

Support Structures for the Development of Quality Distance Courses over the Internet

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the interest, for an institution willing to develop quality distance courses over the Internet, to set up a global support structure. It presents the case of the LabSET and the objectives of this structure, mentions the qualitative improvements brought by the distance courses, then illustrates the notion of quality by two examples from on-line courses. It details the kind of support provided by the LabSET to internal staff members and external partners and lists some of the LabSET quality criteria for the management of the process of turning a traditional course into an active distance course.

Introduction

The University of Liège (Ulg, Belgium) has adopted an integrated distributed learning environment for the preparation and delivery of courses and activities via the Internet. The WebCT platform is being used by undergraduate and graduate students from 5 different faculties (8 in 2001). Courses involve groups of 10 to 300 students. As in many universities, this deployment of a Virtual Campus at the University of Liège has been organised by a support structure, the LabSET (Supporting Lab for Electronic Training/Learning).

Objectives and activity of the LabSET (support structure)

The LabSET, a small team of 8 persons (researchers, graphist and web technicians), aims at the following objectives :

1. Design and implement distance courses and activities ;
2. Help Faculty members and private organisations to design their own distance courses and activities ;
3. Run and maintain the ULg WebCT server (its accesses, its statistics of use) ;
4. Advice ULg on decisions to be made to facilitate the deployment of ODL ;
5. Keep in touch with world-wide pedagogical literature and field experiences to «feed» practice ;
6. Create new pedagogical solutions giving added value to open and distance learning.

The LabSET is currently involved in more than 20 projects comprising the transformation of about 13 face-to-face courses into ODL (equivalent of min. 300 "course hours"). The team works both at university and non-university levels, with public and private partners (banks, universities, training institutes, educational bodies, hard and software Cies, federations of companies/enterprises).

Qualitative improvement of the courses

As a University Lab and due to our close links with the Faculty of Education, the LabSET stresses the student's activity and encourages Web courses developments only if they are linked with a qualitative improvement in the teaching and learning process.

Examples of this focus on the learners' activities can be outlined in several ongoing courses. The forums and a section usually named "activity section" illustrate the kind of tasks we ask our students to perform : tasks that are complex, close to reality, directly related to the professional situation they will face in their near future. Consequently, methods include case studies asking for problem solving, peer assessment and role playing, use of electronic (but user friendly) learning tools, activities sometimes designed for self learning. This set of varied pedagogical situations aims at developing highly transferable skills more and more clamoured for by the employers.

On-line examples in the Faculty of Educational Sciences show those variety and quality in the activities proposed to the students :

- in the ESA course (Edometrics and School Assessment), 28 students played alternatively tutor and student roles (peer assessment), working on case studies fully at a distance ;
- in the AVL course (Audio-Visual and Learning), 12 students performed various activities, partially at a distance :
 - simulated professional situations (on the Web site, requesting decisions and actions) ;
 - "Dialecti-Cases" (arguing with theoretical arguments on practical issues in discussion forums) ;
 - "Reciprocal Multimedia Activities" : creating a challenging situation (such as distinguishing between a real and a forged multimedia commercial designed on purpose by a peer) and answering a peer's challenge ;
 - "Reading-Question-Answers-Tests" replacing the traditional lectures.

Courses from other faculties are under development and will demonstrate the same focus on the activity of the students.

Support to staff members and external partners

The support provided by the LabSET comprises following up documents, check lists, a web site (<http://www.ulg.ac.be/labset>) and, the most important, a real individual guidance of the staff members willing to use the Internet for courses delivery. This support not only pushes forward the educational community, accentuate the spreading of innovation, but above all increases the quality level of the resulting distance course. It notably improves the coherence and the pedagogical quality of the course, with more real activity of the learner and with meaningful settings allowing complex mental processes to take place at a distance.

On top of this support, a set of quality criteria helps the LabSET partners clarify their vision of what a "good" distance course should look like. Some "examples of good practice" guide the staff members in their approach to distance learning, since we noticed that poor distance courses usually result from a lack of awareness more than from a lack of competence in the staff.

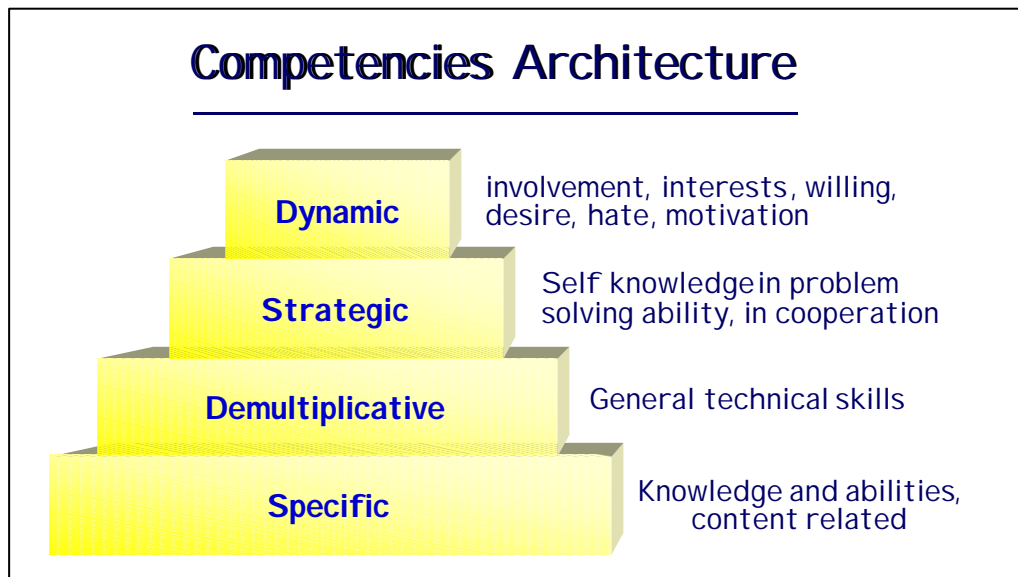
Quality Criteria

The quality criteria concern the Project definition, the course development Process and its results (the Product, namely the course in itself). We summarise hereafter the main (PPP) criteria used in the discussions with the staff members and serving the monitoring of the projects.

1. Quality criteria concerning the *project* definition :
Degree of adequacy of chosen contents and methods to the needs analysis performed by the different partners of the project (professor/LabSET/institution/sponsors).

2. Quality criteria concerning the development *process* :
 - Partnership : frequent exchanges between partners and mutual implication ;
 - Time share between tasks : respect of the initial share of the LabSET support time, devoting
 - about 70% to the pedagogical design, staff training, technical development and transversal problem solving ;
 - about 15% to the follow up of a first experimentation of the course (direct help to the staff in charge) ;
 - about 10% to the evaluation of the new course setting ;
 - about 5% to the writing of synthesis and regulation of the project.
 - Respect of the work phases ;
 - Written justification of every pedagogical choice, assessment of feasibility degree, type of response provided to any problem in a given time.

3. Quality criteria concerning the *products* :
The major criteria concerning the products is the pedagogical added-value compared to the former course in terms of
 - Objectives to reach : not only specific objectives, but also demultiplicative, strategic and dynamic ones.



Tab. 1 : Competencies Architecture (LECLERCQ, 1998, p. 87)

- Strategies to reach the objectives (we advice, per type of objectives, on some pedagogical strategies that are particularly well suited and convenient at a distance) :

- To develop the specific competencies : structured and well organised notes, with conceptual helps (hypertext links, glossaries,...), numerous good quality audiovisual supports, possibility of deepening a given theme, activities that make sense and could be transferred to real situations, management of others' learning,...
- To develop the demultiplicative competencies : use of the resources of the integrated learning environment (platform) with its forums, chat, e-mail, tests and other learning sections.
- To develop the strategic competencies : complex situated learning, case analysis, information searching in different sources (bibliography, webliography, course books, lexicons,...), information sharing amongst learners' groups, autonomous decision making processes (of subjects to be treated, groups to form, ...), self training management,...
- To develop the dynamic competencies : motivating learning situations, formative evaluation, wide opening on other learning contents, dialog with the tutors and the other students, graphical quality (aesthetic) of the learning environment.
- Obtained results (report on the satisfaction of students, staff and sponsors, some measures at the four levels of competencies and the perceived added-value of the distance course compared to the former course).

Conclusions

To develop quality distance courses over the Internet, an institution should set up a support structure that provides guidance and support to every staff member willing to organise distance activities. That support structure insures an equal (high - to be defined) quality of all the productions, develops common tools and focuses the dialog inside and outside the institution. The LabSET plays that role for the University of Liège which ends up with highly interactive courses, bringing a real added-value to the course development and transforming the common image of what an Internet course looks like... as well as what its impact can be !

References

LECLERCQ, D., (1998), *Pour une Pédagogie Universitaire de Qualité*, Sprimont, Mardaga.

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