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USER FEEDBACK ON SYMPA COLLECTED IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EU-PROJECT *PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES ON E-LEARNING (PARCEL)* IN 2007

The tool was tested by male staff responsible for computing and data management or staff being not absolute beginners in it. Different features were tried out by different people. Hence the feedbacks are not fully comparable. Some people had expertise and experience with similar computer software. Nevertheless the feedbacks contradict each other in several points. This is a sign that many features depend on individual user demands. For this reason it might be advisable to create more features that can be individualised by the respective user:

The spontaneous feedbacks vary: “simple handling, comfortable and good overview”, says one user, “optically unacceptable” says another one, and it is a painstaking task to compile lists, subscription and administration are confusing. Another first impression says “user-friendly to deal with, some features are unusual”.

One of the users with strong computing skills expected more options for the creation, subscription, and administration of mailing lists, and is not quite satisfied with the graphical user interface, which does not allow for quickly creating lists, and he considers it inferior to Mailman in these respects, and also for the subscription of lists he thinks that there are not enough options that can be individualized.

Another one believes that list descriptions for “lists” and “member subscribing” are very detailed - maybe too detailed and too complicated.

The simple mailing system is easy to use, at least with the instructions of a technician, says a less experienced computer savvy users.

There are some innovative options. One user missed or did not find the option how to insert graphical elements and to send smallest compressed pictures.

There is absolute inconsistency concerning the user-friendliness of the tool, sometimes even the same users seem indecisive in this point, and say one time that there is good information quick access to the lists, easy subscription and sending of messages, but at the same time they think that the tool is there is bad overview and it is time consuming. One user considers the installation (perl lcnap) of Sympa as too time-consuming, suggests to improve the manual and the FAQ, and misses additional information in user fora and a porting for Windows.

There the same inconsistency of feedbacks on graphics, design, fonts we get from other tools too: evidently this is mostly a matter of taste. Because there is some unfavourable feedback, too (an eye-catcher says one, disagreeable, not pleasing says another), it might be best to offer the user different individual options to create their own optical design.

Concerning the menu the feedbacks say it offers good and simple overview, sometimes too many details or no good overview. Some fine tuning may be helpful here, too.

It is nice that the tool loads and reacts quickly, there is no waiting time, everything functions immediately.

Feedback and error reporting is clear and understandable,. Only one user thinks this could be improved for the installation process. He also thinks that the support is difficult to find and one thinks that the some expertise is needed to use the online support.

It took the users some hours (between 3 – 12 hours) to work to become familiar with the tool, which seems to be a satisfactorily short time to us. Nevertheless it was our experience during PARCEL that this is one of the most critical issues (see the general report on feedback on tools). So if there are any options to shorten training time even more, we would go for it.

Following ideas to improve the tool are suggested by the different users:

- > Sending of pictures
- > Graphical user interface
- > Quicker compilation creation of lists
- > An easy-to-find help function in several languages
- > Easier installation and porting for Windows
- > Online support
- > More systematic user guidance
- > More options: offer perhaps a “simple” mode and an “advanced” mode

The used equipment was sufficient – Intel Pentium 3, respectively 4 and AMD Duron chips - and everybody had sufficient RAM. The operating system was either Windows XP or open BSD. The only BSD user was a bit more critical, so perhaps installation might be more difficult there?

Some users used the tool for quite a while – several months or half a year – which indicates the usefulness of the tool.

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About PARCEL

PARCEL complemented the dissemination activities of KALEIDOSCOPE and PROLEARN, the European Union's Networks of Excellence on technology-enhanced learning, with participatory communication activities in Austria and the Czech Republic.

PARCEL gave civil society organisations, which want to make use of technology-enhanced learning,

the opportunity to select from a choice of tools offered by KALEIDOSCOPE and PROLEARN like software, hardware, course material and anything else useful for technology-enhanced learning and test these tools. Within feedback rounds and roundtables they report back their experience working with the tools.

PARCEL reached out to groups which, although being quite broad, might be different from the traditional groups of technology enhanced learning, institutions in higher education, larger companies, governmental departments or other organisations with sufficient financial resources and staff familiar with ICT: Elderly people, people with learning disabilities and children, handicapped people, and social groups lacking resources.

PARCEL's communication activities were conceived as pilot activities and offered good practice for participatory communication activities of similar Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence.

PARCEL was a Specific Support Action under the Horizontal Action *Promoting the „embedding“ of science and society issues across the Framework Programme* of the Science and Society Workprogramme under the Sixth EU Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development.

Further information on the project is available at <http://parcel.uni-sofia.bg>.