ONLINE SUPPORT IN THE ONLINE ECONOMIC EDUCATION PROJECT

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1. Abstract

The "Economic Education Online" (EEO)project is developing and testing an internet-based teacher training programme for teachers of economic education Furthermore, preparations are being made for exporting the programme to Poland and Russia.

Active learner support during on-site events and in the online learning phase is an essential element in the concept of "Economic Education Online". The following paper describes the learning support measures for learners. Special emphasis is placed on tutorial online learner support. Tutor's responsibilities, functions and qualifications are based on the requirements of the relevant target groups. Therefore, the training of online tutors gains added importance.

2. The "Economic Education Online" programme

In order to close the current gap in teacher development, as well as basic teacher training in Germany in the area of economic education, an internet-based learning system was developed called "Economic Education Online" (EEO).

EEO is financed by a public and private partnership model. Project partners are the Bertelsmann Foundation (Project Management), EWE AG Oldenburg, the Heinz Nixdorf Foundation, the Ludwig-Erhard Foundation, the Foundation of German Business, the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport and the Lower Saxony Ministry of Science and Culture. The pilot phase of the project ends in December 2004. Sustainability is an important aim of the project, in order to be able to continue to offer an internet-based qualification after the initial funding period.

10 German states are involved in the programme: Baden-Württemberg, Brandenburg, Bremen, Hamburg, Hesse, Mecklenburg Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, Northrhine-Westphalia, Rhineland Palatinate and Thuringia.

Project leader is professor Kaminski from the Institute for Economic Education at the University of Oldenburg which is responsible for carrying out the project and academic project management. The Institute for Economic Education co-operates closely with the the Center for Distance Education.

More current detailed information can be found on the project's Internet site (www.oebo.de) or on the Institute for Economic Education homepage (www.ioeb.de).

3. Pedagogical approach

3.1 Content

As part of the project 74 modules are developed through a network of more than 40 academic institutions in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. 30 modules are currently available in the online

learning environment and until end of 2003 about 300 learners coming from 10 federal regions are registered in the programme. To support the learners, 37 trained tutors are involved.

Study materials are developed following the instructional design process (cf. Schreiber 1998). The content of "Economic Education Online" is divided into economic, business and pedagogical components. Modules for job orientation and scientific propaedeutics are also offered. In total, seven basic modules are developed, as well as more in-depth modules concerning "Private Households" (five modules), "Companies" (14 modules), "State" (12 modules), "International Economic Relations" (six modules), Law and Economy (six modules), four modules on scientific propaedeutics and 20 pedagogical modules.

Examples of economic-political issues serve as basic situations for linking and observing the module contents from different perspectives (Example: pop music and the economy; the debate about copyright laws serves as an example for the topic of the function of the state in a capitalist society, within international business relations or private households).

Teaching and learning

The course is divided into online learning and on-site phases (cf. blended learning, Sauter & Sauter 2002).In Lower Saxony, for example, 15 days of on-site tuition are scheduled over 2 years, focussing mainly on pedagogical elements of economic education.

The pedagogical concept is based on a constructivist understanding of learning and teaching (cf. Duffy & Jonassen 1992, Gerstenmaier & Mandl 1995, Jonassen et al. 1995). It is important to keep a balance between instruction (structure) and constructivist elements (dialogue). Alongside predefined exercises or self-assessment, the students also have to construct learning maps for certain areas of content.

Learning activities online are as follows:

- Using the multimedia module contents provided and working with interactive objects.
- Identifying central issues of individual content fields, using examples from current economic-political circumstances.
- Writing excerpts (for example concerning contents of the in-depth modules) exchanging with other members of the learning group.
- Debating module contents in discussions and answering questions.
- Carrying out self-assessments.
- Designing and discussing lesson plans and proposals (partly as a group exercise).

The on-site sessions focus on the following activities:

- Presenting and discussing participants' contributions.
- Academic and pedagogical work in relation to the delivery (teaching economic education; planning lessons).

All these activities require tutorial support, which is conceptualised as follows.

3.3. Tutorial Support

Online learning affords more flexibility and independence, but also transfers more responsibility to the learner (Moore & Kearsley 1996). Support, guidance and advice is therefore of critical importance for successful online learning (Simpson 2002, Zawacki-Richter 2004). Depending on how the new information and communication technologies are applied for teaching and learning, two different ways of their integration can be identified:

- Computer-based communication is used in an additive way, i.e. as with first and second generation distance learning (cf. Garrison 1985), many resources are invested in the production and distribution of high-quality study materials, which are then "only" accompanied by a tutor.

Therefore, computer conferencing issimply another channel for support and does not change much in terms of the tutor's responsibilities. Communication becomes quicker and more flexible. This model is referred to as "cmc added-on" (Thorpe 2001).

- The teaching/learning process and interaction is more defined by the tutor, and less by the study material. This approach is referred to as the "interactive model" (Allen 2001). Much greater responsibility is transferred to the tutor here: "[...] the tutors of the course carry authority to create the detailed course teaching as it progresses over the duration of the course, rather in the way a conventional university lecturer might decide how they were to teach [...]. Such instructors must of course be content experts, but they will also need even more skills of learning facilitation than the conventional tutor of a second generation distance education course" (Thorpe 2001, p. 17).

"Economic Education Online" carries out an intermediary role. The course modules are written in advance by experts and are then designed for the online learning environment, so that they can be used as self-learning materials. For the tutors there is still leeway regarding their support of the course. They are not only available for questions in conferences, but they also organise the group work and set tasks for self-assessments and tests. The functions and roles of the tutors can be divided into four categories: pedagogical, organisational, social and technical (cf.. Berge 1995).

Category	Tutor's responsibilities
pedagogical	• Learning advice for the participants as far as the content is concerned • Advice and support for the participants regarding application of the content (teaching scenarios, utilisation of special services such as online databases etc.) • Adjustment and expansion of tasks depending on the interests and progress of learners • Feedback on participant's contributions, as well as on self tests
Social	• Creation of a positive learning atmosphere • Situative reaction to events (e.g. conflicts) during the course • Motivation in the case of low participation
Organisational	• Set-up and support of working teams (virtual and/or physical) • Observation and monitoring the formal and academic standards of written work
Technical	• Support for questions regarding the use of the learning platform (in order to resolve specific technical problems additional support is provided)

The online phase follows an initial on-site phase, which is important from a social and psychological point of view to get to know to the participants, tutors, the overall concept and the technical learning environment. Group feeling and identity must be carried over from the on-site phase into the online phase, meaning social and organisational matters are given priority at the start. This phase is of great importance for the seamless success of online measures, since for the participants the content, media and type of communication are all new. Such situations could give rise to worries which could hamper the learning process and active participation within the learning environment. Therefore they, need special attention. It may also be the case that many technical questions have to be resolved at the beginning of the course. Moving on from this, the emphasis of the tutor's work shifts to pedagogicalelements.

In the testing area of the learning environment, which is only accessible for the tutors, there are questions and tasks for each of the 40-50 sub-headings of each module. The tutors select a number of exercises from this pool and make them available for the students. Discussions are initiated and moderated based on these activities. The tutors can influence to a large extent which topics are then dealt with in depth.They gain an overview of learner's progress and commitment from the test results and learner's contributions in the conferences.

Following the initial phase, a content field is then developed further in each case. This includes selected modules of a given focus area. The topics approached using an authentic example scenario e.g. "company formation" in the "company" content field. The tutors designate work groups in which, for example, individual in-depth modules are explored and are then presented as excerpts to other course participants in the virtual classroom.

Additionally, the tutors are responsible for supporting the learners in resolving constructive tasks. Thus learners put together lesson plans and concepts etc. with regard to the individual subject matter. Wenn es noch mehr Beispiele gibt, dann sollten die hier auch besprochen werden, sonst streichen!

5. Training the Online Tutors

Given the complex functions and roles of a tutor in Economic Education Online, it is clear that a special training programme for online tutors is needed to enable them to carry out these responsibilities.

The training for the online tutors is broken down into a one week on-site session and a three week online phase. It is provided by employees from the Institute of Economic Education and the Center for Distance Education. The tutors are teachers from the federal regions involved, who receive time in lieu for training and their activities as tutors. The training has been offered two times since June 2002 with 37 participants.

5.1 On-site phase

During an on-site week at the University of Oldenburg, the aims, contents and organisation of the programme Economic Education Online will be introduced to the future tutors. At the on-site event the first personal contacts can be made, which have a positive effect on motivation and will facilitate communication between the forthcoming online tutors. The employees of the Institute for Economic Education convey the pedagogicaland academic concept of the education and training. The employees of the Distance Learning Centre are responsible for technical training and special aspects of learning and teaching online as well. Technical skills in using the internet-based learning management system is a prerequisite for tutorial work. Technical details are therefore the subject of several sessions during the on-site week..

After presenting the individual elements of the online learning environment, the functions and use of different tools are worked out with exercises from the participant's and the tutor's point of view.

The on-site week ends with a reflection of the training and an introduction to the online phase.

5.2 Online phase

The online tutorials are based on authentic situations and are practice oriented. As a result, the one-week on-site event is followed by a three-week online phase, which is intended to enable the participants to develop a routine in coping with the internet-based learning environment. Once the on-site event has taken place, the technical basics are in place for dealing with the software. During the following weekend the participants install the software on their computer at home in order to be able to begin the online phase in the following week.

Participants are expected to invest seven hours per week in the course: one hour per day in order to ensure that they participate in the discussions and group work on a regular basis.

The objective of the online phase is not so much to provide technical knowledge but rather to learn the role and tasks of an online tutor in the framework of Economic Education Online . The technical routine results from participating in the online course (participant's view). In addition, a copy of one course module is provided so that the participants themselves are able to experiment with a module from the tutor's point of view.

During the first week (Introduction) the relationship between online learning and distance learning is explored. This relationship is, unfortunately, often overlooked. Indeed, the development of online courses should benefit from support systems which have been developed at distance teaching. Articles are made available, which deal with special needs of distance learners. Another topic covered during the first week includes the pedagogical opportunities of computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). However, considering the fact that only seven hours learning per week is designated, there is

not a lot of time to read long, academic papers. Therefore, the materials used in the Media Center have been prepared didactically. A page precedes every document, which explains why the text choice has been made and the participants are focused on the main topics in the form of asking questions as a means of understanding the text (study questions). The documents are provided in their original format or as excerpts. The discussions in conferences are the essential element of the course. Each week ends with a summary by the course leaders.

In the second week (Models of Online Tutoring) participants exploredifferent models of tutoring that impose different requirements on tutorial work. The learners apply these models on Economic Education Online and reflect them in terms of pedagogical, organisational, social and technical roles and functions in online tutoring. This week also offers a practical insight into the daily work of online tutors. An overview of the various responsibilities is provided e.g. by Berge (1995), Mündemann (2002), Müskens (2001), and Salmon (2000).

During the third week the future tutors work in groups. It is a challenge to experience for oneself the difficulties that can arise in "virtual" co-operation. Taking into account the overall concept of "Economic Education Online" and using all available materials, each group is to put together a concept for tutorial support. In order to start with the group work, a group speaker is nominated to co-ordinate the group process, delegate smaller tasks and ensure that they are completed on time. At the end, the results are gathered in a collaborative document which is then presented in the public conference in order to obtain feedback from other groups and from course leaders. The course ends with a summary and a closing feedback conference.

6. Further perspectives

The concept as described here is very ambitious. A great deal is expected of the tutors, not only in terms of subject matter, but above all in relation to pedagogical and social skills. Meeting these expectations is by no means guaranteed, despite careful employee selection, despite the measures outlined above and despite the fact that the tutors will also benefit from the project in terms of their daily work. Nevertheless, the project managers are convinced that the tutors will be able to meet the expectations placed upon them.

The demands made on tutors concerning their work with participants are the same as those that people responsible for the project place on themselves regarding the support of the tutors, not only in terms of preparatory seminars, but also in the form of ongoing support. The key term is empathy, and here again it is worth remembering the words Börje Holmberg: "On the basis of my many years of experience I dare claim that the most favourable factor paving the way for motivated students' success and preventing dropout is empathy between the learning and teaching parties, availability of immediate support and advice when difficulties crop up, ease in consulting tutors and other subject specialists and general feelings of rapport." (Holmberg 2001, p. 74)

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