

European Co-operation through "Interactive Storytelling" in the European Virtual Training College

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Introduction

This article on the SOCRATES project "C³. Communication, Collaboration, Community Development - Impacting Education in Networked Learning for Disadvantaged Young People" focuses especially on the relationship between Open Learning and Lernzielorientierter Unterricht in a European collaboration process. It highlights the question of compatibility of virtual classrooms and real classrooms in a learning and teaching culture of disadvantaged youths and their teachers. Looking back on our project that started at the end of '98 we try to describe a few discoveries.

Project partners from Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic are working together in the C³ project addressing directly teachers who are working with disadvantaged young people. It tries to develop a method of Open and Distance Learning, "Interactive Storytelling", that reflects the special needs of our target groups and the different styles of teachers. Main aims are:

- Development of ODL for youth at risk
- Focus on active use of Multimedia and Internet as communication and production environments
- Establishing a European working context between institutions supporting youth at risk
- Empowering teachers to link the real classroom with virtual classrooms

Being Disadvantaged ...

What does it mean to be disadvantaged? Can we identify characteristics of a disadvantaged person? There are a lot of different characteristics that make a young person today 'disadvantaged'.

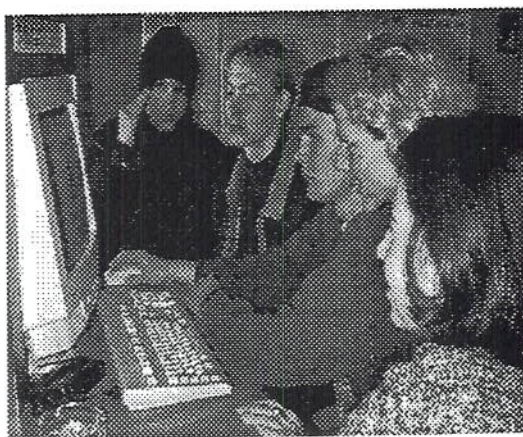


figure 1: Youth in our Chat Cafe

Firstly, I would like to underline that it is necessary to see being 'disadvantaged' in relation to the social situation of the young people and that it is not the product of personal qualities as such. As we can see, increased youth unemployment is causing greater social selection. If young people were in a position to make out clear-cut prospects with regard to their working lives even ten years ago, today they cannot have much hope of continued employment. Take a youth from Turkey living in Moers, for example. He or she comes from a family who left their home place in the sixties because the husband/father had found work in one of the mines in Moers. Today, the traditional miners' environment does not hold out any hopes for the future of these youths with regard to their working lives because mines have been closed down and miners made redundant or sent into early retirement. The Turkish youths neither possess their own indigenous Turkish cultural background nor are they fully integrated and accepted members of the German regional environment - be this language-wise or culturally. In competition with German youths they usually stand a poor chance especially since the demand of training places is much higher than the number of training opportunities on offer.

Extent social conditions and individual situations interact with each other and have a spiralling effect on the marginalisation of certain social groups. With regard to the project our different national situation is being reflected by what we individually and nationally determine as our 'disadvantaged' target groups at the local level. In this respect, too, the term 'disadvantaged' is something socially relative. We now tend to abstain from - and would request others to do the same - terming people 'disadvantaged' because of the danger of stigmatising the person concerned, i.e. project social consequences as the qualities of a person *sui generis*.

The Social Design

This is the complex and multi-layered social context, our project is set in. In contrast to classic ODL which appeals to a university-type learner, we find here that the learner's personality, his or her social heritage and integration is crucial to her or his personal definition of meaningful educational targets or achievements. The classic form of Distance Learning is based on the ideal learner who is intrinsically motivated and will study on her or his own account and independently. Under such circumstances Distance Learning offers the advantage of overcoming spatial distance so that subjects as well as knowledge taught, i.e. a curriculum, can be provided which would otherwise not be available locally. The official translation of 'Distance Learning' in German is 'Fernunterricht' which particularly highlights the paradigm of this type of Distance Learning as *distribution of knowledge*. Looking at the target groups, however, that we have in mind in our projects the social premises of classic Distance Learning come into focus and thus the incompatibility of this rather academic teaching model with the requirements, interests and skills of our target groups.

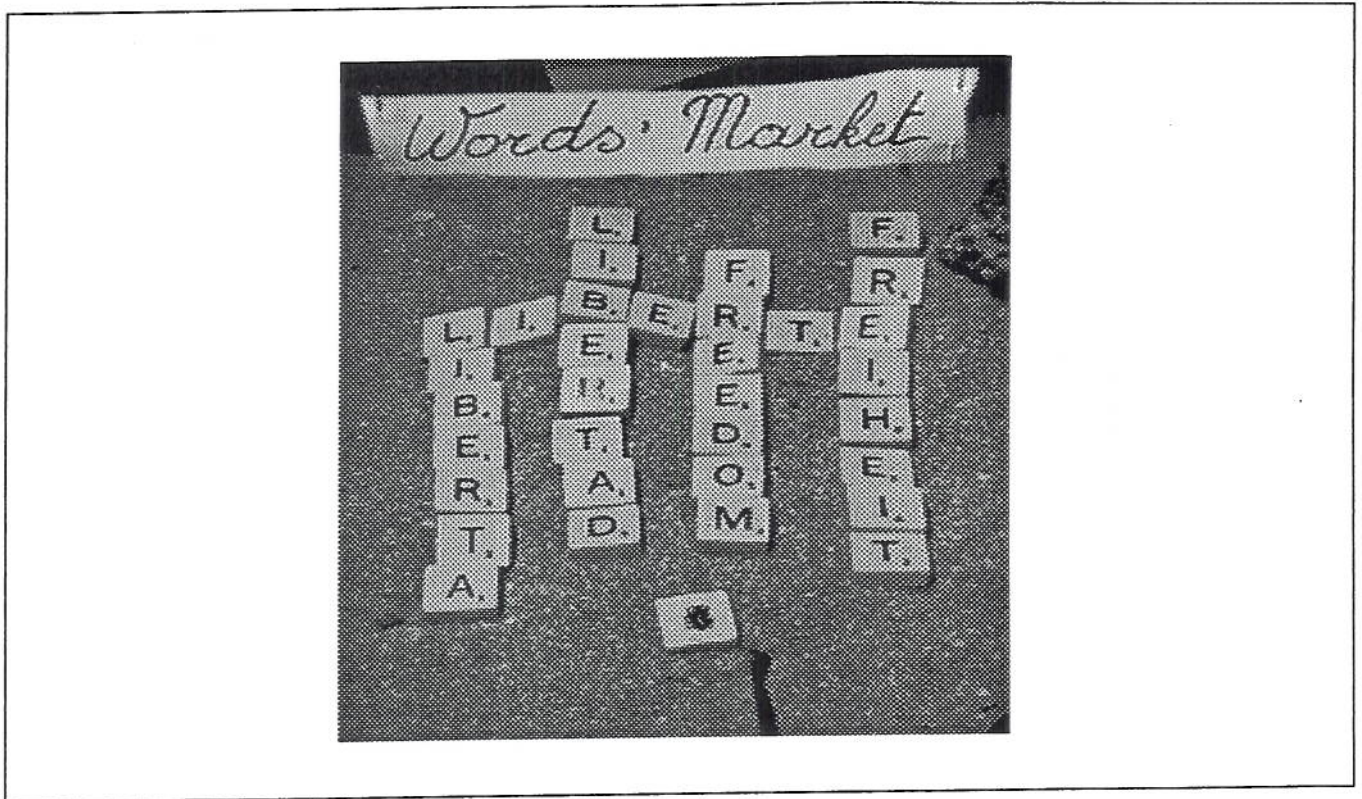


figure 2: from a story

Within the scope of the C³ project, ODL is out more than anything else for offering a different set of subjects as well as providing an alternative to the common model of classroom learning which has to be held responsible for a number of disappointing experiences among young people.

With respect to all partner institutions, the project is based on a real and social learning context; it is rooted in the real classroom so that it would be possible to transfer the given social context into the virtual classroom. This is the fundamental thesis of the project. It reflects the fact that our young people depend on personal and social assistance as well as on motivating support and encouragement.

Another fundamental idea of the project is the conviction that today the need for pedagogical integration possesses top priority, and it is not so much lack of technical development which stands in the way of utilising modern means of telecommunication. This is the reason why we gave preference to the use of commercially available or free standard tools such as Multimedia software for stand-alone PCs and Internet tools, which would also have a favourable effect on the transfer of the project results.



figure 3: from another story

"Interactive Storytelling" as key to ODL

In the light of the experiences working as teacher, trainer, social pedagogue etc. with young people we surely remember a lot of stories, that they had to tell. But also very often their stories was not be heard or they are only told in a peer group. This oral youth culture is a strong resource of our young people and it is worth to be shared with other people which can benefit from that. "Interactive Storytelling" is linking young peoples own life experiences with Internet and Multimedia tools (*Lambert*), sharing these stories with other young people all over Europe and to communicate them through the medium of networked communication and to develop a community of young storytellers. Basic principles are:

- Young people are constructing knowledge through sharing their experiences by telling their personal life stories.
- The individual needs and experiences of young people are in the centre of the storytelling process, nobody is telling what to write, the learner is an autonomous author.
- "Interactive Storytelling" is a mean to use Multimedia and Internet tools in a creative way, the young people are producers not consumers of content (*Software Design by Learners, Papert, Piesche-Blumtritt/Rauter*).
- "Interactive Storytelling" is integrative, not separating learning in different curriculum areas. It is language, arts, design, IT, math, narration etc. and much more than tool acquisition.
- The young people are planning running and evaluating their storytelling process by themselves.
- They are able to share and discuss their stories in a cross-border European network of young people (*Shared Constructionism, Resnick*).

Teacher Training

Based on the pilot experiences of cross-border co-operative learning for disadvantaged young people by means of Multimedia and the Internet within the framework of the former EVA project, the C³ project now analyses the new roles of teachers/instructors within the new pedagogical concept of cross-border co-operative learning. The C³ project is designed to develop a model of further training for

ODL. The target group comprises European educational/training institutions and their pedagogical staff who work with so-called disadvantaged young people within the framework of prevocational courses. During the first project year (9/98 - 8/99), the focus is on institutions directly involved with the project. The second project year (9/99 - 8/00) addresses outside participants who will have to be enrolled for the training.

The results of the project will make a curriculum model, i.e. a manual for co-operative ODL based on 'Interactive Storytelling', as well as a presentation model in the form of a manual to prepare pedagogical staff for their new roles in the Virtual Classroom.

The organisational and specific implementing of the training will itself be carried out according to the principles of Open Learning. On the one hand, this will give rise to demanding challenges with regard to the structuring of the courses and, on the other hand, facilitate individual ways of realisation on the part of those involved, making effective communication imperative.

The further training is designed to help pedagogical staff understand ODL in social a context and to assist them with regard to the implementing of these in their all days work. Practical projects with young people will thus serve the purpose of putting into practice what has been learned. During their further training the pedagogues will learn the following:

- develop contents;
- work out the structure of a story;
- produce an esthetical code;
- be authentic in their own productions in order to be able to permit authenticity;
- communicate and stimulate communication;
- learn the application of software tools.

Conclusion

From our projects we learned that the concern of the teaching staff about their lack of confidence having to employ a technique they did not master in the same way as they were used to in respect of previous matters and methods: The teaching staff saw their lack of confidence as qualification deficits in view of mastering a technique. Our evaluation described the situation as uncertainty on the part of the teaching staff who found it difficult to accept their state of uncertainty. Thus a basic social competence was highlighted which is essential in Open Learning and which students and staff will have to try and acquire together (*Sesink*).

Coming to an end, we would like to stress once again to be aware of including the new media in social interactions. It is necessary for us to leave behind the abstract image of a homo educandus who in view of her/his lack of social and motivational concreteness is fiction and could best be compared - if at all - to a real-life university student. Here it appears to be of special interest to round off our picture of learning cultures from an ethnographic perspective. We are of the opinion that today provision of learning environments have become technically essentially easier for the Internet than have the development of sustainable and dynamic learning arrangements which try to integrate the Internet and which are in agreement with the interests and educational backgrounds of people in their every-day situations and in their social diversity.

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