Project

Joining the DOTS: A collaborative approach to online teacher training

Abstract

Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS) is one of 20 “Empowering language professionals” projects currently funded by the Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). Its principal aim is to develop an online platform for delivering teacher training at a distance. Once completed, this collaborative platform will contain a range of modular activities for self-training via a selection of interactive CMC tools.

This paper describes the participative process involved in developing this platform and in creating bite-size introductory activities to online tools for language teaching based on the input of online learning experts and users from 25 European countries.

1. Introduction

The Council of Europe's European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) promotes language education in Europe (www.ecml.at). As part of its 2008-2011 programme it is currently supporting 20 projects based on the theme of “Empowering language professionals”. Developing Online Teaching Skills (DOTS) is one of these projects, led by a team of experts from the UK, Germany, Spain, Croatia and Canada. Over four years, DOTS aims to develop a selection of bite-sized online training activities, delivered via an open source virtual platform (Moodle), which can be integrated into teacher training courses or used independently by part-time and full-time teachers.

2. Need for teacher training in online skills

The European Parliament and the Council of Europe recommend eight key competences for all citizens of the knowledge society. These include communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages; digital and technological competence; learning to learn; and intercultural and social competences (European Commission 2004).

Learning languages through the use of online technology allows learners to simultaneously develop key competences in technology, language and learning to learn. Teachers, in particular, can promote learners' continued interest in foreign languages and cultures through the use of up-to-date technology. Teachers, therefore, have a special need to develop and continually enhance these competences. They also need to be equipped with the skills to independently acquire new knowledge and apply this knowledge in their teaching. The Lisbon strategy states explicitly the need to “take steps to ensure that all the teachers involved are qualified in the use of these [new] technologies” (European Commission 2001: “Objective 1”).

In general, language teacher training is well supported by individual institutions and organisations. There is also no shortage of good materials for online teaching of languages (e.g. ‘Multilingualism’: the website of the European Commission: http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/language-teaching/doc26_en.htm; an overview by Graham Davies: http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk/freestuff.htm). However, much effort and expense in creating online language learning material can be wasted without the
provision of adequate training of teachers. Current training programs often do not go beyond dealing with the technical skills necessary for teaching in an online environment and key pedagogical issues related to particular tools in this environment are frequently left unexplored.

The DOTS project does not make any assumptions about its users; it does not assume that they are full-time language teachers, or that they are computer literate beyond the most basic skills. Its focus is on the social skills of community building, and the skills needed to teach languages creatively and develop a personal style in an online medium (see Hampel & Stickler 2005).

3. Pedagogical Framework

The pedagogical approach of the DOTS project is informed by sociocultural and constructivist theories, both in terms of pedagogy (Arnold & Schüßler 2003) and in terms of technology (Dougiamas 1998). Focusing on the socio-cultural dimensions of learning marks a paradigm shift from past traditions: learning is not considered a "transmission model" in which knowledge is passed from an expert to a novice but rather as an attempt to strike a (temporary) balance between the perceived environment or sensory impressions and the internal, mediated representations (Glaserfeld 2007). Theories of socio-constructivist learning also emphasize the importance of collaborative learning to enable each learner to advance through his/her "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky 1978: 86), which refers to the difference between the developmental potential a learner can exploit on his/her own and the potential a learner can exploit in collaboration with (more capable) peers.

Collaborative learning has been linked to online learning since the inception of computer-mediated communication in the early 1990s (Harasim 1990). Recent years have seen the development of web 2.0 tools (some of which feature in the DOTS project) and an increase in their use in educational settings. Many teachers are using tools such as audio and video conferencing, wikis, blogs, social networking tools and virtual worlds for interaction with and amongst their students and for creating collaborative learning environments. Common ways of implementing collaboration in the classroom include collaborative projects amongst learners in a class – building, for example, a wiki or a website (Engstrom & Jewett 2005) and telecollaborative projects which bring together learners across institutions and across languages (O'Dowd 2006).

Collaborative learning has thus come to be part of the new literacies (Richardson 2006) that learners as well as teachers require to engage successfully in today's educational contexts. Critical factors for teachers include fostering learners' collaborative skills, especially at the sociocognitive level; prompting students' critical thinking (Engstrom and Jewett 2005: 14–15); and knowing when and how to intervene (Mangenot & Nissen 2006: 616). Yet teachers often do not possess these skills to support collaborative learning (Mangenot & Nissen 2006), and although training has been shown to be of paramount importance (Hampel 2009), it is still rare to find comprehensive training programmes.

The DOTS project also builds on the notion of learning communities and communities of practice in order to promote deeper levels of knowledge processing and retention (Wenger 1998; Wenger & Snyder 2000; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). The term 'community of practice' refers to a theory based on learning as social participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) used the term to capture the importance of activity in binding individuals to communities, and of communities legitimizing and developing individuals' practices. Communities of practice are thus formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain (Wenger 1998). They allow individuals to incorporate capability into their practice by developing a shared repertoire and resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary, symbols, artefacts, etc. These embody the accumulated knowledge of the community and "preserve the tacit aspects of knowledge that formal systems cannot capture." (Wenger 1998: 6)
4. Project partners and Project aims

4.1 Partners

DOTS brings together an international group of specialists in teaching languages to adult learners from diverse professional backgrounds. Their pedagogic expertise ensures that the project is focused on best-practice use of ICT, using technology as a means to support the development of communicative and intercultural skills.

The Department of Languages at the Open University (OU) in the UK is the coordinating institution, and the team members from the OU (Ursula Stickler as project leader and Tita Beaven and Regine Hampel) bring their expertise in synchronous online language teaching and tutor training to the project. Martina Emke is a German freelance language teacher with expertise in non-formal adult education.

Pauline Ernest and Joseph Hopkins, from the Language Programme at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), provide their experience in synchronous and asynchronous language learning and teacher training online. Mateusz-Milan Stanojewic from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Zagreb brings his expertise in the use of the Moodle platform and his knowledge of the training needs of Eastern European language teachers.

A non-European team member, Aline Germain-Rutherford, from the University of Ottawa, who specializes in bilingual education and teacher training, was able to join the project as a result of the collaboration of ECML with the Canadian Educational authorities.

Overall, the geographical spread and diversity in learning contexts of the participating institutions (tertiary, adult, continuing education and lifelong learning) guarantee that a variety of perspectives is always taken into account when planning and developing training activities.

4.2 Aims of the DOTS project

These are to:

- Enable language teachers to develop their online teaching skills independently with the help of bite-size self-training materials and reflective activities
- Empower teachers to use their existing pedagogical expertise to develop relevant technological skills and to use these new competencies to improve the pedagogical design of their online courses
- Establish a network of language teachers with different levels of expertise in online teaching and encourage collaborative work among them within the context of a community of practice
- Enable teachers to promote the use of new media and technology amongst their students during and after their formal language courses
- Provide equal access to online training materials in all ECML member states in a cost-effective manner (Moodle platform)
- Encourage reflection on the pedagogical aspects of new forms of teaching and language learning in order to improve the quality of online language education
- Promote lifelong learning amongst language teachers by encouraging their continued professional development
5. Current Achievements

The aims of the project were divided into a number of objectives, which included the following: identification of the training needs of online language teachers; development of training materials and guidelines for their production; piloting, evaluation and dissemination of the training activities. So far, these objectives have been realized through team communication, involving participants in face to face project workshops, online activities and dissemination.

5.1 Communication amongst project team: the Moodle platform

In the first year of the project the online Moodle platform set up by ECML was populated and used by the project team for internal communication. Moodle was chosen as the website platform for three reasons: Firstly, it is based on constructivist principles and therefore lends itself to learner-focused approaches which facilitate collaborative work. Secondly, the software is open source and very stable. Finally, both the University of Zagreb and the Open University UK have chosen Moodle as their VLE platform, which means that project partners already have experience with this particular platform.

The workspace is ideal for storing and up-dating documents, saving meeting notes (wiki), holding asynchronous discussions, and for external communication and dissemination of information for the project’s workshops (see below). Using an online workspace makes a difference to the nature of teamwork not only by reducing the number of email exchanges, but also by ensuring that all team members have an equal chance of being involved and of working collaboratively in the project, regardless of timetables and timezones. In addition to the Moodle workspace, the project team communicates regularly via the FlashMeeting videoconferencing tool.

5.2 Communication amongst experts: DOTS workshops

This first DOTS workshop was held in Graz, Austria, on 4–6 December 2008 and was attended by 26 participants from 25 different European countries. Initial training activities designed by the project team were trialled at the workshop and, based on the feedback received on these and on the results of the needs analysis questionnaire filled in by all participants, the team has since developed 10 bite-size introductory activities to online tools for language teaching. In 2009, these training activities were published via the ECML project website (http://dots.ecml.at/).

Detailed results from the needs analysis questionnaire will be published in a special edition of the The Journal of Teaching English with Technology (TEwT) (http://www.iatefl.org.pl/call/callnl.htm) to be published by the IATEFL Poland Computer Special Interest Group in July 2010. This edition will be edited by the DOTS team and will focus on the development of online teaching skills for language teachers.

The second workshop of the DOTS project was held in Barcelona, Spain, on 3–4 December 2009. Sixteen experts in online language teaching (eight from institutions in Spain and eight from other European countries) participated in the workshop, which was also attended by ECML director Waldemar Martyniuk. The experts collaborated with the DOTS team in creating sample activities for the project workspace and this process led to agreement on four major points which need to be taken into account when developing online training activities:

- flexibility (to accommodate potential users' different levels of technological/pedagogical expertise)
- need for a clear structure and activities which can be implemented immediately
- consideration of different learning styles which combine theory and practice
- inclusion of activities based on learner reflection.
It was also agreed that for most efficient use, the target activities should be modular and searchable both by the communication technology used (e.g. chats, forums, blogs) and by pedagogical elements (e.g. listening comprehension tasks, writing tasks, speaking tasks). An initial sample of the activities developed at the workshop can be found on the ECML website (http://dots.ecml.at/Resources/tabid/1390/language/en-GB/Default.aspx).

5.3 Involvement of participants and dissemination of materials: the Moodle workspace

At the beginning of the second year of the project, the Moodle workspace was being used quite frequently by participants and team members to discuss general developments and ways in which the new skills acquired at the 2008 workshop were being implemented and also to disseminate the results of the Needs Analysis Questionnaire.

Interaction in the workspace declined, however, during the period following December 2008. After the initial enthusiasm resulting from uploading materials and contributing to the forum, the most popular activities used in the workspace were related to “user data” (i.e. editing and reading information about participants), “wiki activities” (reading, editing, contributing to the wiki); and “resource” (uploading and downloading resources from the workspace).

![Figure 1. Most popular tools/activities.](image)

By the end of 2009, only a small number of participants were still using the workspace regularly. The DOTS team has tried, on several occasions, to reinitiate the dialogue and activities in the workspace but with limited success. One reason for this could be the normal attrition after an intensive workshop, although the lack of two-way communication between participants themselves is no doubt also a relevant factor here. Most forum posts were initiated or answered by team members with communication from participants mainly occurring in a one-way mode (announcements, dissemination of materials). This pattern of communication will need to be taken into account for future development of materials.

Contact with some participants from the Graz workshop is ongoing, partly through personal email but also via the joint venture of producing the special edition of The Journal of Teaching English with Technology (TEwT).
5.4 Dissemination: International presentations of DOTS

The team has presented the DOTS project at the following conferences and teacher training events:

- B.I.B International College, Hannover, Germany March 2009
- ICL conference Villach, Austria, September 2009
- DGFF Tagung, Leipzig, Germany, October 2009
- TESL Canada, Banff, Alberta, Canada, October 2009
- CETL conference and workshop, London, UK, November 2009

6. Future developments

The DOTS workspace will be made available to the public in 2011. It will contain a range of modular activities for self-training (which will also be available offline) and interactive CMC tools to aid reflection and peer-support. The conclusions and final product of the DOTS project will be presented at an ECML conference in Graz in September 2011.

More generally, language teachers will be facing new challenges over the coming years. Younger learners in particular will have increasing expectations regarding the integration of the latest technology in their language learning, while more traditional learners may become wary of the need for yet more technology to “interfere” with their learning.

We hope that the DOTS project, with its firm grounding in self-determination and collaborative learning, will help language professionals to make competent, informed choices about the use of appropriate technology in their work and will thus contribute to improving the quality of online language education.

References


