The Evaluative Research of Complex Projects in e-Learning: The Case of the 'EQUEL' (e-Quality in e-Learning) Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the evaluative research of complex European projects aimed at social, educational or training development. It proposes a social practice approach that emphasises the way a project [in this case EQUEL] evolves over time and is expressed through the experience of its key stakeholders. The paper identifies the metaphor of the implementation staircase as a useful framework for this approach. Its theoretical stance is that a project idea is modified and adapted in the light of the strategic, practice based concerns of each stake-holding group occupying a 'step' in the staircase. It suggests that EQUEL has the potential to be a rich resource for e-learning within the Union.

Keywords:
E-learning, evaluation research, project implementation, evaluation tools, provisional stability

INTRODUCTION

This draft paper outlines an evaluation approach developed for use within the European funded EQUEL project. We advocate a stance that could be understood as an 'evaluation for knowledge' [Chelimsky 1999]. We argue that it is necessary to give meaning to the process as a support for the actors to share their questions and observations. It is important to suggest however, that this support may or may not be during the lifetime of the project. In the case of EQUEL, it is unlikely that the evaluation activity carried out by the evaluation team had a formative impact on the work of the individual special interest groups that formed the centre of EQUEL activity. However, the aspiration is to enable a common frame of reference, which might guide future action in the context of the diversity of each of the participants' contexts for action. This evaluation approach focuses on the nature of the complex interactions occurring within EQUEL as a project, rather than an evaluation of the quality of the EQUEL outcomes or the way the project worked as a network. However, while the concept of 'network' or the extent to which EQUEL was or was not a network is not the focus, the interactive elements of the project are clearly relevant.Given the timing of the Network Learning Conference, this paper is still very much in draft form and awaits the observations and iterations afforded by EQUEL members' responses to its depiction. An early version of this paper was presented to the EQUEL project at a meeting in Copenhagen in November 2003.

The ultimate aim is to help build common knowledge that could be shared by all the actors of EQUEL and potentially others engaged in similar work. In order to develop an approach, which addressed the issues of diversity, flexibility and complexity, we first developed a clear understanding of the general processes, which characterise 'change' in a project like EQUEL. However, in endeavouring to accomplish this task, we began to develop ideas on the role of evaluation in changing or transitional environments, which might have wider application.

In summary, we adapted the work of Fullan's ideas (1998) on complexity theory to suggest the need to accept complexity or diversity as a given in the design of a change process. His work, along with other commentators who have identified the rapidity of change and the creativity required to survive during these periods of chronic uncertainty (see Hann 94 for example) suggests a move away from scientific-rational approaches toward those which are more sociologically informed [see Trowler, Saunders and Knight 2003, Sanderson 2000 and Yanow 2000]

In particular we have adapted the work of Saunders and Reynolds [1987] to emphasise the often situated way in which the understanding of the priorities for action, the emphases and the experience of a project like EQUEL

by participants exhibit diversity depending on the positioning of the group or individual within the project and the historical circumstances that brought them together. EQUEL's espoused purpose was to provide resources for a Centre of Excellence in E-learning.

> "Establish a virtual European Centre for research into innovation and the practice of e-learning at the level of higher and post-compulsory education. The Centre will bring together a wide range of experts working in the field along with the existing research and practitioner networks that they already work with or are part of. The work and activities of the Centre will be open to both experienced and young researchers and to actors and/or users from the private sector as well as from higher and post-compulsory education" [EQUEL proposal p15]

However, we argue in this paper that participants rarely, if at all, had the central premise of a Centre of Excellence in mind when undertaking work within the project. We have attempted to demonstrate that to depict project activity as conformity to an over-prescriptive framework is a mistake, we have taken the view that we should look for the expressions of participants' own positioning within an 'implementation staircase' as a more apt metaphor to capture the way different stake-holding groups experience a project. A key organising frame for work within EQUEL was the Special Interest Group, the leaders and members of which formed key stake-holding groups.

> "A key activity of the project will be to establish 7 interdisciplinary Special Interest Groups (SIGs) that will focus on key and significant areas of research, innovation and/or practice of e-learning. The SIGs will focus on issues related to the Learning situation, Institutional Change and Policy Inquiries. Members of the network have already successfully done or are doing existing projects in these three areas. The SIGs will operate as dual mode groups and each will be responsible for developing an extensive range of activities and resources relevant to the theme or area of interest of the SIG." [EQUEL proposal p15]

There are of course problems with the metaphor of a staircase to depict a project like EQUEL and thus the role of evaluation in it. Staircases suggest a linearity, which does not fit with the way in which EQUEL might be perceived i.e. as a loosely affiliated set of groups with a loosely co-ordinated internal structure. A network is closer metaphor. However, not withstanding the difficulties of defining what a network might be [see Araujo 1998, Castells 1996], the focus for the evaluation was the way in which participants at varying functioning points in the EQUEL network experienced the project. There was a sense in which 'policy' messages or 'project' messages, to be more accurate, did move through this 'loosely coupled' [See Weick 88] EQUEL system and were interpreted differently depending on where the individuals were situated. The second potential problem with the metaphor of the staircase is the extent to which diversity of experience and the explanation of it, was more likely to be a product of the different foci and different constituents of the SIGs than an individual's positioning in the project organisational contours. This is a plausible point. Interestingly however, the depictions of experience we gathered did have commonalities based on 'role', which we inferred as a function of 'project position'. In addition, we used framework tools that we hoped would render or help depict the way participants' experience changed over time.

The notion of '**provisional stability**' is useful to us in two ways [see Bonamy, Charlier and Saunders 2000 and 2001]   First, it is a way of depicting the object for evaluation in project evolution or a change process. Provisional stabilities are produced by reflecting, learning and understanding project process through evaluative activity, enabling choices or decisions for future action to occur. Second, provisional stability also refers to the artefacts the special interest groups within a project like EQUEL might produce and might form the basis of a resource for the wider community. Provisional stability is used in both these senses in this paper.

EVALUATION TOOLS AND APPROACHES: STAGES OF CONCERN AND ADPATIVE STAIRCASES

Stages of concern

We understand that involvement in a project like EQUEL can be characterised in part as sequential. In other words, experience and understanding of project practice evolves. One way of understanding the evolution of involvement in a project or, put another way, the emerging implications of project involvement is to see them as on a continuum from mere awareness to adaptive practice. This occurs as priorities and confidence change. An approach that has distant origins in the work of Gene Hall and Susan Loucks (1978), illustrates this continuum. In adapted form it will be helpful in analysing the way in which EQUEL participants experience participation in EQUEL on a continuum from 'awareness' to 'refocusing'. Figure 1 depicts the potential adaptation from the original framework

Fig 1 Stages of concern in project involvement

7	Refocusing	Attention now on adaptation, major changes, alternatives to original ideas, creativity, consolidation of ideas
6	Collaboration	Coordinating and cooperating with other stake-holders in developing project ideas and outcomes
5	Consequence	Attention on impact on students, staff, departments and whole institution of project outcomes and the development of new ideas
4	Management	Attention on difficulties in the processes and tasks involved in the project, developing and accommodating new practices, processes and systems
3	Institutional/personal	Begins to analyse involvement in context of existing systems and practice
2	Informational	Emerging awareness and interest in knowing more, thinking of implications of project participation
1	Awareness	Initial awareness of the project characteristics
0	No Awareness	

We identified a need to utilize conceptual frameworks that emphasise the way in which project messages are adapted and modified through the process of enactment project participants. The stages of concern model helps to alert us to the way in which responses to projects evolve over time. This is not a linear model, rather an heuristic. It is quite possible for example, to jump stages or to engage in stages in a different order. To that end we collapsed some of the categories identified by Hall and Loucks to form this simpler depiction of the evolution of EQUEL.

Fig 2 Stages of Concern in EQUEL

EXPLORATORY [STAGES 1, 2,3]

Participants' sussing out method, discussing interests, themes, differences in expectations and approaches, stabilising main activities within SIGs, attempting to understand whole project mission, trying to use communication platforms

CONSOLIDATION [4,5,6]

Settling on courses of action, making divisions of labour, deciding on mechanisms of communication, core and sub groups developing

DEVELOPMENT [7]

Pressure to produce artefacts, stabilise thinking, concern with products and futures, pragmatism as the end of the project approaches
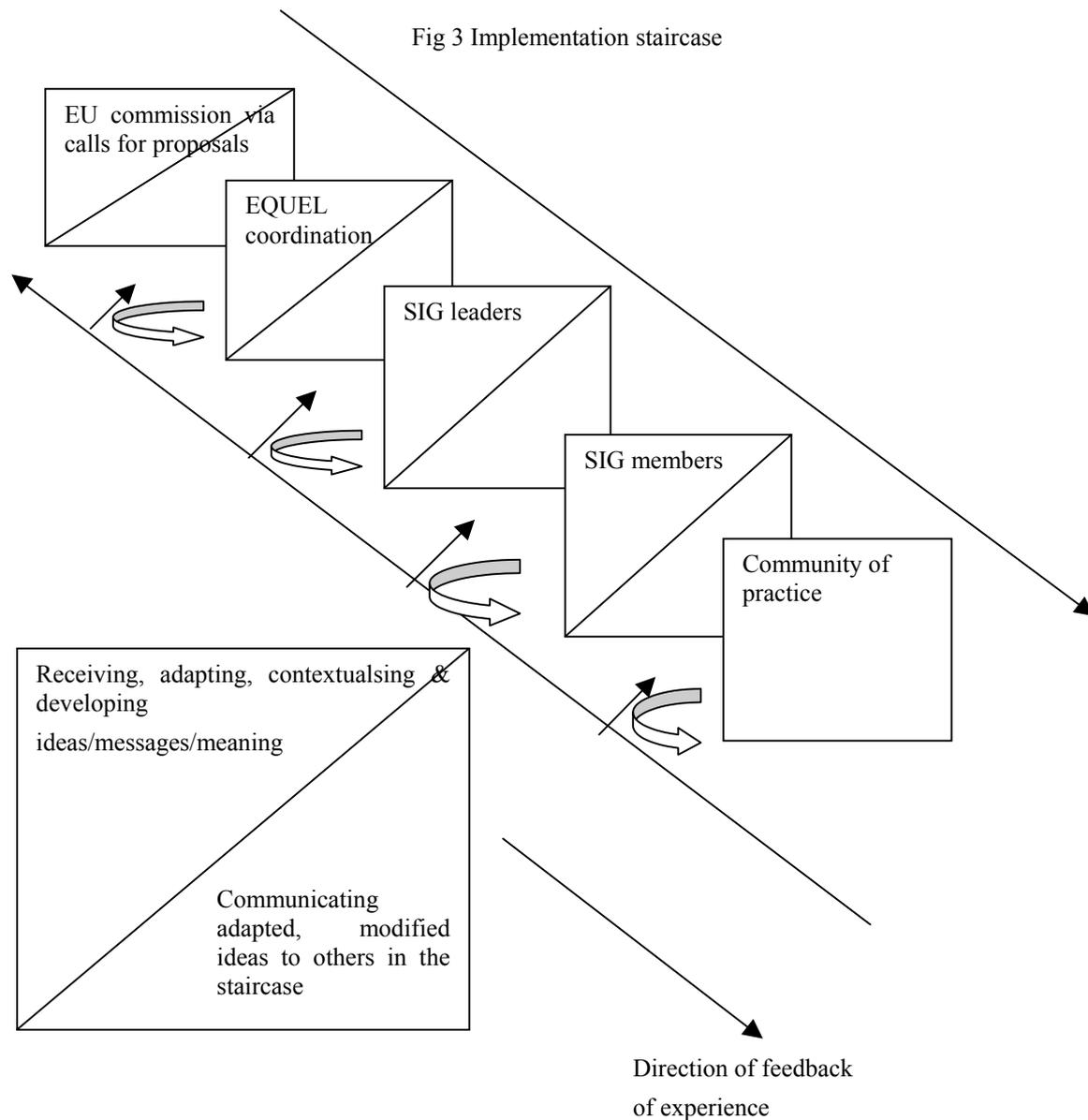
Examples of the kinds of consideration that characterised the exploratory and consolidation periods were the following. At what moment would the relatively unstable discussions, reflections and thoughts within the spaces of the EQUEL web site and face-to-face or by phone be made more publicly available i.e. through an open web

page? In many ways it was not appropriate to do this until participants were more confident about the learning points which had emerged i.e. had created some provisional stabilities. At that stage it was unclear to what extent such stabilities were beginning to emerge across the whole project. In that collaborative learning was a strong part or a core element in the vision of EQUEL, it was interesting to reflect on the alignment between the processes that embody EQUEL and its core vision. Are the practices that are developing collaborative and in what ways are they producing new learning? Some of the 'peripheral' members [members who participate only sometimes in group activities] might find it quite hard to participate in the strong 'communities of practice' which were beginning to emerge around specific activities-how would they break into these quite strongly bounded inter-actional processes? There was a sense in which the centre of gravity for EQUEL was in the activities within rather than across SIGs. The evaluation suggested there was a relatively undeveloped sense of inter SIG or whole project knowledge. In what sense were there practices in the project that displayed inter-SIG knowledge or had a sense of the broader EQEL project purpose, that is, to develop a Centre that provided a range of services to an e-learning community for example. It was uncertain at what stage and under what conditions and how might inter-SIG knowledge or the broader mission might begin to emerge. It was interesting to speculate whether it was accurate to depict EQUEL as having the potential for a quite unusually diverse and disparate focus *within* as well as between SIGs. At the exploratory and consolidation phases, this diversity was seen as stimulating and exciting, if uncertain. However, the provisional stability needed for development was made much more difficult by this strength.

 It was also interesting to establish the levels and understanding of the notion of collaboration *'as practice'* within the project. There were instances of critical friend activity around specific developments in teaching, shared reflections on mutual activities and critical commentaries on more stable ideas and theories. It has transpired that the outcomes or products of EQUEL have been stabilised and, to some extent, reified by the production of texts or papers focusing on the Network Learning Conference, although it is unlikely that this will form the end of development. In an important sense provisional stabilities centre on the virtual meetings or reflections that are taking place periodically that have then produced text based artefacts. Is this the most useful place to look for examples/evidence of collaborative learning that has taken place within a SIG that can then be stabilised provisionally and shared more widely?

The implementation staircase

It is important to understand the way in which project messages are 'transmitted' or move through a system and are modified and adapted as they are expressed by one group of participating stake-holders to another [See Saunders, Charlier and Bonamy [2002]. As we note above, we use the metaphor of the implementation staircase to capture this process. The point about this metaphor is that it suggests the importance of constructing the experience of the project from the points of view of all the main stake-holders within the system. Further, it suggests these points of view may well differ significantly and it is the task of the evaluation to 'uncover' these important differences. Another dimension to this metaphor is the way in which each group acts as both a receiver and an agent of a project message and through this process, the project message will undergo adaptation and understood very differently according to the unique and situated experience of each stake-holding group. As we note above, using the unit of analysis we have is contentious. It is predicated on the view that there was enough in common between the SIG leaders and between the SIG members to make these units of analysis viable. It must be said that only after analysing the various data sets did this become apparent.

Fig 3 Implementation staircase

EU commission via calls for proposals

EQUEL coordination

SIG leaders

SIG members

Community of practice

Receiving, adapting, contextualsing & developing

ideas/messages/meaning

Communicating adapted, modified ideas to others in the staircase

Direction of feedback of experience

We will now turn to the depiction of the EQUEL project based on face-to-face interviews and on-line questions with stake-holders occupying the different steps in the Implementation Staircase. This analysis will show that the depiction of a complex project like EQUEL is dependent on the situated understanding of project practice and priorities from each of the stake-holding groups on the staircase and their emphasis differs markedly. The last group stakeholders i.e. the e-learning community has not been addressed in this paper. We illustrate points with the use of extracts from interviews and on-line observations from EQUEL members. These are anonamised.

STAKEHOLDERS' PREOCCUPATIONS ON THE EQUEL IMPLEMENTATION STAIRCASE

EU preoccupations with EQUEL as an e-learning project

Inspection of the documents announcing and describing the parameters for proposals under this initiative [Preparatory and innovative actions: e-Learning action plan - DG EAC/25/01], identified a general discourse associated with up-skilling in order to gain global competitive advantage, to provide 'resources' for learning on

a wide front and to identify 'good practice' or even to address the issue of standards within the e-learning environment.

> "The *e*-Learning initiative of the European Commission seeks to mobilise the educational and cultural communities, as well as the economic and social players in Europe, in order to speed up changes in the education and training systems for Europe's move to a knowledge-based society" [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/programmes/elearning/programme_en.html.]

> *"eEurope is a roadmap to modernise our economy. At the same time, through its eLearning component, it offers everyone, but particularly young people, the skills and tools they need to succeed in the new knowledge based economy."* (Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission)

These messages align a practical concern with 'good practice' with the idea of a central focus on the 'learner', as an EU commentator said

> "put back the learners in the driving seat and take into account the real problems"

Other messages centred on the discourse of 'quality' i.e. to identify 'best practice' and to build resources that can be adaptive and participative in that the approaches, maxims and resources would not need complex mediation by those other than practitioners.

 In interviews there was an emphasis on the notion of 'Networking' which aimed at transferring practices by through collaboration.

> "the human networks are central"

Both the notion of 'collaboration' and 'network' were left unspecified, particularly in the extent to which and how, they would bring about changes and improvements. In other words, both in interview and in the documents, there was not much evidence of a strong theory of change.

There was a preoccupation with how projects like EQUEL would impact on the target groups of learners and practitioners. Interestingly, responsibility for the resource and planning issues associated with sustaining the work of the projects were left un-specified.

> "The main issue for a project (as EQUEL) is: 'are you able to disseminate on a larger scale concrete tools, grids, services and supports?'"

> "The issue of Services is important: it can be very simple things as a web site, a good demonstration on PowerPoint, a hit parade of articles, an audio comment or a re-edited conference. Humility is here important very simple things can be very useful. It is necessary to show simple and concrete achievements (even in very complex matters). They become tools for the user."

As we note earlier, the stake-holding groups occupying steps in an implementation staircase are composed of real people, in real time, promoting one view or another, winning some points which become enshrined in a policy and losing others; all depending on a complex mix of power based and strategic factors. It is important not to 'reify' the perspectives emanating from any stake-holding group. In a significant sense, while policy documents are clearly a form of reification, they embody non-reified negotiations that have happened during their development. It will be interesting to track the way the EQUEL approach is received by the EU officers in that there may well be diverse understanding between a view of EQUEL as a provider of general learner oriented quality *services* and EQUEL as a designer of EU wide quality *standards* for e-learning.

EQUEL co-ordination preoccupations

From an EQUEL co-ordination point of view, there were preoccupations concerning fundamental 'vision' type questions, but predictably, the positioning of the role of co-ordination means that central strategic thinking and practice circulates around issues associated with running the project and having a tangible outcome at the end of it. In the context of EQUEL, there were some unique conjunctural features that provided real co-ordination conundrums. As in all projects of this type, participation was on the basis of highly diverse factors, individuals understood EQUEL in very different ways, the development of any clear or firm understanding of the outcomes of EQUEL were also diverse and relatively undeveloped and the groups that formed the SIGs were composed of both well worked existing networks, and individuals with no particular network 'affiliation'. Strong views on the type of technical platform that might be developed to support EQUEL and even a virtual centre in the longer term also militated against straightforward consensus.

From a co-ordinating point of view, however, there was a working understanding of the discourse and thinking [referred to above] that underscored the EQUEL project:

> "…my interpretation of it and that was not an entirely uninformed interpretation after having taken part in a discussion they wanted to have, was locate some of the best practice and the best work to make it accessible to people at a European level so that they were giving people access to other research, innovation and best practice and of course they do operate at the level of best practice as a concept discourse, although we didn't"

There was therefore a degree of continuity between understanding at this step in the implementation staircase and the previous one in which the policy approach has its genesis. Other discursive continuities can also be discerned at the level of 'vision'. An important part of the vision, and the part that most if not all the participants in EQUEL expressed comfort with, was the notion of 'collaborative learning'. While diversely interpreted, this notion suggests that engaging in tasks, activities, problem solving interactively, with others, has a positive effect both on the learning experience for the participants and on the quality of the learning outcomes, whatever they may be. This holds in general but particularly in the context of e-learning. To that extent, the project was imbued with this vision of 'services' or a centre of excellence i.e. they should be generated collaboratively.

> "We believe that without the kind of Centre for excellence in research and innovation in e-learning that we propose, post-compulsory and higher education institutions in Europe will not have the necessary access to research and practice that seeks to achieve e-quality (in every sense) in e-learning. That is, e-learning that is based on principles of collaborative learning and dialogical processes and which acknowledges diversity in orientation and practice in teaching and learning processes" [EQUEL proposal p 15].

How the wider community might interact with these resources was not emphasised.

> "….trying to work according to our (aims, vision, philosophy) which is to, I guess understand and learn through collaborative mechanisms and thought processes, so they said design a project actively based on that notion and constructed as far as possible in a collaborative way, you know that was actually a very conscious effort to do"

The variety of backgrounds, experience and alliances that characterised EQUEL and the corresponding differences in specific interests, philosophies, research stances and priorities, provided both coordination challenges and rewards from this perspective. Participants were "very interesting people" with a "variety of starting points" but the collaborative rather than hierarchic approach to project practice means that central co-ordination has been at the level of project administration or process concerns [which, as in all EU sponsored projects as been considerable] rather than in terms of SIG content in or around activities.

This 'loosely coupled' network has had two interesting effects. First, It locates the locus of operational effort and attention firmly within the SIGs rather than the project as a whole and de-emphasises the broader purposes of EQUEL as a provider of services in the form of a Centre and emphasises the exploratory dimension of SIG activity. This differs to the preoccupations that emanated from the EU and suggests the exploration of notions of 'services' or a 'centre' has yet to emerge. Second, it has however, encouraged a rich array of artefacts, tools and resources [see Fig 3] that might form the basis of 'bridging tools' for learning for the wider community and coheres very well with one view from the EU concerning the nature of the resources that could potentially form 'services' for learners and practitioners.

One last indication of coordination preoccupations appears prosaic but underscores an important issue. We have depicted EQUEL project process as an implementation staircase. It is composed of a range of exploratory activities associated with learning, conventionally with learning collaboratively, with the ultimate aim of making the outcomes of this work [according to the EU] available as a community resource. By the nature of this exploratory collaborative work, many of the artefacts can be said to be unstable, in the sense that they are still being iterated or are still evolving, at what point do they become 'provisionally stable' and made available to the wider community? There is an interesting dynamic at work here, in that the internal work of the SIGs has a 'protective shield' enabling chances to be taken, risks to be shared, kites to be flown and uncertainties explored, as long as these interactions and the products from them, remain relatively insulated [this is only relative because much work can be externally accessed]. However, once the outcomes of this work are made formally public, this protective shield ceases to operate and there is an imperative that these instabilities become relatively stable.   There has been, therefore, during the course of the project, an understandable tension between the public and private dimensions of EQUEL. Project coordination was placed in a position in which pressure from the EU to go 'public' [show what was going on, what resources had been produced] was countered by project participants who needed to sustain a safe environment for iteration and risk   This Network

Conference is an opportunity to peruse the diversity of bridging resources that have become provisionally stable.

It is possible to see how the policy messages emanating from the EU were taken up but adapted and modified at the level of project design and coordination. The project profile in practice is uniquely shaped by interpretations of priorities fused with an emphasis on a collaborative vision, which built in a tendency for unpredictability and divergence.

SIG leaders and co-ordination preoccupations in EQUEL

We have indicated above the context in which the SIGs were working. SIGs were built around themes associated with the interests of the project participants, a sense of what the key issues were [from this relatively well developed community of practice] and a well informed view of what the EU might consider as important or relevant. The collaborative vision emanating from the project design and the coordination style enabled the project practice at the SIG coordination step on the implementation staircase to be relatively autonomous and participant driven. Understandably, the policy messages, two steps up were relatively de-emphasised.

Each SIG was coordinated from an institutional base and included members who had and had not worked together before. The interest of the members of the SIGs were allowed, by design, to characterise what went on rather than from central organisation, membership of the SIGs was open at the beginning and individuals could choose to participate in any SIG. The biggest challenge from the SIG coordination points of view was to settle on activities that members felt were worthwhile and to cohere members' theoretical and/or research orientations.

The most common strategies were a] to develop intra-SIG groupings in which negotiations around sub themes might become more manageable, b] develop agreements on a devolved approach in which members contributed artefacts, case studies or examples around specific themes c] sub or smaller collaborations around professional problem solving] more unusually, whole SIG projects in which all participated to a greater or lesser extent. All these strategies have created 'core' membership that tended to 'drive' activities along. Resource allocations to the project, time and availability should not be underestimated as key in this process. However, there was another dynamic brought about where a core group developed a strong internal cohesion and agreement. Naturally enough, this process resulted in difficulties for other members to gain access and make a contribution. Given the autonomy of the SIGs, this process developed organically and in an unplanned way. SIG coordinators aimed to develop strategies for involvement, stabilising activity and deciding on outcomes, particularly in the light of the diversity we identify above. In many cases this meant stabilising activities sufficiently to present at the Network Conference. A key strategy used by SIGs was the face-to-face meeting in which key decisions were made, effective sharing of experience occurred and plans were agreed. These meetings were an opportunity for members of the project who had not known each other before to interact and develop friendships.

We have already touched on the under-emphasis of the policy message concerning the idea of a Centre or the provision of services at SIG level and the tendency for the SIGs to be immersed in 'activity' and operate relatively introspectively in this respect. Cross project concerns were not emphasised apart from the use of the technical platform developed to support EQUEL. There were many comments concerning the structure and design of the platform. Some found it an unsympathetic environment to work in without certain key characteristics, in particular 'threading' and 'linking' capacities. The design that centred on the SIG spaces [although there were other spaces of a general kind] also tended to direct attention toward the internality of SIGs rather than the whole project. While there were instances of the EQUEL site being used for collaborative work, they were not as frequent as might have been expected in a project of this kind.

> "There's a feeling perhaps that we don't communicate much in the EQUEL web site: though we do a lot of work 'off line', such as developing and running the two workshops mentioned above. But at times there does seem to be a lack of momentum online - but maybe we shouldn't worry too much about that"

In sum, the project messages adapted and adopted by this SIG coordinating group had some continuities with EU and EQUEL coordination steps in the staircase to the extent to which a diverse, rich and multi-layered set of resources, from a wide range of perspectives had been developed that had potential as a resource for wider community use. This had been brought about by the relatively autonomous processes that characterised each SIG and the sub activities that had developed. However, there are dislocations. The differences centre on the way in which SIGs had produced these resources by giving free rein to engage in activities without necessarily having a view on the end to which they might be put in terms of the EU mission. This perspective is graphically illustrated by the following extract.

"It would be good to think we might develop a centre of excellence and bring together all the work of all the SIG's. That would be a major achievement"

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SIG members preoccupations in EQUEL

As we mention above, the EQUEL project consists, at its heart, of SIGs that have a broad focusing theme. The membership of the SIG was drawn from first, SIG coordinators from institutional bases and thereafter by negotiation begun in a face-to-face meeting at the outset of the project and continued virtually for some time. Eventually the composition of the SIGs was stabilised and the negotiations around key activities and the underlying rationale or theory for them begun. This discussion has in fact continued and continues in parallel with the production of more stable artefacts. All SIG members identified these negotiations as a key preoccupation for them. In one sense the rationale for participating in EQUEL has continued to be an object of discussion throughout the project period and has created discomfort as well as stimulated thinking and learning. The debate has centred on both the most useful foci for the work as well as creating the most viable work processes. At the level of the individual member, these negotiations have featured strongly and have been played out mainly in face-to-face meetings. The extracts below exemplify the way in which the EQUEL project was genuinely shaped by the dynamics of the collaborative efforts of the participants of SIGs, with all the difficulties this implied.

"No doubt having a common purpose was challenging! this is easier said than done. It takes a lot of work to understand and make explicit what the SIG is for in the minds of its members".

"Collaborating is EXTREMELY difficult. Collaboration involves the '...mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve the problem together'. Well, I don't think we have collaborated much in our SIG and in the EQUEL project in general."

"Another sign of this tendency to not collaborate is to post pieces of work that are almost semifinal versions, or some sort of very advanced drafts, and not embryonic and unstructured ideas to be discussed with the others and used to build something more organized and structured".

"The most challenging aspect has been to understand where people are coming from in terms of the knowledge and experience they are contributing to the Project, particularly in the concentrated timescale for the Project and to establish a fruitful dialogue for moving forward. Hhaving got through this initial process of 'getting to know' the other partners, there has then been the challenge of how the different perspectives 'fit' together and what they mean."

"Arriving at understandings between individuals in the SIG about the main

purpose and focus of the SIG; enabling difference at the same time as

attempting to reach common purpose"

Alongside this defining experience was the more prosaic but still critical issue of the time and effort of sustaining an active participation in the project. For many members, this pressure to be active within severe time constraints was a continual source of discomfort and was part of the reason for concentrating mainly on SIG based activity. Two other important adaptations, both echoing the SIG coordinators' view, characterise this groups' experience of the project. The first is the under emphasis of the 'whole project' as members are immersed in negotiating their SIG based activity and SIG based dynamics

"I get the feel that everyone's attention has been on the individual SIGs rather than EQUEL. In my second SIG the main challenge has been the dominance of the agenda from the 'home' core group. The SIG has run in their interests and the others in the SIG have really performed functions for them and their agenda rather than been partners in a joint enterprise. This is being raised in the SIG but does not have a public face as yet."

The second is the realisation of the background issue concerning broad purpose and the idea that SIG based work has some wider implications.

"I think our biggest challenge is to have our work connected up to big policy questions. For instance, an e-Learning response to support the Bologna declaration would be good; I am concerned that otherwise our project will go the way of many other European projects, i.e. disappear into a Eurobin"

"I feel that our priority has been to complete the work of our SIG and that there has not been enough time to discuss continuation. Also, the work of the SIGs has been to some extent mapping and analysing the knowledge that already exists - and not necessarily consideration of how this output can be used. I feel that the concentrated timescale of the Project has made it difficult for this to happen."

While these issues of broader purpose are important and the dynamics of SIG life have been challenging, the process of inter-cultural collaboration has yielded rich possibilities for learning. These extracts are typical.

> "The meetings. There have been some very enjoyable and stimulating discussions of substantive issues. I also find this (and EQUEL as a whole) a most agreeable bunch of people to spend time with. Good to work with academics who clearly care about what happens to their students. "

> "Different viewpoints and efforts to try and 'deal with difference'!

Finding (as we have) some shared perceptions despite the very disparate cultural and social settings in which our work is based. The efforts to resolve the differences into a shared overall vision have been very stimulating and revealed issues that I would not have otherwise considered. In this way I do think the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

The members' preoccupations have centred on the interactive dimension of negotiating a viable and rewarding modus operandi within SIGs. The main pre-occupation has been with the amount of time and effort involved in being an active and valued member and the extent to which this cohered with personal agendas of work. Issues associated with the whole project or the purposes of EQUEL as an EU project inevitably fade at this point in the staircase. Still undeveloped but potentially important, is the extent to which members, SIG coordinators and EQEL coordination have a consistent view of the relative balance between practitioner concerns and the aims of research and theory in networked learning.
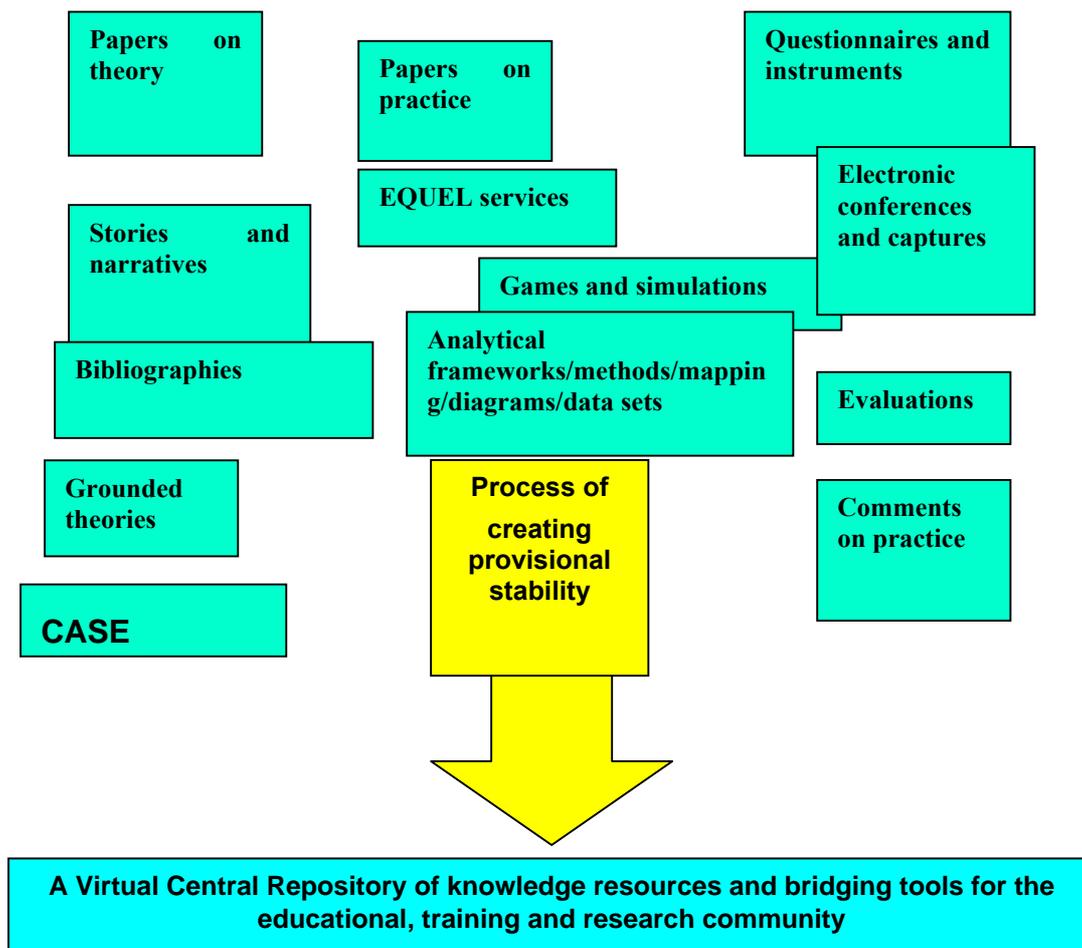
OVERVIEW

We have used the implementation staircase as a way of depicting the EQUEL project. We have identified the way in which project messages move down and to some extent up, a project implementation staircase and groups occupying the different steps have different sets of priorities. They modify and adapt the project message in the light of their own situated realities. These realities are to some extent produced by the design and functioning of the project itself but also reflect historical realities brought to the project by previous experience. When portraying a project or even a policy-in-practice, we would argue the authenticity of its expression is enhanced through the depiction of the stake-holding groups as its messages are modified, adapted and reconfigured through practice.

ISSUES OF SUSTAINABILITY

We have identified the conundrum at the heart of the EQUEL project given voice, if indirectly, by the various stake-holders. That is that EQUEL has been able, through the efforts of its members, to create a richly diverse set of products and resources [see Fig 3]. This project purported to be creating a centre of excellence to be used as a resource for the community. In fact it has produced the ***resources*** for a ***potential*** centre of excellence. The dynamics of the project have meant a focus on the production of resources but not on the purpose of this effort. We now need to turn our attention to how these resources might be used, what kind of platform might best serve their use, how they can evolve and how different types of user groups might interact with them and gain benefit. In other words, we need a vision of an EQUEL Centre.

Fig 4 EQUEL knowledge resources as 'bridging tools' and knowledge resources

Papers on theory	Papers on practice	Questionnaires and instruments
EQUEL services	Electronic conferences and captures
Stories and narratives	Games and simulations
Bibliographies	Analytical frameworks/methods/mapping/diagrams/data sets	Evaluations
Grounded theories	Process of creating provisional stability	Comments on practice
CASE

A Virtual Central Repository of knowledge resources and bridging tools for the educational, training and research community

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