An Inter-university Platform for Sharing and Collaborating in English Studies: Creating SEED (Sweden’s English Educational Database for tertiary education)

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1. Academic Networking

Networking has always been necessary to scholars, but it is only in the last twenty years that truly rapid asynchronic networking has become feasible for the academic community, only in the last decade for students, and perhaps only in the last five years that such networking has begun to be seen as a natural extension of one’s studies. At the same time, Internet-related activities are an area that is evolving at increasing speed and involving ever more people in various forms of informal networking (witness the growth of e.g. Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, bulletin boards, blogging, and chat sites). Against this background, establishing a dedicated inter-university educational network among active teachers and students of English throughout Sweden seems desirable; this paper describes an attempt to develop such a network called the SEED project.

1.1 Student networking

The literature on networking in language teaching is largely concerned with students networking with one another, and an enormous amount of expertise has accumulated over the last twenty years on how networks for co-operative learning can be created for students (for example Kern et al 2008, Kol and Schkolnik 2008, Shin 2006, Fitz 2006, Freedman and Liu 1996, Nguyen and Kellogg 2005, Chun 1994, Riel and Levin 1990). Kern et al 2008 point out that the affordances of electronic networks coincide

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with the ideology of social constructivism and the belief that learning is facilitated by co-operation and interaction), so that the technology is in tune with the pedagogical spirit of the age (see also Wright 2000 for a discussion of the larger implications of this belief). But success is not guaranteed by simply creating a network: as early as 1990 Riel and Levin talked of ‘electronic ghost towns’ – networks that had ‘fallen silent’ because their social organization was not appropriately planned. Moreover, regardless of the resource levels available, student motivation and interaction need to be taken into account (note how tools such as MSN and Facebook have expanded at an extraordinary rate). A key issue for educational use has thus been shown to be the creation of ‘shared purpose’ (Tolmie and Boyle 2000), i.e. student participants in an activity must have a common view of the purpose of that activity.

1.2 Teacher and researcher networking

Much less is available in the literature on the creation of networks for co-operation among teachers, and most of what is available deals with novices in training. In practice, most teachers have remained isolated and fail to make use of potential networking tools. Levin, Kim, and Riel (1990, cited in Stephens and Hartman 2004) suggest some criteria for network success: “(a) a group of people who work together or share interest in a task, but who find it difficult to meet in the same location and/or at the same time; (b) a well-specified task to be accomplished by this group; (c) ease of access to a reliable computer network; (d) a sense of responsibility to the group and/or task; and (e) strong leadership and final evaluation of the group task.” Stephens and Hartman describe two failed networks of trainee mathematics teachers and conclude that one suffered from a lack of common purpose, expecting interaction to arise from simple co-presence. The other, in which tasks were imposed by a coordinator, resulted in one-to-one communication between participants and coordinator and no genuine networking. Stephens and Hartman conclude that the failure was due to a preference for face-to-face interaction (which was a viable alternative, given the availability of local colleagues) and lack of time (which we would interpret as low priority).
On the other hand, there is reason to believe that networks among practicing teachers and researchers do not need conditions as favorable as those required for students or trainees. Informal IT-based networks such as the TESL-L network (Tillyer 1995) and the LINGUIST list (http://www.linguistlist.org/) have evoked a high level of participation and become valuable and accepted academic resources, without having an obvious immediate common purpose, feedback, or sense of responsibility among members (note the parallel to modern blogging and Wikipedia). Notably, these asynchronic, low-budget bulletin boards are easily accessible, non-demanding and with a worldwide membership which has little chance of creating face-to-face meetings; their very success indicates that the potential is there, and on a large scale.

1.3 Educational networks in Europe and Sweden

Since the EU comprises an area with primarily or entirely government-controlled universities, tertiary education tends to operate under national guidelines, with largely similar conditions, funding and goals, so that establishing discipline-based networks on a national basis appeared to be a reasonable alternative to the mammoth task of EU-embracing networks. Moreover, any development funding available for English tends to be at the national level.

When the SEED concept was first developed in 2006, the Swedish situation as regards IT-based networking, summarised in Jandér 2005, appears to have been typical: basically, there existed neither functioning nor planned university-level language-department networks for cooperation and sharing. In point of fact, no such pedagogical networks were operating in any discipline.

Nevertheless, English departments in a country like Sweden would seem an appropriate group for the construction of national Internet-based networks. Historically, English departments in Sweden have had shared purposes of developing effective teaching of language proficiency and linguistic and literary skills, and a national commitment to maintaining equivalent standards and student mobility.
Although in theory departments are in competition for students, this has hitherto not proved to be a major obstacle, as Swedish students are not particularly mobile. Spread out over a large geographical area, these departments are relatively small, with sharply constrained resources for course development, staff exchange, and research. In consequence, expertise in content and pedagogy at any individual site is quite limited. Such a situation cries out for collaboration and pooling human resources, to achieve a richer teaching and research environment.

Moreover, if an electronic networking approach is successfully implemented for English, it would seem even more reasonable to apply the model to other language departments, most of which are even smaller. This use of English studies as a pilot area can furthermore draw upon their increasing familiarity with ICT, brought about by the integration of e.g. corpus linguistics that has characterized English linguistics in recent years.

2 The SEED project

2.1 A twofold vision

In this context the authors proposed a project to facilitate networking and sharing, and in 2006 succeeded in securing pedagogically-oriented funding from the Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education (NSHU, Nätverket för Samarbete inom Högra Utbildningen). The project group was comprised of six coordinators from five universities: Stockholm University, the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH), Mid Sweden University, Malmö University, and Blekinge Institute of Technology.

Our ambition was to create a platform for professional and learning cooperation among staff and students at English departments in Sweden. This platform was intended to a) facilitate the exchange of teaching and learning materials and research resources, and b) encourage the exchange of ideas and experiences through networking and collaboration among both teachers and students. For this purpose, the
site would consist of two major components: an open-access repository of learning objects and a virtual learning environment (VLE) platform for discussion and exchange. It was to be available to all university participants within our discipline – students, teachers and researchers alike. To facilitate participation in the project, contact teachers would be recruited at each institute of higher learning in the country.

2.2 The repository

The repository is intended to function as a fully searchable electronic database containing “learning objects” accessible to teachers and students. Although it resembles an electronic extension of any university library, this repository has content that is essentially dictated by the users, since it is they who contribute material. Teacher resources include teaching materials such as PowerPoint presentations, compendia, study guides and different types of exercises on various topics. These materials have all been produced by active teachers in various subject domains such as grammar, language history, general linguistics, literary studies and cultural studies. In addition to material actually produced in the various departments in Sweden, there are numerous links to teaching resources produced by others internationally, resources which have been tried and approved by active teachers operating inside the Swedish education system. Examples include links to on-line text corpora and corpora of sound files of different dialects, on-line grammars, resources for academic writing, various specific software which can be used in teaching language (“Highlight” is one such example; it detects typically academic words in a text and highlights them for students), as well as links to Web 2 software such as Second Life, including instructions on how these tools can be used in teaching. Another important teacher resource in the SEED repository includes links and documents related to administrative aspects. Here we have included documents dealing with grading criteria, course plans and course development, as well as placement models for in-school training for future school teachers, to mention only a few such areas.

For researchers, the main resources include links to different networks, conferences and journals on various topics. Supervision of Masters and PhD students is also of
relevance: SEED includes a growing list of descriptions of the various English MA and PhD projects that are underway in departments in Sweden. Research resources also include software tools and various small and large corpora.

For students, the most important repository service is resources related to individual BA and MA research projects. However, there is also collected documentation on writing resources such as essay writing compendia and referencing guidelines, as well as links to undergraduate essays produced at different universities. Linguistics students also have access to the abovementioned small and large corpora, which can furnish starting points for numerous corpus-based essay projects.

2.3 The collaborative forums

The second aspect of SEED is a much more interactive one: providing a collaborative space for joint projects and exchange of ideas at various levels, from first-term students to teachers and researchers. This component requires an interactive VLE that can provide multiple forums with minimal upkeep. The raison d’être of such forums lies not least in the small size of student groups at the upper levels in Sweden today. By linking together participants from all over the country, we greatly increase the chances for students to find other students interested in working in the same area. For the individual student, SEED can function as a one-stop clearing house, which is clearly superior to ad-hoc solutions where students must rely on a teacher happening to know of another group at another school that might be working in the same area.

In addition to avoiding the trap of isolation, SEED offers students the opportunity to become acquainted with educational patterns and philosophies at other departments. In addition to serving as a counterweight to potential intellectual inbreeding, this broadening of horizons may be particularly important for future schoolteachers, as in their future career they will meet and work with colleagues trained at numerous other universities.

A further extension of this idea is that the SEED forums may provide a space for Swedish educators who wish to come into contact with other English teachers in
various parts of the world for cross-cultural telecollaborative experiments. There clearly is international interest in this type of activity and SEED forums can provide a hub for such activities, ranging from virtual and real student exchanges to joint research applications.

When actually implemented, however, it turned out that the SEED forums could provide another important function, namely that of an exploratory playground. Precisely by being liberated from their own institution, students selecting essay-topics can use the inter-university group to brainstorm on their choices of essay topics, posting initial ideas and obtaining advice and feedback from other students and lecturers/researchers involved in this collaboration. Similar (and even more playful) effects can be expected in literary endeavors such as creative writing.

3. Development of the project

3.1 Establishing SEED

Upon approval of our application in September 2006, we began by implementing our own mini-network with regular virtual meetings, since we ourselves were scattered over the whole country, although Stockholm University, the originator of the project, functioned as the hub. At these meetings, and in discussions with our respective colleagues, we endeavored to convert our plans into a functioning network that could in fact reach all English departments in Sweden. Since no such organization already existed, this involved establishing contacts, visiting universities, informing them of the project, and—ideally—recruiting a contact person at each institution. An easily-accessible SEED homepage was launched via Mid-Sweden University's site, with general information and instructions about how to find and enter SEED. In addition, a preliminary version of the SEED site was set up on Malmö University's web board. This process culminated in April 2007, when we presented our project to the assembled English departments at their biennial conference (Tällberg 2007), to the relatively enthusiastic response normally afforded networking initiatives when presented in face-to-face meetings (Stephens and Hartman 2004), together with
promises to make use of the site, particularly on the part of linguists and teacher educators,

On the technical side, initial plans called for SUB (Stockholm University Library) participation in the repository design (to ensure metadata standardization and search capacity), and for the SU IT-Media unit to provide discussion-forum space on Mondo, the Sakai-based virtual learning environment being developed by Stockholm University (cf. http://sakaiproject.org/portal). Near half a year was lost when SUB unexpectedly withdrew from the project without producing the repository; instead, IT-Media agreed to set up a repository for what can only be characterized as a nominal fee, a point which was to have repercussions as the project developed. Mondo was due to come on line at roughly the same time.

During summer 2007, when the repository (DSpace, an MIT/Hewlett-Packard product; cf. http://libraries.mit.edu/dspace-mit) became available, it became obvious that access, entry of new items, and searching within the database were extremely difficult even for SEED coordinators with owners’ privileges. Technical support was not forthcoming, and the entire site was still clearly in an experimental stage. Mondo, on the other hand, was working well within SU, and could in a pinch serve as a repository, so DSpace was essentially put on hold, and Mondo became our main site. During the autumn semester, 2007, members of the SEED group were able to visit many English departments in Sweden and demonstrate the version of SEED which we had now established in the Mondo environment, but these demonstrations continued to be dogged by both unpredictable difficulties in access and performance (more below).

3.2 External evaluation

In November 2007 our external evaluator Tim Caudery (Aarhus University, Denmark) was sympathetic to the concept, but highlighted these access difficulties, pointing out that it is difficult to launch any comprehensive system that will get users involved without payback, and that encouraging use is a long-term process. He referred to Tillyer 1995, who reports on the long and demanding process of getting a network
started, even when it is technically extremely simple and easy of access. His primary comments were:

1. Registering is (too) difficult. Lack of real commitment to project will stop novice users, even if they would clearly benefit from it. SEED needs an open area without login problems.
2. Getting people involved in using a site of this kind takes a lot of fleshpressing. convincing others will take time.
3. As more and more people join, a serious classification and cross-reference problem will appear in (the relatively loosely-structured) Mondo.

In response to 1 we opened a easily accessible Google site. In response to 2, we first concentrated on our own institutions and personal networks. In response to 3, the DSpace option, despite technical difficulties, will at some point become a viable additional option\(^2\); meanwhile, the VLE must serve instead.

3.3 SEED in action

By spring 2008 Mondo was working smoothly at SU, but not yet for guests. We instead launched a Google-based SEED discussion site for BA-level essay writers, which was fairly successful, with 48 members and some 15 active student users, as well as many lurkers. Interaction was mostly staff-student (as in Stephens and Hartman’s second network). During this period SEED started to host some wider functions, such as discussions surrounding the development of an official Swedish-English online word list for educational terms (a project by HSV, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education). In June 2008 SEED became the core of a potential nexus for co-operation around the subject of English in Sweden, involving numerous formal bodies: SWESSE (the Swedish Society for the Study of English), NJES (the Nordic Journal of English Studies), and the biennial English Professors’ Meeting.

The final period of our funding, July 2008 - November 2008, was characterized by further improvements in password arrangements, so that Mondo can now be said to be fully functional even for guests, and international exposure at the conferences of the

\(^2\) During 2008, unbeknownst to us, Stockholm University’s center for teaching resources, Lärum, began cooperating with a half-dozen other Swedish universities (cf. [http://oeriir.blogspot.com/](http://oeriir.blogspot.com/)) on a small project concerning the use of “open educational resources” involving DSpace!
Association for Language Awareness in Hong Kong and EuroCALL in Budapest. At these conferences, there was good deal of interest in the project and it was evident from discussion that what we were attempting was by no means common practice yet. Further funding is no longer forthcoming, but Mondo can host SEED with minimal maintenance, at least for the near future.

4. Problem areas

4.1 Technical problems

Technical problems rarely are at the core of pedagogical projects, but frequently have the potential to stall or destroy IT-based ideas (Levin et al’s ‘ease of access to a reliable computer network’), and this nearly proved the case for SEED. The initial application to NSHU had a miniscule component for software development, instead relying on being able to adopt existing software to produce an internationally-standardized archive database. DSpace is actually designed for this purpose, while Mondo was in part designed to provide a forum for discussions and informal exchange. Theoretically, they should have been sufficient for our dual purposes, and might have proved so if we had been operating solely within the confines of an individual university. The use of alternate commercial software from e.g. Google is also not without its difficulties, as noted below. Moreover, with no funding for future maintenance, software development becomes a dead-end, while both DSpace and Mondo appear to have a long life ahead of them.

4.2 Conceptual problems

The crucial problem in starting up SEED turned out to be both technical and conceptual in nature: by its very nature SEED is intended to serve as a national platform, but all existing university technology presupposes university-based log-ins: we function as an archipelago of independent islands with no functioning ferry service! No national Swedish log-in or inter-university log-in exchange system exists yet (one projected solution, called Shibboleth, remains only a sketch), and there exists
no central Swedish authority with the power to create or facilitate such a log-in system.

The dangers of using commercial, easily-accessible systems were vividly illustrated when we set up the open-access Google group for students writing their BA essays in English, to see the effect of easier access. The site almost immediately began to function as intended, but was actually captured, with pornography appearing there, so that regaining ownership of it was quite an arduous task and it has been discontinued.

4.3 Legal problems

Legal problems turned up in two forms. First, repositories such as DSpace commit authors to really knowing the status of their material, ensuring that e.g. no copyright is being violated by pictures in one’s PowerPoint or compendium. Future publishers may refuse to accept material partially placed on a permanent free site. While such obstacles are usually surmountable, they demand dedication and effort from the contributors.

Second, and more interestingly, as Swedish universities enter a period where competition is touted as a mantra and prospects of recouping investments in the form of teacher time and effort in e.g. developing exercise material become of interest to university management, the question of proprietary ownership has been raised. However, ongoing discussions between universities and unions about the nature of this relationship indicate that a policy decision accepting open-access principles is in the process of being adopted. The importance of such a decision may be seen not least in the fact that at least one potential contributor flatly refused to make available material for SEED, citing fears that because it would be placed on Mondo’s university-owned server, it could be in danger of seizure by SU (the author was based at another university). Although an improbable scenario, it nevertheless indicates the reality of concern about ownership issues. In the field of corpus linguistics, for example, copyright issues have for over 15 years blocked the creation of an American National Corpus to match the already-existing British National Corpus.
4.4 Motivational problems

Motivational problems are the final major problem area. Teachers and students will not use a system that does not accomplish what Riel and Levin 1990 designate as achieving shared interest, a well-specified task, a sense of responsibility, and response and feedback. If everyone used SEED, put useful material on it, and downloaded valuable material from it, everyone would gain. But if there is not much material posted there, there is little point in accessing the repository, and so long as one has not used SEED there is little motivation for looking in it.

The plausible solution is to make SEED use a requirement for students and necessary for teachers and researchers. As one step in this direction, SEED has been made a collective centre for our subject-specific national organs such as SWESSE and the Nordic Journal of English Studies, so that it should become central in disciplinary communication. As future areas of national concern appear, such as how to formulate responses to the pending reform of teacher education programs, these areas can be added to SEED, thus providing an instant national forum for discussion.

4.5 Lessons learnt

Many of the important lessons we have learnt from this project centre around the issue of enabling and stimulating the use of the SEED site. First of all, small technical hurdles can jeopardize the entire project if large-scale a priori commitment by researchers and teachers is lacking. A commitment at the university and national levels would have immensely eased the entire undertaking, and indeed DSpace manuals explicitly advise such commitment as being a sine qua non. To get students to initially engage, collaboration must be built in as an obligatory part of course activity. In order to continue use beyond the initial requirement, teachers and students must be motivated by real needs. In addition, the question of intellectual ownership and sharing must be addressed head-on, since there are divided opinions in the
university world as to the value and benefits of distributed access to teaching and research materials.

5. The future

Funding for SEED officially ended in November 2008, but as noted above, this is by no means the end of the site and its ideas. The coordinators remain committed to devoting time to maintenance of the existing sites and to encouraging future projects to utilize the facilities developed for collaborative efforts nationwide, for both teachers and students. On the technical side, SEED’s existing platforms (Mondo, DSpace) continue to flourish. In terms of content development, we predict that SEED will eventually become the human resources pool that we projected from the outset. During the past two years we have, perhaps, tried to do too many things at once, as Tim Caudery also notes in his evaluation report. Other reports from the 2008 Eurocall convention in Hungary indicate that no even vaguely similar European or American effort has yet succeeded in reaching significant numbers of language teachers, but that the concept is still primarily being explored from hubs based at the level of individual universities (alone or in EU consortia), rather than from the national level envisaged by SEED. The new university-level efforts at considering joint repositories notwithstanding, future successful interactive developments are likely to be of a distributed bottom-up nature, dictated to a large extent by users’ needs rather than project coordinators’ visions, and SEED is flexible and open enough to provide a channel for efforts in either direction. The biennial meeting of English departments in Sweden will take place shortly after the submission of this article, and national collaboration is one of the key issues that will be discussed. SEED will once more be brought forward as an ideal platform for future cooperative efforts.

What, then, are the strengths of SEED, as we go into what we might call the consolidation phase of the project? Firstly, the NSHU funding has allowed us to create functioning platforms and to build up a network of contacts at all of Sweden’s English departments. The repository of materials is slowly growing and will at some point in the future reach a critical mass sufficient to attract more and more new users.
who will be willing to make their own contributions. The collection of links to all published BA and MA papers in Sweden is an example of the kind of resource that simply does not exist elsewhere. Its popularity among students embarking on term papers is further evidence that when people see its advantages, they will be quick to work with this new medium.

Moreover, an important change is taking place within the academic community itself: a new generation of students is arriving who have cut their adolescent teeth on chat sites, Facebook, blogs, and many other net-based media, with flexible use of many programs as one of their hallmarks. Their increasing sophistication at interacting electronically is beginning to percolate upwards into the world of their teachers, the younger of whom are also fully used to these patterns of interaction. Technical difficulties will thus presumably play a smaller and smaller role in any future cooperative scenario.

In sum, although the project has encountered some surprising difficulties, and faces a major challenge in the policy position that rejects pedagogical cooperation, SEED has nevertheless become established as the first major European attempt at inter-university subject-based cooperation at a national level, and will continue to gather momentum in the years to come. The SEED team is committed to maintaining the current platforms as an ongoing operation, actively searching for partners and funding for future expansion, and developing SEED whenever possible. Moreover, we would like to issue a challenge to other language departments, and indeed to most other university departments -- the technology is now in place, and we believe that the SEED approach is now ready to be straightforwardly cloned and implemented throughout Swedish higher education. The difficulties have been manifold, but the learning and sharing potential is far greater.

Key URLs

http://dooku.miun.se/mats.deutschmann/seed.htm
https://mondo.su.se/portal (subscribe to SEED tab)
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