Staff Development And E-Tutors Training

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the rationale for the training and staff development of e-tutors. We then examine how this is implemented in practice through the presentation of case studies from three European universities. Finally we analyse the differences and similarities of these case studies to exemplify some principles for training models and guidelines for training of e-tutors. We conclude that although it is possible to identify these principles of good practice, there is great flexibility and diversity of methods and approaches in the training and staff development of e-tutors.

Keywords

Staff development, teacher training, professional development, training the trainers, e-tutors, university, e-learning

INTRODUCTION

In web-based training, distant education and in most other forms of e-learning, the teacher/tutor is very important, sometimes more important than in traditional education. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is different from traditional education and teachers often need to be trained for these new roles. This presents a major challenge for teachers, particularly in understanding how they can adapt their professional practice from teaching in face-to-face contexts to teaching in virtual learning environments. What forms of training are most effective and how are these being developed?

This training can be performed in various ways and is sometimes dependent on the specific course context and/or learning situation that is to be taught. In this paper, we exemplify and comment on a number of different approaches for teacher/staff development at three different European universities. Adoption of training models, guidelines or training principles can help us to operationalize and standardize the e-tutors' interventions. Different models of tutor training can be identified and applied to concrete fieldwork (e.g. Salmon, 2000 ; Denis, 2003). One of our SIG goals is to propose to the EQUEL partners to do some concrete fieldwork with them in the domain of tutor training. That means to help them to design and/or to follow up tutors' training sessions. These activities are based on the recommendations coming from the literature analysis and the expertise of the SIG partners.

Three experiences of e-tutors' and e-teacher's training are presented here and analysed. Those illustrations enhance the reflection on the organisation and the efficiency of tutors' training and provide recommendations about it.

Tutors' training in the Learn-Nett project

Objectives and actors

The Learn-Nett project started in 1997 with the aim of implementating a collaborative learning environment at an interuniversity level to address the needs of future teachers or trainers using Information Communication Technologies for Education (ICTE) (Charlier *et al.,*1999a). The learners work at a distance and the course objectives are concerned with (1) the collaboration process (to collaborate at a distance with other students, to efficiently use distance collaboration tools), (2) the product of the collaborative work (to create or analyse an ICTE use using typologies to characterise it and disseminate the product), (3) a reflexive process about the experience (describe and analyse the learning experience).

In 2004, students of three countries (Belgium, France and Switzerland) and seven institutions are involved [see http://www.icampus.ucl.ac.be/LN2004/]. The learning environment includes several actors: local animators, tutors, professors, learners and coordinators.

The local animator trains the students of his/her university in pedagogical aspects (educational uses of ICTs, collaborative learning concept…). He/she provides technical prerequisites and a hot line during the project, works in collaboration with the professors and the tutors and contributes to the regulation of the process. At the end of the project, he/she organises an evaluation session with all the local actors.

A tutor is in charge of a group of learners from different universities and interacts at a distance with them. Referring to Deschryver (2003), the tutor's roles in such a distance collaborative learning environment aim at building a community of users, clarifying the project, organising work and ideas, helping to choose the relevant resources, evaluating the work (task and collaboration process). It was found necessary to train the tutors before starting the collaborative work, and training sessions have been organised since 1999 (Charlier *et al*, 1999b).

The professor is responsible for the course at the university. Officially, he/she defines the objectives, the number of hours to credit to this work in the curriculum and the evaluation criteria. He/she can ask for information from the animator and/or the tutor. The learners are graduate or postgraduate students enrolled in a course dealing with educational technologies. The coordinator manages the project and he/she is the interlocutor between all the university partners. In 2004 about fifty students are enrolled and among the training staff, there are fifteen e-tutors, seven local animators and seven teachers.

Main phases of the collaborative learning activities

The first phase is a technical and pedagogical preparation period: presentation of the objectives, of the actors' roles, of the planning and of the evaluation criteria. The learners also state their expectations of the project. As some competences are prerequisites to work collaboratively at a distance, the animator trains - if necessary - the learners. The technical training also includes a familiarisation with the Learn-Nett campus and its tools.

The e-tutor starts intervening during the second phase (groups constitution and first virtual contacts). After the choice of their project topic, the learners will be enrolled in a group (maximum 5 students) including students from two institutions. The tutors discuss together the groups constitution, respecting as well as possible the learners' topics first choices. After, each tutor starts interacting with his/her group.A videoconference is organised to meet each other. The third phase concerns the clarification of the project, the division and the negotiation of tasks. Regular interactions between the group and the tutor are then necessary. The local animator also assists the learners.

The next steps are the realisation of the collaborative project and its evaluation by the tutor and by peers. At the end, the learners publish their work in the virtual campus space and write down a report on their learning process.

Tutors training

The tutors' training sessions are organised following the six phases of the Denis' model (2003): (1) experience of a distance learning system, (2) sharing representations ofthe tutors' roles, (3) definition of a tutor's target profile, (4) consensus on tutor's roles and editing of a charter, (5) practical preparation and (6) animation and feedbacks loops.

About fifteen tutors are enrolled in this training every year. It starts with a one-day course where tutors can live and experiment the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) where they will work later. One of the objectives of this session is to produce a common framework about tutor's roles and interventions and to and to reach agreement about these. After having presented the VLE philosophy and its tools and resources, the participants share their representations on what would be the e-tutor's roles in Learn-Nett. First the future tutors discuss in subgroups by chat with the help of a tutor (who is experienced in tutoring collaborative groups) in order to produce their vision of the e-tutor's roles. Just after, during a plenary session, they submit their conclusions to the whole group and a common e-tutor profile is agreed. The common profile is edited and helps the future tutors to remember their roles and to communicate them to the learners. During another activity, short case studies are proposed and the future tutors have to say how they would react to these situations. This helps to clarify what the limits of their roles are, considering that there exist other educational actors (professors, "local animator', etc) to whom specific tasks are assigned. After this one-day training, a follow-up by phone conference, forum,… is organized to ensure support to the tutors.

Results

The common profile defined is not standardized as the tutors intervene differently with the groups. During the training sessions, the participants highlighted the need to be proactive, especially if the learners do not have individual autonomy in attaining objectives such as the collaborative work organisation, the search for relevant resources, the mutually agreed agenda. The degree of proactivity can also vary from one phase of the project to another. The tutor's roles are focused on pedagogical and communicational processes and depends on the specific situation and evolution of each group.

The Learn-Nett team organised three training sessions for future tutors. Comparing two training sessions (one with tutor training and one without) in the same collaborative learning system, we have observed that these activities favour a certain coherence of the interactions between the e-tutor's and the learners in respect to the objectives of the learning activities. Tutor training provides more equality in the interventions of the different tutors.

Virtual workshops in e-learning for academic staff at the University of Sheffield

At the University of Sheffield School of Education, our approach to e-tutor training has been developed because of the identified need to support academic staff in developing their professional practice in e-tutoring. This is complex because the range of professional development needs for e-tutoring goes beyond mastery of the technology and includes pedagogic and managerial knowledge and skills as follows (Thompson ,1997):

- conducting successful group discussions online
- new class management techniques
- managing online commitments with other responsibilities
- developing appropriate assessment strategies
- changing administrative processes

Through our experience of running a virtual Masters programme in E-Learning (http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/csnl) we have also developed a course design that reflects the diversity of needs of participants and also the diversity of forms of provision in training for e-tutors (Banks, Lally and McConnell 2002). To meet the growing expectations of staff in wanting to adapt their practice to technology-based teaching and learning, there is a need for staff developers to develop forms of provision to support the development of good practice to meet the growing expectations of staff in wanting to adapt their pratice to technology-based teaching and learning. There are still gaps in provision of training the trainers programmes, as identified by Alexander (1999).

Course context and design

In early 2003, we were commissioned by the LTSN Generic Centre in the UK to run two virtual workshops in e-learning to help academic staff develop an understanding of e-learning in their teaching. The target group for the two courses was mainly teachers in Higher Education in the UK but also staff responsible for staff training and development and support staff.

For this purpose, we designed the workshops as virtual learning communities that were experiential in enabling participants to learn about e-learning and e-tutoring while experiencing it for themselves. The workshops had specific aims and outcomes relating to the implementation of e-learning in different contexts, pedagogy, student motivation and achievement, group work online, collaborative learning, learning communities, course designs and e-tutoring. Each workshop lasted for 18 hours over a three-week period. After the first week of introduction and socialization, handouts and case studies related to key topics were posted and discussed online. The role of the e-tutor was to create the community, facilitate discussion, intervene at key points, and be a co-learner. Participants were supported by a variety of resources, including articles and case studies on e-learning, documents posted when required, hot links to web sites and a dedicated web site. In the final stage, all the activities were reviewed and constituted a resource for participants to continue their work. Our workshops were fully recruited within 10 days of advertising them on the Web, with a long waiting list - indicating the market demand for this kind of provision.

Evaluation results

The participants valued most the experience of being an online learner and the interactions with the tutor and the other participants. The tutor herself served as a model of an e-tutor through her facilitation and communication style online. They also valued the structuring of activities with specific learning outcomes related to each activity and the provision of resources that could continue to be used following the end of the workshop. Although the online workshops were clearly successful, there were a number of issues arising from the evaluation:

- The timescale of 18 hours for each workshop was too short to achieve certain learning outcomes relating to skills and knowledge. We found that it took longer for participants to feel comfortable with working and communicating online than we had anticipated. Although we have identified a market demand for short online courses, we would recommend that future workshops last for a minimum of 30 hours.

- We provided a lot of learning content in the workshops, including good practice examples, references to the latest literature and handouts on key topics. However, we found that participants valued the interactions with the e-tutor and with each other as much as the use of these resources. We therefore recommend that the learning community model where participants discuss their professional interests and work on activities related to these in collaboration with others is particularly appropriate for this training context.

- We have identified a number of barriers to participation in online workshops. These have been identified as:

  Time: the heavy workload of many participants meant that they often struggled to participate in the workshops and sometimes fell behind in the online activities as a result. As they connected to the workshops through their workplace, this restricted the time available for participation.

  Levels of participation: there were three levels of participation in the workshops - a high level of activity, a low level of activity and non-participation. Clearly time was a factor here, but we had several participants who did not participate in the workshop but nevertheless reported that they had benefited from it.

  Confidence of participants and managing diversity: there was great diversity in the experience and knowledge of participants, ranging from novices to those with specific responsibility for e-learning. We required participants to post biographies as a means of building the learning community, and several of those participants with less experience were clearly intimidated by being in the same workshop as those they perceived as being 'experts'. We will change our methods for using biographies in the future.

  Workload of workshop facilitator: the short length of the workshops meant that there was a concentrated timescale for achieving certain learning outcomes, and this placed an unreasonable burden on the workshop facilitator in getting to know the participants, facilitating the discussion and activities and keeping to the timescale for covering all the topics. This is another important reason for extending the timescale of the workshop.

From this evaluation, we have concluded that this model of virtual tutor training through experiential learning in a professional development context with online communication as the medium for knowledge and skills development is very successful. However, adaptations need to be made to the course design in terms of length of the course and to scaffold the online activities in ways that acknowledge more explicitly the learning contexts of both the tutor and the participants.

Teacher training courses at the Karolinska Institutet

Karolinska Institutet (KI) is a medical university with about 5000 students in 19 different undergraduate programs, all focusing on medicine and healthcare. KI also has 2500 graduate (PhD) students, making KI as one of the largest medical universities in Europe. Most teachers at KI are primarily considering themselves as researchers, but with more or less educational obligations. Very few of them have any formal pedagogical training. In year 2002, the board of education at KI wanted to change this situation and initiated a number of formal teacher training courses for KI teachers and later on, KI took the decision that all teachers at KI should have at least three weeks of formal pedagogical training. Today, year 2004, there are 16 different teacher-

training courses at KI, out of which two are dedicated to e-learning and net-based/distant learning [http://www.lime.ki.se/cul_education_teacher.htm]. Some of the other courses also contain some examples of e-learning methods and distant education. During the period 2002-2003 more than 500 teachers have attended one or more of these courses.

Teacher course in net-based learning

The Net-based/distance education (DE) teacher-training course (1 week) is set up as a two-step problem based course for 20 teachers. In step 1 (2 days), the teachers are divided into groups of 2-4 and after a short introduction of learning theories (incl. Biggs' model on constructive alignment) and distance education basics, they are given the task to create a course-plan for a fictitious DE course. This practical task is mixed with more theories on learning and net-based learning tools and practices. This part is ending with a general discussion on all developed course plans and their pros and cons of them. This step allows even inexperienced teachers to get theoretical and practical base to stand on when trying to start thinking as an e-tutor.

The second step of the DE course is based on the teacher's own courses, where they are given the task to create a detailed course-plan, including practical solutions to all ingoing activities. This part of the course is performed on part-time basis during two weeks using Karolinska Institutet's DE platform PingPong allowing all teachers experience how it is to be a student in a DE course). Support is given by the instructors via the platform only, and the different teacher groups are also instructed to give comments on the other group's preliminary course plans and practical set-ups via the platform.

The course is ended with a physical meeting where all developed courses are presented and discussed. Here, the role of the teacher and the role of the students in DE courses are thoroughly discussed.

The first version of this course has recently been given, resulting on very positive comments from the teachers. Most of all they appreciated the they could work with their own courses and DE problems during the course, and many of the teachers also pointed out that it was a good experience to be able to use a DE platform during the course.

Teacher course in eLearning

The second teacher-training course at KI with focus on e-learning is a broader course, covering a variety of e-learning tools, examples, experiences from courses and practical pedagogical hints. This one-week course starts with a survey of possible e-learning methods and their applicability to medicine and healthcare. The course week is a mix of theory, demonstrations and practical work on Web-based learning material, Visualisation & Simulation methods in medical learning, planning of eLearning courses, copyright and intellectual properties, the situation of the teacher and the student, video conferencing in learning and a very brief introduction to distant education.

This course has been running since 2002 and is very popular amongst the teachers at KI, most of them pointing out the good thing with seeing many different applied examples from the field of medicine and being able to work practically with a number of e-learning tools that they think might be able to use in medical learning.

Final comments on the KI experience

As mentioned above, the teachers at KI have very seldom any formal pedagogical training. Even after teaching for 20 years at KI, this is rare. Furthermore, most undergraduate courses at KI are rather special for medical universities, contain many laborative moments and are very often linked to clinical education and/or practical medical skills.

This indicates the need of specialised teacher training courses, where both the specifics of a medical university and the broad educational knowledge must be combined into dedicated courses. Moreover, a mix of theories and practise seems to be very important because of the lack of formal educational training.

Our experience tells us that this might be possible to develop with good results, but that even more specialised e-learning and net-based learning courses might be needed. This might for example be needed for teachers of clinical medicine (using for example net-based simulation of patient cases, net based clinical learning resources etc) or teachers in laboratory courses (virtual laboratories, internet based labs, etc). [For examples of specialized medical e-learning systems, please refer to for example: http://www.lime.ki.se/cul_research_et_projects.htm].

These kinds of specialized and sometimes rather advanced simulation methods call for special course set-ups [Bergin & Fors 2003, Bergin *et al* 2003] and thus, special roles for teachers/tutors, which need to be trained. These types of highly specialised teacher training courses are now under discussion at KI.

CONCLUSION

From these three case studies of e-tutor training, we can conclude that applications of e-tutor training are very diverse in their modes of delivery, use of technology and pedagogic methods. However, we believe this diversity to be a strength because it demonstrates the flexibility of provision as these case studies, while addressing different training contexts, also have much in common:

- All the courses make use of technology but in different ways – fully virtual, online combined with face-to-face meetings, use of online and paper resources and ongoing learning support sometimes online. The technology used ranges from virtual learning environments to web-based resources;

- The courses are customised to the needs of participants and negotiation of content and process is an integral part of the course;

- The courses develop both knowledge and skills of participants, including both pedagogic and technology skills;

- The courses foster to a greater or lesser degree active collaboration and sharing of knowledge between participants;

- Modelling of good practice and materials is embedded in the course delivery. The online communications actively promotes 'apprenticeship' where less experienced participants can learn from the communication and behaviour of more experienced participants. This approach enables the experiential methods of the courses to have a stronger impact on practice.

From this analysis, we conclude that while there is great diversity of practice in the training and staff development of e-tutors, there are also some principles of pedagogy and implementation that these courses have in common. We also conclude that it is possible to deploy a wide range of strategies in the training and staff development of e-tutors and there is scope for further development in this emerging field of practice to meet the growing expectations of teachers and learners.

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