

Report

The Electronic Year Abroad

Résumé

A number of HE institutions are currently involved in the development of various ideas and good practice regarding Residence Abroad Matters, not least the National Residence Abroad Project, funded by HEFCE's Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning, a collaborative project including Portsmouth, Northumbria, East Anglia, Ulster, Southampton, Salford and Keele Universities and Nene College.

Notwithstanding the illuminating results expected from such a large-scale undertaking, it is likely that many institutions have already begun to consider what possibilities exist in I.T. with regard to the Residence Abroad Matters. This is indeed the case at the University of Hull, and this brief article gives notice of a pilot scheme set up in September 1998. Visible results were swift, and sufficient positive response was received to encourage further development and expansion of the idea.

In September 1998 the University of Hull French Department decided to investigate a new, electronic outlook on the Year Abroad. During a redevelopment of the Departmental website, it was considered that information on Residence Abroad should be included, firstly as a direct reflection of basic details already available in printed form, and also, when the initial phase was finished, that the Residence Abroad section be expanded to be of more real use to the students. Use of available technologies at the University of Hull is sufficiently wide-spread to suggest that it is now appropriate to include electronic or web-based approaches where they can be beneficial to students. The residence abroad requirement of a language degree, not being a taught component with strictly defined targets, may be harder to transfer to electronic dissemination than simply posting lecture notes and seminar discussions; however it provided a more interesting challenge to those involved.

Albeit on a much smaller scale than the National Residence Abroad Project, our trial development at Hull has produced immediate results, and will certainly continue to evolve. I hope that this summary of our ideas, problems and solutions will be of interest and information.

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The Electronic Year Abroad began as a basic information contained on the Department of French homepage, on University and Departmental requirements for residence abroad; details on where and how language students (in this case of French) should spend their third year. This information is available in printed format and is given as a booklet to students at the end of their first year; however it was felt that many students are as likely to retrieve the necessary information while surfing the web as they are to dig out and keep handy another departmental booklet.

The possibilities offered by technology seemed to blossom in front of us as we transferred the data from the printed format. Gradually, since the summer we have expanded the basic information into a wider project which we hope increases our support structure for the Year Abroad. The University of Hull prides itself on having a close relationship with language students going abroad for their third year. Second-year students have both informal contact arranged with newly-returned finalists, at the beginning of the year, and more formal preparatory sessions on a number of relevant topics toward the end of the session. A tutor is allocated to each student to oversee general well-being and direct the dissertation written whilst abroad, and almost every student is visited during their time abroad. The Electronic Year Abroad now adds, we feel, an important further dimension to our service.

Aimed at involving students in their second, third and fourth years, the Electronic Year Abroad uses web and mail formats. Our web presence is three-fold. Direct from the departmental homepage

<http://www.hull.ac.uk/arts/FRENCH>

one can access Year Abroad, Year Abroad Preparation and Year Abroad Feedback (these are not year-specific).

Year Abroad

This contains the requirements on language students for their third year, and provides information on the various choices that can be made as to how and where the year is spent. Division of time between different countries for joint honours students, and the pros and cons of being a student against working as an assistant are looked at here. Some general advice is also offered in terms of how to survive application and bureaucracy hassles such as the correct translation of birth certificates.

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Year Abroad Preparation

This section begins with the Top Twenty Tips for being a successful assistant. The remainder of the page is still under development, but the intention is that it will go on to contain hints and tips for classes at all levels (with a majority of students going to France as assistants, emphasis logically falls on this area). It is hoped that this page will come to comprise both EFL principles and “road-tested” ideas — lesson plans which can be downloaded and adapted, or printed direct from the web page. A number of students have offered to share ideas they used whilst abroad in order to produce a valuable resource to refer to.

Year Abroad, Feedback on France

This is an expansion, in a way, of the TQA questionnaires which students normally complete on their return to Hull. In addition to that anonymous record, which remains unchanged, Year Abroad Feedback provides an electronic form on which finalists are asked to give their opinions on anything and everything from the area and accommodation to the social life and how to make ends meet on an assistant’s allowance or student grant. Originally, it was intended to manipulate the information received in two ways. Firstly as a series of Frequently Asked Questions, from second-year queries and fourth-year responses, which would then form part of the Year Abroad Preparation. Secondly, as part of the Feedback on France, it was intended to produce a collage of miscellaneous responses received from returning students which would provide a varied viewpoint on the Year Abroad.

At present, this has not happened, as we want to wait until we have a large number of responses to use for our two-fold objective. In the meantime, the responses received are wholly available on-line, categorised by location. As completed forms are submitted, they are added to the list, and will be re-formatted at the end of this year.

Email

In terms of email contact, a discussion list has been set up, open on subscription to all internal users. With the emphasis on providing a forum for second-year students, these have been automatically subscribed. This means that they all have the opportunity to follow or participate in discussions, but also that instructions and information can be quickly circulated around the year group.

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In order to widen the forum, it was hoped that as many fourth year students as possible would also join the list, so that they could share their experiences with both their friends and anxious second-years. Volunteers are asked to subscribe themselves. Obviously, with the scheme in its first year, it is more difficult to persuade the current final-year students to help out than we believe it will be when those students now in their second year return from France, having experienced the benefit themselves. As a persuasion for this year, finalists have been encouraged to join by the posting of job placements via the discussion list, which has had a certain success. Unsurprisingly, it is the same core of final-year students who have both completed the questionnaire and subscribed themselves to the discussion list. Although we are slightly disappointed by their total number, there are enough of them to make the system work, and we are confident that more students will join as the scheme becomes established.

The informal briefing organised by the *Cercle Français*, the student society, which draws together second- and fourth-year students, is a one-off affair, and though highly helpful, does not provide the perfect opportunity for shy students to raise questions which they think are too obvious, nor does it provide the answers to questions thought only of on the way home, or weeks or months later.

The email list, on the other hand, is available throughout the year, and questions can be posted indiscriminately, with a certain degree of anonymity. When a student poses a question, he or she tends to receive several replies, showing the differing views of the other students. Questions and answers are obviously available to all members of the list, thus allowing even the quietest students to benefit from following the discussions.

The discussion list is also a fine way for third year students who have access to their email to compare notes, cry for help, or keep in touch whilst they are actually abroad. This allows advice from their peers or from been-there-done-that finalists, and the progress of unfolding situations can be monitored by the second year to be made mental note of.

The list is set up with a minimal staff presence. It is essentially an unmoderated forum for the students themselves, but a small staff presence means that we can also direct the discussion, by posting specific questions or topics to encourage a varied response and different views and solutions.

Results

As to the success of the experiment, we are in no doubt. Results were instant. As noted above, the main problem we encountered was how to encourage the fourth-year students to participate in the Electronic Year Abroad. We expected that without having had this facility available to them when they needed it, they would not be immediately drawn to help others. We had to hope that enough of them would be sufficiently charitable to participate because they would have liked to have had access to such a system in their second year. Thankfully this was the case. Those who filled in the Feedback on France questionnaires almost all included their current telephone number in “other info”, saying *please do not hesitate to get in touch if you want to know more*. When a query is posted to the discussion list, responses are invariably received in a very short space of time.

The number of responses to the Feedback on France forms shows how many students have accessed the new Departmental website. Hopefully this will increase as we develop the electronic Year Abroad to include lesson ideas. The Departmental site has hitherto been thought of as something for publicity purposes outside the university, but is gradually becoming more of an internal resource as well.

The discussion list had very few teething problems. It was initially hoped that we could have a web-based bulletin board, in order to keep the electronic Year Abroad in one location, but after advice from Academic Services (Computing), we settled for the email discussion list. This has a modicum more security, and information goes directly to every student on the list. As we anticipated, there was a high volume of traffic in the three weeks leading up to the submission of assistantship application forms. Whilst fourth years were happy to provide information on specific places: “I quite fancy going to Besançon — is it a nice town?”, the staff could post gentle reminders that you choose a *département* rather than a particular town. “Can I type my application form?” was another practical request, and there were many others. As the emphasis at the start of the year is on practicalities, we encountered no questions which were wholly unexpected. One student currently abroad asked for help when she ran out of ideas for classes three weeks into term — hopefully the on-line resource centre will help people like her next year!

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Also as expected, once the assistantship forms were handed in, traffic dwindled. The list has been almost dormant since the end of November, with the exception of the occasional query about summer courses or a work placement being advertised. We are certain though, from the initial response, that as we approach Easter and the students begin to realise how close their adventure is, the volume will increase again, with queries more relevant to the task of living and working abroad.

Conclusion

All the students I have spoken to have welcomed the idea of an Electronic Year Abroad, so while the final test awaits, I am quietly confident that we have succeeded in setting up a system which will deal quickly and effectively with all manner of queries the students may have, when they find out where they are being placed, and start to worry about how to find accommodation, what pubs to avoid etc...

I hope that they will stay in touch via the Electronic Year Abroad once they get to France, as many of them will still have access to the Internet. And I look forward to this year's second year returning, and being able to enjoy the first full cycle of what promises to be a very useful resource for the students and the department.

The Head of the School of European Languages and Cultures is watching carefully, to see if this pilot scheme should be extended across all the departments. We have shown that if there is not yet a need for this kind of technological support, there is certainly a niche into which it happily fits, alongside and complementary to our traditional approach to residence abroad.

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