Forum

Introduction

Comments supplied by COMCULT's internal panel of evaluators

1.   Expectations

Any expectation arising from use of an Internet forum in class to add value to what can be discovered about the views or lives of other young people must be backed by corresponding motivation, since without it the set objective is unlikely to be achieved.

Motivation A: Self-interest

The body of a discussion (or Internet communication) needs to be in the students' self-interest. In schools this is however rarely the case.

Motivation B: Rewards

If the act of communicating involves effort, teachers need to put a convincing case for the meaningfulness or usefulness of the exercise and honour student participation by awarding corresponding marks.

Motivation C: Kindling of a different (expanded) type of self-interest

A third form of motivation might be for teachers to set goals the students also seek in terms of discovery or experience, a setup more readily attainable via use of an Internet forum than other means of communication.

2.   Process

2.1 Forum: Value Debate

The bulk of discussion here was conducted by contributors from Poland, Greece, Spain and Germany. Beneficial impact was threefold:

a)   The young people were first obliged to become aware of their own standpoint, i.e. through answering the question, "What values are important to me or for us?"

b)   The views then needed to be put into words and communicated to others, and all in a language that was not their native tongue.

c)   A third stage should normally involve comparing one's own statements with what others think and report, revealing fresh sets of issues or explanations as characteristically occurs in fruitful discussions.

No evidence of this third stage – which takes considerable mental effort – can however be detected in the Forum, with the sole exception of an external contributor (Value Debate, p. 10, Tom, probably resident in the USA).

It goes without saying that if such input is hoped for, teachers must provide the necessary motivation and information, and organisational assistance too.

All the same, ideas were expressed concerning:

- tolerance
- prejudices
- respect
- religious beliefs
- tradition
- social grievances and economic evils
- allegedly "important" or "not so important" values

Perusal of the individual threads reveals, to a striking degree, that religious beliefs are frequently only linked to such externals as festivals, rituals, images, specific buildings or institutions. Generally speaking, a large number of the young feel that religion and the values it stands for have ceased to be of any great significance to them.

Interspersed in discussions about religious customs are the occasional short comments about football or Formula One drivers, referring to deities that occupy the attention of young people far more than what might differentiate one religious denomination from the next. The latter subject remains completely without elucidation. The question from Spain regarding the difference between Christians and the Orthodox Church also receives no reply from Greece (Value Debate, p. 5, 13th January 2006).

2.2 Forum: Intercultural Dialogue

This was another Forum in which Polish students first seized the initiative, boldly taking up contemporary issues known to be of a divisive nature.

Students from Spain then sent out a list of 15 questions to all partner countries. This was undoubtedly well-intended, the aim being to encourage simultaneous discussion in all participating schools. However, the input unfortunately backfired somewhat as the 15 submitted questions ended up practically dominating the entire activity on that particular aspect of the Forum during the months that followed.

Students undoubtedly discovered as a result that immigration is a physical reality felt to a greater or lesser degree in classrooms in other countries, and that older students have little difficulty with this situation. There was one question about how young people spend their leisure time, however, that led to a plethora of repetitions that offered little in the way of enhanced perceptions, differences in such activities being determined far less by geographical location than student age or the level of parental income.

Occasionally, additional questions were asked designed to gain greater insight one from the other. For instance, some 18-year-old Cypriots wanted to know from some 15-year-olds in Spain: "If you could change something in your country, what would it be?" (Intercultural Dialogue, p. 11, 1st March 2005). The reply came back: "Nothing". Such a response from 15-year-olds comes as no surprise since they are as a rule too young to have a more sophisticated view of things. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the reply to the following from Cyprus: "Do you have problems with Islam in your country?" To which the Spanish response is simply: "Yes, there are some problems." What these are is not mentioned. Is this due to inhibitions about expressing an opinion publicly, lethargy, or simply the non-existence of detailed information at this class level?

There are numerous passages in the Intercultural Dialogue Forum with points that could be taken up and dealt with in depth by teaching staff. This would help students gain a grasp of the problems particular to individual EU states. Without such intervention, the majority of contributions to the Forum do not extend beyond the mere cataloguing of circumstances.

2.3 Forum: Transformation Processes

Regrettably, this Forum attracted only a few entries from Poland and Bulgaria. Is this a sign of there being insufficient awareness of transformation processes among students in schools in the older EU states of western and southern Europe? Or is the simple explanation the fact that language teaching sees no pivotal role for topics concerning socio-economic and cultural change in Europe?

2.4 Forum: Regional Conflicts

It was to be expected that little in the way of opinion would be submitted to a public Forum on this topic from persons living in countries where such conflicts are non-existent. It is all the more astonishing then that not one single entry was posted by Cypriot students concerning their island's problems. The values pursued by separatists in the Basque region, Catalonia or in the Balkans also apparently constitute no-go areas for Europe's schools. Do such issues not send seismic shivers through fundamental European values? Where are the limits to the right of self-determination, solidarity and tolerance? Is national or regional sovereignty a value per se?

2.5 Film Forum

Submissions to this Forum were slow to arrive, the first year of the project being taken up with experimentation at all partner schools. Very shortly after the first video sequences were made available on the web however, a spirited discussion was set in motion, fuelled in the majority of cases purely by the students' personal involvement as they found themselves competing with others through entering their own productions. Fine points were praised or criticised. Sometimes suggestions for improvements were proffered, or attempts at explanations might be given for particular scenes that had met with negative criticism.

What is highly conspicuous, however – apart from language difficulties – is the dearth of any voiced consideration of conceptual aspects affecting the video as a whole until very late on in the process. This only occurred at a point in time when individual partner schools already had a large number of takes and sequences in the can (s. Film Forum. P. 20, 17th March 2006). Further details on a variety of aspects of the trans-national video production can be obtained by going to our web pages at Videotheque => Video Production

3.   Non-conducive aspects

3.1 The way schools operate

It is no mean feat to run an Internet Forum as an information platform within a trans-national schools network.

It is not everywhere common practice when lessons are done for students to be able to access their school's computers, as it is feared viruses may be imported or equipment abused.   This has been confirmed – over and above feedback from teaching staff – in the pupil survey (s. Evaluation, Questionnaire, D 62). In the majority of cases, what was submitted to a Forum therefore had to be entered and sent during normal school teaching, i.e. as a rule during periods spent learning modern languages.

However, this runs up against obstacles in schools that have no computers with Internet access in modern language classrooms. In such cases, if no switch to suitable classrooms can be readily organised, swift response times to enquiries in the Forum are virtually unattainable.

3.2 Standards of entries to Forum

Qualitative standards of what appears in the Forum are very much subject to student age and of course also the type of motivation A, B or C that fires it (s. Expectations at 1. above).

As far as Forum production is concerned, experience shows that the dictates of self-interest among 15-year-olds do not extend as a rule beyond exchanging personal data (e.g. eye colour, hair colour, leisure activities). If benchmarks are to be set higher, teachers need to provide the necessary information and create motivational impulses via rewards (B).

With older students, motivation type C – particularly when group work is involved – brings dividends in the shape of high standard Forum entries.

3.3 Trans-national collaboration

If trans-national debate in an Internet forum is intended to achieve enhanced understanding of, for example, the problems facing citizens in other EU states, partners in the debate need to coordinate topics and times to such a degree that their concerted effort ensures that it will take a week, at most two, to provide responses to submitted questions. If intervals are lengthier than these, students lose interest in maintaining the dialogue.

COMCULT Forums may however take several months between question and reply. Lack of interest is probably not the reason but rather a diversity of constraints rooted in national curricula. A great number of these curricula make too little or indeed no provision for teaching involving trans-national learning via project work. COMENIUS 1 projects may therefore provide an improved opportunity for successful coordinated Forum activity at a thematically predetermined level when only three or four schools constitute the vanguard for total dedication to this goal.

3.4 Technical difficulties

To enable others not directly connected to the partner schools or the Project to submit entries to the COMCULT Forums, we decided to permit password-free access to the COMCULT network.

In retrospect, this decision proved to be ill-judged as in particular the Forums Intercultural Dialogue and Film Forum increasingly found themselves abused from 2005 on for the rendition and even sending of SPAM. Advertising for games of chance, particular kinds of pharmaceutical products and lurid pictorial objects inveigled its way into the Forums to such a massive extent that – despite repeated deletion – topic-related debate proved next to impossible.

In June 2006 we attempted to eliminate the SPAM onslaught through closing the insert/message window. This however failed to have the desired effect as the hackers had apparently implanted a so-called Trojan horse program into the Forum's software itself that was automatically spewing new SPAM data into the Forums on a daily basis.

This resulted in the course of October 2006 in our having to rescue all previous submissions to the Forums through converting them into normal web pages in pdf format, which however effectively bars any form of interactive additions to them.

In November 2006 access to Forum software on the server was universally closed down.

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Translated from the original German by: *Sandy A Pirie*