Tinkering with (digital) chance events.  
Auto-ethnographical reflections of a foreign language learner and the emergence of his personal learning environment  

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Abstract  
The main goal of this paper is to contribute to reaching a better understanding about how one’s personal learning environment may emerge and develop, not as the result of a plan or design, but by means of tinkering with chance events. In order to accomplish this goal, I will mainly refer to personal reflections derived from an auto-ethnographical study. The main focus of my study was limited to seeing the emergence of my personal learning environment for learning the Estonian language. More specifically, I focused my attention on the emergence of my personal learning environment described as my own *modus operandi*.

Keywords: tinkering, personal learning environment, modus operandi, digital instrumentation, chance

1. Introduction  
The notion of personal learning environment (PLE) has emerged in the last decade or so as a promising alternative to the “one size fits all approach” peculiar to the LMS (Learning Management service) [7]. As Fiedler and Väljataga [10] reported in their review about the usage of the term, the notion of PLE seems to have shifted in recent years from a rather reductionist conception, which views PLE as yet another application of educational technology, to a broader interpretation, which looks at it as a concept with a potential heuristic value in education. According to this later view, the whole idea of the personal learning environment refers to a broad range of activities that are related to the way in which the learner constructs and organises his/her personal learning environment, which is then considered an essential part of his/her workspace[14].

In this paper I will examine the idea of personal learning environment as part of one’s workspace *in its unfolding*, that is, as an emergent phenomenon rather than an object of intentional deliberation and/or design. In this sense, I will consider one’s personal learning

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environment as one’s modus operandi. Modus operandi is translated in English as operating method. A method is usually defined by a set of explicit instructions dictating which steps to take and in which order to achieve a pre-determined goal or objective. Since a method is known beforehand, it draws a clear line between theory and practice, where the former provides instructions informing action, and the latter is the mere context of application of the method itself. I posit that a modus operandi is a method sui generis. It can be defined as the totality of one’s own ways (cf. [4]). One’s own ways comprise all those practices – either novel or not – that one comes to develop and appropriate over time, that is, as she/he goes, never before she/he goes. I use the term “practice” to denote something that we do that has some kind of identifiable unitary coherence. In the case of modus operandi theory and practice are not hierarchically organised in a sense that the former informs the latter, and never vice-versa. On the contrary, theory and practice copenetrate one another, as those emergent practices are not imposed upon the learner from the outside, but they are found and appropriated by the learner himself/herself. For they are nothing but the product of one’s own lived experience [18], that is, they are experienced for oneself.

Since a modus operandi inevitably stems from one’s own lived experience, the first step I decided to make was to start from my own experience, which is the only one that I actually own and can live through. For this, I chose autoethnography as my method of inquiry. As a method of inquiry autoethnography relies on a researcher’s accounts and stories. For my ethnographic data refers to my personal experience and sense making activity [1]. In this sense, as Atkinson and colleagues put it, auto-ethnographers themselves “form part of the representational processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling” [1]. It is worth mentioning that autoethnography usually focuses on a single case and in doing so it places attention on drawing lessons from within a case instead of across cases [3]. I purposefully use the world “lessons” and not “generalisations”, because in my view auto-ethnographical accounts serve the purpose of stimulating reflections rather than providing a type of law-like doctrine about how things should or should not be done in a given domain.

The main object of my auto-ethnographical study is the emergence of my modus operandi in the context of learning the Estonian language. My observations covered a period of eight months that coincided with the beginning of an Estonian language course, which I started attending in September 2013, and ended in May 2014. In my auto-ethnographical study I focused not so much on what I have done or achieved, but how I have come to develop and appropriate certain practices. In this sense, my main objective is not to formulate and describe best practices that every foreign language learner can use and re-use, but to report about the way in which I have come to find and use those practices of learning Estonian that are nothing but belonging to my modus operandi. In the course of my study I limited my analysis to those digital practices that were mediated in one form or another by technology. I therefore focused on what is called digital instrumentation [10]. I chose foreign language learning for two reasons. First of all, for an opportunistic reason. It was a learning experience I had the chance to be involved in. Secondly, because I had no pre-existing knowledge about foreign language learning that could somehow bias me. In this way my ignorance concerning language learning helped me deploy the kind of explorative attitude that I wanted this study
2. The emergence of my own *modus operandi*

As I mentioned above, I started my Estonian language course at the end of September 2013. The course was hosted by The Folk University of Tartu (Tartu Rahva Ülikool). The course was for beginners and covered the two basic levels (A1 and A2). It consisted of two autonomous parts, 60 contact hours each, two classes per week. No final exam at the end. The first part of the course started at the end of September and it ended shortly before the Christmas holiday. The second part started at the end of January and it ended in the second half of April. Prior to the course, I had been living in Estonia for about 23 months. During this period I had a mere passive exposure to the Estonian language and my vocabulary amounted to no more than 15 words. Although my wife is Estonian, we have communicated in English since we met. English is also the language that I use at work since I moved to Estonia from Italy in October 2011.

The Estonian language belongs to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family. And as such it has very little in common with the two other languages that I can speak, namely, English and Italian (my mother tongue). The predominant feeling that I had before I started learning Estonian was pure helplessness, as virtually all the words were totally new to me, with the exception of a few loan ones. In order to overcome this sense of frustration, around the time my course began, I started photographing billboards, advertisements, newspaper headlines, road signs; everything attracted my attention when I left home either to go to work or for a simple walk. When I started picturing ads, billboards, etc. I did not expect very much. Nor did I think that it was actually an efficient way of learning. I did not hold such a view in mind. It was a mere reaction to the feeling of being overwhelmed by all those unfamiliar words.

What brought me to this point was the result of some kind of coincidence. First, I had already developed the practice to carry my iPod Touch with me and take pictures of whatever captured my attention. Secondly, since I was using an iPod Touch, I did not have Internet access. Which meant that I could not check any of the one-line translation services such as Google Translate. Taking a picture was similar to making a note of something and to come back to it, at a later point in time.

Indeed, I did not go around taking random pictures, and yet I never developed over time any kind of *purposeful* strategy. Most of the time there was something accidental capturing my attention. In Figure 1 I collected four representative cases: the first picture (upper left corner) says “New Beginning. Come and see” (*Uus algus. Tule ja Vaata*). It was hanging in front of a church in Tartu. It was a gloomy November rainy day and the word “algus” – beginning – was some kind of encouragement to strive on. So, I took a picture of it, because I wanted to remember this word. In the second picture (upper right corner) I was in a supermarket and the woman is a sale assistant. On her back it is written “Ask. I may help” (*Küsite. Ma võin aidata!*). I knew the word “küsite” (ask) and I found it quite funny that a sales assistant had a sentence like that written on the back of her shirt. I also used to mistake “vöin” (I may) for “vöitan” (I win). So, I decided that this picture could help me
remember the difference. The third picture (bottom left corner) is an advertisement located on the way to the city centre in Tartu. It says literally “Do you have a problem? I am one big ear” (Sul on mure? Olen üks suur korv). I took this picture to remember how to say “I have” (mul on). Estonian does not have the verb “to have”. So, it is rendered as “something belongs to me” (literally it is “something is on me”). I took the fourth picture (bottom right corner) at Tallinn Airport, because I remembered the same verb – astuma (to step) – from another visual note of mine. It was from a newspaper headline published when the Estonian Prime minister resigned. In Estonian it is “Pea minister astub tagasi” – literally “the prime minister steps back” (in English we would say that the prime minister steps down).

Figure 1: Accidental encounters becoming visual note

Soon after I took my first visual notes I started using Facebook. Here again I did not really follow an exact plan. Facebook is a kind of visual diary for me and I mostly use it on my iPod Touch to share pictures. So, it became somehow natural to start sharing my visual notes on Facebook. Interestingly, it was only in retrospection that I realised that posting on Facebook was a way of selecting my visual notes. I was somehow aware of the fact that I did not really have a chance to go back to all my visual notes. That was already a familiar experience with my other pictures, most of which were (and still are) collecting (digital) dust, so to say.

The integration with Facebook did actually more than just help me avoid the sense of oblivion for my visual notes. Facebook allows the addition of some brief text accompanying a visual note, namely, a caption. Although I am not a big fan of adding captions to pictures, I thought that this could give me the option of practicing my written Estonian. I could in fact compose short sentences trying to re-use the very same words appearing in my visual notes.

In Figure 2 I pictured three leaflets left on a table at the entrance of a pub in Tallinn.
They were advertising three films by Austrian director Ulrich Seid. The three films form a trilogy dedicated to hope, faith and love (lootus, usk, armastus). This “scene” captured my attention because the line hope, faith, and love is a quote from Saint Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, which I like a lot. So, I decided to look for the famous quote in Estonian and add it as a caption to the image: Paulus on oelnud: Usk, lootus, armastus, aga suurim neist on armastus! (Paul has said: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love!). Accidentally, I had to ask my wife how to use the present perfect (Paulus on oelnud), since back then I had not learned it yet. So, on this very occasion I also had a chance to learn something new.

Another habit that I developed was to post collages composed of some of my visual notes. I already had the habit to post photo collages on Facebook after I saw a contact of mine doing that with her holiday pictures. Interestingly, it turned out that my collages now allowed me to organise my visual notes into some kind of “mini-stories”. In Figure 3 I composed a collage from three different ads that I one day stumbled upon on the way to Tartu coach station.

The first picture says: “Choose me” (vali mind!); the second: “Only the best” (ainult parimast!); and the third: “Tartu people love” (Tartlased armastavad). I then added the following caption (which does not appear in the picture) combining these three short slogans: Today’s signs: beloved Tartu people, pick me! I’m (only) the best! (Tänane märigid! Armasad Tartlaned, vali mind! Ma olen ainult parimast!). Interestingly, it is not that I already knew all the words in this sentence. For instance, I did not know the word “sign” yet (singular nominative märk, plural nominative märigid). So, while writing down the caption I had to look up the word and choose the correct form. In so doing I had at least a chance to increase my vocabulary. Indeed, this was a rather simple sentence, and yet I felt just great.

Since I started posting my visual notes on Facebook, I expected to engage my Estonian-speaking contacts. And yet that did not really happen, apart from a few cases. A colleague of mine, who knew about my experiment, did comment a couple of times. But nothing more. I also expected to engage those of my course-mates who were among my Facebook
contacts (around 8 people). However, that did not happen either. Retrospectively, this did not affect me so much.

I had, though, the opportunity to engage my teacher on quite many occasions. I exchanged some private messages with her. But mostly I used my visual notes. I tagged her every time a visual note of mine made me think or wonder about a particular expression or a grammatical rule that I could not fully understand. She always kindly and patiently answered my queries, and that indeed encouraged me to keep going.

In Figure 4 one may see one of the exchanges that I had with my teacher. In this particular case everything started from an image that I found on the calendar that we had in the kitchen, which says: “this year choose a red tractor” (ueel aastal vali punane traktor). I expected the partitive case to be used in this case (punast traktori), not the nominative
(punane traktor). So, I asked my teacher, who patiently answered my question. Interestingly, the conversation went on and I posted in my follow-up question another picture of mine to see, if I got it correctly or not. The picture in question came from the Estonian weather forecast website ilm.ee, where I had already found a similar example.

After about six months into the course, I decided to try a different social media platform. Although I kept posting my visual notes on Facebook, I started experimenting with Pinterest. As I started my experiments with Facebook, I did not think that Pinterest could be of any help for my visual notes. The reason is that I mostly used it for re-pinning others’ pictures, not mine. I did not even know how to upload a picture. However, I decided to give Pinterest a try, as I found particularly interesting the idea of having separate picture collections on one single account – the so-called boards. So I started collecting my visual notes on Pinterest in a dedicated board that I called “Eesti keel pilides” – Estonian language in picture. Although Pinterest offered me the opportunity to repost my visual notes on Facebook, I never did that, as I found it redundant to post the same thing twice. I must also say that the fact that I failed to engage my course-mates discouraged me from trying again.

![Figure 5: Adding a description](image)

Unlike Facebook, Pinterest forced me to write a description for every image that I wanted to upload. I actually did not want to write any description. But I decided to add one word for each visual note just as a reminder (see Figure 5). In Figure 5 I took a picture of a slide during a presentation that said “How to distinguish life from theatre?” (Kuidas eristada elu ja teatrit?). I was already familiar with all the words but one: eristada (to distinguish). Therefore I decided to use that one for the picture description. I did the same with the second visual note in the same figure. In this case it is written “step into the future” (Astu tulevikku). I knew already the word “tulevikku” (future), therefore I decided to add as the picture description the word “astu”, which I already found some time before (see above). The very fact that I had to add for each picture a description forced me once again to be
more selective when deciding which picture to upload and which not to.

After 10 weeks of experimentation with Pinterest, I decided to connect my Estonian language board to my research blog – www.chanceseeking.net. Originally, I wanted to do that with another board of mine. However, after a few attempts, I decided to give up. The reason was that I was not entirely satisfied by the way in which my pins were visualised on the homepage of my research blog. As most of the pictures were not taken by me, some were far too big, some were far too small. However, I did not want to give up on the idea of connecting Pinterest to my blog. Firstly, because I had paid to have a web space to experiment with similar things. Secondly, because I felt that this could be an interesting experiment to carry out. So, I decided to replace the original board with the one dedicated to Estonian language. This time the visualisation satisfied me. Even more importantly, that created a positive synergy. In fact, very soon after that I realised that I could consult my visual notes on Pinterest much more often than before, as I was used to (and still am) visiting my blog almost everyday, either to write down some note or to read some of my previous posts. My research blog is in fact a kind of notebook for me.

![Figure 6: Connecting my Pinterest board to my Research Blog](image)

I began to perceive learning a foreign language a bit like training. As one keeps training regularly, improvements are indeed visible. After the course ended (at the end of April), I started writing in Estonian (or trying to do so) more often than before. Although my visual notes were still an important part of my learning environment, writing had become more and more frequent, and quite enjoyable. I did not write for the sake of it though. I decided this time to engage my Estonian speaking colleagues directly via Facebook messaging and via email. Although I was used to writing to colleagues in English, I started adding a few sentences in Estonian commenting on the weather or what had happened to me lately. As a side note, I noticed that some of my colleagues did not respond in Estonian, as they preferred to write back in English. And yet that did not discourage me to keep on trying.

Surprisingly, another application turned out to be a good companion for my learning process: Strava. Strava is both a website and mobile application to help athletes track bike rides and runs via GPS. In the recent years it has become extremely popular among
cyclists around the world. With this application one can easily analyse his/her own rides, share, compare and comment on them with other users. And so do I. Interestingly, Strava also allows a user to write a title for his/her ride, something quite similar to a caption for a photo in Facebook. Therefore, I decided to take this as an opportunity to write a line in Estonian for some of my rides. In Figure 7a I wrote “First ride with Cinelli” (Esimene rattaring Cinelliga). This also gave me the chance to engage from time to time some of my Estonian-speaking contacts in Strava (see 7b).

Another interesting practice that I developed is watching films with Estonian subtitles on the coach that I usually take once a week on the way back from Tallinn. I usually go to Tallinn for work once a week, and very often on the trip back – which lasts approximately two hours and a half – I am not able to work anymore. So, I usually either listen to some music, watch a film of mine, or just let my mind wander over the rolling fields. Now, in these new coaches, each seat is equipped with a monitor where one can find quite a good selection of films that changes every once in a while. Once I turned on the monitor in front of my seat and to my surprise I saw that one of my favourite films – The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel – was among the ones available. I had already seen it several times. Therefore, I turned on the Estonian subtitles and started watching the movie. The experiment was a good one, as I watched the film and, at the same time, took some notes with my iPod Touch (see Figure 8). I once again took some visual notes pausing the film to take a screenshot. The monitor had a touch-screen interface, which made that quite smooth and easy. The most interesting thing was to write down not just single words, but those expressions that I could get. Already knowing some of the dialogue by heart helped me a lot. Although I did not repeat this experience as often as I hoped, I found it extremely useful.
A class in its own is represented by all those applications that are chiefly related to translation and grammar. Three main applications that unsurprisingly came to become part of my personal learning environment. First, Google translate, which I mostly used on my laptop. On my iPod Touch I used two apps: the first is called “Estonian Grammar - ŕOS 2006” (http://estonian-grammar-s-2006-29mp.appsios.net). The second app is called iTranslate and it is an on-line translation service analogous to Google translate. iTranslate requires Internet access, whereas ŕOS 2006 does not.

So far I have reported about habits that I have developed and carried on quite consistently over a relatively long stretch of time – over the last eight months or so, from September up to the end of May. And yet there are plenty of failed attempts. I will limit myself to a few of those experiments as they contribute to illustrating something about the tentative nature characterising the development of my personal learning environment.

Even after some time into the course, I noticed that it was still quite hard for me to understand spoken Estonian; although my overall comprehension had improved. However, I felt that I could do much better. I actually had a couple of textbooks with listening tasks. But I found them a bit artificial and therefore not very catchy. Once I was visiting the local market in Tartu with my wife and I came up with the idea to record the short exchanges that she had with the sellers. These short exchanges were more meaningful and could help me practice my listening skills, as they involved numbers, simple questions like “how much is this?”, basic vocabulary related to eating (egg, cheese, meat, ham, different kinds of vegetables, etc.). Although I tried to get involved in those exchanges, I could not really make it. So, I decided to try to record them. I found the idea quite illuminating, and yet this never turned into anything consistent. There were mainly practical reasons for this. First of all, I had to help my wife with storing goods in the bag. So, my hands were quite busy with things other then pressing the record button on my iPod Touch. Then, the quality of the recordings were not so good, as I did not dare to hold up my iPod touch right
in front of the sellers’ mouth as if it were a microphone. Another problem was that I often missed the start of those exchanges. Recording the whole visit to the market would have led to me wasting too much time editing the audio file.

I also thought that schemas and drawings on my laptop could be somehow helpful, and yet nothing significant happened (or has not happened yet). From when I started my Estonian language course, I paid more and more attention to the Facebook pages and Youtube channels dealing with English for foreigners. In particular, I became quite fond of those Facebook pages providing the reader with visual explanations regarding phrasal verbs, prepositions, domain-specific vocabularies, etc. (see picture). Interestingly, all this resonated with the schema that my Estonian teacher gave us illustrating the so-called locative case (the one indicating a location such as “in”, “on”, “at”, and) (see picture). This prompted me to apply something similar to my case.

I have also tried to apply some tips coming from a Youtube channel called Learning English For Free (http://www.engvid.com). The majority of those clips were indeed specific to English. So I did not really benefit much. However, I found that a bunch of clips about how to improve one’s vocabulary were not language-specific. I watched them carefully, although I never really put them into practice.

3. Lessons to draw

As I wrote in the introduction, autoethnography does not aim to make generalisations across cases. And yet one may try to draw some lesson from within a single case. Those lessons do not aspire to become principles or pieces of law-like knowledge. Conversely, they are inseparable from the story that the auto-ethnographer writes. In this sense their purpose is not to provide the reader with a demonstration. Rather, it is the reader himself/herself that determines if the story told speaks to him/her about his/her experience [9]. In this sense, the main role of these lessons is to try to engage the reader in a series of open-ended critical reflections [15] around a certain issue.

I claimed that one’s modus operandi is composed of those emergent practices one comes to find and appropriate over time. In my case, I will list six of those digital practices, which involved in one way or another the use of technology:

1. to take pictures, first, of billboards and ads in the streets, and later of leaflets, newspaper’ headlines, Estonian book titles, and other signs;
2. to share some of those pictures as visual notes in Facebook;
3. to add a caption to those visual notes with which to practice written Estonian;
4. to tag my Estonian teacher in those visual notes that brought up a linguistic problem worth discussing;
5. to collect my visual notes on Pinterest on a specific board along with a one-word description for each visual note as a memory aid;
6. to connect my blog to my Pinterest board dedicated to Estonian language to skim my visual notes.
As I have tried to show in the previous section, all these seven practices were not part of a predetermined plan before I started and that I only had to implement. Conversely, they were the product of what I refer to as “tinkering with (digital) chance events” [2, 17], whose meaning will become hopefully clearer in this section.

If we look at the first two emergent practices listed above, they have an important connection with two previous habits/practices of mine. Firstly, I was already used to carrying around my iPod Touch and taking pictures of everything that was going on in my immediate surroundings. Secondly, I was already using Facebook as a kind of visual diary, posting almost on a daily basis pictures related to my life in Estonia. These two previous habits/practices of mine cannot be accounted for as the direct cause of the emergence of the new ones. They were in fact co-opted (cf. [12]) and so re-used for a new and unanticipated purpose, namely, practicing Estonian language. Interestingly, the co-optation of these two specific habits of mine cannot be viewed as the product of an intended plan or purposeful decision that informed the whole process beforehand. Conversely, their co-optation was somehow ignited by mere accidental circumstances or, as I prefer to call them, by chance events. That is, the very fact that I noticed some advertisements/billboards that by chance attracted my attention. In other words, some particular habit of mine resonated with a chance event, and a new option became then available as a kind of unpredicted side-effect. I want to stress here the chance element involved in this co-option, because it was these two very habits of mine that were actually re-used and not others. In a way the chance event worked like a trigger that activated the inherent potential to the particular situation I was in [13]. That is, the chance event made this inherent potential visible and thus exploitable.

All other practices that I listed above may be viewed in a similar vein. Interestingly, when a new practice emerged, it later became a basis for exploiting other latent potentials that subsequently appeared on my way. For instance, the option of adding a caption to my visual notes appeared as an unintended consequence of starting to use Facebook. In fact I did not see that option before I actually started using Facebook. Conversely, I literally bumped into it in due course. It was again an inherent potential of the situation I happened to be in that was activated.

As I mentioned, during my learning experience I never tried to force things into being by following a pre-determined plan. I remained very much open to whatever could come in handy [16]. This resulted in a specific attitude according to which I took the various options that I stumbled upon over time more like a springboard for exploring further opportunities for action. Those digital practices, provisional as they may be, served “as the motors driving human agency” [11, p. 768]. In other words, since I never really tried to force a certain plan to happen, I acted following the old saying “one thing leads to another”. For example, as soon as I started collecting my visual notes on Pinterest, I was just open to see what I could actually end up with. I did not expect anything in particular to happen. For I never tried to make it happen. I wrote already what happened afterwards: as I connected my Estonian language board on Pinterest to my blog I realised that I could now have the option to skim my visual notes more often than I could have done without it. Once again, this option became available as I started tentatively exploring the inherent potentials of a situation, not before.
This particular attitude of using options as a springboard rather than looking at them as definite solutions made me particularly sensitive to, and focused on, what Chia and Holt called “immediate concerns” [5]. I never really tried to reach some kind of bird’s eye view from where I could predetermine what to do next. Conversely, I very much tried to make the best out of each situation just like a tinkerer would do [16]. As the old saying goes, *when life gives you lemon, make lemonade* (or limoncello). This is particularly evident in the example related to my blog. As I described above, the decision to connect my Pinterest board dedicated to Estonian language to my research blog was not planned. It was my dissatisfaction with the way in which another board of mine was displayed on my blog that led me to see this other new and potentially useful option. That is, I promptly reacted to an apparently irrelevant on-going activity that did not promise too much, but that nonetheless turned out to be an opportunity to think of how to further exploit my visual notes. If I had not adopted this more tentative open attitude to whatever could come in handy, probably I would not have been able to turn a failure into a new option.

The importance of immediate concerns and the role that they played leads me to the last element that I would like to mention here, which is related to the phronetical dimension that characterised the emergence of my modus operandi [8, 6]. By phronetical I mean that the emergence of my modus operandi reflected and disclosed my individuality, identity, values and aspirations [8]. That is, I never stepped outside the process and played the role of a detached executor, who merely implements and execute the plan. Conversely, I stepped into the process along with my aspirations as well as idiosyncrasies and proclivities so that the kind of modus operandi that eventually emerged cannot be entirely separated from the particular historical person and learner that I am. It is therefore personal in a sense that “it characterises and expresses the kind of person that one is” [8, p. 244]. For instance, as I mentioned before, the habit of taking pictures with my iPod Touch, which turned out to be quite important in the emergence of my modus operandi, was rooted in a quite personal experience, which reflected very much the way in which I was trying to adapt in another country – Estonia. I was used to taking pictures, but that was not the kind of thing one does, because he/she thinks that it could be somehow useful. That represented my way of dwelling in a foreign country and trying to make sense of the big change that my life was going through.

4. Conclusions

As I already wrote, an auto-ethnographical study does not aim to create a type of law-like knowledge, as it inevitably falls short when it comes to making reliable generalisations. And yet the experience that one lives through may provide the basis for elaborating some consideration that aspires to become, say, food for thought.

The main objective of my study was to focus on the way in which my modus operandi as a foreign language learner could develop. For I paid attention to documenting the way in which my digital practices emerged over time, and became part of a larger and thus more structured whole. In conducting this kind of study, I therefore tried not to force anything
into being. Conversely, I tried to see what I could end up with when no deliberate plan is forced.

From my experience I may derive four main conclusions, which describe better than any definition the idea of tinkering with (digital) chance events. First of all, when one gives up on the idea of following a predetermined path, and thus entrusting himself/herself to the creation of a new one, previous habits do not dissolve into thin air, but they may be re-purposed. And the major source of re-purposing pre-existing habits is co-optation. Co-optation, though, is not a process that can be entirely intended. But, as I tried to show, it benefits from chance events – events beyond our control that literally befall us. So, trying to avoid unexpected events with obsessive planning may turn out to be counterproductive, as it impairs this co-optation from happening. Secondly, one may build on chance events by co-opting previous habits. And yet that is entirely, say, conjectural. Which means that once an option for action comes into view, it should be taken more like a springboard for further action rather than a definitive solution. The kind of principle that seems to be effective is: one thing always leads to another. Thirdly, the absence of a plan and the consequent activity of tinkering with chance events makes one be particular attentive to whatever comes in handy. This implies in practice a focus on immediate concerns rather than to find and make use of a bird’s eye view, which concentrates more on general aspects. Fourthly, the creation of one’s own path is inevitably bounded to one’s personal experiences and personality. In this sense, as I wrote above, the emergence of one’s modus operandi is phronetical. Which means that it is not a way of doing things that cannot be effectively separated from one’s values, aspirations, and even proclivities, idiosyncrasies, oddities, which will eventually affect for better or worse one’s learning experience as well as results.

More in general, I may claim that this study of mine may offer food for thought to take a different perspective on technology in education, a perspective, which views learners more as tinkerers than designers of their learning experience. That is, what my case seems to point to is that one’s personal learning environment, which I viewed as one’s modus operandi, might be fruitfully considered more as a space for tinkering with (digital) chance events and, in so doing, being engaged in open-ended explorations of potentially novel digital practices.

References


