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Turning digital in international training programmes: Chances, Challenges & Perspectives

Abstract

Teaching and learning in international and thus intercultural contexts places special demands on the conception of trainings. The same holds true for online or distance learning. Taken together, both factors – training in an intercultural *and* online context – pose specific didactic and technical challenges. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic all international training programmes under the umbrella of the Higher Education Management Programme at FH Münster – University of Applied Sciences had to be held online. In the article on hand we share our experiences with online training for actors in the higher education area from developing and emerging countries and discuss its specific demands along the lines of common criteria for effective learning.

Keywords

online training, international, developing countries, criteria for effective teaching

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1 Introduction

Besides all its terrible effects, the COVID-19 pandemic has also created positive momentum. It very quickly made visible the hitherto unsuspected possibilities of digital exchange in international cooperation in general and in the field of international teaching, training and consultancy in particular.

Since 2016, the Wandelwerk, the Centre for Quality Assurance and Enhancement at FH Münster – University of Applied Sciences, has been sharing its expertise in the areas of higher education management, quality management and internationalisation under the umbrella of the Higher Education Management Programme (HEM Programme).⁴ Currently the focus is on training and consultancy services for actors in the higher education sector in emerging and developing countries in Africa and Central Asia. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to switch our activities to online formats quickly and without the possibility of prior thorough reflection.

Specifically, we are talking about five learning units dealing with Quality Management in Higher Education, that were all embedded in longer-term training courses. The courses, originally planned as two-day to one-week face-to-face workshops (3 in Africa, 2 in Central Asia), were to a large extent about the participants learning from the expertise and experiences of other participants through exchange. The target groups from both regions were characterised to varying degrees by the fact that they are less accustomed to self-organised learning than participants from European countries and by the fact that the technical infrastructure that allows for trouble-free synchronous online work was not available to a sufficient extent. Apart from that, all courses had in common that little time was available for the development of comprehensive asynchronous teaching and learning material. These framework conditions contributed to the courses being implemented as a mix of asynchronous and synchronous learning elements, with a preference for simultaneous cooperation. In the following, we would like to share our experi-

⁴ <https://en.fh-muenster.de/hem>

ences with the new setting and systematically analyse opportunities and challenges, resulting in recommendations for this field of work.

2 Chances

In the area of capacity building in the higher education sector “going online” provides many opportunities:

- Saving costs: If neither participants nor trainers have to travel, costs are saved and the carbon footprint is reduced. Even if we set off costs for hardware, software and the development of participants’ digital literacy, online training will be the more cost-effective option in the long run. More funding remains for further training activities to reach a broader audience, thus eventually contributing to a higher educational equity.
- Acceleration of processes: Online meetings can take place more frequently than long-distance travel. In our trainings, the coordination in the run-up to the workshops with international partners was not only faster but also more productive online.
- Sustainability of networks: It may be more difficult to build a professional network online, but maintaining one is easier – a positive effect for those trainings that aim at the establishment of professional networks by the participants.
- Distribution of work and qualification of own team members: In online settings, it is much easier to involve several trainers including new colleagues who can be introduced step by step to the new task without travel.

We do not want to say that face-to-face meetings are superfluous – quite the opposite. We are also aware that depending on the level of development of a target country and the topic the possibilities vary. Nevertheless, the partial replacement of face-to-face training with online elements can help training providers to reap the benefits (BRUHN, 2017).

3 Effective distance learning

In order to systematically analyse the challenges of our new international online-training programmes, we will consider five criteria for effective learning that have been elaborated and analysed in various scopes by e. g. SLAVIN, 1995; BROPHY, 2009; HELMKE, 2015, p. 168–271, and MEYER, 2017, p. 23–132:

- time on task, i. e. the time effectively used for learning activities;
- appropriateness of goals and teaching methods;
- clarity of goals, structure, content and tasks;
- supportive classroom climate and
- individual guidance and feedback.

3.1 Sufficient time-on-task

A major precondition for effective learning is sufficient time actively spent by a learner on a given task (SLAVIN, 1995; MEYER, 2017, p. 39–46; BROPHY, 2009, p. 10–12). Even in face-to-face trainings, this so called time-on-task usually is much shorter than the time allocated for a workshop. The time-on-task will, be reduced, e. g. if the trainer and/or the participants arrive late or if organisational questions have to be answered during a session. In an intercultural online training, these challenges remain. However, time-on-task might be facing some additional hurdles in this context:

First, it might be difficult to reconcile different time zones of the participants and trainers. Second, integrating late-coming participants may be particularly challenging, because late-comers may miss important technical introductions offered at the beginning of an online session. Third, in an online scenario time-on-task depends on the technical infrastructure as well as on the digital literacy of participants and trainers. If weaknesses occur here, both aspects tend to reduce the time available for work on a given task.

In international settings, the language of instruction most of the time is not the native language of participants nor trainers. In contexts where video transmission

must remain switched off due to poor internet connection, comprehension difficulties may be amplified due to a lack of lip synchronisation and facial expression. Moreover, to prevent digital eye strain, in a simultaneous learning scenario, shorter sequences and frequent breaks are needed, again leading to a significant reduction of time for joint learning activities. Last but not least, if participants take part in an online workshop from their workplace or by using their private mobile phones, they run a greater risk of interruption and distraction.

As the time spent on learning activities is one of the basic conditions for effective competence acquisition, the aforementioned aspects deserve thorough consideration by careful scheduling – including time for technical explanations, additional breaks and buffers to cope with connectivity or language problems.

3.2 Realistic goals and appropriate teaching methods

International online trainings do not make an exception with regard to the demand for constructive alignment (BIGGS, 1996): Regardless of the medium, teaching and learning scenarios still have to be derived from the intended learning outcomes (ILOs), i. e. the knowledge and skills a learner shall possess after completion of a learning unit (ANDERSSON & GRÖNLUND, 2017). Thus, switching to a digital setting first means to rethink the goals. The reduction of net time-on-task due to the aforementioned challenges, in many cases should entail a reduction of expectations, especially for the synchronous phases of the training. On the other hand, new goals like fostering digital literacy or familiarising participants with new methods of learning could be addressed explicitly. For example, self-study demands a learner's self-organisation skills. This cannot be expected without restrictions from participants who are used to a teacher-focussed instruction, who are not familiar with digital settings and whose internet connection may be poor (which prevents downloading or streaming material).

This reminds us of the necessary adaptation of goals and of the choice of appropriate teaching methods – appropriate in relation to the ILOs, to the individual pre-conditions of the participants, and to the specific challenges of distance learning

(KIM & BONK, 2006). Reading material or watching a screencast can never replace group work or other interactive scenarios. Depending on the goals, the participants will need opportunities to discuss, to practise and to apply what they have learned (BROPHY, 2009). Thus, also in an online setting, sufficient opportunities for project work and peer consultation or for the exchange of good practice from the own working context of participants should be included. Engaging participants in stimulating, critical discussions is a very important approach to construct content-related understanding (BROPHY, 2009). But initiating and moderating a discussion is not as easy in a video conference as in a real classroom, especially if video streaming has to remain switched off due to poor connection. Nevertheless, it is important that the participants relate to each other, for example by reacting to contributions in a forum or by having to answer questions in the chat etc. Apart from this, clearly structured rules for contributing to a discussion are very helpful here.

3.3 High clarity of goals, structure, content and tasks

Apart from the definition of realistic goals and the choice of competence-oriented didactic settings, clarity is one of the most important criteria for effective learning (HELMKE, 2015). Learning processes are more effective, if students know where they are heading to. Therefore, clear information about the intended outcomes – of the whole training and of each session – is of high relevance. In addition, the somewhat greater difficulty to ask questions in online formats increases the importance of clear tasks and a reliable timetable (when to be back after breaks, for example). Of course, clarity still should come along with a certain flexibility: If necessary, a schedule should be adapted to the participants' needs. These changes again have to be communicated very clearly in an online workshop, since – different from a face-to-face situation – the trainer may not be available for organisational questions during a coffee break.

The necessity of a clear structure does not only apply to the agenda, but also to the learning process and the input provided (e. g. MEYER, 2017). In a digital setting, aspects have to be considered that do not arise in this form in face-to-face trainings.

Online, most of the time information is provided by presenting Powerpoint slides via screen sharing or in the form of screencasts (video recording of a presentation with accompanying audio) to be worked on asynchronously. Especially in international settings, participants quite often join video conferences using their private mobile devices: E-learning thus turns to mobile learning (KOOMSON, 2018), making it necessary to adapt design and font size of presentations. In addition, if a screencast only contains a recording of the presentation and audio (i. e. no video of the presenter), special attention must be paid to the visual preparation of the content. Without the liveliness that a real speaker brings, a non-animated Powerpoint presentation soon can become boring to watch.

3.4 Supportive classroom climate

In many studies, the classroom climate has proved to be one of the main factors influencing students' learning outcomes: „Students learn best within cohesive and caring learning communities.“ (BROPHY, 2009, p. 8).

For professional trainings, this means that participants need to feel free to ask questions and to share sensitive examples from their own work context. This is even more important in intercultural settings, where the notion of losing one's face may differ and the importance of the concept of being a team or a “family” may be of different importance. And it is particularly true for our HEM programme, where topics are approached with a high (peer) consultancy component. Such a trust-based atmosphere can be created more easily in face-to-face settings, where there are usually more opportunities for informal exchanges during breaks. Therefore, apart from the highly important personal attitude of the trainers towards the learners, specific methods should be used in order to support the development of a “caring learning community”. For example, group work in a breakout session may be combined with a task that helps the participants to get to know each other better. And, as already reported for other online learning activities in Africa (MPUNGOSE, 2020), social media or messenger services like Facebook groups and WhatsApp were highly accepted tools to stay in touch during our trainings, despite the known points of criticism related to questions of data protection.

3.5 Individual guidance and feedback

The importance of improvement-oriented feedback was one of the key findings of Hattie's study on visible learning (HATTIE, 2012, e. g. p. 18–20, 134–136). This also holds true for professional trainings. Homework or group work has to be appreciated and constructively criticised (BROPHY, 2009, p. 22) – in a virtual setting as well as in a real classroom. However, due to the usually more limited time in a digital workshop, the necessity of individual feedback should be considered explicitly.

First, enough time for the exchange of feedback must be factored in. Apart from that, it may be more difficult in an online setting than in a face-to face workshop to observe ongoing group processes: You cannot walk around from one group table to another if the participants are meeting in virtual spaces. Of course, some video conference tools offer the opportunity to hop in and out of group spaces. However, this may cause more distraction for the ongoing group process than the listening with some physical distance in a real on-site training. And, in synchronous meetings, it might be adequate to shift feedback exchange to an extra meeting or to a written form etc. in order not to have the whole group listening.

4 Recommendations

Summing up our experiences, we would like to share seven recommendations for international online trainings:

- **Realistic scheduling:** Take into account that synchronous meeting time may be reduced significantly by technical introductions, weak connectivity and the need of shorter sequences and frequent breaks. Allow enough time for participants to work on asynchronous learning material, factor in time for the trainer to remind participants about deadlines and offer e-mail support.
- **Appropriate goals:** If time is reduced, goals have to be adapted. Also, expectations with regard to the intended learning outcomes need to be adjusted, if the participants are not familiar with digital media.

- **Variety of teaching methods including asynchronous and synchronous elements:** One criterion for effective learning is a certain variety of teaching methods, with all tasks aligned to the intended learning outcomes. With regard to self-study, we want to emphasise that some participants may need additional instructions to work through uploaded material. However, material offered for asynchronous preparation – if combining relevant content with an attractive design – can be helpful, if poor internet connectivity hinders fluent web conferences.
- **Choice of tool:** We recommend to focus on a small number of tools, easily available and easy to use. All applications should allow participation from mobile phones and older devices with limited storage capacities and the tools must comply with the relevant data protection regulations.
- **Technical onboarding:** In order to minimise technical barriers, especially with participants, who are not too familiar with digital formats and written instructions, a specific online onboarding will be very helpful.
- **Teambuilding and Networking:** The learners should be given the opportunity to get to know each other online so that a basis of trust can be created for the intended cooperation. A good start are introductory phases, in which the tasks are designed so simply that all participants can take part directly. In this phase of online socialisation, rules for joint interaction should be agreed on like commitment, punctuality, feedback rules or speaking rights. This phase forms the basis for the development of the participants’ “online identity” and determines whether they feel comfortable in a learning group (SALMON, 2013, pp. 56–63). Here, shorter synchronous meetings and communication in a forum or messenger services (WhatsApp, Threema etc.) can be very helpful, if all participants agree taking into consideration data protection.
- **Feedback sessions:** In order not to neglect the important feedback in online training, it is advisable to schedule separate, shorter meetings in smaller groups for feedback on multiplication projects or group work, or to offer written feedback if synchronous meetings are not possible.

- **Funding:** If possible, additional funding for infrastructure should be included in the calculation for a training, e. g. for the purchase of data-bundles in grant applications.

5 Conclusion

Our reflection shows that digital trainings in an international context are more than just an inevitable evil, brought over us by COVID-19. They provide many opportunities. However, certain technical and didactic challenges have to be considered if these virtual distance-learning scenarios still should meet the criteria for effective learning.

The recommendations were derived from our experience in trainings with participants from Central Asia and African countries. From a scientific point of view, the question remains, whether the criteria for effective teaching (and learning) that we have used for this article in fact are universal. BROPHY (2009, p. 33) mentions that he based his recommendations on studies conducted in the USA, Canada, Western Europe and Australia. Thus, he could not be sure whether his findings also apply to other countries and cultures. However, during our trainings we did not find a clue that the criteria themselves are under doubt in an international online setting. The diversity of our participants' competence profiles may be higher than in a national training and the previous knowledge (for example the digital literacy) may be different from what we would expect from a group of participants from the countries Brophy refers to. However, the participants of our international trainings seem to have benefitted from the abovementioned recommendations based on the common criteria for effective teaching.

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