

## **Summary of Session 1: Staff Development and Learner Training**

*Chair: Anne Räsänen*

### **John Pettit and Marina Mozzon-McPherson: "Virtual spaces: preparing for real learning"**

John Pettit outlined the most salient features of an online community, using the example of a postgraduate course, which he chairs at the Open University in the UK. The course is an MA in learning online, which is aimed at professionals involved in education and training. The management of the course entails the creation of an online community where the learners work together over 32 weeks while never meeting up face-to-face, but communicating using the computer. The students write themselves into the course by discussing relevant issues with each other online. This discussion is facilitated by the teacher who has the task of encouraging the discussion to begin and must intervene and respond adequately and to an appropriate extent. The tutor needs to ensure that an atmosphere of trust is created, so that the course participants can feel confident in posting messages and responding to the online discussion. The tutor's responses enable learners' messages to be woven together and incorporated in commentary which can both refer to relevant published material and make specific reference to individual messages left by learners. The tutor's skill in knowing how to offer input is an important element of the course, as is the ability to help learners to build up their confidence in the requisite skills needed by them. While learners may feel secure in participating in chatrooms they may feel challenged by having to critique a paper presented to them. The latter is an example of an old skill which may be lacking – often the skills necessary for successful participation in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) are old ones rather than new ones.

Some of the skills, old and new, required of learners are:

- Keyboarding and other ICT skills
- Groupwork in an online conference
- Searching on the Web and evaluating results
- Reading & commenting
- Writing a 'public' critique
- Range of learning styles

On the other hand, the following are skills needed by teachers using VLE's:

- Keyboarding and other ICT skills
- Facilitating/teaching groupwork in an online conference
- Facilitating/teaching searching on the Web and evaluating results
- Facilitating/teaching reading & commenting
- Facilitating/teaching writing a 'public' critique
- Facilitating/teaching in a range of learning styles
- Time! Using template text; sharing online activities with other teachers; FAQs; managing expectations about email; student self-help
- Thinking through how to integrate ftf and virtual (e.g., the five ways to introduce a topic)

- Presentational skills in VLEs; asset management
- Resisting unrealistic pressures: teachers
- Avoiding unrealistic expectations: managers

Many learners will already have well-developed ICT skills, while they may need to develop their skill in critical evaluation.

The main challenges faced by teachers will often be lack of time, and it will be important for teachers to make explicit what expectations are realistic for learners and which ones are not.

Finally, there will always be the need to assess realistically the degree to which the VLE should be used for a particular course and to achieve the appropriate balance between online and face-to-face work in any particular situation. It may take a long time for students to become confident in the use of ICT and to engage with this approach.

Marina Mozzon-McPherson outline the issues raised by the development of online communities of learners in the context of a postgraduate programme for language teachers called the "Postgraduate Certificate in Advising for Language Learning", organised at the Language Institute of the University of Hull. This course is delivered entirely by distance learning, using 'Merlin', the university's own electronic learning environment. The course consists of three modules, as follows:

1. Language Learning
2. Management of open learning for languages
3. Advising for language learning

The programme aims to develop new professional skills needed to perform an effective role regarding language learning support and promoting learner autonomy. Staff involved in this programme aim to generate a sense of community among the participants, who would all be language professionals. Thought and effort are therefore put into the management of the complete set of relations between the participants, the learning activity and the wider world. Participants need to develop a sense of ownership of the content of the course. Many societal functions of language become operational during the course, with much interaction taking place between the students themselves online. After a number of weeks, the students themselves take over the business of moderating and summarising discussions between participants, with the development of skills in relation to norms of online participation, including managing entries and exits in conversation and citing and referring to earlier interventions. Newcomers to the system are frequently helped and advised by more experienced users.

### Discussion

In discussion, the following issues were raised:

- The importance of time management, especially in relation to the time devoted by tutors to reading and correcting the work of students. Thought needs to be put into establishing patterns of response and pacing of corrections.
- Evaluation of students is an important area for consideration. On the one hand, students (along with the tutor) form a supportive community; on the other hand,

the tutor has the task of assessing students work including, possibly, their participation online.

- It can take a long time for students to become confident in the use of these approaches, although, when they do become confident, they often engage very enthusiastically with them.
- The formation of communities of users needs to be managed, in order to achieve an appropriate balance of gender and of native and non-native speakers of the language of communication. This reflects the need for the tutor to develop sociological skills, as opposed to linguistic skills.
- In reality, many of the skills needed in order to manage virtual environments are the old skills required of teachers, including the ability to manage groups, ensure participation by all concerned, etc. Many of the skills developed are transferable skills to do with the ability to work in groups, including by online means.