European Trade Union Distance Education:
Potential and problems

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Abstract

The growth of transnational corporations, and in Europe the development of a social dimension to the European Union have created greater needs for trade unions to collaborate at European and international levels. Education is a central activity of trade unions as preparation for action in the social and economic fields and the recent and rapid spread of the Internet has created an obvious opportunity to explore the role of computer mediated distance learning. The European Trade Union Distance Education project (ETUDE) is one example of a collaborative approach to networked learning, in the context of a particular community of practice.

Introduction

As trade union organisation acquires a greater transborder dimension in an increasingly globalised world, so the issues associated with cross-border trade union education become increasingly prominent. This paper reflects on the experiences of one project exploring the use of ICTs to support computer-mediated distance learning in trade union bodies at national and European levels. The European Trade Union Distance Education (ETUDE) project, co-ordinated by the European Trade Union College[1] (ETUCO), with the support of the EC, brought together training bodies from affiliated national trade union confederations from Germany, Italy, Sweden

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[1] ETUCO is the education and training body of the European Trades Union Congress (ETUC).

and the UK[2] (along with two UK universities and independent evaluators from the UK and Sweden).

The project objectives fall into three main areas: developing pedagogic approaches to distance and multimedia education appropriate for use in trade union education; developing and implementing a technical infrastructure to support these; and delivering a programme of national and transnational training courses. Alongside their involvement in ETUDE, the four union confederation partners have simultaneously been developing strategic national computer-mediated distance learning programmes, with distinctive foci. Each of these has involved the development of particular approaches to computer-mediated distance learning, with varied objectives and using different technological bases. Although there are substantial differences between national traditions, trade union education generally has an orientation to active learning, drawing on broader democratic and participative trade union traditions (Miller & Stirling, 1997).

This paper examines networked learning aspects of the project. Firstly, it locates the ETUDE project in a model of the development of ICT and education among ETUCO and its affiliated partners. This model highlights two aspects for further discussion - tutor training and organisational - which, it has been asserted, become increasingly significant in the adoption of ICTs in educational organisations. These are reflected on in more detail, before a short discussion highlighting some of the potential, and the problems, for computer-mediated distance learning in European trade union education.

Locating the ETUDE project

The ETUDE project developed out of a strand of education work by European trade union confederations, focusing on education about information and communication technologies (ICT), and their social and economic dimensions. Several of the actors in the project (both organisationally and individually) had previously been involved in an earlier EC-supported project (ETUE-net) which implemented a training programme in the use of the Internet and developed an initial infrastructure for Web-based communications among trade union educators

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[2] The confederations involved are the German Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund Bildungswerk (DGB), the Italian Confederazione Italiana Sindicati Lavatori (CISL), the Swedish Landsorganisationen i Sverge (LO-S) and the British Trades Union Congress (TUC).
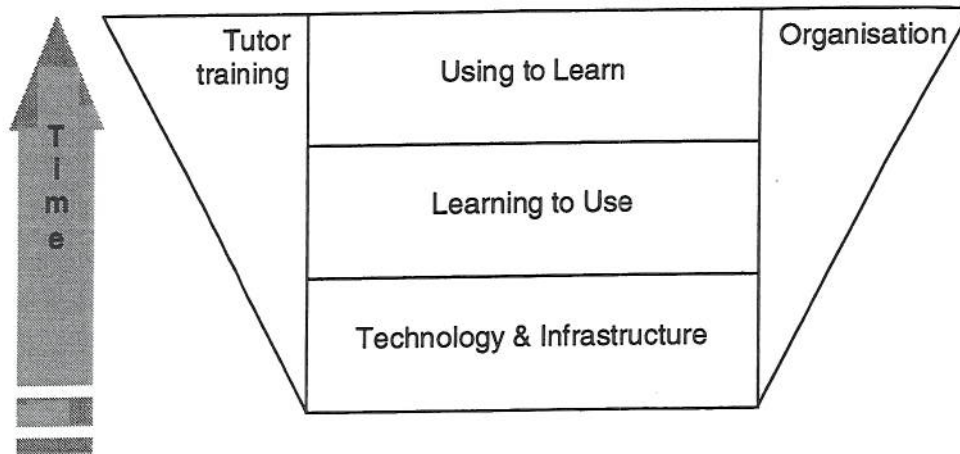
Figure 1: Simple model of ICT Adoption in Educational Organisations

across Europe. In the ETUDE project, partners sought to move on from the earlier training about ICT, to the use of ICT in the organisation and delivery of training: *"ETUDE responds to the need for European trade union education to move from training **about** telematics to training **through** telematics."* (ETUDE Project Proposal, p18 emphasis in original).

The spirit of the ETUDE project can be seen in a simple model (Voss, 2000) that has been used to describe the adoption of ICTs in educational organisations as shown in Figure 1. The ETUE-net project[3] addressed infrastructure and *'learning to use'* phases or levels at national and transnational levels. The ETUDE project was designed to move to *'using to learn'* with ICTs. Usefully, Voss's model highlights the growing prominence of issues associated with the training of educators and with organisation and structure, as educational organisations move from acquiring access to ICT infrastructure, through learning how to use the infrastructure, to using the infrastructure for learning.

However, to support the ETUDE project's transnational training, a new infrastructure was implemented which comprised two main components, and which largely superceded the

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[3] A follow-up project ETUE-net - ETUE-net II is extending the earlier training programme to a wider range of European trade union confederations.

infrastructure developed in the earlier project. Firstly, a conferencing, messaging and electronic mailing list system has been established. This provides access to conferencing facilities via the Internet either using the First Class client or a standard Web browser. Two of the confederation partners already had extensive experience of using First Class to support distance learning programmes; the other two are involved in developing proprietary Web-based conferencing and distance learning facilities. The second major technical area has been the development of a 'Knowledge Pool'. This aims to provide a repository of electronic learning resources that can form the basis for the ongoing development of materials and methods. The Knowledge Pool can be used to store and retrieve materials which may be localised and re-used (or, in some cases re-used directly); materials to support tutors involved in distance learning (for example, guides and checklists) and materials which exemplify particular pedagogic or technological approaches. Alongside the Knowledge Pool, the project tutors are developing a multimedia 'Tutors' Toolkit' of resources.

Consequently, despite the shift in emphasis to using ICTs to learn, the ETUDE project has still involved significant aspects of *'learning to use'* the technologies. A slightly revised model, locating the ETUDE and ETUE-net 1 projects is given in Figure 2, which attempts to catch some of the additional infrastructure implementation and 'learning to use' aspects of both projects.
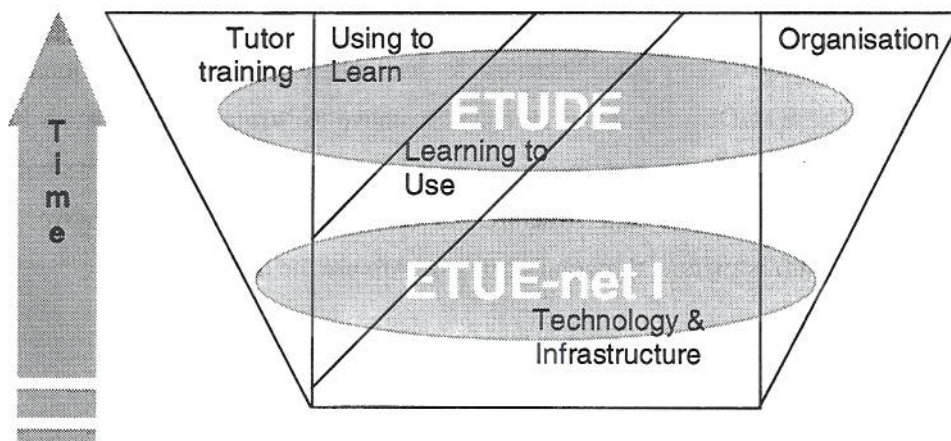
Figure 2: Locating ETUDE in a revised model of ICT adoption

For the remainder of this paper, however, the focus will be on the project's treatment of the growing importance of organisational and training issues, as identified in this model.

Training trainers

The project has an overarching objective of developing a transnational European network of trade union educators as a means of exchange and developing innovative approaches to computer-mediated distance learning:

> "The overall objective of the project is to establish a pan-European network for computer-mediated trade union education. ETUDE aims to build on the collaborative and participative traditions of trade union education and provide an on-line environment supportive to this approach. ETUDE Project Proposal p.88

The 'Train the Trainers' course was a central example of how the project began to explore these possibilities. Building on the technical base which had been put in place during the first phase of ETUDE, a mixed-mode training course for trade union trainers was developed which aimed to highlight the conceptual framework of a virtual community, while simultaneously providing a realistic scenario for using the technology to learn. The aims of the course were to raise awareness of the pedagogical and practical issues involved in computer-mediated ODL from the perspectives of both tutor and learner, and through a series of individual and group activities, to introduce participants to the skills required to plan, moderate and evaluate a successful online course. Following this, all participants would be responsible for setting up and managing online courses at a national level on various aspects of trade union training.

By restricting the size of the group for this pilot study (12 participants in total from 4 national confederations), course tutors hoped, through stimulating discussion and activity, to encourage the development of a transnational virtual learning community which would be a model for the type of cross-border trade union networks which ETUDE wished to promote. As the effectiveness of the learning experience is closely related to the social context in which it is situated (Mayes, 1995), encouraging identification with this community would be a crucial aim of the course. In order to promote this therefore, inter-confederation groupwork was initiated and activities were designed to encourage collaborative learning.

Structured around a framework of First Class conferences, the sixteen week online course was sandwiched between two face to face sessions, the first of which provided participants with the opportunity to gain further technical skills before going on to use this technology for a specific

learning purpose. In the final session participants were encouraged to review the online course and to reflect on their learning experience. Positive aspects cited were:

'learning to use'

- the opportunity to enhance technical and pedagogical skills and thus increase confidence in their own abilities as online tutors.

'using to learn'

- the model itself was seen as useful and transferable, the online tutor support helpful and the resources provided relevant and re-usable.

- even if the overall participation level in conferences was disappointingly low (only 2 out of 12 completed all activities, a further 6 made some contribution, while 4 did not log on at all), a majority of the participants agreed that they had learned vicariously from the contributions of others (Dineen at al, 1999).

- The transnational exchange of ideas and experiences in the F2F sessions was valuable.

More negative aspects included:

- Language - the course was conducted entirely in English, and although all participants had a high level of competence in English, several still felt inhibited from contributing to the online conferences.

- Groupwork - in spite of encouragement from the tutors, the anticipated cross-federation groups did not materialise and activities were amended to individual ones.

- Local support - tight restrictions at a local level caused delays in some participants getting access to the required technology.

- Structure – some participants would have preferred a 'looser' structure to allow for adaptation as the course progressed.

- Timing - scheduling the course over the main holiday period caused problems for many, and there was an overlap for some trainers with their own national courses which had to be given priority.

Although the course had many positive features, it is clear that the anticipated virtual learning community had not materialised, and that the approach to contextual issues such as language and cultural differences had been less than successful. This was characterised by low participation rates and lack of real engagement in the learning process.

One influential factor arose directly from the trade union tradition which encourages a learner-focused, participative approach to education. Instead of creating a fairly tight course structure as was done here in order to stimulate discussion and establish a network of relationships (Jones, 1999), the context suggests that the model should perhaps be re-visited and adapted. Rather than imposing a tutor-led framework, a more inclusive approach which encourages negotiated learning and an accompanying sense of ownership by participants may go some way towards raising motivation levels and encouraging the virtual community. This approach would be significantly different from that which is generally adopted by conventional educational organisations, where accreditation often dictates the necessity for a tight course structure. It would have implications also for the management, organisation and focus of transnational online interaction. As this is crucial not only to the development of European trade union networks, but also to the more general shift towards computer-supported, work-based learning on a global scale, it clearly merits further investigation.

Organisation: networking trade union educators

The ways in which these networks might work to encourage the transfer of ideas and innovation (that is, learning) is not, however, explored in detail in the project proposal and is left largely implicit in the design of the organisational and technical aspects of the project. The organisational spine of the project has been a series of six 'Trainers' Workshops' which brought together the trade union educators involved in both national and transnational course and materials development and implementation (as well as others, including distance learning specialists and technical designers). As noted above, the technical infrastructure has supported the networking aspects of the project through email and conference-based communications channels and the creation of an on-line repository of digital learning resources.

The central importance of social networks in the diffusion of innovation is well established (Rogers, 1995). Granovetter (Granovetter, 1973) has highlighted the role of the individual with 'weak' links into separate, more tightly bound social groups as playing a particularly crucial role in the transmission of ideas from group to group. The importance attributed to channels of

communication in the diffusion of innovation has led to the examination of the role of computer-mediated communications networks in facilitating the transmission of ideas and information (e.g. Constant *et al*, 1996; Pickering & King, 1995).

While these models provide some insight into ways in which innovation and practice can be communicated, an alternative way of looking at the transmission of ideas and practice may be that of situated learning. The notion of learning situated in communities of practice has been used to analyse ways in which identity and learning co-develop through a process of participation within a community of practitioners (Lave, 1991). Communities of practice provide the means by which newcomers to a practice learn the skills and practice from old-timers - frequently through relatively informal processes. Communities of practice need not (in general will not) be bound by organisational boundaries and may not be geographically bound. The possibility of transnational communities of practice developing with ICT support has been identified (Hildreth & Kimble, 1999).

The interest here is less on the patterns of participation within the communities than on the interaction between communities, and the ways in which innovation and practice are transferred between them. The interactions at the boundary of communities of practice constitute an area of communication between them and the possibility of transferring skills, knowledge and practice. Taken together, these communities of practice may comprise *'constellations of practice'* - configurations (such as social movements) which themselves are too diffuse to constitute identifiable communities of practice but across which there is some continuity (Wenger, 1998).

Using this approach, a project such as ETUDE may be conceived of as a constellation of practices (Figure 3). Distinct communities of trade union educators might be identified among national partners[4], and of which participants in the project are members. These communities exhibit the characteristics of sustained mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire which Wenger argues form the sense of coherence within a community. It is doubtful, however, whether the project partners *in toto* can be said to constitute a 'community of practice'. As noted above, even where face to face and computer-mediated communications events specifically aim to foster joint activities, language differences alone can provide a serious obstacle to sustained mutual

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[4] These may be nationally, organisationally or politically based, depending on the national trade union education environment.
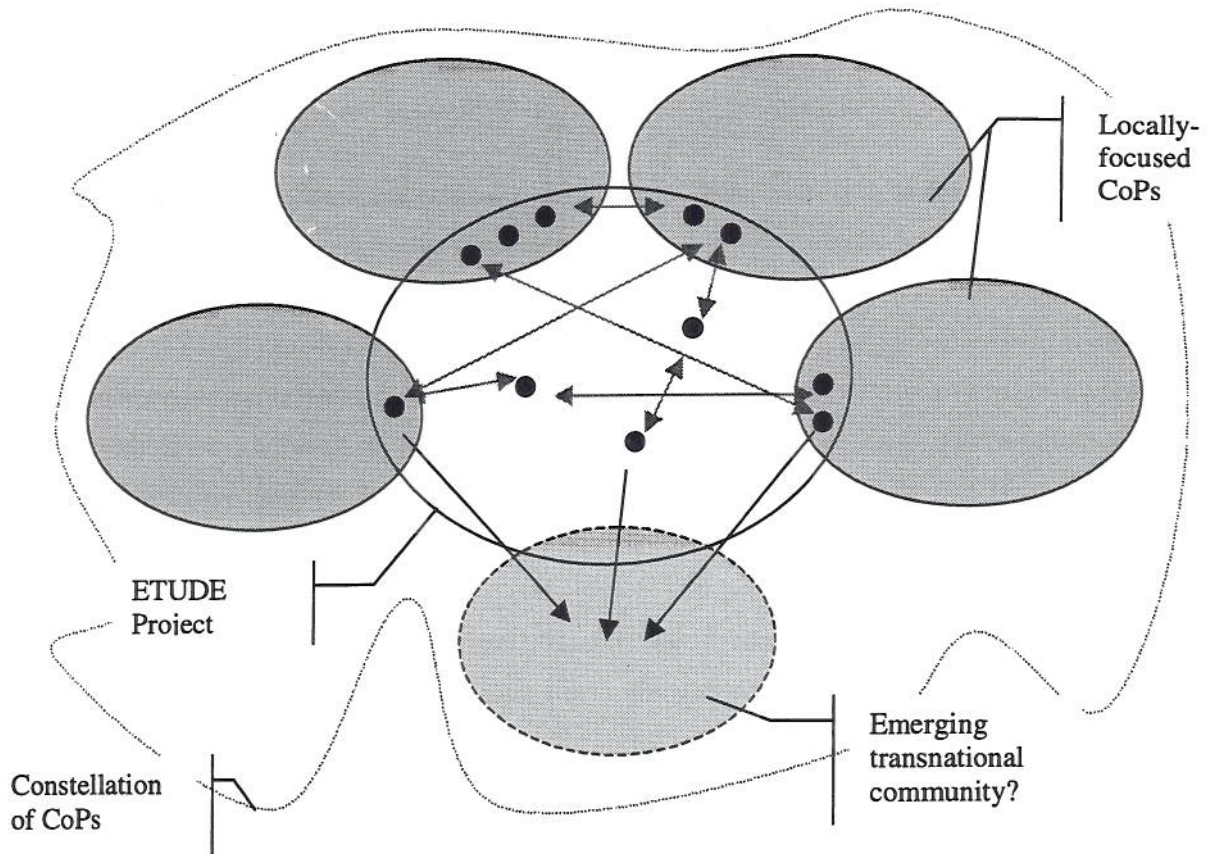
Figure 3 : Configurations of Communities of Practice

engagement. A range of contextual differences between national and organisational settings may also limit the development of shared repertoires and even (given the differences in the wider role of trade unions across European countries) joint enterprise. There is, however, an undeniable continuity of identity across national and organisational boundaries around general ideas of trade unionism, and more specifically trade union education.

The activities within the ETUDE (and similar) projects - both face to face and computer-mediated - may perhaps be seen as providing arena for ongoing, but less intense, interaction between members of these diverse communities[5]. At one level, this provides a mesh of 'weak links'

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[5] Overlapping participation in multiple projects also provide for some level of continuity of interaction beyond the life of a single project like ETUDE.

between members of locally-focused communities of practice which provide channels for transferring ideas, skills and practice. (For example, one partner demonstrated and discussed its experiments with using Internet-based videoconferencing in some of its education activities).

However, the project provides a more intense forum than implied simply by a collection of weak links. One indication of this is in the possible emergence of a new community of those concerned specifically with the development of computer-mediated distance learning events which bring together participants from multiple local/national settings. Those involved actively in this process form a subset of project participants but are concerned with tacking issues of organisational, cultural, technological and linguistic differences which do not occur as issues in national contexts. These issues demand new practice if transnational computer-mediated distance education is to become more significant among trade unions. Such a community would likely coalesce around the organisation of ETUCO - the one partner concerned with transnational education as its central activity - but will also centrally involve educators from national organisations who share this concern to develop a transnational practice. It may also develop to include practitioners from outside the world of trade union educators to include those with specific expertise, for example in the design of computer-mediated learning events or digital learning resources.

Another indication is in the creation of an infrastructure for the ongoing exchange of learning resources. ETUDE has both produced a number of resources which can contribute to the exchange of ideas and practice within and beyond the project itself, and is providing mechanisms for the exchange of existing resources through its 'Knowledge Pool'. This exchange has been at the level of a student guide developed by one partner for use locally being translated into English as a more widely accessible demonstrator of particular practice. It has also involved developing resources within the project, such as training materials and a Tutor Toolkit. These have provided foci for discussion and exchange within the project, as well as acting as a 'boundary object' which can encapsulate elements of practice and knowledge, and transfer them to other communities (Star & Greisemer, 1989).

Discussion

The foregoing is a sketch of the ways in which ideas of learning communities, communities of practice and constellations of practice can help to understand a project like this. It may, however, provide a way of distinguishing different types of interaction, networking and learning and assist

with the design of future projects by allowing a closer alignment of face to face events, distance learning events and supporting technologies to the types of networking and exchange intended.

For example, the varying degrees of intensity of communication may benefit from different technological support: intense communications within practices may benefit from the development of more tightly specified communications systems (and practices). Less intense exchanges between members of distinct communities of practice may benefit from rather less tailored communications channels which fit more readily into the daily practice of people working in very distinct communities and for whom the interaction between communities, while desirable, nevertheless is subsidiary to the primary concerns of the 'home' community. Similarly, as noted above, a greater degree of negotiation in, and about, the process of learning may be more appropriate to encouraging the development of more sustainable learning networks.

One particular area where organisational and technical intervention may assist in future projects is in reducing language barriers, perhaps through the use of more intelligent machine translation systems, or through the involvement of human translation (e.g. of summaries of series of conference contributions).

There remains an underlying question, however. To what extent can the difficulties encountered in this project be overcome at the level of project organisation and technology utilisation? Or to put it another way, to what extent are the linguistic, organisational, cultural and other barriers to sustaining learning networks too high to allow for genuinely transnational communities of practice? This is not to deny the value of 'weak link' learning that focuses on the transfer of experience between essentially distinct national communities of practice, or the potential in some settings of creating more durable networks – particularly where the focus of the practice is transnational. It does suggest, however, that there may be value in distinguishing between these two types of learning network and taking account of their attributes in the design both of projects and technologies.

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