A global approach to graduate education and research training

MOSER-MERCER, Barbara, CLASS, Barbara

Abstract
Interpreting and translation are professionally oriented fields and universities usually offer skillbuilding degree programs at Masters level. Research orientations of young researchers fall mostly into the categories of library-based and applied field research supervised by faculty whose involvement with the professional practice of translation and interpreting usually seized at the time of their appointment. Thus, few professors in these domains have the dual qualification of professionals and academic researchers leaving doctoral students to compete for limited resources at a global level. Translators and interpreters are a geographically mobile target group, working as independent contractors wherever international conferences take place. This is the context that produced the initial impetus for creating a virtual doctoral school to cater to a mobile student body in need of sound research training. Additional impetus has come from the changing research landscape in higher education and industry, where large, collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects have largely replaced the individual, small-scale study; [...]
A global approach to graduate education and research training

Barbara Moser-Mercer, Barbara Class
Department of Interpreting, Faculty of Translation and Interpreting, University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland
Barbara.Moser@unige.ch
Barbara.Class@unige.ch

Abstract:
Interpreting and translation are professionally oriented fields and universities usually offer skill-building degree programs at Masters level. Research orientations of young researchers fall mostly into the categories of library-based and applied field research supervised by faculty whose involvement with the professional practice of translation and interpreting usually seized at the time of their appointment. Thus, few professors in these domains have the dual qualification of professionals and academic researchers leaving doctoral students to compete for limited resources at a global level. Translators and interpreters are a geographically mobile target group, working as independent contractors wherever international conferences take place. This is the context that produced the initial impetus for creating a virtual doctoral school to cater to a mobile student body in need of sound research training. Additional impetus has come from the changing research landscape in higher education and industry, where large, collaborative and interdisciplinary research projects have largely replaced the individual, small-scale study; how to overhaul traditional structures for research training to successfully meet new challenges has therefore become another important dimension of the project; in addition, ensuring quality in doctoral education together with creating and maintaining a network of highly experienced researchers are two goals that are embedded in the larger objectives of this project. The pilot is staged on a web-based portal already used to offer different degree programs at the Interpreting Department of the University of Geneva. Six individual and collaborative learning activities have been designed to address different dimensions of the research cycle. Project evaluation addresses all three stakeholders - doctoral students, faculty, and designers - and is based on both opinion data and real data retrieved from the learning portal and is designed to provide proof-of-concept for virtual collaborative doctoral research training.

Keywords: graduate school, virtual learning environment, proof-of-concept.

1. Introduction

The field of translation and interpreting is multilingual, multicultural and interdisciplinary. Graduate degree programs have a strong professional orientation and emphasize skill-building rather than scientific inquiry. Graduates enter the labor market as practitioners and comparatively few decide to embark on a research career, while at the same time continuing their professional practice as translators, terminologists and interpreters. The two professions are highly mobile, moving with the demand for their services. Only very few universities around the world can offer doctoral students in this field the opportunity to work under the guidance of professors who have the dual qualification of professionals and academic researchers. Leveraging limited available resources and catering to a geographically mobile target group provided the initial impetus for this project. The globalization of research in higher education and the need to pool resources and collaborate across disciplinary boundaries represent important additional dimensions of this project.
2. The project

The project provides for the design and development of a virtual doctoral program that meets the following objectives:

- Global sharing of relevant research competence across universities around the world;
- Leveraging distributed expertise and intellectual traditions from different scientific cultures, closely related to the field of translation, interpreting and terminology;
- Ensuring quality in doctoral education in the field of translation, interpreting, and terminology;
- Creating and maintaining a network of highly experienced researchers in a comparatively small scientific discipline.

The project is in line with the recommendations issued by the Rectors' Conference of Swiss Universities (CRUS – [www.crus.ch](http://www.crus.ch)) for the time period 2013-2016; these emphasize excellence in research, a structured approach to research training including networking and knowledge-sharing among doctoral students, and insist on a minimum number of registered students for doctoral schools to ensure the transition from the traditional isolation of doctoral students to a more networked and social research environment for any given discipline.

In addition, the following guidelines serve as benchmarks for the project:

- Quality guidelines for undergraduate and graduate programs at the University of Geneva ([http://www.unige.ch/rectorat/static/dimensions_programmes.pdf](http://www.unige.ch/rectorat/static/dimensions_programmes.pdf));

The pilot project focuses on the design, development and deployment of an integrated introductory learning module, which will go on-line in June 2013. Doctoral students from interpreting, translation and terminology at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting will constitute the target audience. The objectives of this pilot within the framework of the overall project are:

1) To identify common knowledge and skill elements across the three sub-disciplines;
2) To integrate these elements in a pilot module offered to all doctoral students of the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting on the Interpreting Department’s web-based PhD portal;
3) To include faculty from all three sub-disciplines in providing feedback on students’ submissions;
4) Pilot evaluation that includes the three stakeholders: doctoral students, faculty, designers.
3. Learning environment

The pilot is staged on a web-based portal already used to offer different degree programs at the Interpreting Department (Moser-Mercer, Class & Seeber 2005; Class & Moser-Mercer 2011; Class & Schneider 2012). The pilot module’s mix of six individual and collaborative learning activities addresses dimensions of the research cycle, the identification of research questions, research ethics, research methods, and the communication of research results. These activities are to be completed online in the dedicated virtual learning environment (VLE) within a period of five weeks and will be subject to formative and summative evaluation.

The course description functionality provides clear guidance as to the completion of the required task (see Fig.1). The forum and activity-specific threads bring together students and faculty to discuss the work in an open and collaborative way. A Wiki and Blog provide additional options for collaboration and sharing. The Repository holds both course materials and completed individual and collaborative student assignments; actual PhD thesis work can either be openly shared or access-restricted in view of the confidential nature of empirical data. A student can grant partial access to peers and non-advising faculty via a forum thread to discuss particular aspects of the dissertation research, while maintaining other parts of the project confidential in keeping with relevant ethics laws.

In such an open environment (see Fig. 2) doctoral students and faculty are encouraged to communicate with each other, to benefit from peer knowledge and feedback, and to broaden their research horizons by engaging in collaborative learning across the three sub-disciplines. This will provide a valuable learning opportunity for engaging in interdisciplinary research either for the doctoral research projects in progress, or for future projects.

Figure 1: Sample activity description for PhD Pilot module
4. Research approach and methodology for the pilot project

Both higher education authorities (the Conference of Rectors of Swiss Universities – CRUS, in the case of the project described in this progress report) and doctoral students, whose needs had been analyzed using a qualitative survey design to inform the research and development application which was retained for funding by the University of Geneva, have identified problems in traditional doctoral education. These relate primarily to the isolation of doctoral researchers during the formative time of their research training and to the subsequent difficulties they face in collaborating across disciplinary and geographical boundaries (Rhodes & Valerdi 2007).

Thus, the real-world problem that represents the starting point of the current project is one of individual inquiry in a scientific and research environment that capitalizes on synergies and cross-disciplinary approaches to understanding the world around us. The project methodology builds on our long-standing experience with virtual collaborative learning and its ongoing evaluation, and is designed to inform the development of a new program (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009) by providing proof of the concept of virtual collaborative learning in doctoral education. The pilot study is highly focused, involving one module and one cohort of 20 doctoral students at the Faculty of Translation and Interpreting. The primary purpose of the pilot study is to provide information for the conduct of the larger study, which will cut across institutional and geographical boundaries; we consider the pilot study to be a formative study to, or an embedded component of, the larger study which will focus on implementing the concept validated in the pilot (Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

In line with the objectives identified in section 2 above, the pilot is designed to provide support for the concept of a virtual collaborative doctoral program that cuts across sub-disciplines, enables doctoral students to benefit from peer-to-peer learning and to leverage synergies across different research projects.
By making available the tools and the content for doctoral students to work together in the virtual space according to a specific structure as provided for in the course description, we built a basic prototype in order to initiate the feasibility study. Specialist testing of the key concepts that underlie the objectives of the pilot project – identification of common knowledge and skill elements, integration of such elements in a pilot module, close virtual collaboration among peers and faculty, and joint feedback – is then the basis for establishing proof of the feasibility of such a virtual doctoral school.

5. Evaluation

Project evaluation will be based on opinion data and real data retrieved from the virtual space and include all three project stakeholders: doctoral students, faculty, and designers. The evaluation's objectives are aligned with the pilot's objectives as described above; in addition the following three domains will be evaluated:
- Pedagogical approaches in the virtual learning environment, including feedback;
- Academic collaboration across sub-disciplines (interpreting, translation, terminology);
- Adequacy of the VLE for social and networking support for doctoral students.

6. Conclusion

As Higher Education has become global and disciplinary boundaries become increasingly fuzzy, investing in quality graduate and research education has taken on a new sense of urgency. With knowledge having assumed the role of the leading global commodity, producing high-quality knowledge can no longer remain the occupation of individual researchers. Networking is promoted and usually required by all grant-making institutions, but expertise in collaborating on scientific projects does not emerge automatically once a doctoral student has defended the dissertation and passed all relevant exams. Collaboration skills are the new tool set researchers need to succeed in the 21st century, and we propose that the adoption of a collaborative approach to doctoral education provides an important medium for young researchers to experiment with and validate strategies that will be crucial for maintaining a vibrant scientific enterprise.

7. References


