Setting Up a Web-supported Environment for Distance Learning - the MICCPAM Experience

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MICCPAM is an acronym for Modules for International Countryside Conservation, Protection, and Management, a project funded by EU, DG Youth and Education, carried out by University of the West of England, Bristol, University of Hannover, Sofia University, and Warsaw Agricultural University. The project has developed a framework and five modules for a Masters course in countryside management by distance learning. The course focuses on students who have difficulties attending a presence course because of remoteness, disabilities, or family commitments.

The modules have been designed to be tought using the web, i.e. study guide online, other downloadable data, e-mail contact to tutors, chat, links to other relevant sites, quizzes, online assessment. Still, the aim is to work web-supported, not web-based. Thus, there are also paper based readers and literature. The project has used and compared two approaches for the web-supported environment: a bespoke system designed with standard software tools running on a standard web server (Apache) and a virtual learning environment (WebCT). Advantages and disadvantages will be discussed. During the project, several pilots have been run to test the framework and the modules. Pilot students and tutors have evaluated the approach by filling online questionnaires and sending e-mail.

The paper will focus on the following conclusions:

- Using a learning environment is not generally easier than setting up a bespoke system: well prepared modules of a learning environment software save time and offer opportunities but there are severe restrictions for the design and the code.
- Module authors and web designers and technicians must work closely together. Authors must have an idea of technical opportunities and also restrictions and designers should have an idea of the content they are styling to do it adequately. During the project, writing and styling ws done sequentially, thus establishing learning from each other. Also, web designers had a planning background. Very important was the development of a style guide which covers the following topics: pedagogic approach, functionality of a VLE, format, structure, and navigation of the site, writing style, visual style, technical standards, interactive behaviour, work flow, integration with support, help systems, confidentiality.
- Embedding CIT into a distance learning course does not just mean transferring paper based material into HTML. It requires systems analysis and design for web use right from the beginning of preparing material. Thus, a structure for a short course for module authors needs to be and has been developed.
- Piloting feedback shows that students on the one hand enjoy to study when and where they like. On the other hand, reading larger texts from the screen and the absence of personal contact to other students and tutors are obstacles inherent to the approach. They may be overcome by more animated material and presence phases.
- Students obviously used some offered features more than others.
- Finally, running the course internationally is a challenge: different countries (here: UK, Germany, Bulgaria, Poland) have different educational regulations (e.g. assessment via web vs. presence), different copyright regulations (how can

a permission to include material be achieved?), often different didactics, and different experience in CIT use. Especially in Eastern European countries, slow connections are an obstacle to web-supported learning. Thus, designers must reduce their ambitions and write code that works with small bandwidth or implement a system that can also be delivered on CD.

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