

## **The POET-principle – a model for sustainability**

### **Integrating VOLL Online teacher-training courses into institutional contexts**

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The trainees of the EUROVOLT via VLE teacher training course dedicated an admirable amount of time and effort to the course. Reason enough to give some thought to their return on investment. The outcomes of the EUROVOLT via VLE teacher training course can be measured in several ways:

- 1) Are trainees content with their personal and professional development?
- 2) Have trainees achieved the EUROVOLT certificate?
- 3) Have trainees successfully developed a vocationally oriented distance language course of their own?
- 4) Is there a prospect of sustainability? Are the trainees' courses likely to be integrated in their organisations' regular programmes?

All of the trainees witnessed that the course had been rewarding for them personally and professionally. Half of the group achieved the course aim of developing and setting up an online language course of their own, and, in addition, others actually managed to implement some units, albeit not in a full-blown course. Not surprisingly, the reason for success or failure is to be found in a trainee's work situation rather than in their commitment or personal aptitude. Some trainees' organisations had expressed a wish for the teachers to develop a distance course and had committed themselves to supporting them. These teachers/trainees succeeded in developing and setting up courses of their own - courses that have already been run with real learners or will be offered in the near future. Those EUROVOLT trainees, however, who participated of their own accord and without explicit institutional back-up, were confronted with technical, practical and economic obstacles that hampered their work or made it entirely impossible for them to put their new knowledge and skills into practice.

One of the lessons learnt from the EUROVOLT course, or rather a well-known fact confirmed by EUROVOLT experience, is that the success of an undertaking like this and the sustainability of its results, are ultimately dependent on the institutional support given to the teacher/trainee.

Today, most schools, institutes and organisations have realised the need to open up to ICT-assisted means of learning and teaching. But, as yet, few heads of teaching institutions are familiar with the demands and requirements of online and distance learning. They have no overview of the issues involved and fail to see how they can best support their staff and further the development of online courses.

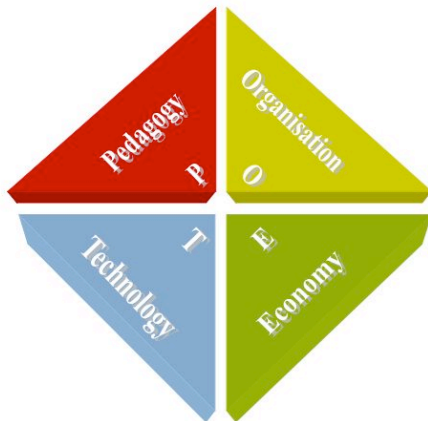
The EUROVOLT course aims to help trainees and their institutions cope with this situation. One of the units, "*Organisational aspects*", provides teachers and their employers with tools for the development of distance and online training. It provides a *model for reflection* together with *checklists for analysis, discussion and planning*. These highlight the most important issues and underline the need to find workable solutions that will suit each individual institution.

### **The POET-principle: A tool for reflection**

The organisational structure of most teaching institutions has developed over a number years to offer and run traditional face-to-face (f2f) courses in an effective and efficient way. Online courses have their own specific which the f2f-course organisation cannot cater for.

The success of new online courses will depend on how well the school adapts to these new demands.

The POET-principle is a term widely used in Sweden as a model or way of thinking for reflection on the interrelated nature of pedagogy - organisation - economy - technology. It illustrates nicely the variety of tasks involved in online learning. It is only the 'P' – pedagogy – which embraces the teachers' usual and accepted tasks. The poet-principle makes it clear that different staff categories have to collaborate for online training to be successful.



One can start reflecting on any aspect of learning online and explore how it is connected to the rest of the POET-model. For example:

**A pedagogical point of departure:** *You, the teacher, decide that your learners will need to practise oral skills (P). You design a discussion task for them to be carried out in pairs with you as a listener and evaluator (P). You choose Skype technology as a tool (P, T). Your learners will need to install Skype and buy a headset (T, E). You need someone to help you with hard- and software in the teachers' room (T, O) and expect the school to pay for your headset (E). The discussions in small groups will take more time than "classroom teaching" - which you would like to be compensated for (E, O).*

Most potential problems and obstacles boil down to the question of economics (What does it cost? Who pays for it? Where can we place it in the budget?), and the division of responsibilities, e.g. organisational issues (What needs to be done? Who should do it? Can we cope with the new tasks without having to employ someone new?).

## Checklist for online courses: A tool for planning

The following checklist will help teachers and schools, to identify possible problems.

The teacher, the head of department and other players involved go through the various items and mark those that are relevant for the course they are planning and check how each point will be dealt with in their institution/course.

### **Technology**

- Access to hardware for course developers and teachers
- Access to hardware for learners
- VLE – who sets it up? Who sets up individual courses in it?  
Permissions and access status?
- Backup of the VLE – what is saved and how often? Who does it?
- Software required? For course developers? For teachers/tutors?  
For learners?
- Licences? Who pays?
- Internet connection. Who sets it up? Who pays for it?
- Accounts/passwords for teachers and learners
- Rules or policies to be taken into account (e.g. limited access to computer rooms during holidays, installation of software on institution's computers requires special permission)
- Support for course developers, teachers, learners? How soon can help be expected?
- Help with software installation
- Security
- Who keeps teachers' computers in good repair?
- Emergencies, e.g. if the teacher's computer should break down.

### **Materials**

- Commercial materials – licences, CD-Roms, books, etc.
- Web-based materials
- Who produces/writes new materials?
- Who digitalises them?
- Copyright issues

### **Administrative tasks & practical issues**

- Advertising: How? (Website? Course catalogue? Special print materials?)
- Guidance for potential participants
- Special requirements for registration and administration of learners? (Check on attendance, access codes, authentication for tests, etc.)
- For how long will learners have access to the course and the VLE?
- In what format is learners' work saved and how can they themselves preserve/sustain it after the course?

### **Staff**

- Who/which categories of staff are involved and how will they need to cooperate?
- Backup/colleague to substitute for the teacher
- Pedagogical support and opportunities to discuss the course with colleagues.
- Is everybody involved familiar with the technology and procedures or is there a need for further training? How can that need be met? Who pays for it?
- Working hours – how much time will the tasks take? Can they be fitted into peoples' ordinary work load? If not, how can responsibilities be re-organised within the institution, e.g. could one of the teachers take on responsibility for the VLE and be compensated by a reduction of teaching hours/number of own learners?

## **The teacher's time budget: A tool for setting salaries**

Since online and distance learning and teaching is rather new, most schools find it difficult to appreciate the time teachers have to invest in a course and to set realistic salaries or fees. Many employers still wrongly believe that online teaching is the same as self-study and, therefore, less time consuming for the teacher and, as a result, saves money.

The best point of departure for negotiations seems to be a realistic view of the tasks involved and the time they will require. This tool provides a list of tasks that are likely to occur in a distance/online course. The teacher, together with his/her superior, draws up a realistic budget:

### ***Time budget for the development of a new course***

- Planning/discussing meetings with teacher/course developer and superior/department
- Finding resources (practical/personnel)
- Planning the course\*
- Finding, evaluating, selecting, adapting materials as well as creating materials\*
- Setting up the VLE\*
- Creating the course in the VLE
- Solving technical and practical problems
- Own training/learning

### ***The "regular" running of an already existing course***

- Checking and updating materials before the course starts (e.g. are links still valid?)
- Adapting course and material to the specific group of learners
- Moderating the course as a whole\*
- Contact with and feedback to individual learners
- Assessment of learners' work
- Solving technical and practical problems (own and learners')
- Administration of learners, e.g. presence, work delivered, grades
- ...
- "Wasted time" (i.e. time the teacher had reserved for an activity which cannot take place, e.g. when the server is down, when learners have not submitted work he/she had intended to comment on, when a Skype meeting has to be postponed because learners experience technical problems, or when the teacher has to wait for the technician to help him/her with a problem etc.)

***The first time you do things:***

- Extra time, because everything takes longer the first time round.  
(Should be labelled "training time".)

In an ideal world the project team would meet at least half a year before the new online course is supposed to start. The members of the team would represent the four sections of the POET diagram. It is vital that decision-makers and experts are involved.

With the help of the tools they would discuss the development process and, pooling their expert knowledge in their respective areas, they would draw up a realistic plan for the development and sustainability of the new distance language course.

**Voices from trainees on the EUROVOLT training course ...**

... stress the importance of these questions and issues. Their reflections and statements are taken from a forum for trainees' meta-discussion (the "Play within the Play"):

***Time budgeting. From trainee K.:***

"I was wondering how other people have managed/are managing on this point. I think that it's maybe easier when working in a team where you can assign tasks and time lines. I think six months isn't enough, one year should be enough, but it all depends on how the rest of one's time is spent (teaching, researching, personal, etc.) It could take longer, but in the meantime technology is outdistancing us...

But I think it also depends on the support the institution gives. If one is on one's own, it could take much longer, looking for materials, writing or adapting them, exploring the software and media to be used, etc.

Our staff here seem to be technically oriented and not so pedagogically oriented. So colleagues should work together to develop the course, but this doesn't always happen. I think training is a big issue, having the know-how, but, in order to get things rolling, meetings or friendly discussions where ideas are thrown out and tried are important too; something that working at a distance doesn't always solve...

Ideas about budgeting time? 😊 K.

### **Reply by trainee D.:**

Hi K,  
I think you have hit the nail on the head: institutional support and departmental co-ordination are key points here. In my case, I am lucky because I am a freelance instructor who was offered the chance to take part in this course through the University of /.../. I have also had much support in terms of technology and material. Because the VLE is so new and the courses are f2f, the platform is completely optional for the instructors. This in turn makes it easy on me: I can do as much or as little as I want with it. And I am not obligated to work or negotiate with staff and/or administration. On the other hand, I am completely on my own in terms of tasks and time lines.... Because I teach at several institutions, I rely more on existing links than my own online exercises that I have developed. I just don't have the time at this point. Speaking of which, I wish I had recorded the hours that I had put into setting up my VLE....!

### **Reply to trainee K. by trainee H.:**

Hello K,  
Tricky one this one! Level of ambition is where it all starts I think. You could put something together that isn't too time consuming and then build on it as and when you come up with new ideas, adding them as you go. I agree that organisations often don't see the pedagogical, methodological side of things. In my own organisation they seem to think that the only issue is getting people to learn the technology and then magically the courses will appear. They also think that doing teacher training for half a day will do the trick, which all of us who've tried know isn't anywhere near enough, you need time to fiddle about with the technology and learn as you go along - which again takes time. I think we've learned a lot on this course, though, also about how long things take, we've tried lots of different things here. Sorry K, but I have no good answer to your question!  
H.

*\*The EUROVOLT Teacher Training Course comprises units that deal with these aspects in detail.*