

DIALOG ON: ONLINE LEARNING AND SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION SECTOR

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Abstract

This concise paper will describe the work in progress of the European-funded Dialog On project which brings together two different facets of Internet use by exploring its potential for computer-mediated distance learning and the support of transnational networking among European Trade Unions and Industry Federations. The impact of initial training opportunities along with the challenges posed by organisational, cultural and linguistic differences will be examined.

Keywords

Online learning, communities of practice, trade unions, networking, social dialogue

Introduction

Globalisation is a key driver for change in industrial and commercial organisations worldwide where continuous updating of knowledge and skills is seen to be essential for survival in today's new economy. The speed and ease of online communication is helping to fuel the influence of multi-national corporations, and in order to address this, the trade union sector in Europe recognises the need for more emphasis on transnational cooperation and collaboration (Walker & Creanor, 2000). The provision of online learning opportunities across national confederations, and the exploitation of computer-mediated communication to extend the impact of industry federations through social dialogue are the current focus of activity, supported by the timely acquisition of EU funding.

Here, as elsewhere, there is recognition that new approaches require innovative pedagogical skills and an intuitive recognition of the diverse needs of online distance learners. Similarly, online networks, perhaps more recognisable as communities of practice as identified by Wenger (1998), need the support of an empathic and responsive facilitator to animate, encourage and provide direction for the group. It is on the provision of training and support for these vital skills that the Dialog On project intends to focus its efforts.

Background

The trade union sector has been keen to learn from experiences in higher and further education, and previous projects in this area have attempted to establish online learning opportunities based on guidelines produced by experts in the field (e.g. Harasim et al, 1995). Results however have been mixed. For example, the EU funded European Trade Union Distance Education project (ETUDE), a small scale project involving 4 trade union confederations and 2 academic partners which ran from 1997 - 2000, reported disappointing outcomes from its online courses for trade union educators, due in large part to motivational and linguistic difficulties (Creanor & Walker, 2000).

Historically, trade union education has been in the main voluntary and unaccredited, wholly residential, and has encouraged a democratic, participative approach. During the ETUDE project, the lack of formal incentives highlighted motivation as a major issue, especially over the extended periods required for online courses. Varying levels of support from within organisations was reported by the participants

which led inevitably to the prioritisation of work-related responsibilities rather than voluntary study. The crossing of cultural, linguistic and organisational barriers presented challenges which had not been fully appreciated when ETUDE was envisaged. It is hoped to address some of these issues more directly in the Dialog On project.

Dialog On

Dialog On has been granted a total of almost 3 million Euro by the European Social Fund under Article 6, Innovative Measures. The project will bring together 8 European industry sector organisations and 8 national trade union confederations along with two academic partners. These are Learning Services at Glasgow Caledonian University and the School of Information Management at Leeds Metropolitan University, both in the UK. The role of the former is to advise the project on effective pedagogical approaches to networking and online learning, and to develop a series of modules covering topics such as communication skills for networking, introduction to online learning, and online learning in transnational contexts. The latter will be responsible for the project evaluation. The European Trade Union College (ETUCO) in Brussels is leading and managing the project which began in November 2001 and continues for a period of 2 years.

The two main strands of Dialog On reflect complementary facets of Internet use. The online learning strand, known in this context as computer-mediated distance learning or CMDL, will provide training and support materials for experienced trade union tutors who, like many staff in higher and further education, are embracing information and communication technologies in the face of increasing demand for flexible learning opportunities. Following the initial training, 8 transnational and 8 national CMDL courses will be launched. Similarly, the network strand will provide training and support materials for those responsible for establishing and facilitating online networks in the European Industry sectors. Eight networks will be established which will address such diverse issues as quality in European higher education, and health and safety in the building and woodworkers industry.

Computer-mediated distance learning

Building on previous experiences with the ETUDE project and subsequent training courses delivered by ETUCO tutors, the training provided for new online tutors will take into account the specific needs of the sector. For example, in contrast to the entirely online model of distance education often promoted within higher education (e.g. Salmon, 2000), Dialog On will recommend the adoption of a blended approach. A combination of residential seminars and online learning has been found to be most successful, particularly in the transnational context, as it allows participants to establish real contact with each other, get to know the tutors, and goes some way to overcoming cultural and linguistic barriers. (Creanor & Walker, 2000).

Collis and Moonen (2001) emphasise that the successful implementation of innovative methods requires recognition and encouragement at organisational level, and full integration within strategic plans. Although aimed at educational institutions, these recommendations are just as relevant to the organisations involved in trade union activities which include a range of commercial and industrial employers as well as the main trade union organisations. As the successful cascading of Dialog On methodology depends very much on high level organisational support, these issues will be highlighted. The main emphasis however will be on the crucial nature of the tutor role, and the moderating skills required to encourage learning and to support the establishment of learning communities in these complex and challenging settings.

Networking

Posing perhaps an even greater challenge is the ambitious aim to establish a series of active and influential industry federation networks, each of which will have its own goals and ethos. Preece (2000) has highlighted many of the technical and social factors which can influence the success of virtual communities, but their support across cultural and linguistic barriers offers much scope for research. An online community of practice may form naturally when a group of people with common interests come together to communicate and interact for social or professional purposes, or there may be a deliberate attempt to harness the potential of technology to support a group which is "bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The Dialog On project aims to support the latter.

The innovative nature of the Dialog On approach is that it is founded on the premise that the provision of appropriate training and support to those responsible for establishing and managing the networks will have an impact on future success. These network animateurs, as they will be called, will be given training in various aspects of networking and supporting online groups, but as with the CMDL tutors, the emphasis again will be on communication and moderating skills. The difference here of course, is that unlike an online course which has a fixed time schedule and clear aims, a successful online network should be able to continue indefinitely, or as long as it serves the need of the community, and must adapt to the inevitable changes in focus which new developments and fluctuating interest demand.

Our initial development work has already highlighted the fact that there are several areas of overlap in the educational design of online courses and the gradual evolution, albeit over longer periods of time, of active networks.

The development stages

Salmon (2000) recently identified the distinct stages which online learners tend to follow as they gain confidence and become truly engaged in the learning process. An experienced tutor will support and encourage this progression by providing appropriate input to the group and to individual students as required. Salmon encapsulated this in her 5 step model (Figure 1) which neatly illustrates the implicit expectations of both tutor and student, and indicates the change in role for each.

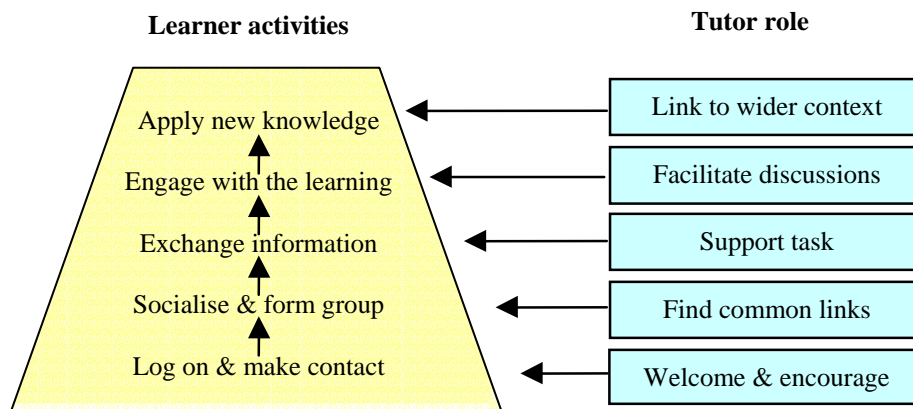


Figure 1: Adaptation of Salmon's 5 step model

It is interesting to compare this model with that of Gongla and Rizzuto (2001), who have also identified 5 stages in the development of successful communities of practice (Table 1). Their research is based on the evolution of online groups within a large global organisation, and although these communities are described as informal networks rather than deliberately formed groups, they do have specific work-related aims and they are enthusiastically supported by their employer.

1. Potential	A community begins to form
2. Building	The community defines itself and formalises its aims and ethos
3. Engaged	The community is fully operational and continues to improve its processes
4. Active	The community understands and demonstrates benefits from knowledge management and the collective work of the community
5. Adaptive	The community and its supporting organisation are using knowledge for political and strategic advantage

Table 1: Adaptation of Gongla and Rizzuto's Community Evolution model

There are clear similarities between the stages in each model. The most obvious difference however, is that in the Community Evolution model there is no indication of a network animateur or facilitator, as the community as a democratic whole works towards common goals. It will be interesting to observe how these models apply to the Dialog On processes, and to establish to what extent initial training and ongoing support from experienced tutors and animateurs will influence development, thus enabling the groups in both cases to achieve the fifth, and most useful stage in the process.

Conclusions

It is clear then that there are many interesting opportunities for research within and between the two main strands of the Dialog On project, including the impact of the tutor/animateur interventions and the influence of organisational and cultural expectations on the online communities. To date (July 2002), the focus has been on the design of the training experience, the creation and piloting of support materials and the development of an evaluation strategy which will extract the necessary data to enable us to investigate these areas further. Over the next few months, pilot training sessions will take place for the key tutors and animateurs before the launch of their online courses and networks later in 2002 and early 2003. Both strands will encourage learning and social dialogue: explicitly within the CMDL courses, and implicitly through focused activity and exchange within the online networks. The impact of the initial training and supporting materials will be a key focus of the evaluation, particularly in the less familiar area of networking. We look forward to investigating the outcome.

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