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## **ONLINE MODELS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF A DISTRIBUTED TEAM USING VIRTUAL TOOLS – THE DYSLEXIA IN MODERN LANGUAGES PROJECT**

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### **Introduction**

This paper presents an online model of professional development for a distributed team of teachers of languages in a distance learning context. It presents a model that uses both synchronous and asynchronous tools, as used in previous projects by the project team and their colleagues as staff developers to bring together teachers, variously to develop online skills and practical knowledge to underpin the support of distance learners. This paper shows the model and its evolution in this particular project. With a focus on developing teachers' pedagogical expertise in the field of modern language teaching and specific learning differences, SpLD, and dyslexia in particular, it shows the use of a range of virtual tools to facilitate the shared gathering of information and the writing and reversioning of learning materials to support adult language learners with dyslexia in HE. This paper proposes to show the teachers' engagement with the shared gathering of knowledge and collaborative production of open educational resources, OER for supporting these students.

The study covers a staff development project which took place at the Department of Languages, Open University, UK, between December 2012 and July 2013. The project rationale was the identification by teachers and their academic managers that many language teachers in distance learning felt they could be better prepared to support adult language learners with dyslexia. These are very experienced teachers who have excellent practice in language teaching and in facilitating the development of learning strategies. Given that inclusive language teaching is regarded as an essential aspect of their professional practice, teachers welcomed the opportunity to develop expertise and good practice in that area.

The present paper will describe the design and different stages of the staff development project. It will discuss the affordances and shortcomings of the different virtual tools, and how combined they allowed the participating teachers to reflect on their practice and to create and reversion teaching resources in the light of their reflection.

## **Contexts**

Established over forty years ago, the UK Open University attracts a wide variety of students who study part time for a comprehensive range of qualifications. They are typically older than traditional campus-based students and have a wide range of living situations and economic activity. Approximately 7.5% of the student body are registered as having additional requirements<sup>1</sup>, which includes dyslexia.

Historically delivered by correspondence tuition, Open University courses now make extensive use of online tools. The model of print materials for home study, maybe with some televised lectures, supported by a teacher who, amongst various distance support practices, gives periodic face-to-face group tutorials, has been superseded by a blend including computer mediated learning. The evolving online practices have enabled new learning communities to build up. These can be for students, either as a designed part of the course or more casually occurring online mutual support. For the teachers, these can enable the shared development of knowledge and good practice, as in a project such as the one described in this paper.

Since 2009 Languages students at the Open University have been supported by blended learning (Nicolson et al., 2011). As part of the blend, teachers make use of synchronous and asynchronous online tools to support their student group and at times use them for extra sessions to reinforce and facilitate learning for individual students with special learning needs. Languages students are also encouraged to meet outside timetabled tutorials, to practice their speaking skills. The use of online tools promotes cultural understanding through more effective communication, enhancing employability and social mobility, as emphasized in the Common European Framework for Languages (CE, 2001, p.3).

### ***Context of professional development for part time teachers at the Open University UK***

The support and development of part time teachers at the Open University has long been the responsibility of their academic managers. The nature of this support has reflected the move to e-learning. At a time when the tutorial element of the students support was typically one face-to-face meeting a month, staff development was a once or twice-yearly event. With the progressive integration of online tools into student support, opportunities for guided reflection and skills development for teachers has mirrored this. As the tutorial support timetable for all languages students became a blend of online and face-to-face sessions, staff development reflected the increased variety of modes. This proliferation of techniques and resources that expands to reflect available media is a benefit of the digital age (Nicolson et al., 2011, p.233).

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<sup>1</sup> Learning Accessibility Guide, Open University. <http://www.open.ac.uk/inclusiveteaching>

The use of a dedicated Moodle website as a project core, with a forum for asynchronous communication and a synchronous space for organization and themed discussion is a model used successfully for development activities for between 10 and 20 participants. In 2008, for example, a jointly-run collaborative project organized by members of the department of Languages of the Open University UK and colleagues at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Ernest et al., 2011) saw part time teachers further their skills with online tools, sharing their respective experience. Research into other learning projects on a virtual platform underlines the benefits of the structured, combined use of online tools with joint working to open up horizons, fostering co-operation and encouraging problem solving strategies (Pellas, 2014).

With the introduction of an online repository for sharing teaching materials LORO<sup>2</sup> further projects were undertaken to encourage its use. LORO was created in 2009 under a JISC funded project, using Eprints software (Comas-Quinn et al., 2011). It now contains three classes of language teaching materials for sharing. Firstly, there are the tutorial materials produced by the Open University Department of Languages. These are provided for the part time teachers to use in online tutorials, as resources they may choose from to support the students in their groups. Secondly, there are materials uploaded by the teachers themselves. Finally, there are materials uploaded by the wider language teaching community. Set up as a repository for sharing tutorial resources with staff who work in distributed teams to support distance learners, LORO also operates on an Open Educational Resource basis and makes materials available to any language teacher who registers on the site. LORO is open for browsing, inspiration and ideas sharing. Contributors must choose a Creative Commons category and they must confirm the material is theirs to publish, with acknowledgement of any previous versions or sources they have drawn on.

In 2011 the developers of LORO and three academic managers (Staff Tutors) came together to encourage the use of LORO with a scholarship project for a group of interested part time Open University language teachers. Building on the use of LORO as a repository for downloading materials created by others, the project aimed to enhance more active use, to include sharing and uploading. The teachers who elected to participate in the project were brought together online to write, comment on and reversion resources, with a view to giving them a firm grounding in open educational resources (OER) and through the project scaffolding their engagement with open educational practices (OEP) (Beaven, 2013; Duensing et al., 2013). The project structure promoted working together in virtual spaces of a distributed team with joint purposes, with the benefits of a community of practice and breaking the possibly isolation of the distance teacher.

This staff development model involves bringing together of a project team of teacher developers for project design, the seeking of expressions of interest from interested part time teachers, then a series of tasks, generally with guided forum activity interspersed with

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<sup>2</sup> <http://loro.open.ac.uk>

synchronous meetings. This model includes opportunities for reflection and discussion and is illustrated in the figure below:

Table 1: Generalised project schedule (adapted from Duensing et al., 2013)

| Stage                   | Dateline                              | Action  | Tools  |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| Preparation             | Over a 4-month-period prior to launch | Project team meetings to design and plan  | Synchronous and asynchronous conferencing        |
| Recruitment             | Month 1 (1-hour-session)              | Invitation Briefing meeting for all interested teachers                                 | Advert ,email Online room                        |
| Training and discussion | Month 2 (2-hour-session)              | Project Launch (participants and project team). Group formation and planning discussion | Online room                                      |
|                         | Month 3 (2-hour-session)              | Presentation and discussion of work   | Online room                                      |
| Group work              | Month 2 to 4                          | Project activity  | Synchronous and asynchronous conferencing. Email |
| Progress meeting        | Month 4 (2-hour-session)              | Presentation and discussion of resources  | Online room                                      |
| Completion              | Month 4 to 5                          | Finalising and uploading of resources, peer commenting, final report, dissemination     | Online repository                                |

## **The Dyslexia and Modern Language Learning (DMLL) project**

The staff development project on the theme of dyslexia and modern language learners in HE arose out of a number of part time teachers in the Department of Languages at the Open University UK seeking the guidance of their academic managers as to how best to support such students. The project was set up to strengthen the support and develop understanding, using the same tools that the teachers have available for use with their students. The virtual tools were used in new ways and a little used tool was added. The rationale was to provide a framework for the part time teachers to discuss their experiences, gather information, reflect, adapt their own teaching resources and share good practice.

The project ran from December 2012 to June 2013 and was managed by a Project Team consisting of four academic managers and staff developers (Staff Tutors), who worked with a cluster of twelve part time language teachers across a range of languages and levels, and a member of the University accessibility and disability team. The project is described below through a focus on the virtual tools and the uses to which they were put. The project sought to answer teachers' questions, "How can we make adjustments in our teaching to accommodate the individual learning needs of dyslexic learners?" and "How can we best support our dyslexic students?" As a first joint action, the participants worked with a shared purpose, to gather a literature of pedagogy and accounts of practice from a variety of contexts.

### ***The elements of the project workspace***

The project, on a Moodle workspace, consisted of four top level links to different online tools. There was a project text-based forum for the project, a synchronous meeting room (Elluminate), a Moodle repository and a wiki. Each of the virtual tools had a particular purpose within the project, as described below.

#### ***The text-based forum***

The Moodle forum was the spine of the project. It was used to set and maintain the direction of the project as well as a point of reference. The project team shared responsibility for moderating the forum, including welcome and information messages. The forum, then, is an asynchronous tool, which enabled participants to post when they had time available, one of its prime advantages. It gave structure to the project, with details of particular tasks posted for particular time windows, for example the gathering of information about supporting students with dyslexia from a variety of sources, and later the application of new strategies to teaching materials. There was a fluency to the interchange, with no postings remaining unacknowledged or unanswered for long. An organisational advantage of a Moodle forum is the threads that can be set up easily. Teachers were encouraged to set up threads for their project working groups of 3 to 4, split by areas of interest in a particular language or type of activity. As the various strands were not closed, all participants could read them and post comments. The forum aspect of the project worked well because all participants were familiar with the tool and respectful both of the strands as self-contained conversations and of each other as fellow professionals with valid opinions. The forum remained active and easy to navigate, and an area of relevant information exchange even after the formal end of the project.

#### ***The synchronous meeting room***

Experience of online projects has shown the need to factor in training and development time (Ernest et al, 2011) in the use of new tools. An introduction to synchronous online conferencing is more significant than skill building for forum use. The participants in this project, however, were already skilled users of audio graphic web conferencing. Another salient factor for this tool is that synchronous meetings require particular times in common to be made available by the busy members of a distributed team. A timetable was issued at the outset of the Dyslexia and Modern Languages project and participants asked for their commitment to attend. In the synchronous meetings each phase of the project was explained and discussed. In an early meeting, participants exchanged experiences and information from the first task, the literature review. In a later one they discussed strategies to make materials accessible to dyslexic learners, and further on in the project presented their materials and gave peer evaluation, as shown below:

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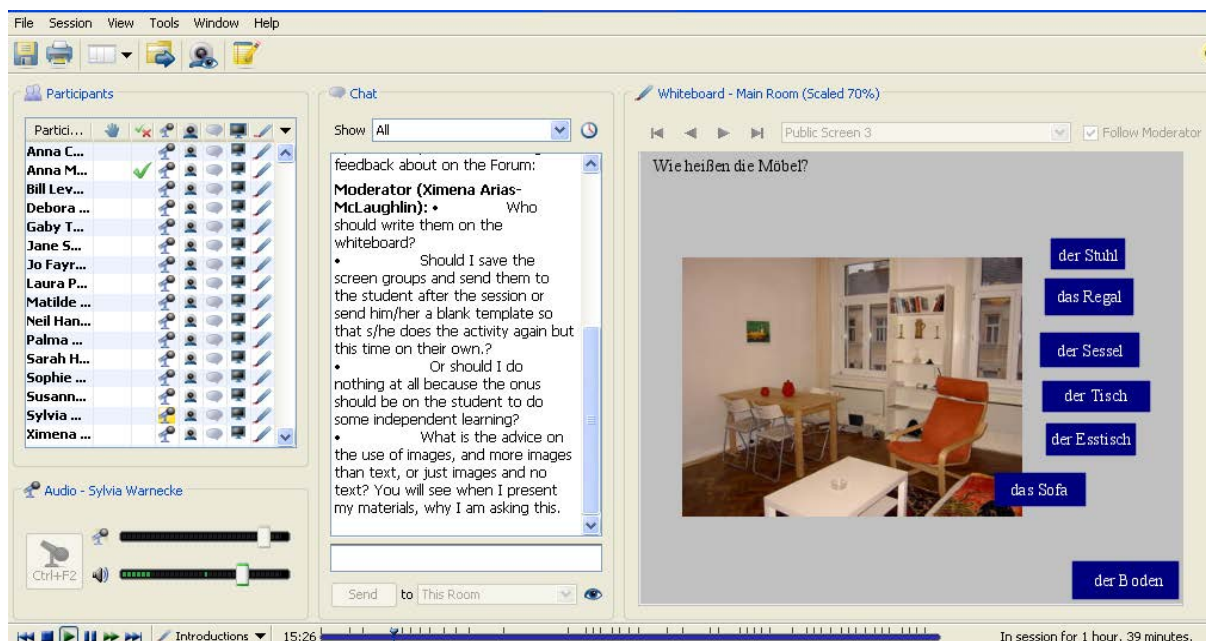


Figure 1. Elluminate meeting

Throughout the project the Elluminate room was available for small group meetings, for example to prepare presentations and later in the project some peer observation of online teaching with the newly created materials took place.

### *The repository*

The Moodle repository was used for the collecting and sharing of references and scholarly publications of existing research on dyslexia and for the gathering of general support guidelines for students from the OU Disability and Accessibility experts. Some participants also uploaded information about other relevant experience. The Moodle repository was used at some points for sharing of materials and 'how to' guidelines. The collective literature review and sharing of expertise from other educational sectors and contexts was a distinctive element of the Dyslexia in Modern Languages in HE project. By its use the participants shared their variety of contexts, experiences and reading, and therefore built joint knowledge as a community, based very much on their diversity as teaching professionals.

### *The wiki*

In the later stages of the project, participants collaborated to draw together their reflections and discoveries into a *Guide to Good Practice* for supporting Open University language students with dyslexia, for the use of other teachers. One project participant suggested the use of a wiki rather than the repository for this work. The wiki, a tool available in Moodle, has the advantage that changes by a number of contributors can be made to a single version of a document. The inclusion of a tool suggested by a participant was a positive feature, which helped progress the combined work on the *Guide*. Later feedback suggested it was the least popular of the tools, possibly due to lack of familiarity and insufficient planned strategy for its use.

### Open access “dyslexia-friendly” resources

The project participants assembled advice such as reducing cognitive overload by careful staging of the introduction of content. They learnt about and experimented with the use of colour, sequencing and style. They exchanged activities with word game structures and attractive visuals with a very clear purpose in the learning activities. As experienced Open University Languages teachers, they were all familiar with LORO as a location for finding materials, though not necessarily uploading their own. Previous staff development projects have encouraged the used of Open Educational Practices in LORO and the uptake of the underused comment function (Duensing et al., 2013). The DMLL project gave participants step-by-step guidance, both in a synchronous session and in the forum of how to upload their materials with a ‘dyslexia friendly’ free tag. In consequence, all 18 resources associated with the project can be retrieved with a single search.

The dyslexia friendly resources reflect the teaching interests of the participants, the shared interests, and their students’ needs in spring 2013. For example, the Italian teachers created ‘dyslexia friendly’ resources on the use of Italian pronouns and pronunciation for beginner learners:



Figure 2. Italian direct pronouns activity for beginners (<http://loro.open.ac.uk/3364/> and <http://loro.open.ac.uk/3347/>)

The levels of the resources span absolute beginners to Open University level 3 (CEF B2/C1). As well as Italian, there are resources for Spanish, French, German, Chinese and English for Academic purposes, several of which have explicit guidance in the teacher notes of how they might be further adapted across languages.

### Conclusions

By the use of a number of virtual tools in a structured staff development project; the synchronous room, text-based forum, Moodle repository, and wiki, teachers were able to develop their knowledge and expertise for supporting students with SpLDs, in particular dyslexia. The tools enabled them to share good practice amongst themselves, gain confidence

and experience, to produce a *Guide* for the use of other teachers and to upload 18 examples of ‘dyslexia friendly’ resources to LORO to be shared with colleagues and the wider language teaching community on an OER basis. As one participant commented:

*Working with others has been very successful. Sharing ideas and expertise with colleagues meant that we complemented each other and learning took place through sharing.*

As part of the successful joint learning experience, firm insights were gained:

*I thought that dyslexic students all had similar characteristics and faced the same difficulties. I now know that dyslexic students’ characteristics and needs may vary and that they also have much strength which should be tapped*

Collectively, participants concluded that good practice for dyslexic students was generally good practice for all. By working together collaboratively online with a shared aim of learning how best to support dyslexic language learners, the part time teachers enlarged their professional skills. They did this within a project framework that was itself developed by the experience. This paper shares the project framework, discusses the detail of virtual tool design and use, and touches on the content, now available on an open educational resource basis.

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