MA VIE PARISIENNE

**THE ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT**

In the fall of 2013 I finally implemented an idea that had been at the back of my mind for years, to wit, send the students in my Accelerated Elementary class on a semester-long virtual adventure in Paris that would unfold in sync with their linguistic abilities. I got the idea from a book by Francis Debyser entitled *L’Immeuble* (Hachette, Paris, 1986). [[1]](#footnote-1) Now a classic, this book launched, at least in the field of language pedagogy, the concept of global simulation, that is, a course or a part of a course based on the collective creation by students of a virtual world. *L’Immeuble* consists of a series of writing assignments describing the life of a virtual building, complete with various apartments, first-floor shops, tenants, pets, conflicts, visits, incidents, etc.[[2]](#footnote-2) The original global simulations were created with pen and paper but obviously the development of the Internet made amazing resources available for such projects. I expected therefore to find a host of global stimulations --and therefore ready-made templates or easy-to-follow models -- in cyberspace, but, surprisingly, I found very few of them described or mentioned on the Web. So I went ahead and asked Steve Welsh at the Columbia Language Resource Center for help to create my own simulation. The result was Ma Vie Parisienne, which is at present still only a pilot, but I am rather pleased with what it has already achieved. In the spring semester of 2014, two graduate students in the French department modified the MVP template to use it in their own Elementary II sections, and I hope to see the project develop in all sorts of new directions in the future.

**GOALS AND SPECIFICATIONS**

Today, elementary and intermediate language classes focus strongly on oral practice, which is certainly the best use we can make of class time. Writing assignments happen mostly outside of class, are often solitary in nature and are rarely shared, and since writing a composition is a major, time-consuming task (for both those who write them and those who correct them), instructors tend not to assign enough of them. When creating MVP, I was aiming to devise writing tasks that would:

* be stimulating and fun;
* be communicative;
* be collaborative while reserving a private space for each student;
* public;
* grow with students’ ability to use the language;
* be evolving and would give students an opportunity to write and revise as much as they wanted, alone or with partners;
* be well guided but also open;
* be autonomous but also linked to other activities that took place in the classroom.
* be creative but realistic and authentic at the same time;
* have a strong cultural content.

I had other considerations too when designing MVP. It was important that the project should not be perceived by some students as a waste of their precious time, which meant I had to ensure the following:

* The bare minimum of time was to be spent on tasks that were not directly either linguistic or cultural.
* The technical tools were to be simple to learn and reusable in other academic or professional contexts.
* The tasks would be designed so that students would have to spend as little time as possible hunting for information and cute pictures on the Web. Of course they were welcome to make their projects as pleasing to the eye or as original as they wanted, but there also had to be a standard, simple, fast way to carry out the assigned tasks.
* Instead of having the students write everything from scratch, some writing activities would in fact be adaptations of the compositions or exercises they had to write anyway for other components of the class.
* Some of the tasks being collaborative, they could be more complex or longer without being overwhelming for individual students.

**TASKS**

With these considerations in mind, here is what Steven Welsh and I came up with.

1st main task, the apartment. As soon as the students had learnt how to ask questions and describe themselves and their tastes and preferences (lesson 4, week 2), they interviewed each other in class to find 2 or 3 roommates with whom they were going to share an apartment in Paris.[[3]](#footnote-3) They then exchanged e-mails to choose a neighborhood, a building and an apartment. On a map of Paris that was provided for them, they posted pictures, floor plans, and descriptions of the apartment (collaboratively), as well as a self-portrait and a description of their virtual room (individually).

2nd main task, what to do in Paris. After students learned the vocabulary of sports and leisure activities, (lesson 8) they were asked to find things to do in Paris together with their roommates and also activities they would like to do on their own. They exchanged e-mails to decide which activities they would all want to do, then posted pictures on a map of Paris, wrote (collaboratively) about the experience and did the same thing individually for the activities they had “done” on their own.

3rd main task, the dinner party. After the lessons about food and restaurants (9 and 13) Groups 1 and 3[[4]](#footnote-4) wrote letters to Groups 2 and 4 respectively to invite them to a pot-luck dinner. Then students had to do a bit of research on line to find recipes they might want to make and locate shops where to buy ingredients. In class, students got together and decided who was going to bring what, and what they would do at the party -- dance, play music, play games, watch movies, etc. Finally, they had to write about the party individually. We had a potluck picnic (with simpler fare) on the last day of class to supplement the assignment.

We had initially planned a final task, organizing a trip outside Paris for winter break, which would have corresponded nicely to the last lessons (future, conditional, subjunctive, traveling, prepositions, and French regions), but we ran out of time.

In between the main tasks, I had envisaged doing some shorter activities to keep the momentum alive. I only managed to do one, the divvying up of household chores. Students negotiated in class and then posted the table of weekly chores for their groups online.

I also assigned one composition where students had to describe their daily virtual lives in Paris to a family member who spoke French, and asked them to invent an anecdote about a weird neighbor who lived in their building.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

Students only had to learn how to use two tools, wikis and Prezi (a dynamic alternative to Power Point). Each group had its own Prezi (with a map of Paris on which most assignments were posted) and Wiki page (which I and sometimes Steven Welsh used to post instructions and which served as a discussion forum for the students), and students all had their own individual Prezis and Wiki pages. Both tools were accessible through the CourseWorks site for French 1105.

Students had quite a lot of guidance for the project. I had my own Prezi, where I posted models that students could copy. Steven Welsh came to my class twice to demonstrate the tools and explain how to proceed. He made himself available to tutor students individually when they needed helped as well as answered questions by e-mail. He created all the wikis and Prezis for students and groups, and posted detailed explanations on the MVP Wiki. I e-mailed and posted detailed instructions regularly, breaking down the main tasks into smaller tasks. Steven and I provided students with pictures of buildings, rooms, furniture, and floor plans, and I selected a few websites where students could find all the information (about Paris neighborhoods, activities, exhibitions, shopping, etc.) necessary to accomplish the tasks.

I monitored students’ posts and wrote to groups and individual students, in order to nudge them to complete tasks, give them feedback, or congratulate them. I frequently mentioned the findings of one group or another in class to make sure students visited one another’s Prezis. I repeatedly recommended that they proofread what they had written and edit their own work and each other’s.

**EVALUATION**

While a few students did not quite get into the spirit of the project, everyone did at least the minimum required. Most worked with enthusiasm and great creativity, at least for the first two assignments. The weakest students worked particularly hard and did not content themselves with simply posting pictures. Their groups happened to be less active than the other two and they ended up being the ones starting discussions and urging the others to respond. One group went above and beyond, met in cafés to work on the project and even exchanged e-mails to make editing suggestions on each other’s personal Prezis.

The project benefited the class in many respects, and I can’t think of any downsides to it. It promoted cohesion and collaboration between students, stimulated their interest in going to Paris, helped them learn about different neighborhoods, cultural institutions, food, and peculiar Parisian habits, and they got to write and revisit their texts twice as much as they would have without MPV. This was a particularly strong class, but I feel that their writing has really benefitted. One thing that I did not push enough, though, was editing. Despite my frequent reminders that there were still mistakes in their texts that were easy to fix and suggestions that they should point out to others the errors they noticed, quite a few of the texts remained uncorrected. I did not want to spoil the fun for them and make MPV just another composition exercise, so I did not push the issue too much, but I’ll go about the problem differently next time, probably by having some sessions of collective proofreading, which will also make sure that all students look at and appreciate the cultural discoveries and fun adventures presented by their classmates. I also have many ideas for other assignments, but there are only 14 weeks in the semester and one has to be realistic about the capacity of students to do these kinds of projects.

1. I used the activities suggested in the book with my own children to get them to practice writing. It turned out to be a success, whereas everything else I had tried had failed miserably. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *L’Immeuble* was soon followed by more books or projects that applied the same approach to other quasi autonomous worlds, such as a hotel, a firm, an island, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am aware that choosing Paris as the location of a semester abroad is profoundly unoriginal, but Columbia students are attracted by the idea of spending a semester in Paris, Columbia has a program in Paris, there are wonderful online materials about Paris, and Paris is the French city I know best. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I chose to have the 2 most dependable and enthusiastic groups initiate the invitation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)