Report of Workshop 4: Distance Education and

e-Learning

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Introduction

Anne Stevens introduced the Workshop giving a brief summary of the main findings of the research from the group and leading into the five discussion questions.

Background and context

Task Group 3 set out to establish the extent to which distance teaching and e-learning are being used to provide additional language learning and teaching opportunities, particularly in less widely used and taught languages.

The format of the workshop was informed by the results of the survey undertaken by the Task Group 3. The participants mainly comprised representatives who had not taken part in the survey. They were interested in developing wider provision for language teaching and learning. The 32 workshop participants were drawn from 15 different countries who represented a range of educational cultures working within different professional settings.

The discussions underlined key themes that had been identified in the report and these emphasised the importance of specific circumstances influencing development and change.

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1. To what extent can we expect ODL and e-learning to extend and enhance the availability and delivery of languages ?

Discussion questions:
1. What are the challenges to using these delivery modes?
2. What is the typical profile of e-learning across all disciplines in a typical institution?
3. What can we learn from this context?

There was a broad consensus that e-learning can and does already contribute to the expansion of provision. It is a means of:

1. retaining languages on programmes
   - can be applied to manage heterogeneous languages / learner groups
2. extending the range of languages offered
3. reaching more learners as it is
   - motivating
   - creates personalised learning spaces
4. improving the quality of teaching and learning

In practice, activity levels are lower than might be expected. The reasons are seen as the lack of implementation, management and financial structures such as:
- a shortage of digital learning materials for many languages where markets are un-commercial
- a lack of commitment to initial investment in infrastructure to drive forward implementation
- a lack of staff development creating a climate of uncertainty even among professionals as to the value and in the longer term the place of new delivery modes

Issues

Concern was expressed in relation to the position / value of foreign-language teaching and learning overall within the current academic context:

1. The quality of language learning in higher education is often at risk and teachers perceive themselves as having low value in the overall plans of the institution, viz:
   ➢ the trend towards outsourcing that is increasingly in place
   ➢ languages are often omitted from the scope of auditing systems that evaluate the quality of academic education

2. The introduction of new delivery modes, teaching and ICT applications is often seen as exacerbating the situation being perceived as a tool via which overall provision might be reduced resulting in and further risks to teaching staff

3. Any policy to include more e-learning must:
   ➢ incorporate career and professional development for teachers
   ➢ demonstrate the benefits in terms of a wider curriculum in language teaching rather than.

It was agreed that a co-operative and self-supporting structures would assist in improving the potential for implementing new programmes of study. A strong need for more inter-institutional co-operation was expressed.

Specific Action Areas:

Among structures that need to be in place as a pre-cursor to successful development, the following were agreed as essential:
   ➢ Toolkits to allow learners to develop sense / awareness of their own needs – via diagnostics, self-assessment and self-evaluation
   ➢ Examples / approaches to the delivery of personal learning programmes
   ➢ Means of overcoming the current sense of isolated experience in some institutions

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2. At an institutional level, what developments are in progress that can/could support progress in e-learning to deliver modern foreign language programmes?

Discussion questions:
   1. What is meant by e-learning and ODL?
   2. Are institutional policies and practices aligned?
   3. Are institutional funds available for development?
   4. Are staff development programmes in place?

E-learning is applied and used to a variety of situations, most commonly to deliver content across multi-site centres. Participants offered examples of institutions with a policy. The aim of any policy has to be to encourage staff to bring in new practices and support them in this process. On the basis of experience, the following observations were made:
   ➢ The introduction of e-learning requires the construction of a new teaching culture.
   ➢ The basis of implementation is more likely to comprise a mix of delivery modes, the pedagogical strategy should define the use of ODL, e-learning in the blend related to each institution.

Issues

1. Upfront investment and management costs must be confronted.
2. The need for a digital environment for managing the development of content and for ensuring the quality of materials are vital to the underpinning of any policy
3. Teacher training and development
4. Need for both top down and bottom up activities

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3. What does it take to expand the range and delivery of languages offered via ODL and e-learning?

Discussion questions:
   1. Can current experience be exploited and built upon?
   2. Is access to free/ open content available?
   3. Would this make a difference?

The discussion revealed a number of didactic concerns regarding the development, training and quality associated with autonomy of learning:
- ➢ how can teachers help learners to identify, access and use available resources?
- ➢ how can learners be supported in "learning how to learn" and reaching the required degree of autonomy?
- ➢ how can basis of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages be promulgated?

The Framework and the European Language Portfolio have gained wide acceptance as they provide the common standards and respect cultural diversity. This approach would allow e-learning to evolve in a similar context.

Issues
1. There was a broad consensus among participants that more information and better funding are required:
2. Foreign-language practitioners report that they are insufficiently informed about available resources and how to use them.
3. The price of resources is considered prohibitive by many.
4. The wider availability of "study guides" developed in some institutions was cited as a model of good practice.

Specific Action Areas:
The following actions were proposed:
1. A website listing available resources.
2. More sharing of materials.

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4. How can institutional co-operation at regional / national and European levels contribute to expanding the use of ODL and e-learning?

Discussion questions:
1. Are there models of provision available to share?
2. Can content across different languages be made available?
3. How can issues related to
    a) personalised learning programmes and
    b) critical numbers in terms of students be reconciled and addressed?

Issues
1. A number of participants referred to support from regional funding for content development and the acquisition of hardware. This had assisted in supporting developments.
2. It was noted that the expertise acquired in the field of distance learning in the pre-ICT era are relevant and applicable.
3. One should also take into account that many learners do not have access to the internet or lack the computer skills required to benefit from available resources.

Specific Action Areas:
1. Creating greater transferability of resources, skills and applications: co-operation is regarded as fundamental. Much of the available expertise is institution-specific and not suitable for sharing.
2. Adaptation from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was suggested as a solution to this problem.
3. Quality control - the importance of the quality of partnerships and of quality control was emphasised.

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5. How can the proposed HELP network persuade institutions to support and encourage developments?

Discussion questions:
1. What are the key elements in the business case to be made to institutions?
2. What are the added value factors in pedagogic terms for institutions at a national and international level?

There is a recognised ambition among Higher Education institutions to seek a profile in the field. Participants with experience underlined the importance of defining a policy with regard to:
1. Language learning, e-learning and the application of both
2. The commitment including the costs of implementation of such policies should be carefully planned and resources clearly allocated.

There is currently little existing replicable good practice. Experience is not yet well grounded and in the main developed to meet specific institutional needs. However it was felt that the sharing of any practice would be of benefit with the ultimate aim of the dissemination of models of good practice.

Issues:
1. The level and depth of available experience is limited and may be even lower than reported when taken across all institutions.
2. Despite the lack of practice two thirds of institutions do have targets for growth. The significance of this is that the role of ODL should be formalised and its value recognised. It is however, a top down policy.
3. Staff are aware of plans but may not be confident in implementing them without training.
4. The testing site *Dialang*, on which a great many institutions depend, has become unstable.

Specific Action Areas
1. The construction of an interactive website has been proposed, where language professionals can share their own experiences with their colleagues.
2. The model of identifying 'centres of excellence' with particularly defined specialisms was seen as the likely most effective route forwards.

Conclusions and recommendations
For the potential of e-learning to be fully exploited, the following action areas were agreed:

I. Conditions for sharing materials and experience
There is a need for more co-operation among institutions and among individuals.
Recommendations
1. Bring together the advantages to language learning of online and ODL. They address a number of key issues including: learner retention, motivation to continue study, delivery costs and a number of important recognised didactic barriers in language acquisition.
2. Outline need / value of staff development programmes. Issues related to the training of staff working in the new teaching environments are not consistent. Comments confirm that provision is not seen as a priority.
3. Define the advantages and cite results of current practices and successes from experienced partners currently working alongside smaller traditional institutions

II. Realistic and holistic planning from institutions beyond policy statements
Educational institutions need to work out explicit strategies with regard to language learning, e-learning and the combination of both. They have to see to it that these strategies are effectively implemented and provide the necessary resources to achieve the desirable goals.
Recommendations
1. Create mentoring institutions to foster developments among less specialised centres
2. Staff to staff exchanges – virtual and real
3. Build models of implementation based on wide range of contexts.

III. Teacher development and training
More and better language-learning tools are required, especially for less widely taught languages. These tools have to be adapted to the learners' needs and learning styles, and be easily available. Adequate funding has to be provided for the creation of these tools.

Teachers need to be trained in the implementation of e-learning and have easy access to information about available resources. They are willing to make self-made resources available to the community.
Recommendations
1. The HELP network could provide some guidelines, user feedback and recommended sites that could be used to advantage.
2. Activate programmes to bring about shared expertise. Funding limitations create a need for collaboration and building content from recognisably modest resources.
3. Audit and exemplify free downloadable material, open content initiatives and materials available for collaborative working.

4. Language training, directed at vocational and professional needs which are seen as potentially important, should be investigated and levels of required specificity defined.
5. Overall, market size and the extent of commonly identified needs are determining factors in selecting development areas.

IV. Training the learners
Learners require proper guidance in transferring the main focus of their learning to self-study and autonomy as is required in ODL and e-learning solutions. This includes both processes and skills.
<u>Recommendations</u>
1. Raise the profile of training and to alert institutions to the risks of non- participation in such programmes. Without training and development of teachers delivery will be less effective.

Conclusion
The workshop revealed that e-learning can play a major role in achieving the ENLU objectives: more languages learned effectively by more learners, as the need arises. These can be propagated via the proposed HELP network.

AS 30/04/06