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Teaching by distance learning or face to face: the differences between direct and distance teaching *Marjolijn S.M. Kok*

Introduction

In this paper I will explore some of the differences involved in teaching either directly in front of a classroom with students or at a distance through the interface of a computer. The participation in the Leonardo project *E-learning as a tool of knowledge transfer in the field of protection and management of archaeological heritage* on distance learning and the experience of direct teaching have led to several observations concerning the differences between teaching by distance learning or face to face. Through direct teaching I have taught theory, gender archaeology, landscape and heritage, fieldwork and field administration. Distant learning was a new experience. The distant learning course consisted of 15 modules written by authors from six countries: England, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, and Sweden. Although the subject matter of each module was at a European level, experience at the national level could be brought to the fore. In co-operation with Heleen van Londen four modules were written from a Dutch perspective. These were module: Mentalities and perspectives in archaeological heritage management; Cultural biography of landscape; Sustainable development in the archaeological heritage sector; and Commercial archaeology. English was the main language within the project, but where necessary modules were translated into the national language. This meant that all of the original course material was first written in English. The participants from all countries could comment on this first version before it was taken into production by a multimedia team based in Poland.

The philosopher Derrida argues that speech has no priority over written text as both are similarly inadequate to convey perfect communication, where the meaning of the words of the speaker/writer correspond perfectly with the

meaning the audience understand these words to have. Perfect communication is, however, seldom a goal of teaching. The content of a course can be similar but the way of communication is very different. The written word (by hand, more and more on a computer) differs from the spoken word (verbally, usually face to face) in the way the speaker/writer interacts with the audience. Although the outline of the course is similar for both ways of teaching, the infill is quite different. The preparations and performance needed for a lesson differs depending on the type of interaction taking place, either direct or at a distance through an interface.

Direct teaching

When teaching face to face I seldom write out the entire text of a lesson. The outline is filled in with key-words and only definitions or quotations are written out. In this way when actually teaching I will not forget important elements, but I can speak more freely. My eyes do not need to focus on the text and I can look at the students. The expression of the students, not just their faces but their entire body language, is very important in assessing the way the lecture is received. I can react instantly by elaborating more on a point or skipping introductory knowledge. I have noticed that students are more apt to ask questions or make points when they have the feeling you talk rather freely. It is less of an interruption and after the question is dealt with you do not need to continue with a prewritten text but can continue in the same strand of speaking. At the same time I can question the students directly about what they have been told and respond to their reaction or assess their level of participation and/or understanding. Furthermore, teaching often involves multiple lessons and during a course you can rehearse, repeat and respond to the difficulties students bring to the fore.

Distance teaching

With distance learning the preparation is quite different as you have no direct interaction with the students. You have to anticipate what keeps the students attention and whether they can understand the information. During the course there is no room for alterations as the making of the modules costs too much time and money.

As this was our first experience with distance learning, the content of the modules for the Leonardo project were co-written by Heleen van Londen, at the start we had no real idea of what exactly was needed. We wrote a text that

was more or less an article. It was a continuous text with a clear storyline and long paragraphs complete with references. In other words, it was more or less like a narrative you would tell your students within a classroom.

From the digital library we were used to reading articles on-line and had not thought about the length of the text any more than it should not exceed twenty pages per module. In the Leonardo project the archaeologists wrote a text that was converted into a syllabus by the Polish multimedia-team of whom Dorota Bochenska and Agata Prinke were our contact. Once we saw what the end-product looked like we realised our approach had to change. The main change was that the text should be divided into coherent independent units that would fit on one page. In other words per module we had to write about twenty small lectures. And like a course these small lectures should form an understandable narrative. The text needed to be bite-sized. This required a new look at the text which focused on the essence of what was important and how it formed a unit. And usually this, for us, a small unit would be cut up further into inter-active scenarios. These small units also needed illustrations to keep the course attractive.

Although we usually use illustrations during lectures it was more difficult to find illustrations for all small units, especially when they were of a more theoretical nature. Luckily within the project there was room for the production of new drawings that could exemplify specific ideas. Here, the co-operation with the multimedia team was essential. Visibility and clarity were important elements that had to be kept in check. The meaning of the pictures should be clear and should not contain too much detailed information. In other words, the drawings should clarify instead of being picture puzzles. Puzzles were included at other moments when the students could test themselves. We had received some examples of puzzles that could be included. Most included some form of yes/no answers. Here again it was more difficult to find suitable puzzles for the more theoretical parts. Rights and wrongs are not always present and this is something you also want to teach your students. This remained a problem that could only be partly solved by adding small texts when the so-called solution came up.

The insertion of clear references allows the students to further their knowledge or look up extra information about the subject. In the modules there were, however, no references as in articles but bibliographical information was put in the last section of each module. During a direct teaching course it is normal to refer back to previous lectures or explain something

that will be dealt with in a later part of the course. Our cross references to other modules were not taken up in the actual modules, as each small text should stand on its own.

The teaching itself was for us a strange affair as, except an introduction hour, all was done through e-mail and monitoring. We could log-in on the web-site of the project. Here the different modules could be opened, but also the progress of the students could be followed. Students could use the modules and a forum to discuss with other students. The questions we received from students mainly concerned technical problems. We received no assignments from the students. This could be partly due to the fact that most of our students were professionals who did not need the credits. We did not push this issue as people were taking part in their spare time.

Try to define how AHM is organised in your country following the concepts of a positivistic and/or interpretive approach. Use the characteristics given and answer with yes and no.

Here we give the characteristics in question form of the sc07 drop and drag scheme only now they can choose a yes or no. when finished an answer appears.

Questions

1   Does preservation focus only on single objects?
2   Is there a scale on which monuments are valued?
3   Are archaeological remains viewed as a finite resource?
4   Are the people professionally dealing with archaeological remains all archaeologists?
5   Are archaeological monuments fenced in?

Answer

>   *If all yes:* text appears 'AHM in your country is organised in a positivistic way.'
>   *If all no:* text appears 'AHM in your country is organised in an interpretive way.'
>   *if yes and no answers:* 'AHM in your country is organised in a diverse way using both positivistic and interpretive elements.'

Figure 1 Example of a puzzle from the *Cultural biography module* as described in the syllabus which was used by the multimedia team to create an interactive element. In italics the actual text on screen, underlined the multimedia description.

Evaluation

The participation in the Leonardo project has been very useful as it gave us the opportunity to participate in a new way of learning at a European level in a subject of our interest, archaeological heritage management. Not often do you get the opportunity to really experience a new teaching method and actually prepare part of the course material. The international character of the project gave an insight into how others teach and work with students and how they deal with archaeological heritage management. This allowed for reflection on our own way of teaching and dealing with archaeological heritage management.

The major advantage of distance learning is that you put a lot of energy in the preparation of lessons which leads to a complete narrative with a very clear structure. Sidetracks are reduced and recognisable as sidetracks as they are defined as examples. References have to be exact and are for students easier to find. In direct teaching I often point to literature when usually a full reference is not given as this will hamper the flow of the lesson.

The difficulties come to the fore in the shortness of the text-units of the distance learning. All the separate units quickly get a matter-of-fact character. Which is enhanced by the interactive elements that allow mostly yes/no questions. Short sentences are not good for explaining, especially complex things such as heritage management with its diverse angles. Studies in the Netherlands have shown that coherence marking will lead to better text comprehension, especially when the reader has little knowledge of the subject. Although this effect is stronger at low levels of learning (Land 2009), it was also relevant for test subjects with a higher education (Kamalski 2007, 216). The same principle seems to apply to text written by social servants for public purposes. When they wrote sentences that were too simple the public had more problems understanding the text (Sanders 2009). It seems that complex sentences with coherence markings may give the impression of being difficult to read, but lead to a better understanding.

Linking words between sentences and paragraphs guide the reader. In a textbook on academic writing it is demonstrated that '…linking words and phrases can help a writer maintain flow and establish clear relationships between ideas.' (Swales and Feak 2007, 27). Linking words are nearly absent between the different text units in the distance learning course, which may lead to a lesser understanding of the complete text. Students and teachers may not be aware of this lesser understanding. As on the one hand, students

form their own mental picture that fits their previous knowledge, which is not necessarily the context the teacher is writing about. And on the other hand, the text and the questions in the distance learning modules both have a factual instead of an understanding character. Nearly all tests within the module can be made by just going back in the texts. The level of reproduction is tested instead of the level of understanding.

Another positive aspect was the international character of the project which allowed for a diverse view on heritage management. This enlarges the awareness of students that local solutions to heritage management are not necessarily the only solutions. Different approaches may lead to good results and at the same time not all archaeological heritage should be approached in a similar manner. For example, it may make Dutch students aware of the peculiar nature of what they call archaeological monuments in relation to other countries. In the Netherlands many archaeological monuments are located underneath the soil and their content is estimated. This leads to the different involvement of the public into local heritage management than in countries where archaeological monuments are clearly visible and part of everyday life. The problems we all try to deal with in our work are shared by other people and solutions may be found outside our national borders. Furthermore, archaeology is taken into a wider European perspective which can lead to the appreciation of other people's heritage. Case-studies across borders and this may give students an incentive to more actively use data/ information from other countries not only in this course, but in other courses as well. The international character also gives an awareness of the possibilities of studying archaeological heritage management in different countries. There is, however, a disadvantage related to the different authors from several countries in the sense that the style of the modules changes throughout the course. When reading the different modules you have to adapt to the different levels of insight that are required by the reader. This can lead to the impression that the course has some imbalances. Although we had long sessions on the content of modules, they were often written simultaneously and the actual content could differ from what we expected. This made it difficult to anticipate if certain information was given elsewhere or would be left out. What is considered relevant for specific subjects can vary considerably between the different authors. Although the structure of the entire course was planned some elements are missing from the text and others are repeated. In our comments on each others texts we could point to the elements we

thought that minimally should be put in. No major elements have been left out, but the coherence of the entire course is not optimized. The fact that the other authors read your texts did give insight in to your own flaws and could be used to overcome your own oversights. Comments have to be precise to be the most useful. Not only when your module is commented on, but also when you comment on other modules, precision helps you to think clearly about what you think is important to communicate to the students and how to communicate this knowledge.

Finally the important element to evaluate is the actual experience of teaching. Here what is prepared becomes reality. We had opted for an introduction hour as the Netherlands is a small country this was no problem and the participants were keen to come. People, who came to this introduction, also followed all the modules. This was less the case for the people who did not come to the introduction. Especially with professional working people, the fact that it was voluntary meant that the urgency to do the course was absent. Although they had been interested in the e-learning project in itself, actually following the course seemed less interesting. This could be due to the generally high level of knowledge about heritage management of most archaeologists working in this sector. But also the absence of direct contact with co-students could be seen as a setback as networking opportunities are less present. Networking is an important reason for attending all kinds of informative meetings.

As a teacher the distant learning course was an alienating experience, I could monitor the progress of the students. I could follow if they read all course material, but I had absolutely no idea if they had understood anything they had read. For me one of the joys of teaching was completely gone. I always find it very rewarding to see a student who is struggling with a subject, coming to grasps with that subject. Direct contact is essential for this kind of experience. The level of understanding might have been more obvious when the participants would have made the assignments, but we had no way to force them to make these. Pressuring students is also something we are not familiar with within our teaching practice. Students are very independent and will not accept pressure of any kind. The grading afterwards is the only means of pressure we can use. This is also how we want to teach, students should come of their own accord. Here the social aspect of direct teaching is of major importance. The contact between students and teachers

is enough to motivate students. They understand that through this contact they will learn in a more easy way than by just studying books.

Maybe this sounds old fashioned as students nowadays are constantly chatting and e-mailing on the internet, but I still think that face to face contact has extra value. It is not just what is communicated in words, it is the whole of postures, gestures and facial expressions that makes you realise that a student has understood what you tried to teach.

Conclusion

Although the participation in the Leonardo project on E-learning has taught me much, I have not been convinced of its extra value in teaching complicated subjects like archaeological heritage management. This may be due to the smallness of our country and teaching traditions. The time and effort that go into preparing the modules and following the students at a distance do not lead to better education. In cases where accessibility is a problem it could, however, be a solution.

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