What is a virtual class?

Report on Group 1 Discussion 1

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ABSTRACT

This document summarises the discussion of Group 1 on the morning of 4 February 2016. We discussed the challenges and opportunities of virtual classes, and considered when in the course it may be best to introduce virtual classes. Finally, we examined the practicalities of virtual class organisation.

Challenges

We acknowledged that virtual classes (VCs) are associated with special challenges. These may include technological difficulties, especially when the simultaneous mode is used. Technical checks may be time consuming because of, for example, availability of technicians and university bureaucracy. Another area of difficulty may be integrating trainer feedback during the VC due to time constraints. It can be difficult for trainers to know when/if they can intervene to provide feedback or whether there is time for this. In terms of feedback, it can be difficult to differentiate between teaching and assessment in a VC. Because trainers based in Brussels may only see students perform once, or perhaps infrequently, their feedback is based on one performance and cannot take into account a student's individual progress, which is perhaps why the VCs sometimes feel like a test for students. It should be made clear that the performance is being assessed and not the student. Student participation in VCs may present another difficulty. Sometimes students may feel discriminated against because they do not get the chance to work in a VC. On the flip side, some students do not want to work in the VCs because they feel that their language combination is of little interest to Brussels. Finally, in multi-lateral VCs, efficiency is seen as a problem (due to language imbalances, for instance).

Opportunities

However, the group felt that VCs also offer special opportunities. They give students direct contact with the professional world, and may be seen as an exciting opportunity. The VC may also be stressful for students, thereby giving them a chance to practice stress management skills. It can be positive to expose students to stress. Students may also appreciate feedback from external, professionally experienced trainers, who may provide a different point of view or use different words to explain something. Equally, this third-party assessment of a student's progress can help validate feedback provided by in-house trainers. Multi-lateral VCs can allow students to network and feel part of a larger interpreting community.

Timing of the first VC

The group also discussed when in the course VCs are introduced, and when they should be introduced. The general feeling in the group was that the timing of the first VC depends on the course structure – in some courses, where training lasts for one year, the first VC comes early on in the course. In longer courses, VCs are gradually introduced. There are advantages in both instances. Where VCs are introduced early on, students can be plunged straight in at the deep end; they have an immediate contact with the professional world, and trainers in Brussels can immediately validate university trainer feedback. Where VCs are introduced later, students may feel more comfortable with the mechanics of the process (e.g. note-taking) before the first VC. Students do not feel overburdened by too many things at once. Furthermore, in some courses, students do not all start off on an even pegging (some already have consecutive training, for example) and so

introducing VCs later on levels the playing field as all students will have received some training.

Trainer responsibilities

Trainers have a variety of responsibilities before, during and after a VC. Before a VC, trainers should ensure that they are on time, and that they print out the script of the VC. The main trainer should ensure that all other trainers are aware of the time constraints involved in a VC. The VC should be prepared, both in the immediate run-up (e.g. sound tests) and ahead of time (e.g. liaison, indicating students' levels). During the VC, trainers should be alert and reactive, and in general be a reassuring presence for students. In general, we felt that the role of university trainers *during* the VC was the least well defined. Finally, after the VC, trainers should provide a debriefing, both generally and for individual students who have worked in a VC. They should ensure that students leave the VC feeling motivated, for instance by encouraging them to set specific objectives.

Can virtual replace face-to-face?

We discussed whether virtual distance teaching should replace face-to-face teaching. The short answer was No! Face-to-face teaching allows trainers to follow the progression of students and take their individual needs into account in a way that distance teaching cannot. Furthermore, in a university environment, students can interact with peers, benefitting from peer feedback for example.

The dos and don'ts

In conclusion, we looked at some dos and don'ts of VCs.

Do:
- Arrive early, or at the very least on time
- Manage expectations – students should be aware, for example, that it is their performance at that time and on that day that will be assessed
- Advise of level – let the institutions know students level ahead of time
- Print out the script

Don't:
- Panic
- Blame the institutions – instead make sure that student's set a positive objective afterwards