

The Virtual Course-Room as a Complement to Face-to-Face Tuition

Gabriele Frank-Voutsas

Educational Liaison, Goethe-Institut Athens, Frank@athen.goethe.org

Abstract

In this presentation the term Virtual Course-Room (VCR) is used to describe a structured Moodle-room offered as an additional service for students attending Goethe-Institut language classes. It consists of 3 levels: Level 1 is mainly course documentation, level 2 offers students a choice of online resources for independent language learning, and level 3 makes full use of the interactive tools of the VCR, integrating online activities into face-to-face tuition. Together with interactive whiteboards becoming standard equipment of the classrooms, the aim of this concept is the hybridization of classroom learning.

Students benefit from the possibility to keep up with their course in case they miss a lesson as well as from additional training opportunities and detailed information on the Goethe-Institut's examinations. The electronic course book makes course targets and progress transparent. Students can, and many do, subscribe to the course-book, thus getting new entries as soon as they are posted. Moreover the virtual course-room can help to achieve a genuine pedagogical objective, which is a more learner-centred approach and personalized learning, often difficult to be realized in face-to-face classes.

An important advantage of working with the VCR is the improvement of the teachers' ICT knowledge and abilities. Being familiar with some major developments in the field of learning and teaching allows them to keep a high degree of professionalism and they more readily accept that their role as teachers is changing. New ways of learning and communicating are not envisaged as threats but as a chance to make the lesson more attractive and to feel part of the modern teachers' community.

Keywords

virtual course-room, online course-room, hybridization of classroom training

From the Electronic Course-Book to the Virtual Course-Room

In 2007, when the Goethe-Institut adopted Moodle as a tool for language classes and teacher training, the reactions of the Goethe-Institutes abroad varied, as could be foreseen, from interest to disapproval. For those who had already experimented with different forms of digital lesson documentation, Moodle seemed to be the tool they had been waiting for.

One of these was the Goethe-Institut in Athens, which will serve to illustrate how the Virtual Course-Room (VCR) was implemented. From October 2008, all language courses in Athens were enriched with an electronic course-book (ECB), which was a Moodle-room in a weekly format; all classrooms were equipped with internet access, a laptop and a video projector, and all teachers were expected to document their face-to-face lessons in their Moodle-rooms. To this end they were introduced into editing a Moodle-room and also, but mainly through a technical approach, into the use of what we considered basic tools: They were shown how to upload a file or link a website, how to add a glossary, a discussion forum, a wiki and a chat-room. They were given printed instructions with step-by-step screenshots and some examples of how these tools could enhance learning and teaching. They were also encouraged to ask two colleagues who were more familiar with Moodle for help, either individually or at two fixed appointments per week.

The results were ECBs varying from very plain to quite elaborate, depending not only on the teachers' commitment to informational content, clarity and aesthetic sense, but also on their readiness to explore new teaching tools and to offer their students new ways of learning. In the meantime, Goethe-Institutes in other countries had also started courses with ECBs. As a result a variety of different ECBs were being used worldwide; e.g. in Rome the lesson's documentation was sent as a forum post, thus keeping the course's homepage the size of the browser's window. The fast and manifold development of ECBs led to the question of

how quality standards regarding content and design could be assured for the 149 Goethe-Institutes in 93 countries around the world. Clearly this could only be achieved by means of a course room template, applicable to all Goethe-Institut language courses. That is how the structured, 3-level Virtual Course-Room (VCR) came into existence.

The 3-level structure of the Virtual Course-Room

Level 1 includes the documentation of every lesson, stating its learning targets, content, extra material and homework for the next lesson. Other features are teacher forums, attendance records, links to online services of textbooks, information about aspired examinations (if applicable) and rss feed of the local Goethe-Institut's cultural program. Teachers may use the platform to help students with their homework.

Level 2 gives students access to online exercises and dictionaries, to informational websites related to Germany and to the questionnaires "Evaluation of the Language Course" and "Evaluation of the VCR". Although the exercises are self-correcting and categorized according to levels of language competence, teachers are expected to make collective or individual recommendations to their students.

Level 3 includes the use of Moodle's interactive tools, where teachers (and sometimes students) generate their own tasks and activities and students interact with their teacher and peers. To this end, abundant material and support is being produced and will soon be available, together with new (VCR-) tools, such as learning cards and tools for easy audio recording, mind mapping and collaborative writing.

Challenges and potentials for Goethe-Institut's language classes

When introducing the VCR into all courses of a Goethe-Institut simultaneously, regardless of how familiar teachers were with ICT, the structured VCR was a great help. Of the 3-level template only level 1 is obligatory for teachers while the other levels are hidden by default. In this way teachers could become familiar with their Moodle-room at their own pace. The first challenge for all of them was the change from printed to electronic course books which was more than a change from handwritten to digital editing (Chen et al., 2005). Goethe-Institut language classes have always been documented, but the ECB implied a shift of perspective: Printed course books documented lessons in a minimalistic way, intended to inform a substitute teacher in case of absence and to allow a supervisor to track the progress of a course program. The ECB still serves these needs, but must also be comprehensible to students.

While this objective was soon achieved, the major challenge of course was to introduce the meaningful use of interactive tools into face-to-face tuition, to exploit their full potential and add new possibilities of communication, collaboration and self-determined learning into the classroom (McBrie & Jones, 2009). Despite the teachers' professionalism in terms of conventional language teaching and despite specific training material, relatively few teachers made extensive and regular use of Moodle's interactive tools (VCR level 3). It became obvious that Moodle-workshops, even if they went beyond technical aspects, could not bring about the necessary skills and expertise. What we really needed was a new approach to classroom learning and teaching, in which the web would be integrated into face-to-face tuition.

That is why this year a group of expert teachers were assigned the development of course material for hybrid classroom activities. At the same time and in close cooperation with the teachers, a group of professionals in both conventional and digital didactics took up writing a teacher's handbook on how to hybridize classroom learning. It will provide explicit answers to what, why and how to use interactive tools and contain detailed lesson scenarios.

With interactive white boards having become a standard in most Goethe-Institut classrooms last year, all technical devices are given for a systematic introduction of online activities into face-to-face-tuition. Our vision is that students and teachers will freely move between the sheltered world of the classroom and the open universe of the internet.

References

- Chen, N. S., Ko, H. C., Kinshuk, & Lin, T. (2005). A model for synchronous learning using the internet. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 42(2), 181–194.
- McBrien, J. L., & Jones, P. (2009). Virtual spaces: Employing a synchronous online classroom to facilitate student engagement in online learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3).