

An Interview With Peter Mortimer

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As part of a project to investigate cultural significance in the field of distance learning through communication with international experts, I interviewed Peter Mortimer, a British national living in France working as a project manager for the French Governmental Institute for Distance Education (CNED). CNED (<http://www.cned.fr/>) was founded in 1939. It is the prestigious, leading supplier of distance learning courses in France, Europe, and the greater French-speaking world. With 300,000 student enrollments in 500 courses composed of 3,000 modules, the Institute is a counterpart to the Open

University (UK) (<http://www.open.ac.uk>) in the English-speaking world.

Mortimer is a professional training expert graduating from the University of London with a master's degree in distance education. He is also a specialist in creative media use. My main interests for this interview focused on his professional development in Europe, his views on distance learning design, and his experience in a research project adapting the use of distance education in prisons as part of a large European Union supported project.

Without much knowledge of what is going on in that part of the world, I first did some research on what is going on in Europe, and especially in France, in the field of distance education, so as to get the interview questions right. With the differences in schedules and time zones being a challenge, Mortimer answered the following questions through a self-recorded session:

1. In distance learning, does the choice of technologies (e.g., learning management system) make any difference? If so, how?
2. You have extensive experience in creative media use. Does that impact the way you design a distance learning course? If so, how?
3. You talked about learner-centered approach on your personal website, <http://peter.mortimer.free.fr/> Why is it so important to you?



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4. How did you get involved in the networked teaching and learning in prison project?
5. What approach does that take? Any face-to-face components?
6. What are the critical success factors for the project?
7. What are your key takeaways?
8. Looking into the future, what roles do you see distance education can play to make learning more accessible/affordable?
9. How would you design an ideal distance learning course?
10. What is your best-kept secret about distance education?

Mortimer has a very practical perspective on the use of technologies in distance education. Understanding the wide range of existing technologies from a simple web page to some elaborate virtual world like Second Life, Mortimer argued that one had to test and assess technologies upstream before bundling them with any new programs. The essence is to keep technology simple and transparent to the target audience. At the same time, Mortimer recommended that professionals in the field of distance education should learn about as many technologies as possible. They could then match up the right technology to fit various learning profiles.

To Mortimer, every learner is unique. With his learner-centered approach, he aimed to draw information out from the learners to help them identifying who they were and to eventually assist them to develop to their fullest capacity. Mortimer believes that the only way to retain long-term concrete learning results was to provide learning materials relevant to learners' life and aspiration. The knowledge stayed with them when they cared about the content.

Mortimer compared a well-designed distance education course to a good book with pleasing layout and illustrations. A positive first impression opened the door

to get people further into the medium. Without getting overly aesthetic, Mortimer supported that courses needed to be visually appealing to their audience. At the same time, with his extensive creative media experience, Mortimer recognized that designs should be kept simple and self-evident. The creator should step back regularly from the project to see the bigger picture.

In a collaboration research project examining the situation of learners in prisons in France and in the bigger European context, Mortimer attempted to identify the learner profiles, their aspiration and motivation to education and training, particularly to higher education. Mortimer argued that to prepare offenders returning to the twenty-first century, they "need to master its channels of communication—the Internet, intranets, and mobile phones—and that enabling networked learning in prison, notably in the field of higher education, is the means of achieving this" (Mortimer, n.d., p. 1). With the constraints of prison environment, Mortimer conceded that his recommended distance networked teaching and learning approach was difficult to implement, to say the least. Prison learners were nowhere near the top of any government policy agenda, so a huge amount of work would be needed just from that perspective.

During the project, Mortimer worked with prison administration and authorities; he learned that ideals and ambitions had to be carefully tailored for various circumstances in reality. One had to learn to negotiate, be humble and down-to-earth and be satisfied if an inch was gained. The research also informed Mortimer of the diversity of prison culture across the six European countries. There was no use to impose one's idea on others. Adaptation was the key to take advantage of best practices and good solutions.

Even though no concrete applications were drawn from the project results, Mortimer recognized that a better-imple-

mented communication plan from the beginning would have helped to generate a wider impact in the six collaborative countries spearheaded by Spain.

Looking at the future of distance education, Mortimer pointed to the social networking phenomenon on the Web. He saw its potential for people to understand what they needed to learn and/or wanted to learn by sharing experience, exchanging ideas and engaging in dynamic discussions. He saw all kinds of learning happening when people came together in these vast communities with tools available on the Internet.

Mortimer concluded that for any distance education program to be successful, motivation has to be ingested into the design. One should slip into the psyche of the target audience and be empathetic to their needs. The program should put

learners in a position to be creative with tutors ready to help on the side. Educators and administrators involved should bear a mission to assist learners to gain more knowledge and to acquire new skills to better themselves.

Although Mortimer was speaking from another continent, the knowledge and experience he shared certainly have universal application. It is also quite obvious from the interview that Mortimer's passion for his profession plays a major part in his success in the field.

REFERENCE

Mortimer, P. (n.d.). *The challenges to networked teaching and learning in prison*. Retrieved from http://eifad.cned.fr/joomba/media/news/Networked_Teaching_Learning_Prison_EA_DTU.pdf

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