

Peter MORTIMER
July 1999

***Distance education project for the
Montbrison multimedia centre***

MA in Distance Education,
University of London
and International Extension College, Cambridge, England

PREAMBLE

The DE centre I am studying in this assignment is situated in Montbrison, a small rural town on the western fringe of the Rhône-Alpes region, some 25 miles north-west of Saint-Etienne.

The centre is part of a network of online multimedia resource centres devoted to distance training and education run by the ARDEMI. The ARDEMI is a public, non-profit-making organisation, situated in Lyon, specialised in the development and production of multimedia educational software. Its other vocation is the setting up of the *Réseau en Rhône-Alpes pour la Formation à Distance*. It is to this *réseau*, this network, that the Montbrison centre belongs, along with 12 other centres throughout the Rhône-Alpes region. The resource centres (called *sites récepteurs*) are supplied with distance training programmes by adult education structures (*sites émetteurs*) in the major cities of the region: Lyon, Grenoble, Saint-Etienne, Chambéry, Annecy, Bourg-en-Bresse.

Involved as I am at present in Lyon in the planning of a DE course for the *Formation Appliquée Continue*, the Adult Training Centre of the Lyon 3 university, I have taken this structure as the hypothetical feed (*site émetteur*) for the Montbrison centre. Using the outline of the ongoing DE project for the *Formation Appliquée Continue*, my aim in this assignment is to study the workability of a DE course in English designed and supplied by one institution and sheltered and managed on a daily basis by another, the latter being at a distance.

INTERNAL ASSESSMENT

Montbrison DE Centre

The centre is financed by the town of Montbrison and is housed in the premises of the local chamber of commerce located in the heart of the town. It was set up in early 1998. One person is employed full-time to man the centre on a day-to-day basis ensuring upkeep of the multimedia room, with one other person on a half-time post acting as administrator.

The centre is open five days a week, from 8:00am to 12:00am and from 1:30pm to 5:30pm. Saturday opening is scheduled, but not yet operative. The centre also proposes to open on an appointments basis outside its regular hours, although no demand for this has yet been felt.

The centre consists of no more than the administrator's office and the multimedia room. The multimedia room is equipped with 5 online PCs and an RNIS video conferencing station. Other equipment includes a scanner, a video tape recorder and a television set.

The centre has been open for 18 months and is far from being exploited to the full. This is due to the poor response from the adult training institutions that are supposed to react to the requests for training that the centre receives. For example, the administrator has recently had six requests for training in English from the local population. The administrator communicates these requests to the adult training institutions and waits for an offer from one or more of them. The major problem however is that for the time being none of the institutions have any viable DE programmes ready with which to meet these demands.

Lyon 3 University Adult Training Centre

This is a public institution offering language courses at all levels. It has a permanent teaching staff and also uses supply teachers according to needs. Situated within the university, it is equipped with a wide range of multimedia and audiovisual resources. The opportunities for innovation, especially in the field of DE and autonomous learning, are good, thanks to a director who is ready to invest in alternative learning methods, aware as he is of the rapidly changing learning environment of his clientele. Funding for such innovation is drawn from the institution's research budget, but teaching programmes must subsequently be self-financing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As regards the Montbrison DE centre, I feel strongly that the administrator and the person in charge of the everyday running of the centre should receive some training in the handling of an audience of distance learners, helping them not only from a technical point of view, but also psychologically. They will, after all, be their only regular face-to-face contacts throughout the course.

The centre's opening times are very restricted. For example, any learner exercising a full-time job would have no opportunity whatsoever to attend the centre. I would therefore advocate that the centre remain closed in the morning on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, for instance, and that these hours be used to open until 9:30pm on Thursdays and Fridays, and on Saturday mornings from 8:00am to 12:00am.

EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

The population in and around Montbrison exceeds 20 000, with a surrounding rural population of some 60 000 people. Montbrison is the second major town (*sous-préfecture*) of the Loire *département*, Saint-Etienne being the first (*préfecture*). The proximity of Saint-Etienne proves a handicap economically and socially, draining as it does new industry and its accompanying workforce into its sphere of influence. Nonetheless, there is a significant industrial belt on the outskirts of Montbrison, with a dynamic municipal Economic Development Department attracting new industry to the town and its suburbs. Small craft industries are also flourishing in the nearby countryside, along with a new-found tourist industry in the Monts du Forez 20 miles to the west of the town.

The town's road and rail network is excellent, with the major *Lyon/Saint-Etienne/Clermont-Ferrand motorway only 10 miles away, and regular train services to areas to the south and north of the town.

Secondary schooling is highly developed (7500 pupils). The town also boasts three vocational training establishments. The municipal library has a stock of some 50 000 volumes and the multimedia library, 145 000 volumes.

The geographic location of Montbrison (400m altitude) fortunately enables an excellent reception of BBC Radio 4 on long wave. French national radio-relay television offers a choice of 6 channels, one of which is an educational/cultural channel, *La Cinq/Arte*. *Arte*, broadcasting in the evenings, regularly shows foreign films in their original language, and not dubbed, as is the French tradition. The two public TV channels (*France 2* and *France 3*) also do the same from time to time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I very much recommend that the DE centre be equipped with two satellite dishes (Eutelsat and Astra) enabling learners to watch international news channels such as BBC World and CNN, and also to listen to BBC radio (BBC World Service, BBC Radio 4 and 3, Five Live, etc.).

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Needs/Characteristics

Judging from requests for training so far received by the centre, a course in English at intermediate level is required. One request, for example, is to prepare for the Cambridge First Certificate in English

exam. Another request is for English for professional purposes: answering the phone, translating letters, etc.

The age range of learners will probably extend from 20 to 50.

Students, ideally, will already be computer-literate, or will be offered a brief training session in the DE centre to familiarize them with a multimedia PC and e-mail.

An initial evaluation test will be necessary to ensure that all the learners in the group have approximately the same level of English. The number of learners in any one group is fixed at a maximum of 5, due to the limited number of PC stations in the centre.

LEARNER NEEDS ANALYSIS

Aim of the course

The aim of the course may be summed up thus:

- ***This course will enable you to communicate more freely in English.***

Objective

Combining the acquisition of skills suitable for external summative assessment (Cambridge FCE exam) and the vocational needs of other learners, the objective may be defined thus:

- ***At the end of the course, you will be able to express yourself - orally and in writing - on a subject of your own choosing.***

Justification for channelling learners into working on a subject they have chosen individually may be found in this extract from an OECD report:

'One increasingly important aspect of the teacher's role is to guide student's choices and to negotiate teaching/learning contracts with them. [...] A key element in the art of curriculum planning is to provide a variety of routes *into* important areas of knowledge, skills and values, as well as different exit routes which can develop individual interests and abilities to the highest possible levels.'

(OECD report, 1989, Set reader: 170)

COURSE SELECTION

(See table on p10)

Media

Autonomous computer-assisted learning, video conferencing, face-to-face tutorials, print, audio, radio, TV, telephone, e-mail.

Content

Video conferencing/Face-to-face tutorials

The Cambridge University Press course *New Interchange* (Level 3) is recommended. The media it involves for tutorial/video conferencing work are print and audio. Pre-recorded radio and TV programmes complement this material.

Autonomous learning

Computer-assisted: In addition to *New Interchange*, a CD-ROM, *Issues in English* published by Protea Textware, is to be used by the learner for online work in the DE centre.

At home: A workbook and audio material (on cassette or CD) specifically designed for autonomous learning are supplied with *New Interchange*. A copy of each is given to the learners.

Assignments

Common assignments

The assignment work for the first five months is common to all the learners and is based on the topics in *Issues in English* (such as Animal Rights, Euthanasia, Gambling, etc.).

Personal assignments

Over the final three months of the course, learners work towards the objective of mastering a subject each has chosen. This takes the form of a personal assignment that is carried out by the learner with support and guidance from the tutor. It may deal with a general subject the learner may wish to explore (photography, rock music, DIY, etc.) or be job-oriented, the assignment thus satisfying the learner's need to master some specialised aspect of the English language: business correspondence in English, for example.

Telephone tutoring

Individual telephone tutoring is offered, on the basis of approximately 15 minutes per learner every month (a 5-minute warm-up conversation one week, followed by a more complex 10-minute

conversation the week after). The telephone tutoring session is intimately linked to assignment work which the learner has to prepare for the following tutorial.

Support

E-mail

E-mail contact between learners and the tutor serves essentially to help them manage their autonomous learning situation: advice on organising one's time, motivational messages, etc. It also serves once a month as a medium for the exchange and correction of a quiz (drawn from *New Interchange*) enabling the tutor to offer each learner valuable formative assessment, above and beyond that given in the tutorials.

E-mail support also satisfies the affective needs of distance learners, regularly helping them build confidence and satisfaction in their capacity to learn autonomously. Visser, L (1998) underlines the importance of such an approach:

'In distance education, student support tactics should aim at making students feel satisfied frequently. The long term perspective of being happy and satisfied at the end of the course, if and when successfully completed, is not enough.'

(Visser, L: 61)

Schedule

Loosely tied to the academic year, the course will last for 8 months, beginning in October and ending in early June.

The course will offer learners a **start-up face-to-face tutorial** lasting 3 hours in the DE centre. This is followed by **monthly video conferencing sessions** on Friday evenings from 7:00pm to 9:00pm.

The telephone tutoring is on an appointment basis - arranged via e-mail - and is also scheduled on Friday evenings between 7:00pm and 9:00pm.

MEETING LEARNER NEEDS

Autonomous foreign language learning requires great determination on behalf of the learner since opportunities to put one's skills into practise in a real-life situation are rare. It is therefore crucial to build into the course **strong motivational elements** and **frequent formative assessment**.

Motivation

The telephone tutoring session serves as a regular contact between learner and tutor. It should not however be considered as a distant language lesson, but as a **task-oriented exchange** between the learner and one's whose role could be qualified as that of a **mediator**. This concept of **mediation** is also developed in the video conferencing sessions, where the use of the topics in *Issues in English* serves **to pool learners' understanding and interpretation of the subjects**. Mediation in this context might be compared to the social mediation qualified by Salomon and Perkins (1998) as one:

'...which sees learning less as the socially-facilitated acquisition of knowledge and skill and more as a matter of participation in a social process of knowledge construction (e.g., Cole, 1995; Greeno, 1997). [...] Social mediation of learning and the individual involved are seen as an integrated and highly situated system in which the interaction serves as the socially shared vehicles of thought. Accordingly, the learning products of this system, jointly constructed as they are, are distributed over the whole social system rather than possessed by the participating individual.'

The other major source of motivation is provided through e-mail contact – a precious source of **flexible, asynchronous communication** between tutor and learner offering **feedback on formative assessment**, but also the opportunity to discuss with each learner such matters as their home 'learning climate', their interaction with the course material and with the other learners (peer support and group learning).

The start-up tutorial must also serve to inform the learners of what is expected of them over the eight months. This ties in with the strategy advocated by Thomas:

'Clear indications to learners of what is expected of them provide a sound basis for anticipating what has to be learnt. On this basis, learners develop their own expectations, and if instructors set high expectations, this is likely to mean higher learner expectations, hopefully leading to high achievement and success.'

(Thomas, 1991: Unit 10: 15)

All learners will therefore receive at the outset of the course a simplified copy of the table on page 12 enabling them to see at a glance the framework of their learning programme over the year.

Formative assessment

The exercises in *Issues in English* enable learners to permanently control their progress. For example, dictations can be carried out that can be self-corrected. This offers the learner immediate KR (knowledge of results) thus reducing anxiety and serving as a guide in the permanent readjustment of the learning process inherent to all distance learning.

Contact with other groups

Once this programme is fully operational, exchanges could be set up between the group in Montbrison and similar groups following the same course in the other 12 DE centres throughout the Rhône-Alpes region. Along the lines of the 'pen pal' formula adopted in schools, learners, using e-mail, could interact in English with their peers to compare work, to offer each other advice and to create a **wider learning community** than the one to which they belong at their local level.

(2180 words, excluding preamble)

* * * * *

References

Salomon G, Perkins D N: **Individual and Social Aspects of Learning**, to appear in **Review of Research in Education, Volume 23**, 1998 Editors P. David Pearson and Ali Iran-Nejad. Article to be found on website:

<http://www.ced.appstate.edu/intercollege/2800/xblanton/readings/salomon.html>

Schools and quality: an international report, OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development), Paris, 1989

Thomas E: **Stimulating Learning**, Unit 10 from Course 1, *Education and Development*, University of London and International Extension College, 1992

Visser L: **The Development of Motivational Communication in Distance Education Support**, University of Twente, Enschede, 1998

Websites

ARDEMI:

<http://www.ardemi.fr>

Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3:

<http://www.univ-lyon3.fr/>

Annex

Course programme 1999-2000

This table outlines the work schedule over the year with the corresponding support offered by e-mail and telephone contact.

TUTORIAL OR VIDEO CONFERENCING		E-MAIL		TELEPHONE	
Week	Content	Week	Content	Week	Content
40 (1999)	Face-to-face tutorial Objectives, collective and individual. Presentation of programme, media and approach to distance learning. <i>New Interchange session.</i>	41	Motivational message. Troubleshooting. Work organisation.	41, 42	Discussion of topic 1: Environment.
43	Video conferencing Class recap of topic 1. <i>New Interchange session.</i>	45	Quiz 1. Assessment. Motivational message.	45, 46	Discussion of topic 2: Animal Rights.
47	Video conferencing Class recap of topic 2. <i>New Interchange session.</i>	49	Quiz 2. Assessment.	49, 50	Discussion of topic 3: Gambling.
1 (2000)	Video conferencing Class recap of topic 3. <i>New Interchange session.</i>	3	Quiz 3. Assessment. Motivational message.	3, 4	Discussion of topic 4: Discrimination.
5	Video conferencing Class recap of topic 4. <i>New Interchange session.</i>	7	Quiz 4. Assessment.	7, 8	Discussion of topic 5: Euthanasia.
10	Video conferencing Class recap of topic 5. Learners submit the theme of their personal assignments. <i>New Interchange session.</i>	12	Quiz 5. Assessment. Motivational message for personal assignment.	12, 13	Discussion of personal assignment: resources, research, method, approach.
14	Video conferencing <i>New Interchange session.</i> Peer group work - in pairs or threes - on personal assignments.	16	Quiz 6. Assessment.	16, 17	Discussion of personal assignment: progress, outline.
18	Video conferencing <i>New Interchange session.</i> Peer group work – the whole group together – on personal assignments: presentation of outline.	20	Quiz 7. Assessment.	20, 21	Discussion of personal assignment: final draft, delivery.
22	Face-to-face tutorial Learners present their personal assignments to the group. The presentation consists of a 10' exposé given by each learner, with accompanying notes, diagrams, illustrations, etc. distributed to the other learners. Course evaluation with the group.				