Chapter 4.9
Online Delivery of Deaf Studies Curricula in Ireland at Third Level

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ABSTRACT

Irish Sign Language (ISL), an indigenous language of Ireland, is recognized by the European Union as a natural language. It is a language separate from the other languages used in Ireland, including English, Irish, and, in Northern Ireland, British Sign Language. Some 5,000 Deaf people use ISL. Given the history of suppression of signed languages across what is now the European Union, the average Deaf person leaves school with a reading age of 8.5 to 9 years. It is no surprise, therefore, that Deaf people are the most under-represented of all disadvantaged groups at third level. This poses two challenges: (1) getting Deaf people into third level and (2) presenting education in an accessible form. In the authors' work, they address directly these challenges in an Irish context, and this chapter reports on this work. In Ireland, two Dublin based institutions, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and the Institute for Technology Blanchardstown, Dublin (ITB) have partnered to create a unique eLearning environment based on MOODLE as the learning management system, in the delivery of Deaf Studies programmes at TCD. This partnership delivers third level programmes to students in a way that resolves problems of time, geography and access, maximizing multi-functional uses of digital assets across our programmes. Students can take courseware synchronously and asynchronously. The authors have built a considerable digital asset and have created a re-architected framework to avail of current best practice in rich digital media over Moodle with learning objects for ISL. Their digital assets include a corpus of ISL, the 'Signs of Ireland Corpus' which is one of the largest, most richly annotated in the world. They have operated online delivery since 2005, hosted by ITB. The hallmark of this project is the delivery of blended learning, maximizing ICT in the teaching and learning of ISL. It is important to note that there are currently

no other universities delivering Deaf Studies programmes with this degree of online content internationally. Thus, this programme and its associated research is cutting edge innovation in its philosophy, its rich content and its utilization of rich media. Signed languages, by their nature, are visual-gestural languages, which (unlike spoken languages) do not have a written form. Given this, the online content is required to be multi-modal in nature and the authors utilize rich-media learning objects in their delivery. Within ITB and TCD, the authors have a number of doctoral level studies linked to this project. These focus, at one end of the continuum, on focusing on Deaf culture and is linked to the perspectives on Deaf Studies teaching modules, and at the opposite end of the continuum on describing, for ISL, the phonological-morphological interface in ISL ad which will enrich the digital corpus of ISL. These feed into the online programme.

BACKGROUND

Irish Sign Language (ISL), an indigenous language of Ireland, is recognized by the European Union as a natural language. It is a language separate from the other languages used in Ireland, including English, Irish, and, in Northern Ireland, British Sign Language. Some 5,000 Deaf people use ISL. Given the history of suppression of signed languages across the EU, the average Deaf person leaves school with a reading age of 8.5 to 9 years. Given this, it is no surprise that Deaf people are the most under-represented of all disadvantaged groups at third level. This poses two challenges: (1) getting Deaf people into third level and (2) presenting education in an accessible form.

Two institutions, Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and the Institute for Technology, Blanchardstown, Dublin (ITB) have partnered to create a unique eLearning environment based on MOODLE as the learning management system, in the delivery of Deaf Studies programmes at TCD. This partnership delivers third level programmes to students in a way that resolves problems of time, geography and access, maximizing multi-functional uses of digital assets across our programmes. Students can take courseware synchronously and asynchronously. We have built a considerable digital asset and plan to re-architect our framework to avail of current best practice in digital repositories with learning objects vis-à-vis ISL. Our digital assets include a corpus of ISL, the 'Signs of Ireland

Corpus' which is one of the largest, most richly annotated in the world. We have operated online delivery since 2005, hosted by ITB, and in early 2008 were successful in attracting significant Irish government funding to expand delivery of a series of undergraduate diplomas to degree level nationwide under the Strategic Innovation Fund, Cycle II.

The hallmark of this project is the delivery of blended learning, maximizing ICT in the teaching and learning of ISL. It is important to note that there are currently no other universities delivering Deaf Studies programmes with this degree of online content internationally. Thus, this programme and its associated research is cutting edge innovation in its philosophy, its rich content and its utilization of rich media. Signed languages, by their nature, are visual-gestural languages, which (unlike spoken languages) do not have a written form. Given this, the online content is required to be multi-modal in nature and we utilize rich-media learning objects in our delivery. This presents a number of serious and important challenges. Specific challenges include:

- Universal design in an online curriculum for Deaf students
- Identifying what aspects of ISL learning can best be supported & assessed online
- Assessing signed language interpreting skill in an online context

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