Making a case for alternative assessment.

Internet-based assessment at the Language Centre of Ghent University (Belgium) [1]

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ABSTRACT:
Alternative forms of assessment are used in the (partly) online course English for Law and Criminology Students developed and organised at the Language Centre of Ghent University. This paper discusses the possibilities and problems associated with the use of internet-based, formative assessment in support of learning. The experiences of the course team and the students are analysed so as to sow the seeds of a code of good practice. This paper also draws on the literature on assessment in higher education and on research into computer-enhanced language learning. It is argued that alternative assessment can encourage students to move away from an instrumental approach to learning, encouraged by the learning economy, and to become more responsible, self-directed learners. However, this paper stresses that for innovation to be successful an educational environment needs to be promoted which is conducive to lifelong, personal development in the learning society.

Introduction

This paper reports on the work carried out within the framework of the Minerva project Internet-based assessment (IBA) at the Language Centre (Department of Language and Communication) of Ghent University. The Ghent contribution to the project has been centred around a language course for law and criminology students which was developed in response to a request from the Faculty of Law. A strong need was felt in the Faculty of Law to improve the reading and writing skills of undergraduate students of Law and Criminological Sciences. Students were reluctant to consult sources in English because they lacked the ability to efficiently read, comprehend and analyse texts. Moreover, they had problems writing texts in academic English. These skills are considered essential in view of the Bologna process and the overall internationalisation of the educational and professional context. Overall, teaching staff complained about the "(half-)forgotten secondary school English" of many Law and Criminology students.
The Language Centre offered to develop an optional language course English for Law and Criminology Students to cater to these specific needs. As the course was aimed at both Law and Criminology students, it was decided to develop a general revision course of English using authentic materials related to both fields of study. At the same time, the centre agreed to explore the

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possibilities of a mixture of face-to-face and distance education in order to allow more flexibility in learning. Undergraduates of Law and Criminology have a tight study schedule. It is difficult to find free time slots for an optional language course as students already have many contact hours for their curricular courses. Moreover, not all students have the same timetable due to electives. Hence, an attempt was made to limit the number of contact hours for this course.
The centre proposed to make use of its know-how and acquired resources in the field of online learning – the centre had been previously engaged in various CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and TELL (technology-enhanced language learning) projects – in order to deliver a 'hybrid' course for Law and Criminology students in a virtual learning environment (VLE) with interactive exercises and a discussion forum. The course was developed and organised in the first two years of the EU-funded project. The course originally relied heavily on activities in a VLE while the number of class sessions was limited. After course evaluation, the number of class sessions was increased.
This paper discusses the development and implementation of English for Law and Criminology Students and investigates the possibilities and problems associated with the use of internet-based, formative assessment. Lessons are drawn for future practice based on tutors' and students' experiences with alternative assessment. We also draw on the literature on assessment in higher education and on CALL and TELL so as to sow the seeds of a code of good practice.

The language centre: background

From the beginning, self-study and independent learning have been important aspects of the teaching methodology of the Language Centre of Ghent University. The centre originally was an advocate of the communicative approach in which the main goal of language learning is meaningful communication. The teacher facilitates communication or is a co-communicator and adopts a less dominant role than in teacher-centred education. Students need to take more responsibility for their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).
Gradually, a more cognitive and constructivist framework was embraced and more learner-driven models were adopted. Development work was aligned to recommendations made in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

> *Relatively few [language learners] learn proactively, taking initiatives to plan, structure and execute their own learning processes. Most learn reactively, following the instructions and carrying out the activities prescribed for them by teachers and by textbooks. However, once teaching stops, further learning has to be autonomous. Autonomous learning can be promoted if 'learning to learn' is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them.* (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001)

It was believed that information and communication technology (ICT) and the Internet could play a crucial role in improving language learning and teaching as they could facilitate constructivist modes of education such as autonomous or self-directed learning, collaborative learning and reflective learning. ICT was seen as a tool to help learners to construct their own knowledge. At the same time, CALL allowed teachers to recycle seemingly outmoded educational practices such as 'drill and practice' and to reshape them in web-based interactive exercises to suit their needs in a more eclectic approach. At that time there was no clear university policy with regard to the role of ICT in university education. There were many bottom-up initiatives in various departments but with little communication and coordination between them.

Recently, the Language Centre has reverted to a more conservative paradigm of language education in which the role of technology has been minimised. Despite this methodological shift, educational practises at the centre try to retain the best of all possible worlds by combining ideas of the communicative and constructivist models. However, it should be noted that there is currently little departmental support for the idea that ICT and online activities can significantly assist, improve and enhance education.
This paradigm shift can be explained by the reorganisation of the centre. Before 2002, the language centre was an autonomous, non-academic, central department of Ghent University which was largely financially self-sufficient. The centre organised extracurricular foreign language courses and courses of Dutch for foreigners. Apart from these, the centre offered some courses for specific (mainly academic) purposes (Medical English, English for Scientific Purposes, French for Law Students,…). The centre was also highly active in the field of CALL and TELL by participating in several local and international projects.

Partly due to financial concerns and an attempt to streamline the academic structure of the university, the centre has been merged into an academic Department of Language and Communication. A new mission statement has been drafted which emphasises that the centre's main task is to cater primarily to the needs of the university, namely its staff and students. The centre still mainly depends on its own sources of income. Initiatives with respect to CALL and TELL are heavily reduced in favour of the development of new traditional face-to-face courses for specific academic and professional purposes (e.g. Academic English). There is no longer an explicit policy with respect to the use of ICT in language learning and teaching at departmental level.

Ghent university: pedagogical framework

Good educational practice at Ghent University is currently strongly influenced by constructivist pedagogy as there has been a move away from teacher-centred education towards student-centred learning. According to constructivist philosophy, "knowledge is constructed by learners (…) based on their mental and social activity" (Kirschner, 2000). The student is no longer seen as a passive recipient of knowledge presented by an expert teacher. Students become active participants in their own learning process. In this process, they are supported by teachers who have become advisers and facilitators, creating a learning environment which suits the needs of the students. According to the university's mission statement, teaching staff has the task to relentlessly pursue the adaptation and enhancement of the students' learning process and learning environment in order to meet the challenges in higher education.[2] The learning society makes heavy demands on student skills. As a result, students are faced with a steep learning curve. Higher education needs to produce autonomous, self-directed and lifelong learners. Ghent university acknowledges that innovation is necessary to better accommodate the needs of students. This implies that certain traditional characteristics of teaching, learning and assessment need to be questioned. It is explicitly stated in policy documents that this involves stimulating initiatives such as a shift to problem-based learning, new evaluation forms and the use of a VLE. The university supports the idea that learning environments can be transformed by interactive technologies which can immediately respond and be adapted to the learning requirements and needs of the students. ICT can thus play an important role in creating learning environments that are conducive to students' learning.[3]

[2] This information has been taken from the website of the support centre for ICT in education (ICT&O) at Ghent University (see http://icto.ugent.be/).
[3] Adapted from a policy document presenting the view of Ghent University on education. This document is available (in Dutch) on the website of ICT&O.

Recently a separate support centre has been established for innovation initiatives with regard to ICT in education (ICT&O). ICT&O has prepared the launch of a university-wide virtual learning environment "Minerva" (previously "Claroline") and also coordinates the further development and implementation of the environment.
Ghent University stresses however that instead of forcing faculties and departments to implement the electronic learning environment, the VLE will be gradually introduced so as to allow both students and teaching staff to get accustomed to it. A balance will need to be struck between top-down and bottom-up innovation. Furthermore, the university has decided to remain first and foremost a 'campus university'. Ghent has no plans to develop into a virtual university and stays strongly committed to face-to-face education. The university highly values the personal interaction between learners and teaching staff.[4] It is clear that all initiatives with regard to the VLE will need to face the tension between innovation and conservatism.
The university has a pragmatic approach to ICT in education. The emphasis is on the opportunities which ICT and other e-initiatives offer in terms of increased accessibility, availability and flexibility. A VLE can make education available and accessible to more people; it can be more easily accessed from anywhere and at anytime. At the moment, however, there appears to be no clear conception of the precise role of the VLE in pedagogical innovation. Many initiatives make limited use of VLEs as administrative and organisational tools (to post notices, to make course materials available online,…). Initiatives can thus mainly be situated within the 'ADD-ON model', in which a VLE is regarded as additional to existing structures and practices. (Meus, 2003). The question of *how* (in what way) educational practitioners can integrate a virtual learning environment (with, for example, self-assessment exercises and forum activities) in educational practice so as to innovate learning and teaching remains largely unanswered. Real 'ADD-IN models' still need to be developed. Answers to this question have to be found at faculty and department level as the university does not impose a centralised pedagogical and methodological framework with respect to e-learning. As a result, there are little islands of practice within various departments. Recently, there have been some modest initiatives, such as workshops and good practice days, to promote the exchange of ideas and information on e-learning within the university and partner associations. Much of the work demonstrated and presented at these events again showed that a VLE is mainly seen as a tool in support of existing teaching and learning practices. Real distance learning does not figure on the agenda.

Development process: reinventing the wheel?

English for Law and Criminology Students is delivered in a VLE which was developed at the language centre. At that time, Ghent University had not yet committed itself to a central virtual learning environment. Some departments had limited experiences with commercial VLE and testing software. Before any development work was undertaken, the course team surveyed and scanned the market of available authoring tools (ToolBook, Hot Potatoes, Questionmark Perception,…) and commercial VLE software (Blackboard, WebCT,…). Existing commercial, freeware and shareware VLE software and authoring packages were extensively tested and evaluated as we were not attempting to reinvent the wheel. The main evaluation criteria were cost, user-friendliness, flexibility and versatility of the software. However, no single piece of software met the expectations of the course development team. Many available VLEs are limited in their applicability in language education. They provide extensive features on an administrative and organisational level but cannot offer the extensive authoring facilities and versatility required in language learning and teaching

[4] ibid.

(Meus, 2003).

> *One of the differences between language learning and other disciplines is that language skills are never an aim in itself, but vehicles that can be used in specific contexts. An assignment in language learning is always about a particular topic which is often the aim itself in other disciplines. This means that e.g. interaction between learners in electronic forums need to focus both on the language elements and on the contexts in which they are used. These contexts need to be made authentic and have to have real value for students of e.g. other disciplines. This makes the implementation strategies much more difficult for language learning and creates a need for far more sophisticated and dedicated authoring tools (including, sound, video, images and animation, voice recording,…) than for other disciplines.* (Meus, 2003)

We worked out a blueprint of a VLE with detailed descriptions and specifications of the desired functionality. This was done in close collaboration with the technical staff in order to avoid creating too many unrealistic expectations on the part of the course developers.
An important requirement of the tools developed at the centre was that they could be assembled into a fully-fledged virtual learning environment which was more than a web page for delivering course materials (lecture notes, presentations, web links,…) and more than an online administrative centre for a course (offering a course description, a time table,…). The developed tools were integrated in the I4LL Learning Environment (I4LL is an acronym for 'Eye for Language Learning' or 'Integrated Interactive Independent Internet-based Language Learning'). A central idea is that students partly work independently, through self-study on the basis of various reference tools and units of interactive self-study exercises with automatic feedback, and partly collaboratively through assignments organised in a special course discussion forum.

Fig. 1: The homepage of the I4LL Learning Environment

The VLE developed at the Language Centre consists of three main components: an authoring tool for the production of interactive exercises, an administrative and delivery component (i.e. a website) and a communication component (a forum and a chat room) that allows students to interact among themselves and with the tutors. In addition to these, various reference tools were developed such as user support tools (FAQ) and dictionary and grammar tools which students can consult at their convenience.
In the first year of the project, we could rely on a small team of computer programmers who were responsible for the actual development of the website, the authoring software and the communication tools. In developing a generic authoring tool, they tried, as much as possible and as

far as the technology allowed, to listen to the wishes and concepts presented by the language tutors and course developers. As it cannot be assumed that a new medium is intrinsically beneficial to students, every attempt was made to ensure that the technology supported and was driven by sound pedagogy and language methodology and not vice versa. Compromises had to be made and at times decisions could only be reached after difficult negotiations in which the didactic benefits and the tutor's desires were weighed against technical feasibility and development hours.
For example, question types in the authoring tool were limited to those types which were thought to be the most applicable in language teaching and teaching and learning in general: for example, 'fill in the gaps' (gap-fill exercises), 'multiple choice', 'multiple select' (multiple response), 'drag and drop' (matching exercises) and 'order text'.

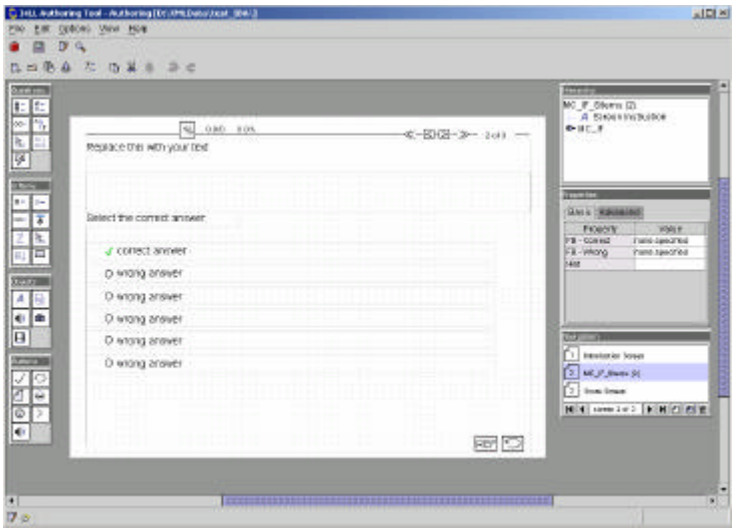

Fig. 2: A multiple choice question in the Authoring Tool

In contrast to many other authoring packages, questions are immediately assembled in a unit, a linear book-like or slide show structure in which the student can freely move through the pages (going forwards and backwards).

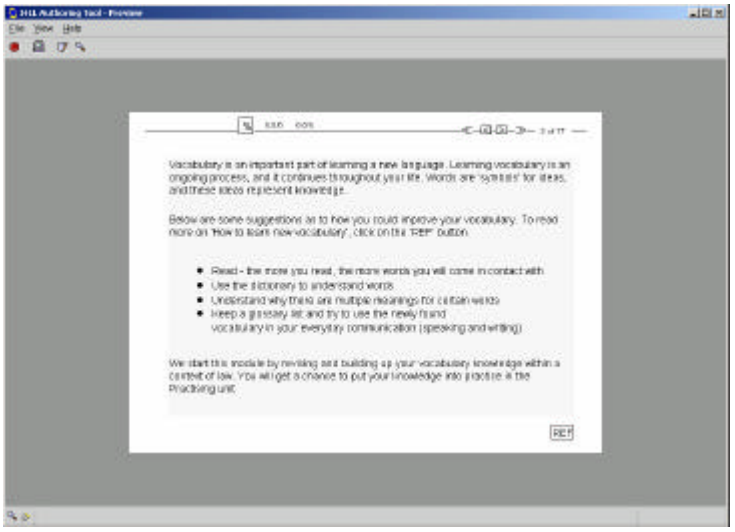

Fig. 3: An exercise unit

The authoring tool was further optimised while course development was in progress. Testing and developing were conflated, partly due to time constraints and limited resources. This had the advantage that weaknesses of the software discovered by course developers could be corrected on the spot and additional features could be implemented if deemed necessary. On the other hand, the computer programmers had to face tight deadlines and were under considerable pressure to produce operational tools which could be used by the course developers. Similarly, course developers had to learn to deal with bugs in the software.

As soon as the first operational version of the tool was available, developers started writing a comprehensive user guide which could be used in the training process of new course developers (language tutors). The user guide helps developers to create basic exercises and also includes tips and tricks for more advanced developers, giving them advice on how to use the basic exercise templates to create more advanced exercises. The authoring tool is geared towards the template approach which allows novice developers to create exercises in a matter of minutes. Exercise templates are conceptually very similar to Word templates which offer ready-made dummy documents (e.g. business letters, invoices,…) which can be filled with meaningful content by writers. In addition, standard feedback messages (e.g. "Correct.", "Wrong.",…) and scores have been provided which of course can be edited and modified to suit individual developer's needs. The rationale behind this approach is that a developer should not require much time to create a fully working exercise. It is up to the developer to decide how much she/he wants to modify the template. Advanced developers can transform basic question templates into more sophisticated exercises.

To develop the course website or the course management system, the PHP scripting language was used, which allows the division of content, stored separately in a database, and layout, namely the presentation of the content to the student or tutor. The main advantage of such a website is that the content can be managed by language teachers with relatively little technical knowledge of HTML or other web languages (XML, JavaScript, ASP, etc.). A teacher can add, remove or edit information in the website using a text editor which is easy to use as it is similar to the editor used in most Windows text applications (e.g. MS Word).

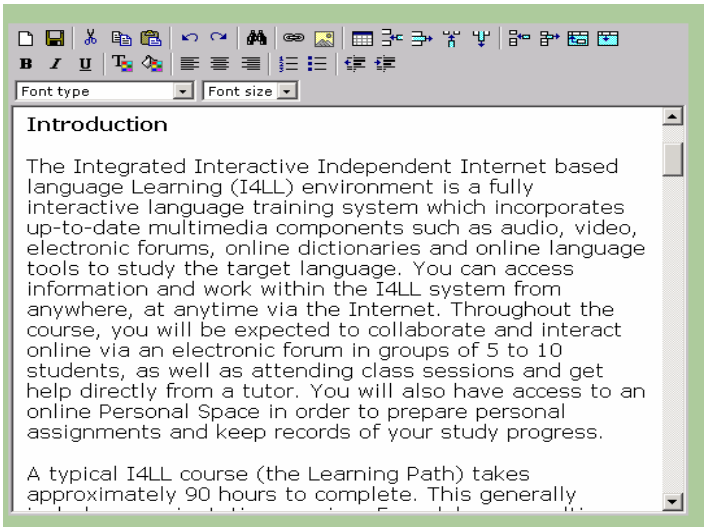

Fig. 4: Editing the course website

The interface and structure of the electronic discussion forum have been modelled on discussion forums in existing VLEs and electronic message boards in general so that the course forum would be easily recognisable to users (teachers and students alike).

Fig. 5: The discussion forum

I4LL: a VLE geared towards pedagogical innovation

The main components of the VLE are a course website, interactive self-assessment exercises and an electronic discussion forum. In its concept, form and structure, the environment reflects particular beliefs and ideas of how students learn (a foreign language). The environment is shaped and constructed to accommodate a constructivist language learning methodology.

The acronym I4LL stands for "Integrated, Interactive, independent, internet-based language learning", which summarises the concept of the environment. The learning environment is *internet-based* as most of the learning takes place online in the website (or takes the website as its starting point).

The environment is *interactive* in that learners engage in communicative exchanges. The learning process is assumed to be largely dialogic. In other words, learners construct their own knowledge and they negotiate their knowledge constructs largely on the basis of the feedback they receive. Within a constructivist framework, feedback refers to the various responses which the learner receives to his tasks (from the computer, the tutor, peers,…). In the interactive exercises, learners receive programmed feedback. In the forum, learners interact with fellow learners and the tutor, which help them to build, negotiate and adjust their knowledge constructs. Feedback will be more fully discussed in a separate section.

ICT is fully *integrated* into the learning experience. The course consists of five three-week modules each centred around a specific law or criminology-related topic (Criminal Law and Procedure, Media Made Criminality, International Human Rights Law, The European Union, and Internet Law). The first time this course was organised, all course activity in the first two weeks of each module took place online. Students first worked independently on a number of units with interactive exercises. Afterwards, they carried out individual and group assignments in the electronic forum. In the last week of each module, a two-hour class session was organised as a checkpoint, offering students and tutors the possibility to deal with both practical issues (technical problems, tips and tricks about the use of the website, the electronic forum and interactive exercises) and content-related issues (additional consolidation exercises, feedback on online assignments, discussion,…).

The VLE to a large extent replaced traditional classroom-based education as only a limited number of face-to-face sessions were organised in support of the online learning experience.

The VLE did not have a completely open-ended structure in which learners had to figure out for themselves where to go and what to do. Constantly having to make decisions is very time-consuming. As it has been shown that students can feel overwhelmed by a completely open-ended environment (Laurillard, 1996), a default route or learning path was set out through the learning material. When students felt that they had accustomed themselves to the new environment and were confident enough to steer their own course, they could deviate from this route. In addition, in a hands-on orientation session in a computer class, students were guided through the learning environment. They could follow what the tutor did on a large screen and could try it out individually on a computer. During class sessions at regular intervals, students were further advised on which route to follow, what to study in the following weeks and which tasks to carry out by which deadline. Tutors helped students not to stray too far from the learning path.
In contrast to the initial CALL euphoria and the belief that the computer could completely replace the language teacher and classroom, it is now widely accepted that the classroom and the teacher should not be removed from the language learning experience. Moreover, many authors in the literature on CALL and TELL emphasise that face-to-face communication is crucial to successful language learning.

> *(…) it takes a very special person to learn and, especially, speak a language without face-to-face communication.* (Felix, 2001)

> *(…) however highly one rates the potential of the Web, it is difficult to imagine that any of this will ever replace best practice face-to-face teaching. What is becoming more and more obvious with emerging research, is that the new technologies offer excellent potential for adding value to classroom teaching in a large variety of ways.* (Felix, 2001)

Although in some situations distance education is a practical necessity, classroom sessions are an integral part of this course. Students of this course are not geographically dispersed. They receive the opportunity to take part in the social experience of the physical classroom and to socialise directly with their peers. This helps to bond the students, which is crucial in any attempt at successful (online) learning. Moreover, classroom sessions help students to gradually adapt their learning style to the new conditions of online learning. In this course, focusing on higher-level reading and writing skills, the need for face-to-face class sessions was thought to be less strong than in a speaking and listening course. Moreover, initially a small number of class sessions were organised to offer a flexible course to Law and Criminology students, who have tight timetables. After course evaluation, the number of class sessions was increased (see the section on global course evaluation).
The units with interactive exercises replace presentation in face-to-face class sessions and offer opportunities for practice, revision and self-assessment at home. Each course unit consists of 2 sub units: a learning and a practising unit. Learning units substitute for the presentation and controlled practice phase of a traditional class lesson. On average, a learning unit represents a workload of 30 minutes so that learners can work through it in one sitting. Learning consists of a mixture of direct and indirect (via exercises) presentation of (language) concepts. In exercises students can test their understanding of the concepts. New material is gradually introduced and accompanied by links to reference materials which students can consult at their convenience. Students assess their own performance based on automatic feedback messages and score indications. Practising units equally represent a workload of approximately 30 minutes. In practising, students are expected to put what they have learnt (in Learning) into practice in exercises of increased difficulty. They can test whether they have assimilated what has been presented in learning. Again students are invited to assess themselves on the basis of automatic feedback and scores.

The forum is a virtual meeting place where students interact (with each other and their tutors). In the assignments in the forum, the emphasis is on collaborative and reflective learning. The forum has been divided into several spaces each reserved for a particular type of course communication: a course space, a class space, a group space and a personal space. Some spaces can be accessed by all students taking the course (course space) or others only by subgroups (e.g. the class space and the group space). Most activities need to be carried out in the group space. Learners are required to carry out tasks which involve posting messages, reading fellow students' messages and replying to a number of messages (e.g. commenting on and assessing their own and other people's work, raising questions, discussing and correcting mistakes). Through peer assessment, they can negotiate meaning and construct their own knowledge. In the personal space (which can only be accessed by the learner and the tutor), learners need to engage in reflective learning. They are asked to keep a learner's log in which they have to record a "Statement of Relevance" at the end of every course week, reflecting on and assessing their own learning.

The learning environment embraces the constructivist approach to teaching and learning as it is geared towards *independent* learners who take greater responsibility for their own learning and who accept that learning is, to a large extent, an autonomous process. Language learners are invited to adopt an active and investigative approach in doing interactive exercises, carrying out assignments in the forum, looking things up in reference tools, assessing their own performance,… In addition, the environment also strongly promotes self-assessment and trains students to evaluate their own performance so that they can better direct their own learning and become more independent learners. Alternative forms of assessment will be more fully discussed in a separate section.

However, the environment is also the product of an eclectic approach as there is room for both drill-and-practice (stimulus-response) and more problem-based activities depending on what is considered appropriate to the students and the context. In classroom practice, teachers will also often draw upon various language methods, techniques and principles and "create their own blend" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) which fits their aims and suits the students' needs.

Bridging the digital divide

Despite initial euphoria over the powers of ICT and the Internet to make knowledge available to everyone and to redress the balance in education, it has been noted that ICT and the Web fall short of the high expectations. In order to offer equal opportunities to everyone, online education needs to overcome a number of bottlenecks. Below we discuss how we try to deal with a number of these bottlenecks.

To take this course, students need to have a reasonably fast PC and a broadband internet connection (cable or ADSL) as the interactive exercises take very long to load through a normal telephone line. As not all students can be expected to have a computer and an internet connection at home or in their student apartments, students get the opportunity to work on the course in the computer room at the Law Faculty. A student survey revealed that the majority of the students indeed worked in the computer room. The speed of the network in the computer room varied so that students sometimes had to wait longer before they could do the exercises.

Seeing that the use of media (sound, images and video) greatly increased the loading time of the interactive units, we decided to restrict ourselves to images and some audio recordings. In this age of multimedia, this may have diminished the appeal of the exercises. On the other hand, there is no real need to heavily use audio and video as this course mainly focuses on reading and writing skills.

In addition to the technical requirements mentioned above, students need to install a small program or plug-in in order to be able to run the interactive exercises on their computers. Students receive

detailed, step-by-step instructions on the website which guide them through the installation process. In spite of these installation instructions, some students still encountered problems installing the plug-in. These were partly due to the versions of the operating systems installed (Microsoft Windows 95, 98, 2000, XP), specific requirements of unique computer configurations or the computer skills of the user. As it is not possible to offer manuals for every situation, we set up a temporary helpdesk via mail and phone to provide technical assistance. The plug-in is installed on the computers in the computer room so that students can work on the course, even if the installation on their own computers is unsuccessful.

Even though we have attempted to deliver an intuitive and user-friendly user interface, we cannot assume that all students have the computer knowledge and experience necessary to find their way in the virtual learning environment. Therefore, we provide online reference manuals in the form of 'Frequently Asked Questions' (e.g. with information on how to use the interactive exercises, the electronic forum,…). Below you find an example of a section in the FAQ tool. The FAQ is regularly updated and new questions and answers are added to the list on the basis of questions which students send to the helpdesk. (There is a similar reference tool with information about the course, covering a wide a range of topics normally found in a course brochure: e.g. registration and payment, structure, objectives, workload, timetable, assessment,…)

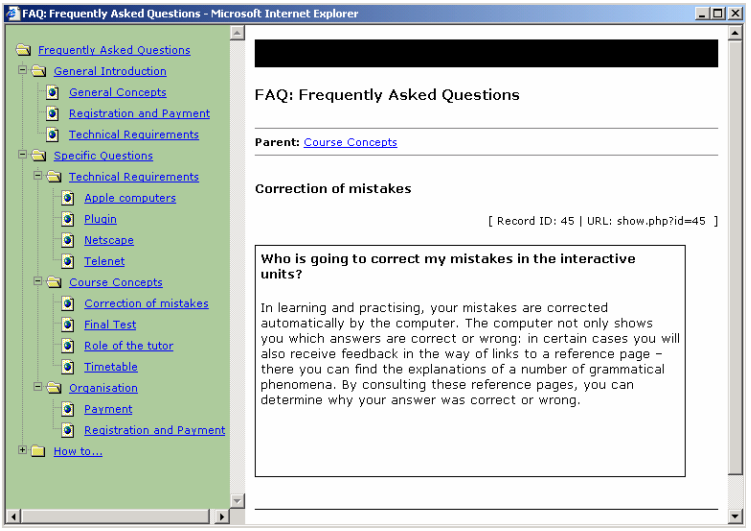

Fig. 6: The FAQ tool

Furthermore, an orientation session is organised before the start of the course in a computer room of the university. In this session, the tutor explains the concept and structure of the course and clarifies what is expected from the students. The students are shown how to use the learning environment. The students follow the tutor's actions on a large screen and try it out on the computer in front of them. They are also encouraged to explore and acquaint themselves with the different parts of the learning environment.

The need for alternative assessment

Apart from the 'hybrid' character of this course, it is also different from other courses offered at the language centre and from curricular courses of Law and Criminology in that it makes extensive use of alternative assessment practices. These practices can be characterised as formative:

Formative assessment is concerned with how judgements about the quality of student responses

> *(performance, pieces, or works) can be used to shape and improve the students' competence by short-circuiting the randomness and inefficiency of trial-and-error learning.* (Sadler, 1989)

Formative assessment thus aims to support learning. Although the university acknowledges the need for new forms of assessment, limited use is made of formative assessment practices in which students receive feedback in support of their learning. Largely due to a lack of resources and time constraints, formative assignments are rare. Most assessment in curricular courses is high stakes and summative: "summative assessment is used at the end of a unit of teaching to ascertain, summarise and communicate to the student and others what has been learned by the student".[5]

Summative practices attempt to measure student performance and outcomes at some point in time and are often used for certification purposes. They frequently serve as gatekeepers, determining who is allowed to proceed to a higher level in education. The aim of this type of assessment is usually not to improve learning as feedback is frequently provided when it is too late (when it no longer can support learning), that is, at the end of a course or after the exam. Partly as a result of the strong emphasis on summative assessment in higher education, students may be reluctant to do un-assessed [read: low-stakes, not summatively assessed] work. Students seem to have become customers with a very instrumental view on learning. Moreover, they have become "more strategic with their use of time and energies" and a result their efforts have been more orientated towards summative, high-stakes assessment practices. This is a process which has been underway since the 1970s:

> *In the early 1970's researchers on both sides of the Atlantic (….), were engaged in studies of student learning at prestigious universities. What they found was that, unexpectedly, what influenced students most was not the teaching but the assessment. Students described all aspects of their study – what they attended to, how much work they did and how they went about their studying – to be completely dominated by the way they perceived the demands of the assessment system.* (Gibbs & Simpson, 2003)

It has been shown that the type of assessment influences students' approaches to learning. Assessment appears to be central to learning. Seeing that most assessment at Ghent University takes the form of formal examinations, students' efforts are heavily concentrated on gaining marks and obtaining the qualification. Students orientate their work to the 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder, 1973). This student attitude is encouraged by market-orientated discourses found in higher education, presenting students as consumers. This development is in sharp contrast to constructivist ideals.

> *It is widely recognised that the main goal of professional higher education is to help students to develop in to 'reflective practitioners' who are able to reflect critically upon their own professional practice.* (Sluijsmans et al, 1999)

In their professional careers, students will have to function as self-directed learners who are prepared to engage in a process of lifelong learning in which they frequently will have to critically reflect on their own performance to assess themselves. Higher education needs to deliver competent individuals who are ready for this task. In many cases, however, this need is not satisfied. University education remains under the spell of summative assessment and grades (Black, 2001). The need for change is frequently expressed in the literature on assessment.

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[5] Definition taken from the IBA project website.
(http://www.onlineassessment.nu/onlineas_webb/materials/Work_bibl/wordlist031202.pdf)

> *The need for lifelong learning in modern society will increase […] as it becomes more recognised that the acquisition of knowledge and skills cannot be restricted to the phase of initial education; rather, it has to be a process continuing throughout one's entire working life. Traditional testing methods do not fit such goals as lifelong learning, reflective thinking, being critical, evaluating oneself and problem solving […].* (Sluijsmans et al, 1999)

Observing that assessment affects students' view on learning, formative assessment also requires a different approach to learning. Formative assessment is believed to help students become more autonomous and self-directed learners as they learn how to use feedback to improve their performance. However, students will need time to familiarise themselves with this innovative way of learning. Similarly, teachers need time to learn how they can adequately support the students.

Alternative assessment in English for Law and Criminology Students

English for Law and Criminology Students (ELCS) attempts to use formative assessment and to integrate assessment into the learning process as a tool in support of learning. It is possible to deviate from traditional assessment practices in higher education as ELCS is an optional course offered alongside the Law and Criminology programmes. In other words, the course result has no direct impact on students' curricular work or on their further academic career.

During this course, no use is made of formal graded tests to measure the learner's performance, the only exception being the final test. Assignments are generally not graded by the tutor as grades seem to be strongly linked to summative assessment in many students' minds.

> *In any area of the curriculum where a grade or score assigned by a teacher constitutes a one-way cipher for students, attention is diverted away from fundamental judgements and the criteria for making them. A grade therefore may actually be counterproductive for formative purposes.* (Sadler, 1989)

Tara observed the following in his attempts to use self-assessment:

> *withholding the mark until feedback has been assimilated helps to demonstrate to students that tutors attach greater importance to learning and to the process of learning than to emphasising the result. The product is also important, but as evidence of learning and not just for accreditation.* (Tara, 2002)

Students are asked to assess themselves or are assessed by their peers and tutor who provide supportive qualitative feedback. As these assessment practices differ from common university practice, they are (initially) perceived by many students as unusual and strange. Learners commonly resent change because it often presents them with a new, unknown situation in which the risk of failure appears to be high (Meus, 2003). Furthermore, the assessment practices applied are not easily recognisable as assessment by learners used to traditional assessment. Learners are therefore instructed in how to cope with alternative assessment and, more importantly, how to gain from it. Assessment becomes part of the overall learning process: students have to learn how to learn from assessment and how to assess themselves and each other independently without any direct tutor involvement.

Self-assessment and peer assessment

The main alternative assessment forms in this course are self- and peer assessment. Below we will discuss in which way these assessment forms are applied in ELCS.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment can be defined as follows:

> *Self-assessment refers to the involvement of learners in making judgements about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning. (…) Self-assessment is not a new technique, but a way of increasing the role of students as active participants in their own learning (…), and is mostly used for formative assessment in order to foster reflection on one's own learning processes and results.* (Sluijsmans et al, 1999)

In this course, self-assessment has a clear formative purpose, that is, it serves as a tool for learning. We apply the following three self-assessment instruments: interactive self-assessment exercises, Statements of Relevance and checklists. These instruments will be discussed below.

Interactive self-assessment exercises

As explained earlier, the interactive units are not merely intended as self-tests in which the students can test whether they have understood and assimilated what is taught and learnt in class. In fact, a significant part of the learning process has to take place online as students go through the units. In the units, students are invited to adopt and active approach to learning.

For this assessment activity, we defined the following aims and objectives:

(1) Students learn to become more autonomous and self-directed learners who are less dependent on tutor feedback. They learn to take more responsibility for their learning process.

(2) In a low-stakes setting, students are more focused on personal improvement and less on obtaining good grades.

(3) Students receive more individual feedback.

(4) Interactive exercises can reduce the assessment burden of the tutor.

In the units, students are presented with various exercise formats which all involve a certain type of interactivity. For example, in the following exercise, students have to complete an excerpt from a paper on media made crime by selecting verbs from a list and typing in the correct form (tense). When they have filled in a gap, they can check their answer themselves by pressing enter.

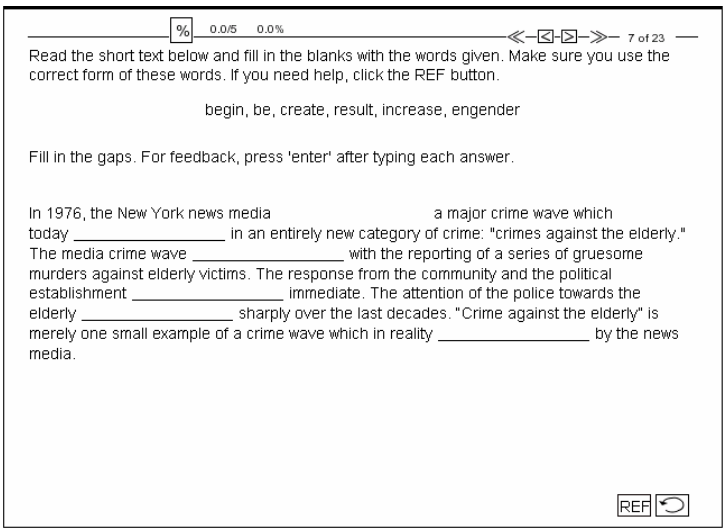


Fig. 7: A gap-fill exercise

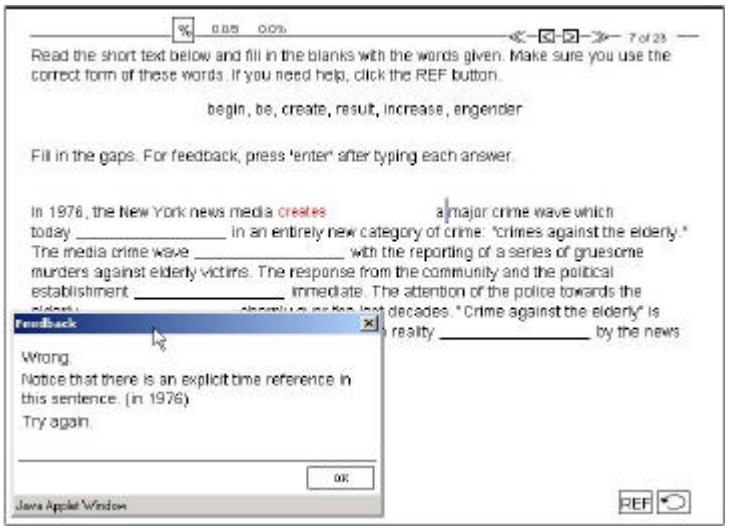


Fig. 8: Feedback in a gap-fill exercise

After a first try, the students receive feedback which helps them to correct their own mistake. In this case, the student's attention is drawn to an explicit past time reference in the sentence. On the basis of this information and what he/she has learnt so far, the student should be able to figure out that a past simple tense should be used. If a student gives a wrong answer in the second try, the correct answer appears automatically in the gap.

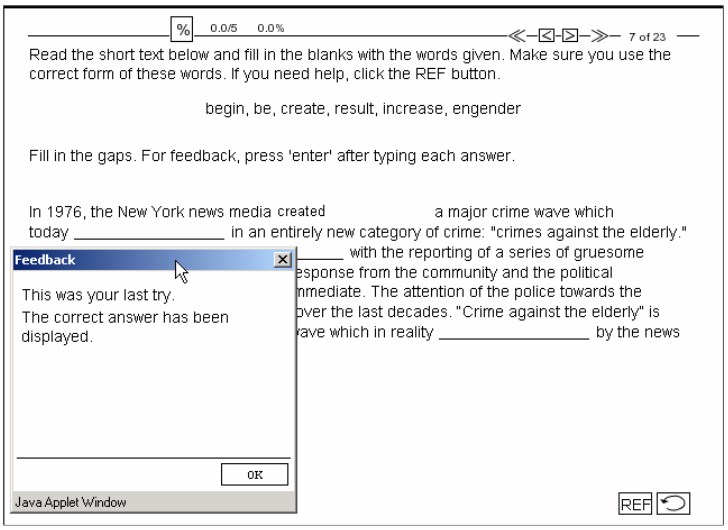


Fig. 9: Feedback in a gap-fill exercise (b)

To enable students to discover what was wrong about their answer, a link has been provided to a relevant section of an online grammar. The student can access this information by clicking on "REF". This information can be read online but can also be printed as many people do not like to read longer texts on the screen, especially when they need to scroll down. Furthermore, students can use this printed information for later reference and can consult it when they are not online.

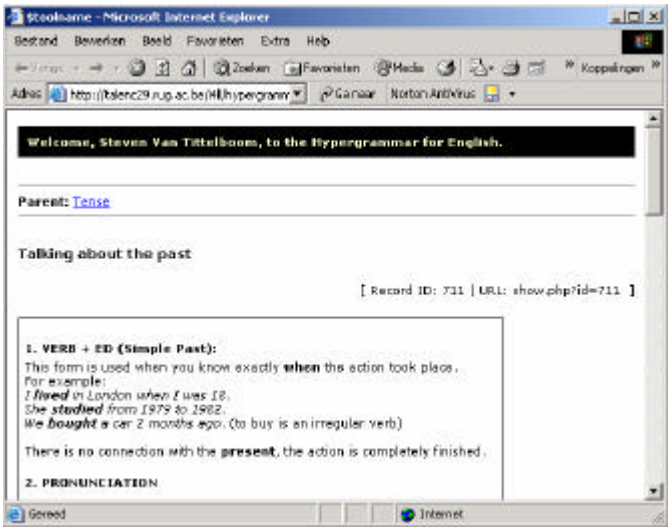


Fig. 10: Reference material

To help students to assess their own performance, a score indication is shown at the top of the screen. This score is not stored in a database (partly due to technical limitations), nor used for summative assessment. The score value is set by the developer. The actual score which a student receives depends on the number of tries used. It is our experience that students like scores as a motivational instrument.

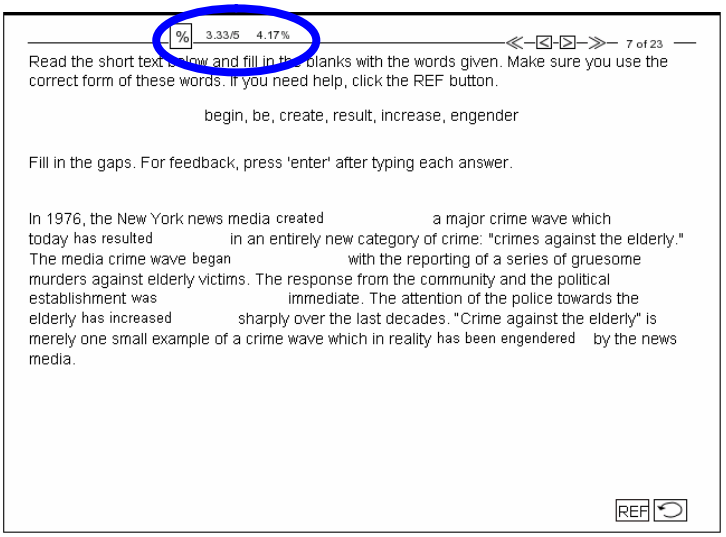


Fig. 11: Scoring

Students have the possibility to reset the exercise and can try the exercise again. On the last screen of a unit, students receive an indication of their total score. If they are not happy with their performance, students can reset the entire unit and start again. If they feel that they have assimilated the information, they may proceed with the practising unit.

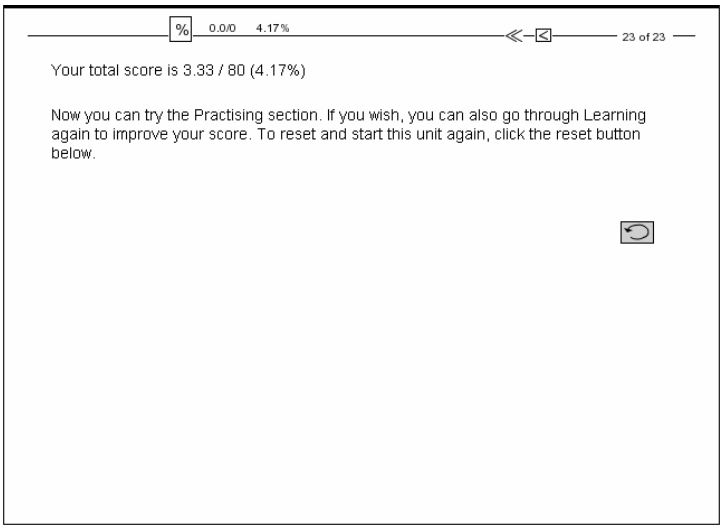


Fig. 12: Score report

Statements of Relevance and checklists

The Statements of Relevance are a second self-assessment instrument. To help students manage their own learning process, they are asked to keep a kind of learner's log and reflect about their own learning process in short weekly statements of about 100 words. This activity is both intended as an exercise in reflective learning and in free writing through which students can acquire more fluency in writing English. The statements have to be posted in the personal space in the course forum. Only the individual student and the tutor have access to the statements. Moreover, the statements are personal and are not intended as messages addressed to the tutor.

As we assume that this type of assessment is still new to many students, they are trained in reflecting about their own learning. To help them get started, they are presented with a number of

questions to prompt reflection. These questions are repeated throughout the course by the tutors so as to keep the students on track. However, students are entirely free to explore and investigate other topics as long as these pertain directly to their own learning experience. Some examples of questions which are given as prompts:

- ? Which goals have I set myself?
- ? What have I learnt this week? (knowledge, skills, strategies)
- ? How will I benefit from what I have learnt?
- ? Did I encounter any difficulties?
- ? How did I try to overcome these difficulties? Did I succeed or not?
- ? What are my strengths and weaknesses in English? How can I enhance my weak points?
- ? Have I made any progress?
- ? How do I learn a language? Does this tell me anything about my learning style?
- ? Have I learnt anything from the discussions in the forum?
- ? How do I cope with this new, independent form of learning in a new learning environment?

During the first class session, students are provided with some 'good' examples of Statements of Relevance which are selected from what students have submitted so far. This is not done to impose limitations on what students should or should not write but to show them that they need to move beyond trivial, chronological accounts (e.g. "I went to the computer room and accessed the learning environment. I had some problems logging in to the system as I couldn't remember my password at first. I managed to do the first unit on paraphrasing. It was not too difficult. Then I entered some words in my online glossary…"). Moreover, it signals to the students that their messages are actually being read by the tutor, which may encourage.

Examples of Statements of Relevance:

1. The beginning of a new course is always exciting. I was curious to find out how things would be going in such an internet-based language course. After a few technical problems, I could finally get started. Going through the first vocabulary unit and solving the exercises was a pleasant learning experience. What I found particularly interesting is that at the end of a learning or practising unit you get the results (in percentages). I experienced it as a motivating factor. It is a good way of giving feedback in an e-course.

I already look forward to starting the discussion assignment, although I think it will not be easy to have discussions through e-mail and not in a face-to-face conversation. Expressing your opinion using only words and not knowing right away whether everyone understands what you are trying to say, can lead to some difficulties.

2. Although the texts which we had to read this week did not contain too many difficult words, the unit about skimming and scanning was not easy at all. What I learned today, was the meaning of signpost words such as: hence, let us consider now,... I realise now that those (often very little) words are very important to understand the general ideas presented in a text. I learnt to analyse their functions. In other words, I realised how they can help to structure a sentence, paragraph or text. I did both tasks twice. Obviously, my score was better the second time. By repeating those exercises, I was able to pay attention to details I had not seen the first time.

3. After finishing module 1, I am much more conscious of what I do when I read texts. To get a better understanding of a text, I often highlight or mark certain important passages.

Teacher intervention during this task is minimal. Tutors only occasionally reply to statements of relevance for motivational purposes and in order to guide students if they stray too far from the purpose of this task. We observed that more interventions were necessary during the first part of the course as students need to get used to the new learning environment and this new mode of learning. Even when students were doing fine, the tutor posted some words of encouragement in order to show them that their work is being appreciated. These interventions often took the form of very short motivating statements such as "You are doing OK" or "You have done well so far. It is good

that you realise the importance of reading techniques such as skimming and scanning". As the course progressed, tutors limited their feedback to general comments on the tasks, mostly given during the class sessions. This is necessary because of time constraints but tutors also observed certain patterns in the difficulties students experienced with this task. For example, many students had difficulties moving beyond trivial descriptions of their experiences. It was thus possible to give feedback directed at the group.

We noticed that as the course progressed more students managed to gain insight into their learning process and reflect about their writing and reading strategies, their level of English, their strengths and weaknesses but also about more general issues such as learning strategies and peer assessment. Below you find some statements revealing 'deeper' thinking.

Examples of SoR:

1. This week I have practised and learned about degrees of certainty. This lesson was not so hard and I was happy with my nice score on the practising part. I have discovered that I can learn much better when I take notes while I'm scrolling the learning unit. It seems that I'm not able to memorize the lessons by just doing the computer tasks. I have to write things down to do so.

2. When I read an English book, most of the time I try to feel intuitively what the meaning of some words may be. This first lesson has made me read English in a more active way. I have reflected and looked up more words than I normally do. The words I have entered in the dictionary are picked from an interesting theoretical book called 'Crime and modernity'. Theoretical books are often quite difficult and making a list of confusing words makes the task less hard. So the learning unit was really fun. The practising unit, on the other hand, was a bit shocking. I discovered how much I didn't know and realised that there is still much to learn.

Partly as a separate task and partly in support of the Statement of Relevance task, students are at set times provided with checklists with "I can" statements to guide their self-assessment and to help them reflect about their own learning experience and the language skills and strategies they apply to accomplish tasks. These checklists help students to deepen their understanding of their own language competence. Students read statements and to decide whether they apply to their learning. This task prepares students for further self-directed learning which is likely to become a more important mode of learning in the future. The checklists have been mainly derived from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the European Language Portfolio. The Common European Framework provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of language learning, for defining course objectives and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. It is increasingly being used as the basis for the reform of national curricula. The European Language Portfolio[6] assists learners in assessing their own language knowledge and reflecting on their learning. Moreover, it helps learners to document their skills and language competence. Below you find an example of a checklist with "I can" statements adapted from self-assessment checklists from the European Language Portfolio.

'Can do' Checklist	YES	NO
Writing		
1. I can formulate a written personal opinion.	☐	☐
2. I can take notes.	☐	☐

[6] See: http://www.languageportfolio.ch/

3. I can write summaries of articles on criminology related topics.	☐	☐
4. I can write about topics within my field of interest in an easily comprehensible and generally correct way.	☐	☐
5. I have a relatively large vocabulary which enables me to write about topics within my field of interest in a detailed way.	☐	☐

We defined the following aims and objectives for the statement of relevance task and the checklist activity:

(1) Statements of Relevance foster self-directed learning and learner autonomy. Students are required to assess their own performance and to adjust their performance accordingly. This means that they need to take more responsibility for their own learning process. They cannot simply rely on a tutor who gives expert feedback on their work and who shows them how to improve their performance. Students learn that they can learn from their internal evaluations. This task also prepares students for further self-directed learning which they will need to undertake during their further academic and professional careers. In the future Europe there will be a high demand for autonomous, responsible learners.

(2) As the statements are a form of low-stakes assessment, the emphasis is on personal development in the students' further academic and professional careers and not on measurement of learning. The statements are a tool in support of learning.

(3) The statements are an exercise in reflective learning which can help students to gain a better understanding of their abilities, skills, strengths and weaknesses and their learning style.

(4) As the students have to assess themselves at the end of every course week, assessment becomes an integral part of the learning process. It is not longer something which comes at the end of the course and is too late to support learning.

(5) Self-assessment checklists help students to assess themselves and to identify their strengths and weaknesses.

(6) Self-assessment checklists help students to focus their efforts on what needs improvement.

Peer assessment

In addition to assessing their own work and performance, students are invited to assess each other's work in a number of peer assessment activities. We adopt the following definition of peer assessment:

> *Peer assessment engages students in making judgements about the work or the performance of other students. At one end of the spectrum, it could involve them giving feedback of a qualitative nature or, at the other, it might involve them in marking.* (Sluijsmans et al, 1999)

In this course, students are not asked to mark each other's work. The main purpose of peer assessment is to encourage students to give each other supportive feedback. Instead of overly relying on the feedback of the tutor, students need to realise that they can learn from each other and

that they can assist each other in the process towards greater language competence. Hence, peer assessment is integrated into the learning process.

Peer assessment is mainly used in activities in the electronic discussion forum. Most activities are carried out in small groups of 5-8 students. The students receive detailed information about what is expected from them and what the aims are of the activity. They are instructed to carry out a task and to post their work in the forum. Afterwards they have to return to the forum to read the messages which their group members have posted. In addition, students are required to reply to at least one message and to assess the work done by a group member. In the interactive units of module 2, students learn about and practise the skills of paraphrasing and summarising. After they have finished these units, students are asked to write a summary of 200-300 words of a longer article in preparation of a later writing assignment in which they have to write their own text in response to this article. When they have finished their first draft, they have to post their text in their group space in the forum. Next they have to read the drafts posted by their group members. They are asked to comment on at least one of the summaries, drawing on what they have learnt in the learning and practising units on summarising and paraphrasing. We also encourage students to act as each other's editors and proofreaders correcting language mistakes. We observed that most students posted their draft but few students actually engaged in peer assessment. The units and reference materials should have provided them with sufficient knowledge to assess the texts. The reasons for the poor response to this assessment activity will be discussed in the section on course assessment. Below are some examples of peer assessment:

1. I congratulate you with your summary. Your text gives a correct idea of the full article. The only correction I could add is the fact that it is a long text. I know it contains just 299 words (as you can see I have checked it!). My view on a summary is that it is not important to give all details but only a correct description of the main points of the article.

2. The text gives a good summary of this matter. Only a few remarks:

- the text should contain 200-300 words. Your text is too long.
- "prosponed": don't you mean "postponed"?

Apart from these formal considerations one thing should be said concerning the content of your text:

Your introduction begins with "This text is about the use of ill-treatement and torture in Brazil". This is true, but only partially: the text is about all kinds of human rights violations in Brazil. You mention indeed other kinds of violations in the rest of your text but, in my opinion, an introduction has to provide a general overview of what follows. I think you should include all the main items in your introduction. For instance you could write:

"This text is about human rights violations in Brazil." Afterwards you can specify what this involves exactly.

3. For a start, you could write I with a capital letter.

4. OK, other remarks are welcome. Consider it done next time.

In view of what they have learnt from reading their group member's summaries and the comments on their work, students have to write a revised draft which is to be submitted by a certain date. This text is then assessed by the tutor.
Instead of directly receiving tutor feedback, students are thus first encouraged to adopt a more active approach towards their own and their group members' work. If the tutor provides the feedback immediately, students probably will not pay much attention to it. In this task, students need to try to discover what is good or bad about each other's work. By assessing each other, students gain a deeper understanding of the skill of summary writing so that they can revise their own draft. Moreover, there is a strong relationship between self- and peer-assessment. By assessing each other, students can also gain more insight into their own performance: "Peer assessment can be

seen as a part of the self-assessment process and serves to inform self-assessment. The contribution of other students can be a very useful input into the self-assessment process" (Sluijsmans et al, 1999). The following statement of relevance illustrates that students can learn something about themselves by assessing other people's work:

> Rewriting the Brazil summary was a good exercise for me. You really have to think about what you are writing, because you have to make a coherent whole. While I was reading the summaries of the others, I noticed that I forgot to write an introduction at the beginning of my summary of the text on Brazil. That was a mistake, because the summary will be much clearer with a (good) introduction. The work I have to do for my school is overwhelming so I could not spend much time on this English course.

Another peer assessment activity is the common mistakes task in class. On the basis of the messages in the forum and the language mistakes in these messages, the tutors compile lists of frequently made mistakes. The names of the authors are omitted. In the class sessions, students are then divided into groups. Each group receives a number of sentences which they have to correct. To help the students, mistakes are classified into 5 categories: grammar, style, choice of words, word forms, and spelling. In brackets the students find which type of mistake they are supposed to spot and correct. Students have to identify the mistake, propose a correction and explain why a mistake was a mistake. In a more controlled way, students are thus asked to assess each other's work and to provide peer feedback. At the end of a session, the students are asked to present their corrections to the other groups. These corrections are then assessed by the other students. Additional tutor feedback is provided where necessary. Students learn to pay close attention to what they or their fellow students have written, to critically reflect about it and to propose corrections. Moreover, this task helps students to overcome their uncertainty and reservations about having to assess each other's work. This task invites students to cross the threshold of peer assessment. The tutor still plays a highly visible part in this activity, acting as an expert correcting the student's answers if necessary. This activity is thus a compromise between student-centred and traditional teacher-driven education as a more active approach is required from the learner while the teacher can intervene when necessary. Towards the end of the course, this task is presented as a forum activity. Each student has to correct 5 mistakes and provide an explanation. This correction has to be posted in the course space. Afterwards, students are required to react to at least one other student with either one or more wrong corrections or wrong explanations and propose an alternative. Students are invited to comment on some of the comments so as to start one or more discussions. At the end of the activity, the tutors posts an evaluation of this peer assessment activity:

> Dear all,
>
> Thanks for all your contributions so far. Not everyone has reacted yet, but I hope the others will do so before Module 5 begins next week.
>
> On the whole your corrections were very good. We thought the choice of sentences and the explanations of Joke De Vos were particularly good, though we had some misgivings about one or 2 reactions she made. Not all of you gave explanations (rules) for their corrections. Were the instructions unclear?
>
> Here are some of our reactions:
>
> Everyone spotted the problems about 'Islamitic' and 'racistic', but some of the corrections were better than others. The problem is that it is a bit awkward to speak of Islamic people.
> It is probably better just to refer to them as Muslims.
>
> The 'Women are not allowed to become priests' confused several students. The major mistake was easy to see, but only Astrid Thienpont realised 'priests' should preferably be in the plural (not pluriel!!! as some wrote) because 'women' is too. You could also say to 'become a priest', but it is less correct here.

'If I had not agreed with you, I would have been surprised.' This sentence created some confusion too. I think Fanny De Bruyne wrote 'If I was not able to agree with you, it would be ...'
All in all, I would go for 'It would have been very surprising If I hadn't agreed with you' (implication: but I did, so 3rd conditional)
But it is good that the sentence created a lot of interaction.

'I think this must change also' was another problem sentence. The easiest solution was to replace 'also' with 'too' or, as Astrid pointed out, 'This should change as well'. You can replace should with 'must', but there is no need to here in my opinion. 'I think this must also change' is acceptable as well.
(…)

We defined the following aims and objectives for the peer assessment activities:

(1) Students construct knowledge through negotiation.

(2) Students are faced with different views and perspectives on an issue and can learn from this.

(3) Peer-assessment is an integral and meaningful part of the course.

(4) Students feel that their messages are read, receive direct feedback on their work and may be stimulated by this.

(5) Peer-assessment can reduce the assessment burden of the tutor.

Traditional assessment

More traditional forms of assessment of learning, such as an end-of-course test, are also included in this course so as not to alienate the learners and to lower the resistance to change and innovation. Traditional assessment is thus applied to downplay the newness of this course, seeing that all other language courses offered at the centre end with a final test. At the beginning of the course, students are told that 60% of their course result is based on continuous assessment. Quantitative and qualitative criteria are applied to mark the student's performance (e.g. the number of messages posted in the forum, the quality of the messages, whether students have carried out the statement of relevance task as instructed, whether students have carried out the different parts of the final assignment as instructed, the quality of the final assignment, the quality of the final statement of relevance,…). These criteria are also communicated to the students.

At the end of the course, a final test is organised in which students can earn 40% of their final result. This test mainly assesses the students' knowledge of grammar (conditional sentences, modal verbs, passive structures), vocabulary and expressions practised in the course. There is also a reading comprehension task testing students' understanding of structure and content. This end-of-course test is organised as a traditional pen-and-paper test to avoid security issues and to lower the technical threshold for the students. Moreover, in the test students are also required to engage in extended reading. It has been found that many people dislike reading longer texts on a computer screen. It can put additional strain on students.

In addition, at the end of the course students have to submit written assignments which are marked by the tutor. Students who pass the course are entitled to a certificate. Summative assessment is thus mainly used for certification and accreditation purposes.

Feedback: constructing knowledge and negotiating meaning

It is relevant to focus on the aspect of feedback as it is a crucial in formative assessment. We cannot engage in any meaningful discussion of the feedback practices in English for Law and Criminology students without first considering the concept of feedback and how it is put into practice. In this section we will discuss the concept of feedback and briefly deal with a number of important feedback-related issues as found in the literature on feedback and CALL and TELL. Feedback is defined by the behaviourist scientist Ramprasad (referring to electrical control systems) as:

> *information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way.* (Ramprasad, 1983)

Learning is believed not to be possible without any form of feedback. Without information about their performance, learners would not be able to alter and adjust their performance and bridge the gap between actual performance and the standard; hence, there would be no learning: "action without feedback is completely unproductive for a learner" (Laurillard, 1993).

In the literature we can also find broader definitions of feedback: [feedback is] "any information that is provided to the performer of any action about that performance" (Black and Wiliam, 1998). There are different views on what constitutes (effective) feedback. According to behaviourists, feedback is information provided by the expert teacher in response to a learner action. By considering this information, learners can confirm or reject their hypotheses. In a behaviourist learning environment, teachers mainly provide learners with information on success or failure indicating that there is a difference between learner performance and the standard. However, no advice is given on how learners may improve their performance. Constructivism, which is currently the most popular learning paradigm at institutes of higher education, allows for a broader view on feedback as information which supports the learning process. The paradigm shift towards constructivism also involved a shift from summative to formative assessment. Instead of measuring student's performance, assessment and feedback should stimulate and direct action to improve performance (Sadler, 1989). Not only the teacher can provide feedback but also other learners (peers) or the learners themselves. Ultimately, feedback should help learners learn how they can assess their own performance. As the cognitivist Bruner stated:

> *the tutor must correct a learner in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the learner to take over the correcting function himself, otherwise the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent on the continual presence of the teacher.* (Bruner, 1966)

In the literature, we can find many typologies of feedback. Below we list four types or levels of feedback which are to a greater or lesser extent catered for in CALL and TELL software:

a) Indicating whether the learner's action was successful or not. This type of feedback often takes the form of "yes"/ "right" and "no"/"wrong" responses to learner actions. This is sometimes called adequacy feedback or stating feedback.

b) Providing the right answer without any further explanation. This is often referred to as correcting feedback. The learner receives information on the difference between their actual performance and the standard.

c) Explanation of why the right answer is correct or desirable: providing principles or rules or indicating which principle or rule was broken (You never…/You didn't…).

d) Explanation of what was wrong about the learner's performance and why it was wrong.

The first two types are often used in CALL and TELL software as they can be programmed with little effort and relative ease. The last two types can be labelled explanatory feedback. Only the last type cannot always be easily automated as it is learner-dependent and related to the learner's prior knowledge (Draper, 1999).

Diana Laurillard (1996) draws attention to the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic feedback. Intrinsic feedback refers to information which is "a necessary consequence of the action", reactions or responses which follow naturally from the learner's action in a particular situation and which show that the learner's action and his language were effective.

> *This means it must be clear to a student that what they have done is correct/incorrect, and why, and if incorrect it should be clear what kind of mistake they have made, in the sense that the feedback gives them an idea of how to give a better answer.* (Laurillard, 1996)

Extrinsic feedback, on the other hand, is feedback at a meta-level which is external to the learner's action. It takes the form of messages such as "Correct. Well done." or "Incorrect. Please try again" which would not be used in a natural language situation. Laurillard (1996) shows a strong preference for feedback of the intrinsic type:

> *The advantage of intrinsic feedback is that it defines a model for the student to aim for, and shows them how close their action came to producing it, thus making it possible for the student to judge how well they did, and what to do to improve their action. Intrinsic feedback of this kind is more motivating than extrinsic, because you can see the benefit the right answer gives you, the communicative value of the right answer.* (Laurillard, 1996)

However, it is often difficult to provide intrinsic feedback in CALL programs.

Timing is another important aspect in considering feedback. It is often claimed that feedback should be timely in order to be effective. What is a suitable moment for presenting feedback? Feedback can be immediate when it immediately follows the action of the learner, for example providing the right answer and explaining why it is the right answer. Delayed feedback, in contrast, does not immediately follow the learner action. It may be delayed by a few minutes, hours, days, weeks. It has been shown that delayed feedback can be beneficial to students in certain circumstances. It may for example stimulate student thought as it can encourage students to consider or reconsider their own actions. It invites them to try to correct their answer themselves. (Draper, 1999)

Many authors distinguish between generic and individualised feedback. Most programs can only offer generic feedback which has been programmed by the developer. Individualised feedback refers to information which meets the needs of particular students. Although there have been experiments in this area, there are still few programs which can handle random learner input (Pujolà, 2001). It is noted that individual feedback remains an important aim in CALL but that also more general feedback contributes to learning.

> *[…] the issue at stake here […] is not so much an ideally tailored feedback message, but rather the impact of various kinds of feedback on the students' learning process […] generically stated*

> *explanations may not meet the needs of each particular student. Nevertheless, they may have a positive influence on students' reasoning process and aggregately work to help them with their questions.* (Brandl, 1995)

In the literature on CALL, we also find a distinction between self-discovery and program disclosure of feedback (Pujolà, 2001). This refers to the options which a program offers in catering to different learning styles and approaches of self-assessment: some learners prefer to discover the correct answer themselves, whereas others prefer explicit explanations. CALL programs differ in the extent to which they implement different types of feedback so that they can be adapted to different types of learners.

Finally, certain researchers draw attention to the length of the error message: "Previous studies have found that lengthy error messages tend to distract the student from the task" (Heift, 2001).

Feedback in English for Law and Criminology Students

In English for Law and Criminology Students various feedback forms are applied which can be linked to the categories and feedback types mentioned above. In what follows, we mainly focus on formative feedback forms in the virtual learning environment.

Feedback in the interactive units

In the interactive units (learning and practising), the tutor cannot intervene or provide feedback in person. The students go through the exercises and receive feedback messages, which have been programmed. In the learning units, a lot of immediate feedback is provided during the exercise. The right answer is typically not revealed right away. In most cases, the student receives a number of tries to answer the question correctly. Feedback messages are displayed in a pop-up. Depending on the objective of an exercise, feedback ranges from stating "correct/wrong" and an indication of the number of tries left or the right answer to an explanation of why the right answer is correct or an explanation of what was wrong about the student's answer. In each case, the right answer is provided when students have used up all their tries. In addition to these messages, there are score indications. These scores are not stored and are not linked to their course result. They are merely provided to motivate the students. Laurillard (1996) noted in this respect that some students only find scoring motivating if it is linked to their grade in some way.

The feedback mechanics in the units encourage the students to adopt a thoughtful approach to the exercises and to correct their mistakes on the basis of, for example, an explanation of what is wrong about their response. The following examples will make this clear.

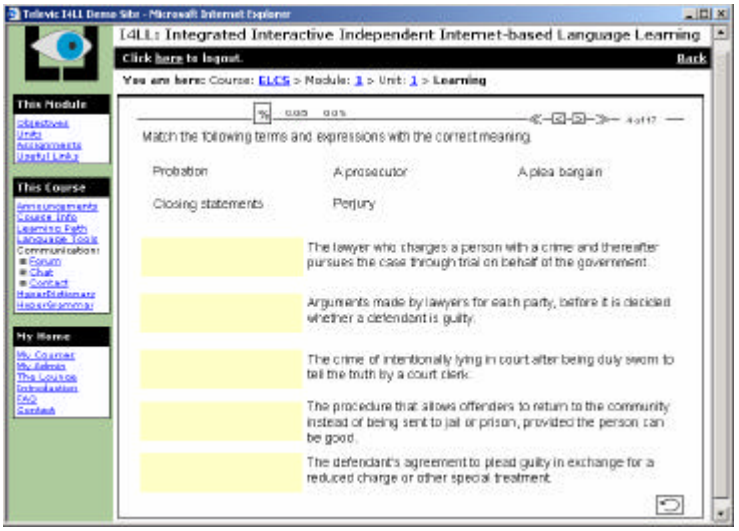


Fig. 13: A matching exercise

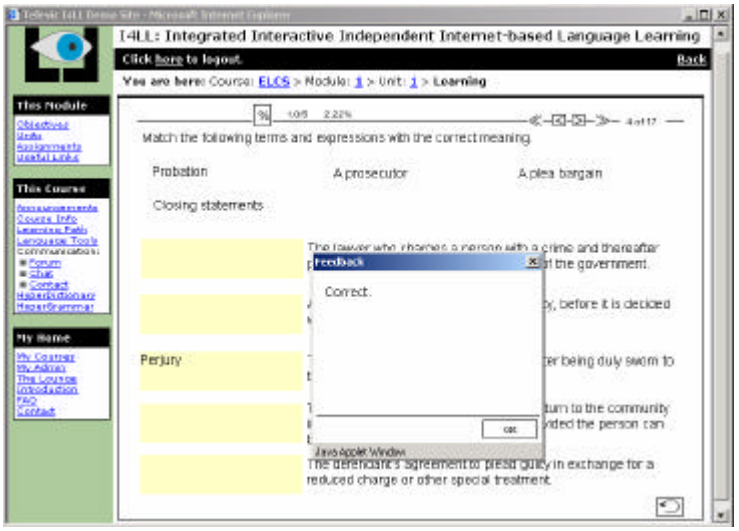


Fig. 14: Feedback (a)

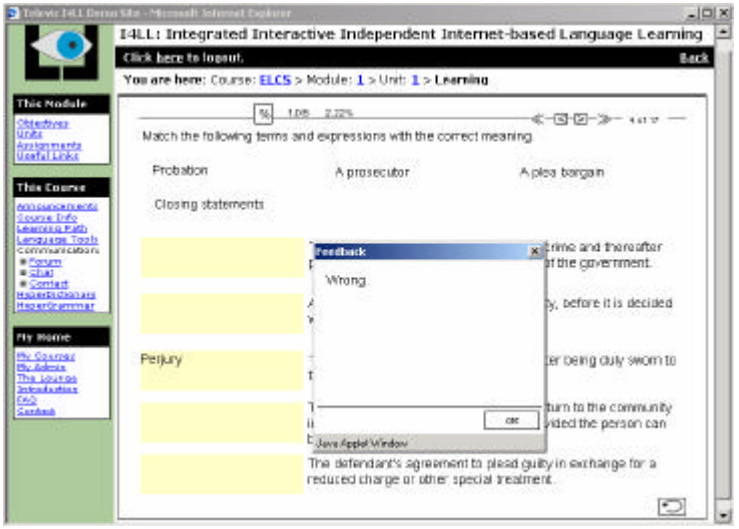


Fig. 15: Feedback (b)

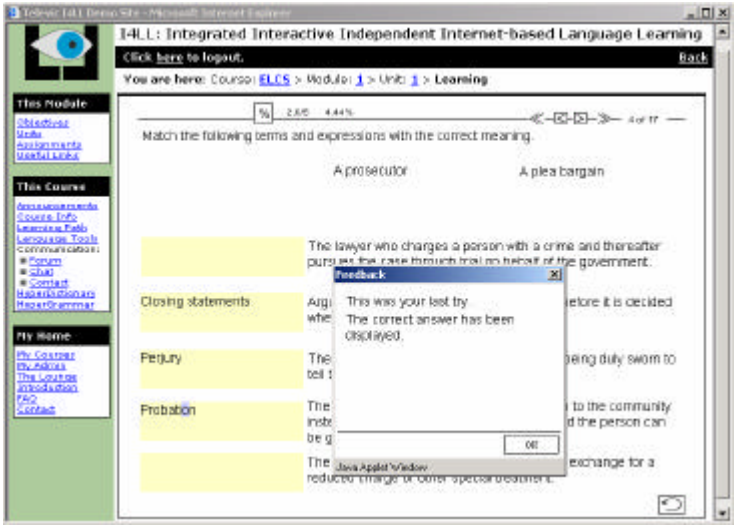


Fig. 16: Feedback (c)

Figures 13 to 16 show an example of a word building exercise in which student match terms listed on top with the correct definition by dragging the terms to the yellow fields. There receive adequacy feedback. No further explanations are provided. Students try to find the correct answer on the basis of the definition. They work by a process of elimination. The exercise gets easier as options are narrowed down. The correct answer is displayed when the student has used up his/her tries. In Figure 14, the student has matched the term "perjury" with the correct definition. In Figure 15, the student has matched the term "probation" with the wrong definition. In Figure 16, the student has used up his tries for the term "probation". The correct answer is displayed.

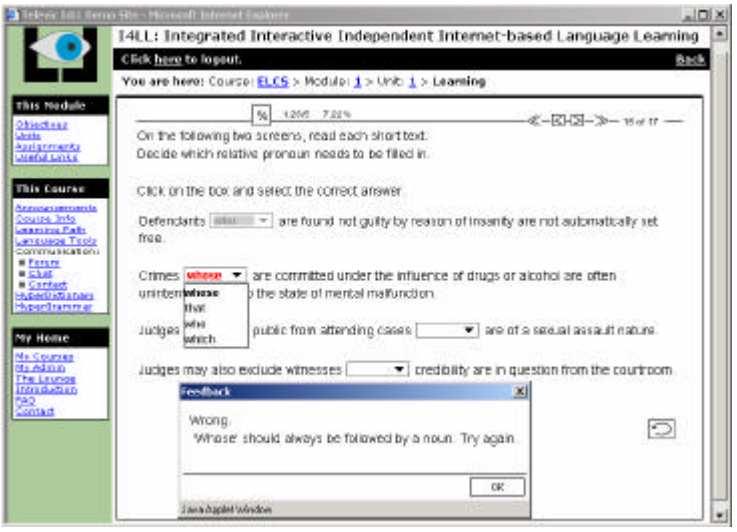


Fig. 17: Explanatory feedback

Figures 17 and 18 show a grammar exercise, in which feedback messages provide both explanations of why a wrong answer was wrong and a correct answer correct. When the student has used up his/her tries, the correct answer is displayed.

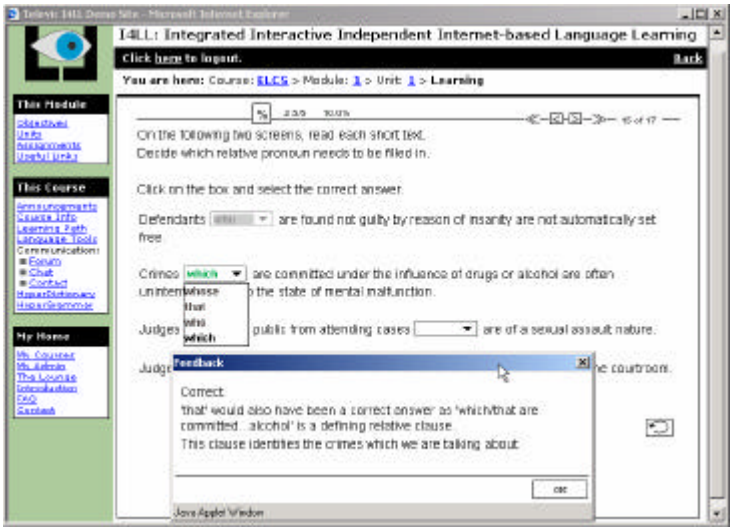


Fig. 18: Explanatory feedback

Apart from these feedback messages, students are in many exercises encouraged to autonomously

find an answer to the exercises using information presented earlier on in the unit or in the reference material which can be directly accessed via REF buttons on certain screens (see figures 9 and 10).

In the learning units, students typically receive feedback after each answer (e.g. each gap in a gap-fill exercise). In the practising units, less instant feedback is given as students are expected to manage more on their own. They still receive feedback messages at the end of the exercise (after filling in all gaps in a gap-fill exercise) However, feedback is less detailed. In most cases it is limited to "success/failure messages" and a presentation of the correct answers (after all tries have been used up). This is because the emphasis in the practising units is on putting what has been learnt into practice. Longer explanatory feedback messages would only serve to distract the students. Figures 19 and 20 illustrate feedback in a practising unit.

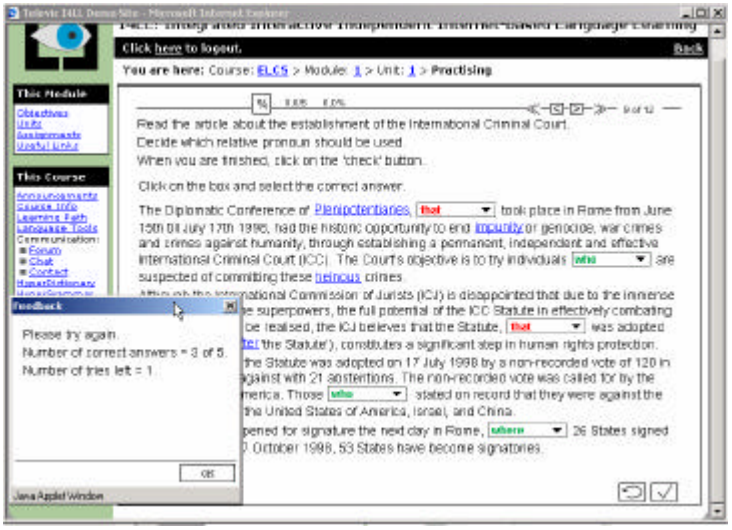


Fig. 19: Feedback in a practising unit

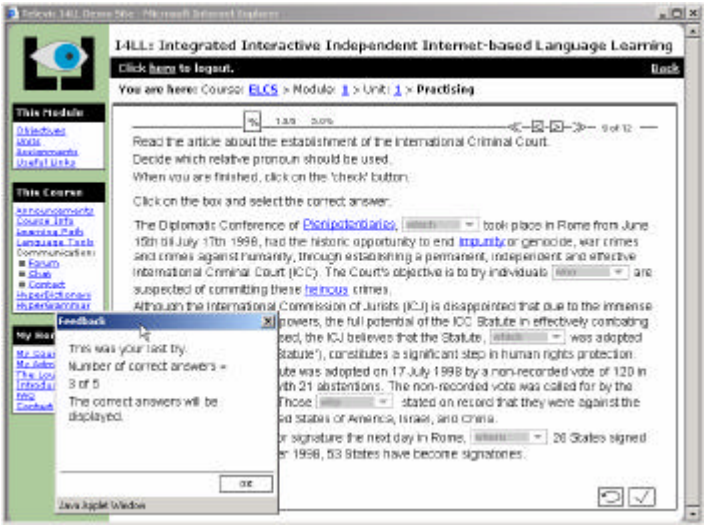


Fig. 20: Feedback in a practising unit (b)

Even though some researchers point to the motivating effect of purely supportive feedback messages ("Excellent"/"Well done"/etc.), most studies show that "praise, like other cues which draw attention to self-esteem and away from the task, generally has a negative effect" (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Minimal use has been made of these type of messages.

It is generally more straightforward to programme feedback in drill-and-practice activities in which there are only a limited number of correct answers. In a writing course, students are however also required to perform more free format tasks such as writing tasks or essay questions, in which it is difficult or virtually impossible to predict what answer the student is going to give. In these cases, customised explanatory (individualised) feedback is not possible. Explanations about what was wrong about the learner's performance and why can thus not be given directly. In the writing tasks in the units, we provide a model answer, i.e. a text which is an adequate response to a given question, allowing students to compare their answers with the model so that they can assess the quality of their own work. It needs to be stressed that most of the open tasks are carried out in the electronic forum, where feedback is given by peers and the tutor.

Feedback in the forum and in the class sessions

In the assignments in the forum, students are encouraged to assess each other's work and to provide feedback (see the section on peer assessment). We have noted before that within a constructivist framework feedback is not the exclusive territory of the tutor; peer feedback can also contribute to learning. The tutors mainly provide structuring feedback to assist the students in the process of peer assessment.

During the class sessions (once every three weeks), students receive feedback on their writing tasks by correcting common mistakes. Both the tutor and the students provide feedback.

Feedback: classroom vs. computer-generated feedback

One of the apparent advantages of self-assessment exercises is that they can provide immediate feedback to individual learners so that students have more opportunities to adjust and correct their performance. Feedback is thus delivered on demand. Conversely, in a classroom a teacher is faced with a number of constraints (large number of students, time constraints,…) so that there is little room for individual feedback or feedback adjusted to the individual learner's needs and learning style.

As self-assessment or self-instruction exercises are aimed at individual students who are learning at their own pace, it is possible to provide customised information which is supportive of the individual learner. All students receive special treatment as their individual answers are being assessed and feedback is given to support their learning. This is however an idealised account.

The feedback provided still needs to be programmed by course developers who need to consider in advance what feedback would be appropriate in each case. The feedback given to individual students is the feedback which the tutor thinks the students will need. The programmed explanatory feedback is thus generic in that it refers to a limited number of situations and problems which students are expected to encounter in a particular exercise. Similarly, in many exercises, the students' output is controlled in that only a limited number of possible answers can be given (e.g. Multiple choice, Multiple response, matching, gap-fill exercises in which the words to be filled in are given,…). Real individualised explanatory feedback offering individual assistance to students is still difficult to achieve in CALL, although attempts have been made in this respect.

Classroom teaching and learning allows for a degree of flexibility in providing feedback which is difficult to simulate in online exercises: if necessary, teachers can correct students' language,

provide explicit explanations indicating what is wrong and why, repeat information, provide additional examples, ask students to reformulate an answer, request clarifications,… In many ways, student output is also less controlled and questions can be asked. Moreover, students receive additional feedback from peers.

It is thus a challenge to provide a wide range of feedback types in a VLE which are suitable to a diverse group of learners and which can simulate the feedback variety offered in the language classroom. In this course, interactive exercises are complemented by (peer) feedback in the forum and in the class sessions so as to provide a wide feedback variety.

Changing roles for tutors and learners: a learning process

The shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning involves a significant change in the roles assigned to tutors and learners. Both parties need to adjust their assumptions and expectations. The distinction between learners and teachers is blurred as teachers are no longer authorities steering and controlling the learning process. Students are no longer regarded as passive recipients of knowledge; they have to actively construct their own knowledge. It is the task of the tutor to facilitate this process of knowledge construction. Students need to realise that tutor feedback is only one source of feedback and that they can give valuable feedback on their own and each other's work and performance.

As ELCS is a partly online course, students have to work much more independently than in a traditional face-to-face course. Tutors no longer play a leading part in the learning process. They have become supporting actors. Conversely, students have to take centre stage and learn how to accept the responsibility for their own learning. In ELCS, students are explicitly told before the start of the course that they will not be able to sit back and absorb knowledge. Instead, they need to become more self-directed learners, adopting an active and investigative approach. This means that learners are expected to try and find the answers to their questions via the provided information or via their fellow learners in the first instance before consulting a tutor. Tutor interventions are aimed at facilitating learning instead of providing students directly with the correct answers and explanations.

Students also need to accustom themselves to the characteristics of the new learning medium: They need to learn how to use the virtual learning environment/website, the interactive exercises, the electronic forum, etc; They need to learn how they can best learn from the screen. An attempt is made to keep the technical threshold as low as possible. A lot of technical support is offered to students with basic and limited ICT skills to help them overcome their reluctance and to increase their computer competence.

More than in a traditional course, students have to learn how to manage their learning process. In the introduction session, students are told that they need to learn to efficiently manage their time. They can not postpone their work until they are halfway through the course. They immediately need to take initiative if they do not want to feel overwhelmed by the work that piles up. Moreover, regular student activity is crucial as students are asked to work in groups and engage in collaborative learning.

Students are assisted on their road to independence. For example, they receive a timetable which they can use as the basis for their own work schedule. Students have to work out how much time they want to and can devote to the interactive units and the assignments each week. Once they have their schedule, they have to try to stick to it. A high degree of self-discipline is thus required to successfully complete the course. Other structuring tools are provided such as deadlines during the forum assignments. As each assignment only lasts for a number of weeks, it is crucial that students do not postpone posting a message until the end of this period. For each assignment, students

receive step-by-step instructions which set deadlines and which encourage them to start early with a task so as to allow for group interaction. Some additional deadlines are set, linked to course evaluation, to stimulate the students to carry out an assignment on time.
Tutors also have to adapt themselves to the new learning and teaching environment. They have to be prepared to accept greater student involvement, which involves a change in tutor identity:

> *Assessment and feedback are at the heart of tutor identity and this must surely be one of the deciding factors which make so many tutors reluctant to hand over any of this responsibility or even share it with students.* (Taras, 2002)

In addition, tutors are required to perform a whole range of new tasks and accept a new set of responsibilities which are integral to the overall task of tutor of a hybrid or online course. Tutors do not need to head traditional teacher-fronted class sessions. They need to assist and support students in their journey towards greater competence. First of all, tutors need to help students to overcome their fears of coping with increased learner autonomy. We noticed that a lot of supportive feedback had to be provided both in the classroom and in the electronic forum, especially in the first weeks of the course. Tutors also had to learn how to monitor activity in the electronic forum. This involved reading a large number of messages and providing appropriate and effective feedback to stimulate group work and, if necessary, to direct students back on course. Moreover, tutors also had to offer a lot of practical helpdesk support answering questions about where certain information could be found, which tasks had to be carried out by what time, … Tutors sometimes even had to offer feedback of a more technical nature to students who had problems doing the exercises on their home computer. It is thus an illusion to believe that online learning as such lowers the workload of tutors and is less time-consuming. In courses in which forum assignments are used, the opposite may be true. This is especially so if the tutors themselves still need to learn how to adapt to their new role.
In this project, there was overlap between the roles of tutors and developers. The developers were also the tutors of this course. On the one hand, this increased the workload of the tutors but on the other hand it had the advantage that tutors were well acquainted with their learning materials.

Course assessment

Course assessment instruments

After the first year of ELCS, we measured students' reactions on the basis of an end-of-course survey using a questionnaire and a final extended statement of relevance which students had to submit at the end of the course. The questionnaire was developed and delivered online in Questionmark Perception as it allows for extensive analysis and easy reporting of survey results. Students were asked to complete this questionnaire after the final test. The student survey aimed to measure the attitudes of the students towards the concept of the course, the content of the course materials, the methods of delivery and the teaching methods. In addition to the questionnaire, which mainly consisted of close-ended questions (Yes/No, Multiple choice and Likert scales) suitable for quantification, students were asked to write a final, extended statement of relevance on the basis of the short weekly statements, covering their entire learning experience during the course. To put them on their way, a number of questions were provided for consideration:

Discuss the problems you were faced with during the course (explain how you tried to overcome them. Were you successful?)

Can you trace any evolution in the way you used the forum?

What did you discover about your learning strategies and techniques? Did you in any way have to adapt them?

Are there any statements in the early SORs that you no longer agree with?

What did you learn about your knowledge of English (strengths/weaknesses)?

Has this course changed your view on learning (a language)?

The statements proved to be a valuable tool for course evaluation. This activity generated long, often well-considered personal analyses and well-argued views which were valuable for qualitative analysis as they offered deeper insights in the learning experience, student expectations and student attitudes towards the course. Tutors were able to derive valuable information about the course from the statements of relevance. The statements enabled the course team to assess whether the course was successful in achieving its aims or whether certain aspects of the course needed to be adjusted. The extended statement was also regarded as a writing assignment, traditionally assessed and counted towards the final result. This activity can thus be regarded as a combined summative and formative assessment practice on the level of the course.

Global course assessment

Of the 34 students registered for English for Law and Criminology Student, 22 students successfully completed the course. A drop-out rate of 35% is not unusually high for a course which is largely organised online. Students can work anytime and anywhere on the course, but they need to pay a price for this freedom and flexibility: they are expected to be more independent and require a lot of self-discipline. Despite the assistance offered, certain students did not have the maturity to complete the course. Some students did not succeed in drawing up or sticking to a personal work schedule.
Nevertheless, the survey and the final statements of relevance showed that, overall, the students were happy that they had taken this course as illustrated by the following comment taken from a final extended statement of relevance:

> *Overall, I am very satisfied that I registered for this English course. It lived up to my expectations very well. One major advantage of this internet-based course was the possibility to choose the moment when you preferred to solve the assignments and other exercises and the possibility to work from home. You were able to make your own time schedule.*

This comment alludes to the flexibility offered by an online course, an advantage which is often put forward by supporters of online learning.

Many comments also indicate that the student-centred approach in this course was a new experience:

> *I would like to conclude by saying that the pupil who wants to end this course successfully needs a lot more self-discipline and endurance than pupils who follow the same course in the classic way with a weekly class session. This means that this course was a test for me concerning the language and concerning endurance.*

Some students noted the greater responsibility of students in the learning process:

> *The amount of the workload depends on yourself. If you want to get a lot out of this course, you could spend more hours on e.g. searching other texts, looking for more vocabulary, studying a lot of grammar in depth,…etc.*

Students were also very critical of certain aspects of the course:

(1) Despite the technical assistance provided by the course team, several students complained about technical problems they encountered during the course. Most of these problems were solved quickly but students still lost valuable time in the process.

> *Sometimes the technical problems were more difficult than the course itself.*

(2) A large number of students commented on the heavy workload of the course which was not directly rewarded as this course was an optional course which did not provide students with any credits. Many students had difficulties to combine their work for the course and their curricular work and as a result they prioritised the latter.

> *Sometimes it was hard to combine all the assignments with our "law work".*

(3) Many students preferred a traditional classroom-based course to an online course. They believed a language should be learnt in the classroom. Many students also did not immediately see the need for an online course as they were not geographically dispersed.

> *I am still convinced a written course with many class sessions is more appropriate in order to learn to communicate fluently. Nevertheless, the internet has some advantages. (…) one can always post new messages, reply to other messages, etc. In a way the internet improves communication.*

(4) Moreover, some students raised the issue of equal opportunities, arguing that they could not be expected to have a relatively fast computer and a broadband internet connection. This shows that it remains difficult to bridge the digital divide.

> *I realised that e-learning is not a very good way to study a language for me since it doesn't provide the same opportunities for everyone (…). (…) this way of teaching is addressing a certain type of student: those with a fairly new computer (…) and with Internet facilities at their room in Ghent. In my opinion, this takes us back to the situation before the Second World War, when university studies were only meant for the wealthier part of the population.*

The course was revised and improved in response to the reactions from the students. For instance, the workload of the course was reduced and extra class sessions were organised. The online component was downplayed to avoid negative publicity in the light of the reorganisation at the language centre. These course changes were further motivated by departmental policy changes, signalling a move away from radical constructivism and initiatives in the field of CALL and TELL.

Meta-assessment of alternative assessment

In the following section we will assess the alternative, formative assessment practices in the course English for Law and Criminology Students based on the course team's course experiences and self-assessment and on the students' reactions. To measure student reactions, we used the end-of-course survey and the final, extended statements of relevance. This evaluation will only address those issues which pertain to assessment. We discuss the different assessment instruments separately. For each, we note our actual experiences and the lessons learnt from this. Online distance learning as such will not be discussed as this is largely outside the scope of the present article.

Self-assessment in interactive exercises

A. Actual experiences

(1) Most students reacted positively to the interactive exercises as illustrated by the following comments:

> *"To me the units are what I liked most. Although there were some difficult modules, I always liked to do the exercises. This is probably because of the variety in the exercises, which makes it fun to complete the units. It is always nicer to do some "animated" exercises on the computer than to just fill them in on a piece of paper."*

> *"During the whole course, solving the learning and practising units was one of my favourite parts."*

Students highly appreciated the feedback they received in the exercises (and in the reference material):

> *"I found it very interesting that at the end of each unit, you got your results. I experienced this as a motivation. It is a good way of giving feedback in an e-course. The immediate feedback on your performance when you solved the exercises in the units was also very useful and stimulating.*

> *"Another positive element of the units was the feedback. It's nice to know immediately what you have done wrong, and what you have to pay attention to in the next exercise."*

> *"I had all the exercises completely wrong. But, fortunately the REF-button helped me! That hypergrammar is a real gift when you fail to understand something."*

The survey also showed that students thought that they had received enough feedback in learning and practising and that they regarded the direct feedback in the units as the most interesting aspect of the computer activities. The second most interesting aspect was the flexibility offered (accessibility).

The feedback in Learning and Practising was sufficient.

1: I strongly disagree
2: I disagree
3: No opinion
4: I agree
5: I strongly agree

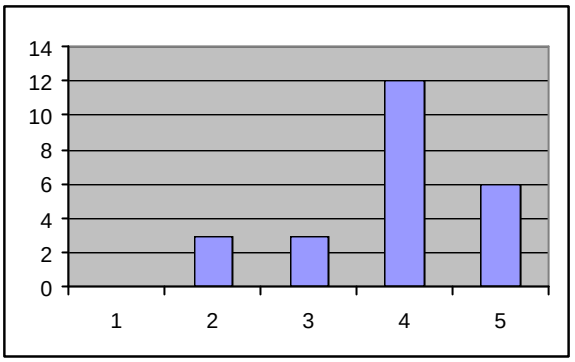


Fig. 21: sufficiency of feedback provided

Which of the following aspects did you find interesting in the computer component?

1: Reference material for individual study
2: Direct feedback in Learning and Practising units
3: Seeing other students' texts in the forum
4: Reference material for individual study
5: Accessible at all times
6. Self and teacher evaluation
7. Language tools and Useful Links

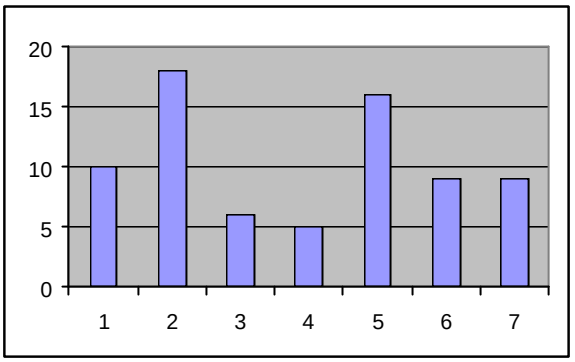


Fig. 22: interesting aspects in the computer component

(2) As there was no possibility to track the students' work and no form of social control, many students postponed doing the exercises until just before the final test. Not all students could handle the freedom implied in self-assessment. This type of learning and assessment is particularly suited for mature learners.

(3) Developing sufficiently challenging exercises which train students in higher-level skills was difficult. Many exercises are drill-based. To keep students motivated, exercises should neither be too easy nor too difficult.

(4) Programming adequate and unambiguous answer-specific feedback was time-consuming. Exercises can only to a limited extent provide individualised explanatory feedback on what was wrong about the student's performance and why.

(5) Open questions and essay questions were less appropriate for the interactive exercises. They cannot be corrected by the computer. A model answer can be provided.

B. Lessons learnt from experiences with the interactive exercises

(1) A summative element may need to be added to the exercises. We should be able to track students' work and save their scores. This is a form of social control which can motivate the students. The information on the students' performance in the units can also help the course team to evaluate the quality and difficulty of the exercises.

(2) Feedback needs to be carefully considered and planned.

(3) Open questions and essay questions should be presented in the forum. Students find it difficult to assess their work on the basis of a model answer.

Statements of Relevance and self-assessment checklists

A. Actual experiences

(1) The change towards autonomy is not an easy process for students who have been largely traditionally educated. Many students still have a strong attachment to tutor-driven education. They have become dependent on the tutor. This conservative view on education seems particularly strong in the field of law. The student survey showed that self-assessment is new to many law and criminology undergraduates at Ghent University.

Self-assessment like in the Statements of Relevance is something which I have _____ been asked to do before.

1: never
2: seldom
3: often
4: very often

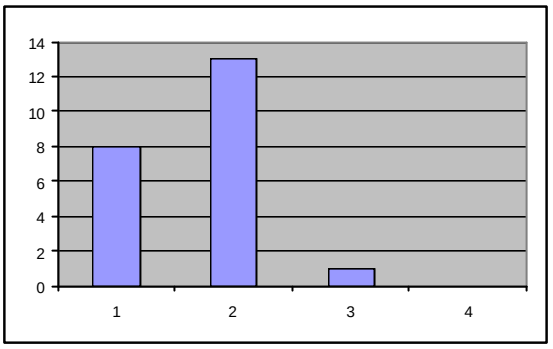


Fig. 23: self-assessment as a new experience

As a student remarked in his final statement of relevance: *"The only way of teaching that I knew was the 'classic' method in which a teacher explains the subject matter and the students have to take notes."*
Several students also commented on the newness of this task: *"But to evaluate this every week, and to write a short text about it, was very difficult for me. First of all, because I have never had to do something like this before."*

As it was anticipated that students would have little experience with self-assessment, they received a lot of assistance and support. The tutors provided example statements, questions to prompt reflection and checklists. Especially in the first weeks of the course, tutors closely monitored the students' statements and provided tutor feedback (especially motivating messages).

(2) It is very difficult to conquer students' psychological resistance to this task. Students seem afraid to cross the threshold of assessment. At the end of the course, still a significant number of student had a negative attitude towards this task:

I liked assessing my own performance in the SoRs.

1: I strongly disagree
2: I disagree
3: No opinion
4: I agree
5: I strongly agree

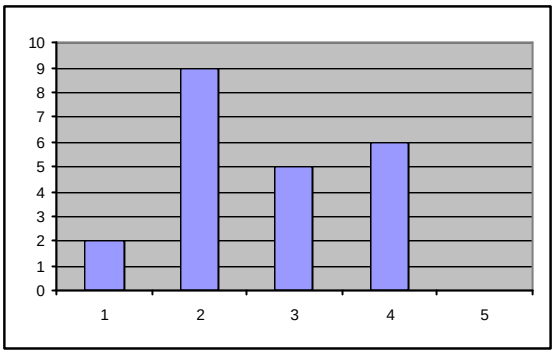


Fig. 24: reluctance to self-assessment

The following comments bear evidence of students' reluctance to this task:
"I think this part of the assignments is a waste of time"
"The one thing about this course that I really did not like to do, was writing the statements of relevance every week."

(3) Students are not used to investing much time and energy into low-stakes activities which are not directly valued in terms of marks or which do not count towards their final result. Moreover, this assessment activity adds to the already heavy workload of law and criminology undergraduates. Students give priority to curricular work and summative practices.

(4) Despite the support and assistance, the survey revealed that only a small number of students succeeded in gaining insight into their learning experience. Many students continued producing trivial accounts of what they had done.

I have learnt a lot about my own learning experience, my strengths and weaknesses from my weekly SoRs.

1: I strongly disagree
2: I disagree
3: No opinion
4: I agree
5: I strongly agree

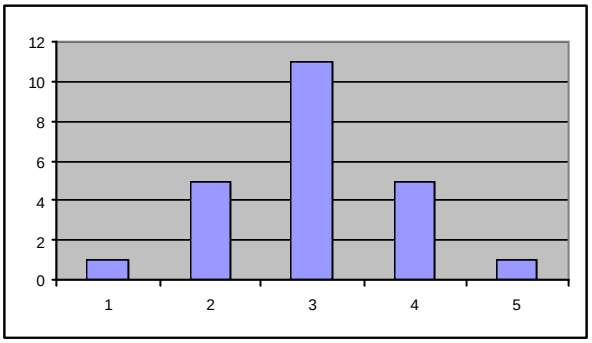


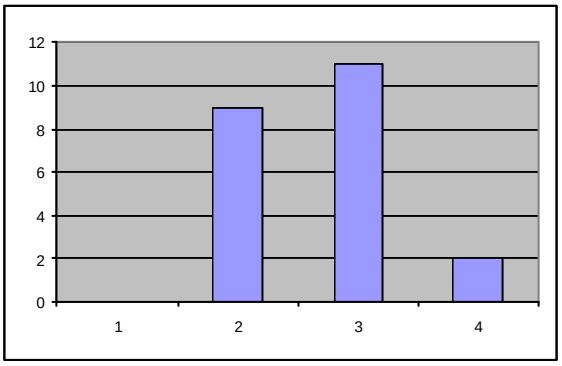
Fig. 25: successful self-assessment

(5) Nevertheless, self-assessment seems to be a learning process. Many students gradually became more skilled in the task of reflective self-assessment.

Fig. 26: Self-assessment as a learning process

Select the statement which best reflects your experience with writing the statements of relevance.

1: I did not succeed in evaluating my own performance
2: I found it very difficult to assess my own performance
3: Evaluating myself was difficult at first but I got the hang of it
4: I had no problem at all to assess my own performance



The following comments further illustrate this:

"In the beginning it did not like this at all. I did not know what to write in it and I did not see the benefit of it. Nevertheless, now I realize that it is a good way to monitor your skills"

"In the beginning of this course I did not realise the importance of this task, but now, I can better discern the parts which I'm good at and where I constantly fail."

"I never knew that reflecting on the course through the writing of the "Statements of Relevance" would be helpful to me."

Tutors also needed time to gain experience in coping with statements of relevance: how should the students' tasks be monitored, when should they intervene and in what way. They needed to get used to their newly acquired role. Offering support to students with little experience in self-assessment proved to be very time-consuming.

B. Lessons learnt from experiences with the statements of relevance

(1) If such a task is to be successful, students need to receive systematic tutor feedback, especially if self-assessment is a completely new experience. Systematic tutor feedback seems crucial within self-assessment (Taras, 1999). Feedback should motivate as well as help the student to keep on track. One cannot assume that self-assessment will greatly reduce the assessment burden of the tutor. Monitoring students and providing feedback are time-consuming.

(2) There should be a real incentive to perform this task. Students need to be shown that their work is valued and appreciated. A summative dimension needs to be added.

(3) Alternative assessment should be introduced more gradually to lower the innovation threshold. Students need to get used to a new type of learning in a new, virtual learning environment. Educational innovation does not happen overnight. Reluctance may disappear if students receive more self-assessment tasks in their curricular work or if they are better prepared for self-assessment in their previous education. In its policy, Ghent university stresses the need for innovation and alternative forms of assessment but it does not impose a top-down approach. Bottom-up initiatives may converge over time and this may produce a learning environment which is more conducive to formative self-assessment.

Peer assessment

A. Actual experiences

(1) Despite detailed instructions, few students engaged in real peer assessment online. Students had qualms about commenting on and assessing each other's work. They also had difficulties to cope with the heavy workload. As a result, they had insufficient time to efficiently engage in peer assessment.

(2) Students found it difficult to give significant comments. Most comments were surface comments on misspellings and inadequate word choice.

(3) The following comments illustrate that some students experienced the benefits of peer assessment:

"During the summary task, it was interesting to see how other people look at the same text. It was a good idea to get the opportunity to rewrite our own version, after having seen the summaries of the others. I was also glad to get some comments on my own work."

"There were a lot of remarks which were clear and made me realise that my summary was a schematic outline of a text rather than a summary."

B. Lessons learnt from experiences with peer assessment

(1) Students need to be explicitly instructed about the purpose of peer assessment and what is expected from them. They also need to receive detailed information on assessment criteria: what do they need to assess.

(2) Systematic tutor feedback is required, especially structuring feedback on the process of peer assessment and motivating feedback.

(3) A summative aspect should be added to motivate students.

(4) The workload of peer assessment should be carefully considered in view of the heavy workload of Law and Criminology undergraduates.

Conclusion

We can conclude from the course team and the students' experiences that innovation cannot be controlled and cannot occur in isolation. Students and tutors both need time to get accustomed to their new roles in constructivist teaching and learning. Contrary to our expectations and objectives, forms of summative assessment continued to exert a large – and in some cases dominant - influence over the students' learning behaviour. While this was an optional low-stakes course, students still tended to measure their work in terms of grades. For instance, students perceived it as unusual that assignments were not marked and they expected to receive more individual feedback from the tutor. The fact that most students preferred to sit a final test at the end of the course also illustrates the strong attachment of the students to summative assessment. Similarly, tutors struggled to find the appropriate discourse in their interaction with students. While they attempted to present themselves as facilitators and learner guides assisting self- and peer assessment, students still expected them to act as transmitters of knowledge and as assessors. Traditional stereotypes of teachers and learners seem to be extremely resistant to change.

Assessment is thought to be at the heart of the learning experience. It has a strong influence on student learning at institutes of higher education, observing that learners orient their efforts towards the 'hidden curriculum' (Snyder, 1973). In order to survive at university, students learn to play the university game in which summative assessment plays an important role. The dominance of measurement of learning is also supported by the market-orientated discourse frequently used in higher education. This discourse reinforces the idea of students as consumers in the learning economy, buying qualifications with credits. Alternative assessment in support of learning can help to change the rules of the game and transform and innovate education. For example, self-assessment and peer-assessment can empower learners and help them to take a more central role in the learning process. Furthermore, it can encourage them to move away from an instrumental approach to their studies, encouraged by the learning economy, which inadequately prepares them for life-long, self-directed learning in the learning society.

As summative assessment is still deeply embedded in university practice, formative assessment practices need to be gradually introduced. Summative and formative practices can be combined – this will be necessary as accreditation will remain important in higher education and society at large - but if institutes of higher education want to deliver students with the skills that society requires, the emphasis should shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning.

We observed a gap between university policy, stressing the need for student-centred learning and the role of ICT in educational innovation, and student expectations which are shaped by their past experiences with teacher-driven and classroom-based education and measurement of learning but also by traditional university practice. If innovation is to be successful, it will need to receive support at all levels, including departmental, faculty and institutional level. Constructivist pedagogy and methodology (including alternative assessment) need to be embraced at faculty and departmental level. Teachers and students require assistance and support in learning how to cope with internet-based education and new forms of assessment and the new responsibilities implied. Ghent University can support innovation by creating the right conditions for bottom-up development. This will inevitably require more top-down initiatives. Small, isolated departmental initiatives cannot carry the full weight of innovation.

An educational environment needs to be created in which ICT in learning and teaching and alternative assessment feature more prominently on the agenda. The recent developments concerning the virtual learning environment Minerva, which is implemented across the university,

and initiatives to promote the exchange of expertise and know-how signal that profound changes may be on the cards.

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