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Conclusions from the first symposium on the distance and semi-presence-based learning of tradumàtica

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If there is a statement with which we have all been in agreement during this symposium, it is that, more than ever, translators are required to have a range of skills in order to not only perform tasks that correspond exclusively to translation but also those that are inherent to the fields of terminology, localisation, documentation, technical writing, assessment, project management, etc. Given these circumstances, lecturers in faculties of translation and interpreting are faced with the challenge of constantly refreshing and broadening the scope of their knowledge, in addition to providing students with other channels, whether by way of support or as a complete alternative, so that those who are unable to attend classes have the chance to learn just as other students do. This situation has given rise to talk of today's lecturers having to become "supereducators" who must be able to cater for the needs of presence-based, semi-presence-based and distance learning alike.

Presence-based and distance learning, or e-learning, to be more specific in the latter case, are not direct competitors; in fact, both teaching methods can be combined to complement each other mutually and optimise education. Furthermore, a gradual incorporation of aspects of e-learning into presence-based education would lead to semi-presence-based education, something that seems inevitable anyway in the medium or long term due to the present nature of the collective of university students in general, and of students of translation and interpreting in particular.

A change in the working mentality of lecturers and students must be accompanied by appropriate renewal and restructuring of content, which must necessarily be dynamic and flexible. Some of the speakers who have contributed to the symposium have illustrated this through examples of subjects that are part of the field of tradumàtica (documentation, terminology and IT applied to translation), such as applied IT and specialised translation using tradumàtica-oriented tools.

Various calls for coordination have been heard over the course of the symposium, not only between subjects that correspond to tradumàtica or between lecturers of the different subjects in question, but also among students themselves and, very importantly, between lecturers and students. In the context of semi-presence-based or distance learning, direct contact between lecturers and students is reduced or replaced by other, generally virtual, forms of establishing proximity (e-mail, chat facilities, etc.). Alongside feedback, these means of interaction will become fundamental parts of e-learning, as Montalt states in his article.

At present, e-learning is thus a solution for the problem of distance and availability. Nonetheless, in contrast to the enthusiasm shown in certain academic circles, there is a school of thought that feels that this kind of education is not suited to all types of student nor to all content. The lack of empirical research in both the distance and presence-based branches of

the field of translation teaching is cited, and it is argued that the former option does not, in principle, enrich the acquisition of knowledge, but actually has the opposite effect, in addition to multiplying the workload of teachers and making slaves of them. Furthermore, the content used cannot be the same for students who work with a presence-based approach as for those who work from remote locations, as the capacity for interaction is not the same. It is for this reason that the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya stresses that e-learning cannot be a translation of presence-based education. A new language is becoming necessary and, according to the Universitat Ramon Llull, the challenge would lie in individualising content in order to adapt it to students' specific requirements (people working from remote locations can actually provide a great deal of information, such as how they are finding modules, the time spent on them, the results of exercises, etc.). It is emphasised that, while different from presence-based education, e-learning should not be regarded as an alternative but as a potential complement thereto, and one that makes it possible to offer support activities and provide students with tools that they can use if they wish, reaping the benefits of resources that are freely available over the internet. Moreover, doing so fosters a positive attitude towards such tools, according to Alcina.

As far as students are concerned, aside from the convenience of flexibility in terms of timetables and geographical locations, e-learning can provide them with a cooperative working environment in which the sense of being part of a community plays an important role. The aim of a distance-learning-based approach to tradumàtica or "e-tradumàtica" is to use tools to teach how tools are used. The issue in question therefore consists of transmitting not only declarative knowledge (know-what) but also operative knowledge (know-how). In turn, this has methodological implications, basically due to the fact that there is more to e-learning than simply posting notes on the internet. Multidisciplinary teams are required for the preparation of materials, as are means of motivating and creating groups, of creating virtual communities. In this respect, it may be more appropriate to use a web-based format than CD-ROMs or other media, as the first option offers immediacy and interactivity. It does entail sacrificing a certain degree of quality, especially in terms of videos, although this is perhaps not the most important element where the transmission of knowledge is concerned.

It has also been reiterated that technology must be secondary to pedagogy, although it is true that the former is an area of great importance when using tools to teach how tools are used and working with an internet-based environment. This importance has been reflected at the symposium, along with that attributed to content and methodology.

The technological situation indicates that there are no universal formulae, nor are there good or bad platforms, but rather that everything depends on relevant needs. Furthermore, there is also the possibility of combining different technologies. The more sophisticated the message to be transmitted is, the more demanding and selective it becomes. Different models and options have been examined during the symposium. There is a school of thought that favours substantial bandwidth, with ADSL or cable being identified as a minimum requirement. On the other hand, Francesc Noguera says that, as a public university, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya cannot ask this much of its students and, consequently, its materials are designed to be less demanding in technological terms. In relation to this point, it is also necessary to distinguish between products intended for education within an organisation and those geared to being launched on the market. A solution has been found in the former case, as wiring the area of a building does not involve technological problems and is more economically accessible, for which reason it is unnecessary for content to be restricted. However, technological and financial factors mean that it is less straightforward to address students who are far away.

Germán Talón of the Universitat Ramon Llull is of the opinion that methods of reaching people are currently adapted to technology, for which reason lasting, stable technologies with a future are needed, with a view to making it possible to create applications for them. The requisite for independence from platform manufacturers has given rise to a new debate, namely whether it is preferable to purchase or develop.

There is a point endorsed by all the speakers, and that is that we are only taking the first steps on the path; although technologies with unsuspected potential are being used, very few of the possibilities that they offer are being taken advantage of in general. Joaquim Fernández of the

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Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya states that at least one thing is changing, although we may not be fully aware of it, and that is that we now use more digital than physical documents. New means of organising information are therefore necessary, and we ourselves are the main obstacle where such a change is concerned, as we do not know how to think in terms of new digital technologies. Information should not be thought of as something that is confined, but as an infinite collage, the most important aspect of which consists of the relationships established between units of information. Meanwhile, the role of the author of content has to be separated from that of its producer, although technological supervisors have to provide them with tools that make it easier for them to organise information. In the words of J. Fernández himself, “the current crisis is due to the technology not being used by those with the knowledge”.

In summary, the “first symposium on the distance and semi-presence-based learning of tradumàtica” has served as an opportunity to share thoughts on aspects such as content design, methodology and technology, which, in this case, are very closely linked. Overlooking the differences between presence-based and distance learning, and avoiding emphasising the pros and cons that each approach entails individually, it is necessary to highlight the ideas raised as regards combining both methods with a view to mutual enrichment, and the observation that e-learning could cause a rethink where presence-based education is concerned. In any case, content, methodology and technology applied to the distance and semi-presence-based learning of tradumàtica should not lose sight of the epicentre thereof, namely students, who, regardless of their distance, expect content to be adapted to their learning objectives, methodologies to be appropriate for their needs and technology to be accessible to them.