

Web Based Training for Community Development

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Introduction

A web based training pilot project was developed and run by CET during 2001.

The project included the development and operation of three web based courses in subjects of community and social development for the third sector population in the periphery.

The aim was to develop and use a distance learning Internet platform integrating synchronous, as well as asynchronous, possibilities of study and to test its technological applicability and pedagogical effectiveness for training and refresher courses in social subjects. The courses were operated in cooperation with major organizations working in community activities and social development in the country – the Community Work Service in the Ministry of Social Affairs, the company of Centers for Culture, Youth and Community Activities and the Shatil Organization for Social Change.

The technological platform and course development

The web based learning environment was a product of the integration of two environments: A synchronous one (“Live Voice Lessons”) of Interwise company and an asynchronous one - “High Learn” - of a sister company of CET.

The product of the integration is an Internet site acting as a virtual “campus” in which the student does all the following learning activities:

- One) Asynchronous activities: studying from learning units and learning materials, working on assignments and tasks, participating in discussion groups, chatting, etc.
- Two) Synchronous activities: taking an active part in the live lessons, having virtual meetings with tutors and colleagues to perform group assignments, etc.

The student enters through the “campus” gate and chooses the activity he wants at any specific time.

The interactive live lessons lasted for two hours per week and the asynchronous studies for an additional three-four hours per week.

The topics of the courses were selected to suit the target population of social workers, community activists and other third sector people located in the periphery of the North and South of the country.

The course topics and the equivalent hours duration were:

- 1) **Community Empowerment** – 42 hours
- 2) **“The Internet for the service of the community”** – 36 hours
- 3) **“A window to working with volunteers”** – 28 hours

The course development process for the Internet based learning environment included:

- 1) Content Analysis: choosing the course content
- 2) Content Design: building the knowledge items in a structure of a tree of knowledge
- 3) Writing the study items and structuring them into study units
- 4) Preparing assignments for groups and for personal activities
- 5) Choosing complementary items – bibliography and webliography
- 6) Defining the graphics requests for the asynchronous items and for the presentations of the live lessons: flash movies, drawings, etc.
- 7) Creating the graphical elements needed
- 8) Putting the study items developed into the asynchronous environment of the campus
- 9) Preparing lesson plans and creating Powerpoint presentations for the live lessons
- 10) Having all the learning materials and study items checked by content experts and pedagogy consultants

Course operation

The operation model tried in the project included two types of learners:

- One) Independent students connecting to the Internet and the study campus at home or at work
- Two) Students preferring to study at least the live lessons in a community center either for the need to work in a group or because they do not have alternative access to a computer and the Internet

The students did not pay any fee for the course or the registration as this was a pilot project. Two of the courses were operated twice. The students were registered in the first run by the partners. The partners did the advertising and marketing in their organizations and geographical areas of operation. Many registered for the first run but did not actually begin the course. The dropout from registration to beginning – about 4 months – was high. In the second run the registration was direct at our office, after a shorter (one month) advertising period which resulted in fewer students registering but the dropout rate until the beginning of the course was much smaller. (Table 1)

Table 1

Course	No. of Applicants		No. of registrations approved		No. of Active students (performed at least one activity)		Dropout percentage (percentage of students who did not do even one activity)	
	First run	Second run	First run	Second run	First run	Second run	First run	Second run
Working with volunteers	36	24	36	24	22	17	39%	29%*
The Internet as a tool for the service of the community	65	25	40	25	22	16	45%	36%*
Community empowerment	79	-	36	-	24	-	33%	
Total	180	49	112	49	68	33	39%	32%

*main dropouts were a group of Bedouin women students who were unable to participate in the evening lessons, and found that out after their registration had been approved.

The operation team included in addition to the tutor:

- 1) The Project Manager
- 2) The Campus Coordinator who managed the administrative contact with the students, registered the students in the campus and supplied technical support for the asynchronous environment.
- 3) Technical support person for the Live lessons and the installation and operation of the students' software. This support was needed only for the first two-three lessons.
- 4) Instruction Assistant: He was in charge of the correspondence with the students during the live lessons, helped students who had difficulties with performing of assignments during live lessons, helped the tutor in time management, controlled the sound during the lesson, etc. Although the tutors said that they needed his services, we considered that his activity was rather limited during the lessons and our conclusion was that employing an assistant should be dependant upon the size of the group (not recommended for less than 20), the type of activities in the live lessons and the experience of the tutor.

Results and Evaluation of the learning process

The evaluation of the learning process was based on reports of the students' activities produced by the software tools of the campus and evaluation questionnaires filled out by the students. The results were as follows:

- 1) Number of participants in the live lessons: It was high - between 60% and 80%. The higher numbers were in the second run.
- 2) Performing tasks and assignments: In the first run it was quite low – between 20% and 40%. In the second run, it was much higher – between 40% and 60%.
- 3) Activities in the asynchronous environment: In the first run it was between 25% and 50% and in the second run it was between 50% and 90%. In the second run, we added materials and assignments in the asynchronous environment making it necessary for the students to be active in the environment if they wanted to complete the course successfully.
- 4) Participation in the discussion groups: In the first run it was between 20% and 30% and in the second run it was between 35% and 50%.

More feedback received from the evaluation questionnaires submitted (about 20% of the students responded).

- 1) Although we asked for people with basic knowledge in using computer applications and the Internet, we actually registered some students who had very little experience with computers and the Net, or no experience at all. However, all of these students operated well in the courses and through this they acquired new abilities to use the computer and the Internet so the courses did in fact contribute to overcoming the “digital divide” for some students.
- 2) Half of those who responded connected to the web from home and the other half from work. In two locations people connected from their local community center.
- 3) Main motive for registration: A third of the respondents registered because they wanted to study topics useful to their community activities. Half of them said they wanted to experience the study through the Internet distance learning environment and the rest mentioned various personal reasons.
- 4) The contribution of the course to their community activity: Half of those responding mentioned that the study in course contributed significantly to their activities in the community. 20% were very satisfied with the course and the rest expected more.
- 5) Suitability for self-study: 60% mentioned that the courses were well organized for self-study. Some students were especially satisfied with the personal support and encouragement they received from the course team.
- 6) The course content: Most of the students (65%) were satisfied with the content of the course and also with the pace of the study. 15% mentioned that the live lessons were too close and they did not have enough time to complete the tasks .
- 7) Participation in the discussion groups: Only half participated in the discussion groups. Some of them said there was not enough incentive to open or participate in such groups.
- 8) The contribution of the live lessons to the course: 80% responded that the live lessons contributed significantly to the study in the course. Some of them recommended that the interactive activities be expanded in the live lessons
- 9) Satisfaction with the live lessons: 75% were satisfied with the administration of the live lessons by the tutors including his responses to the students’ questions.

- 10) Wishes and recommendations regarding the live lessons: To add more live lessons, more interactive tasks during the lessons, to do more team work assignments, to add the tutor's picture.
- 11) Registration in future web based courses of our campus: 75% of the students said they are interested in studying more courses in the virtual campus environment and they will also recommend their friends to participate.
- 12) Technical problems during the course: There were some problems with the students being unable to enter the campus. These problems were successfully dealt with by the technical assistant. Additional problems that occurred only now and then: Network problems – one of the supporting servers “fell” a few times during the courses. Problems with the students sound kit that did not work, the computers the students used were in a few cases too old or too “advanced”. Most problems were handled well by the technical team and were solved quickly.

Summary

The goals of the project from the technological as well as pedagogical points of view were achieved and the learning system proved to be motivating, interesting and effective. We intend to develop and run more courses in this Internet based learning environment and to bring more social and community subjects and programs to the periphery population for the benefit of people and society.