

## Development and Exchange of e-learning: practical lessons from developing e-language tools for support in lesser-used European languages

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### Summary

When e-learning is available from everyone, competition is inevitable and niches are important for providers prepared to supply to small groups. With a large number of different languages in use across the EU, language programs are inevitably an important feature of European e-learning provision. Sustaining e-learning activities on the lesser-used European language led to the identification of new e-tools as services to support learning. Development requires resource investigation, though, and the influences and interactions of EU policies and programmes at a regional level are very significant. Through an informal matching process, a joint initiative to develop on-line language tools for Welsh and Irish was formed. The context, regional influences, difficulties and solutions are described.

The application area is unusual in that it affects database applications applied to languages, but seven general lessons from project development are transferable and highlighted. Networking across initiatives offers multiple ways of developing e-learning and on a regional basis there is sufficient information to enable a suitable fit to be made with relevant initiatives. Political awareness by project staff is necessary in gathering a degree of political support in order to make cooperation between the project partners and government organisations easier to realise. Transnational team building should embrace different levels of staff with the aim that they communicate easily over problems, solutions and trust one another. Good design practice is essential so that the interface needs to be designed so that it can be updated easily in response to user needs. Marketing promotion can be effective in various forms. Through maintaining and updating a fresh and attractive web-site that will attract enquiries and international registrations from the Web. Holding 'special promotional events' that are planned to coincide with course development milestones. Arranging a 'drip-feed' of local news stories to stimulate interest and maintain the flow of registrations. Monitoring of the website provides a quick, precise and accurate indication of the effect of marketing promotion. Finally, evaluation is one of the most important tasks and needs to be scheduled from the first day of the initiative. Emphasis is given to capture as much developmental information as possible, including the unexpected outcomes as well as the planned ones. Features for evaluation included the social and cultural needs, the learning support environment as well as the management. Effective evaluation can generate findings and together with suitable dissemination are important tools for sustaining a dynamic to an innovation.

**Keywords:** e-learning, Interreg, language tools, transnational co-operation.

E-learning has quickly gained a strong band of proponents in the education, training and business worlds and the reasons are not hard to discover: it simply presents so many benefits and new possibilities for innovation by educationalists, trainers, employers and students all along the lifelong learning spectrum.

In this article, I will focus on an unusual practical example of the development of e-learning: new e-language tools for lesser-used European languages. Unusual, because it involves database applications applied to languages. Practical, since it exemplifies many facets of development for a provider: identifying opportunities for new regional and international learners, resource investigation and the interaction of EU policies, as well as regional and transnational exchange.

### Regional and International Markets

What happens when e-learning is available from everyone? Some commentators held the view that large global providers of e-learning will hold sway, others that there will be a complex patchwork of niche providers. Many national and international virtual universities were set up to capitalise on these perceived opportunities, but from the European experience none of these initiatives have reached a level of self-sustainability, that is survival if government support is withdrawn (Bang, 2006). As our world is transformed by the Internet and the immense choice it offers people, so traditional business and operational models are being overturned in every industry. The supply of

books has been transformed by Amazon, the music record business by iTunes, and so on. The characteristic of the new economics, according to Chris Anderson, is that it provides big opportunities for enterprises not in the high-volume end of the demand curve, but for those prepared to address the long tail of this curve, even if they supply in small quantities to people (Anderson, 2006).

In practice, fragmentation rather than integration seems to be occurring with e-learning too, with very many niche markets at the international, national and regional basis - rather than on a global scale. A niche is a group of learners who require very specialised courses and support, which sets them apart as a market group. Niches can occur in economic clusters, geographic locations, concentrations of scientific and creative knowledge, and so on. Niche provision is not exclusive to business clients or skill acquisition, but can occur across all areas of education and training provision across all modes of delivery. However, in an open competitive environment it is inevitable that rival providers try to match an e-learning offer of a particular provider. This in turn places a responsibility on a provider to innovate, to create attractive authentic courses with perceived value for a learner (Roffe, 2004).

Our experience at University of Wales, Lampeter in designing and providing e-learning Welsh language services stretches back some ten years. This built on a forty-year track record of teaching the Welsh language to beginners on regional and summer international immersion programmes. In seeking to make effective use of e-learning, we entered a world in which information and communications technologies, web design, educational design, delivery, support, assessment and educational marketing all converge. Initially we were concerned with making the best use of technology in the learning and support process by blending e-learning into conventional teaching and learning. However, the potential for reaching more learners through a full distance mode of delivery became clear to us because of our large numbers of part-time students. The resources involved in developing this e-learning mode were considerable and required multi-disciplinary action: educators, administrators, technologists and business support staff (Roffe, 2002).

Our initial development activities focused on a Welsh e-learning course. New unexpected clients soon emerged comprising: (a) micro SMEs as part of the Wales regional market; (b) the large corporate university market for e-learning; and (c) the independent e-learner drawn from the international marketplace for students. The development of these client bases provided a major benefit for the university, so that the programme currently supports students in thirty two different countries worldwide. Sustaining e-learning though, has meant identifying new

services to support learning and led us into developing on-line language tools including a dictionary and grammar.

## Language and Meaning

Terminology is very important across Europe. As the European Union expanded its membership in 2004 with ten mainly Eastern European countries joining, the number of different languages in use increased. There are now twenty official languages for the EU, with Irish due to gain this status on 1 January 2007, as well as many more lesser-used languages in the twenty-five Member States ([www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu)). In terms of numbers of speakers, standard German now tops the list of spoken languages, followed by French, English, Italian, Polish and Spanish. With so many languages, there are the challenges of translation as well as finding shared meaning.

Language and meaning are complex cultural identifiers. In the face of this linguistic diversity, the solution pursued by the EU is not in adopting a single dominant language and expecting everyone else to accept that language along with an imposed terminology. This route may lead to social resistance. Instead the EU is promoting regionalism, multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism. It aims for a harmonious understanding of terms with a shared meaning. In this way, the economic and social goals of a common economy, single market and European identity might be achieved more easily.

With a large number of different languages in use across the EU, language programs for education and training are inevitably a feature of European e-learning provision. Dedicated programs and resources are allocated for the education and training field, such as under the e-learning, Leonardo da Vinci as well as the Minerva programmes ([www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu)). Major relevant sources of financial support exist for the economic regeneration of regions through the EU Structural Funds. Other EU co-operation programmes under the Community Initiatives are also used to support e-learning. For instance, under the Interreg programme to support collaboration between adjacent member states, my own University is developing on-line dictionaries, grammars and electronic performance support systems (EPSS) to support language learning in Welsh-English with Dublin City University who are working on Irish-English on-line resources.

## EU Political Priorities

Social, cultural and educational matters are linked to political priorities. Political plans for the EU to become the world's most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010 emerged

from a meeting of the EU Heads of States and Governments in March 2000 in Lisbon. The 'Lisbon strategy' promised to transform every sphere of European economic, social and environmental life by EU policies driven by innovation, enterprise, ICT and education (EC, 2000). In March 2005 José Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, reported that the Lisbon strategy plans had been blown-off course (Barroso, 2005). He pledged a radical shift in direction to get the economy moving towards a business-friendly bureaucracy, focused narrowly on job creation, economic growth and making Europe an attractive place for entrepreneurs. The goal was set at a more modest 3% growth in GDP and accompanying investment in research and development.

When EC policy planners defined the Lisbon Strategy they included education and training as a key component of their plans. They assumed that the existing education systems, in their traditional roles, would not be able to cope with the perceived needs. As a solution, the EU e-learning initiative was proposed to integrate the resources of different EC Directorates General and to provide new economic resources from the European Investment Bank and European Structural Funds. In response, the European education and training sector started to consider e-learning as a serious opportunity, or threat.

The European Commission (EC) in implementing the policy goals agreed by Heads of Government has been a major contributor to the development of e-learning. Participation in EU research and economic development projects has provided opportunities for valuable experience for almost everyone involved in e-learning in Europe. Thousands of projects, person years and millions of Euros have been spent on EU programs for education and training, Community Initiatives, Structural Funds and the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Research and Development Framework in support of e-learning. The EU Leonardo da Vinci programme has been supporting e-learning projects since 1995 and in a thematic review of such projects across a wide range of applications recommended that the issues that needed to be resolved were not really technological problems, but learner orientation, training teachers and evaluation (LdV, 2003).

An umbrella organisation of European Associations and Networks in the field of open, distance education and e-learning, the European ODL Liaison Committee ([www.odl-liaison.org](http://www.odl-liaison.org)) was formed in 2000. It observed recently that since the launch of the e-learning policy initiative, e-learning practice has increased, but policy discussion decreased (ODFL, 2006). It noted that e-learning has disappeared almost completely from top-level policy speeches perhaps because it has lost impact and is a less significant component of educational policy. Education has also lost weight in the overall policy agenda, due to the increased

concerns on security and the need to concentrate resources on the economy. On the positive side, as a result of EU initiatives, a wealth of new R&D results and learning developments have become available and led to the formation of an increasingly professionalized community. There is also massive networking activity at European level that brings together professionals from the fields of research, education, training and industry, due to projects containing e-learning elements. In terms of the Adapted Lisbon Agenda to equip European citizens with the right knowledge, skills and attitudes, it advocates a renewed and reoriented investment on research on education, training and lifelong learning to counter under-utilisation of research results in mainstream practice.

## Regional e-learning level and interactions with EU Programmes

EU policies and programmes are very influential at the regional level in providing substantial support for new initiatives for education and training, including e-learning applications. At the regional level in Wales, this occurs directly through the Structural Funds and the importance placed on ICT and innovation for the economic regeneration for West Wales and Valleys under the EU Objective One Programme. For example, the Strategic Programming Document (2000-2006) indicates that digital technologies are the key factor for growth and employment. A number of relevant actions are included: achieving faster Internet access, accelerating e-commerce adoption, support for high-technology SMEs, participation by people with disadvantages, as well as education and training development in the area of multimedia educational tools, learning technologies, content and services.

The regional level in Europe is recognised by the EU as key in promoting e-learning and the adaptation to the knowledge economy. The Welsh Assembly Government supports the promotion and practice of e-learning. This is reflected in policy papers on lifelong learning (WAG, 2006-a) and economic development (WAG 2006-b). It is also a member of the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning, which is committed to the area of e-learning and produced a perspective on the regional dimension of the EU e-learning agenda (EARLALL, 2005).

In implementing e-learning at a regional level, Wales is well set up to be an e-learning country. There are several key elements in this strategy. Wales on-line (*Cymru Ar-lein*) provides a strategic context for the Welsh Assembly's actions, a forum for sharing good practice and for identifying areas for action ([www.cymruarlein.wales.gov.uk](http://www.cymruarlein.wales.gov.uk)). The e-learning strategy for Wales sets out to promote

cohesive development across Wales. E-learning is seen as particularly important in addressing the needs of learners in the rural hinterland of Wales, and is highlighted in the regional statement of educational and training needs ([www.elwa.ac.uk](http://www.elwa.ac.uk)). Moreover, three e-Training consortia support collaborative development of e-learning content for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the University and College sectors in Wales.

E-learning development at a regional level is multilayered, however, as a snapshot of Wales taken five years ago began to illustrate (Foot, 2001). Sectors, organisations and individuals have seized the opportunity to develop e-learning of particular interests, so much so that it is becoming integrated into working practices. Regional policies and practices act to encourage the process. However, the exchange of ideas between individuals and, networks of professionals occurs at multiple levels: with transfer between individuals in the region and from European institutions.

## Resource Investigation

As an educational service provider, the development and operation of the pilot e-learning programme meant a shift in our resource equation and external resource investigation. In effect the initial shift of the cost base is away from conventional delivery and into content development and learner support. In this respect it is similar to other forms of open and flexible learning provision. However, there is a different emphasis in the composition of the support team for e-learning with the necessity to have technology support as a part of the operational team. This raises the initial and ongoing core costs for delivery, but is compensated by the benefits in curriculum adaptability of the medium, and the scalability of the learning product. (Bates, 2005).

At the heart of our resource investigation was a three stage process: (a) identifying a clear need in a target group; (b) ensuring that partners had the resources, or access to these resources to address effectively these needs; (c) targeting the identified educational and training needs with solutions that make economic and financial sense to all parties involved. However, securing resources for development involves aligning objectives and work plans with the structure of funding schemes.

There is a matching process at work. EU programmes provide a structured framework for the implementation of policies at the European, national and regional level. There is a core expectation of providing new activity that is additional to that supported by national and

regional governments, which is focused onto sustaining existing provision. The different EU Funds and Programmes are attractive for an educational developer because they allow work on the frontiers of new development, with significant co-financing of resources. For these reasons we have engaged with the EU Community Initiatives, most recently under Interreg, to pursue our e-learning plans.

## E-learning and e-language Tools

Under an EU Interreg project called FTU ([www.focal.ie/Project.aspx](http://www.focal.ie/Project.aspx)), leading linguistic expertise in Wales and Ireland are jointly developing and providing ICT based digital language applications for a range of professionals, SMEs, learners and communities that live and work in the Wales-Ireland cross-border area. It is developing easy access to on-line Irish-English and Welsh-English dictionaries, grammars and other sources that are simple to use yet authoritative. It aims to assist the development of the learning society, linguistic equity, equal opportunities and sustainable development by providing services and resources that people need as part of their work and studies. The project intends to produce authoritative and innovative e-learning products of long-term benefit to a broad range of people in the cross-border area.

Starting the project involved addressing several difficulties. Finding the right partners was not easy and involved almost two years in this search. This was a major and frustrating obstacle. We finally made a breakthrough and overcame this due to an internal link and exchange that had been made previously, though a different business sector arrangement. Difficulty also came from the extended application process. The way we have overcome this was by patience and perseverance, making time and resources available to respond and speak to people about the issues over a period of about a year. Even though the criteria for funding were met, at a regional level there are competing priorities for the support of ICT projects, even though they meet the published criteria. Multi-sector partnership and inter-state support greatly assisted final approval, with policy support from Ireland and language bodies crucial in gaining approval.

The labour-intensive element of the data-input required is the major contributor to the resource costs. Interreg funding is essential to develop and disseminate these resources to the highest international standards, rather than the fragmented ad hoc initiatives, which have existed nationally for Welsh and Irish speakers.

The dictionaries and resources for Welsh ([www.geriadur.net](http://www.geriadur.net)) and Irish ([www.focal.ie/Home.aspx](http://www.focal.ie/Home.aspx)) are now up-and

running. Monitoring of access to the Welsh dictionary indicates that there are currently over 200,000 users per month onto the dictionary. Learners have expressed interest in registering for the e-learning provision on offer from thirty-two different countries.

## What are the lessons? Key Findings

The application area is unusual in that it affects database applications applied to languages, but there are general lessons from project development and exchange that are transferable.

1. **Network across initiatives.** There are multiple ways of developing e-learning programmes, but support from the EU Programmes can prove vital. There are challenges in terms of the administrative and financial procedures with such projects. However, on a regional basis there is sufficient information, experience and advice available to establish robust infrastructures and networks for the transfer of information between projects and regional government administrators. This enables a suitable fit to be made with relevant initiatives.

2. **Learn the politics.** Reaching and sustaining agreement on development involving collaboration between sectors at a regional level is necessary. Starting the scheme involved gathering a degree of political support in order to make cooperation between the project partners and government organisations easier to realise. In Wales the university is linked with the *Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg* and the Welsh Assembly Government, while in Ireland Dublin City University is partnering with *Foras Na Gaeilge*. Continuation of these networks has proved essential to operate the project, but the advantages are that they can be sustained by ICT. Understanding of the politics of different organisations though, has proved a key learning requirement for university staff in both Wales and Ireland.

3. **Develop the International Team.** The aim is that different levels of staff with different responsibilities - project administrators, technologists as well as educators - know their equivalent in the partner organisation, so that they easily communicate with one another over problems, solutions and trust one another. Plans for meetings of all the different staff are best made right at the start of the project, when staff are beginning their work, formulating plans and are receptive to new ideas.

4. **Good design practice is essential.** Develop software so that it is easy to change. Updating and continuous improvement is a feature of e-learning development. This means that a lot of attention should be paid to how people use the

Interface, which will bring an understanding of user needs and who benefits from the solution. To respond effectively, the Interface needs to be designed so that it can be updated easily.

### 5. **Aim to widen target groups and exploit new contexts for e-learning.**

Attracting and retaining students is a necessity for all areas of delivery: schools, further and higher education, training and work, as well as for lifelong learning and societal purpose. Independent learners face a bewildering range of options in learning portals, accredited or non-accredited courses, in selecting from hundreds of thousands of options on the online learning market in order to run on their personal computer. Helping people, for example by offering tools to support informal learning, can draw in new e-learners from new contexts.

### 6. **Collect data to assist in marketing future initiatives.**

Monitoring of the website provides a quick, precise and accurate indication of the effect of marketing promotion. Marketing promotion can be effective in various forms: (a) maintaining and updating a fresh and attractive web-site that will attract enquiries and international registrations from the Web; (b) holding 'special promotional events' that are planned to coincide with course development milestones; and (c) arranging a 'drip-feed' of local news stories to stimulate interest and maintain the flow of registrations. The inclusion of online evaluation instruments aids the efficient collection of information and online testing yields information on knowledge acquisition.

7. **Evaluation is one of the most important tasks.** Evaluation has a central role in the development and the programme work plan has been scheduled to include evaluation from the first day of the initiative. Emphasis is given to capturing as much developmental information as possible. The scope of the evaluation is sufficiently wide to catch the unexpected outcomes as well as the planned ones. The features for evaluation included the social and cultural needs, the learning support environment as well as the management. The process involved self-assessment as well as external review through a formative evaluation method. The aim is to generate sustainable results and their dissemination is an important tool for sustainability.

**Picture:** Launch of Interreg project including Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, National Assembly for Wales (front row, fourth from the left),



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## Citation instruction

Roffe, Ian (2006) Development and Exchange of e-learning: practical lessons from developing e-language tools to support in lesser-used European languages. eLearning Papers, vol. 1 no. 1.

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## Edition and production

Name of the publication: eLearning Papers

Edited by: P.A.U. Education, S.L.

Postal address: C/ Muntaner 262, 3º, 08021 Barcelona, Spain

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Internet: [www.elearningpapers.eu](http://www.elearningpapers.eu)