipped classroom is just another tool for us to use as educators.

Digital Storytelling

The hyperlinked texts are a relatively new addition to CyberCaesar. These have been written at the suggestion of my colleagues within my department. I wanted to get pupils reading proper Latin as soon as possible. When it was pointed out to me that Year 7 pupils are unlikely to cope with Livy, my colleagues and I created some elementary reading material. Nothing revolutionary here, some of the best textbooks in recent years have done precisely this. The difference with the narratives in CyberCaesar is that they are designed to promote independent learning through reading. I have written a (tiny) JavaScript code that enables me to provide selective links on various words. Unlike other interactive texts the links are used extremely sparingly. Pupils are therefore expected to retain much of the information, rather than have it provided for them passively. This allows me to control how much extra help they get in their reading in addition to the conventional classroom assistance of a teacher. The interactive texts also promote independent learning, as well as being far more engaging.

Individualised Learning

The final element – the online exercises – is what makes CyberCaesar tick. There are vocabulary flashcards which both teach and assess a pupil’s knowledge of a range of words. There are grammar exercises that test how well pupils understand how to form cases and tenses, forms of pronouns and pronominal adjectives, infinitives and subjunctives. Why are these so important? Not only do these exercises gauge a student’s progress, they mark their work as they go and provide instant feedback thus providing a truly individualised learning experience. From my point of view, it has reduced the burden of marking considerably but not to the extent that we don’t have formal unseen translations or essays. This individualised approach to language work enables students to react quickly to their errors and to work at their own pace. Some of the more gifted students have blazed a trail through the course.

Gamification

CyberCaesar is very much a work in progress. I have been using the site for the last three years and I still haven’t finished everything I want. Obviously the perfectionist in me wants it to be in full working order before I let it loose. There are still some errors that pupils point out with unrestrained glee (and this pleases me – they are bright enough to spot these mistakes). So far the course has been very effective. No cohort has yet completed their public examinations after instruction through the course but internal school examinations have shown real signs of progress. Recruitment has improved considerably, with double the number of pupils taking Latin at GCSE over the last two years. What else needs to be done? I have not finished converting all of my lessons to Captivate, which can take an age to complete. I have not finished all the narratives, which are also very labour intensive. I want to add more information on Roman society, although I try to get aspects of Roman life into the narratives. I would like to add an element of gamification, although nowhere near the sophistication of Operation L-API, but instead would award points for completing lessons and exercises which would then be converted into statuses within Roman society. I have mooted this idea with my students and they are impatient for me to introduce this, competitive as they are. There is a lot to do and, like all busy educators, so little time. However I am hopeful that I will complete the bulk of the remaining work this year.

Personal Learning Networks

CyberCaesar is not an alternative to classroom teaching but is a supplement to it. Digital technologies should not be regarded as something to replace the teacher. If neither my colleagues nor I were in lessons sharing our knowledge and expertise with the pupils, the course would fall down flat. Technology should not be seen as a goal in itself but is present in our educational institutions to assist the learning of the students and to enhance the pedagogy of the instructor. Without doubt there are a range of digital approaches that can be employed in the classroom but the sheer variety is bewildering. There is a lack of confidence on the part of many of my colleagues to use technologies – not just the how but the why. From my point of view, I am a firm advocate of the Personal Learning Network, a collection of feeds and resources unique to every individual supplied through Twitter, RSS and a host of other means. The collaborative Classics E-Learning network proposed by Jonathan Eaton is an excellent idea. It is only by continuing to share ideas and good practice that we can begin to make sense of these new technologies and deploy them effectively.

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References


1 Khan Academy is a free online collection of educational videos. For details, see https://www.khanacademy.org/

1 What is blended learning? The Blended Learning Initiative, http://weblearning.psu.edu/blended-learning-initiative/what-is-blended-learning