7 Course delivery and teaching methods

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This chapter takes a comprehensive look at many of the practical issues of teaching strategy and technique that arose during the CEFES project. The discussion is supported where appropriate with examples from the online sequences.

Topics covered include:

- the collaborative nature of online teaching;
  factors influencing the teaching strategy:
- the structure of the CEFES conferences;
- the tutor/moderator distinction;
- 'hard' and 'soft' styles of curriculum implementation;
- the 'pragmatics' of online teaching.

The chapter concludes by re-emphasizing the collaborative aspect of transnational online teaching, and the shared responsibilities of tutors and students.

Introduction

In any kind of teaching programme, the planning and drafting of the curriculum is really only the beginning of the process, but perhaps this is even more the case with CMC. It is important to recognize the *collaborative* dimension in online teaching, the fact that the textual record of the online exchanges between tutors and students constitutes the main body of material for study. Thus, in order for these exchanges to be used productively by the students, both during and after the event, it is important that the tutors' interventions be carefully judged from the point of view of timing and content. This calls for the deployment of a diverse range of tutoring skills, and for the implementation of an appropriate teaching strategy which encourages debate while addressing both the needs of the students and the academic objectives of the seminar. This chapter takes a detailed look at the various criteria and options for developing an online teaching strategy for use in a transnational context, with reference to the experiences gained during the CEFES project.

The collaborative dimension

An online seminar promotes active learning by encouraging the students to articulate their own ideas and respond in writing to the ideas of others. But rather than being just active, this type of learning becomes *inter*active through the sharing of ideas and information, and the building of knowledge as the participants explore a topic, read each other's contributions on the same topic, and thus learn to understand the issues differently, from a variety of viewpoints. What basically is new here is that:

- students have expertise of their own to share with others;
- teachers are no longer the sole experts - they are more like guides, using their skills to encourage the students to be creative in their learning.

Thus, when working in CMC, students and tutors are, in a sense, peers in an academic community, sharing a common forum. They are equally responsible for the production, sharing, and management of knowledge – and also for the outcomes.

The pedagogical differences involved in the move from face-to-face or orthodox distance teaching to online mode can be conceptualized as follows:

- There is a general shift in authorship from teacher to student in *the production of knowledge.*
- There is a general shift in responsibility from teacher to student regarding *the sharing of knowledge.*
- There is a general shift in autonomy from teacher to student in *the management of knowledge/materials/resources.*

In fact, since in most online conferences their contributions will form the bulk of the debate, it can be argued that the students play a *more* central role than the tutors in the construction of the academic discourse and the transmission of knowledge. Of course, the tutors still have a key role to play in steering the discussion towards realizing the objectives of the seminar. But this role is significantly modified by the 'democratic' environment of the virtual seminar. The teaching strategy (as well as the curriculum design) needs to take account of these role-shifts and be geared towards encouraging debate and eliciting the proper level of response from the students. This calls for openness and flexibility on the one hand, and, paradoxically perhaps, clear planning on the other.

Factors influencing the teaching strategy

The building and structuring of a curriculum, with a certain academic level in mind but with only a vague prior knowledge of the actual students who would be working with it, was one of the most interesting challenges in CEFES. The teaching strategies involved in the implementation of the curriculum should take into account the fact that CMC promotes equalization, insofar as it focuses attention exclusively on what is actually said and not on who is saying it. Age, profession, and socio-cultural background might play a role in student behaviour, but are factors of relatively little importance, for they refer to the reality beyond the computer screen.

However, precisely because communication now depends exclusively on the written word, it is through the written word that difference is perceived, that identity is constructed and presented to others, and comes to have a strong influence on learning.

Considering that one of the aims of CEFES was "to bring together both different national groups of students of European Studies as well as tutors and lecturers in this field", and to implement a curriculum in such a context, the teaching strategy inevitably had to deal with other factors affecting student participation and performance:

- personality;
- level of confidence;
- level of interest and motivation;
- language competence;
- experience as learners;
- experience with computers;
- access to technical facilities.

In addition, in a project such as CEFES, a number of questions emerge very quickly concerning its pedagogic effectiveness, which influence the teaching strategy that is adopted as the debate unfolds:

- How will the tutors and students bridge the gap between different national cultures and academic traditions?
- Will all students be able to cope with the academic level and the conceptual apparatus? Will some find it too difficult, or too easy?
- What is an appropriate information load for this group of students?

- Will the students have the requisite writing skills, especially the non-native speakers?
- How will the students combine their participation in the seminar with their regular institutional commitments?

The structure of the CEFES conferences

The CEFES conference structure was designed to allow maximum flexibility while giving the students the opportunity for a clear progression through the course material as presented in the curriculum documents. For each sequence, there was a main conference, to which all participants had read- and write-access, and which would be opened and closed on prearranged dates. Wrapped around this main conference were a whole series of sub-conferences including:

National/institutional sub-conferences: in which the students from each institution could prepare for and comment on the seminar under the guidance of their own home tutors, and in their own home language. These sub-conferences were normally opened 2–3 weeks before the main conference, and in some cases remained open for a time afterwards. A few of these became very active conferences, with some students contributing more frequently here than in the main conference.

Tutors' conference: which was used to coordinate the teaching duties between the different tutors involved (see below), exchange information on relevant academic articles, Websites, etc. discuss the possibility of opening new conferences and folders as the seminar proceeded (see below), and resolve any minor technical difficulties. The students had no access to this conference.

Students' 'chat' conference: which was closed to the tutors.

Planned sub-conferences: namely the 'Guest lecture' and the 'Transnational task' which were pre-announced and integrated into the programme for one of the 1999 sequences. Here, groups of students (and tutors) who had a particular interest in these aspects of the programme could pursue a more focused discussion complementary to the main conference, but without causing unnecessary distraction. The intention was that the groups should report back to the main conference towards the end of the sequence.

Ad-hoc sub-conference: set up (during the same 1999 sequence) to deal with 'breaking news' in European affairs - the Kosovo crisis, the resignation of the

EU commission, the first elections to the new Scottish parliament - but not directly relevant to the themes of the sequence. These issues were of interest to many of the participants, and demanded a separate debating space, to which there was a high level of contributions.

'Further discussion' conference: which remained open after the official close of the sequence for those who wanted to continue the discussion or review the seminar in a more informal setting.

Archive: which contained a full record of the discussion from previous sequences, for reference and review.

Any FirstClass® conference or sub-conference includes the facility for the 'moderator' to create sub-folders and move particular groups of messages into them, which still remain accessible to all participants. This facility was occasionally made use of by CEFES tutors, for example because a thread was considered 'closed', or because the messages were purely procedural in nature. In addition to these conferences and folders, the participants benefited from standard features of the FirstClass® software, such as one-to-one email and synchronous 'chat' facilities, thus widening even further the range of options for communication.

Tutors and moderators

However well planned the structure of the seminar, the skills and interventions of the tutors will be crucial to the realization of its academic objectives. Much has been written about the roles of the online tutor (or 'moderator', to use the term that appears to be gaining most currency), and there is no intention to reproduce that material uncritically here, but in this respect the collaborative nature of CEFES does offer a genuinely new slant on what is rapidly becoming an 'old' problem.

Because every CEFES sequence was a joint effort on equal terms between two partner institutions from different countries, the teaching responsibilities in the main conference were always shared between two online tutors. (Occasionally, institutions would 'job-share' their responsibilities among different individuals, thus leading to an even greater tutor presence in the conference – and this not counting the 'home' tutors in charge of the national/institutional sub-conferences.) Although not conceived primarily as a burden-sharing device (the fact of having different national perspectives on the same issues was considered

more important), this 'dual control' effectively eased the workload on the individual tutors, and allowed them to negotiate different tasks for themselves within the conference. All too often in the literature, it is assumed that a single tutor will have sole responsibility for the running of the online seminar, and Simon RAE points out in chapter 4, that online teaching typically makes greater demands on the tutor's time and attention than an equivalent course taught using traditional face-to-face or distance-teaching methods.

Robin MASON's typology (http://www.emoderators.com/papers/mason.html) divides the tutor's roles into the *organizational*, the *social*, and the *intellectual*[1]. The fact of having more than one active tutor enabled these roles to be shared out between different individuals, typically with one person taking on the organizational and social roles and the other(s) supplying the main academic input. Of course, these roles, being negotiated rather than pre-planned, tended to be quite fluid; the two institutions might swap roles halfway through a sequence, and there was always a great deal of overlap in practice. But the principle of a division of labour is an interesting one, particularly in cases where there is a heavy volume of student messages on the conference, which might otherwise overwhelm a single tutor.

What is remarkable is that the tutors, in their own discussions, spontaneously assigned the term **moderator** to the person in charge of organizational and social matters (the 'chair' of the conference so to speak) and the term **tutor** to other colleagues involved in the seminar.

> From the CEFES tutors' conference: *"In thinking about the tutor/moderator distinction, one of my concerns has been to lessen the academic burden of the moderator (to keep him from having to lecture or be the direct source of information...) so that she or he can pursue more managerial objectives."*

The word 'moderator' (moderating, moderation, etc.) is in some ways an unsatisfactory and ambiguous term in CMC. On the one hand, it can refer to an individual who has certain technical permissions within the conference, such as the right to delete messages, approve them before they reach the conference,

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1) Andrew FEENBERG categorizes the tutor's roles in the following way: Contextualising Functions (Opening Discussion / Setting Norms / Setting Agenda); Monitoring Functions (Recognition / Prompting); and Meta-Functions (Meta-commenting / Weaving): "The written world: on the theory and practice of computer conferencing" (http://www-icdl.open.ac.uk/mindweave/chap2.html). Roles conceived of in this way may be more difficult to split between different individuals.

create sub-folders, etc. But in pedagogical terms, the moderator is the person who 'chairs' the conference, introduces its themes, initiates and organizes the discussion, etc. These two roles may frequently coincide in practice, but they are functionally distinct. This is why, in CEFES, the word 'tutor' was preferred as the generic term for all those who took on a teaching role in the online seminars (without reference to their status outside this context), with the word 'moderator' being reserved for those who specifically carried out the chairing function.

Implementing the curriculum

The set of tasks, the seminar programme and objectives are important guidelines in the online forum, but cannot always be rigidly followed – some issues need more time and dedication than others, in response to student contributions and demands. This will require a certain amount of quick decision-making on the part of tutors. This section outlines two basic, and divergent, strategies that are available to online tutors with regard to implementing the curriculum. These strategies may be characterized respectively as 'strongly tutor guided' and 'softly tutor guided'. They are perhaps best conceived of as 'ideal-types', and like all ideal-types they only partially reflect the precise reality of the seminar but nonetheless serve as a useful heuristic device through which to analyse online teaching.

Strongly tutor-guided teaching

The first strategy can be termed the 'hard', 'strict', or 'strongly guided' style of implementation. This means that the online discussion very closely follows the initial documentation that was circulated in the preparatory stages. In a 'hard' implementation of the programme tutors guide the students through a discussion of the precise set texts (printed or Web-based) that were disseminated to them before the seminar began. If students wander from these primary areas of focus then the tutor seeks to redirect their attention back to the stated central topic. Tutors would adhere strictly to the planned timing allocated to different themes and questions. They would allow discussion to develop on a given issue but not allow this to prohibit the introduction of the next planned theme.

The overall effect is one of clear structure and guidance. Proactive teaching gives the students a sense of purpose and achievement when planned topics have been addressed. It avoids the problem of them having engaged in preparatory reading but then feeling that they have not covered it. The sense

that their expectations are likely to be met should give the students the confidence to take their full part in the discussion. From an administrative point of view, it is easier to integrate this style of seminar into regular university programmes, and to devise a suitable assignment/assessment strategy.

This approach would seem especially appropriate when teaching at first- or second-year degree level, ie. with younger or more inexperienced students who need more guidance, whether in a face-to-face seminar or a virtual one. Similarly, for tutors who have only limited online experience, 'keeping to the basics' but delivering them coherently and in an organized manner is a sensible goal to aim for.

On the other hand, an excessively tutor-guided seminar might become just too rigid. The dominating presence of the tutor might discourage some students from making contributions, if they feel they have little control over the course of the discussion. Interesting messages may be ignored or dealt with too briefly because of the overriding aim to stick closely to the planned programme. Relevant literature that had not been selected in the original preparatory readings might be overlooked, when in fact it offers imaginative new insights. An element of flexibility and dynamism may have been sacrificed.

Strongly tutor-guided teaching : key advantages:

1. *Proactive teaching gives the students a sense of purpose and achievement when planned topics have been addressed.*
2. *A pattern of discussion, progression, and further discussion of a new topic is guaranteed.*
3. *Strongly tutor-guided seminars are easier to integrate with regular university programmes.*

Softly tutor-guided teaching

A 'soft' implementation of a curriculum involves taking a flexible attitude to the original plan, with the seminar only loosely following the promised content. Now in this context tutors would allow and even perhaps encourage the online discussion to flow more freely away from the stated content of the programme, towards relevant issues that tutors had not necessarily anticipated at the original curriculum planning stages. Tutors would not cut this discussion to abrupt

conclusions just for the sake of covering further curriculum material. Instead, they would metaphorically stop and listen, allowing issues of collective interest to take priority over the aim of completing the curriculum.

The 'soft' style of implementation carries its own risks. Themes that were promised and that had attracted student interest in the project might never be discussed. Prolific message writers might too easily be allowed to dominate the conference with their preferred but potentially irrelevant themes. Trivial conversations and general chat might be more difficult to keep under control. Readings that most of the participants may have undertaken could be overlooked or even dropped. A general lack of clarity and focus might prove off-putting to already overworked participants. In the case of institutions where the seminar was embedded in a wider learning context, any serious digressions from planned curricula could cause a serious violation of the original teaching aims, and even the terms under which the programme was originally validated by the institution.

Nevertheless there are some advantages associated with this strategy. Notably in an international exchange, participants enjoy learning about each other, their national cultures and university experiences, rather than drily working through a predetermined academic theme. One motivation for participation may have been the social opportunity to talk across national borders. This is always likely to lead to discussion which planners and tutors had not anticipated or which does not form part of the envisaged scholarly curriculum. If the quality of the discussion is of a high academic standard and holding the attention of many participants then it would seem overly inflexible for tutors to call it to a premature conclusion simply because it does not conform to expectations. Positive learning outcomes such as student innovation and originality are more likely to follow from a relaxed and free-flowing exchange.

The decision whether to favour a 'soft' strategy for curriculum implementation will depend partly on the nature of the student group and the experience of the tutors. Soft implementation might be more appropriate with experienced higher-level students who are used to taking more responsibility for their own learning. Likewise, it could attract more experienced online tutors who can comfortably find a balance between directed learning and free discussion. Tutors who are less familiar with the criss-crossing threads of the typical online seminar might be wise to shy away from this as a deliberate strategy, for fear of losing control of the discussion for the reasons mentioned above.

Softly tutor-guided teaching : key advantages:

1. *Positive learning outcomes such as student innovation and originality are more likely to follow from a relaxed and free-flowing exchange.*
2. *The opportunities are greater for the students to learn about each other, their cultures and backgrounds.*
3. *It shows greater respect for the students' autonomy and their own patterns of study.*

A mixed approach?

Each virtual seminar is likely to vary in style depending on its subject, student cohort, and teaching strategy. Often the extent to which curriculum implementation resembles either the 'hard' or 'soft' models will be dependent on the attitude of the tutors and the level of the students. However, the CEFES experience suggests that there are some key working principles that are more likely to ensure a balanced implementation of the curriculum:

- Firstly, it is essential that even in a more free-ranging or 'soft' pattern of implementation tutors should not lose sight of the basic aims and objectives of the seminar, at times when the discussion is widening or narrowing in unexpected ways. A reflexive approach is vital, with tutors and students asking themselves why the debate has moved in a particular direction.
- Secondly, in an international virtual seminar it is inevitable that there will be a degree of communication that does not directly relate to the curriculum but originates in the dynamics of the transnational group. This aspect can be fun and more importantly can also add to the learning experience. However, if discussion of cultural differences/similarities for its own sake is conflicting with or blocking curriculum delivery then tutors can ensure that it is pursued in a sub-conference, parallel to but separate from the site of the main conference.
- Thirdly, the combination of good timing and teaching style are critical. For example, it is likely that the first few days of a virtual seminar will be highly tutor-led and focused on the pre-published material. But as the seminar

proceeds and the participants get to grips with the medium, the students may become more confident about expressing where they would like the discussion to go, and a 'softer' teaching style might come into play. Students should be encouraged to voice their opinions about how the seminar is progressing; this facilitates a climate of group learning that takes shape according to the group consensus, with the original curriculum plan being the basis for negotiation.

- Fourthly, it is possible for joint tutors to consciously adopt different but mutually compatible styles. Thus, for example, if there are two tutors one of them can send messages of a 'harder' nature, ie. asking set-questions, referring to set-texts, returning discussion to the set-theme, while his or her colleague(s) can play a 'softer' role, styling their messages to be more open, inviting more varied discussion, or referring to texts or events not included in the initial plan. These different roles, which may or may not map onto the intellectual and organizational/social roles discussed earlier, can be allocated according to the temperaments of the individual tutors involved, or the academic culture in which they are used to operating. Together, their 'mixed' style of teaching, if properly handled, should generate a stimulating and focused environment for learning.
- Fifthly, the cross-cultural challenges of transnational teaching (see chapter 5) may be most effectively met through a good balance of 'hard' and 'soft' teaching techniques. In this context, 'hard' refers to the requirement to be clear and deliberate at all times, while keeping 'culturally contentious' techniques such as irony, humour, and excessive informality well in check; whereas 'soft' means being sensitive to the respective cultural and academic backgrounds of the students, as a way of ensuring that particular national attitudes and preoccupations (especially those of the tutors) do not dominate the discussion.

The 'pragmatics' of online teaching

Even after a broad teaching strategy has been agreed among the tutors, and the various roles allocated, there still remains the question of how the tutors should address, converse with, and respond to the students online – in the face of messages flying at them from all directions (or, conversely, a wall of silence or a slow trickle of responses). As regards the 'pragmatics' of online teaching, the

potential tutor is not short of advice from outside sources[1]; many of the established principles of good online practice can be encapsulated as 'showing a responsive attitude towards the students', and amount to little more than common sense. Nevertheless, it is instructive to begin with a counter-example from one of the CEFES sequences:

> Student: *"Do any of you believe that a United States of Europe will become a reality in the future?"*
> Tutor: *"No. Statehood in Europe developed under particularly competitive historical conditions. Conditions in the US of America were quite different... Europe's existing state system limits how new states can be formed."*

An exploratory, open-minded question addressed to the group received a rather bald, curt response from the tutor, unqualified by any hedging expressions, note of hesitancy or recognition of alternative opinions. The student in question did not post any further messages to the conference. Moreover, the general attitude betrayed by the tutor aroused visible irritation in some of the other students:

> *"[Tutor]'s comment here seems to imply, in a somewhat patronising way, that he is not being unfair to [Student X] and myself because his (usually opposite) argument is the correct one."*
>
> I quote from my contribution of 11 February which [Tutor] and others fail, perhaps deliberately, to consider.

Such remarks reinforce the need for tutors to give positive acknowledgement of student contributions. However, it may be unrealistic in a busy conference to expect an individually tailored reply to every student message. Hence the key technique of **weaving**, whereby, in a single message, the tutor 'weaves' together his or her responses to several different points made by students.

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1) The following authors give a good account of online teaching/moderating: Morten Flate Paulsen, "Moderating educational computer conferences" (http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/morten.html); Robin Mason, "Moderating educational computer conferencing" (http://www.emoderators.com/papers/mason.html); Zane L. Berge, The Role of the Online Instructor/Facilitator. (http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html); Gilly Salmon (2000) *E-moderating: the key to teaching and learning online*, London/Sterling (USA): Kogan Page.

acknowledging each by name, as a means of encapsulating the discussion so far and providing further impetus[1]. (The word 'weaving' may also be interpreted in its other sense, insofar as the tutor can be seen as 'weaving' between the different student contributions in order to chart a coherent narrative.) Here is a classic example of the technique from a CEFES tutor:

> *[A's] recent message and a number of others have formed very interesting responses to my provocative message about 'a country called Europe'. The response so far ([A], [B], [C] and others) has been to point out how different the various European cultures are and that there is little chance to produce a United States of Europe (although I noted that [C] rather hedged his bets on this.)... In a sense, recognition of progress (an issue of 'timing', [D]) has been delayed in relation to actual events... We are, with reference to [E]'s and other's points on defining nations and states, in a period of history where we have a 'European state' – the EU – and are currently building a European identity, through projects such as CEFES which raise the question and thus raise awareness of a European identity.*

Where the question of a 'responsive attitude' becomes problematic is in the attitude that tutors are expected to take towards those students who follow the conference but never post any messages. This is likely to be a common phenomenon in any transnational online seminar, owing the added factor of language competence, and it was certainly the case in CEFES. In some Internet newsgroups and chat rooms, the term **lurker** is used to describe such (non-)participants, but this would be considered too disparaging a word to use in educational circles, so terms such as **reader**, **read-only participant**, or **observer** are preferred. Naturally, the tutor should provide a degree of encouragement to all students to take an active part in the proceedings, but a direct address to read-only participants from within the conference, no matter how polite or friendly the wording, may prove counterproductive. Students who are lacking in confidence, or language skills, may experience this as a direct challenge or unwanted pressure, and withdraw from the conference altogether. Paradoxically perhaps, knowledgeable closely-argued contributions, whether from tutors or students, can have the effect of discouraging the less academically gifted or socially confident students from posting messages to the conference. This effect is redoubled when differences in language ability also come into the equation.

1) See also Mason (http://www.emoderators.com/papers/mason.html) and Berge (http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html).

However, it should not be assumed that, merely because a student is not contributing actively to the conference, he or she is not gaining a valuable learning experience. Some students are quite content to remain on the sidelines, as in face-to-face seminars. In a lively conference, the best solution may simply be to leave the read-only participants alone, as a way of managing the level of contributions. In practice, this is what mostly happened in CEFES.

Some feedback from 'read-only participants':

"I think this forum for international debate is marvellous, only I haven't found time in between study and family life to formulate any ideas or responses of my own. I have, though, enjoyed reading the contributions made and hope to find time to reflect on others' views during my study of the course."

"Although I have not written so much (it is not my subject), I was an interested listener. I found all your opinions very interesting, and an interesting way to run a discussion."

"Although I did not participate much as a writer, as a reader I found it to be a very stimulating journey. I must admit that coming from a psychology related background, I had to do a lot of homework reading, in order to follow the political science terminology/framework."

Conclusions

In the light of what has just been described of the CEFES experience, a number of 'key reminders' regarding the pragmatics of online teaching are worth listing:

- Adopt a welcoming and encouraging tone at all times.
- Present the students with 'ground rules' for discussion at an early stage.
- Try to show enthusiasm, involvement, curiosity.
- Recognize each student individually and encourage participation by giving feedback and acknowledgement to every message posted.
- Direct the discussion by focusing on the students' ideas and not merely the prepared material or conceptual apparatus available for the discussion.

- Do not lecture or overload the student with your knowledge of the subject.
- Employ open-ended questions and 'hedging' expressions (eg. 'I think', 'might', 'probably', 'personally') rather than dogmatic assertions.
- Post clear messages to mark both the beginning and the end of the conference.

Early tutor message posted to a CEFES sequence, with the title 'Points of order':

1. Don't make your message too long.
2. Do include a heading in your message.
3. Do introduce yourself…
4. …or better still give yourself a 'résumé'.
5. *Do 'thread' your messages to those of others.*

CEFES provided its participants (tutors and students alike) with the opportunity, and the organizational structure, to 'learn by doing', to reflect on and evaluate their shared experiences. The fact that the sequences were often very different in character emphasized that it is not enough simply to stick to preconceived deas or recipes about how a 'good' seminar should be run. The experience of collaborating, both face-to-face and online, with colleagues in different European countries brought home the fact that online teaching in general is a collaborative enterprise. Students and tutors are in this sense co-authors. Real interactive teaching and learning offers a shared space for the exchange of knowledge, where dialogue plays a central role, where all the agents involved engage on equal terms in the development of a common academic discourse. This is a demanding working environment for both learner and teacher, who now share responsibilities for the successful outcome of the seminar.

CEFES has shown that in CMC both student and tutor are 'us' and not 'me-and-you'. They are partners in an exchange of knowledge. The tutor must have the ability to model the student's ideas and turn them to good use for the purposes of the interaction, and the student expects from the tutor clear and active guidance to help him or her understand the subject matter. If we consider the transnational context of the CEFES project, it has been demonstrated that collaborative learning and teaching may be the way to build solid and strong educational platforms where participants with different perspectives meet for a common purpose, without losing the value of their individuality.