The potential of a mobile group blog to support cultural learning among overseas students

Abstract

We explored the use of mobile social software, in the form of a mobile group blog, to assist cultural learning. The potential of using this technology for cultural adaptation among overseas students was examined as those students adapted to the everyday life of studying abroad. Two pilot studies and a successful field study of a mobile group blog as used by UK overseas students are reported. A further study with prospective overseas students witnessing this 'moblogging' in China revealed the advantages of communicating through this technology as a form of peer-supported preparation for cultural adaptation. Potential advantages for learning a second language via this system, were highlighted as communication was interweaved with cultural adaptation and exercised in the blog entries. Given mobile internet, the language experience together with cultural observation impressively supported these students' growing confidence with time, space and imagination.

Keywords: mobile group blog, remote context, overseas students, cultural and language learning

Introduction

Learning overseas can offer opportunities for students, but it can also present them with challenges (Wang, Heppner, Fu et al., 2012). Their learning will not exclusively concern their chosen academic discipline. They must also learn about their new environment, the host culture.

For a newly-arrived student, the circumstances for adaptation may happen anytime and anywhere: navigating the streets, talking casually, campus studying, and so on. Incidental learning will be a pervasive and continuous process. Language will be an important carrier of culture, while cultural factors are included in every engagement with language. Atkinson (2002) noted how learning is relentlessly infused through everyday living, with the language that is encountered being inseparable from the experiences that constitute cultural knowledge. While language learning cannot alone deliver a complete understanding of a host culture, culture is always a matter of linguistically-mediated membership of discourse communities: both real and imagined (Kramsch, 1995).

Such encounters with unfamiliar cultural contexts can have serious implications for students in developing countries, including the uncertain impact of importing cultural imperialism from dominant western cultures (McLoughlin and Oliver, 2000; Gu, Schweisfuirth and Day, 2010). It is therefore important to support students in acquiring a measured and sensitive perception of their host culture – as well as helping them sharpen a sense of criticality towards it. Nostrand (1989) interpreted culture as "ground of meaning", i.e. the attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking, behaving and remembering shared by members of some community. Occupying this ground comfortably and appropriating this meaning is a considerable challenge: one that we wished to address in the project described here. So, the aim of the present project was to consider whether mobile personal technologies could be recruited to allow cultural newcomers productively to share their encounters with local culture.

Empowering individuals to act meaningfully and to use reflectively a host language in the authentic host cultural environment will be significant aspirations in support of enculturation. But tracing that process of empowerment might also be helpful to those who are later to enter the culture themselves – if such trails of enculturation could somehow be made available to them. This productive sharing of cultural experience is another concern of the present research.

Cultural learning and its support

University study overseas is an educational option that is pursued by increasing numbers. Yet it is well documented that such student sojourners can experience considerable challenges of culture adaption. These are often referred to in the language of "cultural shock" (Zhou, Jindal_Snape, Topping and Todman, 2008). The form that these experiences commonly take has been the subject of recent review (Furnham, 2010; Smith, Nigar and Khawaja, 2011).

Kramsch (1995) describes the challenge of cultural learning in terms of three axes: the synchronic axis of space, the diachronic axis of time, and the metaphoric axis of the imagination. The diachronic axis has traditionally referred to how individuals can identify themselves as members of a particular society to the extent that "they can have a place in that society's history" [Kramsch, (1998), p.7]. The synchronic one indicates that people who see themselves as belonging to a particular group acquire, through interacting with other members of that group, a common way of seeing the world and which takes the

form of attitudes, beliefs, opinions and, ultimately, behaviors. The final layer of culture acknowledges that common dreams and imaginings also characterize a group and are mediated through language which in turn reflects and shapes its cultural reality . Learning a language interweaves with this cultural learning. Learning a language is far from being an abstract skill: it demands appropriating the cultural resources or voices of local communities in the variety of their social contexts. Accordingly, it is shaped in relation to broad range of social and cultural conditions (Burr, 1995; Collentine and Freed, 2004; Wertsch, 1991). Kramsch (1995) asserts that fully reflecting the historical situatedness and local context of language serves to strengthen language learning - as individuals encounter authentic interactions in the target culture.

The nature of the challenge of adaptation has been explored for Chinese students studying overseas and various patterns documented (Wang, Heppner, Fu et al 2012; Wu and Hammond, 2011). ~~Some argued that overseas students might maintain strong connections with own domestic networks without the feeling of loss in a new country; we should not neglect deep negative psychological effect of being isolated in the real world (Arkoudis, Watty, Baik et al 2013).~~ Albrecht and Adelman have identified several types of supportive communication directed towards the sojourner's predicament: for instance, pre-departure assistance with a source of social comparison, orientation instruction programs, direct assistance with personal resources, emotional support for personal relationships and venting emotions (Albrecht and Adelman, 1987). Sources providing these supportive and traditional messages are indeed numerous for student sojourners. Enculturation has been resourced by targeted preparation for studying abroad, as well as direct guidance in the acquisition of new skills relevant to the host culture (Bochner, 1982; Huang, 2008; Klineberg, 1982; Ying and Liese, 1990). This investment in pre-departure assistance and orientation programs indicates the perceived importance of assigning prospective sojourners in developing realistic expectations and confidence to mediate stress (Albert, 1986; Aycan, 1997; Daly, 2007; Tsang, 2001).

Some universities appoint staff to give lectures overseas about pre-departure information. 'Institutional aids' such as personnel officers, foreign student counsellors, and social workers have been utilized. However, they were unlikely to become part of a personal social circle and thereby be responsive to more personal needs (Adelman, 1988; Humfrey, 1999). Because of the mobility and diversity of these overseas students, formal courses that assist their transition by exploring different living and learning environments are quite difficult to deliver in a sensitive manner. Personalized solutions are inherently difficult because of the diversity and volatility of individual experiences.

According to Kim's review of immigrant adaptation studies, during the initial phase of cultural entry, reliance on ethnic ties were a less stressful form of resource than interaction with natives (Kim, 1987; Volet and Ang, 1998). The previous cross-cultural experiences of expatriates and veterans could be helpful through the resonance of their reactions to transition and their knowledge of the host country (Adler, 1981, cited by Sherry, Thomas and Chui, 2010). In Anderson's research, a social group was established for local students and for women who were international, this group was also called a source of connection, support, information, explanation, and learning (Anderson, 2008). Supports might also came from strong connections with own domestic networks without the feeling of loss in the host country(Arkoudis, Watty, Baik et al 2013); we should not neglect deep negative psychological effect of being isolated in the real physical world. The virtual home built through social media may in some sense released the psychological homelessness (Gomes, Berry, Alzougool et al 2014), yet it also impeded the local social interactions with local and other international students. In the present research, therefore, Chinese overseas students were selected as an example of a group confronting cultural adaptation. The study will explore the opportunities in providing support and resources by tracking their experiences of transition, and facilitating 'group-help' from within those people from the same cultural backgrounds. Students might acquire more adaptive cultural strategies through encountering specific 'common' problems solved by fellow international students, or from solutions collected from authentic experiences. However, such fragmented, touch-and-go, and sometimes unexpected events may not always be captured at their moment. There is a need for technology that might support recording and sharing experiences on the move.

Technology assisting the overseas student

Overseas students today are mainly young people who have grown up with digital technology and, thereby, developed relevant skills and an enthusiasm for using it (Oblinger, 2003; Davies and Eynon, 2012). Moreover, it is apparent that these social media have strongly penetrated Chinese student cultures (Gray, Chang and Kennedy, 2010); Herold and Marolt, 2011; Li, 2010; Szablewicz, 2010)

So, research has begun to explore how digital technology could be a medium for recording, storing and tracing shared experiences of cultural and language learning. One study in the USA found that structuring and presenting students' experiences of language during cultural transition in the form of texts and images through a digital library system ("Woezor"), helped individuals reduce such stress by sharing in-depth stories about

experiences (Azeez et al., 2004). This cultural transition experience, as initiated by institutions, was digitalized into webpages for students to view and search.

In recent years, mobile technology in particular has entered into this support. At one university a mobile application was developed for international students to address issues of cultural shock (Bennet and Maniar, 2007). Students retrieved useful information from prepared cultural knowledge. However, this pre-planned information was still based upon 'expert' knowledge generated by designers or consultants. The wealth of knowledge created by students themselves could be a more effective approach to support. Sharing authentic experiences could provide real-time guidance for individuals to deal with problems and uncertainties. This was not available in those previous studies.

Outside of the classroom, learning frequently occurs through interacting with other people and using socially-provided tools and schemas for solving those problems that arise in the 'everyday' (Rogoff and Lave, 1984). Such learning is therefore a cultural process: it is shaped by the community or social network around its learners (Nasir et al., 2006). Learning about a culture as part of a learning community can sustain people by providing bonding, mutual encouragement, and support (McGivney, 1999). In this sense, overseas students define a community of 'learners-of-enculturation'. With mobile devices, students might collate on-the-spot cultural information, share it, discuss it, or simply react intuitively. Learner-generated blogs are a resource that can extend social interactions - when those blogging learners now have such vastly greater power to publish and access content (Flatley, 2005; Huang et al., 2009).

Mobile blogging, or 'moblogging', is an activity whereby the user publishes blog entries directly from a mobile phone or other mobile device. This might involve sending photos and videos by e-mail/MMS to a web site. A report from DCCI (Detecting Center of Chinese Internet) showed that in 2012 there were over 327 million mobile blog users in total, with 2.31 blog entries everyday on average (DCCI, 2012). Applying mobile blogging in cultural transition could fill the gap of great differences between official information and personal experiences, by managing and sharing authentic individual enculturation information within a group of overseas students.

Mobile technology therefore offers a rich resource for people to recruit the Internet for information exchange. The term 'mobile' should not suggest a technology that is simply portable. It is people themselves that are mobile (Sharples et.al, 2005). As such, 'mobile technology' includes technical resources that allow people to achieve connection,

communication, and interaction while they are on the move. Such communication can play a productive part in the learning experience of students.

In sum, the new genre of 'social software' has been successful in animating networked communication in everyday contexts: encouraging participation (Churchill, 2009; De Jong et.al, 2008; Lessig, 2001). Some social software, such as blogging, has the potential to be a transformational technology for teaching and learning (Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Learning with mobile technology can also be part of this "social landscape" (Rosen et.al, 2010). In short, social software coupled with wireless mobile technology potentially provides the basis for enhancing cultural learning in a relatively unstructured environment: potentially stimulating reflection, critique, collaboration and the exchange of user-generated content (Cochrane, 2006; Greyling and McNulty, 2011).

Using mobile technology around everyday contexts thereby may assist the novice's cultural learning to resolve uncertainties in those contexts, to explore flexibility, and to cater for unpredictability (Ying and Liese, 1990). There is a great need to support the informal learning that might reduce the difficulty, uncertainty, and culture shock so often experienced by overseas students. Mobile communication technology could contribute to addressing this need.

We suggest that the mobile group blog can support such a vision but its use in this role has yet to be widely evaluated. In the present research, we examine and evaluate the authentic application of a mobile group blog to support cultural learning: both by Chinese overseas students in the UK and for prospective students planning to come from China. We consider the following questions：

- How can the use of mobile blogging assist newly-arrived Chinese student to capture on-the-move live information?
- How far can the mobile group blog provide a community learning resource for information sharing and cross-context transition?
- Can current overseas students benefit from sharing enculturation information?

Scoping studies

As this research concerned the deployment of technology situated in everyday living, a sequence of exploratory studies were conducted around comfortable and useful data capture in such natural settings. The project implemented a step-by-step, programmatic

approach, achieved through four sub-studies brought together here. Three groups of Chinese overseas students attending a UK university for their undergraduate or postgraduate study participated in research to establish needs that would inform a final design. A further group of Chinese students in China then participated in a study drawing on the outcomes of this final design.

Two pilot studies were first conducted to assess the actual needs of Chinese students in the UK in relation to help with their cultural transition. These studies also addressed their attitudes towards using blogs and, in particular, their inclination to use a mobile blog. Results were analyzed to scope the design and development of realistic mobile resource. They are outlined in the following sections prior to describing the evolved design and field intervention. The main empirical study investigated real and practical mobile blogging activities with a group of twelve Chinese overseas students who had newly arrived at university. Students' authentic moblogging experiences in the UK were examined. Their blog entries and discussions were then shared through the group blog site with another group of (intending) students in China. Mixed methods were applied including log files collection, personal interview and focus group discussion in each study.

Scoping Study 1: Audio diaries of student lived experience

An audio diary study was conducted to identify the main concerns and observations of newly-arrived Chinese students and thus inform the design of a blog content structure that could support others. Such diaries have been shown to be an effective way of discretely capturing student experience (Conole, 2007). The study recruited a group of 20 Chinese students (16 female, 4 male) from the University of Nottingham's Ningbo campus in China, arriving at Nottingham's UK campus for a one-month summer school. Shortly after their arrival, they were lent MP3 voice recorders for two weeks and were asked to record their thoughts and experiences, especially the differences between any aspects of their everyday lives in the UK and in China. 192 audio diary entries were received. The diaries revealed that these students shared similar experiences and faced similar problems. They often admitted considerable shock and expressed their feelings of excitement, anxiety, uncertainty and loneliness in their diaries. The main themes in their reflections were coded and collated. In order of prominence, these were found to be: food, customs, communication, buildings, travel, study, and shopping.

Participants enjoyed this audio diary study. It enabled them to "think aloud." Although they were not requested to share these stories with others, they showed their desire for requesting such communication, as well as asking for support from others.

Scoping Study 2: Needs assessment using a pilot group blog

Using an audio diary, records could not easily be shared and distributed to others. The purpose of this second study was to explore what might take place when overseas students captured local information with digital cameras. They would involve taking photos and annotating these with textual reflections, since such complementary use of text and image offered a direct and speedy communication device with a great opportunity for sharing.

A pilot study was therefore conducted using an internal group blogging system, Exblog, to investigate traditional (i.e., not mobile) blogging as a resource to support cultural adaptation. Sixteen newly arrived Chinese students (10 female, 6 male) who had enrolled on either an undergraduate or a postgraduate program were recruited. These participants were asked to carry out group blogging about anything in their everyday life that they felt was interesting and useful to share. There were three phases to this study: pre-blogging focus groups, blogging which lasted for 23 days, and post-blogging interviews and focus groups.

The study found that these overseas students were enthusiastic about recording and sharing their experiences with other people locally or globally. Unlike the resource of an audio diary, this blogging did not encourage so many verbal reflections. Photos were more significant representations of these bloggers' experiences.

The follow-up interviews and focus groups confirmed that these overseas students were familiar with the general functionality of mobile phones (SMS and taking pictures) and had positive expectations of the mobile group blog. The digital cameras used by participants in this study enabled records to be kept on the go by taking pictures simply when inspired. However, many regretted that they had missed 'moments' for taking photos in their everyday life when they did not have their camera with them. These participants recognised that if they could use mobile phones, they could take and blog pictures so as to capture unexpected occurrences and share such stories immediately.

Main field work

A mobile group blog system was therefore established on the basis of the two needs assessment studies presented above. Both had demonstrated the appetite for such a group blog. They both also confirmed the need: with surprise and, sometimes, tension in relation to cultural discoveries and a pleasure in the reflective experience. The second scoping study also suggested the potential in collecting and sharing momentary information from mobile devices. Users should be able to access the group blog (for both reading and posting) either from mobile devices or from desktop or laptop computers. The design of the mobile group blog also took account of the categories of troublesome cultural experiences that were identified by students in the two pilot studies.

The mobile group blog system: design

A mobile group blog was created by customizing Wordpress 2.2 with a mobile plugin. The interface of the mobile group blog site is displayed in Figure 1.

--- Insert Figure 1 about here ---

A blog entry contains the title and the content, in the form of text and image. At the bottom of each blog entry is displayed the date of submission, the category to which this blog entry belongs; and the number of blog comments. '*Navigation and administration*' contains five key features: 'recent post', 'recent comments', 'categories' , 'archives', and 'administration'. '*Recent post*' refers to the ten latest blog entries posted to the group blog. It lists the titles of these blog entries in reverse-chronological order. '*Recent comments*' refers to the five latest blog comments made by participants in reverse-chronological order, although it lists only the name of the person making the comment and the title of the entries. '*Categories*' lists the names of preset categories in alphabetical order: custom, conversation, events, life, buildings, food, shopping, travelling, and studies. These categories were inherited from the previous two scoping studies. '*Archives*' gives archived blog entries by month to facilitate search. '*Administration*' provides the links to the registration and login webpage. '*Blog statement and help*' displays a brief description of what the blog is for and what could be posted, together with a link to 'help' pages.

From the mobile devices (Figure 1, right), every blogger needs to input their username and password in 'login' and 'password' textboxes, type in the title and texts of their post and then choose pictures that had previously been taken and stored in their mobile devices. After categories and pictures are chosen, the individual blogger in this group can

submit what they saw, what they experienced, and what they feel about their new life in the form of texts and images straight to the mobile group blog site from mobile devices.

In sum, a full field study evaluating this design was conducted. An opportunity sample of Chinese students in the UK took part as bloggers and respondents in the mobile group blogging. After this, a further opportunity sample of students in China served as passive readers of these blogs. The study in the UK lasted for four weeks and the one-day study in China was conducted after the study in the UK finished.

Participants

Participants in UK: Twelve newly arrived Chinese overseas students were recruited - eight females and four males, aged from 19 to 25. They had joined undergraduate or postgraduate programs at this university. Most were previously unknown to one another. No participants had any experience of mobile blogging before but all had their own personal blogs.
Participants in China: Thirteen participants were female and ten male. Ages ranged from 19 to 23. All these students had their own personal blogs. No participants had encountered moblogging but all of them had their own blogs.

Procedure

Each of the students in UK was loaned a Nokia N80 mobile phone. They were instructed to start blogging on the day they received the equipment, and were asked to recount their experience, thoughts and feelings; including insights into local society and the way of life in the UK, and their exploration of Englishness.

Students in China were asked to review the blog site to understand those mobile bloggers' contribution. Participants were then divided into six groups of either three or, four people. Each group spent about 30 minutes on the reviews, during which time their conversations reviewing the blog site were recorded by audio recorders. This study collected the readers' responses and suggestions about the design of the mobile group blog and investigated the utility of the contents that those bloggers in UK submitted and which could be viewed in China by prospective overseas students.

Data collection

Log files of the mobile group blog site were collected. Follow-up interviews and focus

groups were transcribed. Qualitative data were analyzed by a grounded approach, as there are no precedents for predicting the categories of meaning that might arise. Analysis involved a process of reading the transcriptions, taking memos and notes, reviewing those annotations, revisiting the transcriptions to confirm emerging themes, and, finally, characterising the data in relation to the apparent focal point of a theme. In this way, the participants' reflections and conversations were schematised and integrated.

Blog entries were analyzed in conjunction with log files and interviews. For example, blog entries were classified in terms of themes referenced to the 9 preset categories, individual bloggers' contributions, participation of other people, submission from mobile phones or PCs and the collocation of texts and images. By matching the corresponding patterns found in the blog entry analysis with the interviews, we synthesised findings, drawing upon material from the blog site as well as their conversations.

Results and discussion

Participants in the UK reported no difficulty in using the loaned Internet-enabled mobile phone. Some participants shared information immediately by mobile blogging to the group blog site. Nobody withdrew in the period of study. The mobile group blog site received 216 blog entries and 109 blog comments from students. Results showed that, on average, each participant in the UK had produced an average of 4.5 blogs, 23.45 hits and 2.27 blog comments each week.

The mobile group blog was semi-structured and monitored by the researcher, guiding participants to contribute to the blog under the theme of cultural transition. At the start, the researcher entered a few examples of blog entries as scaffoldings for the bloggers. Support from the researcher was provided through emails, personal contacts and blog comments. Participants could also get help from the website at anytime.

A number of themes describing the experience were extracted from analyses of blog entries, the log files of participants' activities, and feedback from interviews. These are described next.

Tuning a cultural awareness

In our preliminary Audio diary and group blogging studies, participants were not invited to make points regarding specific topics. While in this moblogging study, participants were asked to collect useful and interesting information for the purpose of sharing and

helping others. Participants commented that they had become more alert to cultural transition issues after taking part in this study.

> *"The purpose of this group blog always reminds me of the awareness about the cultural contexts I am in. Sometimes I neglect something in the context but some other people noticed them in similar context and put them on the group blog. Thus I realized the cultural difference there. They may have better observational skills, which make them more sensitive to the environment. This is useful."*
> (Master student, Male)

Student participants in China were eager to know the true experiences of their peers in the UK. An awareness of cultural differences seemed to drive the interest of culture learning. These participants were becoming increasingly aware of cultural issues and more motivated to be involved in sharing their experiences and opinions.

Co-constructing cultural knowledge from authentic representations

In the mobile group blogging, captured knowledge was available for other blog members to draw upon. The knowledge created by mobloggers in the UK was delivered remotely to participants in China. Blog comments indicated that authors and respondents could co-construct knowledge from self-generated authentic information in conjunction with established individual knowledge.

--- Insert Figure 2 about here ---

In the example in Figure 2, for instance, 'Solbyb' addressed her knowledge about the 'leaf cleaner'. Wanzi added her opinion and associated it with British culture using her own inference. 'Solbyb' illustrated that British people did collect the leaves to the truck instead of leaving all of them on the road, but less frequently. In this way, the commenter and the author generated their own 'common sense' about reasons behind the "cleaning leaves" phenomena.

Using the mobile group blog in the real-world not only enriched personal contextual knowledge from everyday life but also enabled the knowledge construction individually and in a community by communication and sharing. Through sharing and discussion, blog members co-author and co-construct their knowledge about cultural transition. The experience is enhanced by retrieving and sharing real-time authentic information on the move.

Gaining language capability and confidence

From all these studies we noticed the Chinese overseas students had a growing command of English. At the beginning of their transition, they indicated a reluctance to blog in English. The following figure (Figure 3) shows an example of language transition in blogging. Both the left and right figures show that these texts were in Chinese with some English words included. The earlier blog entry on the left (posted October 12th) had many Chinese characters while the blog entry on the right (posted November 2nd) had only three Chinese characters. Figure 2 (left) illustrates an example of their construction of knowledge from different individuals' understanding and interpretation about leaves cleaning in the UK. The slight discussion on the phenomenon and the exchange of personal feelings boost their adaptation to the local culture.

--- Insert Figure 3 about here ---

The phenomena described in the moblogging showed the process of transition from pure Chinese towards English mixed with Chinese and then to pure English. Figure 4 below shows the percentages of entries that contained English texts during the one-month of study.

--- Insert Figure 4 about here ---

This figure displays the percentage of English words that were used, in contrast to Chinese words, in each blog entry on the basis of the date they were posted. There are far less English texts at the beginning of the study (early and middle of October) and there is a steady increase of texts in English as time passed. Until the end of the study (late October and early November), most blog entries were in English. In interviews, participants in the UK admitted this transition and showed more confidence in expressing their thoughts in English while students in China were less confident and had difficulties even in reading. This indicated that their language capability could have also been improved by encouraging them to practice English in British cultural contexts, and achieving successful transition from one culture to another.

These findings reflected a successful application of mobile group blogging in assisting students studying overseas. These participants' use of the mobile group blog allowed documenting their lives and the discussion of interesting or difficult moments. Participants thereby constructed trajectories of interaction in the mobile group blog.

Temporal, spatial and community dimensions of cultural learning

At the outset we noted that culture is constituted within three axes: the synchronic axis of

space, the diachronic axis of time, and the metaphoric axis of the imagination. In our study, these three axes were found to be supported by the features of a mobile group blog. Tracking of their locations, time and conversations in-the-country over the blog reflected each blogger, as a member of this 'group' community, with similar cultural background. All their stories in the "group" history were recorded and shared across time and place with out-of-the country students. We explore the grounds for this claim in the sections below.

Issues of place

Mobile technology helped student to capture representations of place while the blog kept the record of the resulting communication. 25.5% of blog entries were real-time reporting of current experience. All participants claimed they often did moblogging in their own room, in the evening after classes. Although photos could be taken at any time, they felt that texts required time to type. They also reported moblogging on trains and buses, in parks, and in cafés. With a full 'anywhere' sense of "on the move", the most valuable feature of moblogging in cultural learning is the freedom of capturing and sharing what they encountered in the flow of everyday life.

Participants indicated that moblogging resourced interaction outside of its own digital environment. Some mobloggers said they went outdoors together, exchanged pictures taken through 'bluetooth', and discussed what was to be submitted to the blog site. They shared skills on how to use the phone to take better photos. This therefore implies an opportunity to build social relationship through these kinds of interaction.

Issues of time

The mobile blog helped to trace activities of this group of students, taking down their stories at specific times. It was found that 47.3 % of bloggers posted blogs in the evening and during the night (after 7pm and before 2am); 39% blogged in the afternoon (after 12 noon and before 7pm); and 14% in the morning (between 6am and 12pm). Most moblog entries sent in bulk were submitted during the evening or night, except two sets which were sent in the late afternoon. Figure 5 shows the frequency of mobile blogging by these participants in detail.

--- Insert Figure 5 about here ---

In this figure, the dots represent the time when blog entries were submitted and the lines between dots represent the duration when there was no moblogging activity. Those superimposed dots indicate bloggers posted several blog entries in bunches at one time.

The more angle in a line, the more bunching in the blog entries that the blogger submitted. Participants were maintaining a steady pace of engagement and nobody dropped out. It is interesting that 'in bulk' moblogging often occurred in the evening. So some participants carried out blogging in the more traditional way: collecting information in cameras and uploading them when they go back indoors. At the same time, our focus group results indicated that most students behaved as 'silent' reader with mobile phones more often than as a blogger. They still believed that the mobile devices brought conveniences of reading blogs.

The data imply that the majority of these participants did mobile blogging continuously, though not regularly. Moblogging activity became intense in the second and third weeks. We may infer a transition happening here, from traditional blogging to mobile blogging. And different people have different abilities to adapt to moblogging: some are quick, like 'Solbyb'; others are slow; while some others were like 'Elsa' whose interview indicated that she did not like moblogging at all as she was not interested in using emerging new technology. It seems the 'anytime' sense of "on the move" is not universally shared. The data indicates the current habit of mobloggers in posting new blogs. The "on-the-inspiration" capturing and "at-own-will" sharing get are readily achieved through the mobile group blogging technology.

Issues of community

The mobile group blog formed an online virtual community for these Chinese students, most of whom were previously unknown to one another. Within the group blog, each participant knew the explicit purpose of this study, and shared their experiences, encouraged people who encountered problems, answered questions and discussed phenomena observed. The following example illustrates a discussion that occurred among three students about their understanding to the neglected 'fallen leaves' that one of them discovered.

--- Insert Figure 6 about here ---

The sense of belonging to the online community provided by the group blog helped to reduce feelings of loneliness. People found common sense through the communication, as displayed in the following example.

--- Insert Figure 7 about here ---

'Owen' expressed his great disappointment with the long waiting time and other troubles he had encountered with his broadband service. 'Wanzi' agreed with his opinion and

gave her impression of British people and their behaviour. She even cited a Chinese proverb to support her comment.

The positive psychological effects of the group blogging activities assisted in reducing cultural shock. Meanwhile results also showed that participants in China also wanted to feel part of the mobile blog community.

Vicariously experiencing remote social contexts

Participants in China found that the information on the mobile group blog site was authentic and personal, and this supplemented traditional supports for cultural transition. The following example came from some blog reviewing students in China:

> *"I would like to know people like us, coming from the same background. Would like to know their lives over there. What are they exactly doing there everyday?"*
>
> *"And this group blog site brought forth some students' true lives to us, although just a bit."(Undergraduate, Male)*

His words also indicated that remote participants were frequently imagining the context that the blogger was in through a blog entry. They reported that, as a result of reading blog entries, some existing knowledge was confirmed and some new knowledge gained. Those blog entries provided an open space for full imagination. For example, they commented that they had previously heard about the good environment and facilities in the UK and were satisfied when they browsed the blog site. Participants in China were unable to understand some contents without being in the same context in the UK. For instance, students in China had no idea about why English cleaners just blew fallen leaves to the road side instead of collecting them and burning them. This indicates how important contextual information is for cross-context users. These cross-border blog participants also suggested that there should be more participants, especially the original bloggers whose continued engagement and contributions were in great demand.

Perhaps a remedy to contextual information that is missing is to ask bloggers to provide more sufficient and relevant contextual information when they are posting a blog entry. Although one might even draw up on the assistance of more advanced context-aware technology. Another solution might revolve around building up more interaction and communication with bloggers synchronously or asynchronously, which would encourage the setting up of an international community.

In addition, the analysis of blog entries showed that participants not only discussed British culture, local events that had occurred, and stimulating things they had found, but also shared in their blogging the sadness, agony, difficulties and troubles encountered in their everyday lives. The example in Figure 8 gives responses to a blog entry previously posted by 'Eva' who had suddenly lost her uncle in the second week of her arrival in Nottingham. Her blog conveys how she felt heart-broken about this bereavement, and how - touched by the sadness of being away - she felt the distance, isolation and fragility of human beings.

--- Insert Figure 8 about here ---

Three other people in this group, although strangers to her, consoled and encouraged her. The blogger's own comments show that she gained some strength from their words. In a sense the responses from other members of the group blog helped her to release some of her stress. The example also indicates the positive psychological effects on individuals that can be gained from social interaction in the mobile group blog community.

Conclusions and future work

Bloggers in the UK could gain benefits by reviewing other group members' postings, as well as finding their own worth in giving cultural help to others. The potential advantages of applying mobile group blogging in the particular arena of language learning suggests a new route towards naturalized language teaching with new technology. While the technology deployed here is no longer particularly innovative, we submit that the use to which it has been put is certainly novel – in short, what the technology has mediated here represents a usefully innovative institutional practice.

The study in China was itself a group reflection undertaken remotely outside the blogger community at some later time. The blog site was therefore sustainable in both the short-term and long-term, and for self and group reflections. This implies that blog entries on the group blog site can be informative and reflective for anyone for as long as the group blog exists – this could be synchronous or asynchronous.

An improved pre-structure for the input of blog entries is required. The 'category' system for issues was found useful, yet bloggers might have other assistance, such as a 'tag' to specify what they tried to express in each blog entry - these might draw from the key words of blog contents.

Yet, despite the apparent success of this intervention, there are several questions that are left suspended. First, it remains uncertain how important the *mobile* element of the blogging is for success. It is true that many uploads were not carried out on the move but at a latter point in a domestic space. Second, it is not clear how far the momentum of the project and its sustainability depended on the presence of a research presence to drive it. Third, we noted that a number of these students had personal blogs and it might be wondered how far this was a necessary condition for engagement.

Insofar as these concerns may appear to represent constraints on the success of initiatives of this kind, they all promise to be lightened by the way in which the constituent technologies are evolving. This project was completed in 2010 and this is an important factor in evaluating the significance of its findings. We do not believe that technology has been transformed since that time and certainly not transformed in ways that would impede activities of the sort reported here. In fact, a number of changes in the technology environment would make this form of intervention all the more practical, while shifts in technology engagement levels would make it all the more familiar and attractive. Therefore, we believe that blogging on the move is a considerably more familiar and realistic activity now than it was at the time of our fieldwork. We believe also that students engage more routinely in this sort of mobile communication now and, therefore, our research presence would be more important to inspire than to sustain such enculturation initiatives. Finally, although students may be less likely to manage personal blogs in the traditional sense of such services, they would be more likely to be active on those popular social media sites that reproduce the feel of such personal blogging. International students may have complex identities on different sources of social media aids for their enculturation , which shape the development of local social networks, our study of the offline to online (real world in host country for current students) and online to offline (real world in home country for prospective students) social activities that connected local international groups and home groups inevitably assisted establishing direct cognition and perception of real overseas study lives.

To enhance engagement and sustainability, further research should be carried out in a larger community and on a wider scale. The ultimate vision of mobile technology assisting international students' adaptation could resource all overseas students, including current and prospective students, to update authentic living experiences, to exchange their perceptions and to understand the remote culture better by socializing around the

contexts. Although a more challenging task will be to integrate the records of these enculturation experiences with the mainstream of the host culture – the wider student community. There is evidently a need to guard against any initiative that exaggerates <mark>social clustering</mark> of students rather than promoting wider participation (Nasier, 2006). Anyway, enculturation required for the most right-to-the-point and effective support within a limited time and space despite of social media aids.

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