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Professional Development of Foreign Language Teachers: The Example of the COMENIUS Project *Schule im Wandel* (School Undergoing Change)

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Abstract

This paper explores blended learning in the context of the further professional development of L2 language teachers. Presenting the European Commission-funded COMENIUS project *Schule im Wandel*, the authors examine issues relevant to teachers of German as a second language. This course aimed to provide European reference model for the professional development of teachers of modern languages, using Moodle as a virtual and universally accessible learning platform. The course included a set of short thematic documentary films filmed at ten German schools, with associated exercises for learners. The authors describe the aims and architecture of the course, and review two pilot projects which used *Schule im Wandel* for the purpose of professional development of teachers in Ireland.

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Introduction

This century has witnessed ever more rapid and fundamental change in all aspects of social life. The economically driven process of globalisation has made the world a smaller place. However, it has also increased the necessity of learning foreign languages in order to facilitate cross-cultural communication and intercultural understanding which takes seriously the speakers of the approximately 6000 human languages that exist globally (Crystal, 2002), without eradicating cultural differences.

English may have become the global language, which leads many native English speakers to believe that 'English is enough'. But this is not really true, because this would imply levelling linguistic and cultural differences, and it would also hand advantages of intercultural awareness and intercultural competence to speakers of languages other than English. Therefore organisations like the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) and corresponding business organisations in the UK, the USA, Australia, etc. are desperately seeking citizens who have a good command of second (L2) languages and a deeper understanding of cultural peculiarities. This would greatly benefit exports and foreign direct investment, as Ireland's national policy advisory body for enterprise and science states:

As communication, and hence language skills, are central to services, it is imperative that the [Irish] State understands, and is in a position to satisfy, the requirements of the enterprise sector in relation to services aimed at foreign markets. (Expert Group, 2005)

In order to satisfy this demand by the business and enterprise sectors, and to offer a comprehensive humanist education, schools have to make sure that students receive competent, stimulating and comprehensive instruction in non-mother tongue languages which is based on relevant results of research in L2 language teaching/learning. This can only be achieved if language teachers regularly receive in-service training and courses in professional development. Only motivated teachers who are on top of the pedagogical and didactic games can enthuse and stimulate students to competently learn all aspects of the new language, including the cultural context. Teachers who are competent in, and enthusiastic for, L2 languages and cultures can reverse some of the prejudices which might put students off learning L2 languages at second and third level, for example the perceived difficulty of learning complicated grammatical and diverse functional-notional structures of a new language, the long period of time necessary to be even modestly proficient in the new language, or the perceived necessity of de-motivating rote learning of vocabulary lists. Therefore regular in-service training and further education of L2 language teachers is vital. After all, the Irish government has subscribed to the official EU language policy that every citizen of the European Union should be able to communicate in at least two Community languages in addition to their mother tongue (Commission of the European Communities, 1995).

However, many teachers may be unsure of what to expect of such professional development programmes. They might fear that the content may go over their heads, or it may not be tailored to their individual needs, or these programmes may be seen as something inevitable which simply has to be done

to fulfil some administrative demands (with inherent negative implications for the motivation to invest time and effort). What is more, in the Republic of Ireland there is no obligation for L2 language teachers to regularly undertake further training. However, in an ever changing world the role and function of schools and teachers also have to change rapidly if they want to keep abreast of social developments in their country and across borders in a European context. Therefore, continuing to teach with a methodology one learned many years ago in teacher education programmes like the Higher Diploma in Education, now the Professional Diploma in Education, simply is not adequate. Nowadays, social changes place new demands on teachers. Being a teacher means more than simply 'teaching' students; it requires a broad range of skills, abilities and knowledge that often do not receive appropriate attention in degree courses and in teacher training. It is exactly in this area that there is a need for offering effective, integrated further training to teachers. Furthermore, it has been proven that there is a higher effectiveness of teacher learning during in-service than pre-service training (Müller, 2010).

Social changes have a profound effect not only on theoretical and pedagogical aspects of teaching, such as the development of curricula, teaching/learning methodologies, co-operative efforts like team teaching and project learning or the actual delivery of teaching a particular subject in a specific setting, but also on the architecture and layout of school buildings. In all of these aspects, there are new developments emanating from European countries which frequently go unnoticed by their neighbours.

What is blended learning?

One of these recent developments in teacher education is blended learning. Blended learning is a concept which puts emphasis on a combination of individual learning and group learning. It allows the learner to work from home, thus minimizing demands on the usually tight time-budget of teachers. In particular, the blended learning modules offer an innovative route to training teachers effectively, and in a skill-orientated manner. In addition, blended learning makes learning more accessible, engaging and relevant (Allan, 2007)

Blended learning refers to a mix of traditional phases of face-to-face instruction and virtual learning in online phases. In a wider sense it can also include using the internet, smart phones, podcasts, video conferencing and other electronic media. Blended learning allows for a teaching/learning approach which centres on the needs of the learner. This is facilitated not only by the didactic arrangement of the teaching materials but also, and this is the unique advantage of blended learning, the mix of different methodologies and forms of learning, as well as media. The use of computer-based learning formats facilitates a learning approach which allows the individual user to determine the pace of learning activities while working from home. Normally, blended learning uses a mixture of face-to-face learning and computer-based e-learning. However, this may be adapted to the specific needs of the overall learning approach, of the nature of the content covered and the preferences of the participants. Basically, there are four scenarios for the use of blended learning in the modern language environment (Rösler & Würffel, 2010), including further education of modern language teachers. The first scenario in blended learning concerns face-to-face teaching whereby the internet is only used as a means for providing additional

information to the learners. Based on exercises which learners receive from the teacher, they look for specific information on the internet and get direct teacher-feedback on their results. In addition, online grammars or dictionaries may be deployed. Scenario 2 involves face-to-face instruction which is complemented by components of online learning. This means that learners receive homework via email or a virtual learning platform which they have to return. The teacher then corrects and comments on the homework of each individual learner. In addition, learners are encouraged to use the internet for further activities, for example getting in touch with native speakers via blogs, emails or bulletin boards. However, the experiences gained from this are not directly integrated into the classroom activities. The third scenario alternates face-to-face teaching and the use of online learning in which both forms of learning are intrinsically interlocked. The group of learners meet at the beginning of the course in order to become acquainted with the fellow learners and to familiarize themselves with the learning platform as well as the demands of the specific learning programme. Subsequent learning activities are carried out by engaging with the exercises provided online by the learning programme. In these phases of online learning the individual learner is not left alone, which might lead to isolation and possibly frustration. First of all, the tutor is always available to provide feedback, assistance and advice, and secondly the programme allows for coordinated group activities and interaction through tools like email, chats, forums, wikis etc. Finally, scenario 4 concerns a completely virtual form of learning, without any face-to-face interaction. All guided learning activities are facilitated and determined by internet-based self-learning materials which have been arranged by the teacher, who also provides regular feedback. Another form of learning is provided by virtual classrooms in a fully online environment such as Second Life. In this environment, learners are supervised by a teacher and they can meet other virtual learners with whom they may collaborate.

These four scenarios underline the great flexibility of blended learning. The computer-assisted components can be used for different purposes, from the mere complementation of the traditional face-to-face learning to the provision of complete virtual learning environments like Second Life. The decision to use one of the four scenarios for a particular learning programme must be guided by the best achievable effectiveness for the specific group of learners. For example, the authors of *Schule im Wandel* have decided to use Scenario 3 due to the internationality of the project. In order to guarantee the availability and adaptability of the materials, the blended learning programme allows for a culture-specific and flexible application of both face-to-face learning and online phases; the task-based materials can be discussed on different levels of abstraction. In addition, the focus of a factual blended learning programme, based on modules of the *Schule im Wandel* project, can be laid on certain contents, thereby neglecting or excluding others (which might not be relevant for the needs of teacher training in a particular country).

Blended learning in the further professional development of L2 language teachers: The COMENIUS Project *Schule im Wandel*

From 2008 to 2010 the COMENIUS project *Schule im Wandel*, funded with support from the European Commission, was developed. It is aimed specifically at the professional development of teachers of L2 languages, in particular of

teachers of German as a second language. The idea of the course is to provide a European reference model for the professional development of teachers of modern languages. Teacher trainers and teachers are frequently unaware of novel developments in methodology and didactics in teacher training that are ongoing in other European countries. The project addresses this issue in a twofold approach: first, the fact that specialists from seven institutions in six EU countries developed the materials guarantees that the project has an international character as it builds on the experiences and knowledge of academics and teacher educators in the countries involved.³ Secondly, the materials can be accessed and used free of charge across Europe and indeed worldwide so that each country, institution and teacher can interpret and use the materials from their own specific angle.

Content

The centrepiece of the blended learning course, which uses Moodle as a virtual learning platform, is a set of short documentary films of two to 18 minutes' duration which were filmed at ten German schools. These film sequences provide insights into the complex and manifold developments that impact on schooling and teaching. They show graphically how traditional forms of conveying knowledge have increasingly been overcome by new forms of learning and new concepts of classroom teaching, which place more emphasis on the needs of students and of the communities in which the schools are located, as well as on process of learning, for example in the form of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or the 'Teaching for Learning' approach.

The films provide visual stimuli for tasks that encourage the participants to cooperatively reflect on, discuss and exchange school-related issues, whether in face-to-face meetings or through the tools used in the computer-assisted learning phases. In addition, the films provide insights into the complex developments of school and teaching and show how traditional forms of communicating knowledge are being replaced with new learning methods and teaching concepts. The didactic adaptation of the German films is supplemented at certain points with additional film examples and documentations from schools in Finland, Poland, Portugal, and the Czech Republic. These film sequences serve to provide further relevant examples of innovative teaching and learning activities from different European countries which are relevant for the project.

The film recordings of the school day and lessons illustrate innovative and creative developments taking place in schools. Some of the films show selected lesson sequences from Classes 5 to 13 (ages 10-18). Particular attention is placed on modern language teaching. Furthermore, there are short reports on numerous extra-curricular activities, for instance a school council, an open day, a media library run by pupils, etc. A further important component of the film material is interviews with teachers, principals, pupils, and parents. They provide short statements to comment on developments in their school and report on their subjective and professional experiences of change over the past few years. The particular aspect of change is the central theme of all films (hence the title of the project). As well as the changing role of the teacher, this is particularly relevant to the development of pupils into people who can learn independently, and the idea of the school as a place where knowledge is acquired autonomously. The blended learning course *Schule im Wandel* has three content

focuses, each containing four chapters. There are several short documentary films related to each chapter, totalling 46 clips on the following topics:

1. Schools
 - School profiles
 - Changes in schools
 - New responsibilities for teachers
 - Visions of school
2. Teaching
 - Starting a modern language
 - Content and Language Integrated Learning
 - Project work in advanced lessons
 - Learning through teaching
3. Educational concepts and projects
 - Step by step to independence
 - Promoting multilingual skills
 - Students take responsibility
 - Opening up the school to the community

As well as learning about the developments emerging in schools today, the film material is used to convey didactic and pedagogical content. New approaches to teaching and organising day-to-day life in schools are discussed. The film sequences provide the hands-on stimulus for discussing concrete concepts and situations, as seen in the films, and to transfer them to and compare them with one's own teaching context in order to improve one's own teaching; this aspect is of central relevance to the project. Each film is contextualised in the respective modules by specific tasks and exercises which the learner has to carry out. Additional material in the form of relevant academic articles and other documentation is also provided in each module. The learner simply has to click on the links to gain access to these materials. The authors have provided a glossary with definitions of approaches and terminology. By clicking on a highlighted word or phrase the glossary is activated.

The exercises range from simple content and value questions to complex questions about the potential criticism and improvement of the sequences in the lessons analysed. Reference will be made to present methodologies, theories and discussions so that the teacher as learner in this project will not only become aware of recent developments but will also be in a position to develop a strong personal voice with regard to these overarching theoretical considerations. In completing these exercises online, the learner is not alone and isolated at his or her PC. Many exercises require group work and discussion groups (all online) so that the learners are encouraged to provide scaffolding for each other in their learning activities. Furthermore, an online tutor will constantly provide feedback to the individual and to the groups in order to stimulate, co-ordinate and develop responses.

Concept

The project uses a blended learning format, based on Scenario 3, for the training activities. The blended learning format has been chosen for the course to accommodate the increasing need for flexitime models in teacher training. The frequency of face-to-face meetings can be increased or decreased according to the needs of participants; this may vary, for example due to their familiarity with computer-assisted learning or due to the geographic spread of learners. The big advantage of the blended learning format lies in the fact that self-managed online phases enable course participants to allocate their time and work according to their individual requirements and circumstances.

In addition, the length of the programme can be adapted according to particular requirements. Since *Schule im Wandel* is organised into 12 themed learning sequences (or chapters), each of 12 hours duration, as the minimum duration of a professional teacher training course is 12 hours. But one can use more chapters from the project, each of 12 hours' duration, up to a maximum of 144 hours (or 12 chapters) of material adapted for teaching, which can be combined as desired, and can be compiled in terms of content and time, to match the requirements of the target group.

The online phases of *Schule im Wandel* were developed specifically for the Moodle platform. In Moodle, participants log in with a personalised password which allows them to access their own protected learning environment. Here they have access to the course materials and are able to communicate with the tutor and other students during the online sessions. Participants complete exercises, exchange views in forums, write shared texts in wikis, discuss issues in chat-rooms, etc. A downloadable handbook has been produced in PDF format to provide participants, who might not be that familiar with the new virtual learning environment, with numerous (technical) notes. In addition, the handbook contains tips and suggested solutions for the individual chapters, film transcripts, and detailed tutoring guidelines. The latter introduces the possible uses of *Schule im Wandel*, offers suggestions for design phases where attendance is required, and defines a possible link with our e-portfolio.

Projected Learning Outcomes

The following learning outcomes should be achieved upon completion of the course:

- (1) Broadening of pedagogical and methodological skills, including familiarisation with different approaches to teaching modern languages, and analysis as well as reflections on these approaches, for example Learning through Teaching, CLIL, and Computer-assisted Learning
- (2) Engagement in subjects with professional relevance in the modern language (including proficiency in specialist terminology in the modern language).
- (3) Use of metacognitive skills, including supporting the learner's capacity to consider the background situation in their own country and its impact on their specific situation as a teacher of German (or another second language).
- (4) Development of transferable skills in media and media didactics.
- (5) Familiarisation with virtual learning environments and computer skills.
- (6) Consolidation of knowledge of the German education system and the current situation in exemplary German schools that use innovative methods.

Experiences with Schule im Wandel in Ireland

There have been two pilot projects testing the blended learning programme for the professional development of teachers in Ireland. The first pilot project took place over four weeks in May-June 2009 with six participants at the National University of Ireland in Maynooth, and the second in July 2010 with 21 teachers at the Goethe Institute in Dublin. Each pilot project was intended for 12 hours' duration and used only one chapter, namely *Start in die Fremdsprache*. But whereas the Maynooth course used mainly online learning (with just one face-to-face meeting at the start of the programme), the Goethe project used only face-to-face interaction and lasted for five hours. The participants reflected upon their learning experiences in a learning diary which was accessible to the respective tutor. This procedure aimed at identifying and evaluating unexpected difficulties and providing feedback to the authors of the programme.

None of the groups had any experience with online learning or blended learning formats. Despite trying to introduce learners to the different online tools and mechanisms it took them some time to get familiarised with this form of learning. Some participants commented that technical difficulties in using wikis and forums, online exercises, and sources of data had a negative impact on their motivation as it proved to be more time-consuming than anticipated.

In spite of these difficulties most participants commented favourably on the fact that they could determine their own pace of learning and work from home. In general, learners liked the learning materials as they were authentic, graphic, and well contextualised by motivating exercises which were relevant to their own subjective teaching experience. They also commented that the online phases of learning facilitated co-operative learning through various tools on the learning platform so that they never had the feeling of being isolated in their learning endeavours.

The pilot projects also provided valuable insights for the two tutors who conducted the respective programmes. It became obvious that constant and effective technical support and content-related assistance were essential. It also proved worthwhile to set specific deadlines so as to guarantee a certain concomitance of the group's learning efforts. In the Maynooth project this was done by setting weekly deadlines for specific exercises. It also transpired that it is vital for the tutor to receive special training for constructing and moderating further training courses. If no training for tutors is available, this can be provided by the Handbook for Tutors which contains detailed instructions for each of the 12 chapters and every exercise (including solutions for the exercises); it can be downloaded from the *Schule im Wandel* website.

Conclusion

The need for regular further L2 language teacher training is undeniable, considering the importance of interculturally and linguistically competent L2 language users for business, economy, culture, and society at large. Only well-trained language teachers who are keeping abreast of recent pedagogic and didactic developments in their field can provide up-to-date, motivating, and efficient delivery of L2 language instruction to their students.

Blended learning offers a comprehensive, flexible, and adjustable learning environment for the professional development of teachers. The advantage of the

blended learning format lies in the fact that substantive phases of training can be delivered online. This enables teachers to work from home and at their own pace, while at the same time being able to communicate with their peers and their tutor. The tutor is constantly available and provides support and assistance when needed.

Schule im Wandel is a good example of such a blended learning programme aimed at the professional development of teachers of modern languages, in particular teachers of German. The fact that the programme has been developed by specialists from six EU countries guarantees the relevance of the content to an international audience. The blended learning format, on the other hand, guarantees the smooth adaptability of the programme (or elements thereof) to the particular needs of teachers in a certain country or region, as was demonstrated not only by the pilot projects in Ireland, but also those which took place in the Czech Republic, in Finland, Portugal, Poland, and Germany. The project's use of short documentary films makes the contents of the chapters easy to understand, and the exercises based on the films are geared towards encouraging learners to reflect upon the potential relevance of the situation seen for their own teaching context.

The two pilot projects which used *Schule im Wandel* for the purpose of professional development of teachers in Ireland have largely been very successful. Minor problems with technical hiccups could be resolved. What is important, however, is the fact that the tutors offering such a blended learning programme to teachers of modern languages are themselves well-trained and well acquainted with the programme and its technical demands. The lack of obligatory professional development opportunities for modern language teachers in Ireland is deplorable, and blended learning like the programme introduced in this article could provide a way forward in this regard. Another advantage of the programme is its free availability on the internet¹. All interested training and further education institutions can integrate these materials with the films free of charge into their own learning platforms and thus design courses for their own target groups.

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¹ The materials are available at <http://lernplattform.goethe.de/course/view.php?id=12>

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