E-course development projects - working with teachers

Sandra Kucina Softic¹, Tona Radobolja²
¹University of Zagreb University Computing Centre, Croatia, ss.kucina@srce.hr
²University of Zagreb University Computing Centre, Croatia, tona.radobolja@srce.hr

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1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies are already starting to have a transformative effect on higher education. New and innovative technologies have become a driver for major changes in people’s professional and personal lives. They have changed the way we work, interact, learn and access knowledge. E-learning has moved into the mainstream of educational design and can provide ways to enhance the quality of the learning experience. In the process of implementation of e-learning in higher education it is very important to give support to teachers engaged in e-learning activities, motivate them and challenge them to think in a new way. When thinking of using ICT and e-learning technologies in their teaching, teachers are often unsure which technology to use, how to use it and sometimes they are unable to find time for it in their busy schedules. Therefore, it is important to provide appropriate, high quality and sustainable support to teachers.

2. How to provide support to teachers

All users should have accessible, sustainable and reachable support in order to feel safe and secure in their work. But support requires a variety of resources - technical infrastructure, training course/curriculum development and support/help. At the same time we have to be aware that each teacher is different and need different kind of support as well. According to Zemsky and Massy's innovation curve, there are five groups of users. The first group are innovators and adopters. They are pioneers and leaders and bring new ideas but the number of individuals falling into that group is rather small. Support is generally needed by those users who constitute early and late majority and make about 60% of the academic community. The former are open to new ideas and the latter are followers. They are not familiar with ICT and e-learning technologies enough to be fully independent and are often reluctant to use them due to the fear of not fitting in. But when they became aware of reliable and quality support, they are willing to try and explore it/be innovative. Some users require guidance only at the beginning, but afterwards gain enough self-confidence; others need assistance for a longer period of time and feel much safer knowing that there is a place where they can always turn for help. The last group of users are the diehards and they will always resist change, no matter what.

3. The E-learning Centre at SRCE

The E-Learning Centre at the University Computing Centre SRCE, University of Zagreb, has been providing support to teachers in the academic community for seven years. The E-Learning Centre was established as the focal point for systematic take-up and support in e-learning across the University of Zagreb when the University started the systematic implementation of e-learning in 2007. Some of the Centre’s activities are teacher and student support in using e-learning technologies, cooperation with and support to local e-learning teams and groups, establishment and maintenance of the University’s e-learning network, promotion of e-learning and (inter)national e-learning projects. One of the first activities the Centre took on was to establish and ensure a generally accessible e-learning platform. The platform was set in motion by the end of 2007 and it has been constantly upgraded and developed according to the users’ needs. Creating a positive environment, raising awareness of e-learning within the academic community and providing the necessary support are long term tasks of...
the E-Learning Centre. Today, the E-Learning Centre at SRCE provides support to teachers and students at the University of Zagreb, but to other universities and educational institutions in Croatia as well. Apart from the e-learning technologies and tools that the Centre provides to users, Centre also focuses on user support, communication and cooperation with institutions and their local e-learning teams, promotion and dissemination of information about e-learning.

Majority of users who require support are teachers and the Centre is a place where they can come to talk and discuss topics on e-learning. We gladly listen to their ideas and needs and enjoy cooperating with them. We offer training courses (covering a wide range of topics, from new technology to pedagogical trainings), technical support and e-course preparation and maintenance support, manuals, instructions and animations about various tools we provide, consultations and helpdesk. Users feel comfortable knowing that they can contact helpdesk (via phone or e-mail) and quickly get answers and solutions to their questions and problems. Positive attitude and friendly atmosphere also help achieve communication.

4. E-course development projects

While listening and trying to understand teachers’ needs, it has quickly become apparent that what is important is working with them and not for them. Also, it was evident that the support should be individualised and tailored to their needs. That is why in 2012 the E-learning Centre started “E-course development projects” service which enables support designed according to teachers’ individual needs. The service also enables more specific training and guidance. Invitations for project participation are announced periodically, usually twice a year.

This service includes the design and implementation of e-courses at the University of Zagreb and extends the standard support teachers can get at the E-learning Centre. The extended support provides help during the development of new e-courses or maintenance and further development of existing ones. It provides support and training in the usage of e-learning technologies, application of instructional design in e-course development, development of new and particular modules in e-courses, production of technically demanding e-learning materials and production of animations, videos and simulations.

For each project, the E-Learning Centre team and the teacher sign an agreement that clearly defines the timetable, workload and obligations on both sides. Projects usually last between 3 and 4 months. At the end of each project, teacher carries out a student survey on the implementation of new technologies into teaching and learning process. The feedback shows students’ reactions to new ways of learning which both the Centre and the teachers find very important.

So far the students’ feedback has been positive, but it has also shown that students think new activities and the new way of learning demands a lot of their time and effort. Students find moving into virtual environment and providing the learning materials and information about the course online, something quite normal, and they are open for possibility to participate in discussion forums, to submit seminars and homework online. They have very positive attitude towards animations which enable them to better understand parts of the course and they usually play them more than once. They are open to new technologies and ways of learning only if they see a benefit in them for themselves. It is important as well that they are easy to use and do not require additional time to complete such tasks. For example, they didn’t find mind maps useful enough for further use except when required by the course.

At the beginning, only teachers with existing e-courses applied for the development of animations and simulations, or some additional module programming. After some time, more teachers started to apply for the e-course development project as they have heard about it from their colleagues or witnessed their work.

After the last invitation for project participation in January 2015 the Centre received 13 applications, 10 of which were projects with completely new e-courses. Our idea is to present the experience gathered in supporting teachers while implementing new technologies into the educational process, especially focusing on the e-course development projects during which we worked closely with teachers.

5. REFERENCES

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6. AUTHORS’ BIOGRAPHIES

Sandra Kucina Softic is the Assistant Director for the Training and User Support at the University Computing Centre SRCE. She is also Head of the E-Learning Centre at the University Computing Centre of the University of Zagreb and the Office for E-Learning at the University of Zagreb, central support units for the implementation of e-learning in higher education. She works on e-learning promotion and implementation at the University of Zagreb, monitoring and coordination of the implementation and providing support as well as advising institutions, teachers and students in implementation of new technologies in learning and teaching processes.

In 2011 she received the Rector's award for successful and motivated work on the development and systematic implementation of e-learning at the University of Zagreb.

In 2013 she was elected the EDEN Executive Committee member and in 2014 she received EDEN Fellow Award.

In 2014 finished a Master’s Programme in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh, UK.

Tona Radobolja works as an IT specialist at the E-Learning Centre at SRCE and she is in charge of the e-course development projects.

Her field of duty is tutoring and instructional design of e-courses. Among other activities, she created several workshops on how to use Moodle, Mahara and Adobe Connect that E-learning Centre provides for teachers. She holds several certificates for e-learning content design, Moodle Course Creator Certificate and MaharaBites for Teachers.