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Title of paper: eLEN — eLearning Exchange Networks: reaching out to effective bilingual and multicultural University collaboration

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Abstract

In 2004 the Language Sciences department of Montpellier 3 University, introduced a new Masters degree in “Knowledge Management, Learning and eLearning” (www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf/), the first year of which is delivered both face-to-face and online, and the second entirely online. In previous research (Marsh & Panckhurst, 2006), an analysis of questionnaire responses from learners and teaching staff on the programme provided important insights into the learning needs specific to this group of learners, namely postgraduate students who require a flexible programme of learning which responds to both the individual professional needs as well as the collective needs of the group. A direct consequence of this research led to a pilot study being conducted by the authors in May 2007 to explore the opportunities for a more flexible learner-centred approach through the provision of an online social network.

A private community eLEN (eLearning Exchange Network) was set up using Ning (www.ning.com) to provide virtual space within a social network environment. Two groups of learners were invited into this network: French students following the Master’s degree in “Knowledge Management, Learning and eLearning” and students following the online Master’s of Education in eLearning (www.hull.ac.uk/ces/courses/MEdineLearning.html) delivered by the University of Hull in the UK.

This paper will discuss the benefits of eLEN within the context of professional development, provide an analysis of the online interaction between the learners and identify key criteria to promote effective learning through international bilingual social networks.

Keywords: social networks, international bilingual collaborative eLearning, Ning, higher and further education, life-long learning.

1. Background

There is little doubt that the past 10 years has witnessed rapid change and development in the field of eLearning and as a consequence we have seen the emergence of new professions, the tutor, the learning technologist, the resource designer to name but a few. It has thus become increasingly evident that there is a need to provide appropriate training and professional development for those working in the emerging new professions and, in response to this need, the Language Sciences department of Montpellier 3 University, introduced in 2004, a new Master's degree in “Knowledge Management, Learning and eLearning” (

montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf/); first year is delivered both face-to-face and online and second year is entirely online with WebCT providing the virtual learning environment (VLE) support for the programme. WebCT has been used at Montpellier 3 University since 1999 when the University's Distance Education centre, the Metice (www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/), after 25 years of distance education, reviewed its practice of providing its learners with paper based learning resources and moved to the provision of online education.

The new Master's programme consists of modules designed and led by University and external staff. A current requirement within French professional Masters' curricula is a clear 50:50 division between public (University) teaching modules and external (private sector) teaching modules. Thus, when the programme was designed in 2004, it was important to establish a network of experts in the French eLearning field in order to provide up-to-date data & expertise for students.

A clearly guided pedagogical framework was provided, however, each individual was fairly autonomous in devising specific appropriate curricula.

Given the constraints of time and relatively little communication between the different teaching sectors, the whole pedagogical approach became far more teacher-centred than originally envisaged. Even the very best designed pedagogical courses may of course suffer if there is insufficient cohesion between teaching staff and the specific courses they devise, as is often the case. Discrete modules may be very well designed as individual building blocks, but the combination of these blocks does not necessarily create a neatly fitted jigsaw puzzle. In the present situation, this seemed to be the problem: the result was a patchwork of discrete modules with little or no cohesion between the different curricula.

A combination of a necessity for qualitative feedback from both learners and tutors on a new programme and early concerns about the disparate nature of the modules led to research being conducted in determining learners' needs and perceptions of the programme. A questionnaire (recherche.univ-montp3.fr/rachel/html/mgaf.htm) was issued to learners and teaching staff after a full two-year cycle had been completed. At an initial stage of the research, questionnaire results were examined and this provided important insights into learner profiles, in particular the learning needs specific to differing professional contexts (Marsh & Panckhurst 2006). The analysis also revealed several important underlying issues to consider: curricula structure, group collaboration & community, appropriacy & technology. It became clear that the existing structure was not entirely appropriate for this group of postgraduate learners who required a more flexible programme in response to individual as well as collective needs. However, given the current French context of higher and further education, and taking into account previous local institutional experiences in which moves to challenge existing teaching methods needed to happen "slowly, but [...] steadily" (Panckhurst, 2001, page 4), a more learner-centred approach may be difficult to implement immediately.

While recognising that a radical overhaul of the current Master's structure was not realistic, that it was a requirement to work within the constraints presented by national institutional models and bodies, and also take into account current teaching staff approaches, we concluded there was a clear need to explore a more experiential approach to learning and teaching on the programme. An approach in which the focus of learning becomes the individual learners themselves — their backgrounds, experiences, interests, capacities, and needs, and in which the learners take more responsibility for their own learning " [...] as members with rights and responsibilities, power and vulnerability, and [who] learn to act responsibly, considering the best interests of themselves, other individuals, and the group as a whole" (Carver, 1997, 146).

The questionnaire analysis also revealed the need to encourage and support more collaborative learning in order to develop a sense of community within the online group. Many of the learners commented on the success and motivation which arose from participating in an activity which involved learners from a different course, on-campus learners following a traditional research orientated linguistics course, leading to a PhD. In this activity collaborative work was fundamental as they were required to rapidly compile (within one week) information for their tutor on "current usage of SMS-texting and blogs and the link with eLearning in French higher education". The activity was divided into three parts (exchanges within the forum in WebCT, collaborative group work and synthesis of findings, auto-evaluation of the activity and what was learnt). It generated an enormous amount of discussion (390 messages posted in one week by 18 students) and a final working paper summarising the results comprising 41 pages.

"Ce travail m'a fortement intéressée, pas tant pour le fond, mais surtout pour la tournure interactionnelle qu'il a prise." [I was really interested in this work, not really owing to the content, but rather the interactional turn it took.], Student A, 17/11/06.

"Cela m'a montré qu'il est possible de faire des études par correspondance tout en ayant le sentiment d'appartenir à un groupe et à une classe, avec tout ce que ça implique du travail en groupe (des tensions qui peuvent se créer, des amitiés naissantes aussi, etc.). Je vous le dis franchement, depuis 5 ans que j'étudie à distance, c'est la première fois que j'ai ce sentiment." [This [activity] showed me that it is possible to study by correspondence, but at the same time feel as if one belongs to a group and to a class, with the implications of group work (tensions which arise, friendships which emerge, etc.). I would say, frankly, that in 5 years' distance education, this is the first time I have felt this way.], Student A, 17/11/06.

The questionnaire also revealed the need to review the appropriacy and use of the supporting technology. WebCT was increasingly used for consulting coursework but rarely for communication between the group and with the tutor. Many were clearly not using the virtual learning environment communication tools if they did not have to and amongst themselves they preferred the alternative asynchronous and synchronous communication tools (i.e., Skype, MSN, iChat, etc.) with which they were far more familiar and which a number suggested were far more user-friendly.

Our learners required tools within which they had a sense of ownership, which they could personalise and appropriate as a group and as tutors we need to design learning activities which were not limited by institutionally provided software (JISC 2007, page 2).

2. Pilot Study: An eLEN (eLearning Exchange Network) using Ning — an analysis of online interaction

As a result of the questionnaire analysis a pilot study was set up which involved the use of a social network (eLEN eLearning Exchange Network) using Ning (www.ning.com), at the time a relatively new platform. Other social utilities such as MySpace, Facebook, etc. could just as well have been chosen for this pilot study, and indeed, may be used in later comparative research; however MySpace and Facebook tend to be instantly connected to social extra-curricula networking tools, and it was considered important to explore an environment which came unattached to such reference.

The challenges were multiple: could we provide a space for effective group collaboration and sense of community? Would the moving away from the institutional VLE and towards yet another technological communication tool be appropriate for students and not just perceived as

tutors wanting to add another "gadget"? How would this initiative fit in with the current curricula?

The eLEN was set up within the context of a module on software evaluation and pedagogical innovation, team-taught by the authors. In order to provide a real networking context for the 13 second-year Master's students (M2) (comprising mainly French, but also Bulgarian, Chinese, Scandinavian participants) in "Knowledge Management, Learning and eLearning", this group was joined by 6 learners following the "Master's of Education in eLearning" from the University of Hull in the United Kingdom, 4 of whom were native speakers of English and accessing the programme from different parts of the UK. One of these 4 was also bilingual (English & French) and had completed her school education to baccalauréat level in France; the other two came from Brazil and Malta and were accessing their programme of study from their home countries respectively. Although the specific curricula content, approach and final learning outcomes of the two courses were quite different, the commonality between the two groups was obviously their personal and professional interests in eLearning. The differing pedagogical experiences and viewpoints were considered to offer potential interest to each other and as a consequence a genuine exchange and construction of knowledge.

In addition to the pedagogical reasons for using Ning there were also the technical considerations. In using a social networking site such as Ning we were able to work across countries without the institutional constraints of access to institutional VLEs (WebCT and Merlin).

A key challenge in providing true global networking is of course language and an important aspect of this research was the exploration of the use of two languages, French and English, within the network. It has been shown in differing contexts that it is important for conveying one's ideas convincingly to be able to express them in one's native tongue (David & Panckhurst, 2004). In the present context, the bilingual aspect was able to be approached, since members of both groups had either written or spoken knowledge of the other language. The learners were allowed to choose their preferred form (language) of expression, and indeed, several situations arose: 1) staff and some students were bilingual themselves and were able to post messages in either French or English, and this occurred in either language depending on the flow of understanding as the study was being pursued; 2) students' native language was either French or English and they therefore mainly posted in their mother tongue; 3) students sometimes made special efforts to post messages in the non-native language to ensure others had understood and as a social branching-out to other cultural members; 4) more rarely, staff and some bilingual students posted bilingual messages, thus ensuring total comprehension by all parties.

Learner-centred Activities

After being provided with an initial framework within which they were to interact, learners were encouraged to initiate and moderate discussion threads from a very early stage.

As a starting point several discussion threads were set up by the tutors. These threads were quite specific in their focus and encouraged the learners to share experiences. The four discussion threads were as follows:

- French-English discussions on eLearning — discussions bilingues en FOAD
- Cultural Differences
- Evaluating innovation in Ning
- Learning Online experiences — Expériences en FOAD

These threads generated interest and enthusiasm for the use of the eLEN and it was then

suggested that each learner set up and take responsibility for moderating his/her own discussion thread. A number of interesting topics evolved, entirely through the learners' own initiative and input. Topics ranged from "Globalisation and eLearning", to "How do we handle people who are against change when it comes to eLearning"? (cf. Appendix for a full list). The tutors of course participated in the student-led discussions, but did not facilitate.

Collaborative Learning

A recent survey by JISC (2007) found that "many of today's learners use technology primarily for social networking" (page 3) and as such the use of a social network proved quite familiar to this group of learners. What was not clear is whether or not the concept of a social network could be used to support learning. However, despite some concerns and the following early posting by one of the French learners:

"Ning se détache plus comme un espace social communicant qu'un véritable espace de travail collaboratif." [Ning is more of a social communicating space than a real collaborative working space], Student D, 20/5/07.

the group took to the social network with much more interest and enthusiasm than they had in previous attempts at collaborative work. They seemed to communicate better together as a whole interacting group, whereas in previous work, they had formed several small groups for the collaborative projects they conducted.

"I now turn on the computer almost with my morning coffee. I'm impatient to continue group discussion, to make it evolve and participate with others, in order to attain depth we never believed we'd get to."
[Maintenant j'allume l'ordinateur presque en même temps que le café du matin. J'ai hâte de poursuivre une discussion commune, de la faire évoluer, d'y participer au même titre que les autres pour arriver quelque part où on n'aurait jamais cru aller.], Student B, 11/5/07.

This interest and enthusiasm was sustained even after the official end date of the module:

"Even if the module has officially finished, I think I've become addicted to the [Ning] forum...;-)" [Même si le cours a fini officiellement, je crois que je suis devenue accro au forum...;-], Student B, 16/5/07.

A closer analysis of the online interaction revealed that there were a number of key factors which contributed to this interest and sustained motivation.

Sense of Belonging

The friendly interface with the possibility of including photos and videos was an important highlight. Each message posted into the discussion threads is accompanied with an individual photo of the person posting the message and this aspect was very much appreciated. The students like the idea that they can personalise their own page with information other than typical classical text "attachments":

"The easy way in which we can insert pictures and films, and view them without having to previous download them, as is necessary in WebCT, is an advantage. I find that the

exchanges are more friendly. Having a personal space which is modifiable also seems interesting and makes Ning more "human".

[La facilité à déposer des images et des films, et à les visionner sans avoir à les télécharger comme sur WebCT, constitue aussi un avantage. Je trouve que cela rend bien plus convivial les échanges. Le fait d'avoir un espace personnel que l'on peut modifier me semble aussi intéressant, et je trouve que cela rend Ning plus "humain".]
Student C, 13/5/07.

Learners take responsibility for own learning

It appears from this study that eLearning exchange networks (eLENs) can give the students a sense of "freedom", and of "pedagogical innovation":

"When I was at primary school in Bulgaria, when spring came, some teachers conducted their lessons outside in the playground or on the grass...I feel exactly the same with Ning, I really feel as if we're outside the virtual WebCT classroom, so if WebCT is the virtual classroom, then Ning is the virtual lawn [...], one really feels this movement from inside to outside which gives me a feeling of freedom."
[Quand j'étais à l'école en Bulgarie, dans les petites classes, avec l'approche des beaux jours et du printemps, certains professeurs faisaient leurs cours dehors, dans la cour de l'école ou sur la pelouse...Je me sens exactement pareil sur Ning, j'ai vraiment l'impression qu'on est en dehors de la salle de classe virtuelle de WebCT [...] donc si WebCT est la salle de classe virtuelle, Ning est la pelouse virtuelle [...], on sent vraiment ce mouvement d'intérieur à l'extérieur qui me donne un sentiment de liberté.]
Student B, 17/5/07.

The shift of responsibility for learning to the learner was evidently appreciated and the opportunity taken wherever possible to direct the learning towards focus of personal and collective interest.

"I had to participate here a long time ago, just time doesn't allow me to do everything...But what is interesting actually [...] we have developed really a lot I think, we have evolved much more than compared with other subjects, where the structure was really rigid...At least, this is what I feel, we englobe lots of domains, lots of subject matters are given space to...For example, the suggestion to start a discussion on our own: this shows lots of things. Our perception of what is important in online learning, it also shows the way that we are "animating" our own forum (so we act a bit like teachers and tutors) etc. etc. As I replied to you in X's discussion, maybe this form of learning will be the future of eLearning? Or Y would say, not a lot of technical innovation, only pedagogical...The roles are variable, everyone takes turn in being the teacher / mentor / guide in developing competencies...", Student B, 25/5/07.

Knowledge Sharing

During the learning-exchanging phase using the eLEN, several points emerged: building and sharing knowledge along with the sense of individual enrichment via groupwork; the idea that confronting opinions and helping each other led to the notion of belonging to a community:

« Je crois qu'en privilégiant l'aspect communautaire, les difficultés inhérentes à l'apprentissage à distance et en ligne, s'effacent, et les connaissances s'enrichissent. »
[I think by preferring the community aspect, difficulties inherent to distance education and learning online, are erased and knowledge is enriched.], Student E, 23/5/07.

« Ce genre d'espace virtuel est un petit théâtre où chacun prend le rôle qu'il a décidé, pour l'ensemble des activités que supporte le site » [This type of virtual space is a small theatre where each person adopts the role (s)he wants, for all of the activities that the site allows.], Student F, 25/5/07.

The self-learning aspect was very apparent and also the feeling of belonging to an initial group which evolved into an online community. The eLen gave the students the opportunity to pursue their ideas further. The students, at their own instigation, then created an eLen which they invited us to join and so far they have created three discussion threads: "Toolbox", "Internships and experiences", "Tutoring".

One student described this process:

« Du caractère collectif et du travail collaboratif de cette activité ressort l'idée principale d'un renforcement du sentiment d'appartenance à un groupe. Notre communauté a d'ailleurs pris l'initiative de poursuivre ce partage au sein d'un nouvel espace sur Ning. » [Owing to the collective nature of the collaborative work within this activity, a main idea emerges: reinforcement of the sensation that one belongs to a group. Our community has decided to take the initiative to pursue this sharing by creating a new specific space on Ning.], Student G, 7/6/07.

3. Conclusion: key criteria for effective eLENS

This initial study has provided important insight into the way in which a bilingual social network can function effectively within the institutional constraints of two different academic contexts across two European countries.

This pilot study has shown that collaborative learning can take place in a social network and that collaborative learning can be effective online for the purpose of achieving an academic goal and that an active exchange of ideas within small groups not only increases interest among the participants but also promotes critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1986; Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991). In addition, interest and motivation can be sustained online, despite the contrary being reported that in many online groups, participation can drop to 'zero' and that despite the initial vibrancy of online communities, large numbers of them fail (Ling *et al*, 2005). However, it should be noted that certain criteria are required for eLENS to be effective learning tools.

This research has identified the following as fundamental for success of an international bilingual social network. Learners:

- must be familiar with working online
- need to be aware with basic principles of eLearning
- need to be used to self-directed/placed in learning context where they take responsibility for own learning
- need to grasp use of eLens within general curriculum in order to understand purpose/focus

In the international bilingual context, motivation was achieved and sustained through learners being able to:

- communicate with others following a similar programme of learning to their own but

- based within a different cultural context
- provide cultural and linguistic enrichment to others
- choose the language(s) in which they wrote or read
- compare pedagogical practices between French, British and other higher education institutions around the world

The pilot study has also provided us with important new directions for development and research. Building on this study and the conclusions drawn by Carver *et al* 2007:

"If eLearning is to offer improved learning opportunities, educators will have to rethink the models that underlie eLearning [...] Progress will depend on embracing learner-centered models that place the student at the focal point, not the teacher and not the classroom [...] While eLearning based on classroom-centered models is not necessarily poor instruction, it certainly fails to optimize what eLearning could be and fails to optimize the students' learning experiences. "

further research is currently underway involving different learners in different contexts: 1) adult mature learners in a lifelong further/continuous education context (Diplôme d'université de conception médiatique — University Diploma for Web Design, delivered at Montpellier 3 University), who are mainly on-campus (just two learners are entirely off-campus); 2) a year-long network for second-year Masters' students, elaborated in parallel to traditional courses (2007-2008).

These pilot studies, which, contrary to the research presented in this paper, do not involve solely distance-education students, should help develop our understanding further in relation to appropriate paths to explore in the future eLearning world, bringing together yet more aspects related to social networks, communities of practice, and international online exchange networks.

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Master's programme, Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3: www.univ-montp3.fr/metice/_masterprogaf/

Merlin: merlin.hull.ac.uk

Ning: www.ning.com

Questionnaire issued to students and teaching staff:
recherche.univ-montp3.fr/rachel/html/mgaf.htm

WebCT: www.webct.com

WebCT at Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3: karolus.univ-montp3.fr

Appendix

22 discussion lists were initiated: 6 by the tutors and 16 by the students. Of the 16 student-initiated topics, all but one (creation of a social topic) were pedagogically linked to the course. Two students (H, M) initiated more than one discussion thread.

The full list of topics, in chronological order, as they originally occurred within the social networking site, is as follows:

- 1) Getting to know each other (tutors)
- 2) Learning Online experiences — Expériences en FOAD (tutors)
- 3) Créer des outils pour la FOAD - Creating eResources (student H)
- 4) Grille d'évaluation — New evaluation form (tutors)
- 5) Evaluating innovation in Ning (tutors)
- 6) Évaluation de logiciels — Software evaluation (tutors)
- 7) Cultural Differences (tutors)
- 8) Questions (Student B)
- 9) Gestion des connaissances/ Knowledge Management (Student E)
- 10) Socialisation (Student I)
- 11) Innovations & usage (Student D)
- 12) Présentiel et FOAD — On and off-campus (Student J)
- 13) Comment la FOAD peut-elle contribuer au développement d'un pays du sud? eLearning and contribution to growth of developing countries (Student K)
- 14) Compétences développées au sein de la FOAD / Competencies developed in eLearning (Student L)
- 15) Gamelearning / Comment utiliser le jeu pour apprendre à distance ?(Student C)
- 16) Le 21e siècle, siècle de la Foad ? / 21st century, century of eLearning (Student M)
- 17) L'efficacite de la Foad sur le presentiel / Effectiveness of eLearning above traditional teaching (Student M)
- 18) Mondialisation et Foad / Globalisation and eLearning" (Student M)
- 19) Innovation dans la gestion des ressources en FOAD / Innovation in eLearning resource management (Student O)
- 20) Si j'étais prof en FOAD — If I were an eLearning tutor (Student F)
- 21) Comment faire face à ceux qui ne sont pas pour le changement envers la FOAD? How do we handle people who are against change when it comes to eLearning? (Student H)
- 22) Et si on recommençait comme en janvier ? / And if we started again, like in January? (Student P)

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