

# **SUPPORT, TRAINING AND REGULATION AS KEY SUCCESS FACTORS IN DEVELOPING e-LEARNING**

## **CASE STUDY OF THE LABSET-ULG, IN BELGIUM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper intends to identify some success factors in the issues of course development and management of change in ODL in Belgium. We will give an overview of the tools and methods for staff support at the University of Liège. Based on four years of experience, we will describe that support and highlight the type of training that appears to be efficient.

We hope this clarification could help other universities or training organisations make their decisions in terms of staff support and training towards the development of ODL.

### **KEYWORDS**

ODL, staff support, staff development, staff training, course design, course evaluation, pedagogical design, post-graduate degree, Belgium.

### **1. CONTEXT**

As most of European Universities, the University of Liège, in Belgium, has developed a Virtual Campus. A specific department, the LabSET (Support Laboratory for Telematic Learning), is in charge of this virtual campus and helps faculty members as well as external trainers develop their own courses on a distributed platform. From the time being, “mixt” courses, combining face-to-face and distance features, involve groups of 10

to 300 students, from the 1st year to post-graduate levels in the 8 faculties of the university as well as external schools and training centres. Active learning and rich pedagogical scenarios are promoted, bringing added value to the existing courses.

## 2. MAIN SUCCESS FACTOR : A STRONG SUPPORT TO STAFF MEMBERS

If we aim at deeply transforming the existing traditional courses into active ODL courses, we have to engage with each interested faculty member into a four steps action :

- ? a needs analysis (to clarify the objectives, constraints and available resources for each course)
- ? a new definition of the instructional design of the course
- ? in parallel, a graphical and technical development
- ? an evaluation of the developed course and of its use in a first experimental session.

A continuous evaluation of the innovation process allows for regulation and improves communication between the development team and the trainers / professors involved.

A strong support from both educational specialists and technicians is the core of the transformation of the traditional courses into distance courses. The transformation implies a series of switches amongst which :

- ? from a teaching centred- to learning centred approach ;
- ? from a receptive mode of message transmission to an exploratory mode of information processing ;
- ? from a top-down communication (from teacher to students) to lateral (peer-to-peer) exchanges ;
- ? from large chunks of unpartitioned content to smaller mouthful portions of disciplinary materials ;
- ? from a rote learning approach to constructive (active) assimilation of content.

The professors, by working on their own course with the help of instructional specialists, move from a traditional way of considering their course to a more open view of what it could be. They envisage more possible options and are influenced in the way they analyse those options. For example, they deepen their reflection on evaluation, being more and more aware of the result of their choices on the kind of knowledge and skills they are testing, being aware also of the necessary coherence between objectives, methods and evaluation. We also try to impact the quality of the courses by introducing contextualised activities including for example problem solving, peer reviewing, role playing and case based methodologies. This important support to the professors is the only way to foster sustainable innovation and deep change.

## 3. A TWOFOLD TRAINING OF THE STAFF MEMBERS

Quality of the training provided to the professors/trainers who want to go for ODL is a major factor for a successful course.

As learning also takes place through interactions with colleagues, we don't need a costly completely individualised process. Group learning and group work are of high importance in the development of the innovation process, what fully justifies the organisation of a specific curriculum.

The training includes compulsory modules as well as optional ones. In the first year, we experimented a completely open training and noticed that, due to the lack of available time amongst the professors who still have their teaching charge, most of them didn't participate to the training sessions (even if organised at a distance). They preferred having the LabSET team do the whole development without their help. That situation was not coherent with our objective to foster deep changes, as those professors only wanted their traditional course to be "coded" into html pages.... By having compulsory activities, most of them organised partly at a distance, we select the faculty members who agree on spending some time with us to really improve their course.

### **3.1. Training in ODL Pedagogical Design**

The ODL Pedagogical Design course consists of a series of activities partly (about 70%) organised at a distance. Some activities include a face to face situation, either because organising them at a distance would be too time and energy consuming regarding the expected added value, or simply for human and social reasons of group building.

Approximately 150 hours of course, related to the four steps of the course design, are planned over a 9 months period of time. For each of the 10 activities, the professors themselves (target public of the course) are exposed to a variety of teaching and learning approaches : they create, explore, practice, experiment, imitate, receive and debate. They are asked to critically analyse each of those learning experiences and consider if they could apply them to their own practice -how, when and why-. If appropriate, they immediately transfer the new experience to the development of their own ODL course.

The architecture of the course makes a wide use of educational technologies : the WebCT platform provides the professors with the usual communication tools (e-mail, bulletin board, calendar), but also with a detailed planning of the distance and face to face activities, precise descriptions of the objectives and sequence of each activity, multiple links to deepen pedagogical and technical resources, practical tools corresponding to the ODL design steps, slides and videos presenting some theoretical points or examples of good practice, 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.

We illustrate the course through a few screen captures hereafter.

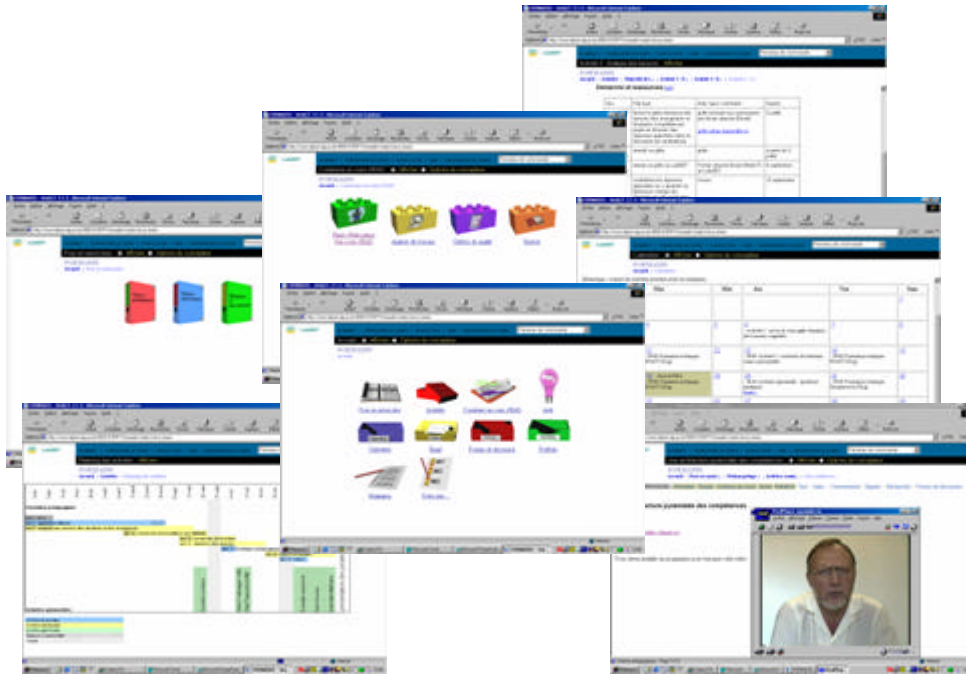


Figure 1. Training in Pedagogical Design – 70% at a distance

### 3.2. Technical training

A five days course partly organised at a distance (Problem Based Learning, through challenges) aims at mastering the technical aspects of the WebCT platform and of a web editor (Dreamweaver). The objectives of this course are to increase the self-confidence regarding technology and to allow to be fully autonomous in the management of a course. All the trainers/professors should be able, once their on line course developed, to give access to a new student, add a page or review part of the course, enrich the glossary, add a bulletin board discussion topic, a quizz or some questions in an existing one, view and analyse a quizz results distribution, post a message to all their students or to some in particular, scan a newspaper article and integrate it right away, integrate a new activity, modify the calendar, ... all sorts of actions that maintain the course and keep it alive.

## 4. A THREEFOLD EVALUATION OF THE COURSES

The continuous evaluation of the courses is also identified as a success factor in the deployment of a virtual campus.

To date, some of our courses are fully developed and have not only been tested on student samples but have also been used in full scale, with hundreds of students ; others are still under construction.

For each course, a “static evaluation” is first performed, using a check list of quality criteria, referring i.e. to learning theory principles, ergonomics, readability, etc. A “dynamic evaluation” is then conducted when students attend on-line and face-to-face sessions using the new courses i.e. participation statistics, their satisfaction, etc.. Finally, an “impact evaluation” tries to describe the overall benefits.

This whole process provides the professors and their assistants with helpful recommendations on how to improve their course or their use of the course for the next sessions.

## **5. FUTURE STEPS...**

As an incentive as well as a recognition for the involvement of the faculty members and external trainers into our development program, we will launch in September 2002 a post-graduate degree. Those teachers, if they enroll, will be exempted from selected courses. The program will stress success factors and address through case studies some key questions i.e. how to foster participation at a distance, how to evaluate the success, how to define quality criteria, how to vary the methodologies, what differences to make between undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate levels in terms of methods and evaluation, which technology to use, combined with the integrated platform, to serve the objectives of the course, how to bring a real added value to a distance course, etc. The curriculum will build on the running ODL Pedagogical Design courses and activities.

In parallel, the LabSET will keep on supporting innovation and ODL course development, to help best practices spread over the university... and widely over Belgium.

## **6. TO CONCLUDE**

We noticed that enabling the faculty teaching staff to use the web as an instructional tool and platform for learner centred instruction face some inevitable challenges :

- ? Hidden agenda : what are the real motivations to put a course on line ? Is it always student centred ?
- ? Faculty involvement : how to involve the institution as a whole, in order to get a collaborative relationship between team members and recognition ?
- ? Web-based instructional delivery is highly labour-intensive i.e. providing technical and pedagogical support, organisational and administrative leadership, negotiating incentives (financial, human resources, time, etc.). How to make it sustainable ?
- ? Rethinking pedagogy of course : on-going training, example of good practices
- ? Student motivation : what strategies to implement in order to increase students' involvement and interest.

Through a strong support to willing staff members, evaluation of the courses, training in ODL pedagogical design as well as in technology, opening up of discussion spaces for faculty members and external trainers and, last but not least, through building up of new international collaborations, we will try to keep on analysing and openly discussing those challenges to better face them.

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