

Educational Issues in the Knowledge Society - Creating the Conditions for Effective Learning in the New Environments

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Abstract. The paper focuses on the experience of the Open University in the UK in designing and delivering modern language programmes to mass audiences through supported open learning. The courses are designed to be accessible to adult learners on an open access basis, with no entry requirements or pre-testing. The programmes started in 1995 since when over 20 000 students have studied modern languages with the Open University. The paper draws on this experience to identify the necessary conditions for successful learning of languages and how best to create positive, supportive environments within which to foster self-development in language learning.

Introduction

The concept of the *Knowledge Society* embraces a vision of learning and personal improvement through a process of continuing development. The *Knowledge Society* fosters and encourages learning among ever more diverse sets of learners. Experienced adult learners bring past learning, clearly defined aims and personal lifestyles to their study. In order to take up new study, with home study increasingly involved, whether or not exploiting new technologies.

Learners tend to have specific objectives and generally are instrumental in their reasons for wanting to learn. The new opportunities, together with the specific nature of learner needs are leading providers to organise educational opportunities designed around the use of a remote tutor and a dispersed group of learners. Such a structure also allows for economies of scale, for specific and narrow needs to be addressed and to utilise specific expertise regardless of geographical location.

The *Knowledge Society* impacts upon individuals urging ever more rapid responses to change, creating an impetus for up-dating on a professional and personal level. The nature of the demand and the subsequent response is influenced by communication technologies and their wide availability. Information and learning are available in many forms and accessible in ever more openly accessible locations. Providers increase in their diversity, with learning sourced from providers that include publishing, commercial communications technology and broadcasters.

Information is available on demand and this phenomenon creates an awareness of the rich sources of information and their value, but also identifies our knowledge gaps. It can engender a sense of personal inadequacy confronted with such a wealth of information. The individual realises to an ever-greater extent that to compete effectively these sources of information should be exploited as wisely as possible.

Aim: the investigation aims to establish how the teaching and learning of modern languages can capitalise on these new learning opportunities to advantage? How best can these opportunities be exploited to improve and increase successful learning experiences?

Theoretical Background

The initial development work at the OU was based on a wide range of communicative methodology and second language acquisition theory. This was applied to the theories and experience of the Open University in designing and delivering supported open learning courses over some 25 years in other disciplines.

Many of the issues associated with the home-based learner are common across disciplines.

Prior research had demonstrated that the study aims of the potential students did not differ from those studying under more conventional methods, namely they wanted to learn to communicate and become 'fluent'.

It was therefore of paramount importance to establish systems to deliver and develop these skills. The team collaborated with the University Institute for Educational Technology who designed the research and developmental testing models of the materials at key points. From this work and other feedback from wider trials, the overall formats were designed. These have provided the basis of all subsequent developments, though each new course is pre-tested before development leading to a process of continual adaptation.

Methods

The paper draws on evidence from learners, from pre and post testing of course materials and from research into more specific aspects of learning. From these sources it sets out the broad lessons and guidelines that now steer developments in the course design and delivery of the language courses.

The analysis takes account of the increasing use and availability of new technologies and applies the evidence

from the field to the new learning environments, as they become increasingly available to learners.

Discussion and Results

Approaches to information gathering, new learning, study, and professional updating are influenced by this societal context. New technologies and communications mean that learning is available and can be explored through myriad new channels. The learner, or consumer, has a rich range of sources from which to choose. The rich range can in fact create confusion rather than inspire confidence.

Faced with different learning modes, patterns of learning and a variety of qualifications and assessment, individuals often feel daunted. At this initial point of selecting study routes, the individual wants to ensure that the learning will fit with their lifestyle and can be conveniently accommodated. The extent to which this is possible and the determination of the individual to persevere with new study routines will be major factors in study success. They will be influenced by the flexibility of the learning on the one hand and the perceived value of the study outcomes on the other.

Where the qualification is likely to lead to professional or personal improvement of some high value, the individuals are prepared to disturb their lifestyles considerably to succeed. So a professional qualification taking a considerable number of hours per week – say some 20/30 hours - over a long period is acceptable (see *Open University - Short Courses Report* (unpublished), Nov 2001). Where the study has more informal and less measurable outcomes, such as language learning for leisure, then the learner will make more minor lifestyle adjustments. Not only fewer hours per week but also a pattern of study that will allow for time for other priorities.

Whatever the pattern, efficiency of study and effective outcomes will be crucial. The individual needs to see progress and be aware of evidence of improvement at regular intervals if he/she is to be motivated to continue to maintain the change in their routines, whatever the scale.

Choice of Study

These circumstances commit the provider to designing and structuring learning programmes that will ensure that they meet the diverse needs of the new communities of learners whilst assuring a quality of delivery commensurate with traditional teaching methods.

Provision within the context of the *Knowledge Society* addresses particularly the situation of adults in society. They come to further learning through personal motivation or professional need. Many such learners will have followed more traditional educational routes and will be unfamiliar with new learning environments or innovative patterns of study. For those who seek language learning opportunities, past experience has often been negative or at least uncomfortable.

As an adult, the learner is not generally seeking to repeat these experiences. A lack of confidence or understanding of the new contexts create further confusions and can lead

to a serious lack of confidence. Whether conscious or not of these factors, the individual will be bringing them to bear on their choice of study route. It is therefore essential that the provider try to meet and anticipate their most likely demands and to organise the study as far as possible in patterns that suit a range of lifestyles.

The typical learner brings limited skills and experience to bear on their choice of study. Most people, even those with experience of new technologies, have little experience of learning outside the traditional environments.

The range and variety of information available creates a need for organisation and the need for a clear focus in searching through sources. Most learners are new to these aspects of learning. The skills apply to new and experienced learners whatever the purpose or level of study. A major issue facing those who exploit the new sources of learning is to maximise the opportunities offered by the *Knowledge Society* whilst locating only appropriate and useful information. Access should be simple and achievable without undue complication or an undue investment of time. Effective learning requires some filtering of resources, in line with specific learning objectives.

Most adult learners have to re-organise and adjust their lives to cope with any new learning and they need to be prepared and trained for the experience. They should approach the issues realistically, be warned of the difficulties and assisted in developing strategies for coping with feedback and setbacks. Adults fear failure, they need and want to enhance their self-esteem. They tend to be highly demanding of themselves and have the highest expectations. They need to be trained to cope with what they would deem 'failure' or they are likely to abandon their study.

Preparing to Learn

What is the appropriate learning environment within which to develop these learners? How can the design and organisation within the materials meet the needs of such a mixed group whilst allowing for personal learning styles to develop and flourish?

Once a suitable study route is located, the individual needs a clear description of what is expected. This should be expressed not only in terms of pre-course requirements and output levels but also of time and resource implications. The form and timing of assessments will be an important priority and if the demands of any of these are underestimated this will cause problems. The learner will need to develop coping strategies as challenges and potentially negative feedback may lead to disappointment or disillusion.

The course design can anticipate many of the likely weak points for learners and, through the structure of the feedback and self-assessment can encourage and motivate the learner. The learner will need assistance in analysing performance in terms of course expectations. In particular, not to over-estimate the performance needed for success. From personal performance observations, which should be carefully recorded a personal record of strengths and

weaknesses will gradually emerge. This will allow the individual to create a set of realistic goals and ambitions that can be successfully realised within the context of the chosen learning.

Their course choice will be heavily influenced by the content, so this should carry a clear description. Learners will have preferences and will want to know what is expected of them. A definition of assumed knowledge prior to study is important, with diagnostic tools provided to assist individuals in making their choice. The more detail the better in terms of course content. Lists of learning outcomes and key learning points throughout the course will all assist the judgement as to suitability. A study chart giving an analysis of when study demands and deadlines will occur helps the learner to anticipate the routines required.

From all of this information, the learners will develop a set of realistic personal aims and objectives. As the study progresses, they will gain experience and become efficient in their learning and develop personal strategies to ensure that the skills and knowledge fit within a lifestyle that suits them.

Providers of learning resources and course materials must take as their starting point appeal to this wide public. Information should be presented such that it is accessible and understandable to a non-specialist. It should be ordered and organised in ways that allow the user to identify elements that are relevant to their needs.

Embarking on Study

Language learning is a public and communicative activity and as such it can prove negative, unfulfilling and even personally threatening for many people. A central focus remains how best to develop effective individualised learning and how best to influence the learning styles of individuals as they forge their own approaches to study, hopefully within a more informed and rewarding learning construct.

This may mean describing outcomes through tasks and competencies and expressed in everyday terms that users will recognise. A syllabus with theoretical and didactic objectives described in detail will not necessarily assist the individual to learn. These outcomes will however be embraced within the description, which is directed towards engaging the learner in the goal setting from the start.

The raising of personal awareness is vital if effective learning is to ensue. The learner must be able to attribute outcomes to the activities and to assess personal performance within this framework and not only a personal construct of needs. Gradually an awareness of standards and expectations becomes more meaningful and an understanding of the demands of the application of the didactic methodology is developed. These professional orientations will help the learner to become more efficient and to better understand where and why particular effort should be expended.

It is the perceived barrier between the starting point and effective communication that is being breached. The aim

being to achieve progress without damaging personal identity, confidence and motivation.

Even the more competent learners find that they feel threatened when 'performing' in public before a peer group or tutor. The more the learning environment can be harnessed to address these issues through private rehearsal, preparation and practice, the better.

The tension in defining the content is then between the personal freedom that attracts learners and allows for personal development and the need to organise a course towards an agreed set of outcomes. In order to achieve these ends, there needs to be regular feedback and opportunities to revise, consolidate and assess on a regular basis. Individuals must develop skills of self-evaluation and self-assessment. Their awareness of the learning process and progress towards personal goals will help to guide their progress towards successful outcomes.

Learners select a particular study route based on personal preferences and expect to achieve their aims within whatever sort of programme is chosen. If therefore a level of individual study, of self-assessment or on-line working is integrated into the programme the learners need to be trained to make best use of these facilities. As we draw on an ever wider and more diverse public, they will bring a greater variety of backgrounds of formal and informal study and different sets of skills to their learning.

Language learning adds complexity to the psychological aspects of learning as an adult. Individuals are distinguished by the language that they speak. They bring personal structures and identification to themselves by the ways in which they use and apply language. Any transfer of these personal identifiers to a foreign language and a new conceptual framework can be painful and difficult. Some manage with more ease than others, many find the process so threatening that they abandon their study. The new environments offer opportunities to self-develop in non-threatening contexts. As more learners come to the learning through personal motivation, they should be encouraged through their efforts to actively engage in the learning process alongside the acquisition of new knowledge and skills.

The Open University (OU)

The OU is the largest University in the UK with over 200 000 students. Teaching is based on part-time study. Each student has a personal tutor and learning support is provided through face-to-face tuition, telephone contact, correspondence, email and on-line contact. The learners are adults; they are home-based and come to study for a wide variety of reasons. The University operates an open access policy with no pre-study tests or conditions. Students are given personal advice and guidance and provided with diagnostic materials to help them to prepare for study and to assess their suitability for a particular course. All the courses are designed from scratch to meet the needs of the constituency.

The Open University set about developing courses in modern languages for the first time in 1991. The issues that confronted the new teams were similar to those of other

disciplines but with additional particular aspects of language teaching and learning. The first course was launched in 1995. Today, the Open University it is the largest provider of distance teaching courses in modern languages in Europe. More than 20 000 language courses have been studied.

Student Surveys

The *Annual Courses Survey* (Surveys carried out by Institute for Educational Technology, Open University. Reports available internally) is one of the major instruments for monitoring and evaluating the courses and services offered to students. Since 1996, the survey has included over one hundred courses and invited comments from around 30 000 students.

A random sample of 400 students is selected for each course or a census if the course population is below this figure. The sample is based on students who are recorded as currently studying at the time of selection, and, may include students who are no longer studying but have not formally withdrawn. The questionnaire is sent out to students just after the examination period. Results are based on those students who either sat the examination or completed the end of course assessment.

The recent analysis for language courses shows that the most important reasons given by language students for taking their courses in 2001 were for personal development (74%), to develop the subject interest (68%), to gain an OU qualification/award (54%) and to study at suitable times (44%). For 32% of language students, the reason for studying was a balance between vocational and personal development. For a further 32%, the reason for studying was mainly for personal development.

The Development of Language Courses at the Open University

With no previous large-scale language developments from which to model, the University assembled a development team who were charged with exploring current best practice and experience elsewhere in the Open University to develop a framework for the development of the new courses. The courses have been delivered in formats that make them rapidly and easily available to home-based, adult learners. This context provides a challenging environment. Modern Languages was a major new discipline to be included in the Open University curriculum and presented a range of challenges to the organisation of large scale learning programmes.

The course structure inevitably evolved from the experience in more traditional learning environments. At each stage research and development work was established to feed back student reaction to the team via developmental testing procedures. Since the first course was delivered in 1995, annual surveys have gathered data from students about their learning experience. The language teams have additionally carried out more research into more specific aspects of learning. The teams now have access to a considerable body of learner experiences and feedback and commentary ranging across a wide student body that could

be said to be broadly representative of learners in the wider community and across national boundaries.

Setting the Scene for the Learner

Much of the on-going development builds on the experience of the learners themselves. A synopsis of student feedback in a number of areas provides useful insights into study habits, effective learning techniques and student response to organisational structures. From this basis a more generalised framework can be developed applying to a wide constituency of learners and not bound by cultural experience. Much remains to be improved and experience is still evolving, but evidence from student experience provides a powerful base on which to build for the future.

A clearer definition of the outcomes and learning objectives described in terms that non-specialists understand sets the scene for the study. Some indication of time is needed but learners will develop personal timings from practice. Adults tend to aspire to perfection and so they must learn what is 'good enough' and how to gauge what is an appropriate level of accuracy and acceptable language. Learner training is therefore essential. A study guide (See *The Language Learner's Good Study Guide*, Open University, 1995) or similar publication is essential as it will help the learner to develop the essential skills for efficient study.

To achieve this they need access to a range of resources and support such as transcripts of any recorded materials, carefully structured feedback and annotated keys to exercises. They enable the learner to use the resources to best effect. A personal learning log annotating both affective and academic aspects of progress is important, allowing the individual to monitor progress and personal development.

Each learner will learn most effectively if allowed the freedom to develop personal routines with some level of freedom. However this should be based on sound pedagogical structures and directed through the course design to be a regime and routine of study. The role of feedback, deadlines and a range of assessment formats is vital. Learners feel more secure in the knowledge that the course presents the overall framework within which to benchmark progress. The structure of the course should allow them to monitor the standard and pace of the work that they produce.

Supporting the Learner

The notion of 'open learning' is something of a misnomer. In fact, left to their own devices, learners have difficulty in pacing their work, keeping to deadlines and certainly in knowing the appropriate standards to expect. Therefore a framework of study guidance, with activities analysed and presented in units as small as possible and with all practical implications made quite explicit help the learner.

Organising the practical aspects, such as the likely time needed and the equipment or study tools required such as recorders all underpin successful study. If working at home, equipment and the place of study are probably

shared areas and, for practical reasons, the home study needs to be organised appropriately. The difficulty of sustaining everyday routines can be one factor that interrupts and ultimately breaks the study altogether. If all the elements for success are in place the study is more likely to continue and the student likely to feel comfortable and at ease with work.

Whatever the circumstances, the learner will need support from a tutor or other 'expert'. This will vary in the extent to which it is used, the reason for the support and the circumstances that prompt the need. When studying alone, the learner is susceptible to a range of pressures and is largely self-dependent. The tutor typically takes on a role with multiple functions. At times it can be facilitative and encouraging. At others the tutor provides academic advice and guidance and at yet others personal support through times of pressure or self-doubt. The role of the tutor and the student/tutor relationship building is a key factor in student retention and in positive response from learners to their experience of learning.

For many, contact and sharing with fellow learners through peer group contact is also vital. This can take many forms but essentially involves individuals in having a range of contacts and relationships to fall back on and to support him/her when necessary. They also form groups within which work can be rehearsed and practised prior to more public or formal presentations. The stronger such alliances and allegiances are, the more sustainable is the base for the learning.

At the OU large numbers of learners have come to supported open learning in languages as a first choice of study route. It had been expected that the courses would appeal to those with no alternative learning sources. In fact, it is the first choice of many learners and privacy, self-pacing and personal learning patterns are predominant reasons in their study choice.

The Student View of Language Courses

The annual surveys cover a range of general features of the courses and also some specific aspects. Given the particular nature of the courses, teaching through open learning, the reasons for study choice are important. Overall, 19% of language students did consider an alternative courses offered by other institutions (Source – Annual Courses Survey, 2002). Reasons for choosing the OU were in part the price, cost influenced the choice of course made by 17% of language students and this confirms views within the sector more widely. The University currently only offers a limited programme of three languages and three courses in each. There is not a full degree programme on offer. Learners expect a rich choice and 12% of language students were not satisfied with the choice of OU language courses available to them. The range that can be offered from the start is important, as a lack of choice is also a factor in alienating students.

Those factors most commonly important to students in making their final course choice were gaining knowledge in the subject (89%), and the contribution to the qualification they were aiming for (44%). The study level

e.g. level one, level two was also a deciding factor in course choice for 22% of language students.

An accurate assessment of the investment in time is important and the amount of study time required was rated the least accurate item of preparatory information and advice received by language students, even so, 67% of surveyed students rated the information received as fairly or very accurate, 26% very accurate. Even more experienced learners have appreciated the opportunity to evolve a personal learning style, which in the end is what every language learner has to do in life if progress is to be sustained and continue.

Language students were mostly very satisfied with the accuracy of the information and advice they received about the course description (97% fairly or very accurate) and, the prior knowledge/skills required (91% fairly or very accurate). The ultimate value of the qualification is a key factor for intending students, 90% of students rated the information and advice they received about the way in which the course might contribute to a specific OU qualification as fairly or very accurate.

The university is also seeking to retain its students and to encourage them into further study. For those students who said they did not intend to study a further OU course, 59% of students gave the reason that they intend to take time out from OU studies, 25% gave general work pressures as their main reason, and a further 25% said family circumstances were predominant.

Feedback on Studying the Courses

More specific aspects of the study experience cover the ways in which students adapted to self-directed study and the efficiency with which they feel they coped. When asked to comment about workload and pacing, 57% of language students indicated that the amount of work was more than expected (33% a lot more, 24% a little more). A further 31% of Language students felt that the workload was about as expected.

Students are provided with a detailed recommended study routine and calendar. 76% of language students fell behind the recommended study pattern of their course and only 50% of these students found it *fairly* or *very* easy to catch up. Over a quarter of students (26%) considered giving up their course, and of these students, support from family/friends (59%), help from tutor (39%) and support from other students (30%) kept students going with their course.

The pressure on the language students is evident as 26% considered giving up their course. Whilst 59% indicated that support from my family/friends kept them going with their course, while for 39% of students help from their tutor kept them going. Nearly one third (30%) of felt that support from other students kept them going with their course.

Each student has a personal tutor with whom they maintain contact in various forms. Some face-to-face tuition in groups and individual contact is organised. Clearly the individual support was the most helpful, 95% of language

students found the one-to-one e-mail support the most helpful, while 72% of students found one-to-one telephone support helpful.

Apart from the language outcomes, students should develop life and study skills. Those learning outcomes which students felt most commonly fairly or very enabled to develop were, a desire to go on learning (88%), independent learning (87%), the ability to apply knowledge (87%), and an awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses (86%). 88% of Language students felt that their course fairly or very much enabled them to develop a desire to go on learning. 87% indicated that they felt fairly or very much enabled to develop the ability to apply knowledge and the same percentage reported that they felt fairly or very much enabled to develop independent learning. 86% also felt fairly or very much enabled to develop an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. All of these findings are encouraging and suggest that students will continue to further language study.

Feedback from Short Courses of Study

The University has been considering the potential impact of new learning patterns and investigated the likely popularity of shorter, more flexible courses. Languages took part in the pilot studies and short courses based on one week of residential study with a pre and post course assignment are now run in the UK and in France. They are proving popular and attract a different student audience from the longer more arduous courses. Feedback for the first two years of study reveals some interesting differences in the student population.

Analysis of the French courses held in a French University, the most popular of the new courses reveals that of those who studied over 35% were new to the University and some 10 % went on to study a longer course. This is significant as it suggests that the University is reaching out to a wider audience. Some 20% of the students had previously studied with the University but returned as they were attracted by the new course. By the end of their experience some 78% felt more confident about using the language and were satisfied with the outcomes of their course.

Their reasons for choosing the course were primarily its length, 77% wanted a shorter course. This confirms findings across the University more widely and reflects the changing lifestyles in society. The subject attracted individuals to the course but decisions were influenced by the convenience (64%) and the flexibility offered, (58%). Students have a flexible time period within which to complete the final piece of work and this offers greater flexibility than the more pressured longer courses.

Across the range of short courses, students welcomed the high quality of the information provided. This is essential in shorter course as the time is limited and learners have very specific needs. These need to be met reliably and systematically. 70% of students found that the quality of the information provided overall was very accurate and 89% felt that the learning outcomes were accurately

described. More than three-quarters felt that the time was accurately gauged and the same proportion felt that the pace was about right. The same proportion felt that the definition of prior knowledge required was also accurate and helpful. All of this feedback endorses the need for accurate and clear pre-course information if successful study is to be undertaken.

Conclusion

Whatever the course of study selected, key points emerge in the process when quality information appropriate to the individual are key determinants in whether they continue with the learning. As the individual moves through from enquirer to student these are the initial information search and the point of decision-making. Once embarked on the study, the initial learning experience, the establishment of study routines and the integration of the study into personal lifestyles. Once embarked on the learning, the development of self-awareness and access to advice and guidance as needed. Throughout the process the ability to self-evaluate and assess progress and the provision of feedback and positive support within the materials continually inform the learning process.

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Edukacinės problemos žinių visuomenėje – sąlygų efektyviam mokymuisi naujose aplinkose sukūrimas

Santrauka

Straipsnyje kalbama apie Atvirojo Universiteto patirtį Jungtinėje Karalystėje kuriant šiuolaikines kalbų mokymo(si) programas ir jas pristatant masinei auditorijai per remiamą atvirojo mokymosi sistemą. Kursai yra taip parengti, kad būtų prieinami suaugusiems mokiniams, be įstojimo reikalavimų ar išankstinio testavimo.

Programos pradėtos taikyti 1995 m., kai Atvirajame Universitete daugiau nei 20 000 studentų mokėsi šiuolaikinių kalbų. Straipsnyje remiamasi šia patirtimi siekiant nustatyti, kokios sąlygos yra būtinos sėkmingam kalbų mokymuisi ir kaip geriausiai sukurti tokias mokymosi aplinkas, kuriose būtų skatinamas nuolatinis kalbų mokymasis.

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