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The role of educational technologists in the provision of language courses in higher education: a case study

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Abstract. In recent years, schools, municipalities, and universities have made increasing use of educational technologists (edtechs) to support teaching staff in the delivery of technology-based courses in face-to-face, blended, or purely online formats. This paper is a case study focusing on the types of training and support provision provided by three edtechs within the arts and humanities faculty of a large provincial university in southern Sweden. The edtechs also identify a number of obstacles in the way of developing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and computer assisted language learning expertise among teaching staff.

Keywords: edtech, ICT, language teaching, professional training.

1.   Introduction

The wholesale introduction of digital technology into higher education over the past 25 years has brought with it an increasing need for both technological and pedagogical support for academic staff tasked with the implementation of the technology in the courses they teach. Edtechs and learning designers are examples of new professional categories which have emerged in the wake of these developments. In the case of digitally advanced countries like Sweden, many university faculties have employed edtechs who work to provide faculty support and encourage collaborative working practices in ICT as well as acting in some cases as instructional course designers with institutional Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). More rarely, edtechs may also be engaged in researching and surveying emerging trends in the educational uses of technology.

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Following the introduction of VLEs in the 1990's, the impact of VLEs in higher education has received extensive attention in the literature (e.g. Britain & Liber, 1999; Weller, 2007a). Nevertheless, there has been a dearth of research into the important work being done by edtechs supporting VLE use in the institutions and subject areas they serve. However, institutional VLE use has been the subject of criticism (Weller, 2007b; Leslie, 2007). This short paper presents a preliminary case study of the role played by edtechs in the provision of blended and online courses in a language department at a Swedish university.

2. The study

This paper presents a case study based on semi-structured interviews (see supplementary materials) with three edtechs currently working within a university's arts and humanities faculty in Sweden. In addition to modern languages, the edtechs provide support to members of staff in the subject areas of design, music, media and communication, art, cultural studies, and journalism.

The interviews were carried out separately with each edtech during the Spring 2019 term (see supplementary materials for a list of questions), focusing on their supporting roles for academic staff within the university's department of language. In Questions 6a-6d, respondents had to rate importance on a scale of one (*not important*) to seven (*very important*). The department makes extensive use of *Moodle* as a VLE; the ICT infrastructure available to teaching staff is advantageous, with facilities for screencasting (*Kaltura CaptureSpace*) and a streaming server enabling the full integration of video material with the VLE. The cloud-based video conferencing tool *Zoom* is also supported and fully integrated into the *Moodle* learning platform.

The respective backgrounds of the edtechs are listed below in Table 1, with fictitious names used to protect their anonymity throughout.

Table 1. Respective backgrounds and experience of the edtechs

Edtech	Background and experience
Rebecca	10 years experience in ICT supporting role; background as a computer technician and Information Technology (IT) systems support
Anna	official job title of edtech since 2013 but overall 10 years experience with ICT
Paul	24 years experience in IT/ICT pedagogical support; 10 years with the official job title of edtech developer

Interview video material in the form of *Zoom* recordings was subsequently uploaded to the university's secure *Box* digital storage facility; the material was otherwise not transcribed or edited in any form.

3.   Discussion

3.1.   General

There appeared to be a uniformity in the support provision regardless of subject specialisms, with one or two notable exceptions which will be outlined below. Overwhelmingly, provision of support and interaction with teaching staff centred around *Moodle*, the institutional VLE adopted by the university and the closely integrated tools of *Zoom* for video conferencing and *Kaltura CaptureSpace*.

3.2.   Highlighting important aspects of the work of the institutional edtech

Paul highlighted his role in building relations and developing an ongoing climate of cooperation marked by continuity rather than seeing himself as some sort of one off 'helpdesk' (see Table 2). Another important aspect was his availability to language teachers seeking ICT support. Paul also stressed the practical aspects of his job as an edtech in encouraging teachers to make use of and experiment with ICT tools and resources in their teaching. Anna described her role in terms of dealing with more acute support problems. Paul focused on the need to keep himself up-to-date via social networks and forums, while Anna highlighted the importance of keeping in phase with internal documentation and university ICT policy. Rebecca stressed the importance of the final product outcome, in creating a good digital environment, retaining students on both blended and online courses, and ensuring satisfactory levels throughput (the proportion of students enrolled that complete the course).

Table 2.   Highlighting areas of importance

Support area	Rating 7=very important; 1=not important		
	Anna	Rebecca	Paul
Providing technical support for language teachers	7	7	7
Providing pedagogical support for language teachers	7	6	7

Establishing collaborative learning practices within language teaching staff instructional design (i.e. designing courses and course templates) using Moodle and VLE implementational policy	6	7	6
Researching emerging trends in ICT for the language teaching sector and keeping language teaching staff updated with technical developments in the field	5	7	7

3.3. Main types of support offered

Of the areas listed in Question 5 (see supplementary materials), the provision of one-to-one consultative support was seen as the most important and effective. From Paul's experience, this form of support was the most effective in ensuring that teachers were able to get started with an initial course room in *Moodle*; group training courses with more than ten teachers were not seen as an effective delivery mode. The highlighting of early adopters as enthusiasts was also seen as important; Paul stressed the importance of teacher enthusiasts inspiring other teachers more effectively than edtechs. Online support was not an area with positive experiences for Paul and 'brownbag' lunchtime courses and sessions were not seen as being effective with teachers needing time for relaxation.

3.4. Edtechs and specific support for language teachers

As mentioned previously, the edtechs did not see a great difference between the support they provided to language teachers and other faculty members. The department has however run a language lab for a number of years, although support provision for this facility was no longer a significant part of the edtech's job description. Two edtechs did however single out ICT tools and resources for synchronous interactivity (such as using *Zoom*) in language proficiency training for communicative dialogues and information gap activities. The edtechs were asked whether they lacked any specific subject area knowledge (i.e. relating to language teaching and applied linguistics etc.) in terms of the support they are able to offer the department's teaching staff.

While none of the edtechs had any formal university background in language/ language teaching, any perceived lack of knowledge relating to language was not seen as being important in their provision of ICT support. Significantly, however, Anna brought up the need to understand better the types of ICT usage among language teachers in schools, given the importance of language teacher training within the department/faculty. In many cases these resources differ from the tools

used by the university; for example the *Google Classroom* suite is commonly used by teachers in the Swedish state system as a VLE/learning management system as opposed to *Moodle*.

3.5.   Obstacles

The main problem in raising ICT expertise among academic staff identified by respondents was the lack of priority given to ICT and digital skills by university management. Paul stressed the lack of importance given to digital skills when language staff are employed and the over-emphasis on more traditional academic merits, such as publication lists of research articles. Departmental heads need to be more aware of these demands and offer greater rewards for the acquisition of digital skills in career path development. Anna mentioned for example the award of digital badges for specific skills acquisition.

4.   Conclusions

The edtechs are clearly committed to the provision of support regarding institutional use of the Moodle VLE and its integration with *Zoom* and *CaptureSpace*. The VLE*, Zoom* and *CaptureSpace* package is seen as the embodiment of the personal learning environment for teaching staff. The place of the institutional VLE in the faculty's support for ICT in language teaching seems assured at least for the time being; this situation seems to fly in the face of some commentators such as Weller (2007b), who somewhat prematurely foresaw the death of the institutionalised VLE. This situation obviously reflects administrative decisions taken within the institution but it would seem that the edtechs interviewed do not favour Leslie's (2007) alternative solution of 'loosely coupled teaching', where teachers use their own external tools and resources outside the institutional VLE. The identification of a lack of priority – on the part of management in higher education – given to the acquisition of teaching staff ICT expertise is a very important one; raising the status of ICT skills among other more academic merits would potentially have a positive aspect on blended and online course provision.

5.   Acknowledgements

6.   Supplementary materials

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