Training for Designing e-Learning Courses in Foreign Languages

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Abstract: The paper presents the results of the second stage of training academia in designing e-learning courses in a foreign language. An action research conducted during such staff development project showed high appreciation of continuous mutual support, need for established channels for sharing, and raised confidence in designing own electronic courses by young specialists.
Key words: Staff Development, e-Learning, Higher Education, Language Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning, in its various forms, has been widely recognised in the leading Bulgarian universities as means of providing modern, flexible, efficient, accessible and quality education. One of the main challenges here is providing relevant training for the teachers to ensure the optimal use to the best of the potential of contemporary information and communication technologies (ICT) [1, 2]. Having identified this issue [3], Sofia University (SU) has launched a number of projects related to implementing ICT in a variety of higher education contexts. One of the projects of the Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology (FCMP) – BG051PO001-3.3.06 - 0045[1] - aimed to support the academia in further developing their skills in designing e-learning courses using innovative methodology, with specific focus on the context of teaching in a foreign language. This paper is based on the second stage results of an action research conducted to evaluate the efficiency of the training of 23 young scientists and post-doctoral researchers of 7 faculties of the University, beneficiaries of the Project.

BACKGROUND

The beneficiaries of the project have been divided into two groups: philologists and non-philologists. The first group consists of 20 young specialists and post docs in 9 languages, lecturers of disciplines as diverse as Phonetics and Phonology of Ukrainian, German Literature or Italian as a Second Language. The second group are 23 colleagues teaching in a foreign language, who are Assistant Professors in Biology, Biochemistry, Pedagogy, Informatics, etc.: 18 disciplines. The project experts, together with external experts of leading educational institutions, designed and delivered specialized training modules in three areas: innovative methodology, technology for education and foreign languages [4]. After careful scrutiny of the identified needs, the literature in the field of academic staff development and good practices in such training, 16 modules were provided for the beneficiaries[2]. These modules were offered as seminars and workshops at three stages: March – April 2014 (for the first group of beneficiaries), August – October, 2014 (second group), and workshops – in April 2014, Open Days – in January 2015, and in June 2015. In addition, individual support was ensured on demand.

METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate the efficiency of the provided training, an action research in three steps was started, each corresponding to the stages of training as described above. The first step was dedicated to the first seminar and respective workshop, the second aimed to evaluate the results of the second training, and the third is envisioned to summarize the results of all seminars and workshops in order to present practice-based guidance for further sharing and staff development. The following analyses are based on the second stage results.

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[1] Website of the Project: http://su.acadlit.uni-sofia.bg/index.php?lang=EN
[2] The outline of the modules is available here: http://su.acadlit.uni-sofia.bg/beneficiaries.php?lang=EN

The methods of collecting data for the stage under consideration include: collecting narrative reports (experts and beneficiaries), questionnaire for feedback after each training session, standardized questionnaires for course evaluation (for the whole training) [3], assessment criteria list (to be applied for the beneficiaries' courses), a focus group (semi-structured, discussion conducted as part of the Open Days Workshop), standard entry and final tests for language proficiency. The narrative reports should have consisted of a list of the training modules attended, opinion regarding the benefits from each one, general opinion on the training and the gains, as well as a statement as to which of the courses were likely to have impact on the respondent's own practice. The feedback during the training was collected using an adapted tool (anonymous questionnaire) with 15 closed questions based on 5-level Likert's scale (neutral at 3) and 5 open ones. The tool addresses the extent to which the beneficiaries perceive a particular training session, activities and materials, as useful, interesting and adequate, and to elicit suggestions for improvement. The criteria list included requirements and was to be applied to a minimum of 3 sessions designed by each beneficiary. The list is based on the standard curricula requirements of SU, taking into consideration the specifics of e-learning design, e.g. structure of the course/module and its sessions, use of appropriate technology, activity design and use of electronic resources. The focus group was arranged to answer questions regarding perceived difficulties, to identify problematic areas, as well as to share general impression of the training and future plans. The quantitative data received were statistically processed, and the qualitative data were annotated, categorized and analysed.

RESULTS
Questionnaires after the sessions and at the end of the course

The second training consisted of 150 hours of a foreign language, 20 - Action Research (AR), 30 – E-Learning Methodology, 20 – Virtual Learning Environments, 20 – Academic Writing (in English and in Bulgarian), 10 – Qualitative Research Methods in Education (QRME). The data from the 623 questionnaires filled in after the sessions were received on paper and in electronic form. The overall score of all trainings is close to the maximum of 5 (absolutely true), slightly above 4.9, with low standard deviation (table 1). These results are even higher in comparison to the reported during the first stage of the training [5] – 4.7. This can be explained with the obvious appreciation of the improvements made on the bases of the first training feedback, as well as satisfaction with the specially designed new courses (AR and QRME).

It should be noted that a significant number of the sessions was dedicated to improving foreign language fluency, and all these classes received the highest score of 5 for all questions. This result shows that the young specialists highly appreciate the opportunity to develop further in this area, recognizing the need of good professional level of the particular foreign language (English or German). The data for the other training provided presents similar tendency of almost complete satisfaction with the module Academic Writing (Bulgarian). Slightly lower, but still between 4.5 and 5 are the results for Action Research, and between 3.6 and 4.4 – for QRME.

Fig. 2 presents the scores for the section of the final questionnaire measuring the overall satisfaction of the 15 (of 23) members of the second group beneficiaries; due to the publishing limitations the other 6 sections are subject to a separate paper. The scores shown here follow the same tendency, with slightly lower absolute values. The latter can be due to the fact that some of the beneficiaries did not attend all classes, therefore their impression of the training was partial. It is evident that the respondents found the materials and their presentation most attractive, with average at 4.46 and 4.31, respectively. Just below 4 (good) scored the online activities, their timing and the balance between these and the class activities. It can be said that the overall impression is of a very successful training. The open question at the end of the questionnaire elicited responses in two

categories: related to the training and administrative. The training is referred to as innovative (5 responses), interesting (4), with a difference in the quality of the modules (3). Suggestions have been made to refocus the work in Academic Writing (English) on practice rather than on theory (2), and the courses for the first group of beneficiaries to be made available for the second as well. In addition, less intensive schedule is suggested (4), with more classes for some of the modules. The latter two suggestions have actually been addressed with the electronic form of all modules which gives access for all beneficiaries to the materials and video lectures taken during the sessions.

Table 1 Questionnaire 1: feedback after the sessions, all courses

Question Now would you evaluate the session and its elements:	Aver	SD
The interaction with the colleagues is appropriate	4,97	0,24
The materials are useful for me	4,97	0,25
The session corresponds with the defined goals	4,96	0,29
The instructions are clear	4,96	0,29
The activities are interesting for me	4,96	0,29
The activities are useful for me	4,96	0,31
The session meets my needs	4,96	0,26
The materials are adequately presented	4,95	0,34
The activities are interactive	4,95	0,33
The materials are interesting	4,95	0,32
The session met my expectations	4,95	0,39
The interaction with the lecturer is adequate	4,94	0,34
The instructions are enough	4,93	0,37
The sequence of the activities is adequate	4,93	0,37
Activity timing is adequate	4,91	0,47

Table 2 Questionnaire 2: feedback after the training, all courses (part 1)

	Very bad (1)	Bad (2)	Neutral (3)	Good (4)	V. Good (5)	Weighted Average
Choice of materials and external resources	0%	0%	0%	53.9%	46.1%	4.46
Choice of adequate media for presenting information	0%	0%	0%	69.2%	30.8%	4.31
Communication with the lecturer	0%	0%	15.4%	46.1%	38.5%	4.23
Communication with the colleagues	0%	0%	15.4%	46.1%	38.5%	4.23
Assessment methods	0%	0%	7.7%	61.5%	30.8%	4.23
Clarity of instructions	0%	0%	15.4%	46.1%	38.5%	4.23
Online activities during classes	0%	0%	0%	84.6%	15.4%	4.15
Sequence of activities	0%	0%	23.1%	46.1%	30.8%	4.08
Feedback	7.7%	0%	7.7%	53.8%	30.8%	4.00
Balance between theory and practice	0%	0%	23.1%	53.9%	23.%	4.00
Balance between the class and out of class activities	0%	0%	15.4%	76.9%	7.7%	3.92
Online activities	0%	0%	30.8%	53.9%	15.4%	3.85
Activity timing	0%	7.7%	23.1%	46.1%	23.1%	3.85

Beneficiaries' courses

This section reflects on the courses of both groups of beneficiaries as they were designed and approbated during this second stage of the current research.

All beneficiaries prepared the required minimum of three sessions for their electronic courses, 28 of the 43 colleagues have more than the minimum sessions, with 8 who have more than one course. 33 courses have been completely redesigned in an electronic form, 24 of which working with students. These sessions correspond to a total of 580 academic hours. It must be pointed out that these courses which followed the instructions and were described as required used the technology in a more adequate and even creative manner. Furthermore, some very successful experiments on using a variety of technologies were identified; most commonly applied solutions were forums, own files, tests and external links (e.g. video materials, interactive exercises, etc.) It is obvious that the active participation in the trainings led to better results, which can be explained with the chance for collaborative work, timely feedback by peers and lecturer.

Focus group and narrative reports

Narrative reports were collected from all 23 beneficiaries of the second group. The overall reflection is extremely positive, and high appreciation of the idea of such training and support was detected. A common opinion is that more individualized work is needed, via consultancy and collaboration with the other beneficiaries. The comments have been classifies into three groups: personal/academic benefits, professional benefits and administrative issues.

The first type of benefits contains satisfaction of the opportunity for improving proficiency in the foreign language (8 answers) and the usefulness of the received consultancy on writing academic texts (3). The lack of time for participation was identified in 1/3 of the answers, at the same time the availability of individualized support was noted and acknowledged. It is evident that the beneficiaries recognise the difficulty in organizing group training for many lecturers, which also reflects the relatively low number of comments on the administrative issues. These results correspond directly with the findings of the questionnaires.

Next group of comments refers to the professional development, in relation to which virtually all courses on e-learning received high appreciation. Awareness was manifested regarding the potential of e-learning to support more students (5 answers), increasing the accessibility (6), providing more varied and interesting courses (7) and increasing student motivation (4). The training modules were considered interrelated and we recognised as a fair opportunity for upgrading own skills (2). It was noted that colleagues who had had training in Moodle before joining the project (3), found current training clear, adequate and applicable to their particular context. Most of the beneficiaries (18) value the chance to work with colleagues from other faculties and fields, noting the quality of such collaboration (3) and the generation of out-of-the-box ideas for their own practice.

The attendees share:

'The courses that have led to updating and modernizing my teaching practice are E-Learning Methodology for FLT, Virtual Learning Environments for FLT, Methodology of E-Learning. The courses Academic Writing and Action Research showed new horizons for my research.'

'As a lecturer, I discovered how to motivate my students to attend the seminars, as I believe that education is a process and not a final exam only, which single goal is to lead to a diploma. The most important thing is students to understand why they have received the particular mark, and the feedback on each task to support the improvement of the performance for the next task.'

'No less valuable was the opportunity to exchange experience and expertise with many colleagues from different faculties and areas, not only humanity fields but also exact sciences. As I have to work with colleagues from the Faculty of Mathematics as well as from the Faculty of Medicine, this communication led to introducing and developing more efficient pedagogical practices.'

The opinions in the narrative reports virtually overlap with the issues raised during the focus group. The answers there cover the same three groups, with an addition of a forth one related to legal issues such as the law system in the field of education and the insufficient support for e-learning. Challenges such as the lack of recognition for the efforts and time required for transforming an existing course into an e-learning one, as well as the lack of efficient regulations of the distance form of e-learning were widely discussed. In addition, the low level of collaboration within the departments and faculties, as well as among them were brought up as a slowing down factors for the effective applicability of the training on a larger scale.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTS

The results of this second stage of research on staff development training for lecturers in a foreign language at Sofia University showed that diverse means of delivery of such training is mandatory for its success. Moreover, both experts and beneficiaries report that the blended mode of the training guaranteed flexibility and high efficiency, combining face-to-face modules and consultancy with web-based contents (in the E-Learning System of Sofia University, based on Moodle), recorded lectures and synchronous and asynchronous support (via e-mail, forums, chats, etc.) Especially highly valued is the accessibility of the materials for the modules via the electronic versions of the training.

Particularly interesting and rewarding is the fact that the majority of the beneficiaries respond extremely favourably to the opportunity for working with colleagues from other fields, thus establishing a community of practice. Noteworthy, the respondents highlight this opportunity among the long-term positive effects of their participation in the trainings, alongside with the gains in academic skills, language fluency improvement and achieving confidence in designing own e-learning courses, activities and materials. Additionally, reflecting on own experience in papers and reports was perceived as having a positive effect on raising the awareness of the benefits about the need of further development. The chances of being trained and exchanging expertise in top-rating foreign institutions and events was also highly appreciated by the colleagues, especially having in mind the fact that they are representatives of a state university of the poorest EU country.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

It can be concluded that the training provided at the second stage of the academic staff development project was successful and could be further improved and applied for a wider range of young specialists and post-doctoral researchers. The results prove the need for continuous collaboration among experts of different fields at university level, stressing on the importance of mutual and self-training, sharing and non-formal development opportunities. A logical conclusion is that establishing a Staff Development Centre for Academic Literacies based on a functional approach will provide a cascading effect of these trainings by involving the beneficiaries in offering consultancy in their turn. Furthermore, ensuring effective exchange with other similar structures in leading universities is recognised as a model of on-going staff development towards achieving high standards of higher education in Europe and beyond.

The future work includes ensuring regular communication among the beneficiaries and experts, involving other colleagues in the exchange of good practices and joining the efforts towards designing high quality e-learning courses in foreign languages. This is to

be started within the framework of the project under consideration and is envisioned to provide the starting point for joint work in this field beyond this framework. The third stage of this research will be dedicated to providing evidence for the establishing of such a collaboration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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