
ACTIVE LEARNING FOR TEACHING STAFF : A POSTGRADUATE DEGREE INCREASING THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY NET BASED COURSES

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1. THE CONTEXT

Wallonia is a French speaking region of 3.5 million inhabitants located in the south of Belgium. It has invested in a wide fibre optic infrastructure along the highways with local loops dedicated to private organizations and public institutions, to favour e-commerce, tele-business and distance learning.

In this context, in 1998, the University of Liège launched the LabSET, Support Lab for Telematic Learning, a 26-person Research and Development unit constituted by a majority of educational scientists who have teaching experience, and by specialists in multimedia production or graphical design. The LabSET works towards the deployment of ODL inside the University of Liège (by co-ordinating its Virtual Campus) and with many external partners. The challenge faced is to reach a critical mass of quality courses, in order to allow for dissemination of best practices in local languages (French in our case).

2. A "TECCC"¹ APPROACH TO ODL DEVELOPMENT

Following Bates (2000, 66), we consider the current approach in ODL design and production as "too hit-and-miss. It wastes resources, ignores the experience and many lessons that have been learned (...) and above all fails to ensure high-quality technology-based teaching in any consistent or widespread form." Since too few teachers are competent in ODL development and too few quality courses are available in our Walloon region and French Speaking Community of Belgium, we have decided to address those two parallel problems by an integrated approach that we have called TECCC. This approach is characterised by a set of organisational and pedagogical principles, or "Keys", that we consider as crucial. We then have applied those TECCC Keys to our specific context of training our professors in ODL design and development

This paper presents the FORMASUP post graduate degree that applies this TECCC methodology, aiming at providing our staff with a continuing training in applied pedagogy, but also at producing a critical mass of quality courses that participate in the dissemination of good practices in ODL, avoiding the "Lone Ranger" approach described by Bates.

¹ TECCC stands for "Training Embedded Coached Course Construction". The TECCC Keys are the following, described in POUMAY (2003) : candidates are selected through competitive calls, training is isomorphic, the approach is project based, with a close coaching by "Sherpas" (LabSET members), activities (and not contents) are central, methods and resources are varied and evaluation is adapted to adults.

3. THE FORMASUP DEGREE : PRINCIPLES AND ORGANISATION



In September 2002, the University of Liège launched a postgraduate degree (called FORM@SUP) in Higher Education Staff Development. This degree is organised by the LabSET under the responsibility of Dieudonné Leclercq and Marianne Poumay, creators of this curriculum coordinated by Chantal Dupont.

This postgraduate degree is conceived to help enrolled colleagues to develop their projects in one of the two following areas : PBL (Problem Based Learning) or ODL (Open and Distance Learning). The orientation dedicated to ODL design, production and delivery aims at the production of quality courses in local languages over the Internet and through a **TECCC approach** (see note 1). This degree also acts as an incentive (due to formal accreditation) as well as recognition for the involvement of the faculty members and external trainers in the continuing improvement of their courses.

For this first year of FORMASUP, 11 ODL projects have been selected. They cover a wide content diversity, each course concerning a different domain. The professors involved come from 4 different organisations, including the university of Liège.

Candidates have to submit a **written application** (mainly the description of the project, but also needs analysis, candidate's time available, constituted team, institutional support,...). After a first selection, they are invited to an interview.

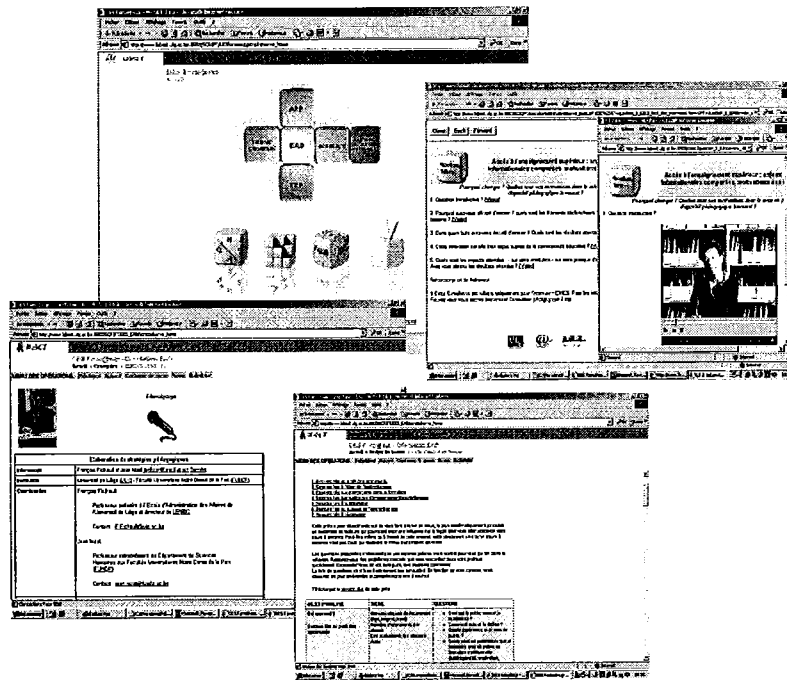
60 ECTS are subdivided into 18 for the common courses, 18 for oriented courses (one of the options being in ODL design and development, detailed here), 18 for the development of the personnel project (the participants' own course) and 6 dedicated to external valorisations (readings, participations to conferences, round tables, contacts, visits, poster discussions, etc). The whole curriculum (60 ECTS) requests a one year involvement of the faculty member.

Activities are organised, in which the professors themselves (target public of FORMASUP) are exposed to a **variety of teaching and learning approaches**: they create, explore, practice, experiment, imitate, receive and debate (teaching/learning paradigms).

Courses are organised **partly at a distance** The WebCT platform facilities are exploited to make the professors familiar with (a) the usual communication tools (e-mail, bulletin board, calendar), (b) road maps and a detailed planning of the distance and face-to-face activities, (c) precise descriptions of the objectives and sequence of each activity, (d) multiple links to deepen pedagogical and technical resources, (e) practical tools corresponding to the ODL design steps, (f) slides and videos presenting some theoretical points or examples of good practice, (g) tests allowing for feed-back loops and regulation of the course, etc.

Videoconference is also used, to have international partners participate as invited experts to some debates and case analyses.

We illustrate our web resources through a few screen captures hereafter.



To deeply transform the existing conventional courses into active ODL courses, we engage with each selected professor into **5 steps**, (needs analysis, conception, realisation, experimentation and evaluation). These 5 steps, corresponding to the classical phases of project management, are not followed strictly linearly, but with permanent feedback loops in an iterative process. The **project-based approach** is really motivating for the participants and provides a permanent impulse to the actions.

Theories, models and tools are provided for each of the five steps. For instance, a model of learning / teaching paradigms is suggested to help professors conceive strategies as well to analyse existing ones. A second model suggests a classification of transversal objectives, to draw the attention to their importance. A third one models the project management, helping the parallel teams understand the process and plan their actions.

The technical content is provided in order that all the trainers/professors be able, once their online course is developed, to give access to a new student, to add a page or review part of the course, to enrich the glossary, to add a bulletin board discussion topic, to add a quiz or some questions in an existing pool, to display and analyse a quiz results distribution, to post a message to all their students or to some in particular, to scan a newspaper article and integrate it right away, to integrate a new activity, to modify the calendar, ... all sorts of actions that maintain the course and keep it alive.

Each participant is in close contact with one or two LabSET members. About once a week (sometimes less, depending on the project pace), the small project teams meet and work together on the project development, step by step. We really consider this **close coaching** as one of the key success factors of this combination of training and course development. This close and personalised relation is mentioned by the participants as one of the best points of this (although very demanding) experience.

Critical analysis of each of the learning experience is requested. The accompanied professors consider whether they could apply each experience to their own practice -how, when and why-. If appropriate, they immediately transfer the new experience to the development of their own ODL course.

Finally, both **the process and the product (the course developed) are evaluated** at the end of the year, in addition to the critical analysis provided by the participants.

4. TO CONCLUDE

In Belgium, the critical mass of ODL courses is not yet reached, but is really in progress. Quality courses are developing, thanks to Regional initiatives and University Curricula. At the same time, we address the problem of staff development, impacting the quality of the course offer at the university and, consequently, trying to address the problem of the huge failure rate. FORMASUP is at the crossroad of those important challenges.

We continuously analyse and discuss these challenges to better face them. We also noticed that the participation in FORMASUP, even though considered as a real impulse to innovation, needs follow-up and the establishment of communities of practices in order for those changes to be sustained.

And finally, we see in our FORMASUP experience two main transfer possibilities for European institutions. LabSET is open to collaborations on these points and welcomes advice as well as experience sharing on :

- the TECCC approach, that seems to be particularly suited to adult learning in Higher Education ;
- the FORMASUP curriculum in itself, that could become an international diploma, with participants coming from different countries and developing a personnel project in local language. The participants would share common courses from Belgium (in English or French) but would also benefit from a local tutor organising the close coaching.

5. REFERENCES

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