

**LEARNING THROUGH SHARING :
OPEN RESOURCES, OPEN PRACTICES, OPEN COMMUNICATION**

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**The OnStream project.
A case study of collaboration between teachers of Russian from three
educational sectors in the UK.**

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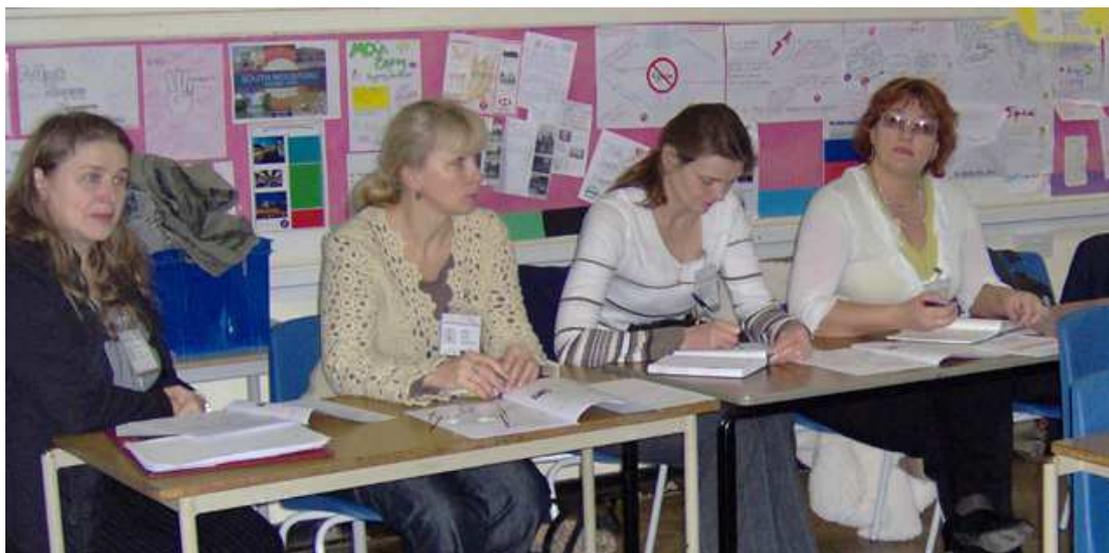


Fig 1 Complementary schoolteachers of Russian observing a mainstream school class

The national context; London the multilingual city

Research conducted by the Department of Quantitative Social Science at the Institute of Education, London, based on data obtained from the Annual School Census of 2008, found that at least 300 languages are spoken in London's mainstream state schools¹. All of the world's major languages are represented. Over 40 languages are each spoken by more than 1,000 pupils.

Some of these, currently called “community” languages, are taught in mainstream schools but most are taught in complementary schools, i.e. schools teaching in the evenings, on Saturdays, or on Sundays. A directory of schools in London, compiled by the 'Our Languages' project² lists 283 complementary and 43 mainstream schools which teach a range of community languages from Albanian to Yoruba. Many of these complementary schools are part of a larger organisation dedicated to preserving the culture associated with the language.

Background to the “Onstream” project

Previous work on the ATLAS competition, “Welcome to London”, open to all secondary and complementary school pupils to create materials welcoming visitors to London for the Olympic Games, attracted entries from more than 15 community languages. Feedback showed that language teachers in complementary schools often desired to know more about ways in which the target language was taught in mainstream schools. They often felt isolated from the mainstream teaching, although they were required to enter their students for the same state exams. In setting up the “Onstream” project it was our assumption that, although both groups of teachers worked in

different circumstances and faced different challenges, each might learn from sharing resources and both would benefit from knowing how the language was taught at university.

For the project we choose Russian as the target language, because we had worked with the UCL Russian Department and with the Friendship Society, a community charitable group offering Russian GCSE and Advanced Level exams as well as a diverse range of cultural activities to children in Saturday schools.⁵ We aimed to organise collaboration between teachers of Russian from 3 complementary schools, a mainstream school and a university. The aim was to involve about 10 teachers working with possibly 80 pupils in total, sharing materials and ideas.

Setting up the project

We approached institutions in the three sectors:-

- a) The Friendship Society which runs 4 complementary schools for Russian in Erith, Greenwich, Newham and Kingston – all districts of Greater London.
- b) Woodbridge High School, a mainstream comprehensive school in the London Borough of Redbridge which has a flourishing, highly successful, Russian Department of three teachers of Russian, with a year 10 class of twenty, a year 11 class of twenty studying for GCSE, a year 12 class of ten taking AS level (i.e first year of the Advanced course) and a year 13 class of eight taking Advanced Level.
- c) The Russian Department in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) at UCL where one teacher and a second year undergraduate class of 12 agreed to be involved.

Preliminary workshop

In September 2010, we organised a workshop in UCL attended by seven teachers of Russian from four complementary schools, two teachers from the mainstream school and one from UCL. Prior to the meeting, participants identified problems and successful methods. We collected suggestions for likely areas to focus on in the project. Some complementary school students who speak Russian at home have little skill in reading or writing and need help on how to prepare for GCSE and AS/A level exams. Under the new specifications, these students very much needed help with writing Creative, Discursive and Research-based Essays - a problem shared by mainstream pupils. After a discussion of common needs, sharing knowledge of resources and pedagogical approaches and identifying specific agreed goals, a project plan was agreed and drawn up.

The pedagogic principle underpinning the project was that linguistic competence is developed when students are engaged through creative activity and have a sense of authentic communication, i.e. involving real situations and audiences. So it was agreed that the project would run in tandem with the CrossRoads2 project which provides undergraduates as e-mentors for school students in a password protected, teacher monitored environment⁶. Each undergraduate student was paired with two or three school students. The virtual learning environment we used was Moodle. The same site was used for the On-Stream Discussion Forum for all teachers to communicate and for the collaborative online resource bank which was set up.

Uploading resources

A large number of files from the mainstream school with teaching content for A level and GCSE classes was uploaded by the two mainstream teachers, along with lesson plans and advice on conducting orals etc. Further items were uploaded by the Friendship teachers. By the end of the project the ensuing resource bank was substantial; 4 short films of lessons in each sectors; 20 items of teaching materials; 2 PowerPoints by teachers for classroom use and 7 PowerPoints by their students on study topics.

5 A note for non-UK readers; GCSE exams are normally taken at the end of compulsory schooling in year 11 at the age of 16. AS level is the first year of the Advanced Level taken in year 12 and optionally continued by some students into year 13 as the Advanced level, before entry to university.

6 The public site describing the e-mentoring work is <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/crosscall>

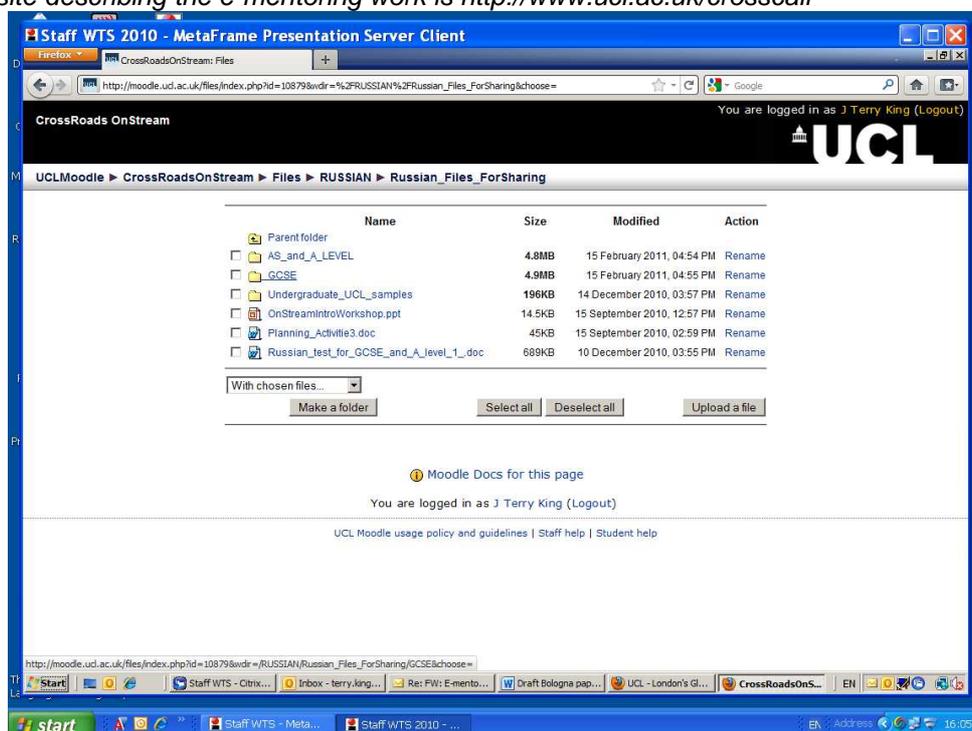


Fig 2 The web page with access to various categories of resources

Apart from sharing resources it became clear from the discussion forum that the teachers were also very interested in comparing teaching methods.

Lesson observations

So in early December, 2010, the Friendship teachers were invited to observe three lessons in years 10, 11 and 12 at Woodbridge High School (see Fig 1) The event was most successful, as feedback showed. The complementary school teachers thought that it was a very useful experience to see the Russian language taught in a different way from how it was taught in their complementary school. This led to an analysis of the differences between the circumstances of teaching in the different schools, in a discussion, in the Teachers' Forum. As a result, more teaching materials were put up on the project web site by all three sectors as well as material pointing out the differences between mainstream and complementary teaching and requests for information. For example, a complementary school teacher wrote, "It will be interesting to know how you present grammar topics and how do you choose an order of grammar introduction or criteria of importance; what do children have to cover (from a grammar point of view) by the end of year 10, for example."

At a meeting after the lessons, we planned the future direction of the project. In order to expand the scope of the project to include teaching method as well as sharing materials, it was agreed to make a film of classes in all three sectors. Accordingly, in late December a film was made of a year 12 (first year Advanced level) grammar lesson at Woodbridge High School and a link to it was put up on the project web site. In January, a film of a first year undergraduate lesson at UCL, also on grammar, was made. In March the third film, in a Friendship school, was produced, on reading and literature. Extracts from all the films were uploaded.

The films clearly highlighted the differences between the three sectors.

- University class – teaching in English to a small, motivated but not cohesive group which included ex-A level students, ab initio learners and a few native speakers.
- Mainstream state school - teaching in English to large classes, mixed in ability and motivation but all learners of Russian as a foreign language. Comparatively well-resourced.
- Saturday school - teaching in Russian to small classes mixed in age, ability, motivation and level of competence in speaking, reading and writing Russian.

Student involvement in creating materials

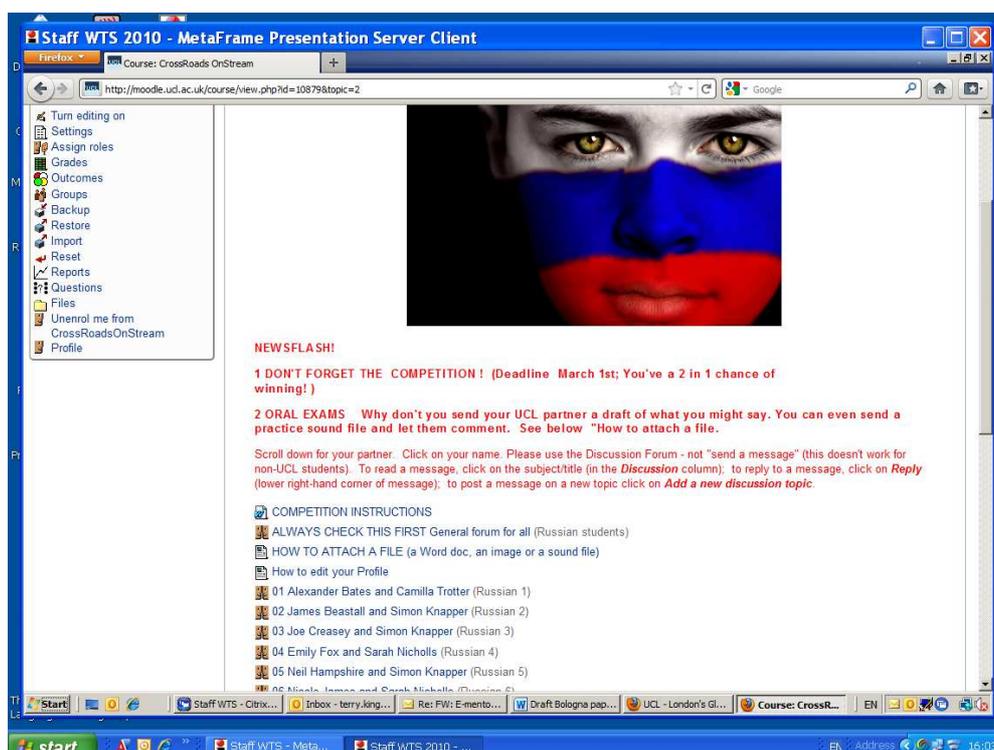


Fig 3 Students' page showing the call for the competition and the mentoring pairs

To involve the students creatively, we ran a competition for all participating students to create materials, with vouchers for prizes (see Fig 3). We ran three sections, one for each of the levels, GCSE, A level and undergraduate. The students were asked to create a PowerPoint or Word document on a topic suitable for the level at which they were studying and relevant to topics on the syllabus. These were:

- For GCSE; Russian customs and/or traditions, Russian celebration days
- For AS/A level; popular culture. e.g. An aspect of youth culture, popular music, leisure, sport or tourism
- For undergraduates at UCL; an aspect of Russian "high culture" (e.g. a writer, composer, artist etc. or an area e.g. opera, ballet) or a topic from Russian history or current affairs

The competition produced some excellent entries on topics ranging from the poet Anna Akhmatova (UCL) to sport (Woodbridge High) and International Women's Day (Friendship Society).

How well did we achieve our aims?

I believe that we have achieved our aims to a certain extent, commensurate with the time and resources available.

a) Our aims for learners

Reading the exchanges of the pairs of students in the discussion forum and judging by the enthusiasm of those who entered the competition, it is clear that some students were helped with their motivation. There were only a few cases of targeted support helping performance. Improvements in performance take a much longer time to evaluate. For the students learning a community language, the fact that their teachers shared resources helped to validate for them the status of that language and consequently to indicate opportunities for progression.

b) Our aims for teachers

All participating teachers had access to the created resources and most expressed, at some time, their satisfaction with them. They all had exposure to a wider range of activities and practices. It will take more time to evaluate whether they were able to extend their pedagogical skills as a result.

At our initial meeting, the complementary school teachers were pleased to be included in the project, valuing the opportunity to collaborate with mainstream teachers. In the subsequent lesson observation, their immediate response was of great interest in the methods and resources of the mainstream teachers. One would hope that it contributed to a sense of belonging to a community of diverse practice. Certainly the leader of the group took great pains to communicate the nature of the teaching in complementary schools.

As regards further complementary and mainstream collaboration, I think that this should be pursued. Many UK schools, especially in London, possess a greatly under-used resource – the wide range of linguistic abilities of some school students. It is my belief that more should be done to bring those outside the mainstream into it. In this respect the Onstream project was, as far as I know, a first attempt to encourage collaboration between the mainstream and complementary sectors. As a pilot, it encountered successes and difficulties which future developers might like to consider.

Successes

The project succeeded where it was able to

- use students from all three sectors in mutually helpful activities in creating materials for each other.
- use demonstration lessons where possible so that the resources could be seen in context.
- use the specialist knowledge and expertise of the teachers whose first language is Russian
- use the mainstream teachers' knowledge of and experience in teaching to UK exam syllabuses

Some difficulties

In our first venture into on-line OER, we found the development of a culture of sharing among teachers faces many obstacles.

1) **The differing context of the production and use of the created materials.** At the initial meeting we felt we had much in common and mutual help was possible. However, in the discussion forum, the complementary teachers were concerned to establish they worked in a very different context to the others. They were part-timers, teaching in the target language to small classes mixed in age with varying knowledge of that language.

2) Differing pedagogical styles.

The videos and observed lessons showed a variety of approaches, teacher-centred and pupil-centred. The resources ranged from the open-ended (e.g. web links with suggestions on their use or original writing for re-use) to the closed (e.g. worksheets for completion by the students). Worksheets and information sheets predominated, possibly because they are easier to share. There is a danger with OER that the easiest format for sharing might become the dominant mode for unimaginative teaching. For one teacher, grammar teaching is a matter of informing students of the

rules and exceptions, exemplified in our resource bank by the sheets of grammatical tables. Their students are passive receptors of information. Another teacher would want their students to be actively involved. One video shows a class being given some examples from which to deduce for themselves the patterns of grammar. Each approach produces different resources and methodology. One would hope that uploading resources for either would lead to a discussion about the effectiveness of each. Complementary teachers are keen, sometimes untrained, volunteers, first language speakers giving up time at week-ends to teach the target language. Not all of them had the skill in English or the time to contribute to discussions on pedagogy.

3) **The problem of non-take-up of resources.** The short time-scale of the Onstream project did not allow a thorough investigation of the subsequent use of the uploaded resources. Creating a resource reflects the creator's own take on teaching. Ownership remains critical when the materials are offered to others. Resources alone are not enough; their quality and the way they are used matters. More research is needed in this area.

4) **Psycho-sociological factors.** There are particularly sensitive areas when sharing with strangers. This would be true in a cohesive group but it is even more challenging for practitioners from a different range of circumstances. Some of the contributors to the forum were defensive and hesitant, others over-assertive. It takes time for a positive group dynamic to evolve.

Yet, on the positive side, everyone recognised the benefits of sharing. The work is on-going. We are setting up a public web site to make the resources available to anyone. In this second phase it is hoped that the rich possibilities of Web 2.0 tools can be exploited and that the idea might be taken up by other major languages taught in London schools and at London universities, such as Arabic, Bengali, Hindi, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Turkish and Urdu. Certainly, London, as a major competitor in trading in the global economy, needs to recognise and capitalise on the rich linguistic diversity of all of its schools.

*Terry King
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