LEARNER SUPPORT IN THE FORMASUP DEGREE: VARIETY AS A KEY FEATURE AND CLOSE COACHING TO DRIVE INNOVATION

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Introduction

In September 2002, the University of Liège launched a postgraduate degree (called FORM@SUP) in Higher Education Staff Development[1]. This FORMASUP degree (Poumay, 2003a) is coordinated by LabSET, support Lab for Telematic Learning, a research unit of the University. The degree aims at helping enrolled colleagues develop their projects in one of the two following areas: PBL (Problem Based Learning) or ODL (Open and Distance Learning). The orientation dedicated to ODL design, production and delivery leads to the production of quality courses in local languages over the Internet, through a TECCC approach[2]. This degree also acts as an incentive (due to formal accreditation) as well as recognition for the involvement of the faculty members and external trainers in the continuing improvement of their courses. "There is no doubt that the quality of their pedagogy is today of paramount importance for the universities" (Leclercq, 1998).

This paper will first present the FORMASUP curriculum, then will focus on the learner support in this program and its impact, before discussing future possibilities.

The FORMASUP curriculum

To be selected in FORMASUP, candidates have to submit a written application (mainly the description of the project, but also needs analysis, candidate's time available, constituted team, institutional support,…). After a first selection, they are invited to an interview.

In 2002, 11 ODL projects had been selected. 14 new ones have been selected in 2003. Those projects cover a wide content diversity, each course concerning a different domain. The professors involved come from different higher education institutions (including the university of Liège) and different countries (Belgium, France, UK and Lithuania).

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[1] This degree is organised by the LabSET under the responsibility of Dieudonné Leclercq and Marianne Poumay, creators of this curriculum coordinated by Chantal Dupont. For the "Themes" activity, tutors are (alphabetical order) François Georges, Anne Hougardy, Lydwine Lafontaine, Laurent Leduc, Thérèse Reggers and Dominique Verpoorten, helped by Marie-France Brundseaux, Catherine Delfosse, Cécile Dessart, Chantal Dupont, Béatrice Lecomte, Robert Peeters and Ingrid Verpoorten for the individual project coaching.

2 Training Embedded Coached Course Construction, as detailed in Poumay 2003c

60 ECTS are subdivided into 18 for the common core courses, 18 for oriented courses (ODL/PBL), 18 for the development of the personnel project (the participants' own course) and 6 dedicated to external valorisations (readings, participations to conferences, round tables, contacts, visits, poster discussions, etc), as often proposed in adult learning. The whole curriculum (60 ECTS) requests a one year involvement of the faculty member.

Activities are organised, in which the professors themselves (target public of FORMASUP) are exposed to a variety of teaching and learning approaches: they create, explore, practice, experiment, imitate, receive and debate and meta-learn. Those 8 *events of learning* (Leclercq, 2003) can be seen as responding to Gagne & Briggs' (1974) *events of instruction*. This variety of learning approaches is qualitatively important for the program (Poumay, 2003b). It follows the "practice what we preach" principle, where the teaching/coaching staff really tries to diversify the learners representations of what could be.

Courses are organised partly at a distance. The WebCT platform facilities are exploited to make the professors familiar with (a) the usual communication tools (e-mail, bulletin board, calendar, portfolios, group spaces), (b) road maps and a detailed planning of the distance and face-to-face activities, (c) precise descriptions of the objectives and sequence of each activity, (d) multiple links to deepen pedagogical and technical resources, (e) practical grids and tools corresponding to the ODL design steps, (f) slides and videos presenting some theoretical points, testimonies and "best practice" examples, (g) formative tests allowing for feed-back loops and regulation of the course, etc.

Videoconference is also used, to have international partners participate as invited experts to some debates and case analyses or, most of the time, simply to allow for communication between our French and English speaking groups of participants. As our 6 Lithuanian participants will not be able to come to Belgium to share with their colleagues, the whole curriculum has to be organised at a distance.

The central role of learner support

Following Charlier & Perraya (2000), we define learner support as « all the functions, roles and tasks aiming at guiding, helping and supporting the learners engaged in a training system partly or totally at a distance in achieving all the individual or collaborative activities. Tutoring concerns the learning aspects, but also the technological, relational and meta-cognitive aspects. »

As an introduction, Brindley & al (2003, 138) mention Salmon (2002, 1) who clearly indicates the necessity of tutoring and its importance in distance learning: "Successful and productive online teaching is a key feature of positive, scalable and affordable e-learning project and processes. Regardless of the sophistication of the technology, online learners do not wish to do without their human supporters."

More than just answering the students' expectations, tutoring also improves the quality of the learning process. For Fox (2003, 250), « A moderate level of CMC participation substantially improves the overall quality of the DE learning experience.»


Learner support in FORMASUP

In FORMASUP, the learner support is very demanding, just like in all those environments considered "interactive" as described by Mary Thorpe (2002, 107): "Courses at this end of the spectrum will have been designed from the beginning in order to take advantage of the interactive potential of online learning. (...) tutors must of course be content experts, but they will also need even more skills of learning facilitation than the conventional tutor (...) There may be some course materials prepared in advance, but (...) It is the purpose of the online interaction to use the learners themselves as a resource, and to build on their experience, reading and perspectives."

To facilitate contacts between the participants, but also between participants and coaches (at least at the beginning), a section of the Website allow for a description of each one, with photos, texts and links. Peters (2003, 67) notes that « All participants think that photos and biographies are a general enrichment of any distance education course ». Peters explains the reasons for the interest of such presentation in the upper mentioned Master of Distance Education. However, FORMASUP organises frequent visual contacts (face-to-face or videoconference) with its participants, what lowers the mid- and long term interest of those presentations. They can still play an important role at the beginning of the year in facilitating first contacts, accelerating group building and establishing a personal relationship between the participants and their tutors/coaches.

Each participant is in close contact with two or three LabSET staff members. We really consider this close project coaching as one of the key success factors of this combination of training and course development. To allow for a better understanding of the central role of human tutors or coaches in FORMASUP, we describe hereafter the role they play in two of the main activities of the curriculum. We also characterise the differences between the two tutoring approaches.

Two contrasted types of learner support in FORMASUP

- • In the core common activity, which mainly consists in a <u>collaborative</u> study of one theme chosen out of four, one tutor is responsible for the animation of each theme. The tutor posts introductory messages, guides the sub-group in making first reading choices in the proposed literature, agrees deadlines with the sub-group for intermediate productions, discusses arguments, etc. Each group of 3 individuals studies one theme, presented as a practical case (Hohl & Kanouté, 1999), two themes being studied in English due to the participation of Lithuanian colleagues. The cases comprise a title, a humoristic drawing (see below), a few paragraphs to set the scene and a selected and commented bibliography (minimum 40 commented documents in French or English). After 4 months, face-to-face (or videoconferencing for the Lithuanian groups) presentations will give the sub-groups the opportunity to present their work to the whole group. Comments and feedbacks from the other sub-groups allow for improvements before the submission of the final reports. Of course, all participants have access to all the discussion areas, but they are so deeply involved in one of them that they usually dedicate less time in exploring and commenting others' work. For most
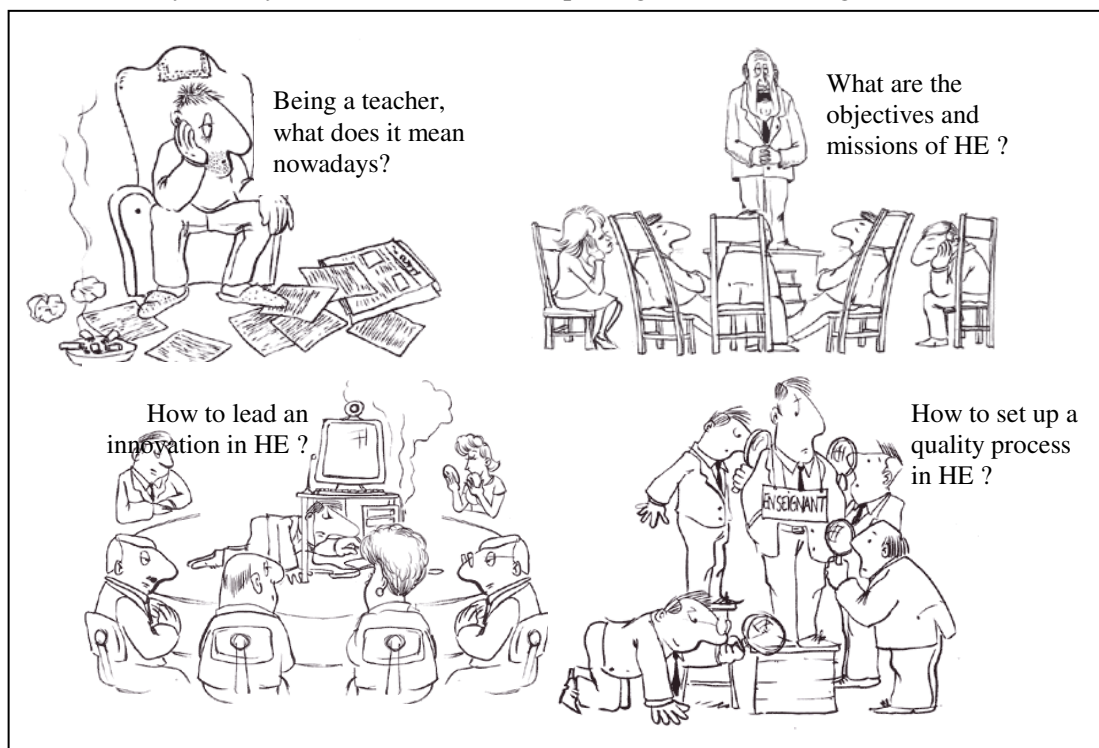
participants, the oral presentations represent a unique opportunity to discover unexplored fields.

- In the close coaching of the <u>individual</u> project of each participant, the project being the online course this participant will design, develop and experiment during the program. This coaching is structured by common tools and steps that each coach proposes to his/her participants. Coaching is either face-to-face for those who can travel to Liège or through other synchronous facilities (telephone, videoconference) for those coming from France, UK or Lithuania. It also takes place asynchronously, as an enormous amount of emails is necessary to keep close contact. From the first year's experience, we can estimate this individual project coaching to about half a day per week and per project, which represents a heavy workload for both coaches and participants.

A blended approach

We went for a combination of face-to-face and distance as well as for a mixing of different groups of students. Those two options seem to present some advantages, that should be further explored:

- We didn't notice any "invisible students" (Beaudouin 2003, 122) or « witness learners », as Fritch (1997) names them as they had learned from witnessing the interactions among the active participants. We analyse this situation as simply due to the fact that in FORMASUP, a close face-to-face coaching runs parallel to the on-line activities. A participant can be "invisible" in the forums, but be very active in the other forms of coaching and ask direct questions to his/her coach during face-to-face meetings to compensate.

- Our participants so far consider the groups mixing as an added value to their curriculum and an opportunity for them to be aware of others' institutional contexts, cultures and behaviours. This should be checked at the end of the program, as really working together might bring about some difficulties that the participants can't foresee at the beginning of the program. Their attitude is open and curious, we'll ask them at the end of the year whether they consider this cross-cultural experience as being an enrichment, as mentioned by Brian F. Fox, MDE3 student, who underlines the interest of "exposing me to the broad assortment of perspectives and experiences shared by my classmates" (Fox 2003, 247).

As a consequence, our tutors have to adapt to different situations (online versus face to face), different roles (see upper, in the two described activities), different groups (individual versus collective activities) and different cultures (Belgian participants, of course, but also French, English and Lithuanians). They have to be flexible and show their ability to deal with this diversity of roles, people and situations.

Tutor as tutored

One of the characteristic of our FORMASUP program is its aim of developing quality courses on the Internet through the individual projects of the participants (professors or assistants in charge). All the activities they live with us during a year in FORMASUP will serve as a basis for analyse, critics and advice. The role of the tutors/coaches both in the collaborative activity and in their individual project will feed the reflection on the role THEY want to play with their own students in the online course they develop. It is then of paramount importance that a deep meta-cognitive process takes place when they live tutoring situations they might want to reproduce or, at the opposite, when the encounter difficulties they would fear in their professional future. Affective components rise during the close coaching, allowing the participants to discuss those issues with their coach.

Experiencing varied tutoring modes is important for the FORMASUP participants, as they might want to "teach as taught", reproducing in their own distance course some features that might not be desirable if not properly analysed.

Impact and adaptations

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[3] Master of Distance Education, jointly offered and organised by the University of Oldenburg and UMUC Maryland (see *http://info.umuc.edu/mde/*)

For a continuous adaptation, we need to gather data and analyse both the satisfaction of the participants and the impact of the curriculum. In addition to the recorded interviews as a way to collect data for adapting the curriculum and the learning environment from year to year, we also gather the participants' reflexive analysis (3 per year), their advices after each significant step, their intermediate productions and several descriptors of their projects (the developed courses). Indeed, the quality of their productions is one of the indicators to approach the quality of our own offer. A longitudinal follow-up is also running, to take into account the sustainability of the noticed changes.

Measuring the impact of the curriculum is not an easy task. In 2002, we analysed 13 of the courses developed by our participants. We isolated the activities proposed in those 13 courses[4] (about 50 activities) and classified each of them following the pedagogical model of the *8 learning events* (see upper). Our analysis clearly showed that the developed on-line courses were rich and varied in terms of *learning events*: on the 13 courses, we noticed a mean exploitation of 5 different *learning events* out of 8, some courses even exploiting them all. The decisions of exploiting one or another of those *events* depend upon the objective of the course, the available material, the professors' preferences and, last but not least, other constraints like the available time, the number of students concerned etc. The observed learning events in those 50 activities were quite well balanced between active (in a constructivist sense) and more passive ones. We also noticed some interesting features like the massive presence of the *debate* event, difficult to organise in conventional large auditoriums of more than 200 students, and the presence of the *creation* event, allowed by innovative methods involving peer-to-peer tutoring and groups crossing. Those analyses show an interesting variety in the developed activities, bringing a real added value to the former courses of those 13 professors.

Individual interviews tend to show that this variety was mostly due to the close individual coaching and the exchanges of practice organized by the teaching/coaching staff. Raising awareness on others' ideas and pedagogical strategies together with the analysis of those practices, both through the coaching and through presentations (critical demonstrations), was considered as a strong innovation factor. From such interviews[5], Delfosse and al. (2003) have isolated 14 success factors. Whereas the majority of these success factors seem to be obvious, this analysis helps considering the relations between these factors as well as the way of managing them successfully. For example, we learned that learner-centred events and approaches were convincing for those professors, but ONLY after having seen and analysed several successful experiences (best practice examples) and having benefited from the support of an individual coach, able to connect theories and practices with the individual project of each participant.

Approaching the quality of the curriculum through some quality indicators in some of the products of this curriculum (in our example: the developed courses) only provides a partial view of the targeted quality, but crossing several indicators gives a complex picture that we find very useful in the continuing improvement of our curriculum. For example, the impact of the coach being considered as so crucial by our participants both for their own satisfaction and for the quality of their productions, we couldn't decrease the time spent in the close coaching of the individual projects. To balance that deep involvement, we imagined the group activity on the four themes (see upper), asking for a lighter involvement of human supporters. This collaborative activity also balances the more individual work on the project, giving the participants the opportunity to live different educational settings. On a staff point of view, preparing the learner-centred study material is also time consuming but can be done during the summer holidays, when the close coaching is almost finished. It remains possible for the same team to both continuously adapt the material for the collaborative activity and closely coach the individual projects.

This new curriculum is the result of an adaptation of the first year organization, thanks to our data gathering and analysis. We have the great chance of working with good willing participants, who

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[4] A "course" is here corresponding to about 30 hours of student learning time. It comprises several learning activities adding value to the former conventional course.
[5] Delfosse and al. have analysed the interviews of some FORMADIS and FORMASUP participants (professors) having developed with LabSET 20 different projects in 2002.

really understand the value of those data... and hope their own students will accept to reflect upon their online experience as well.

Challenges and Perspectives

In Belgium, the critical mass of ODL courses is not yet reached, but is really in progress. Quality courses are developing, thanks to regional initiatives and university curricula. At the same time, we address the problem of staff development, impacting the quality of the course offer at the university and, consequently, trying to address the problem of the huge failure rate. FORMASUP is at the crossroad of those important challenges.

The staff development is not only a challenge at the university level; it is also a challenge for the LabSET team itself. The close coaching is very demanding. The team has to be able to apply knowledge, summon up theories and best practice examples, always ask why and how, anticipate problems and imagine creative solutions or simply ask for help when needed. Those new professionals are guiding our professors and fostering innovation in our institutions. Therefore, LabSET has organised an internal staff learning program with exchanges on different themes, production of integrative documents, witnesses of colleagues, critical analysis of documents, participation to conferences, etc. Amongst the results of the 12 internal three hours sessions held in 2003 (about once a month), we can underline the creation of a case data base where the LabSET staff members enter a series of descriptors for each individual project they have coached. The use of this data base and its facilitation of the coaching activities of the staff members will be observed in 2004, in parallel with its continuing supply with new cases. We strongly believe that the learner's support in FORMASUP is so complex that the coaching staff needs training and knowledge management tools to achieve it professionally.

We continuously analyse and discuss challenges to better face them. We also noticed that the participation in FORMASUP, even though considered as a real impulse to innovation, needs follow-up and the establishment of communities of practices in order for those changes to be sustained. Former participants come back to our conferences and regularly contact us, but we should have a closer look at the way they maintain their developed distance courses and, for example, the type of learner support they consider as the most successful in their respective environments.

Our future agenda will also have to better organise the international experience sharing, as several universities are now very efficient in online tutoring and have interesting ideas we could benefit from. LabSET will welcome collaborations on tutoring as well as on the TECCC approach that seems to be particularly suited to adult learning in Higher Education (Knowles, 1978).

And finally, we fully follow Mary Thorpe when she underlines that everything has not been said: "We can be assured that there will be no single model of online learner support. We can anticipate that a variety of roles and titles will continue to develop" (Thorpe, 2002, 114). There is space for research in this interesting field of tutoring !

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