MYSTORY & ISPY
USING ONLINE SUPPORT TO INCREASE ACCESSIBILITY

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Abstract

MyStory and ISPY projects are two illustrative examples of how online virtual support can come in handy to a large variety of beneficiaries including a wide span of ages. Indentifying those affordances of the online support that can best address the target group and customising them to fit the learning needs are main aspects that are being looked into by the developers and promoters of the two European projects. ISPY platform enables learners to interact with a new language via flash materials based on role-play and problem solving. Activities on the ISPY Moodle platform include formal and informal contexts presenting students with numerous opportunities to understand and practise the language they study. MyStory project aims at creating a link between generations by valorizing and putting to good use the knowledge and experience of representatives from the two main categories addressed - seniors and young people.

Key words: intergenerational learning, technical support, material flexibility

Keeping up with the methodological trends automatically involves taking into account the support materials and media used as intermediary tools to engage and apply various methodological alternatives so as to benefit the final user irrespective of the age category.

Even with the extensive use of the text books teachers have always been aware of the need to adapt and develop the common compulsory materials to better address students' learning needs. With the arrival of high IT developments teaching found itself on a new cutting edge which was not necessarily news in terms of information or method but a step towards greater accessibility.

The meaning of accessibility here is larger than the more traditional one which referred to providing equal opportunities to individuals from different and varied social categories so that they could all benefits from education. With the new IT developments and in the context of present social dynamics accessibility with regards to learning and education also focuses on time affordances of the learner, authentic collaboration and connection to real life activities as well as re-use of materials and skills development.

Moreover, the new support materials and media used for it require new competences and knowledge from the teachers themselves, greater flexibility of thought and action up to new approaches in terms of information intake and output development.

Even though IT support has been long regarded as a distractor, a fashion-only element bound to ephemeral life and youth whim, still the field of education has come to embrace the idea of IT support to enhance learning. With this came the challenge of utility – use ICT for learning and not for the sake of technology only.

MyStory and ISPY projects, though dealing with rather different outcomes, both look into increasing accessibility of the teacher and student to a wider range of already developed materials or to the opportunities of further developing and valorizing these materials.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Both MyStory (511641-LLP-1-2010-1-RO-KA3-KA3MP) and ISPY (511558-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-KA2-KA2MP) are European-funded projects.

MyStory is a KA3, ICT project focused on enhancing intergenerational awareness, collaboration and learning, while ISPY is a KA2, Languages project concerned with promoting study of foreign languages, especially the less widely used and taught languages.

Through their activities both MyStory and ISPY offer a greater level of accessibility to different resources and to different users. The approach to materials development in the two

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projects is based on contextualised reseach within the national contexts of all countries in the international partnerships implementing the projects.

Dealing with intergenerational collaboration and learning, MyStory project based its activities on an initial reseach illustrating the attitudes of the two main beneficiaries, seniors and youth, one towards the other.

Research also included reference to voluntary work and the degree of involvement in voluntary work of the representatives of the two categories. Questionnaires were addressed to representatives of seniors and young people in five countries: Finland, Lithuania, Romania, Slovenia and UK. Questionnaires included multiple choice questions and looked at the following aspects:

- Age awareness and characteristics of old/young age
- Understanding the social needs of the two categories
- Priorities and values for the two generations
- Involvement in social work.

Although the attitude of the two generations towards each other was generally positive, still answers to the questionnaires proved a lack of communication between seniors and young people within and outside the family, in the larger community. Lack of mutual and reciprocal understanding was also due to the fact that the two categories had access to slightly different social realities with different core values and different means of intercommunication.

Accessibility to intergenerational learning was in this case prevented by the lack of relevant communication channels.

The research developed in ISPY project was focused on language learning opportunities within each of the partnership countries. State policies regarding language learning were analysed and accessibility of the learners to foreign languages was illustrated according to various determiners.

The aim of the research was to reveal the national specificities of language learning and teaching so as to create a common basis for the project deliverables which were to be developed by the partnership. Increasing accessibility was therefore enhanced by discovering the relevant characteristics of the educational system within each country.

Acessibility in the case of both projects does not concern only access by the end user. This needs to be intermediated by the tutor/teacher and thus accessibility also concerns teachers and tutors in the sense that they must be offered:

1. relevant materials on user-friendly channels
2. opportunity and posibility to change and adapt the materials
3. various accessibility alternatives to suit different user contexts.

The above mentioned are relevant and relate to both ISPY and MyStory project deliverables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

All deliverables produced in the two projects were worked on with the priority of creating user friendly materials which can be made use of after the end of the funded life of the project and which are also easily adaptable to new learning contexts.

The main materials developed in MyStory project are as follows:
- training support materials and training sessions (online and face-to-face)
- interview database
- film database

The materials developed in ISPY project are represented by language teaching and individual study materials uploaded on a Moodle platform.

Each of these materials can be used in the form delivered by the project but they can also be transformed, added to and adapted so as to suit a large variety of learning and study situations. By offering teachers and tutors opportunities to work on the content and form of the materials the end users themselves are offered better access to the source.

The ISPY core materials are in Flash format and they represent a detective game structured in ten missions. As they advance through the ten missions, students are faced with language aspects contextualised within the frame of the detective story. This part of the Moodle platform cannot be changed as it represents the core of the ISPY materials. However, teachers are given the opportunity to build around these flash activities, to add explanations and support resources so as to offer the core materials to different language level students.

This means that teachers can envisage different approaches to the same materials, they can expand the mission with aditional information and activities, which in turn increases students' accessibility. Compared to a standard language course, ISPY offers not only the material but also the opportunity to engage teachers in professional development. Course customisation engages them with wider knowledge and a better understanding of their own students and their learning needs.

Critical thinking and strategic planning are employed in materials customisation and thus ISPY increases accessibility not only to concrete materials which can be used in class but also to teacher development. Through this, accessibility gains a wider impact upon direct and indirect beneficiaries. MyStory materials are illustrative of a larger variety of domains and can therefore be

put to good use by beneficiaries from: research, museums, libraries, schools, film-makers, and also by individual beneficiaries for informal learning and socialisation.

Flipped classes

MyStory short films are suitable for flipped classes in that they offer information related to historical events, social and political movements and dynamics which clearly illustrate concepts studied in school.

Teachers increase students' accessibility by providing them with the opportunity to listen to and view real life stories. These examples individualise general information making it more relevant and meaningful for students. Students can then conceptualize using these video materials.

The benefits of flipped classes are:

- Students can watch the films in their own time and at their own pace.

- Students can pause the films to look for additional information to better understand the event presented in the film and its context.

- Learning needs are better addressed due to the fact that students can watch the films individually and therefore have the opportunity to work on the video materials irrespective of classmates who may want to focus on other aspects within the same material.

- Teachers and tutors have a higher starting point in providing explanations due to the knowledge students already have from individual work on the films.

- Individual work on the film increases student independent work and initiative taking in terms of learning and learning paths leading to individualsed study and relevant decision making related to personal learning interests and needs.

- Teachers and tutors have more time for interactive and demonstrative activities which transform input into intake and support students' understanding.

- Films develop a much more relaxed atmosphere which encourages students to take the initiative and play an active part in the classroom activities.

MyStory materials are also uploaded online and can be used as a relevant source for various other study activities for different age categories.

Beyond the video materials, the training materials developed by the MyStory project team for the training of trainers are also resources which support skill development, increasing accessibility to intergenerational learning.

MyStory and ISPY projects directly address teachers and tutors by creating instructions and methodological guidance for them to consider when using the project materials.

In the case of MyStory project accessibility is also meant in terms of offering socialisation opportunities to elderly people.

Through intergenerational activities MyStory project aims to raise awareness of the needs of retired elderly people who are no longer professionally active and who need reinforcement of their abilities and of the value of their lives to raise their self-esteem.

Not only are these people able and share their life experience with the young generation and through this raise awareness of the different events in the past but they are also invited to participate in ICT courses for basic computer and internet use.

Helping seniors to develop this type of skills increases their chances of interaction and socialisation and enriches their range of activities to help establish a better social life.

CONCLUSIONS

The degree to which accessibility is enhanced and provided to end beneficiaries and to the intermediary parts within the field of education and lifelong learning initiatives directly impacts upon student motivation and student engagement.

Accessibility needs to be an inbuilt element within support material and it must also relate to the people mediating the educative act so as to empower customisation of the support materials to the specific category of end users.

MyStory and ISPY projects have been developed and implemented so as to enhance accessibility both on the part of the student and of the teacher.

Ensuring accessibility to deliverables not only adds to their value but it also ensures their utility and through this, their sustainability.

Accessibility triggers engagement and engagement helps build on an individualised study path which is in the end the most relevant one for the learner.

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