LEARNING COMPETENCES OF TEACHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN HUNGARY – EXPERIENCE OF A TEACHER FURTHER TRAINING PROGRAMME

Attila Fábián, University of West-Hungary, Sopron

Introduction

It seems to be especially justified to develop Web-based distance education courses when launching teacher further training programmes because of teachers busy schedule. A novel e-learning programme for further training of teachers is presented in this paper and we also try to find answers for the following questions on the basis of the experience of the pilot course: How should a well organised Web-based course look like? How can the dropouts be minimalised? What kind of competences should the participants of the learning process have to succeed?

Aim of the project

These Web-based courses target many things at the same time. The theme of the further education programme in the first place is using Internet in teaching, which can be displayed and practiced through the taught device itself. The learning process can be totally adapted to the schedule of the user, and this form of education bridges the geographical distance as well.

Another important goal was to make teachers gain experience during their own self-learning process about this type of education. The acquired skills and knowledge can be freely applied in different learning situations and conditions. The main goal of the course is to deliver practical information and forming the concepts of the participants in teaching.

Structure of the course

The duration of the course is 120 hours according to prescriptions. 80 hours out of the 120 are for individual learning and there are 40 hours for consultations with the tutors. During the personal consultations participants can discuss the arising problems regarding the learning material; they get assessment of their work and also encouragement for further studies, which can help to minimalise the number of dropouts.

There are other communication channels provided such as: chat, forum, e-mail in order to contact the tutor or participants can share their experience one another whenever they need.

Learning material

The full learning material is available through the Web. It contains hyperlinks, technical commentaries, and also short descriptions of tasks carefully chosen from a methodological point of view which could be helpful in teaching.

The learning material integrated in the Learning Management System has a modular structure. It contains three modules plus an optional one. Those who consider their computer skills unsatisfactory can take up an optional module entitled ‘Use of Internet’ that can serve as a guidebook in e-learning. The other three modules are organised around three problems arisen:

Firstly how can we prepare for classes? This module provides information about various sources of information, on-line communication, on-line technical literature, guides to be downloaded.

The second module is about what authentic material can be used on the Internet? It is about teaching culture, development of language competence, types of exercises on the Web, preparation for examination.

Thirdly, what methodology challenges are to be faced, when teaching with the help of computer and Internet? This module provides information on class work, such as types of Internet based classes, organisation of learning, classroom helping material, individual work of students and evaluation.

Each lesson of the modules have the same structure: the first part is an introduction, which presents a Website chosen for the lesson, gives a short summary about the purposes of the tasks. The second part is based on two topics. It deals with the certain homepage in details, and methodological ideas and exercises are given for a better processing of the learning material. The last part contains optional links on the topic.

Participants are provided a description of the course and a suggested schedule in advance.

The most important aim of the course is to encourage the use of the acquired knowledge in classrooms and when preparing for classes. Besides the participants of the pilot course got to know a great deal of Websites got software containing interactive exercises, games which can be used when preparing for lessons as teachers.

Because the course is to be correspond the accreditation criteria of the teacher further training programmes, the following requirements had to be defined:

- participation at 70 % of consultation sessions is compulsory,
- acquisition of material and submitting at least ten solved tests,
- creation of a common electronic learning material and database,
- microteaching in pairs,
- presentation on the microteaching.

A special test can be found at the end of each lesson in the form of interactive exercises that can be evaluated by the computer, and the results can be stored. Thus participants can test themselves, and their work can be monitored by the tutors as well.

In addition, an electronic database of exercises was created, which can be expanded by adding the exercises sent in by the participants during the pilot course. The participants had to send in teaching materials, exercises on the topic of each lesson, which were checked, collected and exposed on the homepage of the course, and are accessible to everyone. This database constitutes a rich source of inspiration for teachers.

The closing session of the course is a so called microteaching. Smaller groups and couples were formed during the course so they can work together by making use of different means of communication. Thus the groups can prepare for the final presentations together.

Tasks of the Learning Management System

Navigation

Making use of a special Learning Management System gives the practical framework in which the study material is comfortable accessible, which is important for each user as it was proven during the pilot course. The structure of hypertext used on the Web makes good navigation crucial both for inexperienced users and for skilled, experienced users as well. Learning Management System helps users finding, tracing information, or turning back to starting point.

Monitoring student's work

An administration surface is also part of the system, which stores detailed data of participants and their work, and makes it possible to load on learning material. The surface enables the tutor to detect the route of participants and the success of their advancement with the help of registered access. The main

goal of the above mentioned interactive tests built in material is self evaluation, since participants get immediate respond of his performance but results of the test also provide information for the tutor.

Communication

As we pointed out, the different communication channels are of great importance. These appear in the content of learning material, as the means of communication of a new approach to language teaching. However, individual learning process is also supported by the different communication channels, each having different roles, such as:

- *mailing list*: information of common interest (among students and tutors),
- *forum*: permanent information sorted out thematically (among participants),
- *chat*: virtual consultation opportunity, fixed appointments moderated by tutors (getting acquainted with chat, quick way of consultation for participants).

Experience of the pilot course

The presented course is intriguing not only due to participants' critical approach to the learning material, but also because they make remarks concerning this new form of further education. Participants of the pilot course were asked to tell their opinion of the structure and organisation of the course and to compare the efficiency of this form of education with the traditional teacher further training courses.

These opinions show an interesting picture. The positive and negative feedbacks of the participants about the pilot course are presented in the following table:

Positive Feedback	***Negative Feedback***
• one can have their own schedule and rhythm	• freedom of schedule is a drawback in efficient work
• one can process the material according to personal needs	• one has no company, the virtual partnership is not satisfactory
• one does not have immediate help, so the problem has to be solved individually	• there is no immediate help available
• easy, faster navigation in the learning material	• lack of necessary technical skills holds back the work

The twelve participants' descriptions about their experience of the pilot course were summarised, which drew an interesting picture.

'Lack of necessary technical skills holds back the work.'

Since we speak about a computer-based form of teaching and learning, it is obvious that computer skills are essential for successful learning procedure. There is a continuous progress in this field in Hungary. However, when elaborating an e-learning course it is need to be kept in mind what kind of skills the target group might have, what the inevitable skills are for the course, and the instructor also need to sum up the basic skills lack of which would hold back successful work. This important factor would prevent students from dropping out, losing their motivation and not keeping up with the more able ones. The properly considered and consequently implemented tutoring would help participants overcome the same problem. Students would not feel left alone with loads of learning material and rely on a foreign person who monitors his learning process. An introductory, personal meeting is advisable, especially in the case of a group teaching.

Most comments (positive and negative feedback as well) show the presence, or on the contrary, the lack of some kind of individual learning strategy. It is interesting that some students enjoy individual work and problem solving on their own, while others are bothered by these things and need more instructions, more personal contact and strict schedule.

Summary

To sum up, we must draw the conclusion that by now ICT skills have become necessary in obtaining knowledge. Teacher' main task is to help students in the autonomous learning processes and make them think and solve problems individually. Regarding this task students' role is to become a partner, as nowadays the most important effect of the information society is that one should be able to obtain, organise, elaborate and make use of available knowledge.

Because of the novelty of the elaborated further training programme the pilot course served a great deal of conclusions for the developers. There were some comments on the learning material suggesting minor amendments, and also regarding the new form of further teacher training, which turned out to be useful in improving efficiency of the course. The introduced course was redesigned according to the experience of the pilot course, and now it is available for anyone interested.