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CONFERENCE REPORT

SIBILLA REZZONICO*

THE SECOND RESEARCH WORKSHOP OF EDEN RESEARCH AND POLICY IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

University of Hildesheim, Germany
21-23 March 2002

The Second Research Workshop of the European Distance Education Network (EDEN) - "Research and Policy in Open and Distance Learning (ODL)" was organised at the University of Hildesheim, March 21st – 23rd 2002.

The European Distance Education Network (EDEN - www.eden.bme.hu¹) is a non-governmental and non-profit educational association established in May 1991, after the first pan-European Conference on distance education in Budapest in 1990. Its aim is to foster development in distance education through the co-operation and collaboration between a wide range of institutions, networks and individuals in Europe.

EDEN has established special relations with other European networks and international institutions: European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU – www.eadtu.nl), European Universities Continuing Education network (EUCEN – www.fe.up.pt/eucen), European Association for Distance Learning (EADL – www.eadl.org/whatis.htm), European Society for Engineering education (SEFI – www.ntb.ch/SEFI); through a special agreement EDEN is asso-

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¹ All on-line references were checked on 17th May 2002.

ciated with UNESCO (www.unesco.org) and with the International Council for Open and Distance education (ICDE - www.icde.org). There are also regular contacts developed with the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education and Culture (http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture/index_en.htm)) and with the Council of Europe.

In terms of size, range and geographical representation of its members, EDEN is the most comprehensive European ODL association.

Development of research activities

The Annual General Meeting in 1998 decided the new strand of EDEN's activities in the field of research in ODL, through the creation of the research network "R-NET".

The first meeting for presentation and in-depth discussion of research organised by R-NET was held in March 2000 in Prague: "Research and Innovation in Open and Distance Learning."

After this meeting it was decided to organise a second Research Workshop to present an overview of on-going research on ODL in Europe and to give the opportunity to compare projects and experiences in this domain.

More than a hundred participants from 30 countries took part in the event (almost 30% from the eastern European countries): research and educational policy professionals, project groups and consortia working with development and monitoring and observation issues, professionals delegated by traditional and Open Universities, representatives of ODL European associations or networks, and members of private companies.

Plenary sessions presented different facets of European research and policy in ODL, thanks to the contributions of important players in this field such as Claudio Dondi (Sciento, Italy), Peter Floor (Coimbra Group of Universities), Carl Holmberg (DISTUM – Swedish Agency for Distance Education), Hans G. Klaus (Government Programme Implementation, Fraunhofer Gesellschaft), Walter Kugemann, (FIM-Psychologie, University of Erlangen), Wolfgang Nejdil (Learning Lab Lower Saxony and the global Learning Network), Luis Rodriguez-Rosello (Head of Unit, European Commission, DG Information Society), Albert Sangra (Edu Lab, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona), Alan Tait (The Open University, UK) and Erwin Wagner (President of EDEN).

The contribution of Luis Rodriguez-Rosello – *Research and development on technologies for learning: a path towards the Knowledge society* – discusses information and communication technologies that are changing the way in which individuals and organisations live and work and have created the basis for the so called “Information Society” in which we live today. This is a change concerning all the European Union policies. In order for Europe to be a cohesive society, active policies have to be developed.

Being aware of the challenges of fighting against the dangerous digital divide the European Commission (http://europa.eu.int/comm/index_en.htm) has answered by developing a strategy, designing policies and implementing programs. Research programmes such as the recent Information Society technologies (IST-http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/ist/index_en.htm), the programme and the adoption of the “eEurope” and subsequent “eLearning” initiatives all testify to the significance of education and training systems to Europe’s knowledge economy and society.

On 8 December 1999 the European Commission launched an initiative entitled “eEurope - An Information Society for All”.

The eEurope programme (to accelerate the development of the knowledge society and to ensure that its potential is available to everybody) and its action plan have been approved during the Portuguese presidency of the European Union (first half of 2000). The homepage of the eEurope action can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm.

The words of Prodi (President of the European Commission) summarised the global view of the action plan: “eEurope is a roadmap to modernise our economy. At the same time, through the eLearning component, it offers everyone, but particularly young people, the skills and tools they need to succeed in the new knowledge based economy” (January 2002).

As a part of eEurope the “eLearning: thinking the education of tomorrow” defines the initiative to implement the use of ICT and the Internet to improve the quality of the learning process by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchange and collaboration.

Peter Floor’s contribution - *A Framework for European Commission Programme Funding - Policy Paper of the European Open and Distance Learning Liaison Committee* - explained the importance for all member states, governments, and education leaders at all levels and industry work-

ing for this action plan. The ODL Liaison and the constituent Networks give ample attention to the policies adopted and measures, taken and projected, to implement them.

The plenary sessions showed the role of the European Commission and its pursuit of fundamental economic reforms designed to make the European Union the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by the end of the decade.

Parallel sessions were organised around the following topics:

- Educational theory and institutional development
- National surveys and case studies
- Evaluation, benchmarking and standardisation of eLearning systems and courses
- Virtual classrooms and laboratories
- Social and cultural aspects of eLearning
- Collaborative learning on the web
- Development of institutional strategies and solutions in eLearning implementation
- Virtual learning environments and platform
- Learner attitudes, styles and expectations

The last three will be presented in some details.

Development of institutional strategies and solutions in eLearning implementation

One of the most important challenges is to prepare Universities, institutes and companies for delivering high-quality, life-long learning activities for different kinds of target groups.

Many extensive studies carried out by Universities or Institutes in recent years give a comprehensive picture of the eLearning market in Europe and the crucial problems that arise when introducing computer-assisted learning in companies or Universities of any kind and any size.

Against this background Jochen Schiewe analysed the case of the University of Vechta (Germany, www.uni-vechta.de) to show the potentials and the typical problems of the introduction of eLearning in a small University.

The University of Vechta is the smallest University in the State of Lower Saxony, with approximately 2,000 students. In 1999 an interdis-

plinary steering group was established to develop eLearning concepts, implement a basic infrastructure and build internal and external networks.

The activities of the steering group have to be integrated into the structural development of the University, which are supported at a political level.

The description of eLearning activities at the University of Vechta (especially eLearning modules that partially substitute for face-to-face teaching) have shown both some success and typical problems:

The *organisational structure* with a centralised steering group is an effective solution for small Universities, which are not affected by long distance and complicated communication channels. Since the University of Vechta lacks the money to afford full-time personal developing eLearning activities (the actual steering group is the hobby of a research scientist). This problem, typical of small Universities, endangers the sustainable development of these activities.

The *administration capacity* of the Computing Centre has not grown in a manner parallel to the advent of new media components, so that a sustainability is endangered at the moment.

Very good user acceptance and an increase of reputation have been observed, but because few disciplines have been involved there has been less impact on pedagogy (to improve this situation the University of Vechta is planning co-operation with other Universities through the exchange of electronic course materials).

This demonstrates that for this kind of project to succeed a lot of trust needs to exist on the political, University, and personal level.

Virtual learning environments and platforms

Jürgen Handke (University of Marburg) presented a perspective on teaching linguistics using the web-based learning environment “*Linguistics Online*” (www.linguistic-online.de).

Linguistics Online is a German government-financed project running from 2001 to 2003 with the primary goal to make the contents of theoretical and English linguistics at the undergraduate level available via the Internet. The project involves three German partner Universities with the following responsibilities:

- University of Marburg (theoretical linguistics, implementation)
- University of Essen (applied linguistics)
- University of Wuppertal (didactics and evaluation)

The course covers the contents of undergraduate courses in theoretical and applied linguistics in the 1st and 2nd year curriculum.

The realisation of teaching linguistics using the new technologies is considered important because linguistics is an integral component of language studies. This means that linguistics is not just an isolated subject. Rather, it is an indispensable part of many philologies. An eLearning environment in linguistics has to serve a large number of students. Furthermore, linguistics is internationally standardised to a high degree, so this simplifies the development of eLearning contents.

Linguistic Campus uses English since it is the language of linguistics in most publications (any linguistic eLearning platform ideally uses English).

The standard format of examination of students' performances is the format of the essay. Since machine-intelligence has not yet reached an adequate level to perform the evaluation of textually unrestricted essays, eLearning in linguistics necessarily involves a human course instructor who evaluates and marks worksheets, essays and exams.

The temporal structuring of a course needs to be discussed in detail, but the students can have access to all course materials at any time without temporal restriction.

All courses are already fully integrated into the curriculum and simultaneously didactically evaluated.

This course aims at a maximum realisation of multimedia techniques:

- As little text as possible
 - Graphics support where possible
 - Animation as visualisations techniques
 - Maximum sound support
 - Interactivity on all levels
 - Independent web-based training components
-
- Currently, *Linguistics Online* is running three courses:
 - Introduction to Linguistics
 - The history of English
 - English as a foreign language-methodology

The Virtual Linguistics Campus welcomes an overage of 90,000 visitors per month and is among the first fully multimedia-based eLearning systems.

Learner attitudes, styles and expectations

Little is known about the specific psychological features that students associate with the use of the computer for instructional aims. The research of Alessandro Antonietti from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Department of Psychology, in Milano aimed at investigating what students think about the use of multimedia in education.

A questionnaire was distributed with 30 items concerning various psychological aspects of using multimedia in instruction; more specifically these issues were addressed:

- Motivational and emotional aspects of learning (attraction, involvement, tiredness)
- Behaviour during the learning process (active participation, effort)
- Mental abilities required (attention, language, logical reasoning)
- Style of thinking preferred (intuition, visualisation, reflection)
- Cognitive benefits and learning results
- Better understanding, memorisation, applications
- Metacognition (planning)

The overall picture that emerges is encouraging; negative items reporting statements, that describe possible limits and risks had low mean values. Furthermore, the highest rates concerned properties which are not trivial: for example, students appreciated the opportunity that multimedia tools allow to make links and comparisons, in order to apply the notions assimilated and to schematise concepts.

No significant differences were found between humanities and scientific students male and female samples, between students who reported a frequent vs. infrequent use of computer, between students who self-attributed high vs. low computer use ability. The study indicated that undergraduates identified a large number of opportunities in the field of Information Communication Technology (ICT) as applied to instruction. It is worth noticing that not only the most obvious qualities of ICT were recognised, but also more sophisticated issues were appreciated. The

major outcome is that students have a well-defined conception about what multimedia tools can introduce into a learning process. This means that students' beliefs and representation on ICT must be taken into account in the realisation of eLearning activities.

The individual learning styles in eLearning also deserve attention. William George Lockitt from the University for Industry (the concept of a University for industry is as powerful as the notion of an open University, www.ufi.com/) summarised an ethnographic research project that lasted seven years (1994 – 2001) about the development of multimedia flexible and open learning materials, environments and staff. The researchers have developed a Web Site (www.unlimitedpower.co.uk) that contains over seventy case studies, background information collected during the research and a number of relevant publications.

Concluding remarks

The workshop was especially focused on relationships in the research-field in order:

- To enlarge Knowledge
- To provide a better ground for decision-making and development (evaluate the potential of research for innovation)
- To find partners for collaboration and exchange of views (highlight the benefits of networking)
- To strengthen the network support for researches in ODL field.

The document adopted by the European Commission entitled "Towards an European Research Area" discussed during the plenary session of Luis Rodriguez-Rosello opens with the following words: "Even more so than the century that has just finished the XXIst century we are now entering will be the century of science and technology. More than ever, investing in research and technological development offers the most promise for the future. Now it is time for an in-depth debate to define a policy approach in order to reinvigorate research in Europe". In this way EDEN has played a progressive role in developing European policy in ODL, by the promotion of networking and co-operation, the support of East-West collaboration, the preparation and publication of policy and feasibility studies, and active participation in the European distance education programme. This workshop confirmed this positive role.

The workshop's report (aims, programme and keynote) and the possibility to acquire the research workshop book are available on the EDEN Website under the URL: www.eden.bme.hu/contents/r-net/Hildesheim/hildesheim00.html

