

Learning online

Technological and pedagogic approaches to start reducing gaps.

Lessons learned from a online course for professionals working in international cooperation.

Overview

This course has been given entirely online twice from Cuba in 2001 and 2002. It enrolled during seven weeks 16 and 14 participants in ten other countries of Latin America and Europe. The subject of the course, *The role of the Northern NGOs in international cooperation*, aimed to stimulate knowledge sharing among professionals engaged in international cooperation, and to offer a hands-on experience with Internet tools. In the design of the course, we made an attempt at both the technological and the pedagogic levels to develop and implement a model which would be accessible to participants from the South as well as from the North. www.edinter.net

A new paradigm for distance learning

As has been practised until recently, distance learning has been stressing above all the sophisticated elaboration of contents in various supports, contributing to the generalization of a teaching process close to the mode of the magisterial class, where the student passively receives the good narratives and images of the teacher. However the new technologies of communication through the computer offer today for distance learning an array of modalities which allow for the design of courses in which interchange among the participants becomes the centre of the pedagogic activity. In this participative pedagogic model, the widespreading of distance learning is not obtained through the widening of the audience of a dispenser of contents, but through the multiplication of learning communities with very diverse interests.

Possibilities afforded by online training

Distance training making use of some of the new information and communication technologies may show the following characteristics : it will be interactive ; it will not have to rely on specific materials (a mere computer with internet access will be sufficient) : it will not be dependent upon time or geographical location ; it will allow for permanent updating ; it will be selfsufficient ; it will be less discriminatory (sex, race, age, language, disabilities are less visible online) ; it will be efficient costwise ; and it will allow for a permanent and flexible learning process.

The methodology developed in the course

For each of the seven weekly sessions of the course a major reading assignment was provided, various documents were made available and two or three concrete activities were proposed. Two or three discussion forums were also organized for every session. At the end of the course, the working space could give to an outside observer an impression of chaos with 500 messages an accumulation of elements everywhere, but this was the result of the process of progressive introduction of those elements.

Technological aspects

The technical limitations in the countries of the South are related to the computer equipment which is often out of date and to the communications (phone lines and internet) which are slow and costly.

Suggested approaches:

1/ Give up using any client software, which means that the software should be installed within the computer of the participant, and make use of programmes that can be operated with a simple browser in its old versions.

2/ Give up using videos and complex animations. Many people can produce an interesting text, whereas to produce a video or an animation necessitates specific tools and professional capacities and almost always the input of a team. If we want to maintain the communication (that means at least two broadcasters), both teachers and students must rely on what they all already know how to do, that is to say write, possibly drawing. The support will thus interfere in the least possible way in the act of learning and allow for main-

taining the person at the centre of the pedagogic act.

3/ Give preference to the asynchronous communication which reduces the costs of communication and allows for everyone to connect himself when it best suits him.

Pedagogic aspects

Starting from the initial input, knowledge is acquired on the basis of the experience of the participants, through confrontation and discussion among themselves. The facilitator does not play the part of a leader. Asynchronous communication affords for contributions of a higher quality than does a face-to-face situation. The written word and the format of the forums compel concentration in the thinking, the time available to respond or to make a contribution is flexible, and this fosters an enhanced quality of input. There is no need to wait for one's turn to intervene. A language is developed half-way between the formality of the written word and the informality of the spoken word. The personality and the interests of everyone come rapidly to light. Initial moments of perplexity or enthusiasm are followed by spells of despondency in the face of the magnitude of what one would wish to do or learn. There are also moments of intense emotions.

Suggested approaches :

1/ Visualize at the time of selecting the participants the possible exchanges of experience. Balance sex, origin, education and experience when finalizing the inscriptions. Limit participation to at most 20 persons.

2/ Develop an approach and a climate which will allow for a maximum of interchange and sharing of knowledge.

3/ Conceive the role of teacher as that of facilitator of a process and not as the main source of knowledge.

4/ Introduce gradually the complexity of the electronic tools of the course.

5/ Give preference to assembling and emulating small scale communities sharing common interests rather than enlarging the audience of a specialized conveyer of knowledge.

Main difficulties for the participants

The main difficulties which the participants encounter are related to a clear and convenient handling of the technology, to the selection of all the available information, and to the individual organizing of their study time. The marvellous « you can do it where and when it suits you » generally results in serious difficulties in accommodating within the hours of work or leisure the necessary space for the course.

Required time and budget

If we proceed from the idea that this methodology is applicable, in order to select teachers among persons possessing a vast professional experience and some teaching practice, it is important to have a correct appreciation of the time that will be required from the facilitator. A basic training of ten days should be sufficient for a person who does not wish to specialize in online teaching. Adapting the contents of a face-to-face course already in existence took 20 days. Part of this work can be outsourced to specialized staff. For the second course, with the experience of the first one which naturally took considerably more time, the management (promotion, selection of participants, collection of the fees) took 25 hours. Preparing, adapting and updating material and tools took about 20 hours. Each week of the seven sessions of the course required an attention of some ten hours spread over all days of the week including Sunday, to a total of 80 hours including the review of final tasks and evaluation.

We invested 5,000 US\$ in design and translation services, acquisition of software and contracting of servers, working exclusively with the hardware already available (Pentium II of 300hz, 128 RAM with modem). Once made the initial investment, and having the basic hardware, the budget of a course requiring about 60 hours of work per participant should include the following elements : the contracting of the servers, 80 hours of internet connexion, 20 hours of managerial work, 5 hours of server maintenance, 100 hours of teaching work. In the present instance, the initial financing has been actually recovered through the two first courses (inscription fee of 200 US\$ per participant).

Five fake myths about online education

- Online education will allow for savings on teaching staff
- Online education vanishes personal relations
- Online education isolates individual actors
- Online education is a matter for technology specialists or freaks
- Reading and writing will loose importance with the digital technologies

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