Evaluation of a Systematic Tele-Tutor Training

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Introduction
The Lilienthal project is a collaboration of 5 European flight schools (Lufthansa, KLM, EPAG, IAJM and HORIZON), and the universities of Berlin, Stuttgart and Amsterdam. Within this project a Distance Learning Platform (DLP) for pilot training is developed. Students can study 250+ modules and they can communicate with their tutor and peer-students via e-mail, chat, discussion groups and bulletin boards. In a distance learning environment, the role of the tutor is different from the role of a classroom teacher. Traditional teachers from the flight schools now had to learn to become a successful distance tutor. A Tele-Tutor Training has been set-up to provide for this need. This paper describes the systematic set-up and the evaluation of this Tele-Tutor Training.

Systematic set-up of Training Tele-Tutors
From the early beginnings of the project it was considered necessary that the classroom teachers would be trained for their role as distance tutors. Since communication between students and teacher is of vital importance for the learning process (see for example Laurillard, 1993), the DLP was designed with much possibilities for interaction (e-mail, chat, bulletin board and discussion groups). Now the teachers had to be trained to work with these communication tools. They need both practical knowledge of how to use the tools and strategic knowledge about when to use the communication tools.

For the training program a user-driven approach was chosen. The (future) tutors were asked to fill in (part) of the training objectives. They were provided with an electronic template, which they could use to describe the requirements and skills that they would need while teaching with the DLP. The basis of this approach was formed by the activity template provided in Barnard and Sandberg (1994) which links activity descriptions to technical support that is required for facilitating or enabling the performance of activities (Sandberg, Christoph and Emans, 1999). This inventory formed the basis of a list of six main categories of requirements for distance tutors on the DLP (see table 1).

Requirement categories
1. Background in distance learning and the DLP
2. Communication requirements
3. Information storage and retrieval requirements
4. Adaptation requirements
5. Administrative and management requirements
6. Coping with difficult situations

Table 1: Six main categories of requirements for distance tutors.

Categories 1 and 2 contain mainly basic requirements and skills in the field of distance learning, the DLP itself and the communication tools. Categories 3 to 6 contain the more advanced requirements and skills for being a distance tutor.

Description of the training
The different requirements and skills were trained in three phases. First a two-day seminar was organised to teach the tutors the basic skills of the communication tools and the DLP. Then a simulation program was set up. During two weeks, the tutors had the opportunity to practice these skills in a real distance education simulation. Each tutor was assigned a class of students. The tutor never lived in the same city as his/her students, so no other than distance communication was possible. Before this simulation the teachers were

asked to formulate their own learning goals, besides getting practical experience with the DLP. (For example “To be able to interest students”.)
The Tele-Tutor Training concluded with another two-day seminar. During this seminar the experiences of the simulation program were discussed. Furthermore the advanced skills and requirements like time-management and the strategic use of communication tools were trained.

Evaluation Results
The three parts of the Tele-Tutor Training were evaluated separately, and one over-all evaluation was performed. The evaluations focused on the actual skills the tutors gained during the different parts of the training, and on the confidence and motivation of the teachers to become distance tutors.
After the first Tele-Tutor Training seminar, all tutors mastered the basic skills for using the DLP. This was a good result, since some teachers that had never used e-mail before now were able to use the different communication tools on the DLP swiftly. And more important, the motivation and confidence of most teachers to become distance tutors grew during the seminar. The simulation program resulted in 82% of the teachers achieving (partly) their learning goal. Furthermore, experience with the ‘real situation’ was of great value.
All subjects in the last Tele-Tutor Training was reported to be useful.. The tutors were asked for their opinion on the usefulness of the different parts of the training and of the complete training as a whole. These overall figures can be found in figure 1.

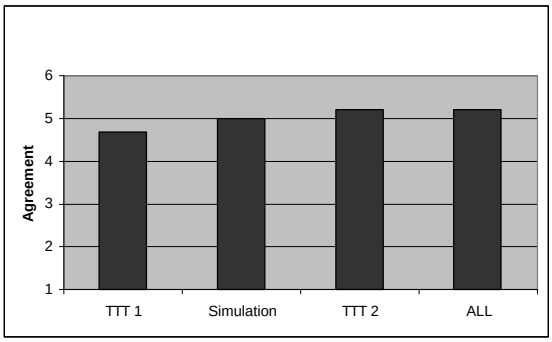

Figure 1: Mean answers to the question on the usefulness of different training parts. (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree)

Conclusion
We tried to set up a Tele-Tutor Training that trained all skills and requirements needed to become good distance tutors. The requirements where gathered by the (future) tutors themselves, giving them influence in their own learning process. The first skills and requirements that were trained were the basic skills for handling distance communication and the practical and technical knowledge for working with the DLP. The training seminar for this purpose was successful, since the confidence of the tutors grew, and they were all able to handle the communication tools and DLP on a basic level.
The follow up training would involve more advanced skills. It was felt that these could only be trained in a real distance course simulation. It turns out that this feeling was correct. Real problems only come up in a simulation as we performed it. And in a simulation as we set up, the tutors finally got an idea of what it would be like being a distance tutor. The set-up was such that every tutor could individually train on his own personal learning goals, while all the tutors were forced to train the essential skills, and build up experience with the DLP.
We strongly advise everyone to incorporate a simulation in a distance tutor course. Distance tutoring only can be taught over a distance. During the presentation I would like to illustrate this with some more examples and evaluation results.

References

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