

**Learning to design WELL<sup>1</sup> in a multilingual community of practice:  
a pilot implementation of the EU-Project PRONETT**

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Paper presented at the 2003 Conference of  
The European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning:

**EUROCALL 2003**  
University of Limerick, Ireland, 3-6 September 2003

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<sup>1</sup> WELL = Web Enhanced Language Learning

## Abstract

This paper reports the results of the pilot implementation of the webportal that is being developed in the PRONETT project by the Faculty of Education of the Hogeschool van Utrecht.

The key objectives of the EU project PRONETT ([www.pronett.org](http://www.pronett.org)) are to:

- Offer a network approach for students, practising teachers and teacher-educators to collaborate and to construct shared understandings of teaching and learning in a networked classroom and institutional environment.
- Develop a regional and cross national networked learning community of pre- and in-service teachers and teacher-educators offering a variety of Web-based resources and telelearning tools for collaborative inquiry into and facilitation of the discourse on learning to teach in a networked classroom.

The PRONETT portal is expected to offer a virtual infrastructure that supports teachers educators and trainees and inservice teachers in the (co)production, execution and evaluation of practice based ILT-rich learning. Access to concrete learning objects will facilitate reuse of educational content and stimulate the dialogue between educational organisations and actors (teacher educator, teacher trainee, school based coaches and in-service teachers). This dialogue is seen as preconditional for the development and sharing of knowledge related to ICT-related methodology in subject teaching.

Currently mainly student teachers from the core project partners based in Belgium, The Netherlands, Spain and Wales (UK) participate. It is assumed that collaboration between Portal members will start at a local level in and between regional organisations (e.g. Archimedes Lerarenopleiding + affiliated professional development schools). At the same time however collaboration between individual portal members at an international level is expected to be most likely and particularly useful in the domains of Modern Languages and for schools with an explicit international focus and a dual language curriculum.

The experiments of individual teacher educators and students teachers of the English, French and Spanish departments will be reported. They will be using the portal for a variety of purposes: to support blended learning arrangements, as a workspace and authentic setting for use of the target language and for the development of professional CALL<sup>2</sup> pedagogy and ICT-E<sup>3</sup> competencies.

This pilot implementation should provide models, procedures and materials to facilitate full implementation at a regional level and to contribute to PRONETT's dissemination targets in scaling up the project at (inter)national level. The related project activities and strategies used will be described.

For downloading this paper and/or some sources referred to visit <http://www.koenraad.info/Pronett>

## 1. Introduction

The initiative for the project 'Professionals Networking Education and Teacher Training' (Pronett) was taken by Archimedes Lerarenopleiding, the department of the Faculty of Education in Utrecht, Netherlands responsible for the regional initial teacher training and development for vocational and secondary education.

For a better understanding of the motives for the project definition a closer look of the context in time and place may be called for.

Inspiration for the project came from the developments and changes in Dutch Teacher Education Provision and promoted by the Dutch Project 'Educational PartnerShip (EPS 2000-2003). This state funded, national project involving seven TT<sup>4</sup>-providers, was to innovate teacher education so that more and better qualified teachers could be trained.

At Archimedes Lerarenopleiding this has led to the development of the present curriculum model based on collaboration with regional schools. The model integrates subject studies and professional preparation and is nationally known as 'The Utrecht Model'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> CALL = Computer Assisted Language Learning

<sup>3</sup> Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) ; E = for Educational purposes, in Education

<sup>4</sup> TT = Teacher Training

Its key elements are:

- partnership
- competence based learning and training
- customized programmes
- dual mode approach
- lectureships

It aims to meet the requirements of modern higher education as defined locally as:

*'...education in which students develop into starting professionals and which takes place in interaction with the professional field. The professional field is involved in formulating competences, formulating and providing (study) assignments, giving feedback on students' results and in the assessment and development of knowledge. Students carry out assignments in the role of the starting professional, which means that they produce work of a high level and that they can demonstrate that their work meets relevant current standards. ICT is an important tool in creating a rich learning environment as well as in creating the necessary conditions: the use of ICT makes it possible to organise educational processes differently.'*

(HvU Education & ICT Knowledge Platform, 2003, p.5)

As from August 2003 some 450 first to third year, full time students will be working in some 60 schools.

### **1.1 The Educational Partnership Project and ICT**

Next to attempts to provide a solution for the shortage of teachers (expected to grow to some 25.000 vacancies in 2006) by offering more flexible programmes the innovation was also targeted at delivering teachers with qualifications required by the changes taken place in (Dutch) schools and society. Among these the competence to apply ICT in designing powerful learning environments. The claim by the Ministry of Education that 60% of the EPS grant had to be allocated to expenditures on ICT-related issues in budgets of local project plans can be seen as an indication of the value attached to this aspect of the innovation.

Motivation for this view can be found in the selected trends below taken from studies commissioned by the Ministry of Education (a.o. Kral 2002), the 'ICT op School' Foundation<sup>5</sup> (Stegers 2001, 2002) and the monitoring of ICT developments in (Teacher) Education by the Dutch Inspectorate<sup>ii</sup> (a.o. Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur & Wetenschappen (2001)).

- scarce presence of ICT use for pedagogically innovative approaches; Use of VLEs<sup>6</sup> occurs in teacher education but is only in an experimental stage in secondary education
- despite the fact that ICT increasingly forms an integral part of school policy there is still a lack of competence and confidence among staff to integrate ICT in teaching. (Vreugdenhil et al. 2003).

With respect to Teacher Education some of the conclusions are:

- There are still serious shortcomings in the preparation of future teachers as far as their competence in the use of educational and subject specific ICTs is concerned.
- Preparation for a future ICT-rich educational practice has, as yet, only a very limited place in teacher education programmes.

### **1.2 A Dutch Benchmark for ILT<sup>7</sup>/ICT-rich teacher education provision**

Confronted with the monitoring results a national working party/network of teacher educators (one of the results of the EPS-collaboration between TT-providers) focusing on ICT issues in teacher education decided to develop a description of features defining what is called an 'ICT

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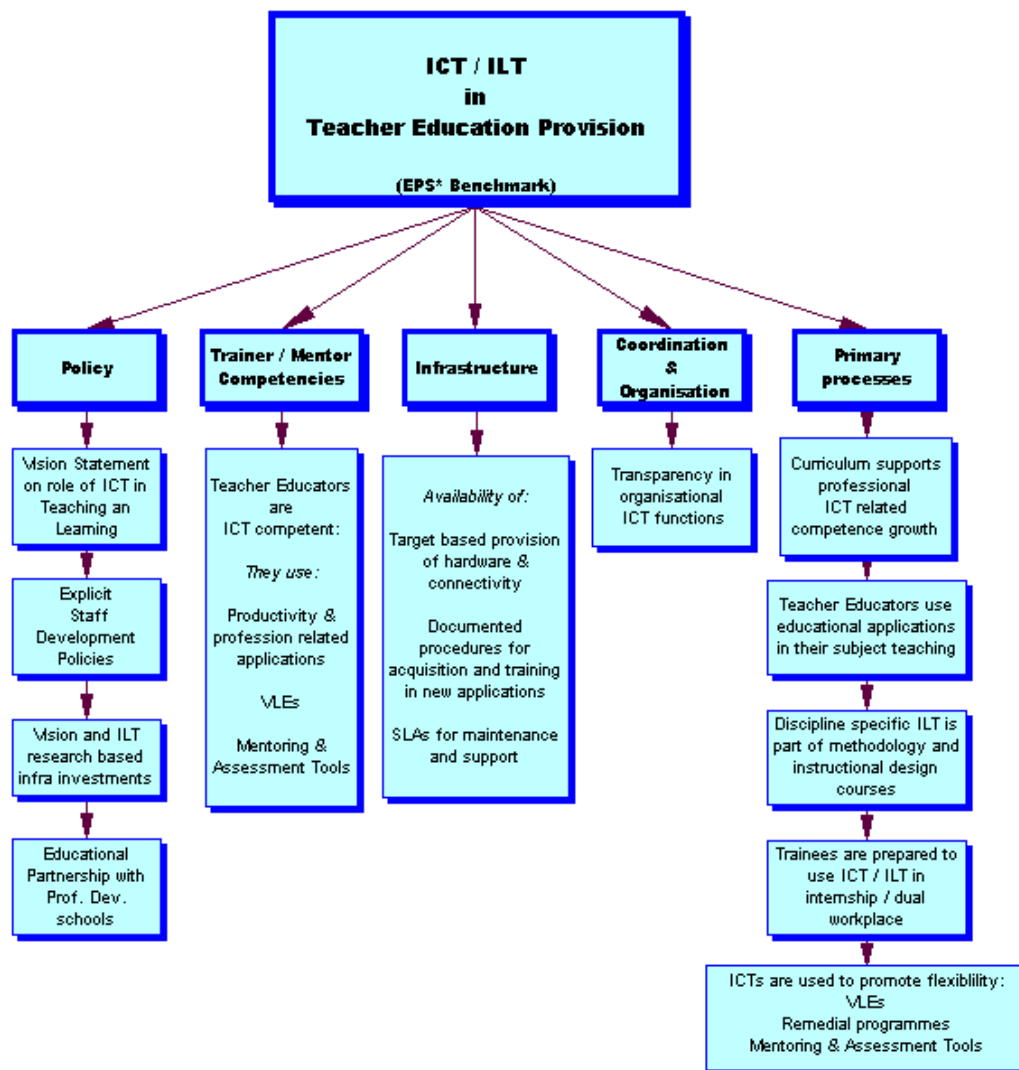
<sup>5</sup> The 'ICT op School' Foundation is a state subsidised organisation founded by the Association of Dutch SchoolBoards. Its main goal is to stimulate effective and efficient integration of ICT in primary and secondary education.

<sup>6</sup> Virtual Learning Environment (e.g. Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle etc.)

<sup>7</sup> ILT = Information and Learning Technologies

rich' Teacher Education programme. Criteria have been formulated for the domains and subdomains: *Policy* (Vision, Staff, Hardware investments, Partnership), *Staff competences*, *Infrastructure*, *ICT coordination* and *ICT in the primary process*.

Figure 1. below shows a graphical representation of the domains and related criteria.



\* As defined by the EPS based ICTnetwork (EPS = Educational Partnership: a Dutch, national, Teacher Education Innovation Project (2000-2003))

Fig. 1: ICT Benchmark for Dutch Teacher Education Provision.

The present study focuses on activities at the Utrecht Teacher Trainer Provision to realise targets in the primary processes domain. For information on other aspects of the local impact of the Pronett Project we refer to (Koenraad, 2003).

## 2. The EU-project Pronett

### 2.1 Project Definition

Coalition forming to define an EU-project with international partners was triggered by the urgency for action emanating from the National Inspectorate's reports and the developing national benchmarks for Teacher Education Provision on the one hand and the lack of local educational leadership in the ICT-domain on the other.

As comparable problems with the integration of ICT were experienced by the other core project partners (Cardiff University, Gent University, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) a literature study (Koenraad et al., 2002a) was called for to define the reported needs at a European level and to provide a basis for a further specification of project goals.

### 2.2 Project Goals

The project's aim is to innovatively enhance, promote and build a European web portal community of Teachers and Trainees in Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education who will be able to collaboratively share experiences and gain expertise in the application of Information Communication Technology in teaching and learning.

A web portal offering a dynamic interactive virtual learning and content production environment is seen as a facilitating instrument (Wenger, 2002). In line with the participatory model of modern higher education (Collis & Moonen, 2001) it is expected to help the student teacher to realize her role as a starting professional (HvU Education & ICT Knowledge Platform, 2003). The model in Fig.2 below shows the organisational setup and corresponding work breakdown as developed for the PRONETT project.

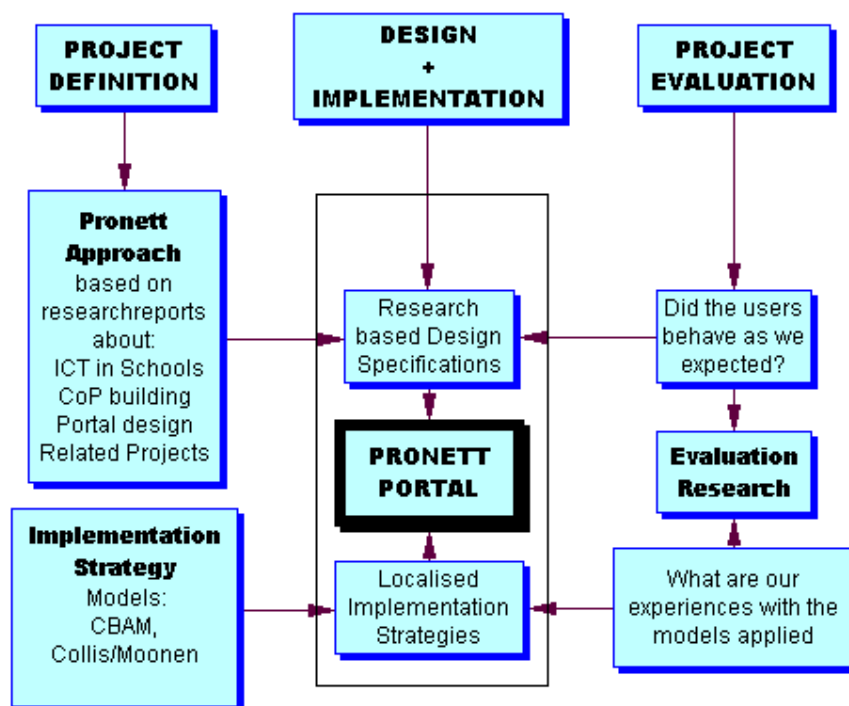


Figure 2: Pronett Project Design

### 2.3. Pronett WebPortal: functionality and technology

The Pronett portal is a customized version of the Zope-based Content Management System 'Plone'<sup>iii</sup>. The design has been inspired by critical features of successful professional

development approaches in the ICT-E domain such as: needs based, learning by doing, enabling 'design & try-out & evaluate'-sequences, on-the-job elements promoting reflection and feedback (also in networks of teachers), collaboration between schools and teacher education organisations and universities (van Eck et al., 2001).

The portal offers a virtual infrastructure that supports teacher educators and trainees and in-service teachers in the (co)production, execution and evaluation of practice based ILT-rich learning. Members have access to personal workspaces to which all sorts of content-types (file, picture, document, forum tool etc) can be added. Standard web authoring tools and protocols such as FTP, WebDAV and XML-RPC can be applied within Zope and therefore within Pronett. An online visual editor to develop or adapt HTML files is optional. Contents developed in a so-called project folder can be published into a database which is searchable with a dedicated search-engine. Access to these learning objects is meant to facilitate reuse of educational content and stimulate the dialogue between educational organisations and actors (teacher educator, teacher trainee, school based coaches and in-service teachers). This dialogue is seen as preconditional for the development and sharing of knowledge related to ICT-related pedagogy in (subject) teaching.

Exchange and communication between individuals, project teams and organisations is supported by a 'public' forum and a facility to publish 'supply and demand' messages for learning objects and/or ICT related educational services from regional placement schools. Its file sharing and decentral user management facilities make it very suitable for CSCL<sup>8</sup> approaches and project- and case based learning, the usefulness of which is widely recognised in higher education (Simons et al., 2000).

Schematically the main ideas in the design philosophy can summarised as seen in Figure 3. below:

<i><b>Pronett design principles</b></i>	<i><b>Web Portal Element</b></i>	<i><b>Functionality</b></i>
<b>Empowerment</b> of individual (student) teachers.	<i>Personal Workspace</i>	<b>Web based virtual project room, facilities for designing flexible learning.</b>
<b>Enabling</b> the production of innovative and customized learning materials and environments.	<i>Edu-Tools</i>	<b>Educational engines and templates.</b>
<b>Support</b> for communication and collaboration by professionals.	<i>RoundTable Forum</i>	<b>Help and advice, knowledge sharing, offer and demand of products and services.</b>
<b>Access</b> to and re-use of learning objects. Resource for ICT-E curriculum (e.g. meta-evaluation)	<i>Project Catalogue</i>	<b>Show and Share results of course assignments and work related projects. Quality assessment.</b>

Fig. 3: Pronett Design Principles

<sup>8</sup> CSCL = Computer Supported Collaborative Learning

### **3. Implementing the Pronett portal at Archimedes Lerarenopleiding**

#### **3.1 Implementation context**

Next to contributing to the general PRONETT Project objectives the Utrecht based projectpartner defined targets to support the further development of The Utrecht Curriculum Model and in this way also contribute to the realisation of the ICT-rich Teacher Education Provision as benchmarked by the Dutch national EPS-ICTnetwork and as adopted by the federation of Dutch TT-providers, ADEF, described above (see figure 1).

#### **3.2 Goals**

With a view to the state of development of the local organisation special focus was given to the following domains and respective aspects of the ICT-rich TT-provision model:

*Policy:* pilots to support further operationalisation of the regional partnership in the ILT-domain

*Trainer/Mentor competences:* use of VLEs to support blended learning, coaching of production and assessment of web based materials

*Infrastructure:* unrestricted access for regional partners to a shared IT-facility (web portal)

*Primary processes:* learning by doing, trainees are prepared to use ICT in internship/dual workplace, promotion of flexibility.

Expected results of the pilot implementation phase were:

- An evaluation of the feasibility of using school based defined needs as input for curriculum activities.
- A scenario and materials for the full implementation of a demand driven curriculum where ICT-rich education is concerned.
- A contribution to the evaluation of the Graphical User Interface of the Pronett Portal: data collection of user experiences

#### **3.3 Strategy**

A plan for the pilot implementation phase was developed in line with the guidelines suggested in (Collis & Moonen 2001, p.45-66) and adopted as a generic Pronett implementation approach..

The present paper focuses on the experiments by individual teacher educators in the Modern Language Teams. The students involved were in a curricular stream that combines subject studies and professional preparation. For more information on other elements of the Utrecht strategy targeted at implementation of the dual mode curriculum (e.g. operationalisation of regional collaboration with affiliate placement schools) we refer to (Koenraad, 2003).

### **4 Pilots in the Modern Language Department**

#### **4.1 Participation and motivation**

Four teacher educators in 3 different teams (English, French and Spanish) decided to participate in the pilot implementation. After presentation of the portal functionality trainers selected an EFL and a FLE-methodology course involving the production of web based materials as the context for experimentation. For the teachers in the Spanish department participation meant facilitation of the planned redesign (integrating Internet resources) of a language skills training course. The main considerations of all concerned were the provision

of facilities for computer supported collaborative production of materials and the opportunity for students to actually publish their results<sup>9</sup>.

*...In the last few years, the main source for finding authentic material on current issues, has been internet. Students find all sorts of texts suitable for both starting and advanced language learners on a variety of sites. Next to that, as a teacher training college we try to stimulate students to make their materials web based to promote the use of computers in language teaching. The concept we chose to work with in this course is the Webquest, originally designed by the American Bernie Dodge. As this course also involves co-operative learning, a virtual learning environment would be excellent to exchange ideas, to publish produced materials, communicate about the process and to give each other feedback. For that reason I (being tutor of the course) chose to take part in the Pronett pilot...(Renselaar)*

The trainers, with a view to their personal professional development, also welcomed the chance of experimenting with virtual environments and blended<sup>10</sup> learning.

#### 4.2 Course characteristics

The aim of the courses selected for the second and third year EFL and FLE students is to develop competences in the domain of modern language pedagogy. The main objective is enhancement of understanding of instructional effectiveness concepts by applying SLA<sup>11</sup>-theory in the design, adaptation and customization of educational materials.

Typical activities and tasks are:

- motivated selection of authentic resources (paper / multimedia) on the basis of instructional criteria,
- presentation of educational reviews of course book materials and URLs,
- design of communicative activities and WebQuests for a specific target group of learners in the 12-16 age range.

The 7-week courses are part of the preparation for the subsequent placement period in the students' final (4th) year.

The Spanish course

The availability of individual workspaces for students was seen as an opportunity to implement a task based approach in a skills development course for first year students focusing on reading and writing. Students were expected to produce an electronic magazine (Revist@ Digital) on a theme of their own choosing for a target audience of learners in a school setting. Also elements from the methodological curriculum line were included by having students design tasks and learning activities for the materials they included in the Revist@s they produced.

#### 4.3 Course preparations

On the basis of the available, paper based course syllabus the teacher educators and the Pronett coach collaboratively developed ideas and defined the related functional specifications for the online support of the courses. The technical realisation of the support structure was then realised by the Pronett team. Fig. 4. below shows a workspace-folder of one of the participating teachers to support her methodology course 'Making Materials'.

<sup>9</sup> Up to 2002 individual trainers and students did not have access to local web publication facilities.

<sup>10</sup> We adopt the definition of 'blended learning' as: the combination of online learning and classroom training; it consist of a mix of ICT supported learning activities combined with some traditional classroom activities".

<sup>11</sup> SLA = Second Language Acquisition

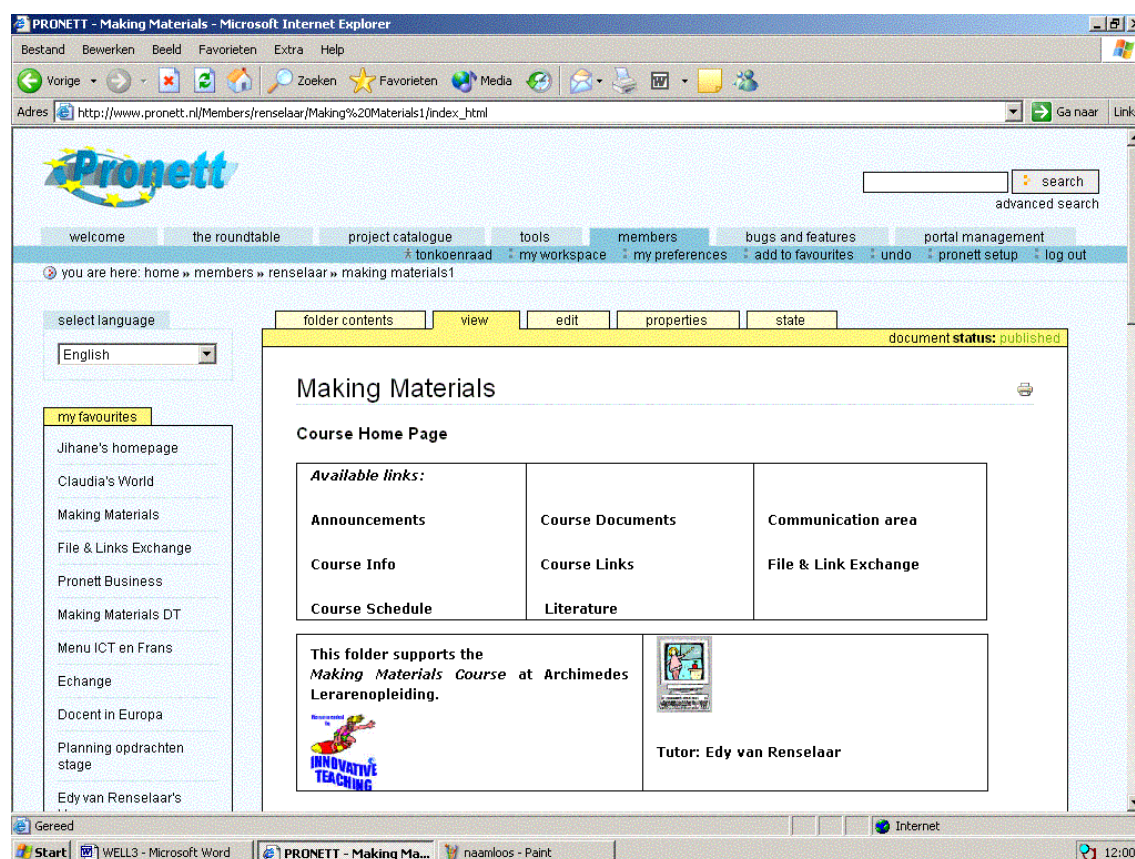


Fig.4: Course folder in Teacher's Workspace

Assuming that most menu-options are self evident a brief comment on the links 'Communication Area' and 'File & Link Exchange'. The tutor made these two folders in her workspace accessible for the students. In the folder 'Communication Area' she offered the opportunity for asynchronous written communication by running a forum facility, one of the generic Pronett *content types*<sup>iv</sup> for use in members' workspaces. In the 'File & Link Exchange' folder students could publish first ideas for and concept versions of WebQuests, share links that they had found to be practical for the tasks at hand and to copy the Pronett version of the WebQuest template to their personal workspaces.

Some training was given to the teacher educators to develop the vital skills for the realisation of their role as e-moderator (e.g uploading relevant documents, presentation of links, placing last minute messages, allocating rights to individual students for specific folders, providing feedback on interim student products).

As the courses required students to develop web-based materials also some specific templates (WebQuest, E-zine format) were developed. Partly to avoid the need for training students in the use of yet another piece of software beside Pronett (e.g. FrontPage) and partly to facilitate the publishing process of those materials within the Pronett environment.

To support the introduction of the portal to new users a practicum was developed. The materials (in Dutch) have also been made available in online version (Tutorial).

### 4.3 Realisation

Six groups of EFL/FLE full- and part time students (n=73) were involved in the pilot. Each individual student registered and had thus access to his/her personal workspace. For the production of the WebQuests students were expected to work in dyads.

In most cases the full time students had a teacher led/supervised, two-hour, f2f-meeting once a week. After an introductory session the students of Spanish (n= 27) were supposed to work autonomously in groups of 4 and produce a Revist@ Digital over a period of 1.5 months. Intermediate coaching and support was provided during 2 additional plenary sessions.

### 4.4. Evaluation

All groups met the course requirements and actually produced WebQuests and Revista materials<sup>v</sup>. Products were shown and results reported and discussed (peer and tutor feedback) during a final plenary session. No formal assessment procedure was followed for publication of course products in the Pronett materials database. The teacher trainers involved required compliance with course requirements and the related criteria set for final products. For the students of French this meant applying the LanguageQuest design principles and the related evaluation rubric developed by the TalenQuest project (Koenraad, 2002b; Koenraad & Westhoff, 2003).

#### Collaboration: Your place or mine?

Little virtual collaboration was observed. Most student collaboration took place during the f2f-meetings or during worksessions at the institute. Student dyads usually sat together in front of PC's adding or editing content in one of the partner's folders. The Spanish workgroups appointed one of them as webmaster so that one folder in this student's workspace could be used as a virtual editorial boardroom and for the hosting of the final product.

#### Content Management system

Only a minority of the students decided (or managed?) to actually register their final product in the catalogue. The possibility of adding specific metadata to finished products was scarcely used. This led to assessment problems as these products could not be traced by tutors or peers.

#### Evaluation of the Graphical User Interface (GUI) of the Pronett Portal

Student reactions can be characterized as highly heterogenous. They vary from enthusiastic to highly critical. A relatively frequently reported comment is that the site offers more functionality than users feel they can cope with.

To illustrate the variety in appreciation we summarize below the written evaluations by the students of Spanish (forms n = 9, representing 7 teams) by formulating three positions and examples of related representative (translated) statements.

- Pronett is difficult, not user friendly enough, too advanced for us considering the ICT knowledge available and training received (n=4)

*I did not like working with Pronett at all as I found it too difficult. I need to add that I have only limited experience with ICT. But still, the portal site is not easy. Besides it was not finished when we started: at the time we could not publish Spanish accents and that sort of things. The course*

*was not geared to people with less experience. Besides, it is possible to produce more attractive websites in other sites.*

- Pronett is educationally innovative; it was fun to do this project: learned new things in the ICT-domain. But some technical problems were experienced e.g. accents (in Urls) (n=3)

*I enjoyed working with Pronett. The tutorial and the presence of the project intern made it quite manageable. However, some more work on the userfriendliness of the software would be welcome.*

- A publication facility is appreciated. More introduction, coaching / helpdesk service needed in the use of Pronett-workspaces and the Revista Digital Template (n=4)

*We learned from this project. It was fun to produce your own E-zine and see it published. But more instruction and support in the use of the portal and the production of html-docs are needed.*

Having looked at a number of model WebQuests available on the web some students had the impression that Pronett limited their ambitions in designing well styled (special fonts, use of pictures, frame-based template etc) webquests and some started experimenting with other facilities on the web such as free webhosting sites and online (WebQuest)-editors. Yet, here too, some frustration was incurred as banners with advertisements had to be tolerated or the necessary ICT-skills involved (html, ftp, Frontpage) were not readily available.

Informal evaluative remarks by the teachers also indicated that students found it confusing to learn to work with a new GUI and the WebQuest template provided simultaneously<sup>vi</sup>. Use of the visual editor was not felt to be helpful at this stage.

#### Tutors' Reflections

To determine strengths and weaknesses and link performance to subsequent action After Action Reviews (AARs) were held with the teacher educators.

*Most students found their way into Pronett, but only few became regular visitors. The ones who put their files on it were enthusiastic about the possibilities to view each other's work. Others, however, failed to visit the space regularly for various reasons (their reasons being: password didn't work, couldn't find their way in pronett etc.).*

*To publish the Webquest in Pronett, a simplified template was designed. Although not without flaws, it turned out to be an accessible way to design materials according to this concept.*

*In conclusion I could say that in this pilot we investigated the possibilities of the virtual learning space Pronett, but haven't been able to use it to its fullest extend yet. The main reason seems being unfamiliar with and complexity of the newly designed space. Besides that, students have to deal with several virtual communication areas which makes them sometimes choose for other options than Pronett (e.g. their regular e-mail account to communicate)...(Renselaar)*

The teachers involved in this pilot did not have any or only limited experience in using a VLE. Most did not really see a need and/or could find the time to exploit the course support site provided in their workspace to actively experiment with e-learning and moderating. Retrospectively however the participation in and evaluation of this pilot made some of them realise the chances offered for internationalisation and L2-use in authentic contexts. And for

students to practice collaborating virtually and do educational projects. An example in this respect is the French trainer's idea to further explore the use of the portal to support eTandem<sup>12</sup> language learning approaches between Utrecht and Belgium based students.

Some points for improvements in the teaching modules suggested are:

- include a task to publish a homepage in L2
- use the public visibility of published products to:
  - include 'writing for the web'-training
  - generate more attention for L2 language aspects (focus on form, writing conventions, cultural issues)
- plan editorial procedures involving peer feedback
- include explicit information how to technically support the collaboration and production process

It was also suggested that tutors should make arrangements to make inspection of the products possible (e.g by having students provide links to or locate their (concept) products (in discussable form) in a folder designated for this purpose. Thus peer- and teacher feedback can be supported and the history of comments stays visible and can be shared, also with the greater Pronett community.

Furthermore trainers thought it would greatly help if students had prior experience with and understanding of the WebQuest concept as many students seemingly could not cope with the multi-tasking that this course module asked for:

- a) understanding the theoretical concepts underpinning the TalenQuest concept
- b) applying the design principles involved
- c) producing a product while functioning in a production team/dyad
- d) getting familiar with a virtual environment
- e) using this environment for virtual collaboration
- f) using this environment (or the customized template) for the publication of the product.

This could be realized by making students familiar with the TalenQuest format by including them in the language learning curriculum line and the introduction of the concepts involved in the methodology modules.

Finally, we have also come to realise that to really benefit from the Pronett environment for an integrated approach to competence development in the areas of e-learning and CALL-methodology and the related ICTskills existing courses need to be redesigned to include these goals.

## **5. Discussion of Results**

### **5.1 Flexibility**

The experiments have shown that it is possible, with very limited developmental work, to support such diverse contexts of use as:

- an online support for 'traditional' courses
- the provision of tools and publication facilities for educational design courses
- a stimulating environment for task based language learning activities

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on this strand of the Tandem Project we refer to its website at: <http://www.slf.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/etandem/etindex-en.html>

- virtual facilities to support collaborative activities and personal and project team rooms

This flexibility is seen as an advantage over standard VLEs<sup>13</sup> and is well appreciated by the competent ICT-users. This very feature, however, also causes problems for less sophisticated users. Some of whom – in the context of a particular course - felt that the options offered were not in balance with the tasks required or even frustrated an efficient realisation.

This illustrates another dilemma. Providing especially formatted folders and specific templates is meant as a support for users who are less competent in the use of ICT in the personal domain. Yet these templates also add to the total volume of functionality that the user has access to. This strategy has another disadvantage: we found that it stimulates the user to see the portal as a production tool. Instead the system should present itself conceptually as a facility for webpublication and content management. The portal supports various textformats and html for webpublication; any editing tools familiar to the user that has plain text or html-files as output (e.g Word) can be used for content production.

## 5.2 User Interface

As the scope of the project did not allow a very elaborate user experience research<sup>14</sup> it is not easy to draw straightforward conclusions from the user reactions. Reports from other project partners seem to indicate that the Utrecht based students are relatively more critical. To what extent this is related to more emphasis on or better training in ICT skills and concepts elsewhere is as yet unclear.

As a project we have defined the following minimal competencies:

*In order to work with the Pronett portal objects and properties the user must be proficient in the basic skills of computing. File management, directory structures, web file transfer and Microsoft word editing and development are all essential and necessary skills for the effective utilization of the Pronett portal. Likewise familiarity with site searching and metadata will offer greater potential to users in terms of content management on the Pronett portal (Parnell, 2003)*

Yet the evaluation research of user experiences with the interface indicate that some improvements need to be made to enlarge the intuitiveness of the portal interface and the personal workspaces in particular. In educational terms it appears that to benefit maximally from the functionality offered when the portal is used as a Virtual Project Room Environment (VPRE), teacher educators and students alike will have to be explicitly introduced to some of the available features to become confident and independent users. For similar findings see (van Vliet et al., 2003).

## 5.3 The trans-national dimension

Contrary to expectation (especially where the language students were concerned) no overt attempts to make international contacts have been registered.

Hardly any observable computer mediated communication took place beyond course or project groups, even within the same language community, let alone trans-nationally. Possible explanations are: no real need considering the many f2f contact opportunities for the production groups and limited internet access from home.

<sup>13</sup> For a similar conclusion also see (van Vliet et al., 2003))

<sup>14</sup> Elements not included were e.g.: (contents of) previous ICT-training received, attitude towards ICT-E, level of ICT-skills, personal experience with virtual learning or collaboration, goal and context of portal use, use of Pronett help files. Or technology related problem causes, e.g. log-in trouble because of use of a Cookie-disabled PC at home etc.

We assume that a course period of 7 weeks dedicated to the production of web based materials can only foster such communications if the production teams are international and/or explicit tasks for this domain are set.

## **6. Further efforts needed**

Although the portal could compensate for the absence of a local VLE and supports the realisation of educational ICT-based design projects, full implementation is not likely to occur if the prospective users are not convinced of its added value over installed ICT-facilities for students, teachers and educators.

The awareness of teacher educators should be raised as to the differences with 'traditional' VLEs and this type of content management systems. In this context the opportunities it offers for future competence and personal professional development (Simons, 2002, p.40-41; van Eck, 2002, p. 31-39) should be pointed out. The possibility of developing the database for local and international support for knowledge sharing on use and design of learning objects (Cohere Group, 2000) e.g. by making professional feedback visible and facilitating resource based teaching (meta-evaluation of final products) should be more explicitly highlighted.

The complexities involved in developing a distributed community of practice across organisations were also reported by other project partners. Development of local community cells will be given priority as of September 2003, as the existence of active local groups is seen as preconditional for the germination of an international dimension.

As to the overall design philosophy for the portal the experiences, talks and evaluations seem to indicate that the accent in future development should be rather on the improvement of the individual workspaces (virtual project rooms) and ease of content production.

At the same time it has become clear that – in cases where Pronett activities also involve language practice aims - another strategy is to be explored at project level: the teaming up between partner based teacher educators involved in comparable curriculum activities.

We will proceed to develop the Pronett-portal as a sandbox offering local and regional opportunities for educational ICTcompetence development in areas such as virtual cooperation, educational design, blended learning, e-moderating etc..)

Top priority for the Pronett project team in the final project year, however, is the adoption of the portal facilities by (future) users. Improvements are planned in three areas:

- a) Ease of use: e.g. more options as to actual use of functionality; improved facilities in personal workspaces for local projects, more facilities for member grouping etc.
- b) Detailed documentation of 'innovative practice'.
- c) Explicit training for all concerned on how to use the workspaces:  
Topics for students e.g. are ways and procedures for collaboration, for educators how to technically realize vital e-moderating functions.

### **Interested in using the PRONETT portal?**

The Graphical User Interface of the portal will be updated in September 2003 on the basis of the results of the pilots by the project core partners and the accompanying user evaluation research. Scaling up the partnership by further internationalisation (offering more language

options/versions) is high on the 2004 project agenda. Other TT-provider organisations or individual (student) teachers and teacher educators are cordially invited to freely use the facilities, share experiences and/or join our initiative to define a follow-up e-learning EU-project.

Other services that can be made available are:

- providing (hosting) the portal to other educational projects
- lease of portal space to host third party EduZope products
- customization of the Pronett portal for use in (educational and related professional) organisations
- Consultancy in areas such as educational community building, implementation issues in regional collaboration, instruction in web based Edtech design, internationalisation, Zope/Plone application development.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> The Key Elements of 'The Utrecht model'

### Partnership

The partnership aims to collaborate in three domains: teacher education, professional development and innovation. Cooperation occurs both at management level (steering groups) and on the workfloor: mixed working parties operationalising models and realising implementation. The partnership is supported by a website: <http://www.samenopleiden.nl>

### Competence based learning

From the competence standards supported by the national, professional associations SBL and ADEF, a programme has been developed based on 4 curriculum-lines:

- workplace related experiences and reflections
- integration: learning from projects studying on real educational problems in schools (preferably in a commissioned setting)
- concepts and skills: mastering of subject content and pedagogy

- professional development: personal development (portfolio), coaching

### **Customized programmes**

Entry assessments (a.o. profiling of previously acquired expertise and competences) lead to individual training programmes. Certificates come with Addenda specifying which competences have been acquired within what schoolsetting. Together with a digital portfolio this is meant to provide a solid base for further professional development and life long learning.

### **Workplace based learning**

All programmes are dual mode: working (paid jobs) and learning combined.

Young (17-19) first year students start as teaching assistants. Specially trained school based coaches and teacher educators collectively support and monitor the students.

### **Lectureships**

Three lectureships have been established to support the innovation of the teacher training programmes by action research. The focus areas are: teaching in the multicultural school, behavioural problems in teaching practice, innovative pedagogy for competence based teacher education.

ii Monitoring of schools (primary, secondary, vocational and adult education) and the TT-provision for primary and secondary education has taken place on a yearly basis since 1997. For a summary in English of trends in the first 4 years see (Kral et al 2002). Since 2001 a qualitative dimension focussing on 'learning and teaching' has been added to the quantitative (ICT in figures) studies of the previous years.

More trends based on the various reports are:

- secondary schools rate their use of ICT for learning as 'beginning'
- although on the increase, the personal ICT productivity skills of teachers still lag behind those of the students and pupils.
- The overall picture is that ICT as didactic tool has not been adequately integrated in the teacher training pedagogy. Trainers' ICT expertise is at the level of basic skills, excepting those involved in expert centers.
- Students also report a praxisshock as to the actual facilities and possibilities at the placement schools and their own competencies. Discipline matters were of paramount importance to them. ICT turned out to be more of burden than a solution in this respect

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iii For more information on Plone and other academic parties and individuals interested in educational applications of this CMS see: <http://plone.org/Members/batlogg/newsitems/2003-06-eduzope>

iv Content types are standard objects that members can use and customise in their workspaces. Examples are: an image file, a folder, a forum.

v WebQuest Examples for French and English and a Spanish Revist@ Digital can be viewed at:

EFL WebQuest: Myers FM

[http://www.pronett.nl/Members/Luciano/WebQuest/document\\_view](http://www.pronett.nl/Members/Luciano/WebQuest/document_view)

FLE WebQuest: Les expressions francaises

<http://www.pronett.org/Members/manongrise1/WebQuests/Expressions>

Revist@ Digital: Lolita

<http://www.pronett.nl/Members/susanita/Lolita/Lolita>

vi The most outspoken criticism came from a group of full time students of English. A further analysis made clear that they – in the 7-week course period – had been introduced to 4 different ICT study tools and environments, not counting the local network log-on procedure: a Yahoo folder holding the course materials and assignments-upload facilities for an ICT-course; the Conference software First Class Client with the same course environment and the use of their personal folders; the Pronett portal; some WebQuest templates and the Pronett customised WQ-version.