CHALLENGES OF A DISTANCE PROGRAMME AIMING AT THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at reflecting on a training programme organized fully online by pointing out its specificities as well as some difficulties encountered in the framework of its implementation. The distance programme is actually part of the postgraduate degree in Higher Education Pedagogy (Formasup) which is organized at the University of Liège (Belgium) by the LabSET (IFRES) and which focuses on the professional development of teachers in higher education. The encountered difficulties are of four types: technical difficulties, difficulties related to communication, learning and programme requirements. As far as possible, we shall propose clues of regulation to address them.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, professional development, distance learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims at reflecting on a training programme organized fully online by pointing out its specificities as well as some difficulties encountered in the framework of its implementation. The distance programme is actually part of the postgraduate degree in Higher Education Pedagogy which has been organized since 2002 at the University of Liège (Belgium) by the LabSET (IFRES). Formasup amounts to 60 credits and focuses on the professional development of teachers in higher education. Several articles describing and commenting on successive versions of the programme have already been published (Poumay, 2006; Poumay & Georges, 2008). We shall therefore concentrate on its latest challenges and on the data enabling us to analyse them.

2. THE 2009-2010 PROGRAMME ORGANIZED AT A DISTANCE AND IN ENGLISH

2.1 Participants

This year, twenty six teachers registered for Formasup. The cohort described in this article is made up of twelve of them, nine from Vietnam and three from Lithuania. These participants attend Formasup fully at a distance and in English.

Although we usually advise participants to break the programme down into two years, we were asked to organize it in one year. The compression of the Formasup activities in one year entails working under pressure. Up to now, three Vietnamese participants have officially given up, two because of health problems, one as a consequence of a change of job.

2.2 Objectives

Two years ago, a competence-based approach to teaching and learning was adopted (Tardif, 2006). Formasup is now centered on three interrelated competences aiming at professionalizing teaching and learning in higher education.

The Formasup competences are:
- Design courses which are coherent and meaningful and which facilitate students' learning;
- Teach 1) in a way that fosters students' motivation, activity and engagement 2) in order to be able to inform each learner about his/her progress 3) in order to facilitate learning in depth and lifelong learning;
- Regulate teaching practices by conducting a research with the following characteristics: well-documented; rooted in teaching practices und useful for them; of interest to the teaching community.

About fifty resources (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes) have to be mobilized in order to develop the three competences. Individual progress is assessed by means of a portfolio which has to be presented and defended orally.

2.3 Methodology and supports

Participants have several pedagogical and technical supports at their disposal to meet the Formasup objectives. Those supports aim at facilitating project-based active learning and learning relying on individual professional experience:
- A fairly detailed syllabus and the Formasup competence map;
- An online course divided into specific subjects which are to be dealt with progressively in relation to the prescribed assignments;
- Compulsory assignments published at a sustained pace: approximately twice a month (a delivery delay of one month entails the exclusion from the programme);
- Formative feedback (participants are encouraged to revise their assignments according to the received individual feedback);
- Several discussion forums (the Formasup instructors regularly check the forums and post messages to initiate discussions or to respond to participants' queries)
- Exchange seminars (via videoconferences) during which participants are asked to present and comment on the progress made.

3. CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

Since the beginning of this year's programme, we have been faced with several difficulties. Some of them could be solved rather easily, others are still subsisting. We shall try to categorize them, to briefly describe their effect on the programme's progress and to propose clues of regulation.

3.1 Technical difficulties

At the beginning of the programme, the Vietnamese participants experienced serious difficulties in connecting to the WebCT platform, in downloading files, viewing videos and reading material available in the online course. At first, they hardly informed us of their difficulties. Only one or two messages mentioning specific difficulties were posted in the discussion forums. We were alerted to the full extent of the technical difficulties by the Belgian coordinator of the CUD project in which the Vietnamese participants are otherwise engaged.

We never imagined that such technical impediments could occur because we never encountered them before with other participants abroad. The Lithuanian participants had no such difficulties. Apparently, the Internet connections in Vietnam are comparatively slow to process information available on the Web. In order to facilitate the access to course-related material, we decided to make all the relevant text files available in pdf format and to make videos downloadable from easily accessible URL addresses.

3.2 Difficulties related to communication

The fact that we learnt indirectly of the technical problems experienced by the Vietnamese participants turned out to be symptomatic of repeated communication failures. Progressively we came to realize that the Vietnamese participants shunned direct critique and often resorted to respectful but non-committing phrases. We came to suspect cultural values to be responsible for such avoidance tactics. Apparently, Asians tend to mark more clearly the respective roles of teachers and students. Students are not supposed to question openly the academic and moral authority of teachers (Robert, 2002). Such role expectations may explain to some extent the reluctance to communicate in discussion forums. However, it does not fully explain the average parsimony of messages posted by both Vietnamese and Lithuanian participants (see table 1). The novelty of online training and difficulties to write fluently in English may also account for minimal communication. Apart from initiating online discussions as often as possible and from proposing more videoconferences or individual "skype" sessions to give participants regular opportunities to talk to us in a less formal manner, we are still pondering on how to improve distance communication.

Table 1. Types of messages posted in discussion forums between October 2009, 27 and March 2010, 16

Types of messages	Number of messages posted by Formasup instructors	Number of messages posted by participants	Total
Pedagogical	13	2	15
Managerial	20	12	32
Technical	16	13	29
Social	2	0	2
Miscellaneous	5	6	11
Total	56	33	8

The types of messages listed in table 1 are borrowed from Berge's categories of online tutoring (Berge, 1995). We added "miscellaneous" to typify other messages such as acknowledgements of receipt, messages of thanks, etc. Table 1 clearly indicates meagre communication via the discussion forums. Formasup instructors posted nearly twice as many messages as participants who did not systematically respond, even to questions directed to them. It has also to be noticed that each participant posted on average three messages in four and a half months. Moreover, two participants posted much more messages (two to three times more) than their peers, which even lowers the average number of postings for each other participant. Most messages deal with managerial (or organizational) and technical aspects of the programme. Pedagogical messages are comparatively scant inasmuch as communication related to learning concentrates in assignments (see table 2) rather than in discussion forums. The distribution of session time spent by participants on various components of the online course confirms the relative neglect of discussion forums. During the aforementioned four months and a half, participants spent 42% session time on assignments, 23% on learning material and 15% on discussing in forums. However, these figures are questionable because participants may have downloaded learning material and worked on assignments offline. They may also have compiled and printed the messages posted in the discussion forums.

3.3 Difficulties related to learning

Formasup champions an approach to teaching and learning requiring teachers to design activities which encourage their own students to become active, to interact with peers and to develop learning autonomy. Such requirements roughly correspond to a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching and learning. Especially for the Vietnamese participants, the expected paradigm shift is not self-evident. These participants are obviously experiencing conflicts with Formasup expectations which seem to challenge their own representations and traditions. Understandably enough, they sometimes shrink from questioning too hard their teaching and learning habits. This "pedagogical cringe" expresses itself indirectly in the quality of the delivered assignments. The repeated incentives to reflect critically on routine actions and attitudes and to question their pedagogical efficiency are acknowledged by participants inasmuch as they complete the assignments and declare them to be interesting and formative. However, the concrete effects of the assigned course-related reflections are hardly perceptible. The exacted reports on effected course revisions mainly consist of well-meaning but vague intentions. Such discrepancies between declarations and actions are bound

to endanger the continuation of the programme. The Lithuanian participants seem to be somewhat more willing to take up the challenges to their habits of teaching and learning but, on the whole, the implementation of intentions remains tentative.

Table 2. Number of postings per participant (P) / per assignment (A) and delay (D) of first assignment posting per participant

	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8
P1	1	3	1	1D	1D	1	1D
P2	1	2	1D	1D	1D	1D	1D
P3	1	1D	1D	1D	1D	0D	1D
P4	1	5	2D	2	1	2	0D
P5	1	4	1	2D	1D	2D	1
P6	1D	1	1D	1D	1D	1	0D
P7	1	1D	1D	1D	1D	0D	0D
P8	1D	4D	1D	1	1	0D	0D
P9	1	5D	1	2	1	1D	0D

Setting aside considerations related to quality, table 2 indicates that participants posted most assignments only once. More than two postings per assignment rarely happened. This means that participants did not regularly respond to the formative feedback given on each posting. Assignment 3 led in general to more postings. The assignment dealt with course objectives and participants found it difficult to formulate their course objectives by means of the imposed taxonomies. Assignment 1 was not taken into account because it simply consisted in sending one's course syllabus. Many participants have not yet posted their assignment 8 requesting to put together and to formalize previous actions and reflections. These participants are on the point of overstepping the allowed one-month delay.

On the whole, we observe that most participants find it difficult to analyse their teaching practice by means of the pedagogical models we advise them to use. Moreover, they do not seem to make much use of the regular feedback they get. They do not either call on peers or instructors to reach their objectives. The repeated delays seem to indicate some want of organization.

3.4 Difficulties related to Formasup requirements

The overall disappointing quality and quantity of participants' productions is probably not only due to cultural gaps between European and Asian understanding of what teaching and learning should be like. Participants regularly complain about the amount of time they have to invest in order to meet Formasup requirements. They find it very difficult to engage in additional training while working already full time. We tried to somewhat lighten their work load by emphasizing connections between Formasup and their everyday teaching practice. We explained that the assignments were primarily designed to make them reflect on and improve their teaching. The assignments should therefore have a direct influence on their daily practice. Unfortunately, we already observed how difficult the implementation of intentions seems to be. For that reason, we advised the Lithuanian participants to break down the programme into two years, which they agreed to do. For various reasons, the Vietnamese participants do not wish to extend the time allotted to Formasup to a second year. Meanwhile, assignments are handed in with delays (see table 2). Poor quality and late delivery of assignments mean that some participants could be in danger of failing in the programme. All this seems to indicate how vital it is to clearly inform prospective participants of the requirements and quality standards of Formasup. Obviously, most participants were not prepared to face those requirements and standards. In order to clarify and to diversify the information already available on Formasup, we intend to refurnish our information site with interviews of former participants who could explain what they learnt from Formasup and tell about the amount of time spent on the 60-credit programme.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Formasup is certainly an ambitious programme which makes significant demands on its participants. The fact that the described programme version is wholly organized online seems to intensify the difficulties met by participants. Besides trying as far as possible to address the obstacles as they present themselves, we are also conscious of the necessity to constantly revise the programme in order to facilitate the professional development of participants, the same way as we request them to regulate their own teaching practice. Therefore, we already decided that, from September 2010 on, classroom research would be limited to gathering scattered pieces of evidence and to sharing the reflections based on evidence with colleagues. The more exacting research will become optional and should mainly interest teachers who intend to write a PhD in education.

Formasup will remain centered on reflective practice. Former participants will be invited to talk about their personal experience of the programme and about their involvement in it. Besides, we also intend to be more cautious about cultural differences and to organize more regular synchronous contacts in order to create a more supportive and informal learning environment. We shall also reinforce our pre-programme actions by interviewing prospective participants to sound out their motivation to enrol in Formasup. Finally, we shall gather from the start data on participants' interactions and learning, as we do it for our face-to-face sessions, in order to inform the group on the encountered difficulties and on the factors facilitating learning and retentiveness. We hope that those combined actions will lead to a stronger engagement and better results of the participants in the programme.

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