

Changing concepts and educational paradigm in the frame of ODL.

Pia Guttorm Andersen and Ole Hansen, TESS Network®

Under the motto: "Knowledge without frontiers" TESS Network® has developed new ways for the educational thinking. The project, SocraTESS ODL Network, which is founded by the Socrates programme, ODL action is an example on how the use of open and distance learning (ODL) has played a part in creating change and development in both the traditional in-service training of teachers as well as in the teaching methods and their attitude towards educational change.

SocraTESS ODL Network

The project is a European collaboration centred around in-service training of teachers from basic schooling (primary and lower secondary) based on an open and distance learning environment (ODL). The collaboration uses as its starting point work with educational integration. The collaboration comprises 13 partners from 11 countries.

The aims and objectives of the project is:

1. to develop and carry out an ODL course: Teaching Children to Read on effective strategies in the teaching of beginner readers, in the light of the international reading survey (IEA, 1994).
2. to develop a pedagogical network and on-line service for teachers in Europe.
3. to implement a co-operational model between educational institutions in Europe with regard to the development of ODL-based teaching material, including the development of a model of how qualifications achieved with the help of ODL can be evaluated.

The primary phase for basic schooling: teachers and pupils in basic schooling, school psychologists, pedagogical consultants and school heads. The number of people who has benefit of the project through active participation and circulation of results is 200 people.

The project's pedagogical approach

SocraTESS ODL Network has further developed an in-service training concept, which was started under the Nordic Council of Ministers, HELIOS I & II and the HORIZON initiatives.

The concept consists of three levels:

- A: The general reflective level, where teacher groups (course participants) from the same school work together with teacher groups from other schools on a given course module and the problem issues to be dealt with on the course. A tutor will be attached to this level, preferably one of the designers of the course.
- B: The specializing and deeper-going level, where teachers (course participants) with a particular interest can enroll in a study group with a specific special-needs problem issue which, for example, might have been revealed through work on level A. A person with a special insight into the problem issue raised will be attached to this level, and the teachers (course participants) will be arranged in study groups with colleagues from near and far. At this level an international perspective will be introduced into problem issues, which are specific to the SEN field.

C: The theory-into-practice and problem-orientated level, where teachers (course participants) organize and execute agreed educational projects (with pupils as a target group). Opportunities for collaboration between the schools will be translated into practical terms and the exchange of experiences will occur as a part of the daily practice. An on-line project advisory service will be attached to this level.

The project's pedagogical method has been chosen and developed on the basis of a requirement that the project's end-user group, teachers in basic schooling, must be incorporated directly into the in-service training programme on several levels:

In order to execute the distance learning courses (level A of the concept), teachers must be able to describe and incorporate concrete teaching modules and/or syllabus areas from their own practice.

The participating teachers have defined the content of the study groups (level B of the concept). The collaborating teachers have defined the content of the inter-school collaborative projects (level C of the concept).

The teachers carry out individual and written evaluations of the activities in progress, on a running basis.

The development of the subject-specific content of the activities has taken place in a transnational collaboration between the educational establishments (universities, ministries and teacher training colleges), which have comprised the partners in the project.

The focus of the project has been reading and the development of early reading skills. Reading skills and their development make up a large part of the efforts being made to improve the level of general skills in European mainstream education. The results from the international reading survey (IEA) constitute the knowledge on which the project builds and therefore forms the basis of the developed concept.

Teaching Children to Read - A quality description of the outcome

The course is about teaching children to read. In the early 1990s an extensive survey - the IEA Study of Reading Literacy - was undertaken in 32 countries around the world.

By comparing information about cultures, school systems and the strategies employed for teaching reading, the survey provides a basis for considering effective teaching. This course is based on the findings of the Survey. The main aims of the Survey are explained in the following paragraph:

"Many diverse views exist about the best way to teach children to read, yet little is known about which countries are most successful in achieving this aim or what the most productive strategies are for doing so. Moreover the campaigns for turning around the rising tide of illiteracy in the world add a note of urgency in the efforts of literacy researchers and practitioners."

(Foreword to: Elley, Warwick B. The IEA Study of Reading Literacy: Achievement and Instruction in Thirty-Two School Systems)

The course offers the teacher the opportunity to learn about and to share ideas and experiences of teaching reading with teachers in other countries in Europe. The teacher will learn that some strategies and approaches have been found to be more effective than others and will have the opportunity to try them out in the teacher's own classroom.

By reflecting on the teacher's own practice and the experience of teachers in other areas, the course will allow him to consider new possibilities and to enrich and develop his teaching.

The authors of the course believe strongly that the number of children who have reading difficulties, and are labeled as having special educational needs, will be reduced if teachers in Europe can recognize and deploy teaching strategies for reading which are the best and most effective for their particular situation.

The course involves the use of new means - both technical and non-technical thereby improving flexibility of learning in relation to space, time and choice of contents or teaching materials (Open learning) and improving access from a distance to education systems (Distance learning).

This means that the entry requirements in order to follow this course, the teacher will need:

- To have access to a computer with connection to the Internet
- An e-mail address. The teacher may wish to use his own computer at home or he could use a computer in the school, or the teacher may wish to use both.
- To have some familiarity with 'browsing' the World Wide Web, and with sending and receiving e-mail messages
- To be prepared to give time to reading the course texts and to complete the associated tasks
- To find a colleague (or even better several colleagues) in the school or center with whom the teacher can share the course
- To be prepared to reflect upon his practice and to share his ideas and experiences with the colleagues and with other teachers in Europe
- To discuss his intention with his Head teacher and seek his or her approval.

The course consists of 6 modules; all 6 modules must be undertaken to complete the course. Each module consists of:

- A key text (about 10 pages in length) to read and then discuss with a colleague or colleagues in the teacher's own school or center
- Related texts and links to help the teacher develop his understanding of the main ideas in the module
- References to important materials on the Internet and in books
- A task, which includes actions the teacher, has to undertake. The tasks are designed to help the teacher to:
 - o explore ideas relating to the topic of the module
 - o reflect on his current practice
 - o develop his teaching in the light of what he have read and reflected upon.

In carrying out the tasks the teacher will have the opportunity to share his experience with teachers elsewhere in Europe via facilities in the TESS Network®. It is an essential element of the course that the teacher should participate in discussions both with his own colleagues and with teachers elsewhere in Europe.

Changeability, flexibility, and priorities mark the new paradigm

Firstly, the application of information and communication technology into education is considered a major topic of development. The results of the project SocraTESS ODL Network demonstrates, among other things, that flexible in-service teacher education and virtual communities of practice can encourage the individual teachers to become learning citizens and to renew their teaching.

Until recently, the societies in Europe were organized according to the objectives of the industrial production, but the growing importance of knowledge, communication, and co-operation is leading to a world which is no longer static and predictable. European teachers therefore need to be very flexible, very skilled in accessing and using information, and capable of working collaboratively with others if they are to succeed.

Secondly, the current need for education, which is inclusive with respect to children with special education needs, is considered a major topic. The European community needs to develop a school where the frequency of dropout and segregation is drastically reduced and where the individual competence of pupils is increased.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary for teachers through their thinking and teaching practice to, on the one hand, orient themselves towards the criteria for openness and flexibility (mentioned above), and, on the other hand, to anticipate criteria relating to competence in the schools of the future. In order to foster the realization of the human potential, the teachers need to focus on the competences needed by the young generations to be able to study, work and thrive in the 21st century.

Thirdly, the reinforcement of literacy education is considered a major topic. This topic is closely linked to the second topic. Reading is the paved road to a rich life. Thus, every teacher should be knowledgeable with respect to the best ways to encourage and support the development of reading skills.

Open and distance learning

Described above is a pedagogical method, which to a large extent is built upon and incorporates the idea of information and communications technology. In this section special attention is focused on considerations which the application of open and distance learning in in-service training of teachers gives rise to and which are also expressed in the aims and objectives of the project.

By distance learning we mean asynchronous teaching, which combines elements from classroom teaching with flexibility in the spatial and temporal dimensions. This could be teaching using electronic mails, conferencing systems or other electronically mediated systems where several students are working within the same "electronic space".

Distance learning as a method strengthens and raises the quality of the content of collegial network groups. Likewise, earlier experiences show that the dynamic between theory, reflection and practice is strengthened.

Use of a computer and the Internet presents an invitation to learning processes of a more autonomous nature. And seen in this light the incorporation of these facilities can be instrumental in adding real substance to the pedagogical paradigm shift from teaching to learning. The first appearance of the computer was in the laboratory, and the laboratory is - in contrast to the auditorium - primarily based on individual problem solving or problem solving in electronic alliances. In the laboratory (learning) the basic intention is that of working autonomously at a pace and level, which suits the individual, while the auditorium (teaching) to a greater extent delivers the same product to everybody in the same time and place. The idea of this example is to show how perspectives on the nature of open and distance learning embraced by this project could be highly compatible with an individual learning style, based on pupil-to-pupil interaction and on a more problem- and task-oriented dialogue between pupil and teacher/tutor.

It is also this perspective, which undergirds the process of transfer, by teachers, of the pedagogical methods of the project to their own practice (level C). The hypothesis of the project has been that achievement of the greatest possible effect will be obtained if in-service

training of teachers is coupled with the daily pedagogical practice. If teachers are to see the utility value of a paradigm shift, then they must be capable of converting new knowledge into practice. Furthermore, the project builds on the idea of providing teachers with knowledge and experience about ways in which educational (special-needs) tasks can be solved in the classroom through the use of information and communications technology.

Technology

The project uses and exploits primarily the technological standards, which are already in existence. This means that by far the bulk of technical difficulties have been solved in the preparatory phase, so that the technical requirements for participating in the project are present at the start of the pilot project.

The most significant economic innovation in the project can be found in the fact that the collaborative activities of the project, ODL activities, the co-ordination and administration have been freed from physical buildings and are thereby independent of time and place. The experience and knowledge, which is developed in the project is free and accessible to everybody and can therefore create innovation at the local level.

And if you want to know more about this Socrates initiative please go to <http://www.tess.dk>

The writers:

Pia Guttorm Andersen (e-mail: pgt@tess.dk)

Pedagogical advisor in the field of special needs education and ICT

Ole Hansen (e-mail: oha@tess.dk)

Chief school psychologist.

PPR/TESS Network@

Svinget 2

DK - 8382 Hinnerup

<http://www.tess.dk>

References:

SocraTESS ODL Network: Final Report for the Commission, 1998

<http://www.tess.dk/socraodl/report.doc>

External Evaluation Report of the 1st project year, 1998

<http://www.tess.dk/socraodl/ramsocod.htm>

SocraTESS ODL Network: Final Report for the Commission, 1999

<http://www.tess.dk/socraodl/ramsocod.htm>

External Evaluation Report of the 2nd project year, 1999

EuroREAD - Teachers ability to adopt changes

<http://www.tess.dk/euroread/euroread.htm>

Factors regarding teachers ability to adopt changes

-paper for the European Commission on Guidelines, indicators and Innovative Steps towards an inclusive school.

Ole Hansen, et al, DG Education and Culture, December 1999

The Human Potential and its Realization

- An Evaluation of the EuroREAD Project

Bent B. Andresen, DK, January 2000