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Editor: Morten Flate Paulsen, MFP101@PSUVM.PSU.EDU
Review: Janet Hartranft and Kenneth W. Borland

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EDITORIAL

The European Community (EC) program Developing European Learning Through Technological Advance (DELTA) has now completed its Exploratory Action phase. According to Collis (1991, 32), it involved "research into characteristics and standards for advanced learning technology systems in Europe". Collis states that the aim was to overcome market and regulatory barriers confronting the use of advanced learning technologies in Europe, and to improve human and technical networks for information integration and collaboration. In total, over 250 industries, universities, and government agencies were contractually involved in the DELTA Exploratory Action and the overall sponsor was the Directorate General XIII (Telecommunications, Information Industries, and Innovation) of the Commission of the European Communities.

With help from Peter Beck at the University of Erlangen-Nurnberg, DEOSNEWS is proud to present the following interview with Luis Rosello, Head of the DELTA Unit, about DELTA's experiences from the Exploratory Action and its plans for the second phase of the program.

Reference

Collis, B. A. 1991. Telecommunications-Based Training in Europe: A State-of-the Art Report. American Journal of Distance Education 5(2) 31-40.

A Distance Education Interview with Luis Rosello, Head of DELTA Unit

Morten Flate Paulsen: Please give us a short overview of the major EC educational programs such as COMET, RACE, and DELTA.

Luis Rosello: There are numerous initiatives and programmes devoted to training and education. Even those projects not specifically concerned with training and education very often have a training component embedded in them or will affect training in the long run. The latter is the case of the Programme RACE (Research in Advanced Communications for Europe) which is developing the basic technologies and systems which will enable the implementation of telecommunication-based distance education systems (for example, by providing two-way multimedia communications via broadband channels).

The main programmes related to distance education, which are specific to training and education, are: COMETT (Community Education and Training on Technologies), which covers a number of actions on training courses, the exchange of students and the development of courseware; ERASMUS, which addresses the mobility of higher education students (including some Open Universities, and therefore the "mobility" of the courses as well). Others are on Vocational Training, like FORCE, or Language Learning, like LINGUA.

DELTA represents in this context the development of technologies and systems for educational & training purposes.

MFP: Can you give us some details on the organization, objectives, and budget of DELTA?

LR: DELTA is the only programme of the EC which is doing research in the field of education and training, although limited to the technologies and systems. It belongs to an action of the overall III Framework Programme of the EC, the "Telematics Systems in General Interest Areas: Flexible and Distance Learning." The budget was ECU 20 million for the first two years of the Exploratory Action, and ECU 54.5 million for the years 1992-94 within the new Programme. Community funding is based on a maximum 50% community contribution towards the total costs of the undertaking or up to 100% of extra costs for universities and research institutes.

The objective of the research, is in the long run, to set up telematics infrastructures for Flexible and Distance Learning throughout Europe. For that purpose a workplan was drawn up covering the development of the technologies and systems in respect to the functionalities required when applied to training: remote access to training resources, delivery systems, design and production, etc.; the telecommunication means to convey these services adequately throughout Europe, and the more appropriate scenarios for Europe-wide distance learning. Finally, a series of pilot experiments are established to validate the services and products developed in real conditions, in different sectors, configurations, etc. A common evaluation framework is being drawn-up to enable cross-comparisons of results on individual trials, and to look at answers on learning efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and other issues.

MFP: Can you describe some of the distance education projects funded by DELTA?

LR: I will refer here only to those projects involving a distance education element, mainly in the use of telecommunications.

Projects like ACT (Advanced Communications for Training), CO-LEARN, and EAST are developing technologies based on ISDN to provide remote access to training services. These involve information access to CD-Rom devices, image banks stored in interactive video CDI's, etc. Others will devote their efforts mainly to setting up experimental services, such as COSYS for distributed production of Multimedia Teleschools (MTS) for delivery systems (to banking staff, telecommunication engineers, etc.).

ECOLE and JANUS are some good examples of strategic projects with a potential long-term influence in structuring "the market of learning technologies", due to the nature of the sectors involved. For example, ECOLE (European Cooperative Open Learning Environment) and EPOS (European Telecom Network Operators) are combining their expertise to develop advanced training systems. In the case of JANUS (Joint Academic Network of Open Universities), other key service providers--the Open Universities--are undertaking joint research on the Telematics Infrastructures better suited to their own needs (VSAT, ISDN, etc.).

MFP: What do you see as the most important impact of these projects?

LR: The first important impact that I see is the drawing-up of a common agenda in Europe in this field of Learning Technologies. One of the main barriers which has hampered the thriving of technology-based learning systems in Europe has so far been the non-existence of common plans enabling the extension of the market, which is very much restricted to national, and I would say--regional or even local--boundaries; whilst today, technologies no longer have any frontiers. Now, programmes like DELTA are making it possible

to define the European standards on distance and flexible learning, which undoubtedly will boost investments.

Some of the projects I just mentioned are already the seeds of Europe-wide learning infrastructures. Therefore, as you can see, it is not only a matter of developing learning materials, nor of developing authoring systems; although the latter is addressed by DELTA projects with a high degree of innovation catering for advanced features (AI, multimedia and hyper-media tools for example). All the individual products, prototypes, etc. can be quoted as exploitable results of the projects, but I insist that the most important results in this area are, for example, to join the main Open Universities in Europe with private companies in order to develop distance learning services. This is a good example of a strategic impact.

MFP: What is the difference between the Exploratory Action and the new phase of DELTA?

LR: There is some degree of continuity in some cases, for example, prototypes developed in previous projects are being tested now. In general terms I would say that this phase is more service oriented, and therefore pilot experiments are becoming more important. In the constituency of the programme, one can find a blend of continuity of the key actors with new partners.

Although this phase cannot be considered what we used to call it in the past: DELTA-Main, that is to say not yet a large scale investigation, due to the limited funding available. The main difference is that it is not an Exploratory Action any more, it is rather a consolidation of the main results, whilst opening up new avenues. It is worth noting that this research is now a part of the R&D Programme on "Telematics Systems in general interest areas", this reflects equally a shift in strategy: technology based solutions to distance learning cannot be considered in isolation, but embedded within more generic services.

MFP: Can countries outside the EC take part in DELTA funded projects and if they can, how?

LR: There are already cooperation agreements signed with EFTA Countries, which will lead to full participation (if everything goes according to plan) next year.

Eastern Countries are already interested and a lot of discussions are under way on this subject. A limited budget to encourage a certain amount of participation has been set aside for the whole Framework Programme of R&D. The contribution of other non-European countries can be accepted under a particular cooperation scheme once a project has been selected or in some cases associate projects from the non-EC can apply, but the process is a bit complex.

MFP: I have heard that some organisations and individuals are frustrated because they must spend weeks and months preparing a project proposal and that the chances for acceptance are minimal. Is this true?

LR: Well, I would say that you are right to a certain extent. There is an open Call for Proposals, and the rate of acceptance is normally 1 out of 5 or 6 proposals, and you can imagine that preparing an R&D project is not trivial work. Of course, funding is limited, but nevertheless to belong to the group of leaders in the field of learning technologies is the final reward and many institutions find it worth trying. There are other schemes to get funding for some projects which are not so demanding; I refer to the numerous Community actions in Structural Funds Policy or those involving the development of particular courses or courseware, to give some examples.

Even in the case of DELTA, the management is equally very demanding. This is a programme and not a set of isolated projects. Therefore, Concer-

tation Meetings take place periodically.

MFP: Where can we obtain more information about DELTA?

LR: There are a number of publications available describing projects, like DELTA 1992, or inputs devoted to the previous Exploratory Action results, like the Final Technical Report, the proceedings of workshops and of the "DELTA & Beyond" conference which took place in The Hague, The Netherlands. The information offices of the EC can process any particular request further information. Our address is:

Commission of the European Communities
DG XIII, Directorate F
Ref: Telematic Systems for Distance and Flexible Learning
Rue de la Loi 200, TR61 00/1
B-1049 Brussels
Belgium

Tel: 32 2 236 34 16
Fax: 32 2 236 23 92
E-mail: ahuy@postman.dg13.cec.be

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