

**The concept of Peer Cognisance:  
Exploring participants' experiences of  
collaboration in a networked learning project**

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of 'peer cognisance' – a mutual sense of awareness, cognition and responsibility among learners – in the context of online and face-to-face collaboration. The study builds on a constructivist, learner-centred approach, and argues the need for reflective practice in education. The literature reviewed for the thesis builds on these concepts, linking reflexivity, motivation, learner autonomy and facilitation to successful collaboration. The research outlines two studies. A preliminary study involved sixteen students in higher education institutions in Germany and the U.S., which had to be curtailed due to lack of participation. The main motivating factor for participants was the mutual sense of responsibility for and awareness of other group members' needs, leading to the second, main study of the thesis, which sought to actively facilitate this awareness, or 'peer cognisance'.

The main study grouped 13-year old pupils and paired them with university language students during their year abroad, encouraging the younger learners to take control of their learning environment as much as possible. Collaboration took place online via WebCT, and, for the pupils, face-to-face in the classroom. Facilitation occurred both online and face-to-face during visits to the school. The study adopts a qualitative approach to data analysis, using narrative accounts from students, pupils and facilitator to explore motivations behind collaboration. The analysis confirmed the initial findings from the first study, and led to recommendations for the successful facilitation of collaboration through the concept of peer cognisance.

## Acknowledgements

I have fantasised about writing acknowledgements for my thesis from Day 1, and it is true that, no matter how 'autonomous' the learner, a piece of writing of this length cannot be achieved in isolation. Acknowledgements are written for the 'acknowledger' more than for the 'acknowledged', and so I am allowing myself the luxury to thank those who have had an impact on this piece of work.

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## **Abbreviations and terminology**

The term 'pupils' refers to participants of school age during the project.

The term 'students' refers to participants registered at a university.

**ALL – Association for Language Learning**

**Asynchronous communication – online communication without immediate response, e.g. email, noticeboard**

**Becta – British Educational Communications and Technology Agency**

**DfES – Department for Education and Skills**

**GCSE – General Certificate in Secondary Education (taken at approximately age 16, in school year 11)**

**HE – Higher Education – in the context of this thesis: university education**

**ICT – Information and Communications Technology**

**LSE – London School of Economics**

**SEN – Special Educational Needs**

**Synchronous communication – communication with immediate response, e.g. oral, face-to-face, synchronous text chat**

**WebCT – Web Course Tools, a commercial online learning platform**

**WUN – Worldwide Universities Network – a network comprising (at the time of the study) 13 universities, largely in the U.K. and the U.S., dedicated to sharing good practice and engaging in joint research**

**Year 9 – Year 9 of overall schooling, i.e. the third year at secondary school, approximate age 13-14 years old.**

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the thesis

This thesis explores the collaboration between language learners in a networked learning environment. The main body of the work (chapters 3 to 8) revolves around a set of research questions which concentrate on my own concept of Peer Cognisance – a mutual sense of responsibility, task sharing, and peer awareness – and how this may be best facilitated. The concept of Peer Cognisance is linked, through literature and research findings, to learner autonomy, collaboration, and motivation, and is followed throughout the thesis in an attempt to describe the evolution of its definition. Unusually, however, these research questions are based on the findings of a previous study (Study A, see chapter 2), which suggested that

*Peer cognisance among online participants positively influences collaboration and participation.*

I am arguing that the development of any thesis, as of any researcher, is a learning journey which is difficult to describe out of context. Any set framework for representing it will therefore only serve to conceal and make more artificial the actual learning experience. As a result of this conviction, I am choosing to represent this thesis in a ‘natural’ format, re-tracing the journey as accurately and honestly as possible. Originally, the main objective of the thesis was for myself to develop the skills and knowledge to facilitate online learning more successfully. As with most other research students I have spoken to during my studies, this objective and the resulting research questions have continued to evolve over the course of the study. In my case, this evolution occurred largely due to the early ‘demise’ of Study A (chapter 2), which nevertheless had a great impact on the composition of research questions and my facilitation of the second study – the main study of the thesis. It seems dishonest to me, then, to present only the main study, as though it stands in isolation, and I have therefore chosen to include both studies in this thesis – Study A in chapter 2, to illustrate how a large number of research questions was honed down to the finding stated above, and therefore to lay the basis for the main research

questions for the main body (Study B) of the thesis. These questions were born out of the main aims and objectives, namely to find out:

- How all participants in networked collaboration experience their participation;
- To what extent external and internal events and attitudes can have a positive or negative impact on motivation for all participants;
- Whether peer cognisance positively influences motivation, and whether this is linked to a pre-existing correlation between learner autonomy and collaboration; and
- Whether a facilitator can facilitate a group towards an enhanced recognition of each other, leading towards peer cognisance.

These aims led to the following research questions:

1. How do participants in an online learning environment experience collaboration?
  - 1a. What do they experience as motivating?
  - 1b. What do they experience as barriers to successful collaboration?
2. To what extent are learner autonomy and collaboration linked, and how does this translate to the concept of peer cognisance?
3. How can a facilitator encourage peer cognisance, in order to improve the learning experience?

These research questions will be discussed in further detail below, although it should be pointed out here, as early as possible, that the collaboration in both studies differed in that it was kept entirely online for Study A, and expanded into a networked learning environment for Study B, including a face-to-face element particularly among the pupil participants of the study. This difference will also be further highlighted in chapter 2, at the end of Study A, and as part of the methodology section, chapter 4.

From early drafts of my research plans, when I was mainly concentrating on my own development as a facilitator, I have, through my research, come to realise that the facilitator's development cannot be viewed in isolation. Just like all other learners, the facilitator is but one contributor in what is, after all, a human exchange of communication. All participants in such an exchange will bring their personal experiences, thoughts, concepts and influences, and by trying to look at just one participant – the facilitator – in isolation, I had effectively dehumanised my research. Thus, I was in danger of losing sight of the reason why I wanted to be a better facilitator in the first place, namely to improve the learners' experiences of online collaboration. This resulted in a distinct shift towards looking at all participants as individuals, and concentrating on their experiences, ideas, and influences to draw a more conclusive, rich, and descriptive picture of online collaboration, including its facilitation.

Undoubtedly, most, if not all, research students experience the phenomenon that their research becomes 'personal'. Making this phenomenon a deliberate part of my writing, by taking into account learners' (including my own) voices directly and giving space to personal accounts, I am seeking to celebrate the diversity of collaborative learning, where, as I found, the diversity of characters involved forms a major part of the motivation to continuously participate. The 'voices' in this thesis are heard most clearly in the evaluation and discussion chapters (6, 7 and 8), but the thesis adopts a reflective (for pupils and students) and reflexive (for myself) approach throughout.

## ***1.2 Background to and Significance of the Study***

This study potentially fits into a lot of frameworks or concepts, not least due to the large number of fields it touches (see the literature review in chapter 3 for a definition of the fields involved). Combining, as it did, both face-to-face and online facilitation, both school-age and university-age participants, as well as being partially funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and involving multicultural and multilingual collaboration, the study has the potential to be of

interest to a variety of establishments, organisations, and individuals. On the one hand, there is an identified need to engage more with the 'voices' of research participants, both in face-to-face (Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 2004; Richardson, 1997) and online situations (Blake, 2000; Palloff and Pratt, 1999 and 2005, Shields, 2003; JISC, 2005; Creanor, Gowan, Howells and Trinder, 2006). As such, the study may be of interest to any educational establishment interested in online learners' experiences, receiving direct input regarding the motivation and barriers related to online collaboration. On the other hand, there is the obvious link with language learning, potentially making the study of interest to educational establishments seeking to integrate multicultural online (or even face-to-face) collaboration and wishing to draw on other studies to avoid pitfalls. The findings of the study centre around peer cognisance, collaboration and the motivation that results from it, and these might thus be applicable to a wider range of collaborative projects, both face-to-face and online, and are at least worth exploring in wider contexts. In summary, the study might be of interest to

- university tutors planning and/or conducting online cross-cultural exchanges;
- school teachers planning and/or conducting online cross-cultural exchanges;
- university departments contemplating the introduction of a networked learning element into their courses;
- university departments planning links with local schools;
- secondary schools planning links with local universities;
- university departments and tutors seeking new opportunities for the development of teaching skills for undergraduates, potentially encouraging interest in Initial Teacher Education;
- Initial Teacher Education courses, seeking opportunities for recruitment of undergraduates on Postgraduate Teacher Training courses; and
- other researchers interested in the field of networked cross-cultural collaboration (including EFL).

The main study originates from the Association for Language Learning's (ALL) desire to explore online collaborative opportunities between students and pupils in the area of language learning. This was supported by a commitment from the

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to fund such a project, and makes it seem prudent to highlight the significance of the study from this angle first. The background to and significance of the study is therefore highlighted initially from a language education point of view, before taking into account potential further applications.

### **1.2.1 Governmental documents relating to the study**

Over the period of time in which the main study of this thesis was conducted, several initiatives and governmental decisions have taken place that had a direct impact on the research. Probably of most significance was the decision to make languages optional after Key Stage 3 (i.e. after Year 9, when most pupils have reached the age of 14), with effect from September 2004. A survey conducted by the National Centre for Languages (CiLT, 2004), with a response rate of 55% out of the targeted 1,500 schools, revealed an increasingly bleak picture. In 70% of all responding schools, languages had been made optional. Quite suddenly, language departments across the UK found themselves in a position where they had to vie for pupils' attention, engaging in marketing strategies to keep up the numbers of students. Of further consideration was the appearing social divide, which manifested itself in the fact that grammar schools were far more likely to maintain languages as compulsory than were secondary schools, particularly in low socio-economic areas. Language Colleges, due to their special status (i.e. languages remain compulsory, and the teaching of languages receives substantial governmental funding), were excluded from this survey.

At this point, it appears necessary to state that Study B was indeed conducted at a language college – this was largely due to the fact that the school had already been identified when I took over the project, but also because it was considered to be beneficial for a pilot study to explore the potential of the collaboration itself, rather than the surrounding difficulties of introducing a study such as this in a school with a low language uptake. If time had allowed, I would have very much liked to continue this research in a non-specialist status secondary school, and I will return to this point in chapter 9, the conclusion to the thesis.

From an ICT point of view, Ofsted stated in a report commissioned by the DfES, that eight schools out of the 13 that were visited to compile the report made 'insufficient use of ICT' (Ofsted, 2005, paragraph 16). The same year Ofsted published these findings, the DfES launched their much-anticipated e-Strategy (DfES, 2005a) with relevance to all schools and higher education institutions. The infrastructure the strategy reports is encouraging, with a current computer:student ratio of 3:1 in universities and 5:1 in secondary schools. All schools have internet access and are intended to have broadband by 2006 (DfES, 2005, p. 13). With e-learning becoming a truly viable option from an infrastructural point of view, the question of implementation looms large. The Becta Review 2005 (Becta, 2005) refers back to the DfES five year strategic plan (DfES, 2004), which states that 'ambitious and imaginative use of technology will be a central element in improving personalisation and choice across the system' (DfES, 2004, p. 88). Although the exact extent to which learners (particularly in a secondary school context) will be beneficiaries of 'personalisation' and 'choice' remains to be seen, it is reassuring that both the e-Strategy and the Becta Review focus on the learners themselves, adopting a learner-centred and learner-led approach that is mirrored in this study.

As a parallel development to the increased drive for motivation in language education, improved ICT infrastructure in schools and the Internet have granted both learners and teachers a multitude of learning opportunities, both in the area of individual research, and in cross-cultural communication. However, as technology in itself does not guarantee great pedagogy (Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Laurillard, 2002), researchers are currently exploring educational frameworks with a view to adapting them for a virtual environment, or, indeed, exploring the need for entirely new pedagogies (Stephenson, 2001).

The need for these new and adapted pedagogies becomes apparent if one takes a look at governmental figures related to the use of new technologies. In the UK, online education attempted to move into a new era with the foundation of UKeU, a 'broker' or 'agent for e-degrees' (Harrison, 2004) intended to work in collaboration with traditional universities with the aim of providing online degrees in an increasing variety of subjects. After the university's spectacular lack of recruitment

and early closure, journalists and academics were quick to blame a number of causes, ranging from poor marketing to inadequate prior research. More and more, it is realised that online learning, if it is to be successful, will need to emulate the social and collaborative atmosphere traditionally more associated with face-to-face education, and I will return to this point in more detail in the literature review. From a higher education point of view, both my studies (A and B) were completely voluntary, making them worthwhile material to explore participants' motivation and the extent to which their motivations and expectations were met by the project. Ruth Kelly (2005), Secretary of State for Education and Skills, highlights the need for personalisation of the education system through technology. For this purpose, it is necessary that individual experiences are heard and taken into account, to provide an in-depth micro-level snapshot of what learners might regard as motivating, challenging and stimulating in various learning environments. This study provides the opportunity for this particular snapshot from a collaborative point of view.

### **1.3 Background of the Researcher**

Describing my background is not easy, so I am taking refuge in somebody else's words, from a musical conceived the same year as myself. Kleban (1975), in writing the song lyrics for *A Chorus Line*, asks the question 'Who am I, anyway? Am I my résumé?' 'Are' people their CV? If so, mine tells a speckled story, although one that illustrates why I am *where* I am, if not why I am *who* I am. Growing up in Germany, and supposed to become a journalist with a scholarship funded by one of Germany's largest newspapers (the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), my German teacher at school and an editor at the newspaper had one major issue with my writing, namely that it lacked the 'necessary detachment' from my 'subjects'. Even at the age of fifteen, I was more interested in people's stories, rather than a (in my eyes) needless attempt to quantify, homogenise and sterilise experiences into facts. Unwilling to change my conviction on this point, and thus prevented from gaining said scholarship, I decided to approach a career where emotions were not only allowed, but necessary, auditioned at a music college in London, and subsequently became an 'opera singer'. My move to the UK held many learning experiences, but one disadvantage I had not anticipated – my English, although adequate for the purpose

of life and study in the UK, bore no resemblance to the lyrical, personal writing I was able to compose in German. Wittgenstein proclaimed that 'die Grenzen meiner Sprache sind die Grenzen meiner Welt' – 'the limits of my language are the limits of my world' – and my world had suddenly shrunk considerably. It took nearly ten years until I began to consider myself bilingual, and I still get frustrated if I am unable to convey exactly what I am experiencing or feeling.

This developmental, linguistic journey has had several off-springs – on the one hand, an empathy with language learners and an innate need to understand 'where they're coming from', on the other the realisation that, in any person's life, many such developmental journeys occur, often simultaneously, and often without much opportunity to reflect on the journey itself. Oakeshott (1933) mentions an 'arrest of experience', where we stop to take stock and try to make sense of the world around us, a concept that holds much value to me.

After music college and my PGCE year, while I was teaching German and French at a secondary school, I was asked to participate in an online learning pilot study (the *tandem* Project, Gläsmann and Calvert, 2001; Gläsmann, 2002; Gläsmann, 2004), and, being the newest member of staff and happiest with the technology involved, I found myself in charge. To develop my own knowledge as an online educator, I enrolled on a Masters' programme in e-learning, but got frustrated when having to juggle a full-time teaching job as well would not allow me to dedicate myself fully to my studies. When, following the MEd, I had the chance to begin a PhD, I saw this as the ultimate luxury: to have the time to chase a thought for years!

This luxury was upheld during the first year, an MA in Educational Research, where a scholarship meant I could dedicate all my time to study. When this scholarship ran out after one year, I had to find additional opportunities to fund my studies. Taking up a part-time lectureship for most of my time as a PhD student gave me another advantage, which I had not reckoned with – an immediate, practical application for my findings. This thesis makes little mention of the post I upheld during my research, but as part of my job description, I implemented collaborative online learning in the department's Caribbean distance learning programme, and conducted research in this area too. I have a natural curiosity to learn about and develop new

ideas and concepts, but combining research and work has shown me that, in the end, I will only be happy if I can see my research making a difference to other people's learning. I have been lucky to catch a glimpse of these differences, and they have motivated me to carry on at times when juggling different commitments has been difficult. Continuing to teach has also meant that I felt closer to the students and pupils in my study, rather than researching them from an academic distance without any bearing on their education. Throughout the thesis, it will become apparent that I very much value this connection with my research, and the fact that the participants were at the centre of it.

#### ***1.4 Introduction to philosophical and methodological underpinnings***

This section serves as a brief introduction only – further information on underpinning theories are provided both in the literature review (chapter 3) and the methodology chapter (chapter 4). As already stated, my main focus for the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of this study were the people who participated in it, i.e. the experiences of individuals as part of a collaborative exchange. Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice approach is cited several times in the body of this thesis, as are links to social and communal constructivism. The thesis further sets out to explore the concept of peer cognisance. I developed this term in response to Study A, where I found that one successful group of students displayed a peer awareness that went beyond my understanding of the term. In attempting to identify a more accurate terminology, I came across the term 'cognisance' to describe knowledge, recognition, awareness, notice, jurisdiction and responsibility (Merriam-Webster, [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)). The thesis thus deals with a number of concepts surrounding relationships between individuals and groups. This is further enhanced by the implied power distributions inherent to the principle of learner autonomy, which are explored and defined in more detail in chapter 3. The role of the facilitator, too, implies a power relationship. Although this thesis does not delve deeply into the socio-political and critical theory aspects of these power relationships, it does highlight the need for people in power, such as facilitators, to listen to the voices of the learners themselves, rather than attempting to construct

knowledge from figures alone. Just how important these learners' voices are will become apparent throughout the study, and formed the basis of the research questions which emerged between Study A and Study B.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

Although the actual research questions have already been cited above, I feel it necessary to return to them in further detail and highlight their relevance, before going on to the main body of the thesis. As already outlined above, arriving at this set of questions was not easy, and an 'evolution of research questions' can be found in appendix 1.

- 1. How do participants in an online learning environment experience collaboration?**
  - 1a. What do they experience as motivating?**
  - 1b. What do they experience as barriers to successful collaboration?**

Online collaboration today forms a major component of a number of university degree courses, and is of particular importance in subjects where communication and repeated teacher/facilitator input are vital to progress, such as in foreign language education. Although highly exploratory in nature, the question is actually a refinement or rather a 'going back to the roots' of earlier attempts simply to find the best way to facilitate online collaboration. In earlier studies, such as my MEd dissertation (Gläsmann, 2002) and even before Study A, there was a lack of a critical approach regarding online collaboration on my part, and a tacit assumption that whatever I considered to be motivating would be experienced as such by my participants, too. Study A quickly highlighted a lack of transparency regarding this motivation, and the fact that my thoughts and concepts differed greatly from the students', who saw only the result of my intervention (or lack of it), but never the thought processes preceding it. As a result of this, I decided to go back to the basics and explore what online collaboration (and indeed, in case of the inter-group work among the pupils, face-to-face collaboration) meant for the participants themselves,

how it motivated or de-motivated them, and which aspects were linked to positive or negative emotions.

**2. To what extent are learner autonomy and collaboration linked, and how does this translate to the concept of peer cognisance?**

During Study A, one group was particularly noticeable due to their combined skills to operate both individually and collaboratively. This led me to query the interrelationship between learner autonomy and collaboration, and to the definition of the term peer cognisance, which I have outlined above. The question seeks to establish the extent to which an individual will need to be able to operate autonomously in order to be a contributing member of a collaborative exchange. This, of course, leads to a need to define the term 'learner autonomy' for the purpose of this study, and I do so in chapter 3.

**3. How can a facilitator encourage peer cognisance, in order to improve the learning experience?**

This third research question serves a number of purposes – it gives way to the pre-supposition that peer cognisance is, in fact, a positive contributor to the learning experience. It furthermore acknowledges the power the facilitator has over a collaborative group – although the study strongly argues for the need to look into all participants' experiences, it is, after all, the facilitator's purpose to steer the learning process and implement positive changes where necessary and possible. Finally, the final four words are kept deliberately hazy – the purpose for this thesis was not to 'maximise learning output' or to provide any measurable form of learning. As has been pointed out above, language education is particular to the extent that learning a foreign language requires constant input. Threats, marks, tests and other attempts to influence student learning are in fact short-term measures, aimed at maximising measurable results which fall back onto schools in the form of league tables. It is my opinion that, if learning is to take place beyond the school environment, then it is necessary to find a way to show that it can in fact be enjoyable to learn. Whatever spells an 'improvement of learning experience' will be as individual as the participants in this study, but if they are to maintain a longer-term interest in the

subject, I feel it is worthwhile to highlight some of these improvements, as perceived by the learners, and look into ways in which a facilitator may be able to support these.

## **1.6 Thesis structure**

As already hinted, the thesis, as much as possible, provides a chronological structure, whilst also maintaining a traditional lay-out. **This chapter** thus formed the introduction, outlining the background of the research as well as the researcher, the significance of the study, underlying philosophy and an introduction to the research questions.

**Chapter 2** is dedicated to Study A, the originally intended 'main study' of the thesis. It is included to highlight the ways in which research questions were reduced, and how the concept of peer cognisance was formulated. At no point would I wish to imply that Study A in itself could have supplied enough base material for the formulation of an actual theory or full theoretical concept. The term 'peer cognisance' merely serves to describe the behaviour I observed from the most successful group, allowing me to name what qualities I felt were worth exploring and facilitating. I will return to the idea of peer cognisance in the conclusion (see chapter 9) to explore whether Study A and Study B combined give enough information to suggest 'peer cognisance' as a theoretical framework.

**Chapter 3** outlines the literature underlying this thesis. It likens the writing of a literature review to the weaving of a spider's web, arguing for the inclusion and exclusion of studies, and the necessity to connect areas of literature which might be disconnected as distinct fields, but all form major components of this thesis. The literature review is further subdivided into sections surrounding 'experiential learning, reflective learning and learner autonomy', 'motivation', 'collaboration and peer cognisance', and 'the role of the facilitator'.

**Chapter 4** covers the methods and methodology behind the study in more detail. As well as arguing for the choice of the actual research methods employed, it also

covers further literature dealing with the methodological approaches, such as constructivism, ethnography, narrative research, and online research. The chapter further discusses ethical concerns of relevance to this Study and contemplates the place of validity, generalisability and truth in a study such as mine.

**Chapters 5, 6 and 7** present the findings and the discussion surrounding these findings. Each chapter is dedicated to a particular point of view in the learning exchange that formed Study B: chapter 5 presents the students', chapter 6 the pupils', and chapter 7 the facilitator's, i.e. my, point of view. Each chapter highlights findings along a similar framework, concentrating on 'collaboration', 'motivation and enthusiasm', and 'fears and barriers' respectively, but leaves space for further subdivision or highlighting according to each individual group's input. It is important to note that the thesis deviates here from other, more traditional models, proposing to focus on data, findings, discussions, and preliminary conclusions, in each respective chapter. This is due to my belief that each participant group deserved to be the focus of a well-rounded analysis and discussion, without trying to 'water down' the findings by homogenising the chapters at this particular stage.

Nevertheless, in order to provide an overview of the findings, and to see where potential links might be created, **Chapter 8** returns to the literature discussed in chapter 3 and ties this to the findings from chapter 5, 6 and 7. Although literature is in part discussed in the findings chapters themselves, I felt it necessary to provide a point of convergence for all participants' voices, and to pitch these voices against the literature, before reaching the conclusion of the thesis.

**Chapter 9** provides this conclusion, returning to the research questions in detail and also discussing limitations of the study, scope for future research and dissemination possibilities.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter served as an introduction to the thesis, including its particular dual and chronological development. Due to this dual status, neither study has been discussed

in full, explicit detail in this chapter, although full details will be given at appropriate places in the thesis. The following chapter will provide these details for Study A, whilst chapter 4 will provide full details for the framework of Study B.

## **2 Study A – Collaboration in Higher Education**

### ***2.1 Introduction***

This chapter, relating to the initial study, has been very difficult to place. Since conducting the research outlined here, my thought processes and my understanding have continued to evolve, leading me almost to discard the chapter altogether, were it not for the truthful approach to development I promised myself I would pursue. My perception on how I want to conduct and present my research has changed. In a thesis which seeks to illustrate a developmental journey, then, where should such a chapter be placed? I feel that Study A now precedes much of the development I underwent during my research, although this is, of course, not true, but a perception in retrospect. Ellis (2004, p. 114) points out that current experiences always loom larger than past ones, and that experiences 'change' in retrospect once we rely on our written interpretations of events. Therefore, my original plan, to have Study A as a prelude, does not work. In my view, the study belongs in the middle of the literature review, before the references to more reflective research and methodologies, as I feel this place would most accurately illustrate the current mental development I was at when I conducted it – although I spoke about development, thoughts and reflection, I did not have the confidence to argue the point for a purely qualitative study convincingly. Instead, I tried to argue how my study would be replicable, and was, at the time, looking through data analysis programmes to validate my findings.

Study A and Study B are not comparable, and Study B did not seek to replicate Study A (in fact, although they share aspects of online collaboration using both German and English, the two studies are at best only marginally related, and differentiate in aspects such as sample, intent, and language skill). Study A did, however, provide the experience necessary for me to find the courage to change my approach, and to concentrate on my participants' voices as a vital part of the content. As such, I feel the preparations, thoughts and results of this first study still warrant presentation, due to the impact they have had on further work. I hope the description

of this first study will prove helpful in retracing the thought processes further research was built upon.

## **2.2 Background to Study A**

At the time when plans for Study A began in early 2003, the focus of several recent publications had been on peer learning exercises (Ender and Newton, 2000; Falchikov, 2001) and online facilitation (Collison *et al*, 2000; Salmon, 2000).

Publications in the field related to cross-cultural or multilingual projects, however, were nearly non-existent, apart from brief asides in longer texts (Leask and Younie, 2001). Therefore, the intent was for Study A to explore these cross-cultural and multilingual avenues. Due to the lack of prior research in this specific area, I initially felt it was important to remain open to ideas, which resulted in casting a wide net of research questions, being aware that it might not be possible to answer them all, rather allowing them to function as reminders and pointers towards a sharper focus as the research went on. At the beginning of the study, therefore, the research question and sub-questions read as follows:

### **How can successful collaboration for online cross-cultural self-governed learning be best facilitated?**

#### **1. What skills does a facilitator in this field need to develop?**

- a) To what extent do existing pedagogical frameworks for online facilitation address issues pertaining to cultural and language-related issues?
- b) What is the learning process of the facilitator throughout the period of study?
- c) How can this learning process be best harnessed to allow other educators to gain an insight into issues related to online facilitation of cross-cultural exchanges?

## 2. What motivates students to participate in a cultural exchange project?

- a) What initial motivation brings learners to these projects?
- b) Are there certain indicators towards autonomous or collaborative learning skills that will help students be successful?
- c) Is there a relationship between reason for initial interest and actual amount of participation?
- d) What is the best way to structure a project to maximise motivation in different circumstances?
- e) What is the role of the facilitator in harnessing and maintaining motivation throughout the project?
- f) How do learners regard and assess the outcomes of the project?

## 3. What are the dynamics in a multilingual online collaborative study group?

- a) What is the perceived role of the facilitator as part of the group dynamics?
- b) How can a change in group dynamics towards increased collaborative autonomy throughout the project be encouraged?
- c) How does communication between individuals and small groups compare to those in the full group?
- d) Is there an optimum way of pairing/grouping students in this type of online learning environment?

Even within the full intended timeframe of one academic year, addressing all of the above questions would have been difficult within the scope of one thesis. With a total running time of just over five weeks of actual online exchanges, findings from Study A are mostly related to aspects of motivation and awareness of learning goals, which appear to have influenced learners' success. As such, the study served to refine the focus of facilitation for Study B. The remainder of this chapter seeks to present and analyse the data leading to this refinement of focus. For ease of reference, each aspect of the research is described fully, including a brief interpretation of the data, in order to maintain this chapter as only a brief introduction to the main study.

## **2.3 The project**

Study A intended to link 16 languages students from the US and Germany (8 students from the University of Willowby and 8 from the University of Kuddelmunch) for a one-academic-year-long project (November to May). Throughout this project, students were encouraged to discuss their perceptions of culture and terminology pertaining to the study. For a list of questions students answered individually throughout the project (in questionnaire and interview format), see appendices 2 and 3. For a complete intended timeframe of and topics for Study A (Phase 1), see appendix 4. Over the course of three phases, students were to be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their own work, including the suggestion of topics, ways of collaboration and group processes, as well as choice of language. Although only one of the three stages was completed, the ethnographic approach to the study led to a sharpening of focus on the topic of collaboration and its facilitation, through discussion with students and observation of the learning environment.

### **2.3.1 Sample and consent**

The research was initiated by myself at the University of Sheffield with the aim to explore issues arising in cross-cultural bilingual online exchanges, with a particular emphasis on attitudes and motivations in voluntary projects. The research was partly funded by the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN). At both participating universities, the project was publicised through a variety of channels, such as information evenings, posters, and through languages classes. As a result of these strategies, 16 students (eight from each university) were identified as volunteers for the project on a first-come-first-served basis. The students were from a wide-ranging linguistic background, ranging from near-beginner to near-native speaker, although, in self-evaluation, the German students were far more confident in their linguistic abilities than their American counterparts. Four of the 16 students had neither German nor English as their mother tongue (speaking Bosnian, Aramaic, Chinese

and Romanian respectively), although two of these students stated they were bilingual Chinese/English and Bosnian/German.

All students were notified before they signed up that their contribution to the project would form part of research with the aim to publish the findings. Further 'consent through participation' was obtained by repeating this point in the first set of questionnaires and interviews, and through messages on WebCT (see chapter 4 for further information on WebCT). Both universities were contacted to identify their specific research consent methods, and all these specifications were abided by and approved by the institutions' internal research boards (IRB) (see appendix 13 for the American university's IRB application – the German university had no such written application regulations in place).

## **2.4 Methods**

The research itself took place over a period of five weeks in November/December 2003. Discussion was facilitated in asynchronous written form only, via WebCT. It was originally planned to continue the project and phase in further communicative technologies, in order to allow students to share their ideas and develop their understanding of each other over an extended period of time (Hoban, 1999), but extenuating circumstances made this plan impossible to achieve, as will be further outlined below. The actual methods used are similar to those employed in Study B and are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

The five weeks of the project were subdivided into three stages. During an initial contact stage of two weeks, all students were given the opportunity to exchange personal information and get to know each other. This stage marked the 'forming' (Tuckman, 1965, in Johnson *et al*, 2002) process of the community, allowing students to identify their motivations and goals for the project, as well as giving each other information about their current stage of linguistic knowledge. As a group of 16 is usually identified as being too large for meaningful, deep discussion (Palloff and Pratt, 1999), students were divided into smaller study groups of four in order to discuss topics relating to learner autonomy and foreign culture. Although learners

were not given an official 'choice' in the way these smaller groups were created, the groupings were based on individuals' behaviour throughout the first two weeks, and took into account that less confident students were paired with those who seemed willing to explain and help others along. Furthermore, the four students for whom neither German nor English was the mother tongue were distributed among different groups, drawing on these particular learners' advanced experience in foreign language learning, but also ensuring there were a number of native speakers in each group to allow for authentic language examples. As will be seen from the findings below, it appears that students' initial attitude and motivation towards the project, and how these students were combined in their respective groups, had a considerable impact on their participation.

## **2.5 The task**

Following initial discussion in the larger group, each small group had the task of producing a questionnaire to gather information from the wider student body at each university. In this questionnaire, students addressed the following topics:

- student life at university,
- learning and teaching styles at university,
- perceptions of German/American culture, and the origins of these perceptions.

It was left up to individual groups to decide if they wanted to spread questions evenly among these areas, or to focus on one area in particular.

This period of small group work was ended with a plenary during which each group presented their questionnaire to the larger group, where these were discussed and combined into one final questionnaire the students were then aiming to distribute to their fellow students. Due to the termination of the project, the results of this questionnaire are not available, however, the discussion process amongst the students themselves gives useful information into working strategies of successful cross-cultural online collaborators.

## **2.6 Data collection**

Prior to the study, each student filled in a questionnaire focusing on their motivations to participate, their self-perceived level of language competence and their learning goals. These questions were further re-enforced via an interview, conducted face-to-face with the American students and via email with the German participants. In this interview, students were asked to reflect on the collaborative learning experience, their role as part of a team, including their strengths and weaknesses, what they perceived to be the role of the facilitator, what level of language balance (German/English) they predicted for the project, and what, in their perception, would make the project 'successful'. These data were evaluated and compared with students' actual participation, through an evaluation of their postings on WebCT, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

What follows below is an analysis and comparison of students' initial motivation to participate in the project, and how this motivation is mirrored in their attitude towards their work on the project. Particular attention will be paid to the students' motivation to participate, their stated learning goals, and their expectations of the facilitator.

## **2.7 Motivation to participate**

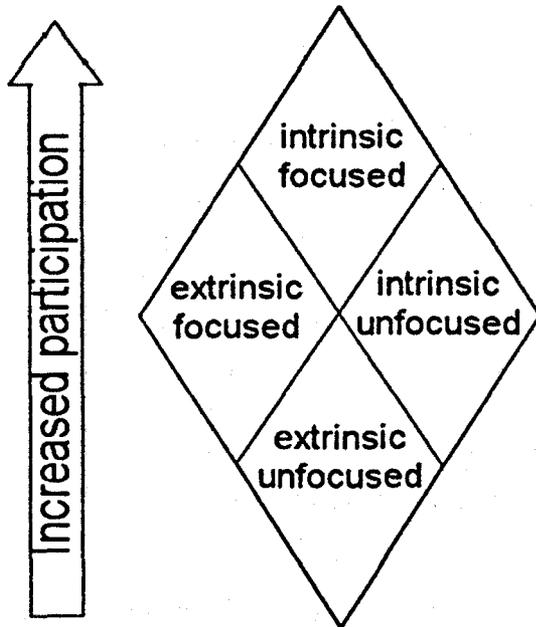
Prior to the project starting, all students filled in an initial questionnaire and took part in individual interviews, which were conducted face-to-face with the American students and in written form with the German students. Both included questions regarding the students' motivation to participate. The students' answers were coded according to categories, composed of various combinations of extrinsic, intrinsic, focused and unfocused motivation. Deci and Ryan (1991) define intrinsic motivation as a 'prototypical form of self-determination', i.e. students choose to participate based on their interest, rather than outside pressures (p. 253). Extrinsic motivation, in contrast, is identified as the result of 'externally administered consequences'

(ibid.), such as examinations. The literature review (see chapter 3) defines the term 'motivation' in more detail, and discusses issues pertaining to motivation as it relates to the research. For the purpose of this study, learning goals were further identified as being focused (i.e. related to a particular area of linguistic or cultural competence, such as verb tenses, grammar, or political opinion) or unfocused (i.e. a general wish to improve either cultural knowledge or language skill). This is but a crude distinction which does not take into account the complex field of goal theory (Pintrich, 2000), which specifies a wide variety of specific target goals, achievement goals, and no less that 24 basic categories, such as exploration, happiness, creativity, belongingness and mastery, to give but a few (Ford, 1992, in Pintrich, 2000). Nevertheless, within the given constructs, four possible categories became apparent, namely

- Extrinsic, unfocused motivation (e.g. 'I need to improve my German for exams')
- Extrinsic, focused motivation (e.g. 'I want to improve my grammar in written communication to improve my grades')
- Intrinsic, unfocused motivation (e.g. 'I want to learn more about the country and culture')
- Intrinsic, focused motivation (e.g. 'I am looking for an opportunity to discuss common experiences, such as political concepts, with a partner on a more abstract level')

Each student's learning goals were aligned within the motivational quadrants outlined above, and then compared to their actual participation (i.e. the number of messages read and posted, as well as the content of these messages, such as bringing forward new ideas, willingness to initiate conversation topics, ask questions, etc.). In doing this, it became obvious that the four quadrants represented a mirror-image of student participation on three levels. Those students with unfocused, extrinsic goals appear to be least motivated to sustain the level of commitment needed to successfully complete a project of this kind. Students with either extrinsic focused goals or intrinsic unfocused goals were more likely to participate, however, those with intrinsic focused goals formed the strongest attachment to the project (based on their participation).

Overall, the correlation between learning goals and participation can be presented in a diamond-shape diagram (see Figure 2.1).



*Figure 2.1: Continuum of motivation in expressed learning goals*

Although the borders between each category appear to be in constant flux due to overlapping goals, most students could be located largely within one of the four categories. Whilst these findings may be flawed on a number of levels (students expressing goals in several different quadrants, one motivated student having 'nowhere to go' due to other group members' lack of motivation on a similar level), it provides food for thought for future projects, and on issues regarding both the preparation of such a project and groupings involved.

Whereas this continuum may help to predict students' stamina in self-study, it does not necessarily take into account the need for a readiness for peer education (Falchikov, 2001). An awareness of the partner's needs is crucial for a cross-fertilising learning relationship, and proof of this awareness formed a further distinctive criterion in the evaluation of students' responses.

### 2.7.1 Small group interaction

As well as taking students' self-defined learning goals as a point of comparison with actual participation, a further point of reference became obvious when postings within different groups were compared with one another. Although counting postings on a purely quantitative level does little to illustrate the quality of an exchange, it can serve to show that consistent participation is needed in order to keep momentum going. During the two weeks the students worked in smaller groups of four, Group 1 managed to publish 9 posts, Group 2 posted 45, Group 3 posted 11 and Group 4 posted 14. It could be argued that the task - to discuss potential questions for a questionnaire about students' perceptions of the other country's culture and university life - could hardly be completed satisfactorily in Groups 1, 3 and 4, when each student would have posted less than two, three and four messages respectively. In fact, all groups had to contend not only with the time constraints of having two weeks to complete the task, but also with peers dropping out. In three of the four groups, lack of organisation and discussion led to either a distribution of tasks (each student writing a number of questions, without any discussion taking place), or indeed one student writing the entire questionnaire in one language, with another translating it. Jones and Esnault (2004, online) point out that

*[n]etworks are dynamic systems that rely on self-reinforcement, without sustaining activity networks become moribund, the non-animate links and connections may remain, skeleton-like, but without activity the flows across the network die out.*

This was certainly observable in Study A – whilst WebCT remained active in principle, it became less and less populated, apart from the participants of Group 2, whose relationship has become the focus of Study A and, subsequently, the basis for the research questions for Study B.

## 2.7.2 Peer cognisance

Group 2, made up of four female students, one of whom never posted throughout the entire project, noticeably displayed a high level of awareness towards their peers in their postings on WebCT, asking about other members' availability, strengths and interests throughout the project. In evaluating this group's postings and comparing them to each individual student's initial questionnaire and interview, it became obvious that not only was this particular group made up of three students with intrinsic, specific learning goals, it was also the only group where all three students had specified that they were interested in helping their partner improve (rather than the less focused statement 'I am interested in communicating with a partner'). By joining the project with a clear idea that the persons at the other end are defined individuals with clear learning needs and goals, these three students appear to have made an instinctive leap towards effective peer learning. Their recognition of their partners' needs was such that I am arguing that the term 'peer awareness' may not be accurate enough to describe the phenomenon, after all, students need to be aware of much more than just the *existence* of their partner. I am therefore proposing the term '*peer cognisance*'. 'Cognisance' encompasses several meanings, including awareness, recognition, conscious knowledge, acknowledgement, observance, notice, but also, as a term of law, jurisdiction, i.e. responsibility ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). Furthermore, the term also describes the scope of somebody's knowledge, demonstrating that 'cognisance' is not necessarily absolute, but can be increased and worked upon, showing a constant flux of learning. As such, 'peer cognisance' illustrates the many different levels of awareness and recognition that need to be present among students to maximise the benefits of collaboration, locating the term both in the affective and the cognitive domain. Study A served to outline this tentative definition of peer cognisance, i.e.

Peer cognisance (working definition): a level of mutual responsibility in collaboration that goes beyond previously acknowledged peer awareness.

As such, this tentative definition shaped further engagement with the literature, leading to a more refined definition of the term at the end of chapter 3.

It seems that, no matter how clearly a project is advertised as an exchange, a large percentage of students will be unaware of the dual responsibility that is part of such an exchange, making the increase of peer cognisance a vital part in the preparation of future, similar projects. With this particular group, peer cognisance resulted in an advanced level of planning, working out internal deadlines which all group members adhered to, dividing tasks to make them manageable. They also maintained a personal level of communication which, though unrelated to the actual task, kept communication from becoming simply a tool for completing the challenge, instead centring further communication around the task set, in the form of anecdotal references. Through this form of group interaction, this particular 'learning cell' of dedicated peer collaborators (Goldschmid and Goldschmid, 1976) managed to both further the group experience and provide 'personal learning by way of other people through sharing information, imitating successful behaviour, gaining direct feedback, or by direct suggestions' (Ender and Newton, 2000, p. 132).

Having looked at the internal group processes, the final section below addresses the issue of facilitating voluntary online collaborations, and in which ways students' behaviour online may be influenced by their perception of the facilitator's role.

### **2.7.3 Expectations of the facilitator**

Prior to the project, all students were asked to share their views regarding the role of the facilitator. These views were widely different, and included (paraphrased):

- Help with problems
- Answer questions
- Act like a more knowledgeable participant
- Follow the progress and jump in when things start going wrong

- Provide topics for discussion
- Tell us what to do, when to be where, etc.
- Create a good basis for communication by encouraging helpfulness, trust and openness
- Hand out vocabulary lists

According to these perceived roles, the facilitator, in order to meet all expectations, would need to operate on a scale ranging from highly tutor-led (i.e. specifying topics, handing out vocabulary, etc.) to almost complete learner autonomy (i.e. only interceding when problems occur). Several authors have commented on the range of input required by an online facilitator (Collison *et al*, 2000; Salmon, 2001), stressing that input may not only need to differ from student to student, but also from task to task, group to group, or subject matter to subject matter. Indeed, throughout the project, the facilitator's role was a different one within each of the different smaller learning cells, and an attempt was made to adopt whichever role, 'voice' (Collison *et al*, 2000) or 'competence' (Salmon, 2000) was required.

One aspect that required particular thought was the exact moment of intervention. Most students, in one way or another, had expressed their need for the facilitator to assist with problems and/or let the group know when they were pursuing the 'wrong' path. In reality, however, the intention of the project was to facilitate peer support, and students were encouraged to turn to each other before calling on the facilitator. Not all students responded equally well to this idea, as became obvious in a survey conducted after the first project phase came to a halt. Once more, initial motivational goals and actual behaviour appear to be linked, even through the mode of facilitator perception. Out of those students who had stated their hopes for the facilitator to help with problems, those with intrinsic and focused motivations, and particularly those with a raised peer awareness, were much more likely to make positive comments about the facilitation process, than those students who were less peer-aware and had different motivations. Although all students were made aware of the peer learning element before the project started, and although facilitation was always overt (i.e. actively encouraging other group members to respond, rather than

passively waiting), students who did not display peer-awareness prior to the start of the project felt unsupported by the facilitator.

## **2.8 Conclusions**

From the findings presented above, the success of an online learning project appears to rely on a combination of preparation and facilitation, although there may be certain areas intrinsically linked to already existing viewpoints among participants, making it necessary to treat students as individuals with pre-conceived notions which are to be addressed or built upon, if the learning process is to become more successful. All students entered the project with clear motivations, which seem to have provided the base for much of the interaction that took place. A high level of peer cognisance, partnered with intrinsic, focused goals, appears to be the strongest indicator for committed, continued participation. If these findings are true, this raises certain issues which, if addressed, may assist in the successful conduct of future projects.

### **2.8.1 Issues of motivation**

If intrinsically motivated students with focused learning goals are better equipped to cope with the autonomous learning aspect of an online project, then project leaders and facilitators may be able to help students identify additional learning goals that students themselves may not have thought of. Although much of the students' intrinsic motivation was directly linked to their history and/or personal lives (e.g. family in Germany, a forthcoming trip, etc.), encouraging students to think more explicitly about their motivations may help them find a focus to 'hang their motivation on'. All students in Study A were volunteers; however, there remained substantial differences between individuals' participation, and, even more pronounced, the commitment to continue the project when extrinsic factors, such as university examinations, took over.

## 2.8.2 Issues of peer awareness / peer cognisance

The students who were both the most successful from a productive point of view, and happiest with their progress were those who had already expressed awareness of their peers' needs, and in fact, had integrated these needs into their own motivation. Although the 'need to help somebody improve' may be hard to replicate in those students who do not already possess this trait, it may be possible to make students more aware of their partners before a similar project starts. In the project at hand, the emphasis was firmly placed on peer learning; however, some knowledge of what this might entail was assumed on the facilitator's part, as was the idea that, if students had volunteered for a project that proclaimed peer learning so openly, they would share a favourable outlook on the mutual responsibilities related to peer learning. It was only the evaluation of the data that showed that those students singularly concerned with their own progress far outnumbered those who made definite reference to peer learning. By integrating a discussion of peer learning into the early, communal stages of the project, or relating a task directly to the exploration of this aspect, students might have felt more prepared to share the responsibility for their own learning, rather than relying on the facilitator to provide answers that peers could give just as easily.

## 2.8.3 Relating Study A to Study B

As indicated in the introduction of this section, there are a number of substantial differences between the two studies. These differences are outlined below, in table format, for ease of reference.

	Study A	Study B
Participants	All Higher Education	Higher Education and secondary school (Year 9: 13-14 year olds)
Ratio	8 students from USA : 8 students from Germany	6 HE students : full class of pupils (24)
Language skills	Exchange between native	Exchange between HE

	(or near native) speakers English:German	students and secondary school pupils, using both English and German – two tiers of foreign language knowledge, but no native speaker input within the actual sample group.
Length of project	5 weeks (intended 1 year)	Full project: 6 months; actual exchange: 6 weeks
Main communication programme	WebCT	WebCT, face-to-face
Facilitation	Entirely online	Face-to-face (with pupils), as well as online (all)
Access to participants	All students volunteered	HE students volunteered, pupils ‘subscribed’ through their teacher
Curriculum	Entirely independent of curriculum	Opportunity to link to school curriculum

*Figure 2.2 Linking Study A to Study B*

The decision to include face-to-face collaboration and facilitation stemmed from both the literature (Castells, 2001), which states that online interactions are strongest when linked to existing social relationships. As such a ‘networked learning approach’, rather than pure online learning, seems to hold greater potential to establish connections between participants, supporting my own belief that particularly the younger learners would benefit from a more structured input, allowing them to engage face-to-face with the facilitator, i.e. myself. This point is further explored in the methodology section of this thesis (see chapter 4).

Despite all differences cited above, both projects form an opportunity to explore another culture and language through online collaboration, which is being facilitated

in order to maximise learning benefits. Although the findings presented from Study A must not be generalised, it would appear to be beneficial to take them into account, in the hope that, combined with the more personalised link of more frequent face-to-face interaction, Study B may be more successful. As such, the following strategies for Study B are proposed:

1. Work more explicitly towards encouraging focused, specific learning goals among both pupils and students. Whereas among pupils, these may be more language and culture related, students may need to be encouraged to focus on the project as an opportunity to increase their skills related to working with teenagers, and exploring pedagogical avenues for career purposes. In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to engage in detail with participants' experiences, including their motivation.
2. Maximise peer cognisance amongst different peers, i.e. student : student, student : pupil and pupil : pupil, as well as encouraging self-awareness. This may be achieved through face-to-face meetings between students and pupils, direct discussions challenging the perceptions of learning peers, and joint exploration of the meaning of terms such as peer-work, peer responsibility and collaboration with the pupils during face-to-face workshops.
3. Continue with exploration of students' and pupils' perceptions of the facilitator, but enhance them with face-to-face discussions in small groups, to facilitate the transition from face-to-face to online learning.

The strategies above led to the revised research questions, already outlined in chapter 1:

1. How do participants in an online learning environment experience collaboration?
  - 1a. What do they experience as motivating?
  - 1b. What do they experience as barriers to successful collaboration?

2. To what extent are learner autonomy and collaboration linked, and how does this translate to the concept of peer cognisance?
3. How can a facilitator encourage peer cognisance, in order to improve the learning experience?

As a result of lessons learnt from Study A, Study B now has a recognisably refined focus, built on the facilitation not only of collaborative online exchanges, but also of the peer cognisance and learner autonomy, which, based on the findings of Study A, may greatly enhance collaboration among peers. Study B will therefore continue to explore the scope of motivation and peer cognisance, and attempt to find ways in which these may be facilitated more pro-actively.

The other significant change to the study, i.e. moving from a higher education context to one combining higher education with secondary schools, resulted from several factors. Among these were the existing remit from the DfES and the Association of Language Learning (see chapter 1), my own familiarity with the secondary school context (over, at the time research began, my knowledge of teaching and learning in higher education), and finally a perceived lack of research in this area. Goodyear *et al* (2005), in researching undergraduates' expectations and experiences of networked learning, argue that 'to the best of [their] knowledge, [their paper is] the first to report on undergraduate students' expectations about, and experiences of, networked learning, [...] (p. 504). The literature in chapter 3 will outline that many of the sources available are indeed linked to higher education, and there, to postgraduate education over undergraduate programmes. Little has been produced in the way of researching networked learning and online collaboration involving secondary school pupils, and less still combining the two tiers of education.

This chapter outlined the research conducted as part of Study A. Due to the limited space here, and the dual nature of some issues in relation to both studies, chapter 4 (Methodology) will return to some of the points, particularly regarding the methods used. After illustrating how the list of research questions was reduced for the main

study as part of this chapter, the following chapter concentrates on the literature relevant to both studies, although the literature review remains conscious of the fact that Study B forms the main focus of this thesis, thus taking into account issues pertaining to face-to-face facilitation, as well as issues pertaining to younger learners.

### 3 Literature review

#### 3.1 Introduction

How to conduct, organise, and present the literature review for this thesis has, at times, felt to be more laborious than the study itself. There are endless scraps of paper, combining areas, discarding others, shifting the focus, and many of them have angry scribbles superimposed on them, as I realised I had once again ‘missed a bit’. Even in the upgrade paper, I acknowledged the difficulty in finding boundaries relating to the relevance of literature in each area. At the time, my attempt at a pictorial overview stood as follows:

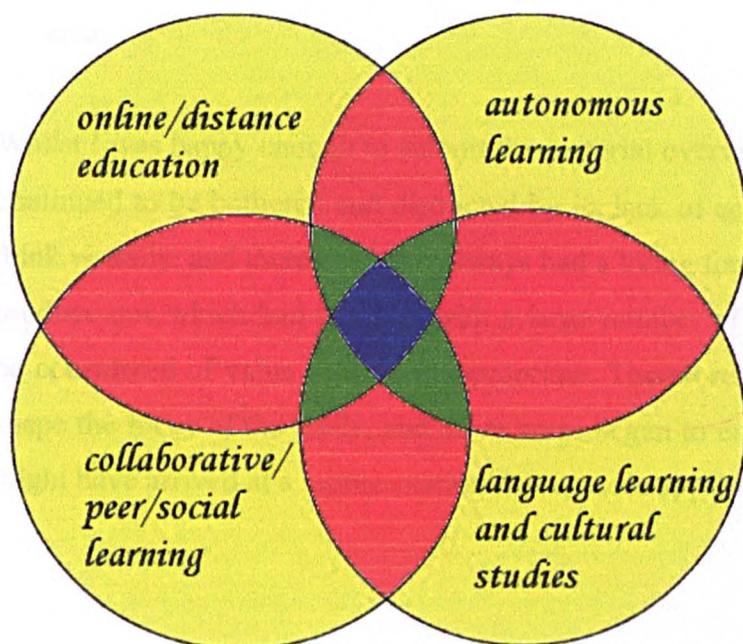


Figure 3.1: Pictorial overview of related substantive literatures

The argument at the time was that my study was located within the blue area, where language learning, cultural studies, collaborative learning, autonomous learning and online education meet. My concerns began with the fact that the pictorial overview failed to mention facilitation explicitly, although that aspect, being the overlying one, would be explored in each of the other areas. There were, however, further errors in the representation:

- The graphic fails to display accurately the possibility of opposite areas of the spectrum sharing literature without involving one of the other two fields.
- Researchers in their respective fields would argue vehemently that online and distance education form two disparate areas, and should not be combined - the same can be said for language learning and cultural studies (which is actually maintained as a joint field below, due to the many related literatures), or indeed collaborative and peer learning.
- Certain aspects that enter the study, such as the construction of knowledge in any of the relevant areas, and motivation, are not depicted at all; however, these should be taken into account as appropriate, as sub-fields within the broader areas.

Whilst I was happy enough to submit the pictorial overview above for the upgrade, I continued to be bothered and distracted by its lack of coherence and applicability. I think visually, and therefore have always had a liking for graphic representations. To produce one which had to come with a large number of disclaimers before it could be considered of value seemed inappropriate. Therefore, as my fieldwork helped to shape the focus of the study, and more areas began to emerge, in May 2005, I felt I might have arrived at a representation that is more applicable to the study.

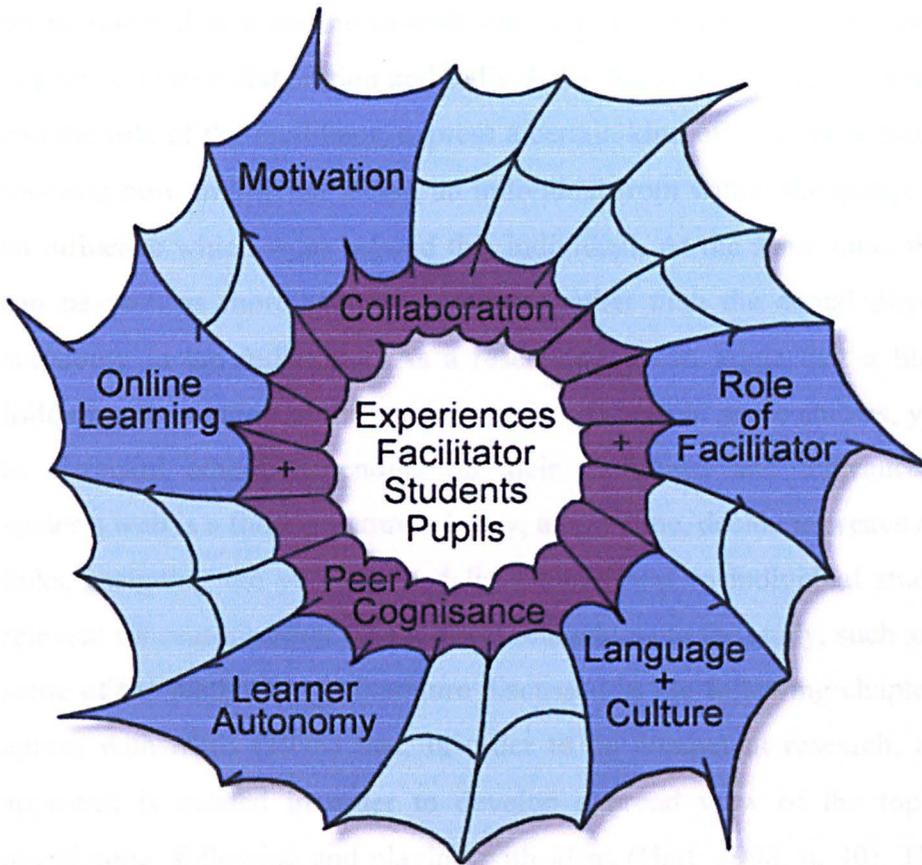


Figure 3.2: The spider's web of literature

Still related to the original graphic in that there is a definite central focus, this focus has now been identified as the experiences of all participants, rather than a nameless area of overlaps. This focus is important to me, as I see myself to be working with people and for people. In my mind, they should remain the focus at all times. Surrounding the people of the study is a ring of collaboration and peer cognisance, effectively illustrating that nobody is an island. From a more academic point of view, the graphic represents Wenger's (1998) concept of Communities of Practice, the way in which we are all shaped by the goals, concerns, and attitudes of both ourselves and the communities we are part of. The ways we work, live and study together link us to the outside world. In this context, the blue areas could be said to illustrate these outside influences, based on pre-conceived notions regarding the related areas depicted there.

Finally, there are a number of related topics in the blue areas – all of which are interconnected to form the overall structure of the spider’s web, and all of which impact on both collaboration and individuals. Some areas, such as learner autonomy and the role of the facilitator, express a certain kind of ‘split personality syndrome’, showing how an internal factor, an individual from within the group, may have had an influence which went beyond this individual. At the same time, these two areas can be seen as more abstract concepts, rather than the actual display of learner autonomy in the individual. As a researcher, I can argue that a literature review following the outline of this spider’s web may ‘catch’ some studies, yet may choose to disregard others, depending on their usefulness and relevance. Similarly, a spider’s web is a fluid structure – I may, at any time, decide to weave and create new links, assigning the yet unnamed light blue areas to individual studies which are relevant for reasons other than a direct relatedness to the study, such as, for example, some of the methodology literature discussed in the following chapter. Hart (1998) agrees with Mills (1978) that, in order to do competent research, an imaginative approach is needed in order to develop a broad view of the topic, as well as questioning, following and playing with ideas (Hart, 1998, p. 30). The structure of the spider’s web allows for this concept to be put into practice.

Regarding the inclusion of particular studies or authors, I followed Slavin’s concept of ‘Best Evidence Synthesis’ (Slavin, 1986 and Slavin, 1995), which states that ‘the most important principle of inclusion must be germaneness to the issue at hand’ (1995, p. 13). It was this approach that helped make the literature review manageable, as it allowed me to be selective. Documents might therefore be included due to the concepts discussed (e.g. Wenger, 1998; Boud, 1988b), their input towards a historical overview (e.g. Ostwald 1982), their practical ideas (e.g. Palloff and Pratt, 1999 and 2005; Falchikov 2001), issues raised in related studies (e.g. Chan, 2001; Luckin, 2003) or their methodological value (e.g. Richardson, 1997; Stake, 2000; van Maanen, 1988).

Having given myself the hypothetical option to weave, connect and select my literature in an almost uncountable number of fashions, I nevertheless have to abide by a paper-bound form of representation for the purpose of introducing the literature to the reader. Rather than following any of the actual topic areas depicted above in a

prescriptive way, I have chosen to represent the literature according to a more fluid fashion, which I hope will make clear some of the connections I have mentioned above. Therefore, the structure of the literature review will be as follows:

- A section on the literature surrounding experiential and reflective learning. As this area includes references to learners taking responsibility for their own learning, this section will also look at some of the principles of learner autonomy.
- In my opinion (and that of other authors, as the literature will show), increased learner autonomy and greater input into one's own learning can lead to increased motivation, therefore, the second section will illustrate some of these links, and highlight issues surrounding motivation through a discussion of intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation, including the motivation provided by using ICT and by working with and being responsible for other people.
- Following on from this, the third section picks up the thread of collaboration in more detail, and will also return to the idea of learner autonomy, namely by looking at the extent to which learner autonomy is or could be a prerequisite for collaboration or indeed 'peer cognisance'.
- Finally, the fourth section looks at the role of the facilitator in all of the above, concentrating in turn on the facilitation of learner autonomy, facilitation in an online learning environment, facilitation with younger learners, and facilitation of collaboration.

These four sections will be followed by a conclusion, and the literature will be discussed further in chapter 8, following the three evaluation chapters, in order to tie the data to the literature.

Throughout the literature review, I will adhere to the view that all participants were learners in this project, and that the people stand in the centre of not only the

pictorial overview above, but the study itself, making it 'learner-centred' in the very sense of the word.

### **3.2 *Autonomy, Experience and Reflection***

I had not originally thought to combine the terms 'experiential' and 'reflective' learning in one section of the literature review, feeling, as Moon (2004) explains, that 'while the meanings are clearly inter-linked, their actual relationship is not obvious' (p. 73). From the outset, I had the feeling that I wanted learners to collaborate, and that I wanted them to reflect upon their experiences in order to find out for themselves how their learning could be improved, bringing learner autonomy into the equation. Interestingly, Moon (ibid.) states that 'both [reflective and experiential learning] are forms of learning that are relatively independent of mediation' (p. 74), and she cites Laurillard's (1993) use of the term 'mediated learning' to mean any situation when learning is aided by another person or through the use of a medium that simplifies the material of teaching. So where does my idea of the facilitation of reflective learning and reflective collaboration come in? With the best will in the world, I feel I cannot claim to have given any participants in the study an unmediated learning experience, and I also do not feel that this would have been particularly beneficial to the motivation and/or participation of the students. Moon (2004) arrives in agreement to this, explaining that

*a defining characteristic of reflective and experiential learning in formal learning situations is that there is relatively little direct mediation. It is not possible to say that there is none because there is usually some level of stated purpose to activities in formal education' (p. 78).*

Before committing myself to saying to what extent the learning that took place during my study was experiential, reflective, or indeed mediated or facilitated, it is worth noting that, once more, the concepts of experiential learning, reflective learning, and learner autonomy seem to be inextricably linked, warranting some time spent on each of these areas in turn, before attempting to arrive at a working definition of learner autonomy that may be used for this study.

### 3.2.1 Experiential Learning

I propose to interpret the term 'experiential learning' as relating to both 'learning by doing' (Dennison and Kirk, 1990; Hutton, 1989) and 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991), as well as reflecting on experience and learning from this reflection (Boud and Walker, 1993; Schön, 1987). As such, although the second part of this section of the literature review deals with the concept of reflective learning, I feel it is impossible to dissociate one from the other completely, although it seems to me more appropriate to discuss reflective learning without touching on experiential learning than it is the other way round, which is why this section will occasionally span both sectors.

Dennison and Kirk (1990) specify that the starting point of experiential learning 'is the amalgam of experiences, expectations and attributes of the students combined with the qualities of the tutor and the materials introduced' (p. 14). In line with my study, they state that the main focus within the concept of experiential learning is the learners themselves (p. 15), and that 'often the processes of learning ought to be more significant than the topic' (*ibid*). Throughout this study, I have felt occasionally the need to justify why I, as a linguist, am not primarily interested in the way my study improved the language levels of my participants, but rather in their experiences, so that ultimately, by improving this experience, I might improve their subject knowledge. Kirk and Dennison agree with this stance, arriving at the statement that a balance between topic and process needs to be found.

Usher (1993) points out the differences between learning from experience (a daily, unstructured occurrence) and experiential learning, which he defines as 'a key element of a discourse which has this everyday process as its 'subject'" (p. 169). This discourse is, of course, the product of reflection, strengthening the already stressed link between experiential and reflective learning. Wildemeersch (1989) argues that the pursuit of independent learning has led to a neglect of the 'central dimension of learning' (p. 60) – dialogue and conversation. If, of course, independent learning is regarded as an isolated pursuit of knowledge, then the art of discourse and dialogue would surely be lost. If, on the other hand, learner autonomy is seen as a step towards collaboration, or indeed part of a mutually influential relationship between

learner autonomy and collaboration, as this thesis seeks to show, then a discussion surrounding the concepts and experiences around independent learning is not only possible, but a vital component in achieving the overall goal.

Boud and Walker (1993) further indicate that this discussion or communication, if it is to be used for a more widely applicable learning process, must be at a linguistic level where it can be understood by outsiders. If, as part of my research, therefore, I am seeking to explore my participants' (and my own) experiences throughout the project, then I must facilitate not only the project itself, but a resulting discussion about the project which gives me the information to outline said experiences (of students, pupils, and myself) to third parties completely uninvolved in the research process. As such, my role is dual – as facilitator, my own experiences are subject to reflection and portrayal, as much as the students' and pupils', yet, as a researcher, I must find ways to stand back and find exactly this form of portrayal which will make the study useful for others. Boud and Walker (*ibid*) have identified several stages to facilitate the discussion related to experiential learning, namely

- *return to experience [and considering what was significant];*
- *attending to feelings [relating to the experience];*
- *re-evaluation [in light of these feelings];*
- *association [linking with previous experience and learning]*
- *integration [of new experiences with those that went before them]*
- *validation and*
- *appropriation ['making the learning our own']*

*(Boud and Walker, 1993, p. 73)*

Boud and Walker point out that relating the discussion involving experiential learning is difficult for those caught up in the experience, and throughout the study, I have encountered problems similar to them, such as simply assuming others would understand links that were obvious to myself. I thus found it heartening to read such honest accounts of research processes, for, as Dennison and Kirk (1990) point out, 'experiential learning is bound to seem a messy business' (p. 7).

The stages outlined above, to me, argue for a learning cycle – as a practitioner, I like knowledge to have an application, for learning to have an impact. As much as I wanted my participants to experience an online collaborative project, I also wanted

them to reflect upon it, decide what went well and what did not, and then to have the opportunity to see whether these changes would have improved the experience. For this reason, the study was divided into several shorter projects, each supported by both interim and post-event evaluation and reflection – this is further discussed in the section on facilitation below.

Providing a further link between experiential and reflective learning, Kenny *et al* (2000) discuss the necessity for reflection as part of experiential learning in order to:

- *make experience significant*
- *[...] identify strengths and development of learning needs; and*
- *establish a meaningful basis for further self and/or community development* (p. 116)

Kenny *et al* support the argument introduced above, namely that communication and discussion are the basis of learning from experience, and that reflection underlines that communication. Although situated in the field of adult education, I have no hesitation to expand their argument into the school environment. Again from the point of view of adult – or, in this case, higher education – Edwards *et al* (2000) point out the power of modelling as part of the teaching and learning process. This approach certainly had an impact on the study, and all participants were aware that my research centred around the experiences of all participants, including myself. Modelling was further utilised when it came to evaluating the study, and the students received an excerpt from my research diary (see appendix 4) to encourage them to think along a more narrative format, rather than aiming to answer set questions. The practice modelled by Edwards *et al* included the attempt to show:

- *a team approach;*
- *valuing and catering for the individual learner;*
- *taking advantage of a range of teaching approaches – not just new technologies;*
- *ensuring that we always had a clear rationale for our activities [...];*
- *letting students know that we were taking risks;*
- *providing students with direct experience of learning using new teaching approaches and technologies [...]* (p. 150).

To a certain extent, Edwards *et al*'s ambitions translate to the context of this study – the team approach between facilitators (myself and school staff) was hampered by illness and misunderstandings (see chapter 7), and I am not certain to what extent the pupils felt that the project was 'risky'; in reality, the school who supported the study showed great trust in allowing a considerable amount of time for a project that was facilitated by an outsider, although it was always clear that the tasks should and would be applicable to the curriculum (for a short outline of tasks aligned with technical, language/culture and collaborative skills, see appendix 10). It was certainly the learner-centeredness that I felt to be most important in the study, allowing pupils to choose their peers and their tasks, and, indeed, to gain 'direct experience of learning' through the online exchange with students abroad.

The student-centred approach outlined by Edwards *et al* is supplemented by aspects of the emancipatory paradigm, as supported by Watson and West (2003), although this study does not claim to engage in detail with the socio-political background of emancipatory research or critical theory. Watson and West argue that the traditional tutor/tutee relationship may prevent students from reaching their full potential, and point out the need of an empowering approach to education, giving students the chance to experience learning situations that will be more comparable to real life as members of society. This, of course, dovetails with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning – if learners are to feel that their experience is worthwhile, they need to be exposed to an empowering philosophy, and encouraged that their experiences are not only worthwhile in and of themselves, but that they form a vital contribution to a learning community or society.

At the basis of all theories outlined above lie two related approaches – one concentrating on the reflection on learning and experience, which will be discussed in the following section. The other one regards the careful facilitation of learning situations to enable learners to gain the most possible benefit from their learning experience. This argument will be explored in detail below, in section 3.5.

### 3.2.2 Reflective Learning

As well as encouraging the participants to reflect on their experiences, I saw myself as very much the learning facilitator, with my own experiences to contemplate. It is for this reason that the main forms of data gathering – the narrative from the students, the focus group discussions from the pupils, and the written diary from myself – reflect an approach through which I hoped to gain the most reflective and experiential input, rather than adopting a more quantitative method, or trying to ‘streamline’ all three learner groups into the same method. It would be foolish to assume that all participants in the study reflected in the same manner, considering the expectations, experiences, and time constraints involved for the various participant groups. I therefore feel I ought to differentiate between ‘reflection’ – the review of processes and behaviour, which is what students and pupils of the study engaged in – and ‘reflexivity’, a more critical, probing engagement with the topic, behaviours, thought processes and participants involved, which was my personal approach and learning experience throughout the study. As we were all involved as participants, however, this section of the literature review will look at both these terms within context. Macbeth (2001) points out that 'by most accounts, reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself' (p. 35). If the 'author' is considered to be the author of reflection, i.e. the person at the centre of the reflective/reflexive process, then Macbeth's argument concludes that the centre of the reflective/reflexive process is the individual in relation to immediate others and the wider social context, articulated through language. McAdams (1997) argues that people create an identity through narrative, thus making narrative the obvious choice for the data collection in a study which seeks to encourage learners to find for themselves better ways through which to learn and collaborate. Reflexivity and reflection as a research method are further discussed in chapter 4. The idea of reflexivity through narrative is supported by Moon (1999), who states that we reflect in order to

- consider the process of our own learning
- critically review something
- build theory from observations

- engage in personal or self-development
- make decisions or resolve uncertainty
- empower or emancipate ourselves as individuals
- empower or emancipate ourselves within the context of our social groups.

*adapted from Moon, 1999, p. 23*

Once more, the connection between the self and others is highlighted, here in Moon's final point. In line with my argument that a certain amount of autonomy may be necessary in order to collaborate successfully, Moon lists the empowerment of the individual before the empowerment of the self as part of the social group. In order to explore the concept of learner autonomy more fully, a substantial part of this section is dedicated to that purpose (see section 3.2.3).

For me, reflection forms a considerable part of the link between deep and surface learning (Weigel, 2002). Entwistle (2001) categorises the differences between the two as follows:

<b><i>Attributes of Deep Learning</i></b>	<b><i>Attributes of Surface Learning</i></b>
<i>Learners relate ideas to previous knowledge and experience.</i>	<i>Learners treat the course as unrelated bits of knowledge.</i>
<i>Learners look for patterns and underlying principles.</i>	<i>Learners memorize facts and carry out procedures routinely.</i>
<i>Learners check evidence and relate it to conclusions.</i>	<i>Learners find difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented.</i>
<i>Learners examine logic and argument cautiously and critically.</i>	<i>Learners see little value or meaning in either course or tasks.</i>
<i>Learners are aware of the understanding that develops while learning.</i>	<i>Learners study without reflecting on either purpose or strategy.</i>
<i>Learners become actively interested in the course content</i>	<i>Learners feel undue pressure and worry about work.</i>

*(Adapted from Entwistle, 2001, in Weigel, 2002)*

*Table 3.1: Deep Learning and Surface Learning attributes*

What Entwistle lists under 'surface learning' actually outlines many characteristics of formal or school-based learning, where, due to curricular constraints, the needs for streamlining, the stressed teachers, the lack of facilities, and the large class sizes too often force the adoption of a surface learning approach. Many (if not all) of the items in Entwistle's left-hand column require reflection, and one purpose of the study was to facilitate the deep learning Entwistle advocates.

Entwistle's attributes outline clearly the advantages of reflection for the individual's learning process. In line with the context of the study, however, I would further like to consider the idea that reflection might also enhance the collective learning process of a group, through discourse. Any form of reflection, I would argue, requires at least some form of language, and if this reflection is actually voiced – whether through the written or the spoken word – and subsequently shared, discussed, probed and, where necessary, adapted, it can then be a powerful tool for the support of the learning process, particularly if facilitated and practised over an extended period of time. Maranhão (1991) points out that 'reflection is not an idle function of thought, but is indispensable for the subject as self to participate in dialogue with another subject as other' (p. 236). Although I am not happy to subscribe to the idea of 'subjects' in my research (as this implies they were 'subjected' to a study, rather than having at least an element of choice), I agree with Maranhão that reflection and dialogue together form a major part of any research process, although he also argues that 'the medium of communication does not serve to characterize the noumenal activity of dialogue and of reflection' (*ibid*). Unlike him, though, I am quite happy to leave this argument with the thought that, in my opinion, there can be no noumenal activity of dialogue and reflection, as such agreeing with Kant (1790) that the noumenon ('das Ding an sich' – the thing in itself outside of and independent from an observer's perception) does not exist, particularly with regard to my study, and that in studying learners' reflections, I am dealing with phenomena, not noumena, so that the medium of communication to me appears to form an adequate part of the research process.

In psychology literature, reflection is linked to the idea of consciousness, and thus the concept of self and personality (Hjelle and Ziegler, 1976), further supporting the argument that reflection in and of itself cannot be independent of interpretation. If, as discussed above, reflection is in turn related to language and the ability to express oneself linguistically, then it would be reasonable to assume that the ability for reflection might be linked to language. Therefore younger learners would have to be facilitated more carefully in order to engage in the thinking processes which support critical reflection. Fisher (1990) argues that traditional schooling does little to support the 'art' of thinking, yet he argues that children much younger than those

involved in my study can be encouraged and facilitated to think and reflect both critically and creatively. Wood (1998) agrees with this, but points out that children will need to have reached a certain intellectual level in their development before they are capable of the cognitive processes which facilitate reflection.

Wood (*ibid*) argues that the development in children between the ages of 11 and 13 forms a critical stage for the reflective process. As not all children mature in parallel, however, it is worth noting that the stages of development among the children involved in the study (who were largely 13 years old at the start of the project) were potentially differing widely. This, in conjunction with other predispositions toward learning through ICT, collaborative learning, learner autonomy, and language learning, would argue for a sample of individuals, and further for a way of gathering and evaluating the data that would allow these individual experiences to shine through.

Much of the literature surrounding reflexivity is in fact concerned with writing reflectively (MacLeod and Cowieson, 2001; Janesick, 1999; Krishnan and Hwee Hoon, 2002), underlining again both the concept that reflection will benefit from some form of structure – by voicing our thoughts in writing, we are forced to engage with content, structure, and history – but also pointing out the advantages of reflection through writing with younger learners. In the study, all participants engaged in reflection through writing, although, in line with the argument above, different approaches were implemented depending on the extent to which I perceived participants to be able to reflect independently. Although I cannot argue that my blanket approach (having all learners within one group – students, pupils, and myself – reflect in the same manner) was necessarily in line with their actual capacity for reflection, the approach allowed for manageable data. Therefore, pupils followed a stricter framework with detailed questions (Fisher, 1990), whereas students received only a brief example of a reflective narrative (see appendix 4).

My own reflexivity centred around two concepts – on the one hand, I saw myself as a learner, a participant in the research process. On the other, of course, I was (and am) the researcher, thus functioning as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987). As such, I occupied a dual space, with dual responsibilities, dual reflections, and, at

times, dual frustrations. This duality was impossible to separate, and my research journal doubled as my learning diary. Whilst this approach fits in well with my own perception of myself as a lifelong learner, reflection also allowed me to keep track of the multiple issues surrounding the research process, particularly in an online environment (Towndrow, 2004). Towndrow's article highlights the practitioner's need for reflection as being different from that of the theoretician, and I often found myself driven by the practicalities of research and the intent to improve my abilities as a facilitator, rather than by an urge to draw up complex theories and underlying principles which had little immediate value. Whilst I was therefore aware of the need for metacognition and critical analysis (Weigel, 2002) throughout the research process, I was often overtaken by research events, meaning that the cyclical approach of the research not only allowed students and pupils to implement their reflections from prior tasks, but also allowed myself the time to review, analyse, and apply new facilitating strategies.

The concepts surrounding facilitation are further discussed in the final section of this literature review (see section 3.5); however, in order to understand how the study built on learner autonomy in order to foster collaboration, I feel it necessary to devote a sub-section to the concept of learner autonomy in general, and how it applies to this study.

### **3.2.3 The concept of learner autonomy**

I have refrained from assigning the concept of learner autonomy its own entire section, as I felt it to be an issue which connected with each of the other main areas, impregnating concepts and frequently seeing it as a pre-requisite, as will become obvious during the section on collaboration below. Furthermore, although there is a distinct field of literature related to learner autonomy in language learning, I have chosen to cover this point in section 3.4.6, which links autonomy and collaboration. In order to be able to tie the concept of learner autonomy to the relevant sections, however, some space should be dedicated to a working definition of autonomy as it relates to this study. As the term 'autonomy' refers in fact to an entire philosophical (and political) area, (Ameriks, 2000), defining the term within the context of this

thesis is vital for a shared understanding of the study. The term takes its origin from the Greek *αὐτονομία*, which first described Athenian democracy in 5<sup>th</sup> C BC (Ostwald, 1982). Ostwald points out that, in Greek politics, the concept of autonomy refers to interstate relationships, and in particular the weaker state, which seeks 'autonomy' from the stronger one. Today, I feel, the term is used frequently without deliberate recognition of the idea that, in order to facilitate autonomy, there needs to be in place a power structure which includes a weaker and a stronger element. One reason why we have to contemplate the ways and means to create autonomous learners in the first place is that the original power structure between teacher and pupil does not lend itself to a balanced working relationship, and I found this to be true in both studies completed for this thesis – an almost inherent willingness to defer to the perceived 'stronger' element, i.e. myself as the researcher, instigator, motivator, grown-up, and facilitator.

Although I find the origin of the term of importance to the study, I do not believe that a detailed account of the philosophical movements towards autonomy under Kant (Ameriks, 2000) and Hegel (Blackham, 1978) are of particular relevance; instead, I would like to highlight the approximate time when 'autonomy' became 'learner autonomy', thus entering the field of education as a dedicated concept.

Gleason (1967) reports on a conference on independent learning held in 1965, and states that

*Recent insights from the behavioural sciences have expanded our conceptions of human potential through a recasting of the image of man – from a passive, reactive recipient to an active, autonomous, and reflective being. [...] Educators are giving increased attention to implementing in practice the recognition that the learner has both the capacity and the need to assume responsibility for his [sic] own continued learning (p. v).*

Presenting itself as an innovative venture (though taking into account previous, often unrecognised work in the field), the conference included speakers from the fields of 'philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, instructional technology, and education' (*ibid.*), in order to explore the concept of autonomy in the area of education. The conference linked learner autonomy to a number of theoretical and

research bases, namely personality theory, motivational theory, socio-anthropological theory, and formal learning theory. In returning to the structure and layout of this chapter, it could be argued that, by highlighting the learners' experiences, motivations, collaborative learning issues and facilitation, the theories highlighted by the conference held in 1965 seem to have endured. I was particularly interested to find that the conference stresses the use of technology to foster independent learning (Gleason, 1967, p. 65), albeit in an obviously far less advanced form. The link between technology and autonomy recurs in Boud (1988a), and I believe that the fact that both concepts (in relation to education) evolved in approximately the same space of time (i.e. the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) goes some way towards explaining how links between autonomy and technology were established, particularly as the early days saw technology and its potential in a slightly science-fiction based manner.

As well as highlighting links between technology and autonomy, Boud (1988b) also offers a description of three aspects of autonomy, as they relate to education, illustrating that

*philosophers of education have dominated discussions of autonomy as a goal for education, innovative teachers have influenced practices which aim to give students responsibility for what and how they learn, and researchers interested in student learning have recently begun to consider the structure of knowledge in different disciplinary areas and how students need to exercise autonomy in coming to understand and utilize this knowledge (p. 17).*

At the time of writing, Boud criticises the lack of 'cross-fertilization' between the groups involved; however, I believe that in the nearly 20 years since the second edition of the book, some inroads have been made to combine at least the areas of research and practice, if not philosophy, thanks to Boud's own work and other authors in the field (Boud, 1988a, 1988b, Boud and Walker, 1993; Chan, 2001).

Blackham (1978) discusses the concept of personal autonomy in education from a perspective which encompasses the whole pupil. Acknowledging the link to political autonomy, he describes personal autonomy as follows:

*Autonomy comes about when an agent, aware of many, not all, of the conditions and causes which influence his [sic] life and behaviour, introduces among them influences which he does initiate (ends, purposes, beliefs, ideals, which he forms or adopts), and which then exert a restraining, organizing, originating, directing influence on his conduct, so that he feels with some justification that he is acting on his own in pursuit of his own ends (p. 27f.)*

Blackham's (rather lengthy) definition is interesting in that it includes disclaimers and justifiers – 'aware of many, not all', 'with some justification' – in Blackham's eyes, autonomy is not, and can never be, absolute, and I believe this to be of particular relevance to the educational context pertaining to this study. Burbules and Berk (1999), in the context of higher education, argue for a notion of criticality, encouraging learners to question concepts, statements and findings. Other authors seek to establish a link between critical theory, via concepts of domination, self-knowledge, learner-centeredness and empowerment (Bernstein, 1995; Young, 1991), and learner autonomy (Winch, 2005). Although all participants in both studies had the liberty to choose their own topics for discussion and collaboration, the framework was such that this choice was self-limiting, and of course, for the pupils in Study B at least, participation itself was not by choice, but enforced. Furthermore, I believe (as outlined in the section on reflexivity), that the timeframe involved did not allow pupils and students to engage in an extensive critical thought process regarding aspects of empowerment through learner autonomy. Blackham's (1978) discussion, however, ties autonomy into a framework of personal development, and interestingly, the pupils who were most successful in working independently and collaboratively in the main study were those who acknowledged the need for facilitation, thus deliberately relinquishing autonomy when they felt guidance was more appropriate. This, in itself, is of course an autonomous decision – as Blackham (*ibid*) states:

*personal autonomy implies a coming to terms with oneself [...]. Mere rebellion, wilful self-assertion, the rejection or usurpation of authority, defiantly doing one's own thing, does not amount to autonomy [...] (p. 29).*

Although I am quite content in agreeing with Blackham that autonomy, at least in the classroom, is always directed and never absolute, Boud (1988b, p. 19) states that 'the autonomous person must be free not only from direction by others external to

himself, but also from his or her own inner compulsions and rigidities'. Determining autonomy by such factors, I would argue, is not only Utopian, but also casts an interesting light on the links between autonomy and motivation (Spratt, Humphreys and Chan, 2002; van Lier, 1996), for what is motivation, if not a compulsion, whether intrinsic or extrinsic? This argues for a critical reflection on the concept of autonomy, and, as stated above, I am not certain to what extent the thought processes the pupils engaged in bridged the gap between 'reflection' and 'reflexivity', I do believe, however, that the findings (see chapter 6) show an awareness of the context – including aspects on autonomy – within which the pupils' collaboration took place. The concepts related to motivation will be further discussed below (see section 3.3), whereas this section will continue to explore the idea of autonomy in the educational context.

Another definition from the early days of learner autonomy is described by Moore (1973), who simply states that autonomy is 'the separation of teachers at the time of teaching from learners at the time of learning' (p. 663). Obviously more related to distance education and 'learner independence' than learner autonomy, I feel this definition has been sufficiently surpassed by current concepts so as not to warrant detailed engagement with the idea, although further links to online and distance education will be made in other sections of this chapter (see 3.3.5, 3.4.3 and 3.5.4).

Whereas Boud (1988b) sees autonomy as encompassing three groups of educational ideas, Noom *et al* (2001) instead distinguish between attitudinal, emotional, and functional autonomy in adolescents, defining the cognitive process of choosing a goal, the confidence in this process, and the ability to strategise in order to achieve said goal respectively. Interestingly, Noom *et al* emphasise that emotional autonomy includes the detachment from peer pressure and the influence of parental opinions (p. 581), which translates to this study due to the close collaboration between individual participants, which could easily influence single pupils to simply agree with more dominant group members, rather than negotiating topics and strategies. Whilst I am not necessarily in agreement with Noom *et al*'s attempts to measure the achievement of autonomy quantitatively, I am happy to subscribe to their three different aspects of autonomy, although they fail to mention that their three aspects

seem to be interrelated to such an extent that they have to be achieved in a certain order and to a certain level in order for the individual to reach autonomy.

In trying to identify a workable definition for learner autonomy as it pertains to this study, then, learners would be expected to take charge of their own learning within the given framework, to identify goals both at an individual and a collaborative level, and to negotiate within their group of peers the strategies needed to achieve this goal. As Flavell, Miller and Miller (1977) explain,

*[i]n social relationships minds influence each other; they persuade, agree, disagree, empathize, collaborate, coconstruct, and share knowledge. A child cannot easily think about human relationships until she realizes that people can think about each others' thoughts.*

*Flavell, Miller and Miller, 1977, pp. 224-225*

This 'thinking about other people's thoughts', i.e. an awareness of others' needs, and to implement these with one's own, particularly within an existing framework (such as a set task or curriculum) requires a substantial amount of cognitive development and self-determination. Chan (2001) argues that such a degree of self-determination presupposes the knowledge of 'what needs to be learnt and why' (p. 506). In a true case of a 'snake biting its tail', the knowledge of what needs to be learnt is rarely self-determined or free from outside influences, instead, it is negotiated (particularly in the school context) by adults far removed from the child's perspective, and reasons given are usually those which are deemed important by external factors, not necessarily the learners themselves.

### **3.2.4 Section conclusion – a definition of learner autonomy**

Before going on to discussing the other areas of this literature review, I feel it is important to arrive at and outline a definition of learner autonomy as it relates to this study. With all the relevant sub-contexts from other areas, it relies on no less than four identifying principles, namely:

The *freedom* to engage with and reflect upon the learning goals provided by the curriculum – this aspect relates to underlying power structures, showing that learner autonomy needs to be both granted and facilitated. Once this is given, learners need to have or develop the *ability* to plan and implement strategies necessary to achieve these goals. This principle, in turn, goes hand in hand with not only the *willingness* to engage in such strategies, but also the willingness to seek and accept help where necessary, as such displaying the *confidence* to share weaknesses, shortcomings, ideas, dreams, and goals. In my own definition, and within the context of this study, learner autonomy is granted, pursued and facilitated in a mutual relationship between teacher/facilitator and the learner, resolutely locating learner autonomy within the context of social and collaborative learning.

Much of the literature cited so far points to the fact that autonomy is not so much an inherent state of being, instead a fluctuating scale of factors determined by circumstances, outside influences, the individual's readiness for autonomy (Chan, 2001), and the balance of the power structure in place, i.e. the extent to which the person in power (the teacher) is willing to facilitate and encourage autonomy. This final point is echoed almost exactly by van Lier (1996, citing Deci and Ryan, 1992). His point, though, is linked to intrinsic motivation – 'the differentiation of intrinsic motivation depends on [...] the degree to which the social context is supportive of autonomy versus controlling behaviour' (p. 118). The authors therefore present here the other areas I have chosen to highlight in this literature review, namely motivation, collaboration (the 'social context') and facilitation ('controlling behaviour'). The way in which the authors write about these issues shows that they are highly interconnected subjects, as illustrated by the spider's web, and this interconnectedness will make it necessary to refer to most of the areas at some point in any of the sections.

Having arrived at a working definition of learner autonomy, the following section concentrates on literature surrounding a further major aspect of my research – motivation.

### **3.3 Motivation**

Like so many of the areas in this literature review, researching concepts of motivation led me to the field of psychology for many of the theoretical aspects, then back to education (via educational psychology) for more practical approaches. This thesis does not claim a background in psychology, nor am I, by any stretch of the imagination, a psychologist. Taking into account the origins of motivation in teaching and learning, however, seems important for the greater picture, therefore, this section will delve briefly into the philosophy and psychology of motivation, before concentrating on its applicability and use in education, including language learning. Further subsections will look at motivation as it relates to the use of ICT and online learning, and finally, how collaboration might increase learner motivation.

#### **3.3.1 'Because it pleases me' – the early days of motivation**

In theory, common sense would dictate that motivation is related to and follows from reflection – in stating my goals to myself, I contemplate what effort I must put in to achieve said goal, and whether the achievement will be worth the effort, thus increasing or decreasing my motivation to proceed. This is somewhat supported by early concepts of motivation, which can be linked back to Freud's 'Pleasure Principle'. This, as Peters (1958) explains, revolves around

*the assumption [...] that the reason why men eat, sleep, eliminate, and so on, is that achieving such goals relieves tension, restores equilibrium, produces satisfaction, and other such variations on a theme (p. 22).*

As a further originator of motivational theory along similar lines, Swezey *et al* (1994) cite Epicurus, the Greek philosopher (c. 341-271 BCE), who stated that 'people are motivated to seek pleasure and avoid pain' (Swezey *et al*, p. 141). Peters (*ibid*), however, argues that the pleasure principle is faulty, largely because, as he explains, the concept of pleasure is rarely identified as 'some extra subsequent state of mind which we have become aware of by introspection'. Peters claims that 'satisfaction' often refers to the simple *absence* of boredom, irritation, or distraction, and states that there is a tremendous difference between the justification of an

activity ('because it satisfies me') and the idea that this is also the 'apex of explanation' (p. 23), which it is not, or not always. This, of course, leaves open to debate for just what situations the justification of satisfaction might suffice as an explanation.

Of course, what Peters refers to in 1958 is today widely recognised as the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, yet I found it fascinating to read a book which, only less than 50 years ago, did not mention terms which are now bandied about by business consultants, teacher trainees, lecturers, practising teachers, and even pupils – although the concept of intrinsic motivation arose around this time (e.g. Berlyne, 1950). Frequently, I believe that those who use these terms today are not entirely aware of what they actually entail, so before going any further, a definition of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation seems to be in order.

### **3.3.2 Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation**

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) description of extrinsic motivation, although cynical, is clear and to the point, and linked to behaviour management. According to Csikszentmihalyi, it is

*based on the tacit belief that people are motivated only by external rewards or by the fear of external punishment. [...] There is no question that this motivational system, evolved by societies over a long period of centuries, is quite effective. By objectifying incentives into money and status, societies have developed a rational, universal motivational system whereby communities can produce desired behaviours predictably and can allot precisely differentiated rewards to construct a complex social hierarchy (p. 2).*

Csikszentmihalyi argues that this extrinsic aspect of motivation is a product of social engineering through time, based on a need for behaviour control. He warns that 'the ease with which external rewards can be used conceals real dangers', and that 'when a teacher discovers that children will work for a grade, he or she may become less concerned with whether the work itself is meaningful or rewarding to students' (p. 3). I agree with Csikszentmihalyi that, by the time children reach secondary school age (i.e. at approximately 11 years of age), many have been conditioned by their school – and potentially home – environment to request

information about what minimum work is required to achieve a certain grade, what exactly needs to be done to gain a star, and to be deeply hurt if, in their perception, a reward has been given out unfairly. At the beginning of the schooling process, however, both intrinsic motivation and self perception appear to be high in most children (Bouffard *et al*, 2003).

Heckhausen and Weiner (1974) explain that 'during the 1920-60 era psychology was dominated by the mechanistic behaviourism of Watson and the neo-behaviourism of Hull and Spence' (p. 49). Their arguments centred around a 'mechanistic psychology' (p. 49) of motivation, where stimulus and reaction were supposedly so interrelated that it would be possible to predict one from knowing the other. In a counter-argument to this era, as well as to Csikszentmihalyi, Glasser (1986) argues that there really is no such thing as extrinsic motivation, as all motivation originates within ourselves. This argument becomes a complex one, because it further develops some of the interlinked ideas of reflection and autonomy. Glasser states that every person is in control of their behaviour, independent of outside stimuli. Whilst this is of course true, and people in general have a choice, for some of these choices, social conventions are so overwhelming that any compulsion not to react to this stimulus is seen not only as antisocial, but, on occasion, as criminal. If we take as an example Glasser's question 'have you [...] ever seriously questioned your belief that you [...] stop your car because a traffic light turns red?' (p. 17), this could be answered in a number of ways: 'Yes, because there was nobody to be seen anywhere', 'No, because a police-man stood right there', 'No, because a little child was crossing the road', 'No, because the law says I must', 'Yes, because I'm aiming to run over that dog'. In line with Glasser's 'control theory', the driver may have the choice or control to stop or not to stop, yet I would still argue that the motivation behind stopping (or not) has an immense influence on this control, and a certain amount of external influence does not seem to be a bad idea.

Of course, decisions in the classroom are frequently less dramatic, and the one aspect to take away from Glasser's theory is that a decision follows 'reflection', i.e. the idea that a motivation should be 'informed', rather than dictated. Deci and Ryan (1992) argue that intrinsic motivation links back to an 'innate psychological need to

be competent' (p. 9). The following section seeks to clarify to which extent researchers have found this to be true in the classroom environment, where behaviour is frequently and deliberately steered towards external rewards.

### **Further motivational concepts**

Motivation in the classroom might be linked to more general motivation (and indeed Deci and Ryan's (1992) statement above), in that, for a young person, the need to be competent, i.e. to achieve, is frequently the highest in the school environment. In the section on collaboration below, Hilleson (1996) talks about the anxieties related to learning a language with other learners. Costanzo *et al* (1992) talk about the balance between undermotivation and overmotivation, as well as a recognition of whether a learner is in fact motivated to achieve, or motivated to avoid failure (p. 215ff). There are therefore distinct and definite links between motivation and achievement, which is also mirrored in the literature (Boggiano and Pittman, 1992).

There have been several studies related to the impact of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation of students. Similar to my own continuum of extrinsic-to-intrinsic goal specification (see chapter 2), Hayamizu (1997) has been working on the identification of interim steps between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Hayamizu points towards the argument between extrinsic motivators either inhibiting (Deci, 1971) or enhancing (Ryan, 1982) intrinsic motivation, and argues for the need of the identification of further steps on the motivational 'ladder'. Her argument is related to more recent findings, where Deci and Ryan (1985) have found that learners still retain a degree of self-determination based on the emphasis which they place on extrinsic motivation, and the extent to which they let themselves be influenced by this. For my study, which largely built on motivation through collaboration, but was forced to employ extrinsically motivating tactics to varying success, these findings are particularly interesting. Deci and Ryan's research led to the identification of four steps of self-determination, namely external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic (Ryan and Connell, 1989). Ryan and Connell point out the difference between an external observer attributing causes for behaviour, and individuals self-determining these, highlighting the difficulty any external researcher will face when making

assumptions about another person's behaviour. This argument is close to my heart and returns to the reason why the participants are at the centre of this study, not only through careful observation, but above all through ensuring they have the opportunity to tell of their experiences in their own words and voices. As well as the already identified 'external' or 'extrinsic', and 'intrinsic' motivation, Ryan and Connell (*ibid*) highlight the concept of 'introjected' motivation, where an individual internalises external influences and assumptions and behaves according to their remit. Whilst this superficially displays an element of choice, the individual will not have fully internalised the values and principles they are behaving in accordance to – this is, in fact, the next step, that of 'identified' motivation.

Taking this four-step model into the classroom, much of the pupils' motivation might, in relation to the definitions above, be introjective rather than extrinsic – there is a tacit agreement that 'a good education' is valuable in life, with or without a more detailed understanding of what each individual pupil might need to achieve their personal goal.

Delving into all motivation theories developed over the past 50 years would go beyond the framework of this thesis, I would, however, like to return to the links between learner autonomy, or self-determination, and motivation, to illustrate further the conceptual framework and basis for the study at hand.

### **3.3.3 Motivation within the context of this study**

In 1987, Deci and Ryan published a joint article that was dedicated to the interrelations between autonomy and behaviour control. They argued that

*autonomy support has generally been associated with more intrinsic motivation, greater interest, less pressure and tension, more creativity, more cognitive flexibility, better conceptual learning, a more positive emotional tone, higher self-esteem, more trust, greater persistence of behaviour change, and better physical and psychological health, than has control (p. 1024).*

In accordance with Hayamizu (1997), Deci and Ryan (*ibid*) argue that rewards tend to be experienced as controlling, thus undermining intrinsic motivation (p.1026). Bandura (1991) argues that motivation can be self-regulated through intrinsic goal-setting. If one is to believe Bouffard *et al*'s (2003) study, however, intrinsic motivation is unrelated to performance, whereas a healthy self-perception is. What, then, should a study such as mine focus on?

In chapter 2, I have argued for a correlation between students' ability to identify focused, intrinsic goals and motivations for their participation, and their willingness to contribute continuously in a manner beneficial to the collaborative environment. Although this correlation has been determined qualitatively, rather than quantitatively, I believe it does not disagree with Bouffard *et al*, instead, it outlines just how closely a learner's self-determination and motivation are linked. As Evans (1989) points out, however, 'even when we can assume some realistic equality of opportunity, there are nevertheless those who seem to achieve more simply because they try harder, persist longer' (p. 113). Although my study does not aim to homogenise the participants, the pupils participating were from one school with a specific catchment area. This hopefully provides – at least to a certain extent – the 'realistic equality of opportunity' Evans mentions, and allowing those who 'try harder [and] persist longer', as well as those who choose not to, to share their motivations and experiences.

A further aspect of motivation my study had to consider was motivation as it relates to the foreign language classroom. This topic has attracted a considerable amount of literature, particularly from the area of English as a Foreign Language. Once more, a substantial part of this area of literature is linked to learner autonomy, due to the self-regulated practices most language learners have to engage in, in order to learn the language in question.

### **3.3.4 Motivation and foreign language learning**

Ushioda (1996) asks a question most pertinent to this study, namely 'how can we help learners to motivate themselves?' (p. 3). This appears to be indeed the crux of the issue, and several researchers have arrived at their own conclusions in this

matter. Gardner (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003) argues for a socioeducational model of second language acquisition, where

*integrativeness and attitudes toward the learning situation are two correlated variables that support the individual's motivation to learn a second language, but that motivation is responsible for achievement in the second language.*

*Gardner and Lambert, 1972, p. 127*

The term 'integrativeness' is directed at a positive attitude toward the speakers of other languages, or, as Gardner and Lambert (1972) explain, 'a willingness or a desire to be like representative members of the "other" language community' (p. 14). Gardner's proposed model is therefore also highly relevant not only to motivation and second language learning, but also to the context of motivation and collaboration, a section which can be found below in this chapter. According to Gardner, a positive attitude toward native speakers and the learning situation are facilitative of motivation, yet it is only through motivation that it can influence second language acquisition. Gardner might therefore go some way toward answering Ushioda's question (how can we help learners to motivate themselves?) – by encouraging a positive attitude toward the learning situation and the sense of 'otherness' it entails. It is for this reason that the study at hand had a high emphasis on cultural aspects, rather than attempting to focus on language only. As such, it aims to entice the participants, in particular the pupils, with the opportunity to find out about a foreign country and culture, 'selling' the language almost as a by-product.

It is my personal belief that one of the reasons for the links between self-motivation and language learning stems from the particular needs and demands of the field. Unlike other subject knowledge, which one might engage with and then retain for future use, and unlike a skill, which one might practise, master, and then use only when necessary, learning a language demands a constant upkeep of practice and dedication. If a language is not used, it quickly atrophies, even if the level of mastery was high to begin with. Dörnyei (1998, in Williams, Burden and Lanvers,

2002) explains the complexity of foreign language learning by stating that language is at the same time

- *a communication coding system that can be taught as a school subject;*
- *an integral part of our individual identity, involved in almost all mental activities;*
- *the most important channel of social organisation embedded in the culture of the community where it is used.*

*Dörnyei, 1998, in Williams, Burden and Lanvers, 2002, p. 506*

Learning a foreign language thus combines the complexity of language with the intricacies of foreign cultures, unknown communities and social structures, and, unfortunately all too frequently, the lack of immediate applicability which occurs if a language is taught out of context and without 'real' practical communication opportunities. This outlines the need for learners to possess a strong sense of self-determination, and a need for teachers and facilitators to instil this sense of self-determination within the learners, knowing well that, once the official learning period ends, any language skills will quickly disappear.

A study by Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) aimed to find out what motivated pupils in Year 7 to Year 9 (11 to 14 year olds) to learn a foreign language. They found a decrease in motivation between the ages of 11 and 14, as pupils grew disenchanted with language lessons, but also a strong indicator that motivation was consistently higher among the female pupils – Chapter 6 will return to this gender issue and compare it with comments from pupils in this study.

They also found a correlation between proficiency and intrinsic motivation, stating that 'students demonstrating high language proficiency were more intrinsically motivated to learn a foreign language than were students functioning at an average or below-average level' (p. 518). This, of course, brings up the question of cause, rather than correlation – are the students more motivated because they are more proficient, or are they more proficient because they are more motivated? This issue is being picked up by Ushioda (1996), who points out that, after initial discussions where motivation was seen as 'a causal variable influencing language learning

outcomes' (p. 10), the process is now seen as more multidirectional, with motivation and proficiency each having both a causal and a resultory role to play.

Rather than trying to identify the definite initiator of this correlation, this study argues for a mutual-causal relationship, where pupils entering from either direction might experience an upward spiral of motivation and proficiency, at least until some pre-determined saturation point might be reached (for example a given 'handicap' or 'gift' toward languages). As Ushioda states:

*Graphs [...] record changes in levels of motivation only. Similarly, the dynamism in the more recent concept of motivation is limited to describe global loss or growth in reaction to learning experience. [...] The concept and the associated theory, however, do little to explain how the relationship between learning experience and motivation might be mediated, so that vicious circles might be broken and positive motivation generated out of negative learning outcomes (p. 10).*

Ushioda raises an interesting point, namely how to break out of any pre-existing vicious circles. It seems comparatively easy to feed positive motivation if it is also rewarded by increased achievement, but how can motivation be maintained, initiated, or even increased if the starting point is one of negative experiences? Without knowing about initial levels of motivation among the pupils, I decided I had to combine as many motivational factors as possible, so the study might appeal to as many individuals as feasible. I therefore reasoned that the study, in its original layout, would appeal to pupils interested in foreign languages, self-directed learning, collaborative learning, and ICT. This literature review has already looked at concepts of learner autonomy and motivation as it relates to language learning, the following two sections deal with motivation as it is related to the use of ICT, and to collaboration respectively.

### **3.3.5 Motivation and ICT/online learning**

Heppell, in the preface to Loveless and Ellis (2001), argues that many adults are in fact incapable of understanding the particular impact and motivation the use of ICT has had on the current generation of school-age children. Too caught up with curriculum demands to appreciate originality, teachers sacrifice their pupils' individuality 'at the altar of uniformity' (p. xviii), afraid to sanction something they

might not be entirely sure of themselves. This view is supported by Papert's (1996) beautiful term of 'cyberostriches' – school policy makers who can only imagine the use of computers within the predetermined, traditional curriculum (p. 25), and refuse to see potential outside this narrow framework. Heppell argues that

*we know that children, faced with a new suite of software tools, constantly push out the envelope – acutely aware of what the 'previous lot' did and anxious to exceed their efforts (ibid).*

Heppell hints at a number of important issues here, which have impact on the motivational 'pull' of ICT for young learners. There seems to be an inherent need among children to see how far things can be taken, without the fear of failure adult learners of ICT are more susceptible to. This perception was supported in a study by Cooper and Brna (2002) with much younger learners at primary school level, where the children's creativity was channelled through the use of the NIMIS project (Networked Interactive Media In Schools). They also found that teacher confidence in the use of ICT had an impact, as this translated across to the children and inspired them to be creative in their use of technology.

Reber (2005) points out that those studies that looked at achievement of learners using ICT, versus those taught by traditional methods, report little if any improvement (citing Voogt and Van den Akker, 2001), yet he warns that 'the use of educational technology may be undervalued if the motivational factors are not assessed' (p. 93). I had similar issues with my second study, where governmental funding meant I was supposed to show the impact the project made on pupils' knowledge of German. Thankfully, measuring the impact on actual improvement is not the purpose of this thesis. Reber (*ibid*) states – within the context of his study, a website designed by students –

*as this activity is a constructive and collaborative form of knowledge acquisition [...], one would predict that students would have more autonomy in pursuing their interests and therefore report more course motivation, even if they do not learn more from this activity than from traditional teaching (p. 93).*

I wholeheartedly agree with him that the pursuit of educational technologies for motivational purposes is a goal which is valuable in and of itself, and that it is short-

sighted to focus exclusively on the direct impact on achievement, without taking the circuitous route via motivation, which might encourage pupils to show more commitment, thus improving learner satisfaction, and potentially achievement, in the long run. What is interesting is that Reber mentions collaboration, autonomy, and motivation, all within the context of ICT, once more highlighting the strength of the web of literature-related links which are pertinent to this study.

Of course, as with any strategy, pedagogy, framework or method, there is no guarantee that one approach will work for all involved. Katz (2002) states that there is a 'psychological suitability' related to the use of ICT, and points out that

*students who held attitudes such as positive self-image, independence in the learning process, self-confidence in the learning process, satisfaction with learning, internal locus of control, level of control of learning, creativity, and motivation for study were significantly more positive towards the use of ICT than students not typified by the same traits (p. 5).*

Interesting about Katz's quote is the idea that students more motivated to study were more suitable for ICT use, whereas other researchers point out how ICT might be particularly suitable to work with disaffected learners or learners with special needs (Franklin, 2001). I do not believe that the two arguments are necessarily mutually exclusive, instead I would argue that they speak for the versatility of the medium, and that success would depend on the particular approach that is taken to support educational technologies.

Huber and Schofield (1998) focus on the gender divide purported to relate to the use of and motivation towards computers. They argue that the way in which girls and women are portrayed by the media support a gender stereotype, where women are seen as 'clerical workers and sex objects', and men as 'managers, experts, technicians, and active "hands-on" roles' (p. 108). Although their study took place in Costa Rica, I feel the argument holds true in the European context as well, although maybe in a slightly less severe form. On the other hand, however, my study could be seen from different angles – either an online study of collaboration, or a study of collaboration through the medium of online communication. Looking at it from the second point of view, Hoskins and van Hooff (2005) have identified several studies

(Arbaugh, 2000; Jackson, Ervin, Gardner and Schmitt, 2001) which show that female learners are more motivated by the concept of online communication than their male counterparts. Their findings are corroborated by this study (see chapter 6). Jackson *et al* (2001) point out that the use of the Internet has 'motivational, affective, and cognitive consequences' (p. 364). They point out that Internet use can either enhance or debilitate social relationships, depending on the individual's disposition towards isolation and withdrawal. Whilst these particular findings might not be immediately relevant to the study itself, Jackson *et al*'s point that women are more communicative online can prove a way forward to redress any technology-related stereotypes, which would advantage the male participants of the study. Although gender was not originally seen to be a particular issue for this study, the fact that all six students were female, and the fact that all groups brought up the issue, means that I will return to the point of gender in chapter 6.

As already pointed out above, the versatility of ICT might serve as a way to find different motivating factors for different participants. Instigating motivation, however, is only half the battle – sustaining it is a different issue, and one which is at least as important as getting that initial 'spark'. Garrison and Anderson (2003) argue that, in an online learning environment,

*while student motivation may initially be high, sustaining this motivation throughout the course of studies will, to a considerable extent, be a function of cohesion and collaboration (p. 80-81).*

Their point acknowledges that motivation can stem from many different directions, and be related to several individual phases of the learning process. Once more, collaboration is flagged up as a vital component of the links between learning, autonomy, and motivation. The following section takes up Garrison and Anderson's point, and looks further into connections between motivation and collaboration.

### **3.3.6 Motivation and collaboration**

As already mentioned above, Gardner's (1985) socioeducational model for second language acquisition takes into account the collaborative nature of language learning, centring around the idea that learning a foreign language is ultimately

aimed at enhancing the communicability of the learner, thus facilitating a social process. As Hilleson (1996) is outlining below, this social process is not automatically encouraging, but may also result in pressures and anxiety. This section aims to highlight the links between motivation and collaboration, before the following section deals with literature surrounding collaboration in much more detail.

Pittman *et al* (1992) propose that interpersonal interactions are characterised by their extrinsic or intrinsic motivational value, i.e. whether or not they entail 'salient rewards that are mediated by, but are not inherent in, the relationship' (p. 39). Their chapter details a study where groups of shy and not-so-shy female undergraduate psychology students were encouraged to engage in a conversation with each other, and were either paid or not. Pittman *et al*'s findings show that the non-shy students were most communicative when there was no reward, whereas the shy students were slightly more communicative when they were being paid; they did, however, spend more time in communication than the non-shy students. Whilst I would find it difficult to actually agree there was no reward for some students (all received credit for their participation), it is the difference between conversation with or without reward in the non-shy students that seems intriguing. Pittman *et al* call this the 'overjustification effect' (p. 42), i.e. the impediment of intrinsic motivation through the introduction of extrinsic values. As already mentioned above, there are those who defend the view that extrinsic and intrinsic motivators may not exist in parallel, and Pittman *et al* subscribe to this theory. In their study, the communication itself was motivating enough, without the need for further emphasis through payment. My study was not in a position to engage in minute detail with the participants' motivation, although the factors of extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation are discussed. I would argue with Pittman *et al*, however, to what extent their payment (1 US\$) was seen as a significant extrinsic motivator by the students, or whether the credit they received was of much more salient value, thus skewing the study.

According to Haslam *et al* (2000), collaborative motivation is strongly linked to a sense of group identity and belonging, indicating the individual's need to see themselves as part of a community. Moreland *et al* (1993) underline this stance by pointing out that, as part of any group socialisation process,

*both the group and the individual engage in an ongoing evaluation of their relationship together [...]. On the basis of these evaluations, feelings of commitment arise between the group and the individual (p. 106).*

Johnson (1999) further argues that the ‘social and intellectual connections’ (p. 40) which result from such a sense of commitment and shared direction, are tantamount to a successful learning community.

I have been struggling to find authors who have commented on inter-group competition – instead, the focus seems to lie with intra-group competition, often as the opposite of collaboration (Wenger, 1998; Wilder, 1993). If several groups find themselves in a comparable situation, however, it is my belief that the sense of belonging members feel toward their respective groups could result in a competitive feeling. This was of course the case for the study outlined in this thesis, and my original plan was to provide a group prize, deliberately encouraging groups to work together more closely by linking rewards to their collaboration. Slavin (1985) mentions the ‘deleterious effect on motivation of evaluation/incentive systems’ (p. 178), linked to cooperative learning methods, and chapter 6 will outline why, in the end, I decided against this path, and also what pupils had to say about the use of prizes as motivators, be it for individuals or groups.

Little (2003), returning to both learner autonomy and language learning, states that ‘there is a two-way relationship between social and metacognitive processes: an effective social dynamic stimulates but is also nourished by appropriate metacognitive activity’ (p. 40). Wenger (1998) supports this, stating that we

*form communities not because we fall short of an ideal of individualism or freedom, but because identification is at the very core of the social nature of our identities and so we define even our individualism in that context (p. 212).*

This argument returns to the recurring connection between autonomy and collaboration, and will be further explored in the section on collaboration below.

### **3.3.7 Section Summary**

Motivation is a widely-used term which is rarely defined within any specific context. This section allowed for a brief look at the terminology, including intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and then concentrated on motivation as it relates to this study, focusing on motivation in relation to modern foreign languages, ICT, and collaboration in turn. As in other sections, overlaps helped to highlight issues of importance, particularly the recurring themes of autonomy and collaboration, the latter of which will be further explored below, and linked inextricably to the former.

### **3.4 Collaboration and Peer Cognisance**

Collaborative learning takes place when a group of learners are pursuing the same learning goal, working together and helping each other to achieve this goal in question (McConnell, 2000). It is therefore different to certain other forms of group learning, such as co-operative work, where each student will pursue an individual goal, calling on a pool of other learners in the process (*ibid*). Whilst these definitions and distinctions appear to be very clear-cut on paper, I have found the reality to be a far less easily defined convolution of personal motivation, altruistic intentions, and outside influences which influences learners' behaviour towards each other. The concept of 'collaboration' therefore becomes far more flexible. This is in part addressed by the other sections of this literature review, which look into reflective learning, motivation, and facilitation, but it also necessitates a wide-spread search for links with concepts from areas such as learning communities, group processes, and communities of practice. This section of the literature review therefore seeks to draw on some of the existing concepts linked to areas of collaboration, before exploring the distinct case of online collaboration, and finally returning to the concept of learner autonomy by asking to what extent the two concepts are mutually inter-linked and co-dependent.

### 3.4.1 The concept of community

Sergiovanni (1999) claims that 'the story of community includes unique ways of thinking about connections, human nature and societal institutions' (p.9). He outlines the 'nature of human capacity', and draws on Herzberg (1974), Sowell (1987) and Etzioni (1988) in explaining the differences between the constrained and the unconstrained narrative. The constrained narrative implies selfish behaviour, 'psychological egoism' (p. 11) and the need for rewards, competitions, and control. The unconstrained narrative, on the other hand, is driven by altruistic goals such as cooperation for the common good, sacrifice of self-interest, and moral bearing (p. 12). If policies are to be derived out of the unconstrained narrative, Sergiovanni argues that

*principals and teachers can be trusted to act morally, and therefore should be provided with the freedom to optimise their moral propensity to do what is right. [...] As professionals, they willingly accept responsibility for their own practice and they commit themselves to the learning needs of their students above other concerns. A similar tale is told for students (p.12).*

In contrast, of course, policy makers from within the constrained narrative would argue that each individual's self-interest must be maximised through a combination of incentives and punishment. Sergiovanni argues that most people display a reasonable combination of both narratives, depending on the social situation and context. This study, too, seeks to combine both of these narratives, through a combination of raising the awareness or 'cognisance' between peers, but also by motivating individuals to give their best by way of a competition.

Brown (2000) reports on the results of over 200 experiments involving individual and group performance, all corroborating that 'on simple tasks performance was facilitated by a co-actor, while on more difficult tasks it was impaired' (p. 170). The fact that the same phenomenon is observed in other species (as proven by Zajonc, 1965) allows for the conclusion that a competitive element may indeed be inherent to the nature of beings, but, if tasks get too complicated, the pressure of being observed and compared to others can get too much. Drawing on these authors, then, it could be argued that an individual has certain inherent tendencies, leaning towards

both selfishness and altruism within social contexts. These tendencies can be corroborated, supported, facilitated and steered by outside influences, which can potentially encourage a more group-oriented thinking in the individual. Regardless of which narrative is dominant, though, individuals appear to be influenced by their social surroundings and an ensuing sense of competition or pressure. If this is to be taken as the starting point of an individual's sense within a community, then collaboration must surely be a way of ensuring each individual within a community finds the equilibrium within which they perform to their best ability, whilst gaining a sense of common pursuit and collegiality. As such, it requires the mutual assistance of individuals, and an awareness of the needs of others so this assistance may occur.

### 3.4.2 Community of Practice

Wenger (1998) describes meaning, practice, community and identity to be the components of a social theory of learning (p. 5). His pictorial overview of this social theory is not unrelated to the various sections of my spider's web, and will therefore be reproduced here (see Figure 3) in order to draw out better the connections that can be made.

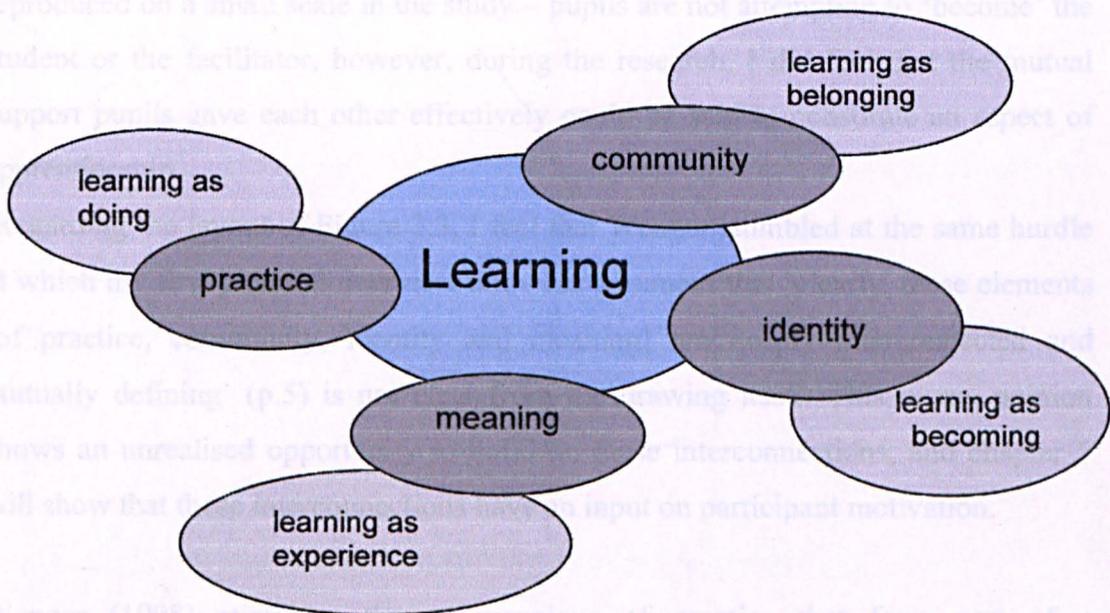


Figure 3.3: Wenger's (1998) components of a social theory of learning

Wenger, like myself, prefers the expression 'learning as experience' to 'experiential learning', and identifies his component of 'meaning' as 'a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful' (p. 5). Immediately, Wenger cites the individual and the collective as two inherently linked aspects of the same theory, corroborating my argument that autonomy and collaboration are inextricably linked, as will be further outlined below. The concept of autonomy could also be linked to Wenger's idea of 'identity' – shaped by social contexts and community, yet also formed by each individual as a sense of being and self.

Not present in Wenger's pictorial overview is the concept of deliberate facilitation. This is not surprising as Wenger's theories are built around the idea of identity and apprenticeship, and he argues that 'in terms of forming identities of participation, the organization of schooling tends to offer students very limited contact with adulthood as a lived identity', as teachers are forced to act 'as representatives of the institution and upholders of curricular demands, with an identity defined by an institutional role' (p. 276). The extent to which a facilitator may be able to work around, or indeed within this identity will be further discussed in the next section of the literature review. Wenger's idea of apprenticeship among group members is only reproduced on a small scale in the study – pupils are not attempting to 'become' the student or the facilitator, however, during the research, I did feel that the mutual support pupils gave each other effectively could be said to constitute an aspect of apprenticeship.

Regarding the layout of Figure 3.3, I feel that Wenger stumbled at the same hurdle at which my first pictorial overview fell – his argument that 'clearly, these elements [of practice, community, identity and meaning] are deeply interconnected and mutually defining' (p.5) is not clear from the drawing itself. This in my opinion shows an unrealised opportunity to build on these interconnections, and chapter 5 will show that these interconnections have an input on participant motivation.

Wenger (1998) stipulates three dimensions of practice that form part of a community, namely 'mutual engagement' ('people are engaged in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another', p. 72), 'shared repertoire' (joint negotiated meaning on 'routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories,

gestures, symbols, genres, or concepts', p. 83) and 'joint enterprise' (p. 73, see below). If measured against these three dimensions, it could be argued that many, if not all, collaborative learning groups fall into that category. The 'joint enterprise' Wenger mentions here becomes a superimposed or mutually negotiated (learning) goal (pp. 78-79), with group members sharing their experiences and knowledge, engaging with each other in order to identify or construct knowledge. Wenger has been criticised for having too idealist a concept of community – see e.g. Fox (2002, 2005), who argues for the term 'actor-networks', which includes the consideration for forces – positive and negative – into the collaborative process, and furthermore argues that that non-human elements are part of a network in the same way as human participants are. Whilst I agree with Fox that Wenger's concept might lack an aspect of problematisation, I do not consider it necessary to completely re-define the concept of community of practice before I align my research with it. Cousin and Deepwell (2005) have explored the links between communities of practice and networked learning environments, and have concluded that both share important aspects of a social theory of learning, relying on 'hospitable and peer supportive learner environments' and 'communitarian values' (p. 57). Cousin and Deepwell's article is particularly useful in the extent to which it engages with the fact that networked learning environments are often constructed, rather than having evolved over time, as a community of practice might. Their argument that an externally managed group under teacher control is unlikely to be high on 'internal means by which it can congeal into a community of practice' (p. 60), i.e. to develop a 'shared repertoire' or 'joint enterprise' (see above) rings very true, and shows the boundaries of Wenger's concept for the study at hand. Wenger's communities of practice comprise professionals who are peers, although they may possess different roles within said community. This opens up the discussion for further literature and concepts surrounding the idea of peer interaction – such as peer teaching, peer learning and peer tutoring, and indeed collaboration.

### **Further collaborative concepts and 'Communal Constructivism'**

Not all authors distinguish categorically between peer teaching, peer learning and peer tutoring, particularly the 'learning' aspect appears to be tacitly assumed, provided appropriate peer teaching or tutoring takes place (Whitman, 1988; Goodlad

and Hirst, 1989). Furthermore, the term 'peer' does not necessarily assume an even distribution of power in the relationship – peer education may take place between a final year student and a first-year student, the first serving as a role model and tutor for the latter. This, if we return to the idea of 'autonomy' as a power relationship, can further mean that learners may need to be 'autonomous' within themselves, i.e. happy to state their learning preferences and goals, so that they may gain the best possible benefits from learning as a member of the group. On the other hand, peers may be at the same level, the learning taking place from a common pursuit of knowledge, based on reflection, rather than actual 'tuition'.

Homans (1961) identifies equality of peers within the same collaborative group as not necessarily one of total equality, rather 'equality within layers or strata – the rough equality with one another of members who are at the same time superior and inferior to others' (p. 316). This allowance for 'near-peers' as well as 'co-peers' (Falchikov, 2001) illustrates the need for a differentiation between separate types of peer education. Whitman (1988, p. 13) cites Goldschmid and Goldschmid (1976) as pioneers of peer teaching in higher education in the 1960s and 1970s. Based on their research during this time, they have identified five types of peer teaching, namely:

- *Discussion groups led by student teaching assistants to supplement large lectures;*
- *Use of students as proctors, to personalise large courses, working with individual students on tests and giving constructive feedback;*
- *Student counseling outside the classroom, where students seek help from professionally trained peers.*
- *Work groups organised by course directors, but conducted by the students themselves;*
- *Organisation of students into learning cells of two to three students, to critique each other's work and discuss readings.*

*(Goldschmid and Goldschmid, 1976, in Whitman, 1988, p. 13)*

As Whitman points out, the above areas of peer education fall into two categories, where the first three areas assume an uneven distribution of knowledge, the last two operate on the principle that students will be learning together, both benefiting from the exchange in the same way. Whereas the participants in the first three of the groups would be described as 'near-peers', in the last two, they are actually 'co-peers', with no one student holding a particular (or at least intentional) advantage

over the other throughout the learning experience, although students may take it in turn to prepare particular readings to share with the partner or the group, thus taking the lead for short periods of time, whilst maintaining an overall balance of equality.

Whitman's definition of study pairs and study groups is particularly pertinent to the study at hand, as the two projects engage both the collaboration of co-peers in form of an online study group in Higher Education, as well as the near-peer collaboration between university students and school pupils in the main study. As a result, the learning goals and learning outcomes for the various participants have been distinctly different.

Based on these various definitions and concepts surrounding group learning is the concept of communal constructivism, which was developed specifically for online learning. As such, it will be further explored in the following section, which is dedicated to collaborative learning online.

### **3.4.3 Networked learning**

As outlined above, the study used a networked learning approach, using technology to enhance connections between learners. Due to the wide variety of terms used to describe networks online, literature has further been drawn from Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), collaborative online learning, and other related fields. Whereas the idea of Goldschmid's 'learning cells' of 'dyadic', mutually beneficial learner collaboration (Whitman, 1988, p. 24) dates back to 1971 (Goldschmid, 1971), the conception of the Internet has given new potential to the idea of collaborative learning, overcoming geographical boundaries through technology. Mayes (2001) poses the question whether online learning requires a new pedagogy, or whether existing pedagogies and paradigms may simply be adapted to a new context. Mayes accurately identifies that 'new technologies, however effective in other fields, don't inevitably lead to major change in education' (p. 17). Laurillard (2002) turns this argument around, stating that '[t]here is no progress [...] in how we teach, despite what might be possible with the new technology' (p. 20). From these statements, it becomes clear that the new technologies available today have not

automatically created innovative teaching and learning environments, rather than there is a need for new frameworks and pedagogies which apply more 'traditional' knowledge to a new area, or even construct new, original knowledge for the field. Garrison and Anderson's (2003) prediction that 'we have yet to fully experience the transformative effects of [computer communications]' (p. 1) is substantiated by the emerging literature in the field of collaborative online learning and related issues, such as facilitation and social dimensions (Stephenson, 2001; Salmon, 2000; Luckin, 2003; Leask and Younie, 2001; Collison *et al*, 2000). One of the major issues related to online communities is the absence of physical, or often even visual or oral, contact. Today, a learner community need no longer be identified by a joint geographical location, and several authors have identified differences in participants' social behaviour, in that they are more willing to share personal feelings and opinions, but also experience less of a connection with (and thus moral obligation towards) their peers (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Turkle, 1997). Brown (2001, online) describes a 'three-stage phenomenon' in online community building, consisting of 'making friends online', 'conferring the community', (feeling kinship and satisfaction after long, threaded discussions), and 'camaraderie', after long-term involvement in and association with the group on a personal level. Brown's concept of camaraderie seems related to Wenger's concept of 'shared repertoire'; however, it can not be assumed that Wenger's model of Communities of Practice (see above) effortlessly translates into an online environment, instead, it is far more likely that collaboration will need to be facilitated, on a flexible scale, handing over more and more responsibility to the group. Models of such facilitation have been developed by several authors and on different levels, ranging from Salmon's five-step model for computer-mediated communication (Salmon, 2000) to Collison *et al*'s (2000) differentiations between several 'voices' the facilitator might adopt, ranging from muse to mediator. These concepts surrounding facilitation will be explored in more detail in the following section. One attempt to develop an entire set of guidelines toward the integration of the Communities of Practice principles into teaching has been made by Putz and Arnold (2001), yet their efforts have been confined to higher education only, and also concentrate heavily on facilitation.

The stance particularly of interest to the study at hand is that of a 'communal constructivist theory' (Leask and Younie, 2001; Pountney, Parr and Whittaker, 2002;

McMahon, no date), exploring ways in which new technologies may be used to help learners to collaboratively construct knowledge. Holmes *et al* argue that

*Communal constructivism [is] an approach to learning in which students not only construct their own knowledge (Constructivism) as a result of interacting with their environment (Social Constructivism), but are also actively engaged in the process of constructing knowledge for their learning community.*

*Holmes et al, 2001*

Although not related to foreign languages by Leask and Younie, communal constructivism could be argued to describe the linguistic and cultural exchange in an online language learning environment, forming part of a potential framework for the study at hand.

#### **3.4.4 Communal constructivism**

Holmes *et al* (2001) have arrived at their theory of communal constructivism after examination of existing constructivist epistemologies, which they found wanting in a virtual learning environment. Their argument is best understood if one follows the refinement of the terminology, beginning with constructivism in general, and arriving at communal constructivism via the definition of social constructivism. Constructivism as a general learning theory 'posits that learning is a result of the interaction between the student and their prior knowledge and experiences in such a way that learners construct their own meanings through an internal, interpretative process' (Pountney *et al*, 2002). Whereas constructivism highlights the internal process of knowledge construction through reflection, social constructivism sees this reflection on a more communal scale, arguing that culture and context form an important part of understanding, as does the cognitive process the learner engages in when communicating within their surroundings in social discourse (Vygotsky, 1978). Communal constructivism takes this concept one step further, and is differentiated from constructivism and social constructivism by its authors as follows:

*by [communal constructivism] we mean an approach to learning in which students not only construct their own knowledge (constructivism) as a result of interacting with their environment (social constructivism), but are also actively engaged in the process of constructing knowledge for their learning community.*

*Holmes et al, 2001*

The theory of communal constructivism places responsibility for the learning environment with each individual learner, thus supplying each participant not only with a learning experience but also with a 'teaching apprenticeship' (Holmes *et al*, 2001). As a result, students are encouraged to engage more with their own field and that of their peers, helping them to develop autonomous learning and teaching strategies in the process. Today, the concept is used in online courses, where students have the chance to influence the course itself through their opinions and feedback (Pountney *et al*, 2002), as well as on a school-link level, through organisations such as the European School Network (EUN) (Leask and Younie, 2001). Further researchers have arrived at very similar constructs, without sharing the label, such as Klemm and Snell (1996) and Leng *et al*, who argue that

*effective use of computer-mediated communication in teaching involves both collaborative learning and constructivism: the idea of the student as an active learner who will construct a personal base of knowledge and understanding, which will also be made available for use by others.*

*Leng et al, 1999, p. 35*

To discuss the extent to which communal constructivism is applicable on a subject-level, Leask and Younie (2001) have explored opportunities for the theory throughout the curriculum. They argue that in languages, the IT aspect of communal constructivism holds particular value, as it not only allows the cultural exchange via computer mediated communication, but also self-regulated access to authentic materials through the Internet, including files selected and deposited by teachers. What Leask and Younie do not mention is the additional difficulty at the basis of bilingual exchanges - as well as providing a unique insight into the foreign culture, computer-mediated communication tends to operate at a faster speed than 'old-fashioned' pen-pal schemes, requiring a new set of skills for handling, interpreting and responding to linguistic and cultural clues quickly and effectively. These skills will need to be part of the facilitation process, which will be further explored in the

following main section. This section will continue by looking at collaboration as it relates to language education, and finally, by bringing together the concepts of learner autonomy and collaboration, arguing that the latter may not be possible without the former.

### **3.4.5 Collaborative and peer language learning**

Online language learning is, by default, either a singular pursuit (such as computer-human interaction when practising vocabulary), or else a communicative exercise between learners (Brammerts, 1996; Pinto, 1996). The studies that form part of this research focus on the interaction between learners, rather than human-computer interaction, seeking to explore the experiences of pupils, students and facilitator. Much work has been done both in the field of collaborative language learning and teaching (Nunan, 1992; Macaro, 1997), as well as on online pedagogy (Garrison and Anderson, 2003; Stephenson, 2001). It is the combination of online collaboration with language learning that is under-researched, and the emerging need for individual learners to develop autonomous learning skills which will allow them to function in such an environment.

There is some literature available both in the areas of collaborative research in language education (Beaumont and Brian, 2000), as well as learner collaboration (Macaro, 1997; Nunan, 1992). At secondary school level, Macaro explores differences between *Teacher Directed*, *Learner Directed* and *Learner Generated Collaboration* (p. 137). His findings state that most collaboration is teacher directed, i.e. initiated and led by teachers, although it is the learners doing the collaboration. The example Macaro cites is that of a survey conducted in class - a task very repetitive in nature, and often forced, to encourage learners communicating with each other. In contrast, when learners are given a more open task, such as creating a role-play scene or producing a piece of collaborative writing, the learners will need to collaborate on a higher level to accomplish the task, dividing the workload and listen to ideas. According to Macaro, learner generated collaboration is one aspect teachers know very little about, as it is initiated by the learners themselves - asking each other for help, building study clubs, or supporting each other in other ways.

One area where some research took place is the field surrounding tandem language learning, or, more specifically, the 'tandem principle' (Brammerts, 1996; Little, 2003). This principle builds on the concepts of autonomy and reciprocity, stressing that the two are irrevocably linked, as this section seeks to illustrate. In tandem language learning, two native speakers of different languages collaborate to enhance each other's language and cultural skills in the respective foreign language. Little (2003) argues that

*although the mutual commitment on which a tandem partnership is founded is first expressed in the essentially social organization of the relationship, the purpose of the partnership will not be fulfilled unless both partners explicitly commit themselves to their own and each other's learning (p. 41).*

The tandem principle has been used by language learners and their facilitators for the past twenty years. Gick (1989), in engaging critically with the philosophy behind tandem language learning (Brammerts, 1996), identifies that learning a language with a partner is neither a blow-by-blow trade (German lessons for English lessons), nor a joint 'working through tasks in books' activity (p. 10). Instead, she establishes the need for communication with the partner, the curiosity directed towards the partner's opinions, origins, culture and knowledge – this returns to Gardner's (1985) concept of integrativeness, which has been discussed above. Furthermore, Gick stresses that intrinsic motivation may be necessary in order to gain best possible benefits from a collaborative language exchange, in line with the literature findings from the previous section, and corroborated by the research findings in Study A. In an example for extrinsic motivation for collaboration in a larger group of students, Freeman (1992) identifies a method by which students receive marks for quantitative effort, i.e. for every contribution they make, regardless of its accuracy. Whilst this practice may work on an accredited course, it would be harder to establish similar ideas in the studies at hand, although the idea for quantitative, as well as qualitative, contributions will be explored in brief in the introduction to chapter 5.

Meskill and Ranglova (2000), in searching for opportunities for effective target language use, state that

*[a] language learner's engagement in meaningful, motivated communication activity using the target language is considered the best route to becoming both literate and fluent in that language.*

*Meskill and Ranglova, 2000, p. 21*

Although this statement clearly makes the case for authentic communication, it does not reach the same level of learner-centred collaboration as Macaro (1997) and Gick (1998) do. It also does not address one aspect of foreign language collaboration that brings us back to Brown (2000), namely that of performance anxiety and group pressures. This issue is discussed beautifully in the aptly named chapter 'I want to talk to them, but I don't want them to hear' by Hilleson (1996). Without going too deeply into the various constructs of anxiety research, I was interested to learn that Hilleson identifies no less than four anxieties that researchers have concentrated on in the past, and which are directly related to language learning, namely communication anxiety, foreign language anxiety, foreign language classroom anxiety and language shock. Of particular interest to collaborative communities and learner autonomy here is the idea of language shock (Schumann and Schumann, 1977). Hilleson states that

*with this form of anxiety students feel they cannot function properly within the community since they have been deprived of their real personality and are embarrassed to display a self that is fundamentally incompetent.*

*Hilleson, 1996, p. 250 (based on Schumann and Schumann, 1977)*

This anxiety is, of course, highly relevant to a collaborative project which looks to encourage learners to share responsibilities, strengths and weaknesses in a cognisant manner. If learners feel that their language ability – or lack of it – prevents them from participating to their best, i.e. their actual or true, ability, then any collaboration will only be based on the perceived personalities, resulting in a rather skewed picture. As will become clear from the remainder of the thesis, however, it does not appear that 'language shock' had a large impact on the main study, resulting from the fact that the students had a far higher level of language ability than the pupils (so there was no danger of being 'shown up' by the younger learners), and that the group discussions among the pupils were conducted in English, as was all research (language of questionnaires, focus group discussions,

classroom visits). Nevertheless, pupils were asked to post messages online, in an environment where they could be read by other members of the same group (though not the entire class), potentially leading to raised anxiety levels, which I wanted to avoid. This was one of several factors which led me to allow the composition of groups according to friendships, to allow for a comfort zone which allowed true personalities to come through. The evaluation chapters, particularly chapters 6, will return to this issue and its successful implementation.

### **3.4.6 Linking Collaboration and autonomy**

Apart from the area of educational psychology, much of the literature based around the concept of learner autonomy stems from the field of language learning. Candlin, in the preface to Benson and Voller (1997) remarks on the tautology of autonomous language learning (p. x), asking whether language learning does not, by default, need to be autonomous in order to be successful. This thought is taken up by Naiman *et al* (1996), who identify skills a 'good language learner' should possess. Their definition makes several references to autonomous learning strategies, though not explicitly, instead mentioning finding a style that suits the learner, being actively involved in the language learning process, and trying to figure out how the language works.

In a publication by the Council for Cultural Co-operation of the Council of Europe (1988), researchers from eight European countries contributed to a discussion on present fields of application in learner autonomy. Within this example of researcher collaboration, Dickinson (1988) produces hypotheses from findings on a study on collaborative assessment, which include the idea that course members increase their involvement in self-directed learning as a result of collaborative assessment. This recurring link between learner collaboration and increased autonomy connects with the intended benefits of facilitation behind the study at hand.

As so much literature in the area of learner autonomy in fact originates from language learning circles, it can be difficult at times to state whether literature from the field of language education covers aspects of autonomy, or vice versa. Holec

defines autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981, p. 3), and further elaborates

*To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.*

- *determining the objectives;*
- *defining the contents and progressions;*
- *selecting methods and techniques to be used; [...]*
- *evaluating what has been acquired.*

*(Holec, 1981, p. 3)*

Although at a first glance related to individual learner autonomy only, the above definition is actually applicable in a collaborative context, if one takes into account the ways in which groups must negotiate roles and responsibilities in order to complete their tasks. As such, autonomous and collaborative learning can and will function as related ideas, with individuals operating autonomously within the scope of a collaborative learning group, taking over individual aspects of any work, in order to enhance the group's progress. Similarly, in order to gain independence from the tutor/facilitator, any group must learn to negotiate the above aspects among themselves, relying on each other, thus achieving a learning status that becomes less and less dependent on the tutor, and more and more dependent on collaboration. Links between collaboration and autonomy have been further defined by Little (1996), when he writes

*The chief argument in favour of group work as a means of developing learner autonomy is Vygotskyian in origin: collaboration between two or more learners on a constructive task can only be achieved by externalizing, and thus making explicit, processes of analysis, planning and synthesis that remain largely internal, and perhaps also largely implicit, when the task is performed by an individual learner working alone (p. 214).*

I consider this quote to be so relevant to my argument in linking collaboration with autonomy, that it is in fact repeated in discussion chapter 6, illustrating how the pupils relied on each other to increase both their individual and their collaborative autonomy.

Returning briefly to Wenger's concept of 'identity', i.e. very much the forming and role of the individual within the community, I consider it necessary to highlight briefly some of the role distributions and social processes that are influenced by individuals within the group. Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) have further criticised notions of community that suppress the idea of 'difference' and individuality; however, I feel that my research, encouraging autonomy as well as collaboration, did not fall within their scope of criticism. Brown (2000) quotes Allport (1924, p. 6) who stated that 'there is no psychology of groups which is not essentially and entirely a psychology of individuals' (Brown, 2000, p. 4). Whereas Allport argues that there is no group mind beyond a combination of its individuals', however, Brown aligns himself with Lewin (1952). Lewin and Brown claim that there is a 'reality and distinctiveness of social groups, [...] unique properties that emerge out of the network of relations between the individual members' (Brown, 2000, p. 5). Winch (2005) underlines the correlation between independence and interdependence, stating that

*Whatever independence people develop is to be exercised within the framework of a common interdependence if society is not to fragment into a mass of individuals, each of whom can only pursue their individual aims through constant friction with others who may be pursuing contrary goals (p. 66).*

According to Winch (ibid), society functions due to individuals possessing varied skills and interests, which they are willing to exercise and negotiate within the framework of society. He further argues that education should not only celebrate these different skills, but seek to emphasise diversity through the education system. I would further argue that, in order for variety to thrive, all individuals must learn to respect and value other people's skills. As such, a project such as Study B, which highlighted both individual strengths and the need for collaboration, could potentially enhance learners' ability to succeed as an individual through life.

### 3.4.7 Section Conclusion: The Concept of Peer Cognisance

This thesis argues that the combination of autonomous and collaborative skills will greatly enhance group interaction – however, it is very easy to claim that autonomy will instead lead to disruptive behaviour which will hinder collaboration. Graves and Graves (1985) bring as evidence the destruction of native peoples by introducing independence over interdependence, where ‘bonds of reciprocity and mutual dependence break down; people can now afford to fight with their extended family and neighbours; social skills diminish through disuse’ (p. 404). In their chapter, they equate autonomy with selfishness, arguing that cooperation is the way forward. Whilst I agree with their stance to the extent that I see cooperation or collaboration to be of high value to any community, I would also argue that a sense of self, one’s own abilities, strengths, and responsibilities, is necessary for a community (be it a group of learners or an indigenous people) to thrive. In my view, there is a significant difference between a ‘sense of self’ and ‘selfishness’, although I would point out that maybe, in the case of Graves and Graves’ research, the native people in question were most likely very much aware of their individual strengths (which presumably defined their roles within the community, without much deliberate or official recognition for them). What I would agree with is that modern society has served to homogenise individuals to the extent that many children in classrooms today lack the sense of self and awareness of their own learning needs, their strengths and weaknesses, and their sense of responsibility, which is deemed to stand for ‘learner autonomy’. As Little (2003) states:

*Like all complex ideas, the concept of learner autonomy is easily oversimplified. In particular, it commonly evokes thoughts of independence and self-management that are pursued with no regard to the socially conditioned interdependence out of which autonomy grows and on which it necessarily feeds (p. 37).*

I agree with Little on the links between independence and interdependence, as well as on the differences between independence and autonomy, and, as outlined in Chapter 2, would also go further and argue for the inclusion of a term such as ‘peer cognisance’, to illustrate how the responsibility for one’s peer in a learning situation might form the basis for successful collaboration. It can hardly be expected of

learners (of any age) to engage consciously with the intricacies of role distribution within groups, anxieties related to group pressure and foreign language issues, or an immediate awareness of other group members' difficulties or learning styles. If all this is to feed into the concept of peer cognisance, then there is a distinct need for a facilitator to try to enhance these skills and this awareness in learners. The following section will thus explore the role of the facilitator, in the specific contexts of enhancing learner autonomy, collaborative skills, and operating in an online learning environment.

### ***3.5 The Role of the Facilitator***

As has been argued above, to enable learners to gain the best possible benefits from their collaborative learning experience, both as autonomous and as collaborative learners, this experience requires facilitation. Voller (1997) argues that, in the facilitation of autonomy, the term should be understood as 'an approach to educational practice that emphasizes learner independence and learner responsibility' (p. 99), once more highlighting the practice of communal constructivism. In much of the available literature, facilitation for both learner autonomy and collaboration assumes a link between the two terms, either explicitly or implied. Furthermore, many citations cover both online and collaborative learning, since the issues surrounding the creation of a cohesive group feeling have particularly occupied researchers in the field. On the other hand, much of the literature is situated in higher education, with a distinct shortage of material for secondary schools, particularly when it comes to online learning. Returning to the concept of a literature review as a spider's web, then, it will be difficult to draw firm lines between the subsections of this part of the literature review. In order to begin the weaving of connections, this section will first outline some of the more generic principles of facilitation, as well as some of the better-known frameworks and guiding principles of facilitation, regardless of whether their origin lies in online learning, collaboration, or learner autonomy. Following on from this, and in line with the argument of this thesis that autonomy and collaboration are inextricably linked, the next section will explore the literature surrounding facilitation for autonomy and collaboration, linking the two concepts where necessary. A further section will look into special considerations

necessary when facilitating younger learners. Finally, a brief excursion will be made into facilitation online. As much of the facilitation was provided face to face for the pupils, this section will be shorter than the others, particularly as some of the issues – due to the linked literatures – will already have been covered in other sections.

### 3.5.1 Principles of facilitation

As has been outlined above, the term ‘principles of facilitation’ is an artificial one, which has difficulty in standing on its own. After all, the term ‘facilitation’ on its own says little – facilitation for or of what? For this reason, the principles outlined here are located within other, or rather further defined, research areas; however, I felt it important to stand some of these principles opposite each other, so that a combined and suitable approach for the facilitation of this particular study might be found.

Whilst Voller (1997) identifies three potential roles for the teacher, namely those of facilitator, counsellor and resource, other authors have gone further, instead concentrating on ways in which facilitation may be achieved. Collison *et al* (2000) have identified a palette of six voices a facilitator might adopt, namely those of *generative guide* (drawing attention to points made by students, suggesting ways of ordering data and thoughts), *conceptual facilitator* (querying misunderstandings and omissions), *reflective guide* (seeking more precise formulations, challenging students to engage further with their opinions), *personal muse* (bringing the facilitator's beliefs in the open as a discussion point, encouraging students to do the same), *mediator* (using personal and communal communication facilities to explore reactions and thoughts, particularly during argumentative periods that prevent the group from moving forward), and *role play* (deliberate adoption of external role to introduce new perspectives). Whilst these voices appear rather specific, Collison *et al* argue that the voice used by the facilitator will need to be this deliberate, and based on whatever communication has taken place since the last point of intervention. Collison *et al*'s work takes place asynchronously online; in synchronous communication, such as oral and typed chat rooms, this deliberate intervention will be difficult to uphold, and will have to make way for more

spontaneous facilitation. This argues for a continuum from asynchronous to synchronous communication over the course of a project, to allow both learners and facilitators to get used to their roles. Such a continuum was the intention of the main study of this thesis; however, the early termination of the project meant this could not be pursued.

Opposing Collison *et al*, some facilitators are put off by the very specific (and allegedly mutually exclusive) voices advocated above. Salmon (2000) has created a table of e-moderator online competencies (p. 40), which stresses necessary skills such as '[a]bility to develop and enable others, act as a catalyst, foster discussion, summarize, restate, challenge, monitor understanding and misunderstanding, take feedback'. At a more basic level, these qualities and characteristics are listed under the headings 'confident', 'constructive', 'developmental', 'facilitating', 'knowledge sharing', and 'creative' (p. 40). All these skills are not different from a face-to-face learning environment; however, in Salmon's (2000) case, the technology demands that facilitators extend their skills to the virtual world, where asynchronous discussions can mean a reply follows several days after the initial posting. McConnell (2000, p. 137) adds a further dimension to the role of the tutor/facilitator, namely that, in most cases, facilitator and assessor will be one and the same person. This means that, although learners may encounter difficulties, they might not approach the tutor, for fear of transmitting the image of failure. If one couples this with Homans' (1961) concerns that students might not ask each other for help for fear of ridicule, the facilitator's need for an open learning environment in which questions are encouraged becomes even more pressing, as the following section of the literature review shows.

### **3.5.2 Facilitation for collaboration and autonomy**

In language learning, Macaro (1997) has identified a 'revival of interest in learner autonomy' (p. 167), which goes hand in hand with an increase of emphasis on communicative language teaching. Since the inception of computers, the question whether the teacher will be replaced by a computer is a recurring one. Of particular interest to this study is Macaro's emphasis on findings from the Council of Europe

(1980, see also Holec, 1981), which stresses that 'ironically whereas the traditional teacher might have been replaceable with a machine, the facilitator-teacher becomes irreplaceable' (Macaro, 1997, p. 168). In line with Macaro (1997) and Voller (1997), Wenden (1991) argues that the teacher is the main agent of change in encouraging autonomy in learners (p. 7). As it is this facilitated autonomy the study concentrates on, other interpretations of the term, such as completely independent learning of a language (e.g. with books and tape material) will not be further discussed here, instead, the focus will shift to ways in which authors have presented the area of facilitation for collaboration and autonomy.

As has been mentioned above, one responsibility of a facilitator in a collaborative environment is it to create a relationship between participants that allows for a comfortable work environment. For the main study of the thesis, this was problematised by the differing ages of the participants. Palloff and Pratt (1999) stress the importance of a community space where 'instructors and students alike can let their hair down and be comfortable with one another' (p. 76). It is indeed in these communal spaces that students initially work up the courage to ask questions of each other and get into the habit of combining their knowledge. A facilitator will be able to learn a lot about the students' character, and gauge who they are likely to encourage successfully to take on a larger part within the community's learning process. In foreign language learning environments, it can often be these communal spaces where a lot of learning takes place, as students are frequently taking the opportunity to ask about customs, hobbies and families, feeling them to be unrelated to 'real' learning.

The extent to which this social community should be formally facilitated will depend on the group; facilitators may decide to post their messages in the lesser-used language, or gently encourage the use of both, as well as opening any communication to the wider community ('That's an interesting custom - what did everybody else do at Christmas?') or bringing in more reluctant participants ('Steve, what have you found hardest on the project so far?'). As has been mentioned above, however, it was unlikely that such a social space would occur if the participants were 20 and 13 years old on average, respectively. Furthermore, the students had to deal with the added issue of being the supplier of knowledge, for some of them for

the first time. The way Palloff and Pratt's (1999) suggestion was therefore implemented in the study was by creating an online community space for the students, where they could ask questions and discuss issues unrelated to the study, and a community space for everybody, pupils and students alike, to facilitate the sharing of information between groups. In addition to this, time was set aside in the classroom for pupils to work in their groups, and they were encouraged to look into the collaborative issues surrounding this group work.

Palloff and Pratt (2005) have built on Davis' (1997) list of challenges to collaboration, by annotating it for the extended context of online learning. In taking over their combined list, I am acknowledging the slightly peculiar hybrid offered by my study, combining as it did both face-to-face and online collaboration. In chapter 8, I will return to these challenges and discuss how they related to the study of this thesis:

- *Turf protection and mistrust: Individuals may not be open to new ideas or to sharing the information or resources they find through their research.*
- *Decision-making processes: Groups need to determine how they will make decisions and hold to that process.*
- *Limited resources: In an online class, this relates to time limitations and limited access to information.*
- *Dropping out: Attrition is a problem in online group collaboration; shifts in membership as an activity is underway can cause significant problems.*
- *Reduced participation: Some members may participate more or contribute more than others, creating resentment and conflict among group members.*
- *Broad representation: Groups should include a cross section of the larger class.*
- *Communication: Groups working together collaboratively need to maintain open and regular communication so that all members feel included.*
- *Solid leadership: Groups that select a leader to guide their process are more likely to succeed in a collaborative task.*
- *Time commitment: Groups need to know up front how much time a collaborative activity will take and each member needs to commit to that time.*

*Palloff and Pratt, 2005, p. 32, based on Davis, 1997*

From a facilitating point of view, the issues mentioned above can and will often be addressed at different stages throughout a particular project – broad representation, time commitment and limited resources are design features, which need to be taken into account during the planning stages. The decision-making process,

communication and leadership are issues which need to be raised with groups from the start, and correct facilitation can potentially prevent such issues arising. Turf protection and reduced participation are mainly issues that might arise mid-project, once groups have had time to gauge each member and have formed ideas about their role within the group, adding these to the three previously mentioned points for main collaborative facilitation during a project itself.

Attrition can be hard to facilitate against, and can take several forms. In voluntary exchanges, participants might indeed drop out, forming the basis for my fear that the university students would 'disappear'. In a classroom-based environment, attrition can be either temporary (due to illness or holidays) or permanent (through moving schools or sets). In both cases, contingency plans need to be in place, so that 'affected' groups might be facilitated through the crisis.

Although the division of issues above reads in a linear way, they are, of course, highly context-related and any might occur at any time. Good facilitation, in this case and in my opinion, here equals solid planning. Palloff and Pratt (2005) agree and make the following suggestions: 'Set[ting] the stage for collaboration' by making expectations of all group members clear from the start; not encouraging 'over- or under-participation' through careful monitoring of activities and dampening or encouraging participants where necessary, 'address[ing] technical difficulties swiftly', both by having immediate contingency plans and by knowing necessary technical support routes; 'provid[ing] instruction and information about conflict management and conflict resolution'; and 'maximis[ing] participation through group composition' (p. 34). The point that comes through clearly is that facilitation for collaboration, and indeed any facilitation, is built on careful planning and a sound knowledge of the subject (so that tasks can be planned and timed successfully) and the group in question – the latter in particular was difficult for myself as an outsider researcher, prompting (among other things) my decision to let the groups self-select.

When the purpose is not only to move the group forward as a whole, but also to encourage autonomous and peer/collaborative learning, a further dimension is added, namely the question of timely intervention. Conlogue and Bowskill (2002) have found in their research that many facilitators feel that the tutor's presence

should be as unobtrusive as possible. One of their interviewees remarked that they undergo a preliminary step prior to intervention, namely that of deliberate alertness in certain situations. This was also the practice for the studies that form part of this thesis. Despite my best efforts, several students during Study A have commented they felt unsupported, as they could not 'see' the facilitator's thought process that led to the intervention not taking place. Although in the case of Study A, the delayed intervention did in fact lead to increased learner autonomy, the dichotomy between learner and facilitator perception led to an increased anxiety on my part during Study B, as I felt I did not want to repeat any mistake I might have made, nor did I want to go the other way and become overprotective. In the end, however, I felt that the issue did not arise to the same extent, due to the increased face-to-face contact with the youngest and least autonomous participants of the study, the pupils.

### **3.5.3 Facilitation with younger learners**

I already pointed out above that many pupils throughout the main study were confused by the concept of identifying their own learning goals, strategies, and by having to analyse their own progress in retrospect. Abbott (1994) points out how the changes to society must translate into a changing treatment of pupils in a school environment:

*Schools now have a vital role in starting a dynamic process by which pupils are progressively weaned from their earlier dependence on teachers and institutions. They should be given the confidence to manage their own learning, to co-operate with colleagues and to use a range of resources and learning situations. But such skills, practices and attitudes cannot be taught solely in the classroom [...]. Schooling in the future must involve both learning in school and learning through a variety of community experiences. Young people require a 'new learning environment', made up partly of formal schooling and partly of informal learning opportunities, so that they receive the support not only of teachers but of other adults. This is a radical proposition and one which does not fit comfortably with the conventional system.*

*Abbott, 1994, p. 5*

Undoubtedly, facilitating a study such as mine faced particular difficulties by challenging pre-conceived notions of how 'teaching' should take place, particularly

as the usual class teacher held with a fairly strict traditional approach (see chapters 6 and 7). Despite an attempt to work against this traditional approach, it cannot be argued that the school-age participants in this project will have had fewer opportunities to negotiate and work in a group than the university students prior to the study. Facilitation in a school environment is therefore likely to be different from facilitation in higher education, and there is far less literature available which concerns this particular concept.

Pachler (2001) argues that

*the role of teachers in identifying appropriate learning outcomes, choosing appropriate software and activities and structuring and sequencing the learning process is imperative in the acquisition of and learning about the higher-order skills necessary to understand fully the social, cultural, political, ethical and moral issues which are often only implicit in new technologies and their use (p. 18).*

Pachler's approach to facilitation seems different to that of Palloff and Pratt's (2005) outlined above, more structured and prescriptive in its approach. Certainly, there seems to be much less room for error when constructing an online learning environment for younger learners. Chapter 4 discusses in more detail the methodology behind the technological design of WebCT for a school environment, and chapter 6 highlights what the pupils themselves thought of the suitability of both the technology and the exercise.

Dennison and Kirk (1990), speaking from the field of experiential learning, argue that

*the main job of the tutor is to help organise the learning [...]. Tutors cannot make students learn, whether through arranging a learning cycle or using a more traditional teaching style. All that can be attempted [...] is to provide an opportunity, and circumstances, which are congruent with student requirements. The tutor organises and by explanation, example or persuasion, motivates the student towards a learning cycle. Sometimes this motivation is unnecessary. On other occasions it will be unsuccessful (p. 9)*

The learning cycle Dennison and Kirk refer to is based on Kirk (1987), and argues for a circuit of doing, reviewing, learning, and applying (either as a final application or as the starting point for a new cycle) what has been learnt, as illustrated below:

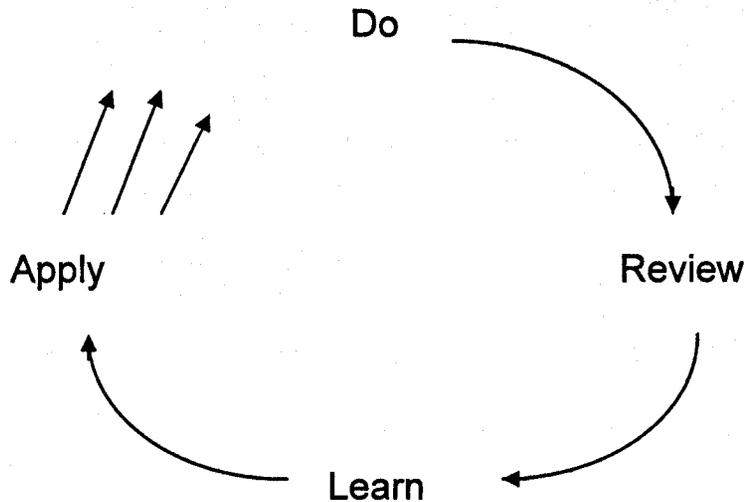


Figure 3.4: Learning cycle (Kirk, 1987)

In the traditional schooling system, of course, Dennison and Kirk's statement that 'tutors cannot make students learn' appears to be slightly disconcerting, to me; however, it seems to be nothing but an honest appraisal of any educational situation. A teacher, facilitator, parent, or other influential individual can coerce, motivate, cajole, even threaten, yet the ultimate responsibility and capacity for the actual learning process lies within each individual. My role as a facilitator of the project I thus saw, in line with Dennison and Kirk (1990), to produce an environment as conducive to learning as possible, giving pupils as many opportunities as I could to become enthused, fulfil their potential, and learn from each other as possible.

In opposition to many of the authors cited above, Krejsler (2004) adopts a much more cautious approach to the facilitation process. He argues that the shift from schools to learning communities, from teachers to facilitators

*often reflect a one-sided fundamentalist faith in progress that loses eye for the conflicts of interest among people dealing with each other in specific contexts. [...] It is often presupposed that agents with different interests may be moved to act in corporate unity in order to solve the problems of the emergent knowledge-based society (p. 491).*

Krejsler draws his viewpoint from Deleuze's (1990) concept of the 'society of control' stating that

*Students are thus encouraged to seeing [sic] themselves through the individualizing practices that are made possible by project work while simultaneously obeying strictly the institutional rules regulating their behaviour. They are hereby gradually disciplined to administer the orthodox practices of school such as 'responsibility for one's own learning processes' and 'participative behaviour'. Practising these procedures obediently they eventually discipline themselves into a certain version of comprehensive and differentiated self control (p. 496).*

In this model, facilitation takes place by teachers supervising and directing pupils until they 'learn to desire what the teacher wants them to desire' (*ibid*), in the following being deemed trustworthy to 'decide' for themselves.

In reading Krejsler's argument, I became first indignant, then thoughtful. I was always aware that working with young learners meant working with impressionable minds, but his words made my wish to make the project look exciting and motivating look almost sinister, the facilitator being a scheming, controlling individual leading participants to think they had control over their own learning, but in truth holding all the strings. In the end, I made my peace with the concept of the 'society of control' by agreeing (as I already have above) that learner autonomy begins by this autonomy being granted by the person in control, and that it must then be pursued. The pupils during the study were aware of the non-negotiable parameters of the study, but also had a clear idea of their own responsibilities. Where I do agree with Krejsler is his argument that this society of control continues throughout our lives, making it good practice for pupils to learn how to work under such negotiated conditions. As this thesis does not make a claim to engage in detail with emancipatory paradigms or Critical Theory, I feel it would be counterproductive here to enter too deeply into issues surrounding control and power, instead acknowledging an inherent power imbalance within the school system, and viewing learner autonomy from a vantage point within this acknowledged imbalance.

If the facilitation process itself is difficult to negotiate, moving this process online provides further issues for discussion. The section below addresses some of these issues, before a summary to this section and finally a conclusion to the entire chapter is provided.

### 3.5.4 Facilitation online

Many of the sources considered above (Palloff and Pratt, 1999 and 2005; Salmon, 2000; Collison *et al*, 2000) already have online teaching and learning – including facilitation – as their main focus, and have been outlined above as part of the principal concept of facilitation. This section's purpose is to highlight other authors, who might have been less influential in developing the overall concept of facilitation, but whose works are still of relevance to the study.

Regarding the practice of online learning, Blake (2000) engages with the common fears of student isolation, and lack of spontaneity and body language, and concludes that '[he has] never come across an adequate defence of these fears' (p. 184). In analysing these fears, Blake arrives at a 'primitive [...] need for physical company' (*ibid*), where discourse goes far beyond that of teaching or learning, and includes a wide variety of social 'oiling the wheels' (p. 186) which are effortless and automatic in face-to-face encounters, but often have to be deliberate in online education. In highlighting the positive aspects of online communication, Blake asks the reader to consider that a lack of spontaneity, by default, allows for more considered responses, thus potentially improving the academic (if not social) standard of the exchange. Online learning thus becomes a cognitivist activity, concentrating on subject matter. Blake argues that both student and facilitator have a choice in how much they want to disclose on a personal level, stating that 'if one accepts that student autonomy is a value in itself, this degree of power over self-disclosure is a virtue' (p. 194). The question of facilitation online thus becomes a philosophical one – is it to make the participant feel socially at ease, or is it to pursue the 'higher' goal of increased academic study?

Blake points out that 'inducting a student into a discipline is not a matter of cementing a personal relationship in the sense of involving them as part of one's local social or intimate network' (p. 189). Whilst I agree that there is a degree of professional decorum which will dictate socially acceptable levels of communication, I also believe that the facilitator online should endeavour to re-create to a certain extent the social climate of a collegial and professional exchange, particularly if peer-learning is to be encouraged. This is echoed by Anderson (2004),

who states that 'distance educators show increasing acceptance of the idea that the development of a sense of community among learners in online courses enhances their learning experience' (p. 183). In Anderson's article, online communication is shown to differ from face-to-face exchanges because accessing each contribution involves opening a file – there is no quick auditory method to identify which contribution might be useful. The facilitator's role here is to guide participants in how to filter the material available (through scanning, author name, or heading) so that they will not be frustrated by having to make an effort to access ultimately irrelevant material, but also to encourage students to adopt a writing style that is ultimately readable and encourages peers to persevere (p. 187). This form of facilitation is very specific and obviously differs from a traditional classroom situation, and its importance is further highlighted by Barker (2002), who also mentions 'netiquette' as one of the skills the online facilitator must endeavour to instil in his or her students. Barker also subscribes to the social dimension of online education, stating that 'it is essential to remember that both formal and informal discussion are catered for' (p. 5). In addition to the more traditional roles of a facilitator, such as guide, provider of subject knowledge, pastoral carer, and potentially assessor come therefore those distinctive to online learning, although it could be argued that these communicative and 'netiquette'-related skills are merely extensions of the usual classroom environment, as a certain code of conduct, as well as a discussion of study skills related to the course, are often implied, if not explicitly articulated, in a tutor's or facilitator's responsibilities.

Mason (2001) mentions two further issues worthy of discussion – on the one hand, the danger of 'interaction burnout' (p. 75), the initial constant compulsion to be available all the time and everywhere, rather than finding ways to limit the interaction to a manageable amount; on the other, the question of who will facilitate the facilitators, arguing for either a network of co-facilitators or a continuing development programme so tutors get the chance to raise issues, gain further experience, and continue their own learning. Whilst these issues are not directly related to online facilitation, a burnt-out tutor, or one who continues to repeat the same errors, will not be conducive to a positive learning environment. Mason's chapter highlights the necessity to see the facilitator as a participant of the learning environment, not an automaton without needs or faults. As such, she helps to

validate the decision taken by myself to direct the study at all participants, including myself as the facilitator.

### **3.5.5 Section Summary**

As can be seen from the above section, the role of the facilitator in an online learning environment is not all that different from that in face-to-face learning. In both instances, facilitators need to be knowledgeable in their chosen subject, to be able to guide, lead and contribute to a conducive learning environment, including tutoring, supporting, and counselling; and to encourage learners to make use of each other as resources and collaborators. Online, however, the subject knowledge is extended by the need of a sound technological understanding, a grasp of the intricacies of online communication, including how to circumvent technological problems, lack of personal contact, and loss of spontaneity, and a general ability to transfer skills to an online learning environment, effectively tutoring 'students without faces or places' (Blake, 2000).

## **3.6 Summary and Conclusion**

Although the field of literature applicable to this study is potentially vast, applying selective criteria, weaving links between relevant areas and concentrating on overlaps allowed for a manageable number of resources. Throughout compiling the literature review, the learner – and that includes the facilitator – stood at the centre of all reading, allowing a focus and over-arching theme. Returning to the spider's web created in the introduction to this chapter, all literature leads back to this centre, but is also interconnected. The concept of learner autonomy provided some guidance as to how learners might perceive themselves, their surroundings, and their learning, the section on collaboration then sought to illustrate how a 'group of selves' might begin to form a learner community. The section on motivation queried the driving forces behind a participant's learning. Finally, the section on facilitation looked at what went before and queried just how a facilitator might be able to support, guide and motivate a collaborative group online. Stephenson (2001) dares to look into the future of online learning and envisages a continued increase of learner-managed

environments, necessitating learner autonomy and collaboration online. He highlights a potential shift of responsibility from the teacher to the learner, who will have an increased input into selecting, processing and packaging the content of any particular course (p. 222). His vision of the facilitator of the future states that

*the educational role of the teacher will expand beyond pedagogical, subject or age-group expertise to include systems management, technical support, specification of new materials and systems, orchestrator of collaborative learning, advisor on quality and provider of support (ibid).*

During both studies that are contained in this thesis (the one that was already discussed in chapter 2 and the one that will be fully discussed below), I certainly found myself to be, at times, fulfilling all of the roles mentioned by Stephenson. Coming from a musical background, I particularly like the analogy to an orchestrator – not a conductor, who dictates who is to play when, but an orchestrator, who envisages how the best sound might be achieved, then assigns roles, but is ultimately dependent on each individual instrumentalist's interpretation of the piece.

One of the aims of conducting a literature review for this thesis was to provide a more refined definition of peer cognisance, following the tentative suggestion of the relevance of the term after Study A (see chapter 2). Of particular importance to this refined definition were the links described between learner autonomy and collaboration, leading to the following definition as a goal I intended to facilitate towards in Study B.

Peer cognisance is an advanced form of peer awareness, allowing learners to link and negotiate their own learning goals to those of their peers, including an acknowledged responsibility toward the collaborative process, as well as their own and their partners' learning.

This working definition, composed from a combination of research findings from Study A and the literature review, led to changes in the design of Study B, encouraging more detailed reflection among participants and deliberately facilitating the sense of responsibility for peer learners which the concept highlights. The

conclusion to the thesis (see chapter 9) offers a final definition of peer cognisance, as it stands at the end of the entire research process.

Following the literature review above, the succeeding chapter concentrates in detail on the methods and methodology relating to the study, returning in brief to some of the concepts highlighted in this chapter (such as constructivism and reflexivity), whilst covering in more detail areas those concepts previously less defined.

## **4 Methodology and methodological approaches**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Some links to the philosophical underpinnings relating to this study have already been made in the introductory chapter of this thesis. This chapter seeks to re-iterate and build upon these initial comments. When it comes to aligning itself with pre-conceived paradigms, this study is drawing on several key concepts, without adhering fully to any one of them. I feel the bridge that is needed to overcome differences in the traditionally statistic-laden field of online education, and the deep, qualitative nature of narrative, reflective, and ethnographic studies cannot be built by any one approach. Henson (2003) describes learner-centred education as a ‘fluid theoretical model which is subject to change’ (p. 5). It is this change which I have found to be both the challenge and the reward of my research – on the one hand, allowing the research to evolve without shoe-horning it into any particular approach, on the other, finding approaches and paradigms to align myself with throughout this evolution.

As the main study (Study B) not only forms part of my PhD research, but doubles as a pilot for potential further development for the DfES, it is arguably a case study, on which further research and practice will depend. Finding a ‘label’ for my research, has led me to explore the problematics related to aligning my research with any particular approach.

#### **4.1.1 Labelling the research**

Both studies outlined in this thesis include aspects of ethnography, exploring communities and their relationships to one another. Yet, Kirk and Miller (1986) state that ‘[i]nteraction with people on their own turf and in their own language’ are ‘the bare essentials’ related to the fieldwork of ethnography (p. 61). In contrast to this definition, my research makes a point out of not only removing the learners from their usual surroundings and placing them in an online context, but also deliberately

involving an additional language. Similarly, it could not be said that there was any sense of 'immersion' into the community that I was researching, a community that has been created artificially in the first place. I do feel, however, that the detailed considerations of learners' experiences show ethnographic tendencies, just as I feel that my own reflections and reflexivity can be said to be at least in part auto-ethnographic, despite their specific focus on the particular context of facilitation. For this reason, a section below looks at the field of ethnography (including virtual ethnography) in more detail.

I might also be able to argue for the term 'case study' to be applicable, as both studies are isolated cases, concentrating on experiences and findings within this specific environment, yet it also aims to point practitioners and other researchers towards improved practice. I take comfort in Stake's statement that 'a majority of researchers doing casework call their studies by some other name' (Stake, 2000, p. 435). He asks the question 'What can be learned from a single case?' (p. 436). What indeed? Both studies that form this thesis are not cases chosen from a pool of already occurring practice; instead, they create the environment that is the aim of the research. This differentiates them from many of the studies Stake cites as examples, and further complicates the labelling of the research.

Throughout the research, my own development as a facilitator was one of the main propelling motions of my research. This, of course, places the study within the remit of Action Research, including aspects of reflective practice. It is certainly true that I wanted to improve my own practice, as McNiff argues,

*many theorists do not see the need to produce live evidence to show how their theories have improved the quality of their own or other people's lives, and why they prefer to stay with conceptual theoretical models.*

*McNiff, 2002, p. 4*

It was certainly not my intention to keep this study within the realms of theory only, instead, I have, through presentations and my writing, actively sought to inform practice through this work. As McNiff further outlines, 'the focus of action research is to observe behaviour and offer descriptions of what people are doing' (p. 39). Certainly, the original research remit from the DfES and the Association for

Language Learning was to produce a report that will be of use to other teachers. In order to align myself fully with Action Research, however, I feel the study ought to have been constructed in a less exploratory manner. Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) describe the cycle of action research as

- *Planning a change,*
- *Acting and observing the consequences of the change*
- *Reflecting on the processes and consequences and then*
- *Re-planning, and so forth (p. 21)*

Although I set out, particularly for Study B, to see whether collaboration can be improved by introducing the concept of peer cognisance, I feel my knowledge of participants was not detailed enough to validate findings on the basis of 'change' alone, instead relying on some underlying, inherent presence of peer cognisance to build upon. Had the collaboration with school staff been more successful, I believe I would have been more inclined to align myself with the label of action research.

As a final argument against 'action research' as a label, although my original situation was that of a facilitator in a secondary school context seeking to improve her practice, my position has since evolved, leading me to believe that it is unlikely I will find myself in a post allowing me to repeat the study. The combination of these facts leads me to conclude that, although the DfES aspect of the study could be labelled 'action research', the aspects of this thesis continue to combine ethnographic, case study, and action research approaches.

The main underlying concept of this study is a reflective approach to learning. This approach has been encouraged through questionnaires, in-class conversation, work sheets and online communication throughout, consistently asking participants to take a look at the ways in which they learn and develop on their own and as a group. A further concept inherent to the study is the airing of the participants' voices, bringing into the open and discussing their experiences. The two concepts can be linked with the idea that, particularly in younger learners, expressing a voice can be difficult in an educational context, where so often opinions seem to be regulated and expected to follow certain conventions. Through a reflective and reflexive approach, participants are asked to explore their voice, and receive help in expressing it. These approaches are linked to a number of theories which concern themselves with

reflexivity, group processes, and learner autonomy. Whilst these three issues formed part of the literature review, some of the philosophical backgrounds they are linked to are picked up again in brief below.

## **4.2 Constructivism**

The literature review (see Chapter 3) has dealt in detail with the concept of constructivism, allowing for only a brief reprise here. The study has been conducted and written according to my own belief that constructed knowledge is based on a combination of reflection and interaction, and in agreement with Kolb (1984), who states that the combination of experiential learning and reflection will lead to beneficial learning outcomes. The knowledge constructed by the participants as part of this research is multi-layered, and is presumed to evolve differently, and have different emphases and values, within each individual, be they students, pupils, or indeed myself. Looking toward constructivism, and further, social constructivism, in my opinion acknowledges and supports my belief – based on my experiences as a learner, a teacher, and an online facilitator – in a shared evolutionary learning process, which I hope to encourage in students, pupils, and myself.

Cloke and Sharif (2001) list the ‘needs addressed by constructivism’ as follows:

1. *Making skills more relevant to students’ backgrounds and experiences by anchoring learning tasks in meaningful, authentic (i.e. real life), highly visual situations.*
2. *Addressing motivation problems through interactive activities in which students must play active rather than passive roles.*
3. *Teaching students how to work together to solve problems through group-based, cooperative learning activities.*
4. *Emphasising engaging, motivational activities that require higher-level skills and prerequisite lower-level skills at the same time.*

*Cloke and Sharif, 2001, p. 15*

In my opinion, Cloke and Sharif already begin to expand on constructivism by introducing a social, collaborative element. Holmes *et al* (2001) take this element further still, as outlined in the literature review section on communal constructivism (see 3.4.2).

### 4.3 Aspects of Ethnography

Rather than consigning ethnography to one particular label, Tedlock (2000) calls it 'a method, a theoretical orientation, and even a philosophical paradigm' (p. 455), warranting its exploration in this particular section of the thesis. My study first and foremost concentrates on a qualitative approach, arguing that concepts such as self-determined learning goals, aspects of motivation and attitudes, voices and experiences will be difficult to capture in a quantitative context. In order to explore the development of the group as a whole, as well as being able to concentrate on individuals within this group, an ethnographic approach appears to be suitable, particularly as it allows for the variants particular to this study, namely, the auto-ethnographical, narrative emphasis on reflection (i.e. auto-ethnography), and the online aspect (i.e. virtual ethnography). Both areas will be discussed in further detail below.

Nash and Wintrob (1972) outline the emergence of self-consciousness in ethnography throughout history, stating that

*the early literature of social and cultural anthropology contains comments about the narrator and his personal experiences, but such accounts tended to be suppressed as anthropologists began to aspire to full-fledged scientific status' (p. 527).*

Although many authors now coherently argue that the concept of ethnography fits into a new understanding of science (van Maanen, 1988; Tedlock, 2000), the field is still continually developing, into auto-ethnography, reflective ethnography, performance ethnography and narrative ethnography, among others in an ever-widening, and partially overlapping field. Ellis (2004) illustrates the issue of labelling her research in 'The Ethnographic I', stating that she called her work

*self-ethnography, ethnographical novel, interpretive ethnography, experimental ethnography, autobiographical sociology, introspective novel, ethnographic novel, introspective ethnography, impressionistic tale and personal narrative' (pp. 41-42),*

before settling on 'autoethnography'. This continual development means that the field remains on the edge of evolving research, forcing researchers to constantly battle with newly emerging issues surrounding truth, validity, and generalisability (Pelias, 2004; Ellis, 2004), some of which are discussed in this chapter. Van Maanen (1988) welcomes this aspect of ethnography, stating that it will prevent researchers from becoming complacent: 'the pressure on ethnographers to continue experimenting with and reflecting on the ways social reality is represented' (p. x). In this short quote, van Maanen highlights the key issues inherent to the study in this thesis, the element of experimentation or exploration, the emphasis on reflection, and the aspect of how the social reality of online collaboration may be represented to make it 'real', namely through the voices of the participants, all of which cement the link between the study and ethnography.

The concept of narrative, however, although linked to ethnographic research, seems to be claiming a niche into which this study does not fit, despite its concentrated use of narrative elements. Wherever I turn in narrative research and representation, the quote I am met with is Ruth Behar's statement that research 'that doesn't break your heart just isn't worth doing anymore' (Behar, 1996, p. 177; Pelias, 2004; Ellis, 2004). Whilst these 'heart breaking' accounts make for captivating reading, and surely have made a groundbreaking impact on the ethnographic field, I feel that other issues, which might not seem to be as dramatic, warrant a similar approach, that voices are not just worth listening to if they tell of traumatic experiences. I do not for one moment consider my research to be heart breaking (although research going wrong may feel like the world falling apart). I would, however, side with David Mitchell (2000) when he says that 'the world runs on strangers coping', and that making these 'strangers' – my participants – more 'familiar', in line with the ethnographic concept of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, has given me insights not as readily achievable with pre-formatted questionnaires.

The remainder of this chapter will concentrate on methodological issues related to online research, before concentrating on each of the research methods in turn. The literature regarding reflective research and online collaboration has been further discussed in the relevant sections of the literature review, allowing the sections

below to concentrate largely on the impact these concepts have on the research itself. The chapter will end with a discussion of the limitations of the research.

#### **4.4 Aspects of online research (virtual ethnography)**

The study addresses issues arising in the research from an educational point of view, rather than a technological one. For the purpose of this study, technology is intended to support learning and facilitation, rather than standing as an end in itself. I am neither a programmer, nor do I have extensive experience with 'technology for the sake of it'. Instead, I have sought to learn the technological skills that may help me to become a better facilitator of online learning, in a field (language and cultural education) where geographical distance makes the case for the use of learning technologies (Brammerts, 1996).

Both studies informing this thesis effectively research online communities, with the emphasis on cultural exchange and understanding. Although this thesis is not an attempt to write a complete ethnography of either of these cases, an understanding of how the research of virtual communities may differ from more 'traditional' (i.e. face-to-face) ethnographies is necessary to discuss effectively the methodology involved.

Compared to the more traditional aspects of ethnography, there is as yet little literature concerning ethnography on the Internet. Researchers in the field, however, agree that there is a need to develop a new research approach to handle the different media and less traditional communities that are to be researched (Hine, 2000; Howard, 1988; Howard, 2002; Ward, 1999). Hine (2000, p. 21) raises questions relating to ways in which the researcher may be able to 'live' with the community in an online environment, whether it is possible to write an ethnography of a community based only on messages, without knowing the thoughts behind these messages. Hine comes to the conclusion that researchers do not need to share one timeframe with the researched any more (p. 23); however, Turkle (1997) argues that not only participating with the online community, but also knowing them face-to-face is vital for the best possible representation of an online community. For the study at hand, Turkle's practice was adhered to as much as possible, both by seeing

as many students as possible face-to-face, and by interacting with the group online. In Study A, the early finish prevented me from meeting the students in Germany, yet in Study B, I was able to meet all participants at least once, and much more frequently in the case of the pupils.

It was felt that the language-related issues were substantive enough to aim for face-to-face contact whenever possible, as this allows for body language and other visual clues to be taken into account, as well as for more spontaneous communication which enables learners to ask questions themselves, in a fluent communicative exchange. Ward (1999) argues that the researcher will need to experience the community as it is seen through the eyes of the participants. Following this was not always possible, as it had to be balanced with how I thought I would be best placed to gain access to the participants' experiences, namely in a relationship that included face-to-face meetings, at least to establish contact. This led to a discrepancy of experiences between the students and myself. Although I myself was able to meet at least the American students of Study A face-to-face, the students themselves had no such opportunity. In effect, I feel this lack of face-to-face contact was detrimental to the research. For the second study, I have therefore made sure that there was an opportunity for the students to meet the pupils, as far as was feasible. Although a meeting of all participants was not possible, as the final participants at school had not been defined, those students who could attend the meeting had a chance to see the actual school and meet pupils from the corresponding year group, hopefully giving them a better idea about the participants 'at the other end' and paving the way for an increased 'peer cognisance'. Throughout Study B, I have found a 'blended learning' approach more useful, mixing face-to-face input with online interaction, and thinking carefully about the design of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Motteram (2004) found that such an approach allows for the benefits of both styles, namely in that it gives participants time to think before asking them to respond, and allows for a differentiation in tasks to both increase learner autonomy and maintain motivation (Motteram, 2004). Although both of these benefits could potentially be achieved online, little research has to date been completed involving younger learners (as became obvious in the literature review), and based on the experiences during Study B, where at some point I was physically absent from the research due to a conference attendance, these learners relied heavily on face-to-face facilitation,

adopting an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to the project unless they were reminded of it.

Due to the small amount of contact time, and the special considerations regarding younger learners, the design of the virtual learning environment becomes a vital element in the overall research process.

#### **4.4.1 Design of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)**

Although perhaps not a method in itself, the considerations regarding the design of the VLE where the group would be collaborating form a large part of the methodology and epistemology related to the study. In a study that tries to implement a learning environment conducive to learner empowerment, collaboration and reflective learning, the vehicle with which these goals are to be achieved online, i.e. WebCT, and its design, must form a section of the methods and methodology chapter. Furthermore WebCT itself gives opportunities for the analysis and evaluation of data gathered online, making it a potential research tool. As both studies made use of WebCT as a learning platform, this section gives a short introduction to WebCT itself, before discussing individual designs pertaining to Study A and Study B.

## WebCT

WebCT (Web Course Tools) is the name of a commercial provider for 'e-learning systems' ([www.webct.com](http://www.webct.com)). Different licensing options allow systems managers to tailor the product to their institution's needs. Although a new version, WebCT Vista, is being introduced in institutions worldwide during the writing of this thesis, at the time of research taking place, both studies made use of the Campus Edition, making this edition the focus. WebCT as a learning platform may be related to a website in layout; it is, in fact, possible to design complete web pages in HTML format and incorporate these into a WebCT environment. An introductory page allows learners to access various sections at the designer's discretion. These sections can be chosen from a pool of options by the designer, allowing for tailor-made designs. Options include

- an online syllabus,
- a calendar where important dates can be highlighted and explained
- a section for readings,
- a discussion board, where learners can read and post messages,
- typed chat rooms for synchronous, immediate communication,
- a personal homepage that learners can create to give information about themselves,
- assessment opportunities in the form of quizzes.

Functions may be created at any time, then released later through a programming feature. This means, for example, that the readings for a second unit may only be released to individual students once the quiz for the first unit has been completed. The designer (often the principal lecturer) has further options at their disposal, including forms of student tracking, allowing them to find out when students last accessed the VLE, how many messages they read and/or posted, etc. For assessment purposes, the quizzes can be compared and averaged, and it is possible to create a printout of data for future use.

## Designing for WebCT

As the studies composing this research were related to communication rather than assessment, I considered it counter-productive to make use of the quiz option, so as not to give the impression that a particular form of 'performance' or a 'right way' to participate would be encouraged. Although a certain type of learner may prefer this form of extrinsic motivation (see Chapters 2 and 3), I felt it important to leave the impetus with the collaborative aspect of the study, the learner-centred creation of a questionnaire for Study A, and a number of collaborative display pages (as well as one individual page) for Study B. As a result, the quiz option was not used, and turned 'invisible' to the learners.

For Study A, where the sample was made up entirely of students, the generic layout of WebCT was used. I myself have participated in several WebCT discussions as a student, and have never found the layout a problem. However, the learning platform was, after all, created for 'higher education purposes' ([www.webct.com](http://www.webct.com)), and I feel that, as both universities involved in Study A already used WebCT to deliver degree modules, I may have inadvertently undermined my own intention to create an environment that would function outside the existing university teaching and learning process, unfettered by pre-existing suppositions on the students' part.

With Study B, an additional aspect comes with the inclusion of younger learners. By its own admission, the VLE has not been created for use within secondary schools, and with more and more emphasis on visual materials in a literacy context in general (Kress, 1998), I felt it important to make the VLE more visually appealing for younger learners. Peterson (1998) argues for a design rationale which will incorporate 'both a high-level theoretical view of how students learn and lower-level issues of interface design and site construction' (p. 350). As mentioned above, the options contained within WebCT allow designers to tailor the content, however, they also present some limits to the design. A desirable option for working with younger learners, for example, would be the 'shared whiteboard', where learners can collaborate in real time on the same piece of text. Such a feature is currently used by the Open University in their language courses, and, as a former participant in such a course, I can say from first-hand experience that such an option is very powerful. A further feature which might be useful would be the inclusion of sound, allowing for oral practice of foreign vocabulary, extending the language practised by participants

to all four skills (listening and speaking as well as reading and writing). This option, however, requires simultaneous communication, a goal difficult to facilitate successfully without regular access to the class and with students in a number of different situations involved in the various countries. Overall, the features on offer within the Campus Edition of WebCT were considered adequate for the purposes of this study.

In order to stay true to the learner-centred aspect of the project, I felt it important that the participants gain a sense of ownership, not just throughout the work itself, but also by taking an active role in the design. For Study A, students were encouraged to create their personal homepage within WebCT, in order to leave their 'stamp'. Few participants, however, made use of this option, resulting in a different approach for Study B, where pupils are encouraged to create a virtual poster for the geographical area where 'their' student is currently located, which is then transposed onto WebCT, allowing learners to come face to face with their own work every time they log on. The personal homepage was repeated from Study A, however, an incentive (in the form of a voucher) was added to motivate those learners who would not otherwise have chosen to participate. The pupils' perceptions of these attempts to personalise the environment will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

#### ***4.5 Combining online and face-to-face – the blended networked learning approach***

One main difference between Study A and Study B was the inclusion of the face-to-face element into both the project and the research. This further confused the 'labelling' of the research – as Mason (2005) recently reported, although there are a number of potential interpretations to the term 'blended learning', the most commonly accepted one today is the blending of online and face-to-face teaching; however, the argument remains that 'blended learning' is 'an amorphous term' (p. 219), and looking at the articles Mason's editorial introduces, indeed none of them are of direct relevance to my research. Mason concludes with the suggestion that

*[p]erhaps it is useful to consider blended learning primarily as an approach to the design of learning interventions. These interventions will be a mix of*

*learning media and methods with the aim of achieving specific learning outcomes (ibid.).*

I follow this description with the definition of 'networked learning' that is associated with the Centre for Studies of Advanced Learning Technologies (CSALT) at Lancaster University, and reported by Jones (2004):

*Networked learning is learning in which information and communication technology (C&IT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources.*

*Jones, 2004, p. 89*

These two definitions, in fact, serve to outline at least in part my own intentions regarding the combination of face-to-face and online collaboration, i.e. the exploration of the concept of peer cognisance in this context. Unlike the term Computer-Supported Collaborative (Cooperative) Learning, the term 'networked learning' is largely free from 'a moral imperative for close forms of coordination and cohesion rather than loose relationships' (Jones and Esnault, 2004, online) inherent in CSCL. Study A had already served in part to illustrate how vulnerable an online project entirely without face-to-face contact would be to extrinsic influences such as holidays and examinations, and I further felt that pursuing a 'pure' online project would be artificial and fail to utilise opportunities of collaboration in a context that provided by the fact whole class of pupils was involved. Finally, I felt supported by literature regarding the positive aspects of the introduction to/maintenance of face-to-face elements in online projects (see below).

Nicol, Minty and Sinclair (2005) found in a higher education context that students felt that face-to-face communication 'provided a bridge into online communication' (p. 272). Although Salmon (2000), conversely, argues that initial face-to-face meetings can prove to be a barrier to subsequent online communication, I felt that my own, multi-blended approach to the project – bringing together university and pupil participants, as well as two languages, would benefit from a face-to-face element, resulting in one initial meeting between students and pupils, and substantial face-to-face collaboration and facilitation with and between the pupils. The social element of online learning has already been explored in section 3.5.4 of the literature

review, where I argued (against others, such as Blake (2000)) that a social element is important to sustain motivation online. The project at hand sought to facilitate this social element, as well as to provide easier communication for the purpose of collaboration, by adopting a blended networked learning approach, using whatever means necessary to improve the connections between participants.

Following the discussions surrounding design of the research and background to the methodology, the next section concentrates on ethical considerations, before the remainder of the chapter focuses on the actual methods used.

## **4.6 Concerns and Ethics**

Reading my research diary, it seems that concerns, in one way or another, feature in most entries. Throughout the study, I felt acutely aware that I wanted to 'do right' by everybody concerned, pupils, students, the school, university, and sponsors alike. As a first step toward this goal, all names of individuals (and locations, where necessary) have been changed. Participants have been given the choice to pick their own pseudonym, where they did not make use of this offer, I chose a pseudonym for them. Although all pupils have native-speaker level of English, a very small number would have been identifiable by names linking them to a specific ethnic minority, and thus making them more identifiable. To avoid this, and in line with the pupils' wishes (if they chose their own name), pseudonyms have been picked from a unified Anglo-Saxon name pool.

### **4.6.1 The danger of interventionist research**

There are several issues related to access that worried me greatly, the first being, once again, related to labelling. My study gives access to what I am hoping to be a beneficial learning environment to a minority of learners from one year group only, within a large secondary school. Critics may call such a study 'interventionist', as I am obviously withholding the same experience from other learners. I had no intention to put any learners at a distinct advantage, but by denying access to the remaining year group, this is what I ultimately did. To make the project manageable,

however, and to make it possible to reflect on my own development as a facilitator throughout the project, it has been necessary to limit the number of pupils involved at this stage. The deep analysis of pupils' and students' perceptions would not be possible on a larger scale, and I feel I cannot argue for the necessity of deep involvement and collaborating with learners on the one hand, yet conduct the study on a scale that makes it impossible for me to even remember the participants' names. As such, keeping the research to a manageable size, 'doing right' by my sample with view to 'doing right' by other learners as a result of this research was what propelled the research forward.

#### **4.6.2 The danger of socially discriminating research**

A further ethical challenge related to access is the nature of the project itself – WebCT allows for access from any computer connected to the Internet, and the time I hoped learners would spend on the computer was not restricted to the number of lessons the class has timetabled in the school's computer room, instead intending to motivate pupils to access the project from home. Yet, as Kyle (2000) describes within a university context, this posed a substantial dilemma for the participants – how are they to participate fully, should their family be one of the 54% of all households without access to the Internet. Furthermore, it becomes obvious from the National Statistics (no date) that any study relying on home access discriminates against children from a lower socio-economic background (the percentage of households with Internet access in 2002/03 in the lowest income decile was only 12%, in the highest decile it was 85%). Although the location of the school involved suggested that few pupils would come from the lower margins of socio-economic backgrounds, the fact remains that even regulated access at home, monitored by parents, may inhibit the learners' participation. Wellington (2001) mentions an additional problem of equity and access, that of gender. Although I myself did not stipulate this as a theme for my research, the pupil focus group interviews have highlighted this as an issue, as can be seen from Chapter 6. Wellington further splits the concept of socio-economic background into two, i.e. issues of social class and economic background (p. 240). Furlong *et al* (2000) also discuss these issues with regard to the National Grid for Learning, and mention

gender inequality, income, and cultural background as the main issues of relevance to this particular study. Selwyn (1998) supports this with findings illustrating that having access to a computer at home positively influences pupils' educational use of ICT. Once more, I was very much aware that I did not want to place any class member at a disadvantage, and so devised additional access to computers in form of a Tuesday lunchtime club. This was not particularly successful, as will be outlined in Chapter 7.

Further to the problems of access outlined here, I felt that there might also be additional aspects I would never be privy to, taking into account human behaviour, namely the possibility that some pupils may not admit to access problems for fear of embarrassment in front of their peers, whereas others may use it as an excuse for lack of motivation to participate.

### **4.6.3 Sample**

As sampling procedures regarding Study A have already been discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the section below concentrates on Study B.

The sample of Study B consists of a total of 30 individuals, 24 school pupils and six university students.

Because the university in question was already involved in the DfES funded project this study became part of, the selection was more or less taken out of my hands and presented me with a convenience sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). Access to the university students was granted by the Languages Department these students were members of, as part of a workshop I gave to help them plan activities for their upcoming teaching assistantship. Out of the students present, 11 students originally volunteered for the project after I introduced it as part of the workshop, however, four of these subsequently withdrew, citing time pressures, and one failed to respond to my emails, creating a self-selected sample of six students. Although I would have hoped to have a wider choice, as my objective was to find students who would cover a wide geographic area in the target countries Germany and Austria, the six students involved fortunately, and by chance, were spending their year abroad in

widely differing locations, ranging from Rostock in the North of Germany to St. Pölten in Austria. One aspect of dissatisfaction with the sample is the gender distribution – all remaining six students were female, although the original 11 included two male students, which I would have been particularly happy to retain, to provide examples to the male pupils involved in the project (see below). The six students are at varying stages in their degrees, three have completed their degree and have chosen to spend an additional year abroad, for the other three, the year 2004/05 was the statutory year abroad, as part of their language degree.

Achieving and maintaining access has not been easy, despite 'jumping onto the bandwagon' of an existing study, as only the original agreement was in place, without any work as yet completed. The reflection below highlights further difficulties relating to this topic.

### Accessing the sample

Physical access to the sample group has not been easy – in case of the pupils, co-ordination with the school has been hampered by confusion and misunderstandings, lack of replies (or an extensive period of time before the reply arrived), and forgetfulness – this will be further discussed in Chapter 7. One lack of access I *had* anticipated was related to the university students. As in Study A, the students in Study B were volunteers; however, in addition to this, they had been removed from their usual environment during their year abroad. A project that seemed like a good idea when introduced in the comfort of their own university thus did not seem quite as relevant or interesting when students were worrying about how to connect to register for a phone connection in Germany or Austria (see Chapter 5)! Different starting times abroad meant that, from one day to the next, my number of student participants would change as they disappeared and re-surfaced – influencing not only the student : pupil ratio, but also design ideas for WebCT. Without introducing constant surveillance methods, or a way to include the project in an accredited module, there was no way I could see in which these issues could be overcome, and sections of the discussion chapters (particularly Chapters 5 and 7) further relate to these issues.

As the secondary school in question had also already been approached regarding this project, I had only to negotiate an appropriate year group and class. As already mentioned above, as much as I would have preferred to conduct the study with a larger sample to make the project accessible for an entire year group, considerations regarding my own availability dictated the use of one class only – something I regret from the point of fairness only, not from the point of reliability and validity, as I will argue below. A Year 9 cohort was selected due to the crucial effect motivation may have in this particular year, i.e. the motivation to continue a subject to GCSE, or dropping it after Year 9. Although this was not an issue for this particular school – where languages remain compulsory, as outlined in Chapter 1 – I am hoping the motivations and experiences from the pupils and students in the sample (and the facilitator) will be of interest and relevance to other schools.

Because Year 9 groups at the school in question are set according to ability, it was then further necessary to select a group from the cohort. The final selection (the top set) was made for a number of reasons, one of them being that the teacher I liaised with was to be the German teacher of this particular class, making organisation easier. This teacher also felt that a top set was more likely to ‘stick out’ the duration of the programme and provide results to be reported back to the DfES. Although I personally would have preferred a wider range of ability, as would the Headteacher of the school, I could not argue with the additional problems a mixed group would present, i.e. no timetabled lessons, no fixed access to the computer room, etc. Due to these considerations, I decided to agree to work with the top set Year 9, consisting of 24 pupils, 12 male and 12 female.

In conjunction with selecting a suitable class, the school’s Headteacher was approached to ensure school regulations were adhered to regarding access to the pupils and use of the data later on. A letter including a consent slip was drafted and given to all pupils for their parents to sign, and to return to their class teacher (see appendix 6). Responsibility to collate the responses lay with the liaison teacher, which posed one of the major problems throughout the study. Relying on joint efforts at professionalism and responsibility, I trusted the teacher when I was told all replies had come back, yet were at the teacher’s home. Similarly, I requested a

Special Educational Needs register, but was told none of the pupils had special needs, despite me voicing expressions to the contrary after I had met the class. Both the consent forms and the Special Needs register were made available to me during the very last session in December 2004, where it transpired that the teacher had mislaid nine out of the 24 consent forms and signed forms on the parents' behalf, and that three out of the 24 pupils were on the register. Whilst I am not happy to have completed the research without all relevant information and consent forms in my possession, I maintain that there is a need for mutual professional trust, which has been broken in this case.

To return to the structure of the sample, the 24 pupils were asked to collaborate in groups of four, and apart from one exception (which will be outlined in the discussion chapter), they built these groups quickly and efficiently, resulting in the following sample groups:

- **Kuss Kuss:** Four girls, none of whom are registered as having a special educational need.
- **SoSoRaCh:** Four girls, one of whom is registered to be monitored on suspicion of Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
- **Kangaroos:** Four girls, one of whom is registered as having unspecified Learning Difficulties.
- **JerryBerrys:** Four boys, none of whom are registered as having a special educational need
- **Misfits:** Four boys, none of whom are registered as having a special educational need
- **DreamTeam:** Four boys, one of whom is registered as having Asperger's Syndrome and who receives learning support.

According to the liaison teacher, none of the pupils are registered to have English as an additional language, and after working with the groups, although several are of non-white or mixed ethnicity, I am confident that all children had a high enough command of English to participate in the study.

#### **4.6.4 Further ethical issues**

The distinctly different composition of an online environment in comparison to a traditional one (see above) expresses the need for different ethics for these communities. In accordance, several guidelines regarding the ethics of researcher interaction with and reporting of online communities have been composed over recent years (King, 1996; Jones, 1999; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Both Hine (2000) and Turkle (1997) have raised ethical issues related to identity and anonymity - contributions are much harder to conceal if the data in question are still publicly available on the Internet, such as in a notice-board format. Their findings have influenced my decision to utilise WebCT as a communication platform in both studies, as it allows for absolute security from outside influences. To further comply with ethical guidelines, each individual institution – university and school – has been contacted and asked to specify their own ethical criteria. As a result, Study A was brought before a research ethics board in the US (see appendix 13) and was permitted to go ahead, and the parents of Study B were asked to sign a parental consent form (see appendix 6) which outlined the aims of the project, allowing their child to participate. In order to promote an open information policy, further information on both studies was made available within the respective WebCT environments, accessible to participants and their parents.

#### **4.7 Methods**

The methods involved in ethnography are intended to gather in-depth, qualitative data about the group or phenomenon that is to be researched, frequently still in line with its original links to anthropology (Chambers, 2000). Kirk and Miller (1986) argue that all qualitative research must follow an ordered, four-phase sequence of invention, discovery, interpretation and explanation, and state that ‘the bundles of research activities performed in each of these phases [...] differ qualitatively from one another’ (p. 60). Although this may be true for isolated studies, I would like to argue that my own study is more related to the cyclical approach illustrated by Wellington (2000), particularly as the evaluation of Study A led to changes in Study

B, even though, from a temporal viewpoint, the two studies overlapped to a certain extent. The four research methods below, namely questionnaires, focus groups, observation and reflection are intended to form pieces of the puzzle which will fuse together to provide answers to the research questions. As with any study which asks participants to create material, be it online or in form of a learning diary, these materials will also need to be taken into account, resulting in the section on documents below.

#### **4.7.1 Questionnaires**

Although a number of different questionnaires were involved in both studies, these were not intended as a main data carrier on which the entire study would be based. Instead, they served two purposes, namely to provide an initial overview over generic data (in case of the students), and to allow the sample among the pupils to be compared on at least some levels against the overall population (in this case all pupils within the same year group who were studying German). Due to the nature of the research, it was largely possible to achieve a response rate nearing 100%, as I would only accept interested students onto the project once they had filled in the questionnaire, and the pupils filled in their questionnaires during lesson time. The only exception to this was the questionnaire administered at the end of Study A, the purpose of which was to determine where the research conduct could have been improved. By this time, those students who had already left the project did not respond, which presumably led to the loss of valuable data, as it seems natural to assume that it would have been these students who might have had particular views on issues such as research design and student retention.

##### **Question types**

Both the student and the pupil questionnaire (see appendices 7 and 9) consisted of a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Other than those questions requesting background information (language teacher, form, name, etc.), the closed-end questions largely involved ranking exercises and Likert scales (Likert, 1932), in order to give a comparable overview over the entire year group. Although the study

concerns itself with personal experiences and argues that each individual's experiences are valid, I felt it important to see to what extent the class I was working with might be representative of the overall year group, as this will go further to make the results useful for other researchers. Although there were only six statements in the Likert-style item in the pupil questionnaire, an attempt towards reliability was made by offering similar and/or disagreeing statements ('I like being told the right answer, rather than having to work it out' versus 'I like finding things out for myself') to assess internal consistency (Peterson, 2000, p. 79). An effort was made to create statements that would attract differing responses, to avoid pupils answering on 'automated pilot'.

The ranking exercise in the pupil questionnaire did not go entirely as planned, as, despite the pilot, some pupils decided to rank the five items one to five, whereas others decided to give each item a number, depending on its rank (resulting in potentially four twos and one three). This presented a problem in the analysis, but it was decided, as the item was only intended to provide background information, to treat the information at face value.

### **Piloting**

All questionnaires were piloted with a sample of students/pupils in the same situation and/or year group, and changes were made before the final questionnaire was administered.

Further information on the questionnaires themselves and their analysis will be presented in the following chapters, although an overwhelming majority of data are derived from other methods, such as focus groups and reflective writing (see below).

### **4.7.2 Focus groups (Study B)**

The decision to use focus groups as a research method resulted from the learner-centred, collaborative angle of the research. Although also intended as a final means to gather data towards the end of Study A, due to this study's early demise, the

method was not used until Study B. Here, the way in which small groups of pupils are teamed up with one student lends itself to the method, and allows for comparison among different groups. The Higher Education students themselves form another focus group for data gathering, although their experiences will be shared online.

Myers (1998) comments on one of the advantages of focus groups that 'they seem like everyday talk' (p. 85), a feature I hoped would encourage pupils to share their views more readily than in a more structured research environment. Morgan (1998) identifies the strength of focus groups to aid exploration, discovery, context, depth and interpretation (p. 12), all aspects particularly valid for this study, which seeks to engage with learners on a collaborative journey, rather than prescribing and then evaluating a particular educational setting. Catterall and Maclaran (1997) state that 'group forces or dynamics become an integral part of the procedure' (paragraph 1.1) in focus group research, a feature which should arguably be considered preferential if collaboration is the intended outcome of a study.

Morgan (1998), however, is at pains to point out that not all information gathering in a group is research, and, indeed, not all group work sessions with the pupils involve focus group work, and instead may concentrate on collaborative group work around the project. I would argue, however, that in this context, as the participants 'experience' the group work, and that their experiences are the focus of the study, the borders between research, chatting, listening, etc. are becoming blurred to the point of non-existence. It is hoped that this practice will strengthen the focus group work further, allowing learners to build up trust on a variety of levels. The outcome of the study is meant to improve the learning experience for the learners themselves, creating a cyclical influence, aimed to empower the participant (Krueger, 1994). Madriz (2000) stresses the importance of focus groups as such a tool of empowerment, which concentrates on 'listening' to the participants' voices, and being therefore of value in fields where empowerment has been an issue, such as feminist and ethnic research.

Krueger (ibid) mentions that focus group research with young people warrants special consideration, stressing the participants' potential perceived need to 'comply' with the moderator, rather than giving truthful opinions. Again, I am hoping that the fact that the participants are known to each other, and that they will

be working with the students, myself and each other for an extended period of time, will minimise this effect. For a list of focus group questions used in both sessions, see appendices 11.1 and 11.2. All focus group sessions were conducted in a pre-booked empty classroom or the deputy-head's office, recorded with a tape recorder and manually transcribed by myself as soon as possible after the session took place – normally within 48 hours.

### 4.7.3 Observation

Observation within the study took place on several levels, but was impossible to achieve on others. Whilst in the classroom, I could observe pupils completing their tasks and collaborating, and I was also able to ‘observe’ participation online. What I was missing was any collaboration taking place outside the lessons I was observing, and even if I was physically present, I would also teach the actual class (for reasons outlined below), which would seriously divide my attention and somewhat dictate the amount and type of observation I was able to complete.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) point towards the continuum of highly structured -> semi-structured -> unstructured observation, remarking that

*a semi-structured observation will have an agenda of issues but will gather data to illuminate these issues in a far less pre-determined or systematic manner [than a structured observation] (p. 305).*

Although, from a personal point of view, I would be far happier going into the observation process with clearly-defined hypotheses and questions, I am aware that ‘an agenda of issues’ gives me the freedom to explore more readily, and once more takes into account the developmental process of the research. On a different continuum, namely Gold’s ‘Roles in Sociological Field Observations’ (1958), my part in the research would most likely be deemed ‘participant as observer’, although I would argue that my role might be perceived differently by pupils and students respectively. Gold’s argument that ‘it behooves [the researcher] to retain sufficient elements of “the stranger”’ (p. 221) so as not to negatively influence the research outcome by too close a relationship with the ‘informants’ [*sic*] may be useful when

working with the pupils, if only because the limited contact time may make it difficult to achieve a better balance of roles.

Jorgensen (1989) describes the methodology of participant observation as one that 'aims to provide practical and theoretical truths about human existence' (p. 16). In the case reviewed in this study, it is human co-existence that is the focus, although to what extent this 'co-existence' can be observed will only become apparent in the discussion chapters. With regard to the students, and, to a certain extent, the pupils themselves, I am much happier aligning myself with the collaborative approach described by Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2000), who argue for a shift from 'observation as a research 'method' per se to a perspective that emphasizes observation as a context for interaction among those involved in research collaboration' (p. 676). In a research study emphasising a learner-centred approach, this commonality of roles appears to be desirable, although, as Angrosino and Mays de Pérez also state, the mismatch of power within the group relationships will be somewhat prohibitive in that respect (p. 680). This is particularly pertinent to my role among the pupils, for, as Fine and Sandstrom (1988) point out, the 'social roles of the participants have been influenced by age, cognitive development, physical maturity, and acquisition of social responsibility' (p. 14). In observing the relationships and potentially emerging peer cognisance among the pupils, it may therefore be the case that I never truly observed what took place, but instead was treated to a show aimed at placating the adult in their midst; however, my impressions are such that, due to the time spent with the pupils, and the fact that I had no direct impact on their grades, the data I collected were as reliable as possible under the circumstances. Among the possible roles Fine and Sandstrom mention are those of supervisor, leader, observer and friend, out of which the leader role may be the one most likely assigned to me by pupils. The dilemma I faced is adequately described by Best:

*although I was not a classroom teacher and had no influence over the homework the children were given or the grades they received, they viewed me as a member of the school establishment because I was an adult within the school.*

*(Best, 1983, p. 2, in Fine and Sandstrom, 1988, p. 24)*

The argument that comes through clearly is that tutors will, at all times, find it difficult to be called upon as a frame of reference, legitimise knowledge, or setting rules.

Fine and Sandstrom's research differentiates between three age groups, namely preschoolers, preadolescents and adolescents; however, I am not certain that I will have the luxury to distinguish between the latter two. In Year 9, pupils are 13-14 years old, an age which places them right on the borderline to adolescence, which, coupled with different ages for maturity, in my opinion may make for a very difficult sample indeed, and a widely ranging number of roles for myself as the observer, not only from between different pupils from the start, but also the way in which these roles develop through the combination of the pupils' growing maturity combined with their familiarity with me as a project leader and researcher.

#### **4.7.4 Documentary research**

Apart from more generic documents, such as those utilised in the literature review, the main emphasis here lies with source material which is 'contemporaneous and co-present' (Scott, 1990, p. 2) to additional data gathered, namely observational notes and my own reflections. This documentary evidence has been created as part of the study itself, in form of messages posted to the WebCT notice board and the work of groups and individuals associated with the study, as well as diary entries regarding these, where appropriate. As well as presenting material for analysis in itself, this documentary evidence may also be of certain use for triangulation purposes (see below).

#### **4.8 Reflection as a research method**

Although the study which forms the basis of this thesis is, to an extent, auto-ethnographic, there are further reflective aspects related to it, unless one sees the entire study as a number of smaller auto-ethnographies, encouraging each participant to reflect more deeply on their ideas regarding learning, collaborating, and indeed

German culture and language. As I will not be privy to all (or even any) participants' private thoughts, however, such an approach will be impossible – the term 'auto-ethnography', by definition, gives the interpretation – I cannot write an auto-ethnography about somebody else, nor encourage secondary school pupils or university students to write auto-ethnographies with the limited amount of time and training available. Therefore, the reflective aspect of the research will need to be split in two – the first part being the reflective practice I seek to encourage among the participants, through their group reports, their reflective postings, etc. (see below); and the second being the auto-ethnographic approach I myself am employing for my own learning purposes. Further aspects of reflective learning have been discussed in the literature review, leaving the remainder of this section to take a closer look at the auto-ethnographic approach.

The students involved were asked to reflect on their experiences within the student area on WebCT, with the added option of keeping a reflective journal, either in paper form or online. Little use was made of either of these options, resulting in the inclusion of the narrative reflection, which formed the basis of the analysis of their experiences.

I have had the luxury of exploring and developing my likes and dislikes regarding a reflective diary over an extended period of time – unfortunately, the pupils involved in the study do not have the same privilege. As free reflection (such as unguided reflection in a diary) would be dependent on the pupils' motivation to engage with this reflective exercise (without being able to offer them detailed support or reward for their efforts), it was decided that structured reflection, which asks pupils to comment on both their own work and that of the group, would be more successful. Each of the tasks during Study B included a reflective exercise, in order to prepare pupils for the final reflective evaluation at the end of the project.

#### **4.8.1 The auto-ethnographic approach**

Richardson (1997, p. 31) links the knowledge of one's own life to an improved understanding of other people's lives. This outcome is desirable in a research project

that places emphasis on peer cognisance, and, as such, the research related to this thesis draws heavily on reflection, both on my own and the learners' part.

Unlike an autobiography, in which authors seek to share their entire lives with their readership, an auto-ethnography relates to specific periods of time, during which the researcher's life may have undergone a particular change or development. It is unlikely that any individual would experience only one particular aspect of their lives at any one time; for most people, different experiences and developments overlap and coincide, influencing each other in the process. It is therefore presumptuous to assume that it would be possible to observe and reflect on my development as an online facilitator within a protective bubble and unchanged by outside influences; instead, the auto-ethnographic aspect of the thesis will seek to trace how these interdependences were experienced and utilised.

In the literature, Richardson (1997) asks how we, as researchers and writers, may nurture our own voices, whilst at the same time laying claim to 'knowing' something (p. 2). This dilemma of traditional research, which often places emphasis on 'objectivity' and seeks to write the researcher out of the research, has been more and more resolved in recent years, indeed, with authors arguing that, as 'objective' research may not actually be possible, it is much more important to situate the researcher's beliefs within the research (Davies, 1999). Within ethnographic research, this paradigm is subscribed to even more forcefully, arguing that an understanding of oneself may help to also understand others (Richardson, 1997). The auto-ethnographic approach linked to this study involves reflective interludes within the overall research, aiming to tie personal development to steps within the research process. It is, in fact, also personal reflection, resulting from my first role as a facilitator in the year 2000, that began the critical engagement with facilitation as a research process. Oakeshott (1933) calls this an 'arrest of experience', the stepping out of 'our everyday experiences of people, objects and places', subjecting them 'to different sorts of examination'. Oakeshott actually criticises these 'arrests of experience' for preventing reality from ascertaining itself (p. 324); I, however, have found the practice useful in order to take stock of my research and my involvement with it.

To allow for analysis and comparison, such as looking for correlating experiences within a group at various stages (a shared sense of frustration or joy, etc.), the way the research diary is kept will need to be fairly formal, with regular entries to enable a temporal comparison. The role of the research diary was explored in a previous MA Educational Research assignment (Gläsmann, 2003, unpublished). As part of this research, Sanjek's (1990, p. 108) differentiation between a research journal and a research diary was discussed, i.e. a differentiation between observation and interpretation. As Sanjek himself agrees, these boundaries are beginning to blur. I see no need to keep different research diaries for different purposes - e.g. such as the recommended 19-section Intensive Journal championed by Progoff (1975, in Moon, 1999, p. 112), which allows for differentiated sections relating to daily logs, dialogue sections and dream logs.

Through personal experience, I have found it important to find a way to make keeping a research diary as uncomplicated as possible. Through years of trial and error, I have found that keeping a blog (a web-log: an online diary) is most suited to my needs, in that it allows me access whenever I am on a computer, and produces data which are searchable, as long as I remember to use the same phrase ('for literature review' was a common one). Although McClellan (2004) in the Guardian quips that 'creating a blog to track the progress of your PhD thesis might seem like the ultimate delaying tactic – a way to avoid ever actually writing the thing itself', he comes to agree with MacRobert-Stewart, who, like me, states that keeping a blog ([www.whataloveleywar.co.uk/war/](http://www.whataloveleywar.co.uk/war/)) has helped her to give focus to her ideas. She also mentions the advantage of publishing your thoughts online, although I have decided not to follow this particular path, as I am all too aware how quickly my fingers may slip, divulging information that, for ethical reasons, should remain anonymous. As such, I am losing out on the advantage of engaging in the sort of world-wide academic discussion that MacRobert-Stewart relishes.

## 4.9 Triangulation

As triangulation is largely used to ensure the validity and reliability of data, it would appear at first glance that a study concentrating on personal development may have no need for such procedures. However, as Fine and Sandstrom (1988) point out,

*as “grownups”, we are limited by our tendency to process [children’s] talk through our own view of the world. We are constrained by the “adultcentric” (Goode, 1986) nature of our understandings (p. 9).*

By collaborating closely with both pupils and students during the analysis of the findings, and placing an emphasis on making the participants’ voices heard, I am hoping to gain different viewpoints which help display the overall picture. Coupled with a combination of research methods (see above), this triangulation will hopefully serve to ensure that I, as much as possible, am basing my findings and developments on what actually happened, rather than my own perception of incidents.

By default, the ‘experiences’ the research seeks to explore will necessarily be recounted by individuals, thus ‘flavoured’ by their current frame of mind, their worries, or their concern to please me, the researcher. Although the sample is quite small (particularly in the students’ case), it has nevertheless been possible to identify both common denominators and what statistics would call ‘outliers’, such as the cases of individual groups which had to battle against more than their fair share of difficulties. The discussion chapters highlight these ‘outliers’ clearly, and I have made every attempt to refrain from drawing early conclusions where I felt the data did not support these.

Having looked at the methods and methodology behind the study, the remainder of this chapter covers a summary of data collected, issues surrounding the analysis of data and concerns regarding the validity of the study, before turning to the findings in Chapter 5.

## 4.10 Summary of data collected

### 4.10.1 Study A

<b>Planned data gathering</b>	<b>Actual data gathering</b>
Questionnaire for partnering purposes	Achieved
Face-to-face interview with Willowby students prior to start of project, e-mail interview with Kuddelmunch students	Achieved
Face-to-face interview with Kuddelmunch students in February (half way point through the project), e-mail with Willowby students	Not achieved, due to termination of project. Instead e-mail interview with students, in order to gain insight in potential reasons for project termination.
Face-to-face interview with all students in May (end of project)	Not achieved (see above)
Online asynchronous discussion via WebCT during phase one	Achieved
Online synchronous discussion and audio-visual communication	Not achieved, due to termination of project
Research diary entries from facilitator throughout project, aiding reflection and facilitator development	Achieved

*Table 4.1 Data collection Study A*

## 4.10.2 Study B

<b>Planned data gathering</b>	<b>Actual data gathering</b>
Initial Questionnaire – Higher Education	Achieved
Initial Questionnaire with entire year group from school	Achieved
Face-to-face focus group interviews with pupils	Achieved
Online asynchronous discussion via WebCT	Achieved
Research diary entries from facilitator throughout project, aiding reflection and facilitator development	Achieved
Reflective data from students	Achieved
Reflective data from pupils	Achieved

*Table 4.2 Data collection Study B*

Please note that a more detailed account of data collected from Study B can be found in appendix 12.

## 4.11 Analysis

A study that tries to capture the voices of the participants can only be truly successful if these voices are heard. As such, it is important to be that the analysis used in this study attempts to relay these voices as truthfully as possible (Pelias, 2004; Ellis, 2004).

Although the data gathered from the three sources - pupils, students, and myself - were different in nature, I decided to code them for common themes nonetheless. The main qualitative evaluative data are the student narratives, the pupil focus group interviews, and my own personal reflections and blogs. After Study A, I felt that, in order to research experiences related to collaboration and peer cognisance in a

coherent manner, I had to look at the participants' experiences as a whole, rather than treating their online work as distinct and removed from their everyday life. This included both ends of the experiential spectrum, namely what might motivate and enthuse participants to collaborate and contribute, but on the other hand, what might prevent participants from making the best out of their experiences. Therefore, all data were first coded or 'chunked' (Bamberger and Schön, 1991, p. 187) to fall into three broad categories:

- Collaboration and Peer Cognisance
- Motivation and enthusiasm
- Fears and barriers.

Further subdivision was then informed by the data themselves, such as the gender issues raised by the pupils, and the influences of outside life on the project by the university students. Bamberger and Schön comment on a similar methodology:

*Once having found a chunking that seemed right, we went back and looked for the criteria we had quite spontaneously used. In other words, we reflected on our own behaviour while at the same time letting the behaviour of our participant 'talk back' to us [...]. These various chunkings served to help us see in new ways. New moves, new behaviour, new features of the protocol were 'liberated' – that is, things we hadn't seen at all became 'visible'. But, most important, we gained insight into our own, often tacit assumptions [...] (p. 187).*

A study which ultimately aims to improve practice, and thus the experience of all participants, must surely also aim to gain insight into assumptions. By concentrating on the same project from three different angles or points of view, I am hoping to challenge my own assumptions regarding a 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' project, as well as its facilitation.

My data analysis certainly contained elements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), but was also vulnerable to interpretation, as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56-57):

*A word or phrase does not "contain" its meaning as a bucket "contains" water, but has the meaning it does by being a choice made about its significance in a given context. That choice excludes other choices that could have been made to "stand for" that word or phrase, and that choice is embedded in a particular logic or a conceptual lens, whether the researcher is aware of it or not. It is better, we think, to be aware.*

*Miles and Huberman, 1994, pp. 56-57*

In line with Miles and Huberman, I attempted to maintain an awareness of the fact that it was me doing the 'chunking', and, where necessary, counted contributions under more than one heading. In a study that aims to represent participants' voices as accurately as possible, the 'authorial voice' (Wolcott, 2001, p. 20) thus becomes an issue. Wolcott accurately claims that

*in approaches that focus on the life of one or a few individuals, the problem is compounded when informants are capable of telling their stories themselves, raising doubts about how or whether we should make our presence known.*

As already stated, I chose to gather data in different ways. Whilst I would have liked to ask the pupils to write individual narratives about their experience, time constraints within the school timetable made it difficult to prepare such a task adequately. Furthermore, I wanted to give the pupils opportunity to feel 'safety in numbers' by interviewing them in focus groups, in the hope that the narrative thread would build momentum through cross-referencing among the group. With this, of course, comes the danger of pupils who are not particularly outspoken to agree with the more boisterous ones, but I tried to alleviate this issue during the interviews themselves, attempting to draw in shy pupils by asking more direct questions.

One piece of quantitative analysis is provided in Chapter 5, in form of a timeline comparison regarding access to WebCT. This has been included to highlight the impact anticipated collaboration had on participation, as will be detailed in Chapter 5 below.

Further methods of analysis were more appropriate for separate sections only, e.g. Lewin's (1952) theory of force field analysis, which is in part utilised and discussed in Chapter 6. A general introduction to ways in which the data were analysed can be

found at the beginning of Chapter 5, before the discussion focuses on each of the participating groups in turn.

## **4.12 Limitations of my research**

The limitations to this research are really two-fold, on the basis that there are, in fact, two different envisaged outcomes, if not more – and how does a researcher ever actually know all the outcomes their research may (or may not) have? On a basic level, however, there is Study B itself, aiming to find ways to enthuse pupils about language and culture, and university students about working with pupils. As this is the study that is intended to inform further work by the DfES, it seems that any limitations have wider ramifications than the second aspect – bringing into the open the different voices in an online learning environment. In reality, however, they share quite a few limitations – both are isolated studies which could never be repeated in exactly the same way, and both depend heavily on my own, personal interpretation of what I witness as part of my research. I will return to the limitations of the research in more detail in Chapter 9, after discussing the findings in the interceding chapters.

### **4.12.1 Validity and Truth**

Ellis (2004) argues that there is much more to validity than just accuracy, and that, in fact, accuracy and truth may not be the same. She states that ‘all validity is interpretive and dependent on context and the understanding we bring to the observation’ (p. 123). In questioning the issue of validity with her students, she refers to a number of authors, including Lincoln and Guba (2000) and Richardson (1997), whose arguments seem to be particularly relevant to this study. All the above authors question the traditional view of validity, with Lincoln and Guba stating:

*Critical theorists, constructivists, and participatory/cooperative inquirers take their primary field of interest to be precisely that subjective and intersubjective social knowledge and the active construction and cocreation*

*of such knowledge by human agents that is produced by human consciousness.*

*Lincoln and Guba, 2000, p. 176-77*

They explain further the idea of 'antifoundational' research, which refuses to adopt any unvarying, permanent standards 'by which truth can be universally known' (p. 177). Richardson (1997) suggests a crystal, through which each 'truth' can be viewed from a number of different angles. Just as truth is open to interpretation and reflection, so is the idea of generalisability and validity.

The more I veered towards the narrative aspect of my research, the less I 'hedged', and the more comfortable I have become that my research will be both generalisable and valid, though maybe not in the ways originally expected. Ellis (2004, p. 195) states that 'a story's generalizability is always being tested - not in the traditional way through random samples of respondents, but by readers as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experiences or about the lives of others they know'. On the same page, she also mentions how readers may validate our stories, however, the validation I have in mind is for my participants - I want them to see that their experiences are important and worthwhile, validate their voices by including them in the research - this returns to the idea of a learner-centred approach. The incredulity I met when asking pupils to tell me or write down their responses, and the pupils' and students' readiness - after initial difficulties - to share their experiences with me, validate my research in my eyes, as does the pupils' increasing confidence to speak out and criticise (and not in the sense of 'negating everything'). I do not want to pay lip service to the idea that I am finding out about what it is like to be part of an online collaborative learning project, I want to make sure that the students and pupils involved feel their voices are being heard, and are considered to be important.

The study described here is highly interpretive, and can only lay claims to an 'interpretive' truth, although it argues that an absolute truth may not exist. It will not be replicable; however, there will be certain issues raised as part of this study which may help to make future, similar studies more successful. At the end, there is no 'bag of tricks' that will cure all shortcomings of future projects - they will face their own challenges. The limitation of this study is that it is an isolated, highly personal

account of two studies in two different settings. The strength, however, is that I have had more time to devote to the reflection on these studies than most practitioners, and I am hoping that these reflections will aid those facilitators who operate in a more traditional environment, where online facilitation forms but a small part of the overall workload.

#### **4.13 Summary**

As a study exploring the voices of learners in an online learning environment and the development an online facilitator undergoes in order to become more successful at facilitating peer cognisance, this research aligns itself with a constructivist approach. Through a number of largely qualitative research methods, namely focus groups, questionnaires, observation and documentary research, the study seeks to balance the reflective account of the facilitator, in order to provide data which may be utilised in the further development of materials for similar projects in the future.

The study focuses on participants' experiences of collaboration, including motivation and barriers, as they relate to successful group work. The narrative, ethnographic approach adopted aims to capture the voices of all participants as truthfully as possible.

The following chapters will begin with a brief introduction of a timeline approach to analysis, which was applicable to all participants in the study, before focusing on students, pupils and facilitator in turn.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.0 Introduction**

After discussing methods and methodologies pertaining to my work in the past chapter, the following three chapters seek to present and discuss the data gathered in Study B, the major study of this thesis. The decision to present three discussion chapters is based on the differentiation between the participants in the study, namely the university students, the school pupils, and myself. As already discussed, I recognise that all these participants will have seen different sides of the projects, therefore arguing for the importance of treating each set of data as different, though interrelated information.

The main form of analysis, i.e. the coding or 'chunking' (Bamberger and Schön, 1991) has already been described in the previous chapter. Before concentrating on the participants' voices according to groups, there is one piece of data which I decided will be of interest to the study, namely a timeframe reference of contributions to WebCT (see Figure 5.1). The figure and following discussion outline how these contributions relate to direct impact from the facilitator, in the form of school visits, and anticipated collaboration through announced postings, i.e. telling students via email when pupils would gain access to the ICT room to post.. Although this form of evaluation presents largely numerical evidence, I feel it illustrates well the extent to which projects such as this can be under the particular influence of motivational guidance. The remainder of this section will therefore show the interrelations between visits, emails, and participation. Following on from this, the next three chapters seek to first present and then discuss the relevant data for each of the three pre-defined strands of enquiry, before collating the information in the final discussion and conclusion of the thesis. In doing so, they will present data and findings relating to the research questions:

1. How do participants in an online learning environment experience collaboration?
  - 1a. What do they experience as motivating?
  - 1b. What do they experience as barriers to successful collaboration?
2. To what extent are learner autonomy and collaboration linked, and how does this translate to the concept of peer cognisance?
3. How can a facilitator encourage peer cognisance, in order to improve the learning experience?

The concept of peer cognisance, as arrived at through Study A and the literature review (see section 3.6), for the purpose of Study B is defined as follows:

An advanced form of peer awareness, allowing learners to link and negotiate their own learning goals to those of their peers, including an acknowledged responsibility toward the collaborative process, as well as their own and their partners' learning.

A more refined definition will be offered in the conclusion to the thesis, building on the data discussed in the following chapters.

The 'chunking' or indeed the different sections of the chapters are directly related to research question 1, whereas questions 2 and 3 will be inferred through the discussion. Chapter 8 will summarise the findings and link them to the literature, whereas Chapter 9 will return to the questions above in detail and answer each one in turn.

### **5.0.1 A timeline approach**

Looking at the time before the pupils joined the project (prior to 9<sup>th</sup> November 2004), the lack of traffic becomes immediately obvious. Although there was, at this

time, email contact between myself (the facilitator) and the students, the student area of WebCT did not seem to provide enough information of interest to entice students away from their everyday lives. In fact, several students did not access WebCT at all (such as Lizzy, who below cites the fact that the pupils would come online to be what motivated her to join WebCT, after all). This pointed towards the need for a 'critical mass' of participants, which might help to carry the project forward.

There is, however, what I consider to be a distinct correlation between my emailing the students that the pupils would come online on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November, thus getting the project rolling. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of November, only one student had left a message for the pupils, resulting in the following, rather desperate sounding email:

*I'm just writing again in the hope I can convince you to post a message for the pupils, who will be accessing WebCT tomorrow. They are really excited, and are so far all on schedule to complete their mission to find out more about Germany and Austria, and I really don't want to disappoint them. If you could post a message about yourself in German and English, either onto WebCT or by sending it to me, that would be really great. So far, there is only one, and I think the project will probably only last another month or so, so any time commitment on your part will finish then. I know you will be very busy with your life abroad, and I hope you'll get this soon and feel inclined to respond.*

At this point, I had already found that a personalised email was more likely to elicit a response than a 'blanket' one, so emails were sent individually with students' names inserted. Fortunately, three more students posted a message within the next 24 hours, and the remaining two shortly after the pupils came online. Telling the students when the pupils would be online had a knock-on effect, though, and students obviously felt motivated enough to return and read the pupils' messages, accounting for the two peaks in student postings, following the pupils' visit to the ICT lab. This correlation is repeated for the second ICT lab visit on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2004. This visit allowed pupils to build a personal homepage, and I had asked students to judge it, accounting for the peaks on the same day and the 30<sup>th</sup> of November.

### Message contributions

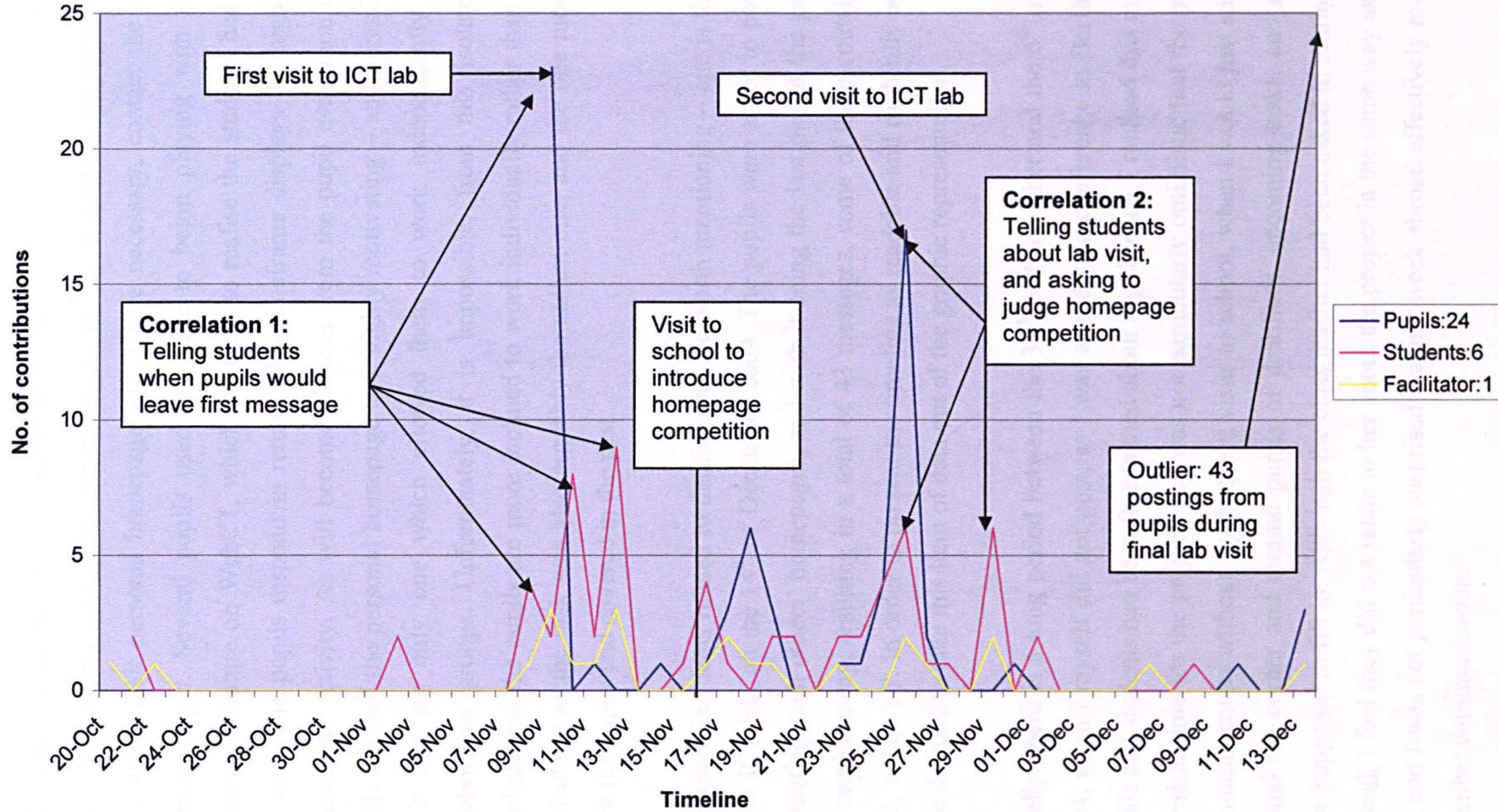


Figure 5.1: Message contribution timeline

Although the pupils' postings are largely defined by their visit to the ICT lab, there is a peak of activity on the 18<sup>th</sup> of November. In fact, 13 messages were posted in the four days following my visit to the school on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, encouraging pupils to think about their personal homepage and, where necessary, contact the students for language input. Several pupils used this time to begin playing with the personal homepages feature on WebCT, which led them to realise the students had responded, and made the pupils respond in return. This timeframe displays the highest level of independent activity. As will become obvious from the pupil evaluation chapter, the pupils did find the personal homepage task highly motivating – an interesting thought, as it was the only one which allowed them to work independently from their collaborative groups. Unfortunately, it is impossible, from this isolated case, to conclude that the pupils are more inclined to work individually rather than in a group, particularly as the task was also arguably the easiest one, and the one most related to work the pupils had covered in the past.

Two more incidents related to the timeline are worth mentioning – one is the final visit to the ICT lab, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2004. The pupils were asked to post messages evaluating each others' homepages, and with it being the last day of the project, some got carried away, resulting in a total of 43 messages, some of them containing only a 'yes', 'no' or ':-)'. In order to present the timeline as readable and truthfully as possible, I have decided to take this item of data out of the graphic representation.

Finally, there is a long period between the 30<sup>th</sup> of November and the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2004, when I myself did not post, as I was attending a conference in Berlin. Although pupils and students had been forewarned about my absence, I realised this might well be a critical time for the project, and was not particularly optimistic that the pupils would maintain contact without my frequent visits to school, when I would just stick my head around the corner and remind pupils of deadlines, upcoming tasks, and reports they were supposed to fill in. Although the class teacher had been asked to remind the pupils instead, I feel they did not relate to her about the project in the same way as they did to me, and I was not particularly surprised that my week abroad effectively meant the end to online communication.

## **5.1 The students' journey**

The three main sources of information from students were the initial questionnaire (completed in May 2004 – see appendix 7), the messages they posted on WebCT, and the evaluative narrative following the end of the project. This final narrative was prompted not by definite questions, but instead by my sending them an excerpt from my own research diary, in an effort to give them an example (see appendix 5, although I stressed there would be no 'right' or 'wrong' way for them to write their narrative). These narratives were in fact the richest and most descriptive data, resulting in them forming a large proportion of the following chapter. All quotes have been taken directly from written comments or posts composed by the students, with all relevant spelling and grammar intact. As outlined in the introductory chapter to this evaluation section, the data were first coded according to three distinct categories, namely 'motivation and enthusiasm', 'collaboration and peer cognisance' and 'fears and barriers'. What follows is a presentation and discussion of the data as they relate to these areas, with emphasis on further sub-categories as appropriate. Towards the end of the chapter, interrelations between the different sections are explored. Throughout the chapter, links to literature are made where appropriate.

## **5.2 Motivation and enthusiasm**

All students were asked why they wanted to participate in the project. In the original questionnaire, many students responded in short phrases which reveal little thought for what the project may entail ('To gain a bit of experience before I go away' (Jodie), 'Just curiosity I think!' (Sonia), 'The project seemed interesting' (Emma), etc.) Only two students – Lizzy and Vicky – mention the collaborative aspect of the project as an incentive, and their wish to contribute to a positive learning experience. These and similar aspects of motivation are picked up by Pittman *et al* (1992), who state that

*features such as novelty, entertainment value, satisfaction of curiosity, and opportunity for the exercise of skills and the attainment of mastery typically*

*characterize the kinds of rewards sought from engagement in an activity when an intrinsic motivational orientation is taken (p. 38).*

It had been my hope that the students would be largely intrinsically motivated, as there was little in the way of immediately apparent extrinsic value to the project – it was not graded, nor remunerated, and as such necessitated a constructive view to self-development and motivation. Breen and Mann (1997) say of such self motivated learners that ‘their relationship towards what is being learnt is not mediated by the eye of the Other or by their own assumptions about what the Other demands’ (p. 134). Although the students were not necessarily in a ‘learner’ position here (being effectively in the ‘middle’, between the pupils and the facilitator), I feel a similar attitude prevailed.

In the students’ narratives (written after the project was completed), the motivation to participate was revisited further. Here, all mention the initial presentation I gave in the language department; however, the purpose of this presentation has already become slightly distorted in their memories – Mary states it was a ‘talk about a WebCT project’, whereas the others recall it (correctly) as a presentation for ‘assistants-to-be’ (Lizzy). Giving reasons as to why they signed up, a variety of motivations are now expressed more verbally than previously – whether this is because of the prolonged engagement with the project, or the extent to which it is distinguishable from what they actually enjoyed about it (or wanted it to be) is difficult to ascertain in retrospect. Lizzy states that she wanted

*to make a non-committal good impression on Sabine who could possibly be a useful contact if this teaching malarky turned out to be my aim in life;*

whereas Jodie mentions

*I have been completely and utterly lazy since I have been at university as far as extra-curricular activities go, [...] and I decided I should really do something about it.*

Although Jodie does not state she felt the need to join extra-curricular activities in order to improve her CV and/or job prospects, both reasons given illustrate some of university students’ attitudes and beliefs regarding activities outside the actual curriculum, and, in Lizzy’s case, an awareness of the potential benefits these might have.

Emma gives a much less specific reason for joining, simply stating 'I do this a lot, sign up for stuff without considering the consequences'.

The need for an enthusiastic start to the project was also emphasised by several students, e.g. 'the talk Sabine gave in the department really did inspire me' (Sonia); or

*I found the presentation interesting and informative, and was somewhat (I really need my thesaurus over here) bewildered/astonished (but with good connotations!) by the enthusiasm with which it was delivered, as all the teachers I remembered having had seemed boring and totally unenthusiastic! (Jodie)*

Even though it has not been spelt out directly in the above quotes, it appears enthusiasm can be contagious, which had been, of course, my intention, as can be seen from my reflections in chapter 7. Realising that the students' motivation had to last for several months, and then translate to the online learning environment, I very much tried to act 'as a cheerleader, attempting to motivate students to go deeper and further' (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, p. 75).

Chronologically, the next 'hurdle' after signing up brought the students to the school; however, only four of the six students were able to come to the initial meeting. Feelings about this activity were mixed, and not all students were enthusiastic, leading to this section being covered again under a different heading below. On a positive note, Jodie writes about her experience:

*After I went into the classroom to visit the lesson in [school], I thought maybe teaching could be an option, as I found it enjoyable and a lot less scary than I had thought it would be.*

When talking about personal motivation, the students' language becomes lively and engaging, which encouraged me in my view that narratives were the right format to use in this enquiry. Mary writes:

*I'd just done a TESOL course and got all excited about teaching people a new language – so anything to help make learning German more fun for people sounded good to me.*

Vicky writes in a similar vein: 'I thought that the kids in England would benefit from knowing more about the countries where German is spoken and I think that is really needed', and Sonia comments 'I am passionate about languages, and consider myself very lucky to be able to speak several foreign languages well'. Finally, Lizzy states 'i really love Germany and don't think it has the reputation it deserves as a country, young brits jus tend to think it's boring but they're soooo wrong!'

In all the above quotes, enthusiasm shines through again – for the language as well as the countries where they are spoken; and the wish to pass on positive feelings and experiences students have had. This passion and enthusiasm is what I wanted to get across in the study, both from myself, and from the students, and I am happy they expressed their enthusiasm so freely. Many of the messages cross between the sections that I have labelled 'enthusiasm and motivation' and 'collaboration and peer cognisance'. Lizzy for example writes:

*When i got replies from the girls i felt very satisfied, they all seemed lovely and really appreciated things that I would tell them about Germany or KA [Karlsruhe]. It was great to be able to share this experience f Germany from an English person's point of view.*

The reason the above quote is used here and not in the section on collaboration and peer cognisance is that it throws up the issue of language commonality, which was also frequently brought up by the pupils. It appears that pairing native English speakers with native English speakers was seen as a success all around. Palloff and Pratt (2005, p. 33) warn online facilitators about the potential issues surrounding cultural differences, such as communication style and role perceptions (Joo, 1999). Whilst cultural differences are, of course, one of the incentives of a language-learning online exchange, it will become obvious from the next chapter that the pupils felt more comfortable experiencing a foreign culture under the guidance of students from their own cultural background. Although making learners 'comfortable' is not necessarily the main goal of learning about other cultures, the thought holds potential for motivating more disaffected, or possibly insecure learners, particularly as the students hold similar views. Jodie, once more in reference to the school visit, sees her experience with the project as a rehearsal for life in Germany:

*[G]oing into a school to give myself an introduction as to what [teaching] would be like seemed like a good idea in order to soften the blow, especially as I'd at least in England be able to understand what the kids were saying!*

Although there have been few similar studies, Falchikov (2001, p. 48) cites a conference paper by Highton and Goss (1997), where they report on students' perceptions of benefits from volunteering activity in schools, as part of a credit-bearing module at Napier University. In descending order of frequency, Highton and Goss list the following benefits as raised by the students:

- *fun*
- *opportunity to help others*
- *opportunity to gain a sense of achievement from doing something useful*
- *improving communication skills*
- *gaining an insight into teaching*
- *enhanced CV*
- *improved confidence*
- *improved academic knowledge*
- *a challenge*
- *social contact.*

*(Highton and Goss, 1997, in Falchikov, 2001, p. 48)*

Nearly all points identified by Highton and Goss's study have in fact also been raised by the students in this project, although, due to the online nature of the project, social contact did not feature greatly, and could instead be replaced by 'gaining technological knowledge'. Similarly, the students did not focus so much on increasing their academic knowledge, realising that the year abroad, as well as the teaching they had to complete there, would probably do more to improve their German skills than the online exchange. As the students were in a foreign country for most of the preparation for the project, and all of the project itself, their motivation had to carry them far enough to pursue the project autonomously. Little (1996) enforces this link, stating that

*learner autonomy has both affective/motivational and metacognitive dimensions. It presupposes a positive attitude to the purpose, content and process of learning on the one hand and well-developed metacognitive skills on the other (p. 204).*

The students' affective use of language and obvious motivation towards sharing their knowledge and experiences was therefore an encouraging first step towards a successful project.

### 5.2.1 Motivating the pupils online

For the students, motivation was, in fact, a dual aspect – not only did they have to maintain their own motivation, they also had to try and keep the pupils motivated – or even get them motivated in the first place. Although closely linked to some of the aspects covered in the next section of this chapter, I have chosen to deal with these motivational strategies here, largely because, for some students, they were a one-sided approach, due to the unresponsiveness of their group.

Jodie adopted an approach based on what she felt the pupils could handle – several of her messages are held entirely in German, although there is one which has been written in English only. Her messages are peppered with small encouragements, such as direct questions, and references to her group's emails, as follows:

*ich habe ueber Rhine-Reisen gefragt (Nov 12)*

*Ich mag Ali G in da House auch, ich habe es nach Deutschland mitgebracht!  
(Nov 12)*

*Deine Fische haben lustige namen! [...]Was machst du gerne am Wochenende?  
(Nov 20)*

*ich glaube das war sehr gut gemacht! Ich merke kein Fehler! (Nov 29)*

For Jodie's group, the above incentives are enough to stimulate, if not the best, than a regular exchange. Sonia also achieves a very good exchange, with very little input from herself – however, her messages are particularly encouraging, asking her group to show initiative:

*But now that December is here, things have gone mad and in Leipzig there is the world's largest Advents Calender - see if you can find a picture of it on the internet for your homepage - just type 'Leipzig Christmas Market' into google or something. (Dec 1)*

Vicky, despite working much harder to entice pupils into posting, was continually hampered by the unresponsiveness of her group, despite her efforts to find out detailed information about some of the pupils' interests, i.e. football:

*Es war nett, von dir zu hören! [...] Was ist deine Lieblingsmannschaft? Gibt es eine Mannschaft in der Schule? [...] I'm going to try my best to find out as much about football as I can for you. [...] What else do u do in your free time other than football? Do you know anything about Austria? What would you like to find out? (Nov 12)*

*What are your hobbies? Have you ever been to Austria? Do you like learning German? (Nov 12)*

*Meine Hobbys sind shoppen, Kino gehen, Freunde treffen, Bücher lesen und Musik hören. Wie heissen deine Geschwister? Bist du nach Österreich gefahren? [...] I hope that u'll be able to find out lots of things about Austria this year, as it's a great country and completely different to Germany. [...] Do you know much about winter sports? Have you ever been skiing? If not, would you like to try? What else do you do in your free time? (Nov 12)*

Even this enthusiasm, however, does not entice her group to respond, not surprisingly resulting in her frustration (as further detailed in the following section).

If we remind ourselves, it seems most of the students' reasons for participation were intrinsically motivated – without any chance of gaining credits or other recognition, signing up meant to volunteer with little opportunity in sight for personal gain, apart from, as Lizzy mentions, getting into my 'good books' in case the students were to contemplate teaching as a career. The students use words such as 'lucky' (Sonia, Mary), 'love' (Lizzy) and 'excited' (Mary) when writing about their perceptions of languages and language learning, and the use of positive language continues when these students talk about their collaborative experiences with the pupils themselves. The best motivation in the world, however, seems not to be enough to motivate an unresponsive group – Vicky tried hard to maintain an upbeat stream of communication, which was only really appreciated by one of her group members, who had little chance to access the Internet from home. Pittman, Boggiano and Main (1992, p. 39) talk about 'motivational orientations in interpersonal interactions', arguing that all interactions are either intrinsically motivated – such as 'friendships or romance attachments', or linked to 'salient rewards', as for example during job interviews. Here, the lines are not as clearly established – arguably, however, the students had less salient rewards to look forward to than maybe the pupils – this concept will be explored further in the following chapter.

It seems that for both pupils and students, lack of access to the Internet had a substantial detrimental affect on motivation. I feel that it is areas such as this where online projects may have their downfall – although the pupils mention the use of computers as one of the most motivational aspects of the project, it will become apparent from the chapter on pupil experiences that, once in the computer room, different uses for the computer can be quickly found, which in turn are more motivational (though less conducive to learning) than participation in a collaborative exchange. With more staff members on hand in the classroom, some of this motivation maybe could have been channelled back towards the project, or indeed, combining further face-to-face visits with the online exchange may have given students such as Vicky a better chance to work on the pupils' motivation, making the experience more immediate and 'real'.

### **5.3 Collaboration and Peer Cognisance**

As mentioned above, many of the students' comments seem to form a direct relationship between collaboration and enthusiasm, meaning that mutual interest between pupils and students seems to be able to spark off a more sustained collaboration than a one-sided approach. Of course, having only six groups to evaluate means the data in question cannot be held conclusive; however, I hope the comments below go some way to illustrate the extent to which students were aware of their pupil partners, and how this influenced their outlook on the project. The students' attitude towards and display of peer cognisance and willingness to collaborate was felt from two aspects of the data – the evaluations (narratives) completed subsequent to the project, but also the form and style of communication itself. Reading through the first messages students have left for the pupils, differences become apparent. Most of them include upbeat, enthusiastic sections, and if they are in German, consideration for the pupils' level of linguistic knowledge is apparent:

*Hi! I've got no idea who else is in this group, so I look forward to finding out!  
[...] Hope to hear from you all soon! (Mary)*

*Mein Lieblingsessen (favourite food) ist Fisch und Pommes (fish and chips) mit viel Salz und Essig (salt and vinegar). Was ist euer Lieblingsessen? (Sonia)*

However, some of these only indirectly invite the pupils to respond:

*I've been in Austria for 7 weeks now and I'm loving it here! [...] I'm here to answer any questions that you may have on Austria, Austrians, Vienna, life in general, whatever!!! (Vicky)*

Furthermore, some first messages only include a written statement regarding life abroad, etc., without any personal connotations or invitations to communicate (Jodie).

Finally, Emma begins communication with an apology:

*I'm sorry this is only a short message but it's not easy for me to get online as my schools internet only works in the office.*

It seems, however, that the initial message, although maybe important, was not a make-or-break aspect of the project – Vicky, despite a positive start, had little chance with her unmotivated group, whereas Jodie quickly takes the initiative to explore one of her group member's questions (regarding trips on the river Rhine), thus proving her commitment to the collaborative aspect of the project.

The students, of course, had to attempt to achieve a larger number of goals, which had not been made absolutely explicit to them; instead, it was assumed they would, on a sub-conscious level at least, understand these responsibilities. Whilst this lack of absolute direction may well be a shortcoming of the project (an issue which will be further discussed below), communication illustrated that students were in fact well aware of what they were trying to achieve. In brief, I had envisaged students would (in no particular order):

- try and motivate pupils to communicate
- try and motivate pupils to collaborate
- try and motivate pupils to complete the project work
- assist the pupils with data gathering
- assist when language-related questions came up
- use a balance of German and English
- be friendly and approachable.

It was unlikely that communication would revolve strictly around the project itself, and unlikely that students could 'get away' with playing just one role within the exchange. Krejsler (2004) illustrates that, in such online collaborative projects,

*subject-related and personal themes are constantly intertwined. The dialogue fluctuates between what is relevant per se for the project and personal or even private conversations. It becomes increasingly difficult to find set fixed limits as to when one acts as a pupil, a seriously involved participant, a conversation partner, an acquaintance or a friend (p. 495).*

Although students do not mention their combination of roles to be confusing, the multitude of things they were trying to do, as well as juggling life abroad, will likely have impacted on their ability and/or willingness to commit to the project. Findings related to fears and barriers will be presented and discussed further below; however, the added difficulty of conducting the entire project in two languages also warrants mention.

### **5.3.1 Collaboration in a foreign language**

Despite this study focusing on the collaborative and peer cognisance experiences of its participants, rather than a detailed analysis of the language learning that took place, the fact remains that it was, after all, a project related to language and cultural exchanges. Therefore, how groups tackled the German aspect of the collaboration becomes an important issue, and, in particular, how the students went about presenting the German material.

As I could find no literature which replicated the exact situation of the study (i.e. students operating as near-peer facilitators), I turned to Macaro (1997), who writes about teachers' target language input to facilitate collaboration and learner autonomy. His findings conclude that pupils most readily identify with the teacher as a 'mediator between the complexity or foreignness of text [...] and the level of language competence of the pupils' (p. 60). Once more, students had to operate at a significant cognitive level to adapt to their learners' needs, and they did not all do so successfully, as can be seen below.

Providing information about the town where the students were living formed part of all group exchanges; however, interesting here is the language in which this took place. Sonia's information about Leipzig has been carefully composed, and thought went into which words might be difficult for younger learners:

*Leipzig hat circa 450,000 Einwohner (= inhabitants)  
Die Stadt hat der größte Kopfbahnhof (= end station) in Europa.  
In dem Bahnhof gibt es ein großes Einkaufszentrum (shopping centre).  
Die Geschäfte sind jeden Tag bis 22Uhr offen (the shops are open every day untill 10pm!) Das finde ich wirklich super (really great!) - It's unusual for Germany that shops are open on a Sunday so Leipzig is an exception.  
Diese Woche fängt der Weihnachtsmarkt an = this week the Christmas Market begins.*

Unfortunately, after this promising start, one pupil requests more information in English, stating that her German is 'not so good'. No more German from Sonia is forthcoming. With more encouragement from myself, Sonia might have been more capable of either continuing with her already very perceptive use of German, or of finding further ways to adapt to different pupils – rather than abandoning German altogether. Closer observation of the communication during the project itself could have made a difference here.

Emma's information about Rostock never verges into German in the first place (although her personal information at the start of the message is in German):

*Rostock is one of the biggest cities in the Bundesland Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. [...] Rostock has a football team in the Bundesliga, the German equivalent of the Premiership. The team is F.C. Hansa Rostock and they are currently in 18th place out of 18. They lost 6-0 at home to Hamburg on Sunday and their manager, Juri Schlünz, quit after the game.*

Very quickly, a mix of both languages moves into most conversations – whilst I never stipulated that both languages should be used equally, I did encourage students and learners to write what they could (or what they felt the pupils would understand) in German. How pupils coped with this will be further discussed in the relevant evaluation chapter.

### 5.3.2 Keen pupils

Four of the six students took the opportunity to meet face-to-face with some of the pupils. At the time, it was unclear how the class was to be composed, making a direct meeting difficult; so instead, the students met with the Year 8 class from which most of next year's Year 9 German pupils would be drawn. For several of the students, this was the first opportunity to experience first hand what working with this age group might be like. Jodie begins the observations in her narrative regarding the pupils on the day she visited the school. She mentions that

*when we helped the groups with the questions they were given I relaxed considerably and actually quite enjoyed myself. I found the kids really funny in a cheeky way, and thought maybe the whole working in a school thing wouldn't be so difficult after all, and began to look at the year abroad a little more positively.*

Reminding ourselves that it was also Jodie who saw the school visit as an 'introduction' to what the year abroad may be like, her comments show that the benefit of a project such as this can indeed be mutual, and not just geared towards the pupils.

Mary also talks positively about her group, stating

*I had a lovely group, who were very responsive and posted messages regularly [...] It was fun to see their messages get longer, and more German-filled, and to get them asking questions and really engaging with culture and language.*

Again, Mary finds mutual benefit in the exchange. She was actually not in Austria at the time of the project, but in Holland, as her year abroad was split due to the nature of her degree. This was not a problem, as she states, 'my group were very understanding, and I learnt a lot about Steyr myself, through their hard work, so good prep for me!'

Appreciation for the pupils also features in Sonia's narrative:

*I realised that the kids back home did genuinely seem as if they wanted to learn (i.e. they DID give a toss!). I've learnt to appreciate any kind of enthusiasm, no matter how small and it was just lovely to get the emails from the kids in my group and I really appreciated the effort they made.*

Unfortunately, Sonia's experiences at the partner school were not very positive, and in comparing the pupils in Germany with those in the project, it seems Sonia found a way not to completely give up the idea of teaching.

Finally, Lizzy also comments about the feeling of appreciation she got from the pupils, and to her, this meant that

*I found myself checking the site very often after a while and felt a great big warm glow of pride when one of my pupils [name] posted a message on the open to all section claiming that karlsruhe was the best place in Germany and she had learnt so much from me! Often I would go home from work and tell my housemates about the interesting questions or nice statements posted on the project site.*

To Lizzy, the project was obviously important and interesting enough to make the jump from work to everyday life – whilst this threshold is located at different levels with different people, her enthusiasm is obvious, as is the fact that it increased after positive comments from the pupils. This is not surprising – being more motivated to do something when one feels appreciated hardly needs a reference to literature to support the claim. In the pupil section, however, group dynamics become even more relevant, and they will be explored there.

### **5.3.3 Other student links**

The links discussed here could be defined as student-student links – among the students themselves, and as facilitator-student links – between the students and myself. I have already discussed what influence I felt my personal motivation had on the students deciding to participate – throughout the project, in contrast, I feel my involvement had little impact, which I feel is partially due to the fact that the online portion was very short. Once again, little literature takes into account the three-level model of facilitator, students and pupils; however, McCombs (2001) points out that 'positive relationships between students and their instructors and between students and their peers are highly important for motivation and achievement' (p. 241). Although I tried to encourage student-student links with a relevant section on WebCT, the section only ever received

31 messages – 17 of them from myself, giving students tips or updates. The only obvious evidence of peer cognisance here comes from Lizzy, explaining how other students might deal with access problems:

*Hi,  
just to let you know, i couldn't access the 'log in to my webct' button from the email link. Instead i clicked on "help guides (and registration) for webCT access" and that then took me to a new window where it then worked when i clicked to log into my webCT. Perhaps Sonia and Jodie could try that?*

Throughout the project, there is little evidence of the students feeling they are a homogenous group, although I do remember (although I cannot find the relevant message) that Lizzy and Sonia met up at some point during their year abroad. Without looking further into this, I would argue that one reason for this may be the difference in ages – half the students were on their first year abroad, however, the other half had officially finished their degree and were on a second year abroad, setting them apart in terms of language skill, confidence to live abroad, experience, and age. Neither my personal influence nor student-student links appear to have had a continuing impact on student motivation (beyond initial interest), and it seems that the pupils had by far the largest impact on student motivation – both in a positive and a negative sense, as can be seen below.

### **5.3.4 Frustration with pupils**

Unfortunately, not all data relating to collaboration and peer cognisance are positive; however, I feel the pattern of mutuality continues. Emma initially had problems getting online, meaning the group had to begin the project without her. With no real person to write to, I found it important to identify a substitute, in case Emma would not make it back, or her problems would prove to be too severe to be overcome. Due to a shortage of other students, and not wanting to draft somebody else in, only to 'discard' them should Emma re-appear, I decided to engage in a bit of nepotism, and asked my sister to help out, which she did willingly. Although I chose not to tell pupils about our family relationship, I was aware that this would place one group in a different position (it was also, by chance, the group with the most fluctuating number of pupils, due to movement

up and down the sets). The unstable environment, partnered with a lack of enthusiasm among the pupils and technical problems on Emma's part took their toll, and she comments:

*It did get quite annoying that despite writing a belated introductory message and later replying individually to the messages that the children had left, the only message I got from the children told me that if they needed me again then one of them would be in touch. [...] i didn't consider stopping until the other girl had been brought into replace me because i was having trouble getting online. Also the fact that the children only left one message between them after the initial messages made me wonder whether i should still bother checking.*

As the other students, Emma started the project with a sense of ownership, which circumstances seem to have chipped away at until the project receded into the background. Palloff and Pratt (2005, p. 29) comment on the need for all students to buy into the team process – in this case, the group faced a vicious circle, originating with Emma not gaining access, thus frustrating the pupils, then the pupils not posting, resulting in Emma getting more and more frustrated in turn. It might be situations such as this when the voluntary aspect of the project becomes most difficult for the facilitator – Palloff and Pratt (*ibid*) recommend the instructor remind participants of agreed responsibilities; however, without leverage, cajoling and attempting to motivate frequently felt to be my only options to proceed with.

Vicky, as already outlined above, was also faced with an unenthusiastic group, and her narrative (incidentally, the shortest of all students) clearly shows her frustration:

*I was really enjoying life in Austria and enjoying teaching, so I really felt I had something to give the kids. But my group were useless. They hardly ever wrote anything, apart from one boy. If they did write, then I would gladly respond, but it was dull. [...] I tried to provide some sort of motivation, but with very little success, so I found myself at a dead end. It was really annoying because the kids were so unenthusiastic.*

Vicky's use of language is emphatic – 'really' features three times in the short paragraph. Both Emma and Vicky had the least responsive groups in the class, and their frustration is palpable. Their enjoyment of the project has obviously been hampered by the lack of mutual enthusiasm, and their narratives clearly represent how the project has affected their interest to participate. It would be idle speculation to wonder how the

project might have gone had the groups been allocated to different students – whereas Vicky does mention her enthusiasm regarding language and life abroad, Emma, if we remind ourselves, was the student who signed up because she tends to sign up for things without a clear understanding of what they involve – all things considered, it really seems this one particular group (the ‘Misfits’) would have had to overcome more than its fair share of challenges in order to achieve success.

The other students had a much more positive experience, which is mirrored by the pupils’ comments (see Chapter 6). Lizzy points out that she would have liked to have taken the collaborative aspect of the project even further:

*I was a bit disappointed with the tasks the pupils had to do as they didn’t ask me for any help with the german on their web pages or what i thought of them. [...] If the project restarted for a second semester i would definitely take part again, but i would like the tasks to involve us (the students) even more as i would gladly have partaken in some teamwork with my pupils in [Yorkshire]!*

Jodie mentions she had thought she would get to meet the pupils again, something that was originally planned, but had to be abandoned due to the changes to the length of the project.

To return to the students’ experience of collaboration, it quickly becomes obvious that, apart from Sonia’s case (see Table 5.1 for a comparison of posts), the student in a project such as this is not an equal collaborative member of the group, but instead quickly adopts the role of a driver and facilitator, matching nearly all other participants combined message for message. As became obvious in the section on motivation and enthusiasm, a one-sided approach is not enough, no matter how hard students try to make the project ‘work’. The responsibility of their role, combined with the additional pressures some students had to cope with during their time abroad, greatly contributed to the following section of this chapter, on fears and barriers.

## **5.4 Fears and barriers**

Coding for fears and barriers was a comparatively easy task, although I am glad I chose not to distinguish too closely between the two categories, instead focusing on what aspects could be seen to be detrimental to successful collaboration online, largely by influencing motivation and enthusiasm in a negative way. If I were to code the data further, my next step would be to distinguish between 'real' and 'perceived' barriers, however, without a background in psychology, I do not feel confident to assess accurately at what level a 'perceived' barrier might become so frightful it does in fact turn into a 'real' one. Instead, this section covers what students mentioned to be the aspects of their experience (either prior to the project, such as lack of technological knowledge, or during the exchange, such as timing) which distracted or otherwise prevented them from participating fully in the project. As will become clear, these are largely practical factors, relating to access and time management problems – apart from the frustration with unresponsive pupils, which has already been outlined above.

### **5.4.1 Timing**

Finding a suitable timeframe for the project proved difficult from the start – on the one hand, it was envisaged that keeping it as close as possible to the physical encounter in May would be beneficial. On the other, I hoped that both students and pupils would be settled in their respective environments once the project started. As the students had volunteered in March, there was also the additional fear that I may 'lose' them over the summer – a fear that will be discussed further in the evaluation chapter relating to my own experiences.

Regarding the students' perceptions, I was aware that the move abroad may bring so many additional worries that the project would be forgotten. Jodie's description of this time, albeit lengthy, seems to me the most perfect illustration of what stress some of the students underwent during this time:

*The summer was spent working full time [...]. However, then it came to two days before I had to leave and I suddenly thought, "oh my god, I'm moving to Germany on Thursday!!". And in the process of quitting my job, saying goodbye to my boyfriend, going back home to surrey, packing my stuff, flying to Germany, meeting the other foreign language assistants, taking part in the training course, negotiating the four trains to Wiesbaden with three suitcases, meeting my 'Betreuungslehrer', meeting the teacher I'd be staying with, settling into my temporary room, realising I didn't know a single word of useful german apart from 'ja' and 'nein', starting at school, being introduced to all the teachers, having to introduce myself to all the classes, trying to get used to the food, trying to find my bearings, realising I had no friends here, trying to persuade 'kids' the same age as me to come to 'freiwillige' lessons (!!!), trying to find somewhere to live without being able to speak german, trying to cope with an almost suicidal boyfriend, trying to plan lessons and writing to friends at home, it went a little to the back of my mind!!!*

Even the style of Jodie's writing here illustrates the breathlessness of moving abroad, and as I had a similar experience when I moved to the UK, I can hardly blame the students for 'disappearing' periodically, more than that, I was genuinely surprised when the project started with all six students still willing to participate!

Lizzy writes about 'guilty' feelings she had when I emailed her over the summer – after committing herself to the project, she was now no longer sure, but did not want to back out. Already very honest about her original motivation to participate, she now admits to not replying for a very long time, hoping that the project would 'secretly go away'. Lizzy's decision was made once she received the email saying the project had been launched, and her curiosity to 'see what all this was about' overcame her fears and, in the end, made her one of the most prolific contributors to the project. Again, there is proof of mutual enthusiasm. Lizzy, in fact, let herself be swept along by the pupils' motivation, resulting in a strong collaborative exchange.

In fact, all students mention the move abroad and adjusting to life there, and not surprisingly so. There were, however, further similarities between their fears and barriers, as becomes obvious below.

## 5.4.2 Technological problems

Most students cite technological problems in their narratives – be it difficulties in accessing the Internet, due to limited opportunity (Emma, Jodie), difficulties in accessing the site (Emma, Vicky), or generally poor computer skills (Sonia, Mary, Jodie, Emma). Emma here seems to have had the most problems, as the following excerpt from her narrative illustrates:

*I struggled to get online because [sic] the only internet access in the school was in the office so I had to ask the headmaster for permission. Also, the most convenient times were break times which only last 15-20 minutes, not really long enough [sic] for me to get through to WebCT and leave a message. It was not possible to connect to the internet in my flat, my flatmate took out the phonenumber without telling me. I managed to find an internet cafe in town but I was annoyed that i was paying to go to this message board where no replies were made to my messages.*

As in earlier sections of her narrative, Emma is obviously frustrated by having to pay for a project which did not seem to be worthwhile – unfortunately, she never mentioned until the final evaluation that she had to pay to access the messages, or some remuneration could have been worked out. The situation Emma describes at school is similar to Jodie, who had to share the only computer with 80 members of staff, and had to use it to prepare lessons, participate in the project, and communicate with friends.

By splitting the technological problems into their several strands, it becomes clear that Emma's name is, in fact, linked to all of them, again counting against this group's successful collaboration. It cannot be said for certain to what extent Emma's frustration about the group made her dwell on all other issues that went wrong, but it seems clear that her group may be considered an exception to the overall experience of other groups, and is more a point of reference for all the things that can potentially go wrong in a collaborative, multilingual, online exchange.

## 5.5 Linking the categories - Discussion

To what extent collaboration and peer cognisance directly influence motivation and enthusiasm (and are in turn influenced by them) would be difficult to measure quantitatively, and doing so is not the focus here. The category of fears and barriers, for the purpose of this discussion, is seen largely as ‘that which negatively influences motivation’, rather than a distinct category. The interrelationship between motivation and successful collaboration strengthens the more the data are evaluated, and will be revisited in the other evaluation chapters. Looking at the postings from all groups, it becomes clear that most groups did indeed rely on a healthy input from the students’ side. In table format, the postings from each group can be represented as follows:

Location	Student	Postings total	Postings student	Postings pupils	Postings Sabine
Karlsruhe	Lizzy	34	14	20	-
Steyr	Mary	30	13	16	1
Leipzig	Sonia	20	3	15	2
Rostock	Emma	19	6	6	7 (+ Katrin)
Wiesbaden	Jodie	17	7	9	1
St. Pölten	Vicky	13	4	9	-

*Table 5.1 – Messages posted to WebCT according to groups*

The table above is organised according to the total number of postings; however, different observations from the various columns are also possible. Sonia’s group sticks out as being one of the most self-propelling, operating with very little input from Sonia, whereas both Lizzy and Mary seem to have worked according to a higher collaborative ratio, at least according to the number of messages. Emma’s group needed two messages for each one they produced themselves, be it from Emma herself, Katrin (who filled in because of Emma’s technical problems), or myself. This group in particular sticks out because of the amount of online input I had; however, with an extra person posting, this is largely due to the number of stakeholders involved. The St. Pölten group

also received input and support, but it was given more during lessons themselves, and in the case of one pupil, via email support.

As described above, the coding of data initially focused on collaboration and peer cognisance, motivation and enthusiasm, and fears and barriers. As expected, these main groupings subdivided into further categories, some of which have been presented and quoted above. Further evidence of correlations between perceptions and attitude may not have yielded a large, quotable amount of data, warranting sub-sections in the written evaluation above; however, there do appear to be a distinct number of influences and motivational or impeding factors, which have been represented pictorially below, showing links wherever I feel there is a one-way or mutual influence between different sections.

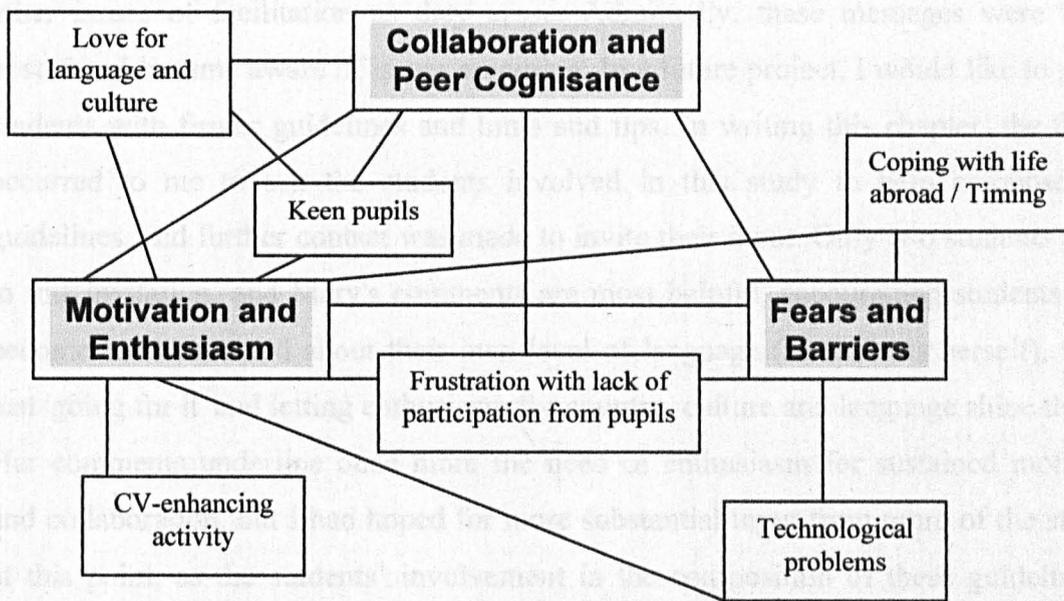


Figure 5.2 – Interrelations between student data

The diagram above shows that the category ‘Motivation and Enthusiasm’ is by far the most connected of the three, indicating that a lot of incidents in the project influenced motivation, either positively or negatively. This became obvious not by observing quantitatively the number of postings or times of access – although the timeline in the previous section also illustrates this point – but instead by assessing carefully where students located the focus of their narratives. If ‘fears and barriers’ are to be seen as a sub-category of ‘motivation and enthusiasm’, it becomes obvious that everything from

that category is connected to motivation, exuding a negative influence. The purpose of a successful study – and indeed, a successful facilitator – then, must be to minimise these negative influences, in turn focusing on positive experiences (such as keen pupils/other participants), or, indeed, continuing to highlight these positive influences to allow participants to build their own enthusiasm.

There are, of course, further links between the different levels of participants – whilst the diagram allows for an influence pupils had on students, my influence does not feature at all. As already mentioned above, I feel this is particularly relevant to this type of study – being voluntary in nature, my main input seems to have been related to initial motivation, and the occasional technical support. All students refer back to the initial presentation, citing its impact. Not one, however, mentions the number of messages I left on WebCT, giving advice on how to deal with language issues, group conflict, and other issues of facilitation as they arose. Admittedly, these messages were largely posted as I became aware of issues emerging. In a future project, I would like to present students with firmer guidelines and hints and tips. In writing this chapter, the thought occurred to me to ask the students involved in this study to help compose these guidelines, and further contact was made to invite their input. Only two students replied to this invitation, and Mary's comments are most helpful, encouraging students not to become too concerned about their own level of language (as she was herself), instead just 'going for it' and letting enthusiasm for country, culture and language shine through. Her comments underline once more the need of enthusiasm for sustained motivation and collaboration, but I had hoped for more substantial input from more of the students at this point, as the students' involvement in the composition of these guidelines for future projects would go further to underline the pedagogical framework behind the study: to create a learner-centred environment, tailored to and influenced by the students' real experiences and perceptions.

Whilst the pressure on students to adapt to a new life in a different country seems obvious, the distraction this provides from a project such as this study, coupled with unexpected technological problems, underlines further the need for careful planning. The names of the schools where the students would teach became known over the summer holidays – with German and Austrian school terms beginning in August, it should have been possible for myself to inquire about Internet access in advance,

making the transition easier for the students. Alternatively, and more in the spirit of enabling the participants to become more autonomous learners, I could have encouraged the students to devise alternative plans for access – as they did have three weeks of use of WebCT before the pupils arrived (which did go some way towards easing access – see Lizzy’s comment above). A more structured approach could have been used, potentially flagging up Emma’s issues, which may have been resolvable by offering to reimburse money spent in Internet Cafés. I feel that this time, before the project, could have been used more appropriately by myself – to devise guidelines on how to work with the pupils, to deal with technological issues, or questions the students might have. Efforts towards all these issues have been made, messages posted regarding what topics the pupils would be set, and allowing the students to find information in advance; however, I feel a bit more structure at the beginning could potentially have gone a long way to ensure a smoother start once the pupils joined the project.

Regarding the method of data gathering, I do believe the narrative format brought out the richest form of data I could have hoped for, particularly coupled with the messages students posted on WebCT. There may have been scope, however, to encourage the students earlier on to reflect on the different stages throughout the project. I do not believe simply asking them to keep a reflective journal throughout their early time in Germany/Austria and the entire project would have yielded much data, largely because I do not think the project held enough importance to them to warrant regular entries. I do feel, however, that maybe asking them to post reflective accounts to the student section on WebCT would have provided a number of benefits, such as giving the student area a true, reflective focus, providing a basis for discussion, and familiarising students with the idea of reflective writing. As it was, I was relying on the students to grasp the concept of reflective writing based on nothing but instructions and an excerpt from my research diary. In retrospect, I do not feel this gave the students much chance to find their own style of writing, as I agree with Moon (1999) that reflective writing is a skill which needs to be practised to become of increasing value to the writer/learner.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter has looked into the students' experiences of the online collaborative project, and has identified strong links between motivation and a willingness to engage in online collaboration. Furthermore, I feel that the links between the students and the pupils were of much more importance than the links between the students and myself. The students were obviously motivated by the idea of acting as sources of information on a country and a language they love; however, if this motivation was met with a poor response from the pupils, less effort was sustained on a long-term basis. Outside influences, such as getting used to life abroad and dealing with job responsibilities, could impede collaboration, on the other hand, in at least one case, the project helped sustain the student's motivation to consider education as a career, despite unhappy experiences abroad. Further links between the different groups will be made in Chapter 8, combining all three participant groups with the literature reviewed in Chapter 3. After concentrating on the students, the following chapter seeks to trace the same journey from the pupils' point of view, again focusing initially on issues surrounding collaboration and peer cognisance, and how these are influenced by motivation and enthusiasm on the one hand, and fears and barriers on the other.

## 6 The pupils' journey

### 6.1 Introduction

The data for this chapter revolve mainly around the transcripts from the focus group sessions which were held after the project was completed. I met each group twice, the first time to ascertain what they remembered about the project, and their experiences directly related to it, the second time to give pupils the opportunity to air their ideas regarding the project – what would they change, how would they have run it, what ideas did they have (for a full list of questions, see appendices 11.1 and 11.2)? The underlying thought was to make the pupils feel they were as involved in the project process as possible. They were aware their group was the first of its kind to be involved, and the concept of a pilot study was explained to them. I feel this helped greatly with encouraging pupils to take the process seriously, and was positively surprised (and, occasionally, admittedly, flattered) by the insights pupils had into the difficulties related to running a project such as this, as will become obvious from the quotes below. In all transcribed quotes, correct English spelling was assumed, however, the content of the quote was left intact as much as possible. Some of the quoted transcript sections are therefore quite lengthy as a result; however, in a study which looks at collaboration, I felt it important to display group interactions as accurately as possible. Therefore, I would argue for the sections to be seen as oral quotes or reported speech: when speakers interact, communication takes less time than it does take up space within these pages, and following this practice, the participants' true voices can be heard. My own contributions are indicated through the letter 'S', and analysis was achieved by the already familiar 'chunking' according to 'motivation and enthusiasm', 'collaboration and peer cognisance' and 'fears and barriers'.

Wu (2003) argues that most studies into motivational variables disregard the interconnectedness between these variables, including the social structure among the learners. As my study focuses on exactly this interconnectedness, i.e. how the motivational aspects of collaboration – as well as the barriers and outside influences –

combine to create an overall learning experience, I am hoping to make a beginning in redressing the balance.

Further data available for this chapter were messages posted onto WebCT, team reports and worksheets filled in by the groups, and the actual work produced. Mostly, however, the chapter does indeed concentrate on the focus group transcripts, as these yielded the richest data. As with the student chapter, the information was initially coded according to the areas of 'motivation and enthusiasm', 'collaboration and peer cognisance', and 'fears and barriers'. Further subdivision was then taken from the data themselves, for example the many comments pupils had on gender issues. In the final section of this chapter, links are made to Lewin's (1952) theory of force field analysis, showing how interrelating concepts may create tension and difficulties, and how these may be resolved through careful facilitation.

## **6.2 Motivation and Enthusiasm**

All groups commented positively on the project experience. This is hardly surprising, considering that it proved a change from the more typical German lessons. Although some groups regarded German lessons as a negative experience, several groups stated that it was just nice to have a change in both teacher and content. KussKuss, one of the groups, voices this as follows:

*Geena: Each, erm, each, for the actual thing, I don't know, cause I really enjoyed, like, thinking, 'oh, Sabine's coming in, we're gonna do...'*

*Lynn: Yeah, that was really good... [...] Yeah, I think it was fun, 'cause, like, German lessons, they're the same all the time, I mean, you learn different things, but it's like (puts on funny voice, unintelligible), just like, doing something completely different to what we normally do is so, it's so, fun. Not that German isn't fun, 'cause it is, it's just a different way to learn, it's just, like, interesting.*

The thought is reiterated by SoSoRaCh:

*Patricia: [...] It wasn't...it's not like ...err...the same as we do at school. It didn't, like, seem...it wasn't like ... 'Thursday's German lesson', it was like 'that is extra'...*

*S: Uh-huh.*

*Patricia: So it was, like, kind of outside of German lessons. So, erm...ermm...I don't know...I don't really think of it as part of a...lesson... (laughs). [...]*

*Alison: It felt better than normal German lessons, 'cause it were, like, more fun to do. [...]*

*Vivian: 'Cause you, sort of, are actually talking to a person who's actually in Germany.*

The motivation provided by 'real' communication will be further discussed in the section on collaboration and peer cognisance. Although pupils comment they did not see the project as part of the lessons, they did in fact very much like that it took place in lesson time, admitting that giving up their time during a lunchtime club would not have been as welcome:

*The fact that...I don't know...because you don't get marked on it...it wasn't like an examination or anything...I think the fact, there was no incentive for you to go to a library, or for you to take time out of your own time, apart from maybe at home, you've got half an hour or something.*

*(Lynn, KussKuss)*

Some pupils acknowledged that, after the project was finished, they might have been willing to attend further lunchtime sessions, but most admitted that, if the project had run as a voluntary lunchtime club, they would not have been interested, unless they were rewarded for their troubles. Timothy from the JerryBerrys extends an olive branch, suggesting a compromise:

*Maybe if you did it as a club, but you mixed it with lunchtime and lessons, so you got out of a few lessons?*

*(Timothy, JerryBerrys)*

The issue regarding time also came through when discussing the length of the project. The JerryBerrys comment:

*Dale: I'm not sure how many people would want to give up time at home – for a year.*

*S: Un-hunh*

*Timothy: They might get bored with it.*

*Dale: Yeah. I mean – one of the things I thought was good about it, was it was something completely new...novelty factor.*

Most pupils agreed that the project had the right length (between a half term and a term), but where to locate this within the school year was a different matter. My rationale had been the half term before Christmas to allow pupils and students time to settle in, but not letting too much time pass between the time the students came in and the start of the project. Furthermore, Christmas seemed to provide an easy choice of topic for the pupils. In retrospect, I might have been able to change the times slightly, and ask students to come in again just before Christmas, re-familiarising themselves with the pupils, and then beginning after Christmas. As it was, few pupils connected the students who had visited them in Year 8 (during the month of May of the same year) with those students who sent them messages half a year later, and I believe I am now more aware how differently time flows when you are planning a PhD, to being a 13-year-old asked to remember one particular lesson over six months ago.

### 6.2.1 ICT

All groups commented positively on the use of ICT, giving a number of reasons:

*And the fact that we got lots of time to spend in the ICT room was quite good.*  
(Dale, JerryBerrys)

*You can get a lot more done on a PC than ... just writing.*  
(Andrew, Misfits)

*The word 'online' makes people a bit more motivated.*  
(Toby, DreamTeam)

*Everyone wants to go on the computers, so... when you actually do go, you actually work, because you don't do these things normally.*  
(Susan, Kangaroos)

Little (1996) also argues for the positive effect the use of a word processor can have, stating that 'using a word processor can change learners' attitudes to the writing task and also the strategies they employ in performing it' (p. 214). The fact that each writing task was stretched out over a longer period of time meant that pupils also had time to engage in research and find appropriate pictures to support their text. The mere motivational difference writing on a computer can make is further illustrated by what the JerryBerrys say they liked least – 'writing on them sheets' – the hand-written reports groups were asked to fill in.

The most emphatic response on ICT use comes from the Kangaroos, when asked if they felt the project ought to be done online or in a different way:

*Michelle: Online! Online, online, online.*

*Natalie, Susan: Un-hunh. (Affirmative)*

*Michelle: You get to use the computers – yippee!*

*Natalie: Yeah, because everyone wants to use the computers.*

Although all groups obviously enjoyed working with computers and cited this as one of the major motivational factors, there was little input regarding *why* they enjoyed it. The novelty factor was mentioned, as was the fact that it was different from normal German lessons. I did find it surprising, however, that ICT still has this much of a motivational pull, despite it being embedded in the National Curriculum, and most pupils having access to a computer at home. In my research, the motivation of ICT was universal, spread evenly across both genders, although Hoskins and van Hooff (2005) cite several studies (Arbaugh, 2000; Jackson, Ervin, Gardner and Schmitt, 2001) which conclude that female students are more motivated by online communication than men. From observation, I would agree, insofar as I believe the main motivational pull for the male pupils lay with using the computers for research and word processing purposes, effectively necessitating online communication, whereas for the female pupils, the communication (and therefore the collaborative aspect – see below) was the instigator of motivation, in turn leading to the production of the work.

## **6.2.2 Competition and Prizes**

Part of the project was a personal homepage competition, in which pupils were asked to create a homepage individually, independent of the group. As much as I would have liked to link the prize to a collaborative project, the lack of collaboration within one group, and the personal plight of the one individual within this group who was interested in participating, prevented me from doing so. Nevertheless, I found the competition to be immensely revealing both on a motivational level, but also in bringing out further comments, such as several quoted in the section on gender issues below. In order to allow for the competition to be as learner-centred as possible, three prizes were introduced – a first and second prize awarded by the students acting as a jury (pupils

winning a £10 and £5 HMV voucher respectively), and a further £10 HMV voucher awarded as a 'pupil prize', after counting the comments pupils posted about each others' sites, nominating a winner. This process meant that I was, in fact, removed from the decision process, handing over the 'power' (and responsibility) to decide on winners to the students and pupils respectively. In the event, the two first prizes went to the same pupil, Patricia. Although this meant the distribution of prizes was uneven, I decided to let the decision stand, as the student prizes had already been awarded, and I did not want to detract from the value I gave the pupils' vote by disregarding their decision. In future, just holding on to the student results might have allowed for a quick re-think, spreading the prizes around. Thanks to the pupils' comments, however, I feel that the competitive aspect of the project would be implemented in a different fashion, anyway, as will become obvious below.

The idea of a prize appealed to most pupils:

*I think if you win a prize then you're more... I don't know... happy... to do the work.*

*(Susan, Kangaroos)*

In discussing the idea of a prize, however, it also became obvious that my thinking in planning the project and the pupils' view of it were quite different, and it was here that I felt their ideas were most enlightening.

*Michelle: I think you should have one person that wins the biggest prize, and then just, little, I don't know, mini Mars bars or something. [...] 'Cause then they'll all feel like they've done something.*

*S: Do you think something like that would have done it? Mini Mars bars?*

*Susan: Yeah.*

*S: I could have done that quite easily.*

*(Kangaroos)*

*I think – I felt quite sorry for you, spending £10 on an hmv voucher, because, I think, you didn't really have to go that far to, do you know what I mean, I think you could have got away with just, giving a packet of Haribo, or something like that[...].*

*(Geena, KussKuss)*

Who needed motivation, and what was the best incentive continued to occupy this group's discussion for some time, culminating in the following exchange:

*Lynn: Yeah, she [Patricia] won two of the three, but you wouldn't have needed to give Patricia a prize to make her, like, work, she just, you know, she enjoyed it. I don't think she sat there, thinking (puts on 'scheming' voice) 'Right, I'm going to do this to win the money!' I think it was...*

*Geena: But it, it made the others work harder, 'cause they felt there were doing it to win it...even though they didn't (NOTE: win it), they did it because they thought they might have the chance, but I think you could have just – you didn't have to spend £25.*

*Lynn: 'Cause really, honestly, the people that wanted to win that, people...mostly (unintelligible, LIKE: 'would have done it for') ...a chocolate bar. (all laugh)*

*S: Easily bribed, you say?*

*Lynn: Just give them food, and they'll just shut up, and they're happy.*

Here, the pupils display an honesty and a clarity of insight into their own behaviour which I had not envisaged. Similarly, when it comes to my issues regarding collaborative and individual prizes, my planning is 'shown up' by the pupils. The pupil who voiced the best idea regarding the distribution of group prizes was not very articulate, so I have been forced to summarise his comments to make them more easily accessible to readers:

*For each project, each group gets a certain number of points, and the group with the most points at the end of the project wins, and there'd be second and third prizes.*

*(Toby, DreamTeam)*

This portfolio attitude towards prizes would have meant more work, but could have been implemented fairly easily. It would also have prevented a further issue, namely that, although motivation was provided by the competition, there was another project to be completed after the competition finished; and while some groups stated they continued to stay motivated, most said they did not, and the fact that only three out of the six possible group projects were finished seem to indicate that the end of the competition had a direct – negative – impact on motivation. The JerryBerrys expressed this as follows:

*S: Did that motivation carry through to the next task, i.e. the Christmas task?*

*Timothy: Probably not – you need something at the end.*

*(all talk together)*

*Timothy: Yeah, 'cause that way, everyone would give it their best until the last piece of work had been finished.*

They also suggest a group prize, as do several other groups. This, coupled with the great motivational impact being allowed to work in friendship groups seems to have had on the pupils, suggests that the pupils were a great deal more interested in collaboration than I initially gave them credit for. Reber (2005) hypothesises regarding a similar (website-building) study with university students that

*as this activity is a constructive and collaborative form of knowledge acquisition [...], one would predict that students have more autonomy in pursuing their interests and therefore report more course satisfaction, even if they do not learn more from this activity than from traditional teaching (p. 93).*

If this was true, it would raise the additional question as to whether the prize itself or the actual task were the main motivating factor, and again, my interpretation is that those pupils motivated by the prize only were likely the ones without a real chance of winning it, or indeed, without a realistic perception of who would win it, arguing once more against the fairness of such prizes, and the need to rethink them.

### **6.3 Collaboration and Peer Cognisance**

As mentioned above, the pupils were highly motivated by being allowed to work in friendship groups. This is supported by Macaro's (1997, p. 136) research, where pupils claimed their language use was 'less fluent' if they worked with people they did not know as well, although I feel this had maybe less impact within the context of this study, and the pupils' preference was due to organisational aspects, such as sharing workloads and agreeing timelines. As a class of 24, I asked the pupils to divide themselves up into six groups of four. This happened almost immediately, with one exception, with one boy looking lost, finally attaching himself to an existing group of four. The fact that I asked him to join the remaining group of three instead came to haunt me, and proves like nothing else in this project the need for collaboration between school staff and facilitator. I had asked the school for the special needs register, but was told there were no pupils with special needs in the class. Throughout the project, I was aware that this one boy had difficulties in bonding with the remaining three pupils, but as he was shy and they were quite boisterous, I was not overly concerned, and instead

ensured the individual boy received as much support as possible from myself and the student in Germany. It was only after the project was three quarters finished that I was told the boy had in fact Asperger's syndrome, and had been deeply affected by not being able to comply with my task (i.e. to collaborate in a group), due to the unresponsiveness of the other group members. At that point in time, there was little I could do, apart from cursing and doubling my efforts to make the boy feel comfortable. This issue affected me deeply and will be further discussed in the following chapter. Overall, however, I found the concept of self-selecting groups to be highly successful – pupils commented positively on the motivation they received from working together, and I feel a lot of potential friction was avoided by allowing friends to collaborate. It also, of course, prevented pupils from getting to know other class members better, or honing their communication and teamwork skills with a wider range of participants; I maintain, however, that in this case the motivation and the trust I placed in the pupils' choice of team members outweighed any advantages forced grouping may have had.

### 6.3.1 Collaborating with each other

Overall, the groups acknowledged that working with their friends had great motivational impact. One of the groups, KussKuss, is the only one to deliberately discuss issues arising from collaboration:

*Lynn: [...] Doing a project like this, it's like, everyone has their own ideas, so it's like...trying to...*

*Emily: Yeah.*

*Lynn: Well, inter...integrate all the different ideas.*

*Emily: And if you, like, discuss it together, once one person's got another idea, they could, like, still go on and do that, and...*

*Lynn: Yeah. Come back and go 'oh, sorry, I didn't realise'...*

This group found that, despite agreeing on terms during lessons, once everyone got home, the collaboration disintegrated, partly due to technological problems, but partly due to individuals pursuing ideas not discussed with the group. Links are made here between collaboration and learner autonomy, and these will be pursued further below. Little (1996) says of these links:

*The chief argument in favour of group work as a means of developing learner autonomy is Vygotskian in origin: collaboration between two or more learners on a constructive task can only be achieved by externalizing, and thus making explicit, processes of analysis, planning and synthesis that remain largely internal, and perhaps also largely implicit, when the task is performed by an individual learner working alone (p. 214).*

KussKuss seem to be on the way to use group work successfully. In their case, however, it seems that individualism interferes with group issues, and further practice in dealing with disagreements and sticking to prior agreements could have helped this group to collaborate better. They seem to improve on their collaboration, though, as the following excerpts help to illustrate:

*I can't remember who it was, [...] she did a page, and it was, like, 'that's not quite the thing we wanted', and it's like, 'cause if we did it together, we could all be (unintelligible). People said: 'Oh, could you change that there and turn it around a bit', but because she was at home, she did it all, and then we couldn't...change it.*

*(Lynn, KussKuss, on the first group project task)*

*Geena/Emily (together): But the Christmas thing...*

*Lynn: It was really fun learning, like, different songs... [...] 'Cause we, like, we went through them, all of us, like, quite a few different ones, and we just, like, tried to sing them all, and it was really fun [...].*

*(KussKuss, on the second group project task)*

*Lynn: I thought that the PowerPoint presentation at the end was fun.*

*Geena: Oh! Yeah!!*

*Emily: Yeah.*

*Lynn: 'Cause you could just, like, play around with all the different images, and stuff like that.*

*Geena: I thought the PowerPoint presentation was really good – because we all had something to do.*

*Emily: Yeah.*

*Lynn: Yeah – we all made one page.*

*Geena: And we had one complete – we were all in the same, we had enough, it wasn't just like we got one lesson, and that was really good. [...] And everyone was actually there, and ... [...] I mean, it wasn't something that you had to go home and do.*

*Emily: So we could, like, correct each other.*

*(KussKuss, on the third and final group project task)*

The main reason KussKuss cite for the success of the third task from a collaborative point of view is the fact that they had the most time in class to discuss and complete it.

Although they were asked to complete detailed group project sheets for each project, highlighting who would complete which task, as well as deadlines, it seems they are still much more comfortable discussing issues pertaining to the work in pre-arranged lesson time, allowing for greater immediate flexibility, and preventing the problem they mention regarding the first project. One group member going away and changing how the work is completed may show a level of initiative and autonomy in this individual, but the level of peer cognisance is fairly low, disregarding other group members' needs and prior arrangements. More could perhaps have been done from my position to ensure pupils not only filled in the task sheets, but understood better how role distribution in peer collaboration works, encouraging and facilitating learner autonomy within the groups. As Macaro (1997) states:

*At a social level collaborative learning mirrors the outside world and the world of work. Whilst there is clearly a need for every learner to achieve his/her maximum potential as an individual s/he must also develop the awareness and the skills needed to operate as a member of a team (p. 143).*

It is a shame that Karen – the 'individualistic' group member of KussKuss, actually 'disappears' during the course of the project (due to the family moving away) – whilst this obviously removes the factor which aggravates and endangers potential peer cognisance, it also prevents the group from finding their own solution – and me from finding out if and how they would have done so.

Although KussKuss is the group which comments most elaborately on collaborative processes, most groups have something to say on the topic. Not all groups, however, quite understood the concept of sharing work:

*Josh: You need a boffin.*

*John: You need a boffin.*

*Josh: Two friends...*

*John: You need one really smart person,*

*Josh: ...and two friends...*

*John: ...one really dumb person, and...errr*

*Josh: (laughs) (unintelligible)*

*John: One to play the games – me.*

*Josh: And for the benefit of the tape – that's me.*

*(DreamTeam, on roles within the group)*

John and Josh are, in fact, themselves the two friends they refer to, and their group did indeed include one person who did all the work (though not a 'boffin'), and one person who was consistently absent (though not a 'dumb person'). The two friends were very much a 'double act', hard to separate, and hard to convince to do any work. Their idea of collaboration, by their own definition, was to have one group member to do all the work, and for the group to receive credit. Although these two pupils did not take the work particularly seriously in any case, a more thorough discussion of roles within group work and shared responsibilities might have helped to alleviate the issues presented here.

### 6.3.2 Collaborating with the students

As could be seen in the previous chapter, the students felt highly motivated by their interactions with the pupils, and the pupils, too, had a lot to say on this topic. Most groups agreed that they liked working with British university students, rather than German or Austrian nationals. For this, they gave a number of reasons – many of them centring around language and confidence issues:

*Vivian: Because they speak better English, 'cause we can't speak very good German, so (unintelligible), if we do it in English, and, if it was a German person, they wouldn't really know about England, and, if they want to talk about stuff, in England, or in Germany, it's better this way 'cause you can compare.*

*Alison: Yeah, and, as well, with something like email, in English and like, if they were German students they might not be able to understand some of it.*

A rather lengthy excerpt from KussKuss illustrates just why the pupils felt more comfortable talking to an older person with the same native language:

*Geena: I think if we'd worked with German people our own age, it wouldn't have worked as well.*

*Emily: 'Cause they, they would just be, like, working on the same level as us, so they wouldn't know...their questions*

*Geena: They wouldn't know a lot of English...[...]*

*Emily: Or, erm, 'what was this like and what was that like', 'cause they might not have done that.*

*Lynn, Geena: Un-huh.*

*Emily: Because Lizzy is, like, older, she's, like, already done it.*

*Geena: And also, erm...it might not have worked as well, because, like us, they might not use the language correctly, so it's, like...*

*Lynn: And also, I think, because she's older, I know it sounds a bit silly, but like, it kind of takes the embarrassment away, because, like, you're not embarrassed to...*

*Emily: Yeah!*

*Lynn: ...ask questions.*

*Emily (unintelligible).*

*Lynn: Yeah. They think – even if they think it's just slightly stupid, and they're like 'why're you asking that? That's a bit silly!' But it's like – she never said that, and she'd always try and answer our questions. She'd never be like 'Oh, I don't want to answer that', or 'Oh, I couldn't be bothered to find out.'*

*S: Un-huh. Can you think of an example of what you might think of as a silly question?*

*Lynn: Errr...I don't really know. It's just like...*

*Geena: Erm – maybe, like 'how do you say this in German', 'cause I asked – I randomly asked her once: 'How do you say 'air hostess' in German, \*laughs\*, because I was trying to talk about my sister, but I hadn't actually told her that, so she must have been like 'what on earth?', but she actually (unintelligible as Emily starts speaking)*

*Emily: But if you ask that someone our own age, they'd just be like 'are you stupid or something?'*

*Geena: Yeah.*

Interesting here is the fact that the pupils regard a vocabulary question as 'stupid' and 'silly' – just the sort of questions many collaborative language projects encourage. The students' willingness to relate to the pupils was obviously important to them, and KussKuss's transcript is full of references for collaboration with Lizzy, the university student, and, incidentally, more proof that the group had a high level of peer cognisance. The following excerpt shows not only a good level of initiative, but also how confident the group is with seeking and providing information among themselves:

*Lynn: When we were talking to her, because, like, cause I was playing rugby at school, I was, like, 'oh, could you find out if there are any local...German...teams' – and she did, and then I went onto their web site, and it was just really interesting, because it's, like, quite similar, and you could see the similarities between, like, the two countries, and stuff. And you got to find out about, just loads of stuff. [...] 'Cause then I think it's more...it's got more of an...incentive to find out, more...about...*

*Geena: What does incentive mean?*

*Lynn: It means more, like, reason. To find out about the things...*

Geena's question, when it was asked, was entirely natural within the flow of conversation, and was directed at Lynn – who, after all, had used the word – rather than

myself as an authority figure, indicating the awareness of and responsibility for each other I have mentioned in my definition of 'peer cognisance'. I was very interested in how this group collaborated and perceived itself, it was definitely the most successful group from a collaborative point of view – furthermore, Lizzy was the student who was also the most affected by her group's motivation. Renshaw (2003) states how the concept of a 'community' 'evokes images and feelings of security ('us' and 'ours')' (p. 356), and it seems indeed that KussKuss had that sense of shared responsibility and ownership. I am writing more about KussKuss below, and how they are opposed by less successful collaborations. Even the level of German used is discussed by this group, and again, working with a student is seen as preferable to working with anybody else:

*Lynn: And I thought it was interesting, because sometimes, she [Lizzy]'d write stuff, and you'd just look at it and go: 'Oh – my – God! What has she just said?' So you'd have to go to your book and, like, piece together sentences, it's like – 'oh, I've never heard of that word before!'*

*S: But you did do it? You didn't just go 'prmhph'...*

*Lynn: Yeah! Like, you'd pick out words, and you'd be like – 'dog' – 'carrot' – what does that mean? (all laugh) Like, you know what I mean?*

The motivation to communicate worked both ways, with pupils trying to understand and be understood. In writing, several pupils originally tried to get away with translation programmes to compose their German messages, when I told them I would not tolerate complete messages which were machine-translated, yet encouraged the use of dictionaries for individual words. Toby from the DreamTeam produced the following message:

*Guten tag,*

*ich Hoffentlich geht es dir gut und das Leben ist gut. Das wetter hat been lieber fremd im [Yorkshire]. Suddenly on Thursday (Donnerstag) it snowed heavily. What is the weather like in Austria at this time of year.*

*Beast wishes,*

*Toby.*

Even without having taught the pupil in question, a native speaker is still fairly quickly capable of distinguishing between words that were already in Toby's vocabulary, and those that were looked up for the purpose of writing the message (highlighted in bold). 'Hoffentlich geht es dir gut' is a standard phrase, meaning 'I hope you are well' – by

preceding it with 'ich', Toby shows he has not quite understood the way the phrase is meant to be used, effectively writing 'I I hope you are well'. Similarly, his use of the words 'lieber' and 'fremd' speak of dictionary use – he is intending to write 'the weather has been rather strange in [Yorkshire]', but uses 'rather' as in 'I would rather go shopping' and 'strange' as in 'a strange (i.e. foreign) place' – both words in German are unrelated to the meaning he is intending, making the sentence intelligible only after it has been translated back into English. This short message illustrates two points – on the one hand the motivational aspect of communicating with real people, which made Toby look up the words in the first place, but on the other, the advantage of using English speakers, who are then able to decipher the less successful attempts and give pupils the feeling their work has been meaningful and led to actual communication.

Not all groups had this close a relationship to their student, though. As the JerryBerrys put it:

*Timothy: They were more like a source of information.*

*Dale: Yeah.*

*S: Un-hunh.*

*Dale: It was almost like we were logging on to some web site.*

*S: Sure.*

*Timothy: Yeah, sort of...it just gave us, like, what we wanted, you know, like correction.*

I had been quite keen for the students *not* to be seen as a mere 'electronic correcting facility', but especially the choice of the word 'it', rather than 'she', shows that there was little personal involvement from the JerryBerrys. Interestingly, however, the JerryBerrys meant this comment to be positive – it was given in reply to my question whether the gender of the student impeded communication. These and other related gender issues will be further explored in the Fears and Barriers section below.

Where pupils do mention the advantages of writing to German national pupils, these are usually related to being 'able to write it all in English, 'cause they're good at English' (Timothy, JerryBerrys), or to sharing the same interests.

## 6.4 Fears and Barriers

As at other participant levels, the project was not all smooth sailing with the pupils. Many of the fears and barriers are directly in inverse proportion to motivational and enthusiastic responses, i.e. the presence of something served as a motivation, the absence as a barrier, and vice versa. My visits to the school, seen as motivational by pupils (see above), proved to be a barrier if they did not occur, and pupils relied on the usual classroom teacher for input. This proved to be difficult, particularly as the teacher showed less enthusiasm for the project than what was expected from the pupils, as KussKuss illustrate:

*Geena: 'Cause that's one...that was one thing that annoyed me, was, that's one thing that annoyed me is that, erm, there wasn't as much communication with the teacher than with the people. [...]*

*Emily: Yes, 'cause, when we were planning things, you know, when you went in the class, there was like Mrs Cooper, and you know, because she hasn't been, like, involved in it, she didn't, like, know a lot about it. So if you asked her, she's just, like 'ask Sabine when she comes in'.*

*Lynn: But then we had to wait another two weeks...*

*Emily: Yeah.*

*Lynn: And we couldn't really do anything on the project.*

*Emily: And then she'd be like 'why haven't you planned it' - 'because I can't'.*

Whilst the timeframe the pupils refer to is slightly exaggerated (I was in at least once a week, so the longest delay would have been nine days), the delay was still substantial from a collaborative point of view. Pupils had been encouraged to email me with problems; however, I believe that, in reality, I did not have enough time to solidify my role in relation to the pupils enough for them to see this as a viable option, preferring to wait until I visited the class next. Although the frequency of my visits could potentially be seen as a timing issue, I believe the barrier in question here is more related to unsatisfactory collaboration between all staff involved. This translated itself to the pupils as a lack of interest and a sense of discontinuity which made them believe any input and effort they made into the project would be unrelated to awards they may receive in class, such as favourable reports and effort grades. I, too, had assumed a higher level of involvement from the teacher, an aspect which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

### 6.4.1 Timing

Most pupils agreed that the length of the project was appropriate (an interesting fact, considering that it was originally planned to last for nearly the entire academic year – October to May). The timing they questioned was related to holidays, and, as Lynn explains, caught some groups unawares:

*Lynn: Yeah. I thought it was good and what we did and everything, but I just thought we could have had more time for this. It were just, like, it just happened to be over, we had the, like, it was during, over, err..*

*Emily: The holiday.*

*Lynn: Half term. [...] And that's, I know it sounds stupid, because you think: 'Oh, you have all the time in the world', but – you don't, because, it's like – I went to London, and ... I don't know...people don't realise...and it's like, you don't really have time, so, I think we could have done a lot more – if we'd had more time.*

Other groups also mention the holidays as preventing them from collaborative work, particularly as it meant an increased dependency on technology, due to lack of physical contact at school

### 6.4.2 Technological Issues

Unsurprisingly, technology features as an issue with the pupils, just as it did with the students. One group explains why one project was late:

*S: [...] Was there something that worked particularly well, or something that was really a big problem?*

*Susan: Michelle's computer!*

*Natalie: Michelle's computer! (laugh)*

*Michelle: Not my fault, my Dad's!*

*S: What was wrong with your computer?*

*Michelle: It just shut down, and my Dad had to take it to the shop. [...] It came back without the work on it, 'cause they put...they set these new programmes up...*

*S: Oh...*

*Michelle: So...I told him not to. But he said he...did it anyway.*

*(Kangaroos)*

Whilst this was a one-off problem, access issues for some pupils were more permanent:

*I just think it was a bit hard, because again, it was just like, with school ending, it was just, like, I actually don't have a personal computer, I'm on my parents' computers, so, logging on to the Internet and stuff like that, isn't particularly easy, so it's kind of, like, you'd get loads of emails, and it'd be quite, like, I could imagine, like, Lizzy or someone, being, 'oh, maybe (unintelligible)', but it's like...[...] 'Cause she sent all these emails, like, 'oh, you guys, like, don't you like me anymore?', you know, 'You're not emailing me back – am I boring you?' And it's like: 'You're not boring us, but we don't have the opportunities, really.'*

*(Lynn, KussKuss)*

Again, Lynn's unease with lack of access is directly linked to knowing there is a real person at the other end, and she displays her concern about her peer's feelings. As mentioned above, there was no other group where peer cognisance was this interwoven in almost all comments and issues, making it difficult both to choose the most appropriate quotes from this group, and not to disregard other, less fruitful focus group sessions with other groups. From the way some emails reached me, however (via friends' addresses, posted from friends' houses), I am aware that at least one other pupil had serious difficulty getting online from home, due to lack of technology, thus impeding his enjoyment in the project.

### **6.4.3 Gender Issues**

Because the self-selected groups were all single-sex, I was surprised about the extent to which gender issues still entered into pupils' impressions of the project. They are the most typical example of the tug-of-war between motivation and barriers – if the online aspect was motivational, then the fact that only female students were at the other end was uninspiring. If the competition was a great way to enthuse pupils, then the perception that a girl would win it counterbalanced this positive feeling. Not surprisingly, it was one of the less productive groups who had a lot to say on this topic – whether by way of an excuse for non-participation or for genuine reasons is not for me to say; however, the number of times gender was picked up by pupils is certainly

significant – not one group failed to bring up the topic. The DreamTeam say about the competition (and, more importantly to them, the prize):

*John: Yeah, but a girl got it. A girl.*

*Josh: Sexist. All girls do it. [...] You should...you should have had a boy one.*

*John: ...and a girl one, yeah.*

*Josh: Yeah.*

*S: Why?*

*John: Because, like...*

*Josh: Because girls probably work better than boys. [...]*

*John: We...probably...90% of the time the girls are winning, so boys won't be that interested in it. [...] If you have a boy one, then...everyone will ...they'll work harder. [...]*

*S: So, do you think if you have a prize for boys and girls...*

*Both: Yeah.*

*S: ...will the boys work as hard as the girls?*

*Josh: Yeah.*

*John: Yeah. [...]*

*S: So you think – if boys and girls work equally hard, the girls are gonna get more done?*

*Josh: They get – always get more done...they're more clever.*

*John: Yeah, they mature two years. Roughly. [...]*

*John: So they're, like, they're, like, 14, yeah, but we're 12 still.*

*S: You think so?*

*John: Yeah – I – I – I don't know, but...that's what my Mum says. And everything else.*

John and Josh are talking about achievable goals, and their feeling that, as girls are both more 'mature' and 'more clever', they, being boys, need not bother applying themselves. I would have liked to pursue their perception further, as I was interested in how John linked the comment on maturity back to his mother, making me wonder about the input parents' comments have on the children's behaviour. I did feel, however, that I lost the thread of the actual line of questioning at this point, and went on to pursue it – possibly at the loss of some fascinating information. If this is placed in conjunction with the assertion by a member of the KussKuss group – that Patricia, the winner of two prizes, would have submitted work of the same quality, with or without a prize – this raises the question who exactly gets motivated by incentives, and, particularly in relation to this project, how could it have been assured that there was a better spread of prizes? This line of thought returns to Toby's portfolio idea, and I agree it would have been a better way forward.

The girls were incensed by the idea of gender-specific prizes when I repeated the idea (without reference to the originator) back to them:

*Vivian: [...] If there is, like, all the boys in our class, they're all like, really, really lazy, and this one person that wasn't really lazy, they're obviously gonna get it. For like, all their work. But, see, like, if, all the girls in the class are really un-lazy, then it'd be harder to actually get it. So... [...]*

*Simone: Yeah, 'cause boys are really lazy.*

*Vivian: They just want it easier. [...]*

*Simone: So they said that they didn't try because they thought a girl would get it anyway?*

*S: Un-hunh.*

*Simone: Even if they did try?*

*S: [...] They basically said: If a bloke tries and a girl tries, the girl's always gonna get it.*

*Patricia: No. But... (as in: but if they want to think that...)*

*Simone: But if they were actually trying, then they'd find out that it's not true...they just don't bother.*

KussKuss venture to try and understand the other gender, and offer the following explanation for lack of participation, as well as susceptibility to incentives and rewards:

*Lynn: It's mostly the boys, it's like, they will just not do anything, 'cause they think their friends think they're goody-goody two-shoes, or their, you know, they probably, they're more like...*

*Emily: But then if they're working towards something, their mates may be working towards it as well...*

*Lynn: Yeah, and then, 'cause then you can turn around and go 'look, I wanna work hard, because we can go and see this film', then maybe they'll be like 'yeah, cool, that's alright, that's not...wimpy', or whatever.*

Gender issues were obviously prevalent at a level I was largely unaware of during the study, thinking as I did that the self-selection of single-sex groups had eliminated these issues beyond the initial focus on gender in group composition. The fact that all groups were preoccupied with how gender influenced their attitude towards the project and each other shows that the facilitator will need to pay more attention to these issues, as they appear to have direct impact on pupil enjoyment, motivation and, by extension, potentially performance.

## **6.5 Bringing it all together – Discussion**

In the previous chapter, the way in which most issues linked in with motivation became the focus of this concluding section of the chapter. With the pupils, I was very much aware of how some pupils focused on positive experiences, citing what motivated them, and how others concentrated on negative aspects, explaining all the issues which interfered with them either concentrating, completing the work, or even enjoying it in the first place. Rather than repeating the linking exercise from the previous chapter, I will here further explore the motivational pull versus the barriers which prevented groups from succeeding more. This form of evaluation is related to Lewin's (1952) force field analysis, although I am arguing that any assignment of numbers to different factors, indicating how strong the pull might be (as the analysis is employed by Lewin), can only be arbitrary after a study of this length. For this reason, I have chosen to follow a less formulaic approach, instead showing the opposing forces as I felt they can be extracted and inferred from the pupils' comments.

As with the last chapter, not all issues represented in the graphic below have been discussed previously; however, in this case, most issues do feature, apart from gender-related issues, which will be covered individually. Following the graphic representation of fears and barriers versus motivation, I will link some of the areas further to the points raised by the pupils, as appropriate.

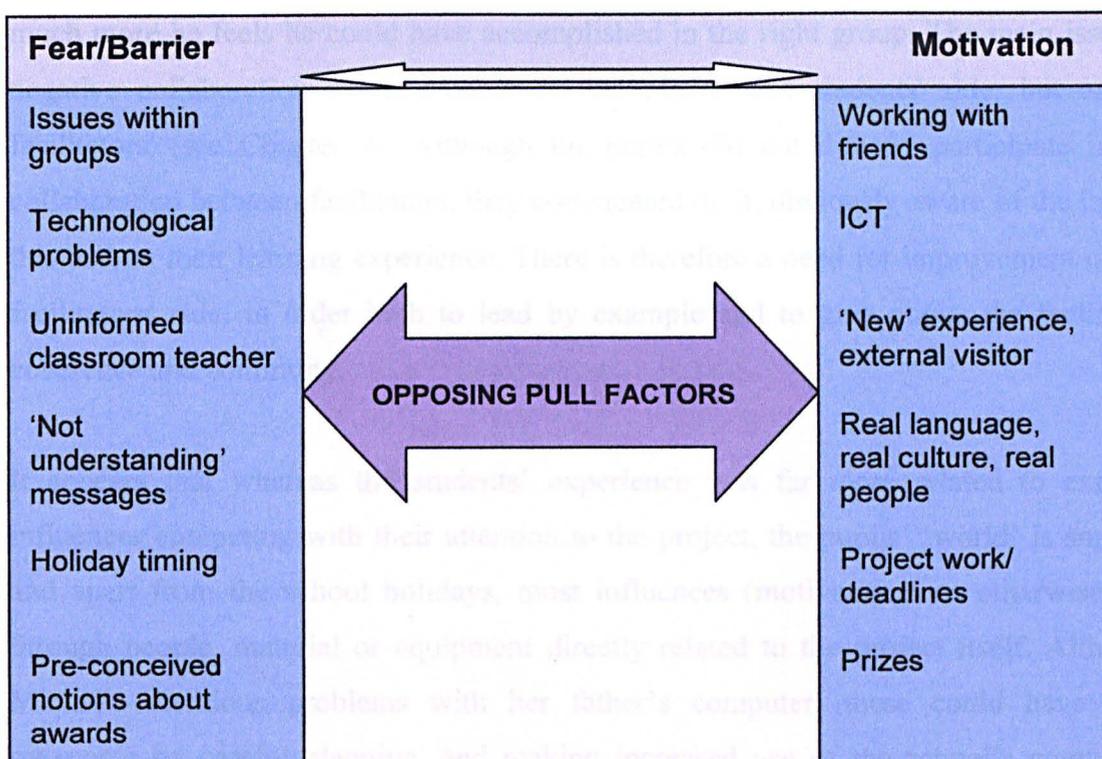


Figure 6.1: *Opposing pull factors in pupil motivation*

Although not all the issues above are directly related to collaboration and peer cognisance, most have been interpreted by pupils in such a way that they allow linking with these areas of discussion. The motivational pull of communicating with real people, who were actually abroad, using language for real communication purposes, for example, stands opposite the fear of not being understood, not understanding, a generic preference towards English, and the fear of asking 'silly questions' (KussKuss).

Most pupils commented they enjoyed working on projects, however, if they are expected to collaborate, timing becomes an issue, and holiday periods are unsuitable for successful collaboration. Similarly, the pull of ICT use and online communication was hampered by access problems for some pupils. If, moving on from the analysis of participants' experiences in an online collaboration, the next goal is to improve these experiences, it follows that ways must be found in which the positive experiences outweigh the negative ones, by further enhancing those experiences the participants cherish or perceive to be useful, whilst minimising those which have a negative effect.

Working in friendship groups was cited by all groups as being highly motivational – the exception being the pupil who did not work in a friendship group, who stressed how

much more he feels he could have accomplished in the right group. The main issue of negative collaboration did not occur on the pupils' and students' side, but on the facilitators' (see Chapter 7). Although the pupils did not directly participate in the collaboration between facilitators, they commented on it, obviously aware of the impact this had on their learning experience. There is therefore a need for improvement on the facilitators' side, in order both to lead by example and to give pupils the feeling of coherence and continuity.

It appears that whereas the students' experience was far more related to external influences competing with their attention to the project, the pupils' 'world' is smaller, and apart from the school holidays, most influences (motivational or otherwise) are through people, material or equipment directly related to the project itself. Although Michelle mentions problems with her father's computer, these could have been overcome by careful planning, and making increased use of the school's computing facilities. Overall, this means that pupils are far more susceptible to input the facilitator can actually influence, through the careful selection of working groups, allowing for school-time computer access, ensuring collaboration and information sharing with all staff involved, and creating meaningful tasks the pupils can relate to and which foster collaboration. The one factor beyond the facilitator's control is, of course, the motivation and access opportunities of the peer student abroad. As previously discussed, access issues should be discernable prior to the project starting, and all students commented how more motivated pupils would impact positively on their own motivation, creating an upward spiral of successful collaboration.

KussKuss, the most successful group from a collaborative and peer cognisance point of view, was not without its technical problems, but they were the ones most aware of each other and 'their' student, continually – though largely subconsciously, I believe – assessing each other's feelings and motivation, and seeking alternative routes to success where necessary. Whilst it would be easy to conclude on some successful formula for collaboration, I do unfortunately have to agree with Macaro (1997) that

*it is impossible to make confident statements about causal relationships. Do learners who interact more make faster progress or do they interact more because they are more proficient in the first place (p. 143)?*

Interestingly, none of the members of KussKuss won a prize, but they mostly stated they were not too bothered about gaining a prize in the first place. However, the notion of prizes is the one which instigated the most comments – as well as the most disagreement – among the pupils. It appears that gender issues and prejudices are deeply ingrained at this age, and short of making these the focus of the study, a project of this length will be able to do little to address them. More intriguing, however, was the notion of who gets motivated by prizes and who actually receives them – it appears that many pupils had hoped for a prize, but, from an objective point of view, seemed to do little to actually receive it. Whether this is a distorted self-view of the pupils or simply talk is hard to distinguish – whilst I understand a hard-working pupil may be disappointed with going unrewarded, I was genuinely surprised when a pupil who had to be reminded consistently not to play games in class voiced his disappointment at not winning. Interestingly, the pupils' vote was fairly clear, and most pupils voted for Patricia's personal homepage. There was an issue with one of the boys' homepages, however, and he did in fact have the most votes – because several boys posted up to seven messages each. Once these multiple votes were disregarded, the winner was obvious – which did not stop the boy in question from voicing his discontent continually. Without actually repeating the exercise, it is not easy to predict how this may have been prevented. The evaluation took place in the final project session, though, and this session was cut by the usual class teacher without warning, from 60 minutes to effectively 20 minutes. I do feel this had a substantial impact on the depth pupils were able to go into, as many of them had little opportunity to really contemplate each others' pages. If I was to repeat the exercise, I would like to make more use of Black's Assessment for Learning principles (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al*, 2003; Black *et al*, 2004), giving pupils more detailed guidelines against which they might judge each others' pages, thus encouraging helpful comments, rather than just a nomination. This, I feel, would further encourage the pupils to consider each other as fellow participants and 'value' their relationship as collaborators, combining forces to achieve the same goal. In a prolonged study of peer facilitation, Ashwin (2003) found a correlation between peer learning and learners' development of 'a more sophisticated understanding of what is involved in learning' (p. 6) – effectively aiding learners' ability to learn for themselves. This provides a further link between learner autonomy and collaboration, and strengthens the argument that, if the project had continued for a

prolonged period of time, lasting effects might have occurred among the participants, if they have not done so already as part of this study.

Regarding gender differences, it appears that the online collaborative aspect, requiring pupils to complete tasks, did bring both genders together, motivating the girls through the communicative aspect and the boys through research and data manipulation, as suggested in the literature review. This imagery, however, is rather black and white, and even though there was infinitely more evidence of female pupils enjoying the communicative aspect than male ones, the other end of the spectrum – i.e. research, data handling and manipulation, and the creation of display work – was less gender-specific. It appears the project was varied enough to allow most pupils to concentrate on topics of interest to them, and most groups acknowledged that some scaffolded structure was necessary to encourage them to complete the work. As the JerryBerrys put it:

*Dale: So, you can't have complete freedom. Otherwise, you miss the whole point of the project.*

*S: So, you think the way it was done...*

*Dale: ...worked well.*

*S: Okay, what about... 'cause I mean, the next –*

*Timothy: We had as much freedom as we could have*

*Dale: Yeah, without, you know...if you had too much, it would wreck the project, yeah.*

*Clint: There'd be no point to it.*

What the group is alluding to is that they recognise the need for facilitation by somebody who sets parameters of a task, however freely, and then supports the learners in their chosen topic. Several groups originally said they would have preferred complete freedom in choosing their topic, and, in fact, all but one of these groups recognised – through intervention of individual members, rather than myself – that they did, in fact, have this freedom and did pursue it. I was pleased that the pupils had thus recognised the emphasis placed on their opinions and input, and were aware of the role of a facilitator in the process.

## **6.6 Summary**

This chapter has concentrated on the experiences relating to the collaborative online project, as seen from the pupils' point of view. As with the students, many of the issues relate to motivation, either enhancing or impeding it, and thus encouraging or discouraging participation. In analysing the pupils' responses, a number of oppositional forces became obvious, leading to links with Lewin's (1952) concept of force field analysis, and an attempt to identify how a facilitator might be able to influence these forces in a positive fashion, thus improving the learners' experiences. The pupils' responses also showed that they were very much aware of each other as collaborators, of the students, and of the facilitator. Of particular interest are the pupils' own ideas regarding their motivation, such as the increased opportunity to celebrate group achievements via a number of smaller prizes, as well as the use of portfolios to accumulate 'winning' entries in a longer-lasting competition.

The pupils' thoughts and concerns were also far more directly related to the project itself and school life in general, and less influenced by outside factors. As such, their experiences differ from the students, for whom the project was constantly influenced by outside factors. For the pupils, the facilitator thus had a much more direct influence on the shaping of the project, but also required as a result was a much more consistent contact, including face-to-face visits.

After having considered the students and pupils as distinct participative categories within the collaborative project, the following chapter now turns to the final participant in the exchange, namely the facilitator – myself.

## **7 My (the facilitator's) journey**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Although I feel my development both as a researcher and facilitator features throughout this thesis, this chapter seeks to concentrate on my experiences in setting up and facilitating the online collaborative exchange project that was my fieldwork. As this thesis argues that external circumstances and individuals' personalities and experiences are vital components of any collaborative project, it seems only prudent to take a brief look at my own personality, and how this may have influenced my research. Returning to Richardson's (1997) argument that looking one's own life can help us to understand the lives of others, I am arguing that this detailed, in part autoethnographic, engagement with my experiences as a facilitator has the potential to be helpful for other facilitators, and to hopefully further improve understanding of the facilitation process.

As an individual, I thrive on adversity – maybe not quite as much adversity as I faced at times, but I am not sure how long I would have lasted with a picture-perfect study, without having to think on my feet, improvise, and make things work. It is fortunate for me in this case, then, that most research has its downfalls, challenges, and messy moments (Law, 2004; Hallowell *et al*, 2005), allowing us to show perseverance and – ultimately and hopefully – leading to success. This chapter looks at how my own motivation was influenced by collaborating with and facilitating the other participants, liaising with school staff, and the fears and barriers this collaboration occasionally presented. The chapter's main data input originates from the (often very substantial) entries from my research journal, an online blog kept in narrative format for exactly this purpose. The chapter follows the subdivisions of other chapters, the interlinking sections of Motivation and Enthusiasm, Fears and Barriers, and Collaboration and Peer Cognisance. Due to my combined role as a learner and a facilitator, where necessary sections are seen from two perspectives – on the one hand my own motivation and enthusiasm for the project, on the other, how I might facilitate motivation and enthusiasm among the other participants. As, for this chapter, data and author are one and the same voice, I decided to wait until the final section of the chapter before linking the data with literature, allowing blog entries and reflections to speak for themselves

until that point. In the final section, then, a return is made to the literature, but also in brief to the analyses of the past two chapters, as I found my experiences to be compounding those of students and pupils: Like the students, I was influenced by outside circumstances – my job as a lecturer, an absence due to a conference abroad, for example – like the pupils, I felt myself subjected to immense motivational struggles between different forces, resulting in mood swings and motivational peaks and troughs. The final section of this chapter thus seeks to return to the related sections of the past two chapters, and to compare experiences wherever possible. In summarising and discussing the data, I am linking the skills needed by myself as a facilitator to a list of four ‘confidences’ – technological confidence, pedagogical confidence, emotional confidence; and personal confidence – which are also presented and illustrated in the final section, and are intended to provide a framework of reference for other individuals seeking to facilitate in a similar environment.

## **7.2 Motivation and enthusiasm**

Due to the early termination of the first project, I was at all times very much aware that the project would unlikely be self-perpetuating, instead relying in my continuous input and excitement to succeed. Keeping my spirits up and maintaining a high level of motivation for myself was therefore a constant component of the study.

### **7.2.1 My own motivation**

I would describe myself as a practitioner, interested in making a positive contribution to teaching and learning experiences, rather than somebody interested in the abstract with little immediate or everyday value. In the blog entry below, this attitude is described as follows:

*[...] knowing what I'm doing something for - yes, I can be a researcher, yes, I can spend months [...] pursuing some elusive goal, BUT this then will need to make a tangible difference for somebody else. (05/05/04)*

Therefore, making ‘a tangible difference’ stayed in the forefront of my mind throughout the entire study. As mentioned above, I did not enter the main study of this thesis in the

highest of spirits, having been negatively influenced by the first study, and questioning my facilitative skills and my confidence to continue. Fortunately for me, there was a distinct difference between the two studies. As well as being located within the UK, and thus allowing regular face-to-face contact to support the online exchange, the second study was linked to an 'official', government-funded project. Operating in a role of responsibility positively influenced my attitude and motivation – not regarding the way I perceived the project to be important, but in the way in which I felt I had the right to expect collaboration from other individuals and institutions, as the study overall had a higher status. In the blog, my relief is palpable:

*I don't think I was quite as insistent with Study A, which might also have been part of it not lasting the length of the project? As a facilitator, you've got to believe your project is important, to feel comfortable - well, maybe not comfortable, but in the right - to tell other people when they are not pulling their weight, or meeting their end of the bargain. In Study A, when it was 'just' my PhD fieldwork, I felt as though everybody was doing me a favour, and I had no rights at all, this time, the [DfES] will want a report at the end, and if it doesn't work out, could I honestly say I've done everything to make it work? This time, I feel 'yes', but with Study A, I'm not so sure now, although it felt like it at the time. (21/10/04)*

The blog entry above relates directly to what I am calling the 'confidence to pursue one's rights' in the final section of this chapter. I felt much more confident in an official capacity, and believed more strongly that I had to offer a project of value, in return for which I could expect a certain level of professionalism and collaboration from students, pupils, staff and outside agencies.

On the other hand, I was strongly motivated by the feeling that all participants, including me, were 'in the same boat' – everybody, in my opinion, would have to contribute to the project to make it successful. My motivation was just as easily influenced as that of other participants, and I was certainly not above feeling demoralised by a lack of participation, as the following entry illustrates.

*I can feel it in myself - I send out the email that the site is live, then check back 5 more times that day to see who has responded. The next day, I vow to make checking part of my routine check-up first thing in the morning (together with bank account, ebay, and all email accounts). However, there's nothing there. I check again at lunchtime, then at dinner. The next day, the morning check again reveals nothing new. I forget about it all day, then think about it once schools in*

*Germany are closed. I feel guilty, but it turns out nobody has posted anyway. From then on, I stick to two check-ups per day, but might not bother during the week-end. After one week, I track the students [using WebCT's tracking facility], and find out one has been to take a look and not posted. The indignation is nearly personal - I'm busting a gut, and they check it out and don't find it worthy of participation??? Well, I won't bother, then. It's hard to drag myself back into \*enthusiastic mode\*, but I decide to email all students to remind them the kids will be joining us soon. Experience tells me posts are most likely to happen shortly after an email, so I'm back to checking five times a day - nothing. If I find it hard to stay motivated, with so much riding on it, what must it be like if this is just a little thing on the side, next to new experiences abroad, new responsibilities (which need to be fulfilled on a daily basis), and this not even being worth official recognition? I can't blame them for not jumping all over to get and/or stay in touch... (02/11/04)*

The blog entry above illustrates how easily even the facilitator can be influenced by a lack of participation. I felt I needed to actively facilitate motivation among the other participants to keep up my own involvement, as will be further outlined below.

Further opportunities to motivate myself could be found elsewhere, in spontaneous communications, experiences, and encounters which often came about unexpectedly:

*Happy moment: Peter and Josh asking for advice on how to build their home page (never mind that it was on the sheet they had mislaid - they'd asked!), and, particularly, Josh coming back after class (completely out of breath) \*because he forgot the sheet which explains the next project\* Hurrah! (25/11/04)*

Due to other experiences with the project, which will be discussed below, I often felt I ought to expect the worst, and every time one of the participants proved me wrong, I felt both elated and vindicated in my efforts, making me work even harder to facilitate motivation.

### **7.2.2 Facilitating motivation**

As I mentioned above, this was a circuitous route, which I was very much aware of. I consider myself an enthusiastic individual who can also pull other people along with this enthusiasm, but I knew that I would need 'something' coming back from the pupils and students if I was to maintain my own motivation. Therefore, actively seeking to facilitate motivation was, for me, both a pedagogical tool and a method of self-

preservation. Offering a prize seemed to be a straightforward method to encourage pupils to participate:

*I'm wondering if saying there'll be a prize at the end will make any difference [sic], or whether it'll just motivate the ones who'd be neat and tidy, anyway? (30/04/04)*

The idea of a prize resurfaces and is put into action more than half a year later – out of desperation, rather than with a clear pedagogical goal in mind:

*I've caved in - I've offered an incentive for participation. Something in my heart tells me that might not be the cleverest thing to do, but I was so unimpressed with the lack of contributions from the pupils...now, there is one prize (a £10 hmv voucher) for the best homepage, provided that person \*also\* has posted three messages to the noticeboard, plus one on how they went about designing their webpage. I think this will \*not\* work on several points: I think it'll encourage them to write quickly, without thinking; their homepage might just sport a translation engine-produced text, and if [sic] I'll ever get them working after this again, without offering a prize, I don't know.*

*When I asked Josh what would have happened if this had been a Maths homework, he said he would have got detention, but, he says, 'I'd have done that, 'cos that's proper work'. I'm trying to stay calm, and ask him what constitutes 'proper' work. We get interrupted, which annoys me, but I hear his reply - it's work that gets marked. (16/11/04)*

My fears were only partially founded – there is little machine translation to be found on the pupils' homepages, yet, contributions do cease almost immediately after the deadline for the prize has passed. I have discussed the issue of the prize in more detail in the previous chapter and will not dwell on it here. Although the first study also raised the issue that increased collaboration would require the pressures of reports and marks, I feel one of the strengths of the project lies within its voluntary nature, and any analysis of motivation would need to be done in a completely different way if extrinsic motivational forces were to be enhanced in this way.

Regarding my contact with the students, I was strongly aware how much I was relying on their good will to keep the project going. The following entry reflects on my 'role' as perceived by the students, and how it may have impacted on their participation:

*This, however, brings me back to who I \*am\* for the participants, and I'm not sure I can ask them that. My interpretation would be:*

*For students: researcher, young person (only few years older than them), external to their actual current needs, from a different department, no power over them - they would not consider asking me for a reference, I'm not grading them, etc. In the daily grind, I'm quite low down the food chain.*

*For pupils: Adult, verified (I'm turning up in their German lesson, with support from their current teacher), accessible, a \*way out\* (project might not be the most exciting thing since soy sauce, but it's different from 'normal' lessons). Authority may be transferred automatically from school context - I have the \*right\* to set homework, etc. My authority may be questioned, but it hasn't happened so far, so the initial hurdle of \*getting in there\* has been taken.*

*One lesson that seems to transpire from this is that students will not automatically see the benefits, even though we've discussed them, and may need somebody 'official' to be linked to the project. If it wasn't me running it, I think the better person would be somebody from university, rather than school, because it appears to me the pupils are more likely to go along with whoever comes in to talk to them, because they can see their class teacher supports the idea. At university, it is very difficult to establish any sort of relationship with students just before they go abroad. Maybe if there was a second-year module in online learning/education, which culminated in the abroad experience - or, even better, a year 4 module in online learning/education, so students could use their abroad experience, but still go into schools to work face-to-face, and use this module to apply for a PGCE? I don't know who would write/introduce such a module, but t [sic] would solve a lot of problems - although it would take away the voluntary idea that I love so much. But, yes, I think a Y4 module would be perfect - except I can't do anything about it now...(02/11/04)*

In the extract above, I am, to a certain extent, pre-empting and consolidating some of the findings from the past two chapters, in that the relationship with pupils was indeed much more direct, due to both the physical contact and the immediate 'role' that was created for me by being linked with the classroom teacher. In contrast, I had little actual contact with the students, and their life abroad in no way depended on the conduct or outcome of the project.

However, the extent to which physical contact was of importance in maintaining pupil motivation became obvious the moment it was interrupted, due to a six-day stay in Berlin for a conference. Furthermore, my absence coincided with the end of the competition, minimising opportunities for continuing motivation:

*[T]here has been very little movement on WebCT since I came to Berlin, as far as I can tell. I don't think this is entirely related to my physical absence, but I think it is enforced by it- although I asked [the PGCE student currently placed with the class] to enthuse the kids, I'm not sure to what extent she will/has, and also to what extent it will make a difference to the class that she is not me – they have had to transfer their loyalty/willingness to work from Caroline to me, I'm not sure if adding a new person into the equation necessarily makes it easier. (05/12/04)*

I had hoped that, by encouraging increased collaboration, the project could continue without my constant presence; however, because of the hard work I had to continuously put in to keep everything going, I knew that the conference was likely to send the project into a tailspin.

### **7.3 Collaboration and Peer Cognisance**

#### **7.3.1 Facilitating peer cognisance among the students**

One of my major influences as a facilitator was to constantly remind all participants of the peers who relied on them to post messages in order to keep the communication going. Especially at the beginning, the students would not post on WebCT, and I feared greatly that the project would come to a halt before it had even started. A number of emails sent out during this time prior to the actual exchange starting illustrate my hope for their professional conduct as participants in a collaborative exchange:

*What I'm hoping to do is to set up the WebCT environment before the pupils join us, so you get a bit of time to get used to the technology. If, in the meantime, you can think of any topics that you think would be good to work on with the kids, or come across any great material or Internet addresses, please let me know. (Email to students - 12/07/04)*

*To start with, I will ask each group of pupils to research one of the areas you're in, and to create a display in English about this area, and I'll ask you to write a couple of simple paragraphs in German about the town/city you're in, and the area - it shouldn't take you long, I know you'll all be very busy. [...] You'll [...] get a few weeks exchanging messages with each other and learning the ropes, while I'm working face-to-face with the pupils, who'll then join you around mid-to end of October. (Email to students - 07/09/04)*

And, finally:

*I'm just writing again in the hope I can convince you to post a message for the pupils, who will be accessing WebCT tomorrow. They are really excited, and are so far all on schedule to complete their mission to find out more about Germany and Austria, and I really don't want to disappoint them. If you could post a message about yourself in German and English, either onto WebCT or by sending it to me, that would be really great. So far, there is only one, and I think the project will probably only last another month or so, so any time commitment on your part will finish then. I know you will be very busy with your life abroad, and I hope you'll get this soon and feel inclined to respond. (Email to students - 08/11/04)*

This email managed to flush out three more students. The last, desperate attempt to achieve full participation from the students is outlined in an entry from two days later, after the pupils had accessed WebCT:

*The final strategy was for me to email [Sonia] all the messages from the notice board she had missed, a reminder that there was something going on she could be part of. (10/11/04)*

The student in question had access problems, and she herself states that receiving the pupils' messages made her work harder to overcome these, showing that, in projects such as this, the collaborative/peer cognitive aspect can be extremely motivating.

When to start online communication with the students on WebCT was also an issue, and one I was particularly aware of, due to the first study, leading to the following blog entry:

*I don't want to start with just Mary and Emma to find history repeating itself - all students from the first project who didn't join in over the first few days dropped out - whether this correlation stems from a lack of motivation to start with or the feeling of being left behind, I don't know - I suppose a combination, but of course, these were the people I couldn't check with after the end of the project.*

In the end, it was necessary to begin without all students being present, resulting in my need for a stand-in – my sister. The outcome of this has been discussed in chapter 5, and was, of course, that Emma, the student with initial access problems (and an unresponsive group) felt undervalued and 'replaced', resulting in her motivation decreasing to the point of very reduced participation. The constant 'last-minute'

approach I was forced to adopt due to initial difficulties surrounding collaboration dampened my spirits, too, and it was during this initial period that I questioned the entire project:

*I honestly don't think there'll ever be 'communication' between the students and the pupils now, at best some perfunctory exchange. With that in mind, what am I facilitating? Not only is the study itself not working, but my 'personal development as a facilitator' is somewhat hampered by having nothing to facilitate - nothing online, anyway.[...] I'm not sleeping much, and I've got a constant, scared feeling, which is beginning to get transferred into other aspects of my life. I'm losing confidence. Will I really have to write a PhD about two studies that didn't work out? I'm not sure I actually want to. (07/11/04)*

Although fears and barriers will be further explored below, I felt this extract warranted a place in the section on collaboration and peer cognisance, as it illustrates the direct causal link between a lack of collaboration on the participants' part, and sense of frustration I am experiencing.

### **7.3.2 Facilitating peer cognisance among the pupils**

The first task sheet (see appendix 8.1) required pupils to assign individual tasks to individual members, and it was therefore the second meeting, when I met each group to discuss their progress, which led to the first observations on peer cogniscent behaviour – or indeed, the lack of it:

*Jimmy was absent, but when prompted, the other members of the group stated they were all friends and they would keep Jimmy in the loop. They had got together to 'sort of' plan the layout. (on JerryBerrys, 02/11/04)*

*This was a tough one - they stated they hadn't communicated since the last meeting, instead 'just got on with it'. Closer probing revealed, however, that nobody had done anything. (on The Kangaroos, 02/11/04)*

*They seemed to be doing alright - said they had several conversations about who was doing what. They identified the holidays as a major organisational problem (in a very professional way, i.e. something they had to overcome, but would have preferred not to have to), and I agreed with them. Karen mentioned problems with finding clothes specific to Karlsruhe [...], another member of the group suggested she try traditional dresses. (on KussKuss, 02/11/04)*

Although at the time I did not consider KussKuss to be my main source of data, the short entry above illustrates that I was obviously already impressed by the professional manner in which they raised problems, and also stressed the point that the group members themselves sought to overcome problems, rather than relying on me to provide solutions. This same fact is mentioned in the pupil chapter, where Lynn explains a term to another member of the group. In itself, this group seemed to be fairly autonomous from the start, relying on me only to solve problems they could not overcome themselves. Even if this may have been the case for other groups as well, KussKuss continue to stand out as the group with the highest threshold for facilitatory needs, as a direct result from their high level of peer cognisance.

One case of inter-group related facilitation during the project warranted a 'happy moment' entry in the blog:

*Another happy moment: got Jimmy (another [outspoken character]) to explain to one of the girls how to insert a picture mid-page - I'd love to say it was an inspired teaching method that motivated me to ask him, rather than tell the girl myself, but no, I actually didn't know how he'd done it. He then played a game to reward himself... (25/11/04)*

I find this incident important particularly because of the number of gender issues mentioned by the pupils, and because of the fact that Jimmy was effectively helping the competition – in helping somebody else to improve their homepage, he reduced his chance of winning the much-coveted prize. Despite being a rather loud character, he here shows a streak of peer cogniscent behaviour, assisting another pupil in this way. In response to this event, I felt warranted in my belief that trusting the pupils to take over at least some responsibility for the project's success was the right decision to make.

In working with the pupils, it had been my intention to facilitate, rather than lead, every aspect of the project. In reality, however, and as will be further outlined below, I had been unaware that I would largely be alone with the class, and therefore unable to rely on the classroom teacher to assist with the project. As a result, my own parameters began to suffer, although, in this case, I managed to see the positive side:

*I can see them responding to my approach, although I'm aware that, faced with 24 kids, I was quicker to supply the answer than to walk somebody through the*

*problem. This would have been much easier with an extra person in the room, but, to look at the positive side, if this is to be rolled out into classrooms, who is to say there'll be two members of staff available? (10/11/04)*

I feel the reason I was able to come to terms with this particular problem so quickly is directly related to my personal motivation, mentioned above: not to engage in abstract research, but to create and facilitate a project that has practical, positive implications on online learning in a secondary classroom and at university level, a project which is replicable. By admitting that having an extra member of staff would probably make the pilot less comparable to later repetitions, I was able to convince myself that I could somehow 'make do' – although, as will become obvious below, the lack of collaboration between the school and myself was indeed the most alarming individual barrier in the entire project.

## **7.4 Fears and barriers**

### **7.4.1 Failure**

The entry related to the lack of collaboration I initially experienced (see 7.3.1) effectively illustrates the main internal fear regarding the project – the fear of failure. This feeling was not so much related to failing to get a PhD, but to a general perception of an attitude towards life. Applying myself with all I have and not succeeding is not a feeling I am used to, nor one I enjoy. This fear could turn into a barrier when I insisted to myself that I wanted everything to be 'just so', in danger of losing the flexibility to make adjustments because I felt the need to show that the initial structure was doable. Fortunately, I also pride myself on my flexibility, resulting in a constant internal struggle between what I wanted and what I felt was actually achievable. In facilitating a project such as this, I found that flexibility was the key, in that a rigid approach could have easily terminated the project, resulting in no online learning experience for students or pupils. There are, however, a large number of blog entries relating to the fear that the project would not 'work'. Even before the project starts, there is an entry on July 8<sup>th</sup> 2004:

*Currently suffering from mild, panicky 'oh my God, what if it all goes wrong again' moments - with everything else, this will be hard to sustain come September.*

Sustaining a part-time lecturer post as well as a PhD, I always knew that my time management would be critical. This post was written just before I had to leave to go and teach in the Caribbean, followed immediately by a trip to Argentina to look after a group of school girls, a remnant commitment from my time as a secondary school teacher. At the time, I was fairly stressed, however, in retrospect, I am surprised how much I did manage to do during that time – no doubt from an internal need to show everybody who had placed their trust in me (my PhD supervisors, my line manager on the Caribbean programme, the pupils I took to Argentina, and students and pupils from the project) that this trust was not misplaced.

By October, the fears became a lot more concrete:

*I can see this one going down the drain, too. The students have had their log-ins for a week, and this time, I didn't even get the initial buzz from them (the whole 'initial enthusiasm' thing). [...] This may all once more resolve itself one way or another in the next ten days, but I don't think it will, and it's not helping my sleep pattern. I'm not sure what I'll do if the student participation continues in this way, now the project has been introduced to the kids, I can hardly [sic] pretend to be all the students, they'll be expecting to 'see' somebody else, not me. It's a sorry excuse for a project.*

*October 29, 2004*

My main worry seems to be quite a logical one from a facilitatory point of view, namely that I would have nothing to facilitate at all. I remember writing this post, and I remember, at that point, being completely unmotivated by the fact this was indeed my PhD fieldwork, instead, my motivation came very much from a professional frame of mind – I had agreed I would facilitate this exchange, so this meant I had to get it set up in the first place. In this case, the exchange was threatened due to students not posting. While this frustrated me, I had read enough literature and was aware from online exchange experiences in the past, that voluntary exchanges rely heavily on the motivation and goodwill of participants, and I was fairly confident I had done everything in my power to encourage the students to take the project seriously. However, the project also relied heavily on co-ordination with school staff, and even

though I have been a teacher myself, and am aware of pressures and stress resulting from the job, I was definitely unprepared for the difficulties this liaison would bring.

#### 7.4.2 Collaboration with school staff

As I agreed to take over the project within the DfES project remit once initial preparations had already begun, both the school and the staff in question had already been identified, and were volunteers on both counts. At the initial meeting the member of staff (Caroline) was extremely enthusiastic, and we quickly agreed on an initial framework, according to her specifications. I had originally planned to run the project as a club, to keep numbers small and manageable, however, Caroline asked that we identify a whole class instead, and I agreed, seeing the benefits to collaborating closely with one member of staff. After the first meeting, however, it transpired quickly that it would take a lot of work for this enthusiasm to translate into action, as the post from 21<sup>st</sup> of May – the preparation period – illustrates:

*Just checked, after Caroline asked me for info on the project yesterday, and also was interested to see the questionnaire. I'd sent the info out on the 8th of May, together with a request for info on languages at [the school]. After receiving no reply, and because I wanted to give her the chance to comment on the questionnaire, I sent the same email again (including the info), with an added bit about the questionnaire, and the questionnaire as an attachment. I have now re-sent both those emails, with another request for info about languages at [the school], and a request for acknowledgement - I thought the fact that she replied to one of them was acknowledgement enough, but obviously not. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be bitching, I know she's busy, but....we all are!*  
21<sup>st</sup> May 2004

On the same day, I am beginning to realise for the first time just how problematic an unresponsive collaborator might be. 'She keeps forgetting what we'd agreed [...] I'm scared of these moving goalposts, as I keep having to adjust my planning' – it was only later that I realised that, although getting the students motivated enough to initiate and maintain participation, it would indeed be the collaboration with school staff that would prove to be the most problematic. The project coincided with a spell of poor health for Caroline, which obviously could not be helped, and must have aggravated the situation further – another proof of how external circumstances change the way a project operates. Caroline as an individual seems very forgetful, resulting in a number of

problematic issues, as illustrated by the following blog entries, the first one related to the first and only session where students and pupils would meet:

*Caroline told me she'd forgotten we'd come and had planned a lesson - not very trust-inspiring, and not very welcoming. (1<sup>st</sup> June 2004)*

*She has not as yet taken any action regarding informing the parents of the project or any such thing - I hope, if anybody's on dodgy ground here, it's the school, not me. (1<sup>st</sup> June 2004)*

Her illness and resulting absences obviously inconvenienced the project, but it was not so much her absence, as the fact I never knew about it until I arrived at school, that made the issue problematic:

*[On the way] to the school I mentally prepared myself for Caroline potentially not being there, and lo' and behold, I was right. This is now no longer a novelty, but more a minor inconvenience. I find it interesting that I got \*every\* kid in that class to communicate with me to a greater or lesser extent, but not their teacher. (25<sup>th</sup> November 2004)*

Whilst I felt (most of the time) that I had the inner strength and professionalism to cope with these problems, there were a few moments when I seriously doubted my ability to contain my anger. Having worked with people with special needs since the age of 16, asking for the special needs register for the class once preparations began in May came as second nature. By the time the project started in October, I was still waiting, however, Caroline assured me that none of the children had a SEN. Despite our other problems, I trusted her professionalism, until the following:

*And then Caroline told me Toby has a form of Asperger's!!! Now, this is the guy I wrote about, saying, 'I don't care what Caroline says, this boy's got SEN'. In fact, I was so sure, I'd put on my list today to ask to see the SEN register, to convince myself, even though Caroline had told me NO kid in the class has SEN of any kind. After two lessons with them, I swear I could point out at least three dyslexics and one ADHD, on top of Toby. I feel rotten I made him work in that group, and I'm glad my instincts were to reassure him on Tuesday I was happy with his work, and not to worry too much about the other group members. And, once more, WHAT THE F[\*\*\*] IS CAROLINE THINKING???* (11<sup>th</sup> November)

This entry marks the only serious swearing in the entire blog, and one of the few uses of online \*shouting\* in capital letters (another example follows further below). I took the

issue very seriously, and was mortified I had put the child in question through what, for him, must have been hell. The issue only came out into the open because his parents had called the school to tell them he had been having anxiety attacks at home due to his inability to get his group to work, and I felt utterly frustrated with Caroline for putting me in a situation where I had made the project such an unenjoyable experience for an individual child. There are several blog entries prior to this one which question Toby's not having an SEN, and I still berate myself for trusting Caroline in this matter, knowing, as I did, that information coming from her was not necessarily reliable.

My frustration culminated with the blog entry for the final evaluation session, which was intended to take a full lesson, and, due to its importance to the project, had been planned particularly meticulously by myself. Albeit long, I feel the blog entry relating to this session must be read in its entirety to illustrate my feelings:

*This is the second blog entry on today's visit - the first was largely incoherent and not fit for sharing (how does that fit in with a PhD on personal experiences?) Here's the (somewhat more clinical) account of what happened.*

*1. Arrived at school to find out the ICT club Caroline was meant to be running wasn't happening. 2 Kids were working anyway, supervised by an SEN support person, who just happened to be there, but didn't do anything. This means the only time during the entire project Caroline actually physically sat in the computer room on Tuesday lunchtime was the one week I had announced I'd come in and sit wit [sic] her.*

*2. Couldn't find Caroline, but [the PGCE student] told me that a) there'd be a presentation for 30 minutes about the German exchange, and b) she herself would sing Twinkle, twinkle little star in German for the last ten minutes. Having my final, beautifully planned evaluation lesson reduced from 60 minutes to 20, I went in search for Caroline, who said the presentation would only take 10 minutes.*

*3. It did take 30.*

*4. The pupils arrived, but Caroline didn't. The network was down, but we couldn't ask her about the whereabouts of an IT technician.*

*5. We fiddled around a bit, wasting more time, reducing the rest of the lesson to 25 minutes. I told [the PGCE student] I was very sorry, but there would be no twinkling of little stars going on.*

*6. Finally found Caroline, who said she was rushing off to drive the Y10s who had given the presentations back to upper school. When I said it would have*

*been helpful to have her around, she said she'd come back before the end of the lesson.*

*7. She arrived with 2 minutes to spare, just in time to hear who'd won the prizes for good work on the project.*

*8. She finally gave me the parental consent forms. She said that there were 8 missing, but she thinks she had them at some point, SO SHE SIGNED SOME NEW FORMS IN THE PARENTS' NAMES!!!!*

*9. Sorry, getting very narked again. She also, finally, gave me the SEN register. After first saying there was no pupil with SEN in the class, then telling me about one boy with Asperger's (but that was the only kid with SEN), she now said she found one more, but that was it. Just on the bus back, I found two more on top of that.*

*10. She expects me to send her reports on each pupil's participation throughout the project, so she can incorporate it into the next set of reports. I would \*so\* like to argue that, if she had taken the slightest, even the slightest, bit of interest, she'd know!*

*As a result of all these things above, the evaluation I got from the kids was quite shoddy, and, in fact, only the brightest and most motivated ones completed the tasks, and without the time and the extra body there, I couldn't support everybody the way I would have liked to. I am intending to go back in January (27<sup>th</sup>) [2005] to look back at the work with the pupils, and start focus group sessions with some of the groups. My concern is that I think I'll be facing the same problem - only those pupils who were motivated in the first place will even remember the project - there was just not enough time to reach the less motivated ones. I'm just not sure where to go from here. I've actually often thought about me writing this particular post, and every time, it started with 'hurrah'. Not now. I feel all the hard work fell down at the final hurdle. I can't go back before Christmas, and then I'm away. Somewhat despondent.*

*December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004*

The post above illustrates just how frustrating I felt the collaboration to be, and also the extent to which it inhibited my facilitation of the project. Very quickly, the issue of writing up the relationship became an issue:

*I wonder how on earth I'm writing these roblems [sic] up, because, ethically speaking, should the school not be able to see and comment on a copy? On the other hand, I don't feel I can leave it out, as it's influencing the shaping of the study... (1<sup>st</sup> June 2004)*

In writing this chapter, this discussion was continued with my supervisors, and it was agreed that the school would receive the actual case study which was produced for the

DfES, and which highlights the importance of a healthy, collaborative relationship between staff involved, rather than being given the entire thesis, pointing to the university library for open access, if interested.

By the end of the research process, I am describing in the blog the preparations I underwent for the pupil presentation session in late January 2005, geared towards reminding the pupils of what work they completed, in preparation for the focus group sessions. Recalling past experiences, I called Caroline to find out if everything was arranged, and, despite having arranged the session nearly two months earlier, found that the ICT room was not booked as yet. As I begin to prepare for all eventualities (such as running an ICT presentation without access to ICT), the blog comments:

*I've developed quite a fatalistic attitude - along the lines of 'What's the worst that can happen? Okay, and what will you do then?' My planning would border on obsessive and unhealthy in every other circumstance I've ever worked in, where you might have a Plan B & C, but in this case, I'm only stopping short of planning for natural disasters!!! (26/01/05)*

Although the planning I underwent in preparation for some of the sessions was excessive, it did prepare me for most eventualities, and, in retrospect, produced a condensed experience of the different issues which might otherwise only happen during a prolonged period of time. As such, I feel the experience was certainly worthwhile and enhanced my abilities as a facilitator, showing that a learning process need not necessarily be enjoyable to be of value. Had it not been for the many other motivational inputs, such as pupil and student enjoyment, as well as an ingrained stubbornness, the detrimental input from this collaboration might have frustrated me enough to abandon both the project and the PhD, as will be further discussed below.

### **7.4.3 Technological barriers**

The technological barriers in question here are less my own, and more the facilities within the school, and those available to students, for which I had to plan and through which I had to facilitate. Being used to such technological problems, however, meant

the blog rarely refers to them – the only related entry is from the visit before the pupils go online:

*After the session, I wanted to make sure WebCT is actually accessible from the school network, however, after borrowing two user names and logging on to 3 computers, the network was still 'applying my network settings' on all three - an eye opener for next week! [...] I'll email Keith, the school's network manager, to make sure access to WebCT is clear, but so far, it looks like planning only ten minutes for logging on next week was very ambitious!!!*

2nd November 2004

By checking for potential access problems in advance, I was able to circumvent later problems, although there were still several incidents when pupils had trouble getting onto the school network, and I had to ask them to use other people's user names.

Further blog entries relate to the useability of WebCT when it comes to project work with teenagers. The following entry relates my main issues with the environment:

*The tool isn't all that user friendly for teenagers - I'm glad I stripped it down so much!!! Even a straightforward discussion topic has no less than 9 options of 'clickable' buttons without starting on the Main Menu, and after clicking on 'Reply' or 'Compose message', there are far too many options, like the 'Equation Generator', and such things. I must admit to an 'adult shortcoming' here - despite using WebCT for several courses, and having used it in the past, I was very much guilty of not seeing the wood for the trees - my own approach had always been - 'If you don't need it, don't bother learning about it right now', and through tunnel vision, I'd actually \*stopped seeing\* the extra options. Not so a bunch of 13-year-old first-time users of the 'let's click this and see' generation - whereas my mother would have sat there terrified, waiting for me to tell her what to click on, they went along their happy way - and it was such a neat way to say 'Miss, I can't find the button'. Fortunately, I was quick enough to sort them all out :o)*

*On a different note, several pupils notes [sic] that the side menu bar mirrors the home page, and set about using this to manoeuvre the site - unfortunately, the font was too small, therefore the distances between lines too little, causing 'slippage' and them ending up on the wrong page. Several times during the lesson, I answered to cries of help from pupils who'd got themselves onto a different page - whether honestly or to confuse me, I don't know - from the number of grins, I'd say a mixture of both.*

*I also should have kept the student homepage section hidden for now - at least one pupil got in there to start messing about (Jimmy), but I derailed him successfully [sic] :o)*

10<sup>th</sup> November 2004

There are several issues arising from this entry – one is my apparent paranoia to be ‘had’ by pupils – this surfaces several times throughout the blog, and I believe stems from not knowing the pupils very well, which resulted in decreased ‘pedagogical confidence’ (see below). This was counterbalanced, however, by a great ‘technological confidence’, knowing the constructs and use of WebCT, a knowledge I was grateful for. It allowed me to deal with problems quickly and efficiently, and no doubt helped to shape the pupils’ view of myself. Despite – or because of – my advanced knowledge of WebCT, however, I made a classic mistake, regarding my ‘blind spot’ when it came to WebCT design. I had been so keen to design a teenager-friendly environment, I had concentrated on visual impact and forgotten about the generic design features inherent to WebCT, resulting in pupils getting waylaid and confused by buttons and links that were not needed for the project. I could certainly have hidden the side menu bar, to encourage access via the larger, colourful buttons, and I could have also hidden the link that so distracted Jimmy until it was actually needed. Of course I realised that younger learners would see the environment, as well as the overall project, in a way that was different to university students, but I failed to realise all possible ways in which this might influence the project in a negative way. Nevertheless, the pupils and students commented they liked the layout of WebCT, so at least, I must have gone some way towards customising WebCT for the younger audience.

### ***7.5 Discussion – a list of confidences***

Within this conclusion, I am drawing together my experiences both as a learner and as a facilitator, with links to relevant literature where appropriate.

Although my approach in seeing students, pupils and facilitator as different, equally important components of one successful project may be a bit extreme, I was surprised, once I looked at my own motivation and compared it to that of other participants, just how comparable our experiences were – although, in retrospect, maybe I should not have been. As a facilitator, I may have been overall responsible for the success of the project, which certainly contributed to a sense of duty that made me persevere where other incentives would not. As a human being, however, I felt myself to be much more

motivated by other participants' motivation, rather than by this sense of duty, or indeed, the wish to complete my PhD fieldwork. Looking at my blog entries and the way I presented them above, I realised that I, as a facilitator, needed a number of 'confidences' related to different aspects of the project, in order to make it as successful as possible.

### **7.5.1 Emotional confidence**

According to Krejsler (2004), 'the teacher must assume the role of consultant, guide, mentor, inspirator, moderator, or, maybe, friend' (p. 490) in order to be able to support autonomous learning in project work. In taking on such a variety of roles, which is comparable to the variety described by Collison *et al* (2000, see literature review), I am of the opinion that it is nigh on impossible to maintain an overall distance from the project one facilitates, nor, do I believe, is this entirely necessary. If motivation is as transferable as the data from this project seem to suggest, then all participants deserve the opportunity to be inspired by each other's motivation, and the contagiousness should be exploited, rather than hidden. Pupils commented that they liked my motivation, and from my own blog entries, it is easily deduced that my motivation was at its highest when students and pupils were responsive both to myself and to each other. My opinion, therefore, is that a successful facilitator is a human being first, sharing enthusiasm as well as frustration (as I did when I repeatedly contacted the students prior to the beginning of the official exchange), and a 'teacher' or 'harbourer of knowledge' second. I felt that the online environment further removed me from the students, necessitating special effort on my part to remind them that there were real people involved in the project. This motivation to work with 'real people' transcended the entire project and was of relevance to all participants, stressing the importance to keep the human element of an online exchange in focus at all times (Anderson, 2004).

### **7.5.2 Pedagogical confidence**

I am very much aware of the confidence which may be needed before a facilitator is willing to show frustration and enthusiasm, potentially from a fear that any overly human reaction may be seen as weakness. This is just one aspect where I feel a

facilitator needs to be strong and confident. Another is the need for a flexible approach when working with unknown participants in an environment which is, at least in this case, foreign to the facilitator, yet well known to the participants, i.e. the school environment. When working in a face-to-face environment with previously unknown participants, I found the pupils were, at least initially, questioning my authority. Although the 'right to be there' seemed to be mine by default (simply by being an adult in their classroom), the right to gain the pupils' collaboration had to be earned from at least some pupils, and I did so with varying degrees of success. By having a fairly laid back approach, I was appreciated by the more mature pupils with a craving for recognition as independent individuals, but was seen as weak by those pupils who were keen to 'try it on' with any authority figure they encountered. Although I am confident in my teaching abilities, I do not think I was flexible enough in my approach, and as a result lost the participation from those pupils who needed more guidance and rules than I gave them. This might be the result from working in a higher education environment for the past few years, and would definitely need addressing if I was to repeat the project. For other facilitators in similar circumstances, it may be more likely that they might know the participants, yet are not used to the online learning environment, which introduces the next confidence I feel to be necessary in order to facilitate a project such as this successfully.

### **7.5.3 Technological confidence**

Due to a background in e-learning, I felt very much at home in an online learning environment. I had no trouble designing the WebCT interface, nor explaining to students and pupils what was expected of them online. As such, I believe I was more representative of an outside researcher coming in to facilitate a project, rather than a classroom practitioner engaged in action research. Although an issue for many teachers I am speaking to when I am running workshops or when I am lecturing, this confidence presented little problem for me, possibly resulting in an over-confidence and therefore my missing the way in which WebCT is not conducive to teenage learning.

#### **7.5.4 Personal confidence**

Arguably the largest amount of frustration for myself resulted from the lack of communication between school staff and myself. This frustration stemmed largely from my inability to do anything about it – would it be right to alert the headmaster to problems I was having, effectively ‘telling’ on the teacher, who was, after all, experiencing health problems? Could I have forced an open discussion with the teacher in question, bringing into the open and potentially resolving issues? Although I was very frustrated by the experience, I feel I am partially to blame myself – I do not like causing trouble and am much more likely to ‘make do’ than to cause a fuss. In this case, I feel my hesitation may have negatively influenced the learning experience pupils and students had, and it certainly impacted on my own enjoyment of and motivation for the project. In reality, though, the frustration became dual – on the one hand the frustration that things were going wrong, on the other frustration with myself that I did nothing about this fact. I kept persevering, trying to contact staff, and circumvented them where I felt I could, but, for example, I never went to the school office to ask for the special needs register. In failing to do so, I effectively invited frustration through passivity. For myself, I feel this is the steepest learning curve, and the one confidence where I had (and have) most to learn. Interestingly, I am currently assisting with another online research project, functioning as a ‘critical friend’ and advisor to a teacher who has serious problems collaborating with his Local Education Authority. Because my capacity is different, I had no problems writing emails requesting immediate assistance and the resolving of the issue, yet, when it came to my own project, I suffered in silence, for nobody’s benefit. As a facilitator, however, I had a responsibility for ‘my’ learners to make their experience as enjoyable and beneficial as I could, which should have inspired me to overcome my shyness when there was a need to argue the project’s case.

#### **7.6 Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined my personal experiences as facilitator of an online collaborative exchange. In doing so, I discovered the interrelatedness between all participants’ motivation, including my own, resulting in a potential opportunity to

enthusiasm participants by openly sharing enthusiasm, rather than insisting on an authoritative stance removed from all emotion. I also related difficulties regarding collaboration with school staff, and my perceived need for an increased confidence in handling such situations, so as not to have a detrimental effect on the other participants' experience. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the need for a technological confidence – in my case, I felt a great sense of security knowing that, no matter what else went wrong, I would know what to do when it came to the technological aspect of the project. The chapter also points out potential differences between myself as an outside researcher and a classroom teacher or lecturer moving an existing class online, in that I had the additional difficulty in not knowing my participants particularly well, which probably encouraged me to enhance the personal aspect of online learning as much as possible, such as via the personal homepages. This personal, social approach to online education is supported by both the literature and the findings from the project, which indicate that the prospect of communicating with real people was conducive to both instigate and maintain motivation.

After outlining my own experiences, the following chapter begins with a brief synopsis of the past three chapters, before returning to the literature in order to weave the web between data and prior research in more details, synthesising findings where appropriate.

## 8 'Weaving the Web'

This thesis, as already outlined, called on a large variety of literature, which, in chapter 3, was likened to a spider's web. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 have presented and discussed the data gathered from student narratives, pupil focus groups, my own research diary, and other sources. The data and findings from these individual participant groups were presented according to headings most appropriate for each individual setting, though largely following along the lines of motivation and enthusiasm, fears and barriers, and collaboration. Out of these areas, however, only two coincide exactly with the wording from the spider's web of literature, namely collaboration and motivation. Whereas chapters 5, 6 and 7 looked to identify each group of participants individually, this chapter instead returns to the headings and areas from the literature review, and draws on findings from any relevant group in order to explore these issues further. In doing so, I am hoping to touch on further possible angles for evaluating the data, and to bring the research full circle.

As frustrating as my experience as a facilitator was at times, I cannot say that it left me emotionally traumatised, nor do I believe any of my participants left the project with lasting emotional damage, although I continue to feel sorry for the boy with Asperger's syndrome, and wish I had done more for him. As outlined in Chapter 4, however, I do not feel that 'ethnography that doesn't break your heart is just not worth doing anymore' (Behar, 1996; Ellis, 2004; Pelias, 2004). In my opinion, there is no need to validate experience through great emotional pain, and the participants who have shared their views of the project have all, I believe, had something important to say which has the potential to improve future collaborative exchanges.

All evaluation and discussion chapters divided the data between motivation and enthusiasm, collaboration and peer cognisance, and fears and barriers. In all three chapters, motivation quickly emerged as the underlying theme, influenced to a greater or lesser extent by successful (or unsuccessful) collaboration and peer cognisance, as well as the absence or presence of fears and barriers. For the pupils, this relationship manifested itself as a representation of opposites, pushing and pulling forces which enhanced or decreased their motivation. Those pupils who had a higher sense of peer

cognisance were both more successful in completing the tasks set, as well as having a greater sense of enjoyment in achieving them. This argues the case for careful facilitation to increase the level of peer cognisance among learners wherever possible, which, as I argued in the pupil chapter, may be achieved through careful discussions on role and responsibilities among the group.

For the students, a sense of belonging seems to be vital if they are to maintain motivation throughout their time abroad, where the project competes for their attention with a barrage of other new experiences. By increasing the time students spend on the project, and maybe the number of times pupils and students meet, the project could potentially reach a higher ranking on the students' list of priorities, resulting in better participation. Further problems could be alleviated by carefully considering any technological implications the students may face, and addressing these before the actual exchange commences.

The facilitator is as important a participant in the exchange as any other, although their actual role may change dramatically from group to group, requiring an advanced level of flexibility and a pedagogical confidence to meet each individual group at their respective level. As well as the confidence to work in an online learning environment, the facilitator needs the professional decorum and attitude to collaborate with other staff, which can be difficult for outside researchers or where there is a pronounced age difference between collaborators.

The motivation of all participants is interconnected and mutually influential. As such, the facilitator has the responsibility to show enthusiasm at all times, although it may be necessary to share frustration, as well, to allow participants to see how their contribution is valued and necessary for overall success. In doing this, however, it should not be necessary to detract from the overall enthusiasm for a project, instead, frustration may be used to illustrate how participants are preventing each other and themselves from having a motivational experience. All participants commented on the positive influence their collaborators' motivation had on them, arguing for a deliberate inclusion of this topic in a project, e.g. by participants sharing with each other what they are enjoying about the exchange.

In this particular project, there were few technological issues, apart from access problems experienced by students abroad, and by a small number of pupils. I can imagine, however, that this may not be the case if the project was to be repeated, and also believe that, at least to some extent, the technological success was due to careful preparation, alternative lesson plans, sound knowledge of the online learning environment in question, and allowing the students to have access prior to the pupils' arrival, so that any issues could be dealt with before the actual exchange.

Following this brief summary of the past three evaluation chapters, this chapter offers a more conclusive approach to a summary, combining findings with the literature discussed in chapter 3, and, rather than following distinct 'chunking' processes for data from each participant group, returning to the 'web of literature' cited above.

### ***8.1 Reflection, Experience and Learner Autonomy***

In chapter 3, I stated that I agreed with Wenger's (1998) terminology of 'learning as experience' over the more theoretic term 'experiential learning'. In providing students and particularly pupils with a new learning experience, I hoped to encourage them to reflect upon their learning, and begin to take control over their own learning goals, becoming more active players in their learning process. For the students, facilitation was a new 'experience', as was their actual year abroad, so coupled with this came the hope that them sharing their new experiences with the pupils would encourage the students to be more aware of their surroundings.

Looking at the students' reflection, much of it remains at an 'experienced', metacognitive level, i.e. recounting occurrences, thoughts, and feelings, but without the deep engagement reflective writers such as Moon (1999 and 2004) encourage. The pupils, too, preferred to recount experiences at this level, although some insights, such as gender issues, were – whether repeated from news channels or individually perceived – at a different cognitive level, particularly as they were not raised by myself, at least initially. My own reflective writing, as discussed in chapter 3, varied, my research diary doubling as my learning log, open ear and vent for frustration. As such, I feel all participants, including myself, could potentially have reflected at a deeper level. If,

however, we return to Moon (1999) and the idea of reflection as empowerment of ourselves as individuals and within groups, then I feel that, particularly at the pupil level, the study has been successful. Throughout the project, pupils became more and more confident in raising issues with me – unfortunately, the true background to this occurrence must remain a mystery – did pupils raise more issues because they became more aware of them through the reflective exercises, or because I continued to gain their trust? The framework for their collaboration certainly called on them to reflect upon their group work experience, encouraging pupils to engage in the deep learning advocated by Entwistle (2001, in Weigel, 2002). Entwistle's points related to deep learning

- *Learners relate ideas to previous knowledge and experience;*
- *Learners look for patterns and underlying principles;*
- *Learners check evidence and relate it to conclusions;*
- *Learners examine logic and argument cautiously and critically;*
- *Learners are aware of the understanding that develops while learning;*
- *Learners become actively interested in the course content;*

*(Adapted from Entwistle, 2001, in Weigel, 2002)*

all occurred at some point during the study. Most pupils were able to state what aspect of the project had been most enjoyable or most beneficial, and all were keen to make suggestions for improvement, which was particularly interesting in the cases where their conclusion was that they needed guidance and structure from an authority figure. As I already outlined, I feel that this 'knowing oneself' is a sign of true autonomy, as stated by Blackham's (1978, p. 50) quote differentiating between rebellion and autonomy (see Section 3.2.3 of the literature review).

The sense of autonomy, I feel, was less pronounced for the students, who, due to geographical distance as well as lifestyle changes, often saw the project as an additional chore or burden, without any sense of freedom or autonomy attached to it. Their experience, as detailed in their reflective writing, was much more related to the motivational and collaborative aspects of the research.

## 8.2 Motivation

In the literature review, Deci and Ryan (1992) were quoted regarding their belief that the need to be competent, i.e. to achieve, represents the highest motivation in a school environment. Whilst I have not found this to be true for this project, it could be argued that the way in which the project was run (by an external researcher and involving tasks both in- and outside the direct curriculum) impeded the pupils in relating the project to their direct curricular activities. What has been more apparent is Gardner's (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003) concept of integrativeness, the positive attitude toward the other culture. In Gardner's concept, it is up to the teacher to introduce and nurture this positive attitude. Interestingly, my study introduced the concept of integrativeness through intermediaries – the students, who, although from a British background, were cultural ambassadors for Germany and Austria. I have been surprised at just how successful the pairing between university students and school pupils was, and it seemed to me a very good way to circumvent some of the cultural differences Palloff and Pratt (2005) warn of, whilst at the same time preserving a sense of adventure and 'otherness' throughout the project. The project was successful not least because of the students' obvious motivation and enthusiasm to share the culture and language of a country they loved, acting as 'cheerleaders' (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, p. 75) for their cause. The main motivating factor of the study was therefore the people themselves, which, although I had hoped this would be the case, I nonetheless found heartening. Seeing the enthusiasm with which students and pupils participated was certainly what kept me going, more so than external rewards and incentives.

For the pupils, of course, there was an external incentive, and unlike my argument that Pittman *et al's* (1992) remuneration of 1 US\$ might not be particularly motivating for a student, I believe a £10 music store voucher had the potential to actually influence the motivation of a thirteen-year-old, if they were inclined towards extrinsic motivational factors. It was here that the pupils' insights were of particular interest, the data suggesting that some of the boys felt there was no chance a boy would ever win the prize, and some of the girls suggesting that the person who won the main prize would

have done exactly the same amount of work without an external stimulus, arriving at the same result as Pittman *et al*, that communication itself is reward enough.

The use of ICT was maintained to be motivating by the pupils in particular, although, as the data suggest, they could give no tangible reason as to why computers were so exciting, suggesting that they are seen as motivating simply because they still suggest a break from the norm. I do, however, maintain the point that I arrived at in my literature review (see 3.3.5), that the versatility of the medium allows for different angles of motivation, such as cultural experience, Internet research, communication, display of artistic talent, or dictionary skills. Hoskins and van Hooff's (2005) point that communication via the internet was seen as motivating by female students might have held true, but I could perceive no particular difference in generic ICT skills between boys and girls, although this might be because the project was conducted largely within recognised areas of ICT (PowerPoint, Word, Publisher).

In chapter 7, I explained that my own motivation largely depends on my concept of myself as a practitioner, i.e. that I am motivated if I feel I am making a positive difference to somebody's learning experience. Several authors in the literature review picked up on the difference between the theoretician and the practitioner (Schön, 1987; Towndrow, 2004), and I truly believe that, in the case of my study at least, they needed to go hand in hand to conduct the study and write up the results. Conducting this research without a tangible, practical outcome would not have enabled me to sustain the motivation necessary to complete. Thus, my motivation to 'make a difference' was a driving, though not always fully articulated, force behind the study.

### **8.3 Collaboration and Peer Cognisance**

As already outlined above, motivation and collaboration went hand in hand for every single participant in the study, providing a mutually enhancing upward spiral for the participation of most involved. All pupils stated they found working with their friends to be a positive experience, sharing the 'social and intellectual connections' advocated by Johnson (1999, p. 40), and all pupil groups had something positive to say about the collaboration with the university students. The students, in turn, had largely positive

experiences with 'their' pupils, although there were of course cases of unresponsiveness and frustration. As already outlined above, I was happiest when collaboration between pupils and students worked, and when I was made aware of issues I had to deal with, rather than having them 'fester' within the individual groups. To what extent this collaboration actually influenced the learning process remains difficult to pinpoint, in line with Macaro's (1997) point cited in 6.5.

Throughout the study, I have pointed towards the idea of 'peer cognisance' as a concept beyond currently recognised peer collaboration. This peer cognisance was, in my opinion, evident in KussKuss, the most successful group, who, when collaborating, adopted the 'unconstrained narrative' outlined by Sergiovanni (1999), sharing a mutual responsibility and awareness not only for themselves, but for others in and outside their immediate environment. KussKuss certainly had the most awareness of 'their' student as an individual with individual needs, and they also acknowledged my position as a facilitator with surprising insight, as well as showing an awareness for other groups. Whilst I would not go so far as to advocate some of the rather high moral standards Sergiovanni outlines for the 'unconstrained narrative' (see 3.4.1), I believe that this one group in particular has achieved what I consider to be peer cognisance, and operated at a highly cognitive level of awareness for each other. As such, they not only matched my idea of peer cognisance, but also that of 'communal constructivism', argued by Holmes *et al* (2001) to be an extension of social constructivism in that participants not only construct knowledge as 'a result of interacting with their environment', but also feed this knowledge back into the community, moving it forward as a whole. These two concepts of peer cognisance and communal constructivism were what I had perceived to be the most useful collaborative attributes of an online learning community after conducting Study A (as outlined in chapter 2), and the findings have certainly held true in the main study of the thesis. Both concepts are linked with that of learner autonomy, and I would like to return to Little (2003), who points out that the concept of learner autonomy has been oversimplified to signify independence and self-management, rather than including the 'socially conditioned interdependence out of which autonomy grows and on which it necessarily feeds' (p. 37). This study consistently linked learner autonomy and collaboration, and will do so further in the following chapter.

## **8.4 The Role of the Facilitator**

Although chapter 7, as well as section 3.5, concentrate on my role of the facilitator, it should not be overlooked that the students, too, had a facilitating role, effectively guiding the communication with pupils from a different angle to myself. Mason (2001) points out the need for facilitator training (see section 3.5.4), and although this was attempted by creating a student-only section on WebCT, I believe it was one of the least successful aspects of the project, potentially due to a lack of clear understanding on the students' part how this section was to be used, calling for the more careful planning advocated by Palloff and Pratt (2005). As pointed out in chapter 3.5.2, Palloff and Pratt highlighted several issues regarding the facilitation for collaboration, which I grouped according to a timeline. Due to the structure of the project – giving groups evaluation sheets and asking for role distributions the groups could be reminded of at a later stage – the 'decision-making process', 'communication' and 'leadership' proved to be problematic within one pupil group and between one group and 'their' student only. The issue of having a 'broad representation' was taken out of my hands by working with a pre-defined group of learners; however, the other design features, such as 'time commitment' and 'limited resources', despite my best plans, held a few surprises, most notably due to access problems for the students and the timing of the autumn holidays, which I had overlooked. These and further shortcomings of the study will be discussed in the following chapter. The other issues mentioned by Palloff and Pratt (2005), such as 'turf protection', 'reduced participation' and 'attrition', all occurred, but only in the case of the one unfortunate male pupil highlighted in chapter 6 did they have a truly detrimental effect on the study.

In writing the literature review, Krejsler's (2004) point of view stuck out as one I found it particularly hard to align myself with, centring, as it did, around the idea that facilitation is little more than a process aimed at making pupils believe they have some sort of control. In analysing and discussing the data, particularly from the pupils, it was therefore heartening to read that they were aware of the extended freedom the project allowed them, but also appreciated the need for guidance, as highlighted by the JerryBerrys in chapter 6. In disagreeing with Krejsler, I would like to return to my own definition of learner autonomy, as outlined in section 3.2.4. There, I argue that, due to

the power relationships inherent in any learning environment, autonomy must first be granted, resulting in the **freedom** to engage with and reflect upon the current learning situation. Granting this freedom is the responsibility of the facilitator, and I certainly felt that the pupils in particular had difficulties in making use of this freedom to define their own goals, as well as displaying the **ability** to plan and implement strategies to achieve these goals. Again, a facilitator's role is to help students identify goals, and guide them to define what strategies might be helpful in achieving them. Certainly, there were pupils who had the ability, but not the inclination or **willingness** to do this, instead preferring to be told what to do, or indeed they were lacking the willingness to ask for guidance when needed. This spoke of a lack of **confidence** to admit to shortcomings in front of peers and/or the teacher/facilitator, something the facilitator can potentially counteract by creating a learning environment conducive to mutual understanding and trust. Authors are divided regarding the point whether such an environment is truly necessary, with Palloff and Pratt (1999 and 2005), Barker (2002) and Anderson (2004) arguing for the need for a social dimension in facilitation, and Blake (2000) putting it second place behind a cognitive, structured learning experience (see section 3.5.4). I fully agree with the point that we all operate from a social perspective, and that the creation of an online learning environment without social facilitation is needlessly artificial. The findings from the study certainly support this point of view, as the collaboration and the social factors were the major driving forces behind the motivation to participate.

## **8.5 Summary**

After detailing and discussing the data and findings in chapters 5, 6 and 7, this chapter served to combine this data where necessary, and return to the literature review presented in chapter 3, to illustrate to what extent the literature is corroborated or contradicted by the findings. Motivation and collaboration in particular had a large, mutually influential impact on all participants, which supports the concept of peer cognisance outlined in chapters 2 and 3. The following chapter will offer a conclusion to the thesis, discuss the limitations and shortcomings of the study, and point forward toward dissemination and potential for further study.

## 9 Conclusion

### 9.1 Introduction

After outlining the two studies that formed the scope of this research, setting down the research questions, aligning myself with literature as well as methodologies, and presenting the findings from each participant group's point of view, this final chapter of the thesis returns to the research questions outlined in chapter 1, in an attempt to summarise the answers. Following on from this, this conclusion offers a celebration of what I consider to be the most successful aspects of the study, an identification of the shortcomings, recommendations, and scope for further research. Before returning to the research questions, however, I am presenting two further blog entries, instead of the more traditional reflection on the research process. Despite a considerable portion of the thesis being dedicated to reflection, I consider these entries of importance to the study, less in the spirit of presenting new data, but more as a way to show how some of the issues were crystallising in my diary entries throughout the study itself, and how the main foci were obvious during high and low points. Both blog entries are direct quotes, and both genuinely begin in the way they have been cited here.

#### 9.1.1 Hearing Voices I (January 2004)

*This is not going to work.*

*It was not so much a revelation when it hit me, more a dull certainty, a final admission of defeat. After nearly ten months of fieldwork preparation, my study (intended to run for seven months) had lasted all of five weeks, before refusing to be revived after the Christmas break. I had emailed participants, scattered as they were in Germany and the US, I had approached tutors, advisors, other university staff, and still, I felt I would not be able to complete. My original list of research questions, kept deliberately long to be refined later, was whittled down to just two questions:*

1. *What went wrong?*

## 2. *What could I do differently next time to avoid the same problem?*

*I had wanted to encourage a true understanding of each other in my working groups, something I had termed 'peer cognisance' – more than just the awareness that they were working in a group, but a shared responsibility, a recognition that the whole is more than the sum of its parts...but I had not counted on the fact that this study, which, of course, was the air I breathed and the dreams I dreamt at night, had somewhat less importance for the participants, who were all volunteers. Once exams came along, extrinsic motivation overtook any intrinsic drive they might have had to participate. So, what could I have done different? Or, to come back to the question above: what went wrong?*

### **9.1.2 Hearing Voices II (November 2004)**

*This is going to work!*

*As I stepped off the bus, walking towards the school where I conducted my research for Study B, I suddenly became aware that I might, just might, pull this off. After many struggles to (yet again) locate all my six students, they had all found a way online, and were communicating with the pupils. The pupils, on the other hand, had all been in the IT suite, and had left their first message, and the students had replied. Not quite yet an 'exchange' of communication, but a good effort for a first step. Immediately, I felt a bounce come into my step, held my head higher, started smiling, not minding the rain. Good intentions went through my head – I was going to be encouraging to those pupils who had not yet done all the work, praise those who had made an effort, learn the names I didn't already know – in short, I was going to be the saint-like and sage-like facilitator and researcher I always depict others to be – not thrown by mishaps, never despairing, always polite and helpful, without having to try for it.*

## **9.2 Research questions**

'Hearing Voices I' above describes the exact moment when my long, original list of research questions was amended to its current form, via a considerable period when the only question was 'what went wrong?' I have cited both excerpts here, as they provide short snapshots which nevertheless hold within them (inadvertently) many of the findings discussed in the previous chapters – outside influences, technological problems, an isolated approach to my research, and, above all, the circuitous correlation motivation had for all involved. After introducing this conclusion via some of the voices 'in my head', I will now focus on each research question in turn and highlight the findings, reiterating the participants' voices.

- 1. How do participants in an online learning environment experience collaboration?**
  - 1a. What do they experience as motivating?**
  - 1b. What do they experience as barriers to successful collaboration?**

For the participants in Study B, the main study of this thesis, online collaboration seems to have been peripheral only – despite online communication forming a vital component of the group work, most actual tasks seem to have been achieved during the face-to-face exchanges among pupils in lesson times. There is, however, the question of what collaboration constitutes, and I would argue that it is not necessarily just the end product (which complies with the set task), but as part of this study in particular, can also be categorised as the communicative exchange that took place between pupils and students. Under this definition, the groups operated with varying success, 'collaborating' with their student to a greater or lesser degree. Their experiences are thus related to dual factors – one being the task-driven collaboration, one the social dimension without which, I would argue, the participants' evaluations would have looked very different indeed.

The human component was by far the strongest motivating factor for continued participation, causing a mutually influencing spiral. This meant that the 'reality' of the other participants was one of the most important realisations that had to take place in the

participants' heads, that not communicating meant disappointing a real person, whereas a response could trigger a 'warm glow', as one of the students called it. Although I fear that this approach will probably have the most impact on individuals who seek an emotional equilibrium (e.g. avoiding disagreements where possible), I do believe that most learners, no matter their age, will respond positively to a mutually appreciative learning environment.

At many levels, the differences between motivating factors and those proposing to be barriers to successful collaboration were at opposite ends of the spectrum, the presence of a positive factor (such as an interested communication partner) motivating, the absence de-motivating in turn. The social component, however, seems to have overruled many of the other factors in its importance, as it motivated students and pupils alike to overcome negative factors in order to take part in the collaborative experience. Without wanting to under-emphasise the importance of good planning and sound infrastructure (Palloff and Pratt, 1999 and 2005), it is both important and refreshing to think that the human element might be able to overcome other potential shortcomings.

Of particular interest to the study for me was the insight with which particularly the pupils discussed their own behaviour, displaying a maturity often unrecognised and unfostered in the secondary school environment. Their references to their own motivation and their need for certain boundaries reveals a level of involvement in their own education which I argue could be harnessed successfully, encouraging learner autonomy and collaboration.

## **2. To what extent are learner autonomy and collaboration linked, and how does this translate to the concept of peer cognisance?**

I believe the links between learner autonomy and collaboration have been illustrated throughout the thesis, not least in Chapters 3 and 6. It appears that learners need at least some level of autonomy before they can participate successfully in a collaborative exchange. In Chapter 3, I define autonomy as a state which has to be granted and facilitated, resulting in the **freedom** to pursue goals and options, including the **ability** to perceive and follow strategies necessary to achieve these goals, and the **willingness** to do so, including the **confidence** to ask for help where necessary. I found this definition

to be of relevance when aligning autonomy with collaboration – the initial invitation for pupils to create their own tasks gave the freedom, effectively granting the first step of my own ladder of autonomy. The ability to identify strategies can be facilitated (see below), yet the willingness frequently had to come from the pupils themselves, and it was here where collaborative aspects had the most impact, motivating or de-motivating pupils to pursue their goals. Few groups showed the confidence to ask not only me or the student, but each other for guidance where necessary.

The concept of peer cognisance, tentatively suggested in Chapter 2, continued to hold during the main study of the thesis. In both studies, one group displayed an ability to negotiate and recognise its different members to a level beyond other groups. The groups who were most successful in their collaboration (measured by completion of task, self-perceived gains and most enthusiastic participation) were not those motivated by external rewards, nor those most academically able, but those who made the best use of each other's strengths and were most willing to turn to each other for guidance and recognise each other's weaknesses. If the aim of education is to prepare learners for the real world, then the ability to collaborate successfully is an important transferable skill schools (and universities) should seek to encourage and nurture. Wenger's (1998) Community of Practice approach could easily be facilitated in educational environments, rather than only the workplace. In order to empower learners and thus enable them to play a greater part in their own learning process, this necessitates a sharing of goals (Chan, 2001; Black *et al*, 2003 and 2004). Rather than emphasising the repetition, retention and regurgitation of facts, I argue that schools in particular could place more emphasis on skills inherent to growing up, identifying goals and pursuing them, ultimately engaging in lifelong learning. This includes all aspects inherent to the term 'peer cognisance', which I would now, by the end of both studies, define as follows:

Peer Cognisance describes a conscious recognition or awareness of others, an understanding of what we ourselves and those around us can know or understand, an observance and notice of others' behaviours and needs, and the acknowledgement of responsibility for those around us. As such, 'peer cognisance' ties the individual to the social, combining individual and social needs to a mutually beneficial relationship.

### **3. How can a facilitator encourage peer cognisance, in order to improve the learning experience?**

If peer cognisance is recognised as a positive enhancer of education, facilitating it in teaching and learning holds the potential for a genuine improvement of learning experiences. As my own development as a facilitator very much evolved in line with the project, the answer to research question 3 has to be given a qualifier, namely that, before a facilitator can successfully attempt to facilitate peer cognisance, they need to be confident of their role as a facilitator in the first place. Chapter 7 identified four such confidences, from an emotional, pedagogical, technological and personal point of view. As such, I am arguing that a facilitator will need to possess the emotional confidence to present themselves as a human being, as well as a genuine participant in the exchange; the pedagogical confidence to engage learners and to base instruction on an enhanced level of knowledge when compared to the learners, the technological confidence to support learners and deal with difficulties quickly and efficiently, and the personal confidence to liaise with other key persons, defending and presenting the learning process to their best ability.

Ideally, these confidences will be in place and inherent in the facilitator before the project starts, yet, I have found that many facilitators of online environments have to learn 'on the trot', unable to focus on the above generics before concentrating on the specifics.

To facilitate peer cognisance means to develop a clear understanding of what it is in the first place (see above). Several times throughout this thesis, I have argued that facilitation only makes sense in context, i.e. with direct reference to what it is that is being facilitated. Following on from this, levels of peer awareness can certainly be raised by encouraging the integrativeness Gardner (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003) advocates, by encouraging learners to link their own environment to that of learning peers. In the foreign language context, this involved finding common interests between students and pupils, or activities pursued in both countries. This method was highly successful, and not only employed by myself, but also by the students when working with the pupils. Furthermore, a constant

reminder to call on each other before calling on myself served for pupils to see themselves as part of an autonomous group of learners. Materials handed out in each session (see appendix 8.1.1 through to 8.7.1) deliberately encouraged groups to identify strengths, distribute roles, and develop strategies and deadlines. Throughout the project, at least some groups did get better at collaborating with each other, achieving a raised level of peer cognisance (see Chapter 6). Despite these being isolated occurrences (at least at recognisable levels), this finding is encouraging and could potentially argue for a higher success rate if similar facilitation was to be woven into general teaching, or if the project had continued.

### **9.3 Summary of research findings**

Following the more detailed discussion of the research questions above, this section serves to summarise the research findings and thus the contribution to knowledge this thesis makes.

- Prior to this study, there was little in the way of research on networked learning combining participants from a higher education institution with school-age participants. This thesis has found that much of the literature from the largely higher-education-context is relevant under the circumstances; however, even more emphasis needs to be placed on the facilitation process, providing carefully structured tasks if the younger learners are to achieve a sense of ownership. The study's findings are furthermore validated by the high emphasis placed on integrating the participants' voices wherever possible.
- The concept of peer cognisance as a sense of mutual awareness, responsibility, and jurisdiction is one vital element that encouraged the participants of this study to maintain motivation and participation, overcoming technological, linguistic and geographical difficulties. The facilitation of peer cognisance holds therefore potential to improve participation and motivation in a networked learning environment, although different participant pools might necessitate an adaptation of this facilitation. The definition of peer cognisance, and its function as a link between learner autonomy and collaboration, is therefore of interest to practitioners, policy makers and theorists alike (see section 9.7 below).

- In order to facilitate for motivation and participation, the facilitator must therefore have not only detailed knowledge of subject content, but also of issues pertaining to aspects of peer cognisance, actively encouraging an aware, mutually-responsible relationship between learners.
- Negotiating the field of literature has been one of the great challenges of this study. The metaphorical connection of literature with a spider's web has, in my opinion, created an addition to the literature on literature reviews previously unrecognised (see e.g. Hart, 1998; Wellington et al, 2005). Paired with Slavin's concept of 'best evidence synthesis' (Slavin, 1986 and 1995) this aspect of the study thus has the potential to be of benefit to researchers in a wide variety of settings, beyond those originally anticipated.

## **9.4 Successes**

The adage that 'necessity is the mother of invention' was felt at several levels throughout this study, not least when I 'attached' myself to the already agreed upon DfES study in order to 'rescue' my PhD fieldwork, finding an outlet for the hypothesis of peer cognisance. Despite recurring blog entries to the contrary, however, the first study was not a waste of time, nor were many of the shortcomings in the second study damning or even negative. Few research students have the privilege to engage in such an elaborate 'pilot study', as I came to think of it, and the work that came out of this study was valid and worthwhile (I will return to the concept of validity below).

The (unanticipated) single most successful occurrence in Study B was no doubt the pairing of same-nationality students with pupils. The use of intermediary facilitators was one finding that linked the outcomes of the actual DfES study with that of this thesis, despite the otherwise less related agendas. Both students and pupils were so motivated by each other, and indeed by the fact that they shared one language, but chose to communicate in another, that I was genuinely swept along by their enjoyment to work with each other. There was no difference between this appreciation – the more able pupils enjoyed having a 'big sister' figure to ask, the less able pupils appreciated being understood. Whilst this obviously prevented pupils from being forced to use

German, it is my own experience (Gläsmann, 2002) that even in mutual exchanges, English quickly becomes the main language of communication, due to German learners' advanced knowledge at a similar age. Using older native English speakers thus instead allowed me to continue to encourage them to use the foreign language, and certainly made my job of facilitation (in that respect) easier.

The other main success – even though it was the focus of the study – was the extent to which collaboration in and of itself was motivating for participants. This returns to the idea in Chapter 2 that intrinsic motivation will carry learners further than extrinsic factors, but also extends this thought to the point that this collaboration, when supported by an initial level of motivation, can be self-perpetuating and propelling learners forward and upward.

## **9.5 Shortcomings**

### **9.5.1 Shortcomings of the project**

Apart from the collaboration with staff, which I feel have been sufficiently highlighted in Chapter 7, the shortcomings of the project, in my opinion, were largely related to planning, or, more accurately, a lack of time. Even though the worksheets and materials highlighted collaborative strategies and concepts, the time to reinforce these was not always there, and having more time (or an extra person in the classroom) could have helped greatly to facilitate the pupils further.

The issue of the prize was highlighted by the pupils themselves, and if I were to repeat the project, Toby's suggestion of a collaborative portfolio would definitely find use – as it is, the recommendation has filtered through to my work, where post-graduate students will need to illustrate collaboration with their peers in order to pass a module on collaborative inquiry.

The insights and level of maturity with which pupils analysed their own behaviour greatly impressed me, and I feel that, had the study continued, I would have liked to use

both pupils and students to help me formulate a guide for other classes and students, and indeed, to inform other facilitators. An attempt of this was made when I asked students for their input regarding this, and when I asked pupils what they would change about the project, but I do feel this could have been taken further.

### **9.5.2 Shortcomings of the research**

Identifying shortcomings of the research process has not been easy – often, there was a temptation to hide behind the difficulties experienced, rather than looking for genuine opportunities to improve on the research. Stepping outside this defensive mechanism, I feel that the findings could have been more valuable if I had achieved a better understanding of my participants. Returning to the question of ‘labelling’ the research, an action research approach within my own facilitatory context (i.e. with students and/or pupils I knew or taught) would have provided a richer ethnographic background. Brett (2004) writes about off-line factors contributing to online engagement in group work, and I feel her findings are informed by in-depth long-term observations my study was not able to replicate. This is of course mirrored by the fact that my study spanned two distinct groups of participants, again highlighting the need for collaboration at facilitator level.

As happy as I am with my pictorial overview of the literature, I am aware that the versatility and the different angles of the study have undoubtedly led me to neglect certain authors in respective fields. In looking at scope for further research below, I am therefore suggesting – in drawing potential publications out of this thesis – to include these further readings, thus tightening the focus depending on the intended audience and purpose of the publication.

## **9.6 Returning to Validity**

Chapter 4 argues the case for a validity based on the knowledge of others through the knowledge of oneself, as well as an in-depth qualitative approach in order to identify experiences over quantitative evidence. Rio Reiser (1990), a German rock singer known for his philosophical approach, sang 'Ich bin anders, weil ich wie alle bin, und weil alle

anders sind' (I am different, because I am just like everybody else, and everybody is different). This research does not claim validity based on a 'true-for-all' approach to facilitation and online collaboration, instead, it argues that each individual's experiences will be unique, yet, by trying to understand some of these experiences in depth, facilitation will be more personalised and the learners' voices in collaboration more accurately mirrored. This might not offer a blanket solution for every collaborative project (face-to-face or online), but will help to empathise with learners (pupils, students, and facilitator), and will provide a good starting point for future projects. How 'true' the accounts in this thesis are can never be measured accurately from one point of view, but my experience as a teacher and my experiences during the fieldwork lead me to think that what is cited here as the learners' voices is true not only in my perception, but in those perceptions of the groups and individuals who recalled them. Pupils and students were frank about things they disliked, including issues where it would have been easy for them to pretend otherwise. As a result, I feel the voices in this thesis are worth listening to, so that facilitation of online and face-to-face collaboration – be it with younger learners, or with the use of interim facilitators/peers (such as the students) might take one further into an ever more successful direction.

## ***9.7 Applicability of the research***

In the summary of research findings, I argue that the concept of peer cognisance is of interest to practitioners, policy makers and theorists. In this section, I would like to expand on this claim, taking each of the groups in turn.

### **9.7.1 Applicability for practitioners**

As improved practice was the original focus of the study, arguing for its applicability for practitioners is comparatively easy. The concept of peer cognisance, although it was used to enhance contact among group members online, held equal value in all aspects of the projects, including face-to-face collaboration. Group work continues to be a part of most learning environments, both at school and at university level. Actively enhancing participants' awareness of themselves and other group members by facilitating peer cognisance has thus the potential to improve the group learning environment in a variety

of contexts, including schools as well as higher education institutions. The most direct relevance would, of course, be found for practitioners seeking to repeat the study, looking for information on all three levels of a facilitated networked learning exchange between pupils and students, for which the entire thesis, including the literature review, would provide valuable input. All three discussion chapters individually, however, hold value, whether the aim is to improve an existing networked learning collaboration, to build one from scratch, or to enhance knowledge of facilitation.

In a language teaching and learning context, other, smaller findings hold the potential to improve the learning experience. The fact that pupils were happier to work with English university students of German than with German pupils of a similar age could potentially help those schools unable to establish working links with a foreign partner school, particularly at a time when teachers and schools have been warned to avoid the potential dangers and liabilities involved in trips abroad (McNeill, 2005). Without subscribing to the fears themselves, bad press and parental fears, as well as sheer logistics, have forced schools to abandon actual exchange trips, or to minimise them in line with a new governmental policy (Press Association, 2005) ensuring each child goes on one trip during their school career. This has increased the need for replacement activities that can introduce pupils to the culture and language of the foreign country. At university level, on the other hand, volunteering for community projects has become a recognised way to enhance a CV, creating the potential for links of mutual benefit between local universities and schools.

### **9.7.2 Applicability for policy makers**

The concept of peer cognisance, I feel, holds considerable potential in improving learners' attitude towards collaboration, as well as their aptitude to identify and pursue their learning goals whilst collaborating with others. As such, I feel it could be included into a school curriculum or university strategy to enhance learners' introduction to lifelong learning and preparation for successful collaboration in the workplace, as suggested by the communities of practice approach. Other, related movements are already in place in many institutions, such as Assessment for Learning (Black and William, 1998; Black *et al*, 2003 and 2004) and Problem-Based Learning (e.g. Boud

and Feletti, 1997). Without detracting from these concepts' usefulness, I feel they could be further enhanced by introducing Peer Cognisance as an additional element, actively enhancing learners' awareness of each other and the mutual relationship of respect and responsibility that can lead to successful collaboration. The element of group work in the curriculum would thus be underpinned by a more informed understanding of the qualities, skills and attitudes that might be desirable to pursue, establishing another link between research, planning, and practice.

### **9.7.3 Applicability for theorists**

Despite its focus on improving practice, the thesis holds potential for theorists too. One study (or, indeed, a pilot and a main study) is hardly sufficient evidence to base significant changes on, instead, it illustrates the potential, now that the practical applicability of peer cognisance has been explored to some extent, to return to the learning theories described in this work (such as constructivism, social constructivism, communal constructivism, learner autonomy and community of practice) and to situate the concept of peer cognisance more accurately within these fields than the scope of this thesis allows. This holds considerable potential for further research, which is outlined in section 9.8 below.

### **9.7.3 Recommendations for similar studies**

Considering that the research spanned schools and universities, recommendations drawn from this study, at a first glance, appear very specific. Some, however, are transferable into other contexts.

The face-to-face meeting between pupils and students had great impact on the students, but was not really remembered by the pupils several months down the line. In order to encourage further collaboration, and potentially peer cognisance, it should be possible to increase the number of face-to-face encounters. This could be achieved in several ways – if the project was taking place over a longer period of time, students could plan a visit into a trip home (e.g. for Christmas). Whilst this would make it unlikely for all

students to visit the class together, there would be a more continuous stream of visitors, tying the online aspect of the project to 'real life'. This approach to me seems beneficial both from the students' and the pupils' point of view, reminding the students that the project (and their commitment) continues despite their new life abroad (see chapter 5), and bringing the project into the pupils' orbit, as they seem to be much more easily influenced by their direct surroundings (see chapter 6).

A further alternative would be to enhance the school/university links already present at many UK universities with a module on teaching or teaching support. In modern foreign languages, the module could take place in students' final year, after their year abroad, giving students and increased linguistic confidence to operate as facilitators, as well as secure technological access and on-call help from a more experienced facilitator. In this scenario, face-to-face visits could support the online aspect of the project as necessary, and students would be in a position to take advantage of the project by using it to apply for teacher training or illustrate their initiative for other employment purposes. To what extent this module would be credit-bearing or remain voluntary would depend on each university's individual set-up.

From the pupils' point of view, I feel that collaboration ought to be encouraged more explicitly in the classroom. In many classrooms, the survey format prevails as the main form of group work or pupil-to-pupil collaboration, despite its unsuitability for true peer cognitive activity (Macaro, 1997). The portfolio approach, suggested by the pupils themselves, would allow the introduction of a competitive element that rewards collaboration, so long as the activity which leads to the portfolio is carefully monitored. The introduction of smaller prizes would make the project viable for any classroom, without the financial need for vouchers or similar. Whether in languages or other subjects, I feel it should be possible to encourage collaboration and a sense of Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) in the classroom, preparing pupils more adequately for life after school.

## **9.8 Scope for further research**

In the introduction to this thesis, I mention the governmental initiatives which made languages optional after Year 9, the year group with which my research took place. I

also mention that my study took place at a language college, which, although not unaffected by the changes, maintain languages up to GCSE. Now, in the final stages of writing this thesis, a further development has taken place, and the government has issued a press release outlining its expectations that schools should hold on to at least 50% of its language learners in Key Stage 4, inform parents about the advantages of language learning and prove that they offer the statutory entitlement in Ofsted evaluations (DfES, 2005). How much impact this will have at school level remains to be seen, however, in order to gauge the true motivational potential of collaboration and communication, the study ought to be repeated at a school where languages have, in fact, been made optional, but for the project to have any impact, it would need to be carried out in the same time period as my study did, as pupils are frequently called upon to make their GCSE choices around February in Year 9. In order to maximise the impact of such a study, I feel that it is important that at least one of the collaborating facilitators has a good knowledge of the participants, to enhance the possibilities for peer cognisance in this setting. If school and university staff were to collaborate effectively, this could allow for great benefits for both institutions, as well as the participants themselves, providing an innovative programme to prepare participants for lifelong learning and collaboration in a variety of settings.

Similarly, I feel the suggestion of a pedagogical module embedded in or added to final year language students warrants further research, and might go some way to encourage students to take up language teaching as a career option. In the current uncertain times for language education, motivation and enthusiasm are crucial components for recruitment into teacher training, and this could be a way for university departments (e.g. Languages and Education) to strengthen their links. Such a pedagogical module could be developed jointly, then form the basis of a long-term study to see to what extent such preparation eases students into life on a post-graduate teacher training course. As not all students stay at the same institution for their undergraduate and post-graduate studies, it could be difficult to obtain the data for all students in one cohort, however, it might be possible to track the participants of the undergraduate teaching module, and to compare these students with their relevant peers at their subsequent institution.

Because the concept of Peer Cognisance is not necessarily related to any particular group of participants, nor directly to online or face-to-face collaboration, I feel that the concept itself offers the largest scope for further research. The two studies outlined in this thesis have provided an introduction to what, in my opinion, has the potential to be a powerful learning and teaching tool; however, there is much work to be done to link it more explicitly to different sectors, explore its feasibility in networked learning, face-to-face learning and 'pure' online education, and to solidify its foundations by expanding on aspects of learning design issues. The introduction to this thesis states that the study is of potential interest to

- university tutors planning and/or conducting online cross-cultural exchanges;
- school teachers planning and/or conducting online cross-cultural exchanges;
- university departments contemplating the introduction of an networked learning element into their courses;
- university departments planning links with local schools;
- secondary schools planning links with local universities;
- university departments and tutors seeking new opportunities for the development of teaching skills for undergraduates, potentially encouraging interest in Initial Teacher Education;
- Initial Teacher Education courses, seeking opportunities for recruitment of undergraduates on Postgraduate Teacher Training courses; and
- other researchers interested in the field of networked cross-cultural collaboration (including EFL).

Although all these offer scope for further research, in conducting similar studies from different angles and with different foci, it might be that the true potential of the study is far more widely applicable, and in order to establish this, much more detailed engagement with the literature on learning design and instructional design needs to occur. The study thus holds potential for the improvement of practice as well as for the advancement of learning theory, and it is certainly this latter angle, i.e. the engagement with learning design issues, that I myself intend to pursue in the near future, to provide a more stable theoretical basis for the concept of Peer Cognisance, before bringing it back into a practical context.

Finally, in order to stay true to the idea that experiences are as individual as those who are experiencing them, I feel there is genuine scope in repeating the study, but building into it the findings from this thesis: more strategies for student facilitators, even more encouragement of peer cognisance for all involved, better technological preparation for students, and higher school input to maximise pupil facilitation. In order to increase my own abilities as a facilitator, I would certainly like the opportunity to repeat the experience with another year group, and find whether the changes (or indeed the participants) would lead to different issues being identified as motivating or preventative to collaboration, and whether the concept of peer cognisance continues to hold.

### **9.9 Final thoughts**

In the introduction to this thesis, I have argued that, for me, research must have a practical output, a usefulness beyond the theoretical pursuit of knowledge, if it is to be successful. Similarly, 'practice uninformed by a clear grasp of theory is blind, forever doomed to repeat old mistakes' (Jones and Steeples, 2002, pp 2-3). Despite moments of despair when my first study did not work out the way it was intended, I now consider myself to be exceptionally lucky, having had the opportunity to expand on a tentative hypothesis, an idea of a framework, by introducing it in a more structured fashion in the second study. Despite the (significant) reductions and changes to the original research questions, the overall aim, which made me want to pursue a PhD, i.e. to become a better facilitator, has been achieved. Throughout the journey of this research and the writing process, I have spoken at several conferences (Online Educa Berlin, 2003; Association for Language Learning (Language World), Canterbury, 2005) and other gatherings – both officially and unofficially – (visiting researcher presentation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003; general conversation Worldwide Universities Network e-learning group meetings, Southampton and Bristol, both 2005), and have been met with genuine interest and encouragement, as well as questions which led me to pursue my research from ever different angles and with ever new ideas. I have, as I put it in the introduction, had the 'luxury to chase a thought for years', and I have truly perceived it as a luxury. Although I have had a chance to write selective findings for a small number of publications (e.g. Gläsmann, 2006), I am now looking forward to share what I have

found, and make true on my promise to my participants, and enable their voices to be heard.

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1 – Evolution of research questions**

### **Stage 1**

(Copied from original PhD proposal, November 2001)

Facilitating skills development through collaborative online learning in modern foreign languages

Proposed research:

- Ex post facto – motivational issues resulting from groups of staff and students that have been involved in online learning, with the possibility of a comparative study against those who have not – possibilities for surveys and interviews
- Needs analysis – To what extent is the range of skills described above [technical, learning, personal, social, cultural, communicative, autonomous, reflective, linguistic, collaborative, co-operative] necessary for successful learning, and to what extent can it be taught/developed?
- Case study – Tandem Learning (Brammerts 1996-2001) as a way of introducing online collaborative learning to secondary age pupils over a period of three years – skills development and success analysis
- Experiment – different possibilities to implement collaborative online learning in modern foreign languages, to be trialled with students – observation in how participation in online learning group changes over a certain amount of time.

### **Stage 2**

(Research questions for the purpose of Study A)

**How can successful collaboration for online cross-cultural self-governed learning be best facilitated?**

**1. What skills does a facilitator in this field need to develop?**

- a) To what extent do existing pedagogical frameworks for online facilitation address issues pertaining to cultural and language-related issues?
- b) What is the learning process of the facilitator throughout the period of study?
- c) How can this learning process be best harnessed to allow other educators to gain an insight into issues related to online facilitation of cross-cultural exchanges?

**2. What motivates students to participate in a cultural exchange project?**

- a) What initial motivation brings learners to these projects?
- b) Are there certain indicators towards autonomous or collaborative learning skills that will help students be successful?

- c) Is there a relationship between reason for initial interest and actual amount of participation?
- d) What is the best way to structure a project to maximise motivation in different circumstances?
- e) What is the role of the facilitator in harnessing and maintaining motivation throughout the project?
- f) How do learners regard and assess the outcomes of the project?

3. What are the dynamics in a multilingual on-line collaborative study group?

- a) What is the perceived role of the facilitator as part of the group dynamics?
- b) How can a change in group dynamics towards increased collaborative autonomy throughout the project be encouraged?
- c) How does communication between individuals and small groups compare to those in the full group?
- d) Is there an optimum way of pairing/grouping students in this type of on-line learning environment?

### Stage 3

(Research questions for Study B)

How do participants in an online learning environment experience collaboration?

- 1a. What do they experience as motivating?
- 1b. What do they experience as barriers to successful collaboration?
- 2. To what extent are learner autonomy and collaboration linked, and how does this translate to the concept of peer cognisance?
- 3. How can a facilitator encourage peer cognisance, in order to improve the learning experience?

## **Appendix 2 – Questionnaire Study A**

### **Questionnaire for partnering purposes**

Please answer the questions as accurately as possible, as your answers will be used to find you the most appropriate partner.

1. First Name:
2. Surname:
3. Gender (please delete as appropriate): male / female
4. Age:
5. Completed years in Higher Education (i.e. put '0' if you are currently in your first year at university, '2' if you are currently in your third year, etc.)
6. First language (i.e. the language you grew up with, not necessarily German or English):
7. Please underline or embolden the statement that best characterises your knowledge of the language you wish to improve during this exchange (i.e. German):

I can express myself in most situations, including conceptual debates, and rarely have to search for a word.

I can express myself spontaneously in most everyday situations, but find discussions on a more abstract level problematic.

I am happy to communicate in the language, but am more comfortable if I have the chance to prepare my contributions.

I prefer structured role-play to spontaneous communication, as I feel I don't have the confidence and/or vocabulary to communicate without preparation.

I have to search for most words in the dictionary, and feel much happier consuming the language (reading and listening) than producing it (speaking and writing).

8. Do you have regular and easy access to a computer with Internet connection (please delete as appropriate)? Yes / No

9. Will you be mainly using the computer(s) (please indicate):  
at home  
at university  
both  
elsewhere

10. If you will be using largely the same computer (or type of computer) throughout the project, does it have (please delete as appropriate):

- a) High-speed Internet connection? Yes / No
- b) Headphones or speakers/microphone? Yes / No
- c) a webcam? Yes / No

11. As of January, we will encourage you to meet occasionally in 'real time', for synchronous communication. Because of the time difference involved, finding the best times can be complicated. Below is a list of possible times when you *might* be contactable by your partner – it is not meant to indicate that you will be available at 4 am every morning! Real time communication will largely be negotiated with your partner, so the timings below are just meant to give a general indication. Please **embolden** or **underline** all times when it will be possible for you to participate in the project:

**in the morning**  
**at lunchtime**  
**in the afternoon**  
**in the evening**  
**at night**  
**during the week-end**

12. Have you had any prior experience in e-learning (in any context)? If so, please quickly outline the work you have done:

13. Finally, please think about what it is you are hoping to get out of this project, and write your thoughts below. Wherever possible, we will try to team up pairs who share the same goals and linguistic/cultural interests.

Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire, I will get back to you as soon as we have found you a partner.

All the best,

Sabine

## **Appendix 3 – Interview questions Study A**

Interview questions for first series of interviews  
(face-to-face at U.S. Institution, e-mail with German Institution) \*these are the U.S.  
questions (i.e. in English)

On language learning:

1. How long have you been learning German?  
First foreign language learned?  
(Did you learn it at school as well?)
2. Why did you start learning German?  
What interests you most/least about the language/culture?
3. When you learn a language, how do you learn it best? (input, structure, media)

Project:

4. What attracted you to this project?
5. Think about the process and the outcome of the project – what would need to happen throughout the year so that at the end you would consider the project to be a ‘success’ for you?
5. What skills, do you think, would help a participant to be ‘successful’ (as defined in 5) in this project?
6. Do you think these skills are different from what they would be in a face-to-face project?
7. How could a peer help a participant to develop these skills, if they are not already present?
8. How could the facilitator of the project help a participant to develop these skills, if they are not already present?
9. How do you envisage your work with your partner and your study group?
10. What, do you think, will you bring into the study group?
11. In what areas, do you think, will you need help from other members of the study group?
12. How often are you currently planning to check for messages?
13. What balance of languages do you think the group will adopt?

**14. How, if at all, might the introduction of an audio/visual element change the project as of January?**

**15. Are there any other comments/issues you would like to address?**

## **Appendix 4 – Timeframe and topics, Study A**

### **Phase 1**

10.11.-14.12.03 (5 weeks, US holiday 22.11.-31.11., US exams begin 15.12.)

Week 1 & 2 (10.11.-23.11)

Pairings and personal introductions, discussions on following topics:

- expectation of course
- form and choice of language for communication – establishing group rules for beneficial language learning on both sides.

During these first two weeks, each student will be expected to post information about themselves on a student page (in a language or mix of languages of their choice), and to begin a weblog (online diary), describing their learning experiences. During the first two weeks, all participants will discuss their expectations together, before the individual groups are formed.

Week 3 & 4 (24.11.-7.12.)

Discussion of terminology – 'culture', 'autonomy'. Possible questions:

- Is culture necessarily high-brow?
- What constitutes (a) culture?
- How is culture influenced?
- Is culture a nationalistic trait?
- Is autonomy positive or negative?
- Can autonomy be related to collaboration?
- How do you describe an autonomous learner?
- Do you think your country's education system encourages autonomy in pupils?
- Is there a difference between autonomy and peer learning?

Each group will be expected to create a questionnaire with the aim to question their peers at their respective universities (outside the exchange group). These six questionnaires will be posted online for the rest of the group by the 5<sup>th</sup> of December.

Week 5 (8.12.-14.12.)

Discussion of questionnaires, picking and choosing from available options to create one overall questionnaire. Each university individually to arrange for set time between end of phase 1 and beginning of phase 3 to administer questionnaire and collect data.

## **Appendix 5 – Example of narrative (Study B)**

Right now, as a man states on his mobile phone, I'm on a train between Kettering and Leicester, on my way back from London to Sheffield. Over the past two days, an idea occurred to me, one of constructed narratives to support my PhD. How to construct a narrative on-line? I'm not sure it's ever been done before. Hah! Groundbreaking research again (she thinks with an ironic grin). Would I need to construct it, to pull it together from individual contributions? I feel I ought to give them a list of questions to consider, as a pointer towards me not wanting 'right' answers. Can I give them my personal narrative, which will form part of the constructed one, before they write theirs? I don't want them to write 'in my image', but I also don't want them to feel they have to answer questions. Could I give them this blog entry? As soon as I'm thinking this, am I not changing the way I'm composing it, with an audience in mind? This research is indeed 'messy', almost Matrix-style, alternative realities unfolding :o).

A constructed narrative would be useful to explore the students' attitudes towards the project, the emphasis they wanted to or were able to place on it once they were in country, their perceptions of the group, the pupils, each other, me, the environment. this is going to be hard. I have spent the last year writing long, reflective entries, and I'm still not finding it easy engaging with my thoughts, going back, questioning why I wrote certain things, how that made me feel. What if they say 'well, you know, it was a project, just part of my year abroad, it really didn't make me \*feel\* any which way - I just did it, you know.'? I'd be stuffed!

If I managed to get each student to write a narrative, a story, beginning with the workshop I ran in their department, when I first met them, their reasons for volunteering, their personal reactions to my emails over the summer - did they think 'what a worry wart'? I feared somebody would drop out just because they got fed up with me going 'are you still there?' :o) How did those who came to the school feel about the experience? Did it help? With what? Did it not? Was it a 'this is exactly how I thought it would be', a 'why doesn't somebody tell me what I'm supposed to do here' or a 'oh my God, they're eating me alive'? Did those who couldn't come to the school feel that it mattered? It's a miracle to me all six arrived in the VLE. Did they wish, once they were 'in-country', that they hadn't volunteered? How did they feel when they couldn't get online (again, I'm becoming aware of the group actually reading this - I don't want them to think I'd want them to feel guilty, and I don't want them to think I thought they didn't care, but it's important I know how they \*did\* (\*do\*?) feel, even if the answer \*is\* 'I didn't care'. Matrix, here we go again :o) Did they have to remind themselves to check for messages? Was it a chore? Did they feel supported? What did they think of the kids? Did they find the layout of WebCT appealing/good/instructional/boring/whatever? Were they as frustrated as I was when the kids didn't post? :o) Can I get across to them how I think it

will be valuable to find out their thoughts, their real thoughts, on the entire process, so that future projects might work better (not saying this one didn't go well, all things considered :o) - but, do they share that opinion? Will they take anything away from this? How many of them are seriously contemplating to work with kids go into teaching, and did this project tell them anything they didn't know? Again, in my heart of hearts - I doubt it. But I don't know!

Who am I to assume the voice of the omniscient author, compose my findings on the students' experiences, without adding their voices? And I cheated myself in writing this, I think, knowing it would be easier to keep the text hypothetical, in the third person, rather than asking the questions directly. It seemed less threatening to write, and, I think, might be less threatening to read, too, and easier to respond to. I want honest thoughts, but not everybody feels comfortable writing like that. And I'm one to talk. How will I cope with an honest 'I thought it was crap, and I never should have volunteered'? Will I magnanimously, bravely say 'well, in order to improve on this in the future, a more elaborated account of your opinions would be helpful', fleeing straight back into the academic language we're all so much more at home with? I hope not. We're hovering outside Derby, I think. I'll now think how on earth I can get each group of pupils to construct a narrative, too.

## **Appendix 6 – Parental consent letter, Study B**

Parental consent letter (Letterhead removed, as printed on school paper)

24<sup>th</sup> September 2004

Dear Parent,

..... German class, taught by Mrs [Cooper], has been selected by the University of Sheffield to be the pilot group for a national study, aiming to increase exposure to the culture of German-speaking countries. Throughout the project, the class will be collaborating with language students from [a university] who are currently on their year abroad, exploring different geographical regions, cultures and customs via the Internet. This is an excellent opportunity for all members of the class to practise their German in a communicative context, and to learn more about the 'real world' outside the language classroom.

Communication will take place via an online learning platform which is completely secure and inaccessible to outsiders. The project will be supported by Ms Gläsmann, a former German teacher now working as a lecturer within the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. All university students participating have been vetted carefully for their suitability for this project.

We would be very grateful if you could fill in the reply slip below and return it to Mrs [Cooper] at [School], to indicate your permission for ..... to participate in this promising project. If you have any questions, please contact Ms Sabine Gläsmann, using the contact details below

With best wishes,

Sabine Gläsmann  
University of Sheffield  
[s.glasmann@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:s.glasmann@sheffield.ac.uk)  
0114 – 222 8129

Caroline Cooper  
School

+++++

I give permission for my son/daughter

(name) ..... to join the Cultural Exchange Programme in collaboration with the University of Sheffield.

Date:.....

Signature:.....

## **Appendix 7 – Initial questionnaire, students, Study B**

### **Initial Questionnaire**

**Thank you for taking the time to fill in the questionnaire - it will be used to help plan the project, and to give me a better idea about who is participating. Please give as much detail as possible.**

*1. Full Name:*

*2. Full contact details within the UK (address, phone number):*

*3. Gender (please delete as appropriate): male/female*

*4. Age:*

*5. Completed years in Higher Education (i.e. put '0' if you are currently in your first year at university, '2' if you are currently in your third year, etc.)*

*6. First language (i.e. the language you grew up with):*

*7. How long (in years) have you been learning German?*

*8. Please underline or embolden the statement that best characterises your knowledge of the language you wish to improve during this exchange (i.e. German):*

- I can express myself in most situations, including conceptual debates, and rarely have to search for a word.
- I can express myself spontaneously in most everyday situations, but find discussions on a more abstract level problematic.
- I am happy to communicate in the language, but am more comfortable if I have the chance to prepare my contributions.
- I prefer structured role-play to spontaneous communication, as I feel I don't have the confidence and/or vocabulary to communicate without preparation.
- I have to search for most words in the dictionary, and feel much happier consuming the language (reading and listening) than producing it (speaking and writing).

*9. Why have you chosen to do a teaching assistantship in Germany, rather than a different type of placement?*

10. Have you got any experience working with teenagers? (please specify)

11. What has motivated you to volunteer for this project?

12. What do you hope to gain from the project - what would make it 'successful' for you?

13. You will form a learning cell together with other students and pupils. What personal strengths and qualities do you feel you will be able to contribute to such a group?

14. In which areas do you feel you might depend on other people's strengths?

15. Have you got any ideas for ways and methods with which you might keep the pupils (and yourself!) motivated? (please specify)

16. The exchange will be facilitated by myself (Sabine) - what do you perceive the facilitator's role to be?

17. How important do you feel facilitation is for this kind of project? Why?

18. The project is likely to use an online notice board format, but may incorporate other forms of communication throughout the year. Please state how confident/experienced you are in the use of the following communicative media:

	Regular user / confident	I'm okay with it, used a few times	Never used, but willing to try	I'd rather not try this
e-mail				
Online notice boards				
Messenger programmes				
Typed chat				
Audio chat				
Video-conferencing				

19. Are you already aware of periods of time when you will be away on holiday, or back in the UK during the next academic year? If so, what are these?

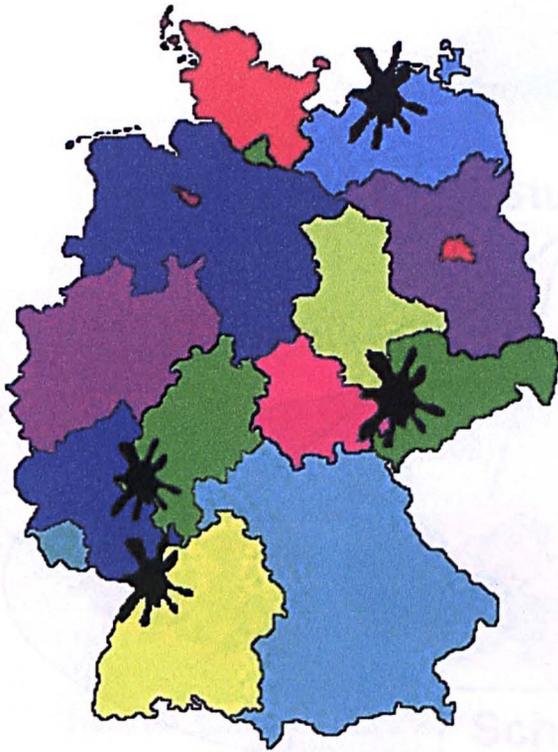
20. Is there any point you would like to make that has not been addressed by this questionnaire (concerns, hopes, ideas...)?

## ***Appendix 8 – Materials used with pupils***

### **Materials used during sessions at school**

Note individual headings on each appendix – 8.1 refers to appendices used in session 1, 8.2 to those used in session 2, etc. Names have been changed in line with those throughout the text.

Appendix 8.1.1 Transparency showing location of students

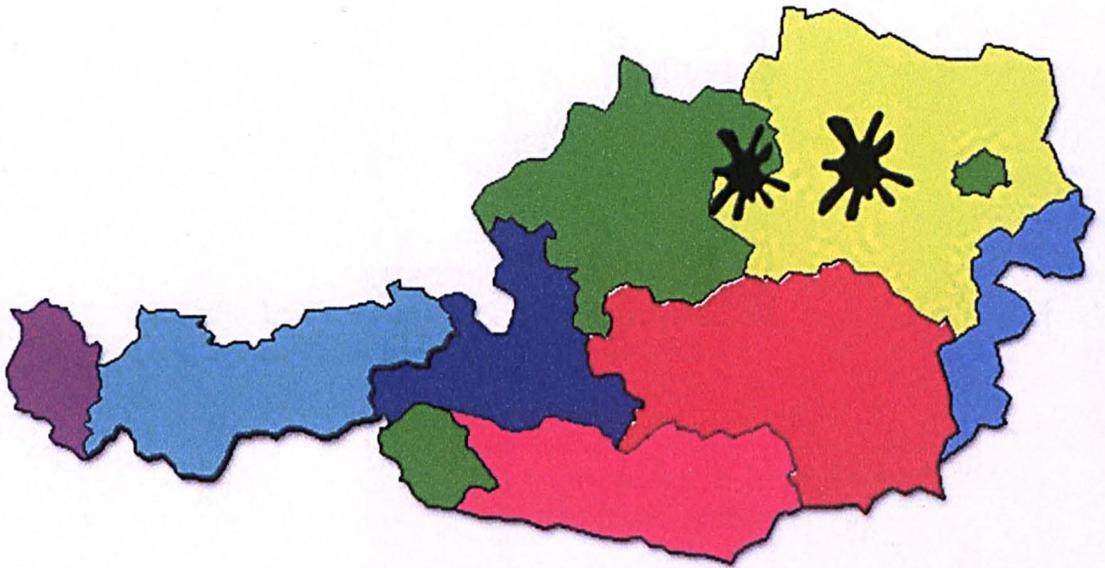


**Rostock: Emma**

**Leipzig: Sonia**

**Wiesbaden: Vicky**

**Karlsruhe: Lizzy**



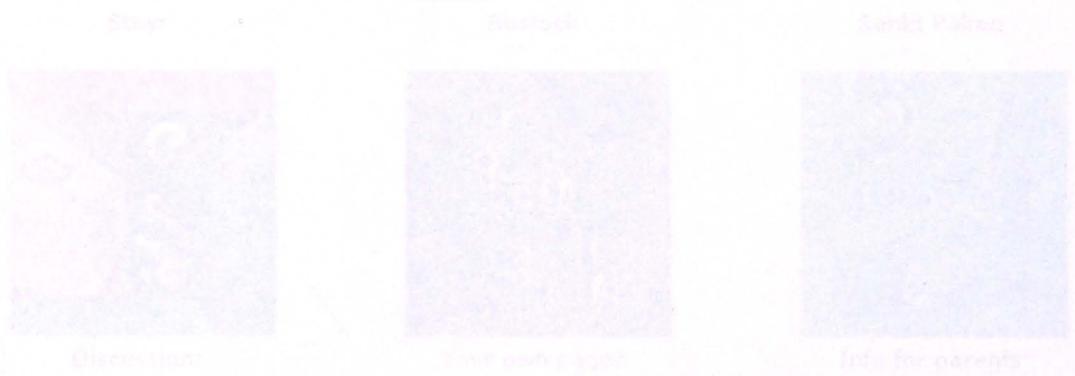
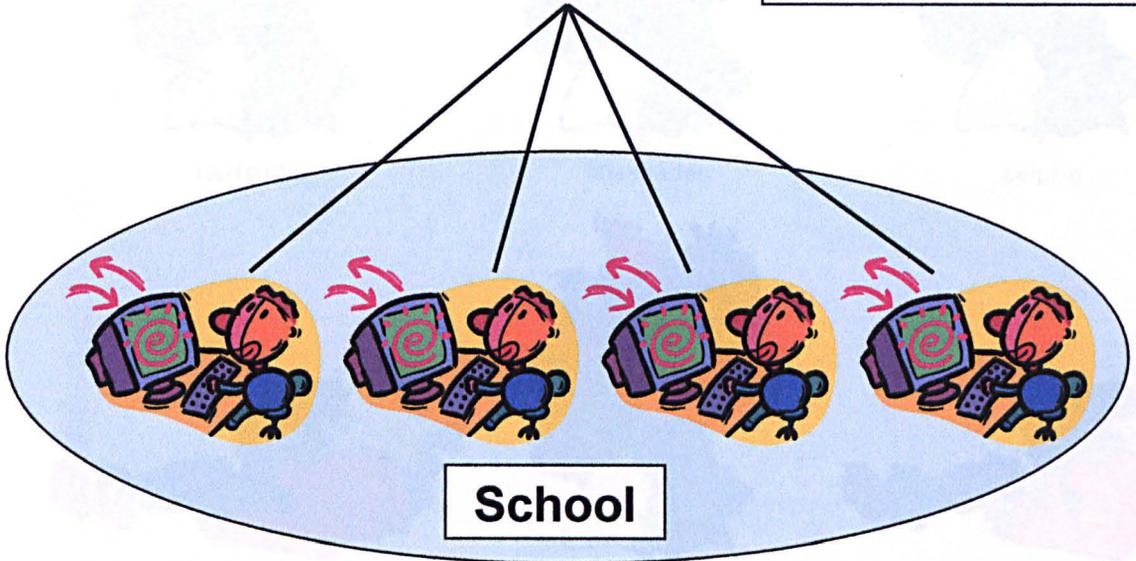
**Steyr: Mary**

**Sankt Pölten: Jodie**



**Student**

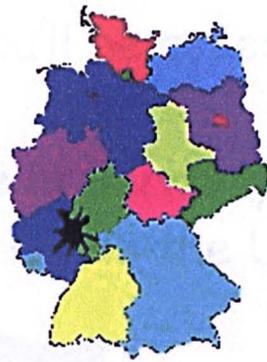
Appendix 8.1.2  
Transparency to outline how  
collaboration would work



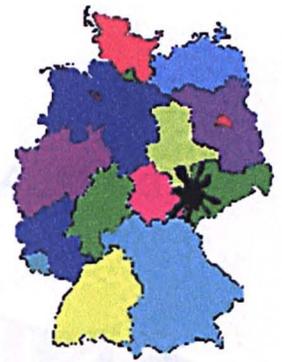
Appendix 8.1.3 - Transparency Screenshot of WebCT environment - the top has been cropped due to school crest on display



Karlsruhe



Wiesbaden



Leipzig



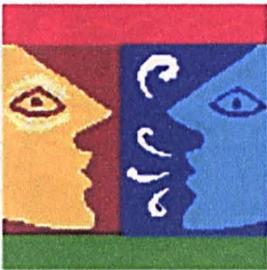
Steyr



Rostock



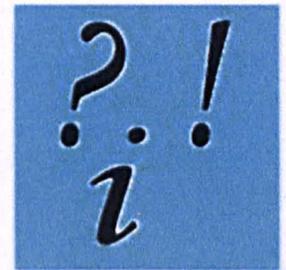
Sankt Pölten



Discussions



Your own pages



Info for parents

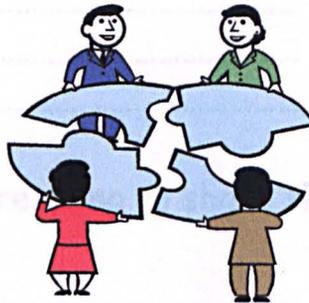
Appendix 8.1.3 – Transparency Screenshot of WebCT environment  
– the top has been cropped due to school crest on display

During this project, you'll be asked to

- find out about life in Germany and Austria, and compare it to life in the UK.



- work with other people in the class, and share the workload fairly, according to your best ability.



- take charge! The project will run, but the way it is run is determined by you! If you have a good idea, share it!



Appendix 8.1.5 – First task sheet for all pupils to fill in  
(font has been reduced)

**Task Sheet 1**

Our group is called .....

We are working with ..... in .....

We have been asked to find out more about ....., and to produce our work in Word, Publisher, html or another format that allows for text and pictures to be displayed. What topic we concentrate on is up to us. We are interested in

.....

..... All members of our group can do something that will help with this project:

..... is good at .....

To complete the project, we are going to share the work.

..... is going to .....

We will have completed this work by .....

Appendix 8.2 – Update sheet

I saw groups individually and took notes on these:

**Work update**

**Group name:**

**What went well:**

**What didn't go so well:**

**What's happening next:**

**Deadline:**

**Who will send?:**

Appendix 8.3.1

Each group filled in a group report after the first project was finished – the number of lines has been reduced to fit.

**Group report – Project 1**

Your name:

Your group's name:

Think about how you worked on the last project as a group, and write down your thoughts about the following:

1. What went well? What did you like about the way the group worked?

---

---

---

2. What could have gone better?

---

---

---

3. Are you happy with the part you personally played in the group? What are you happy about? Could you have done better at some point?

---

---

---

4. What (if anything) do you think will need to change about the way the group works for future projects?

---

---

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## *Task Sheet 2 - Things to do today*

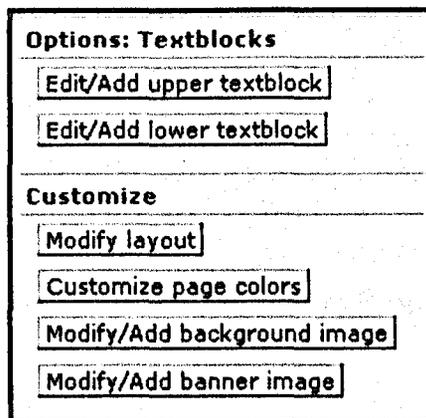
- 1) Go to WebCT - <http://158.143.100.78> - and log in, using the user name and password on your slip of paper. Copy the web address, user name and password somewhere so you'll remember it.
- 2) Click on the different maps of Germany and Austria to look at the work the groups produced. We'll look at these more closely once all groups have sent their work.
- 3) Fill in the 'Group Report' (cream/yellow sheet), and let Sabine have it.
- 4) Click on 'Discussions', and then on the name of the town your group is linked to. There is one message there, click on the looking glass icon to read it, and make sure you understand it.
- 5) You can reply by clicking on the 'Reply' button (above the message). Type in your own message and click 'Post' at the bottom of the window. Your own message should include as much German as possible, and should include the following:
  - Information about you - name, age, family, pets, hobbies, etc. - do as much of this in German as possible, and the rest in English
  - Ask at least two questions about the student or their life in Germany/Austria - make sure you don't ask questions they have already written an answer to, and check with the rest of your group, so you don't all ask the same question!

*If you do have time left, you can start planning your own homepage, which we will talk about and design next time. What information do you want on it? How much of it can you say in German? What do you need to prepare (scan photos, find info, translate vocabulary...)? Take notes in your yellow project book.*

**ACCENTS:** In order to write correct German, you might want to write your message in Word (Insert Symbol) or shortcuts for accents, if you know them, then copy and paste them into the message box.

## *Homepage Design Competition*

- 1) You can only have one page, not a whole site, so think carefully about what you'll want on there!
- 2) Log on to WebCT (<http://158.143.100.78>) with your user name and password. Click on 'Your own pages', then click on your name.
- 3) To the right will be several buttons, but the only area of interest to you is this one:



Use Edit/Add upper textblock and Edit/Add lower textblock to enter your text - it might be best if you write it in Word, then copy it, so that, if you press a wrong button, you don't lose all your work. If you want to change the layout of your text, click on 'HTML Editor' (in either lower or upper textblock), then make sure it's on WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get). Once you're done, click Update.

- 'Modify layout' only gives you the option to work with one or two columns of text, maybe not that exciting.
- 'Customize page colours' allows you to choose some colours different to the pre-set ones.
- 'Modify/Add background image' - if you click on 'Upload a File', you can choose a file from the computer you're working on and upload it onto your page. NOTE: The background image will be tiled across the entire background, so remember people have to be able to read text on top of it.
- 'Modify/Add banner image' works in very much the same way, but the image will only show once.

**YOUR HOMEPAGE SHOULD INCLUDE TEXT IN BOTH GERMAN AND ENGLISH.** As a suggestion, I would say you use the Upper textblock to write in German, the Lower textblock to write in English.

The content is yours, you can write about your hobbies, your family, school, ...it's up to you.

The deadline for your homepages is the 25<sup>th</sup> of November. You will spend your German lesson that day in the IT room, so you can do some last minute editing, if you want. After the 25<sup>th</sup>, the students will look at the web sites and decide on the winner, who will receive a £10 HMV voucher from Sabine. They will be looking for effort, not necessarily the best German!

**A few hints and tips:**

- **DON'T** just write your German text in English and send it through a translation engine. Instead, post it on the notice board for the student to comment on. Let them help you with your German. **DURING THE LESSON ON THE 25<sup>TH</sup>, SABINE WON'T BE TRANSLATING YOUR WORK FOR YOU!!**
- Take care with your English, too - send it through a spell checker before you use it.

The best pages will be nice to look at, show care with both languages and a real effort with the German, will show some preparation went into it, and tell readers something about the author, i.e. you.

**HOWEVER:** Whoever the winner is, they will also need to show commitment to the message exchange with the student, so there need to be postings on the message board! Not just to say 'Can you correct this', but to show an interest in what the students are doing - in both German and English!! With each homepage should also come a post to the 'Open to all' Noticeboard, in English, to explain why you chose to write about the things you did, how you went about doing the work, what you found easy, what you found difficult, etc. This message will be taken into account when the students look at the pages, but you can write it in the lesson on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

With this sheet comes a tick box sheet, to help you remember what you need to do by the 25<sup>th</sup>. On the 25<sup>th</sup>, you will be asked to sign it, and hand it in, to show you've done the work.

**GOOD LUCK!**

**Homepage Design Competition Checklist**

I have

*(please tick)*

- designed my own homepage, in both German and English, using the notes from the Homepage Design Competition sheet 
- written and posted at least three messages in both German and English since the start of the project (in my own project area) 
- written and posted one message in English in the 'Open to All' section of the Discussions, to explain more about my project. 

Signed:

Date:

## Appendix 8.5

Each group received an individualised group worksheet, summarising the strengths and weaknesses they had identified previously. This is the (anonymised) version of the DreamTeam's sheet.

### Dream Team Xmas Work

Report on past work (taken from your own feedback):



You all said you had problems working together, and admitted one member was doing most of the work.

In the end, I got something from two members of the group.

With this next project, I want to avoid Toby doing most of the work - what will you do to make sure the load is shared fairly?

I will need your work by the 13<sup>th</sup> of December at the latest.

---

---

---

---

The idea of this project is to find information about Christmas in Germany and Austria, and this time, you are asked to have information in both English and German - and understand the German!! To complete this task, I want you to think about the following:

What area, or 'bit' of Christmas do you want to concentrate on?

---

---

Which bit will you do in English?

---

Which bit will you do in German?

---

How will you use Jodie to help you?

---

---

What will each group member do?

Peter will: \_\_\_\_\_

John will: \_\_\_\_\_

Josh will: \_\_\_\_\_

Toby will: \_\_\_\_\_

I will need your work by the 13<sup>th</sup> of December at the latest.

What deadline are you setting yourselves? \_\_\_\_\_

Who will send me the work? \_\_\_\_\_

By what date will this person get the work from the other group members? \_\_\_\_\_

**Fröhliche Weihnachten!**



Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## Final Project Christmas Session

Well done, and thanks for all your work so far! There are a few tasks to complete today:

1. Although the students have decided on the prizes, I haven't had a chance to find out from you which homepage you like best! Have a look at everybody's homepage, and then **post a message in the Open to All section**, and tell everybody, which homepage you like best and why. You might want to consider the layout, the use of German and English, whether you find it interesting, like the pictures, etc.



2. With the project coming to a close, it would be nice to write a final message to the student for your group, so, **in your own section (Leipzig, Rostock, etc.)**, post a message to 'your' student, to tell them about your work on the project. What did you enjoy? What would you like to have done differently? Was it how you thought it was going to be? What did you learn about German and Germany? Will you follow up on anything you learnt? Will you be doing German at GCSE? What would you change if you were running the project?

3. Finally, I will be coming back in January to talk to some of the groups in more detail. On the next page, write down why I should (or shouldn't) come and talk to your group to find out more about how to improve the project. In what ways do you think your group might be similar to other groups (in other schools, if the project runs again)? In what ways might your group have been special or different?



## Presenting your work

When working out how you might present your work, think about the following:

Who is going to talk about what?

(Note: all group members should contribute to the presentation - you could say who your student is, where they are, how you went about researching, what you found out, what bits you enjoyed, etc.)

Do you want to bring in your personal home pages as well, or concentrate on the group work?

What could you show the audience to illustrate your work?

The presentations are not long - you'll have only about 5 minutes to talk about the whole project! They will also be filmed, and we might have a 'special audience', so you might want to think about practising your presentation! You could use the bullet points to help you plan, you could, for example, put names next to them to indicate who is talking about what.

- Group members? Student? Area? \_\_\_\_\_
- What work done? \_\_\_\_\_
- Props/evidence? \_\_\_\_\_
- What did you enjoy/learn? \_\_\_\_\_



Please turn over

## Appendix 9 – Initial questionnaire, pupils, Study B

(slightly reformatted to fit page)

### Something about you:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Form Tutor: \_\_\_\_\_

Languages Teacher (please specify for which language, if you do more than one, e.g. Spanish: Mr Smith, French: Miss Miller): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please write down your three favourite school subjects (most favourite first), and say why you like them and what you like about them.

Most favourite: \_\_\_\_\_

Second favourite: \_\_\_\_\_

Third favourite: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Which subjects do you think are the most useful, and why do you think that?

Most useful: \_\_\_\_\_

Second most useful: \_\_\_\_\_

Third most useful: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Which subject do you find easiest? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. And which subject do you find the hardest? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. How true are these statements for you?

	5 very true	4	3	2	1 not true at all
I learn well on my own.					
I don't like school.					
I usually understand things quickly.					
I like being told the right answer, rather than having to work it out.					
I learn well in a group.					
I like finding things out for myself.					

Please turn over

6. How do you learn best? Put numbers 1-5 next to the sentences below, 1 = I remember **most** if I learn like this, 5 = I remember **least** when I learn like this.

- a) Reading about something \_\_\_\_
- b) Researching something on the Internet \_\_\_\_
- c) Hearing about something in lessons \_\_\_\_
- d) Watching a film about something \_\_\_\_
- e) Talking to somebody about something \_\_\_\_

7. If you had free choice, how far would you want to take the following subjects (please tick the box)? The last box is free, in case you want to add a subject. NOTE: In this question, the choice is yours, you can drop or keep any subject you like.

Subject	Drop after Y9	Take GCSE	Take AS/A Level	Study at university
Art				
English				
Geography				
German				
Your other language				
History				
IT				
Maths				
Music				
PE				
Science				
?				

8. What do you want to do when you leave school?

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9. What would your parents like you to do when you leave school?

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Thank you very much for your help with this research project.  
Sabine

## **Appendix 10 – Task list, Study B**

### **Tasks until Christmas:**

#### **1. Geographical information**

Learning activities:

- **Technical:** Searching for information on the Internet, selecting text and photos, producing own material
- **Language/culture:** Read and write in English about chosen region, read short text in German about region.
- **Collaboration/reflection:** Distribute tasks among group, negotiate completion, identify strengths and weaknesses

#### **2. Personal information**

Learning activities:

- **Technical:** Use WebCT to create personal page with information and upload it
- **Language/Culture:** Read and understand longer text in German (student personal info). Combine prior learning by writing longer text about self (in German), balance linguistic input (German/English) with desired communication (easy/complicated). Possibly asking/answering questions (see below)
- **Collaboration/reflection:** Asked to read/comment on other pages within group and identify things they like about them, communicate with students.

#### **3. Christmas**

Learning activities:

- **Technical:** Use of online dictionaries
- **Language/Culture:** Read and understand longer text on German culture (Christmas), written by students, comment in English
- **Collaboration/reflection:** Discuss geographical differences with rest of class, compare with British traditions

## **Appendix 11 – Focus group session questions**

### **11.1 Analysis pupils – Focus groups – Session 1**

- 1) How much do you remember about the project now? Could you tell me:
  - a. the 6 areas?
  - b. the names of students?
  - c. bits of own research?
  - d. bits of other groups' research?
- 2) What do you think about the group sizes? (Enough? Too small? Too large?)
- 3) How did you work together as a group? Did strategies change throughout the project?  
What did you think of working with the students? Was it different working with English university students, to working with German people your own age? How?
- 4) Is there an incident that you remember in particular (something that worked particularly well, or something that was a particular problem)? What was it? Why do you think you remember that one?
- 5) What were the things you liked most about the project?
- 6) What were the things you liked least about the project?
- 7) Did the project change what you think about German/Germany as a school subject/language/country? How? Which language are you doing for GCSE? Did the project influence your decision in any way?

**REMINDER: 'Probe questions' (from Krueger, R A (1998): *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* London: Sage (p. 46))**

- Would you explain further?
- Can you give me an example?
- Would you say more?
- Is there anything else?
- Please describe what you mean
- I don't understand.

## 11.2 Analysis pupils – Focus group session 2

- 1) Last session, we talked about what you liked and disliked about the project – if you had to plan a project like this, how would you do it?  
What topics would you have?  
How long would it be?  
How would you work with the students?  
How do you think groups could be helped to work together better?
- 2) Was there anything that motivated you to participate?
  - a. Did the competition make a difference to your motivation?
    - i. (if yes) Did that motivation carry through to the next group task?
  - b. What else would have motivated you? (give examples – mark, report, prize...)
  - c. Do you think a project like this works better as a club or with a full class? Why?
- 3) Do you think doing this project online was a good idea, or would it work better in a different way?
- 4) Is there anything else about the project you want to talk about – any ideas, thoughts, problems?
  - a. (if any raised, follow up – How could these be included/overcome, etc.)

**REMINDER:** ‘Probe questions’ (from Krueger, R A (1998): *Developing Questions for Focus Groups* London: Sage (p. 46))

- Would you explain further?
- Can you give me an example?
- Would you say more?
- Is there anything else?
- Please describe what you mean
- I don’t understand.

## Appendix 12 – Summary of data collected, Study B

### Data available for evaluation

#### Pupils:

	KuKu	JeBe	Misf	SSRC	DrTe	Kang
Preparation questionnaire						
Task Sheet 1	X	X	X	X	X	X
Work Update	X	X	X	X	X	X
Group work 1 (on WebCT)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Group report Project 1	4/4	4/4	2/4	2/4	4/4	4/4
Xmas Work sheet	X	X	X	X	X	X
Final project Xmas session sheet	3/4	0/4	1/4	3/4	0/4	0/4
Xmas work (on WebCT)	X	0	0	X	0	X
.ppt presentation	X	X	X	X	0*	X
Focus group transcript session 1	X	X	X	X	X	X
Focus group transcript session 2	X	X	X	X	X	X

- Individual homepages
- Messages on WebCT
- Focus groups transcripts

\* presented directly from WebCT

X = available

0 = not available

#### Students

Initial questionnaire	6/6
Narrative	6/6

- Messages on WebCT

#### Facilitator

- Blog entries
- Messages on WebCT

#### Generic

Worksheets produced  
WebCT timeline

## **Appendix 13 – Internal Research Board application, Study A**

On behalf of the College of Education Human Subjects Committee, I have reviewed and approved your research project entitled “Cultural aspects of peer online learning.” I find that this project meets the requirements for the ethical treatment of human subjects according to the Belmont Principles and the policies and procedures set forth in the Institutional Review Board’s *Handbook for Investigators: For the Protection of Human Subjects in Research*. This approval is valid for one year from the date of this letter. You may apply for renewal after one year, if necessary. The designation applied to your research is “no more than minimal risk.”

No changes may be made to your procedures involving human subjects without prior Committee review and approval. You are also required to promptly notify the Committee of any problems involving human subjects that arise during the course of the research.

Good luck with your research.

Cordially,