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Towards a quality label for distance courses The EMDEL experimentation

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In march 2000, the European Council of Lisbon has highlighted, with the development of e-learning, a strategic objective for the improvement of the economy of knowledge. Therefore the European Systems of Education and Training are undergoing major changes. Distance training is progressively gaining ground into the public sectors and enterprises and numerous institutions have already started some projects for the creation of distance training systems.

The EMDEL project : European Model for Distance Education and Learning

The EMDEL project intends to tackle two issues :

- the scarcity of products to meet the complexity of potential demand of training (the high cost of products slows down the time of realisation of the systems)
- the lack of a European Teletraining System to allow for valorisation of existing experiences.

The main **goal** of the project is to design a European Teletraining System which, based on what already exists, could immediately initiate a process of co-operation at the level of production and organization of distance training services. Besides, it should add to the reduction of costs, harmonisation of local systems and a rapid increase of supply of distance courses.

This European project (LEONARDO program 2001-2004) joins the efforts of 10 countries in the following **activities and products** :

1. **Development of an on-line catalogue of distance courses of trans-national interest.** The creation of the catalogue will give the trainers and the administrators of distance training systems the possibility to know what is already available on the "market" and their conditions of use.

2. Production and share of a user friendly Internet site for the **assessment of customers' satisfaction and quality of the products.**

LabSET is responsible for developing an evaluation 'model' : a tool allowing to inform the database user on the quality of the available courses and a methodology of international evaluation of the courses. A quality questionnaire is filled in by a national expert and a 'customer satisfaction' questionnaire is filled in by each user of the course. In EMDEL, all the products listed in the on-line catalogue will be submitted to a quality certification according to the 'model' adopted, making use of a set of 100 quality criteria. It then advocates for a wider use of such quality sets at a European level, allowing for contrasted uses and leading to a quality enhancement of the existing offer, but also to a better dialogue and understanding amongst the educational community.

We notice here a very professional use of the quality grid, where the evaluation criteria are transparent and visible by every user but where the grid is only filled in by international accredited experts. Quality criteria includes :

- Pedagogical evaluation : objectives (clearly stated, in coherence with activities and evaluation, of specified taxonomy levels, diversified in those levels,...), pre-requisites (announced, tested), credibility, validity and maintenance of the site (identified responsible persons), target public (specified, analysed in terms of needs), contents (valid, consistent, exact, comprehensible, well organised), pedagogical activities (described, instrumented, of different taxonomical levels, functional, allowing for tracking, in accordance with the evaluation, corresponding to varied learning paradigms, allowing for interactions,...), evaluation (with customisable feed-backs, formative, repeated, in coherence with objectives and activities, allowing for different paths, ...), interactivity (varied levels, with possible individualisation and personalisation,...) ;
- Technical evaluation : evaluation of the site (error robustness, ...), of navigation, of graphical design and of the use of multimedia.
- Evaluation of the use of the product : conditions of use, existence of a user guide or manual, of an on-line help menu, specification of roles and functions, views on the results per student, per activity, per group, per question, etc.

This kind of use is likely to be more and more common at a European scale, as an answer to the extending but sometimes very poor ODL offer. Having to choose between several courses aiming at the same objectives, the European citizen will find in quality evaluations a way to maximize his/her efforts and going for the best offer, 'best' meaning here the most effective in pedagogical terms. The EMDEL partners hope that this decision of providing citizens with an evaluation of the pedagogical quality of the offer will increase the global quality of that offer. The service providers will be pushed towards quality and the public awareness will raise, the criteria being well known and announced. Note that a course does not receive a final "quality note" as a result for its evaluation, but a series of written comments for each section of the grid, qualitatively underlining the strengths and weaknesses of the course. For each comment and to better understand them, the user can access the filled in grid.

This use of quality criteria is still under fine-tuning. The web site exists, together with the evaluation grid, it has been tested but it is now in the phase of extension of the use to a wider set of evaluators, from the 10 partners countries. The opening of the site to public access is planned for mid-2003.

3. **Exchange of the best products** realised by the partners. For their utilisation, we intend to make first the selection and then the post production (translation, adaptation and diffusion) of at least 10 distance training modules.
4. **Virtual mobility** through on-line utilisation of Distance Training Modules installed on the servers of the partners' net. By this action we aim at :
 - allowing the utilisation of distance training products in original language to a person living in a partner country without an action of post production ;
 - having at one's disposal services of support and coaching both locally and on line (in the original language) thanks to the presence of tutors operating in local systems;
5. **Dissemination**, through the presentation of a model of realisation, of a European Teletraining Network to demonstrate the concrete possibilities of construction, starting from an existent distance training system based locally but with transnational connections. The dissemination also aims at extending the number of agencies of distance training wanting to cooperate for the enlargement of the catalogue and for the increase of the exchange of products.