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Tutor practices in new HOU programmes. Stories from the trenches: the case of LRM (Language Education for Refugees and Migrants)

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Πρακτικές μελών ΣΕΠ στα Νέα Προγράμματα του Ε.Α.Π. Ιστορίες από το πεδίο: η περίπτωση του LRM (Language Education for Refugees and Migrants)

Tutor practices in new HOU programmes. Stories from the trenches: the case of LRM (Language Education for Refugees and Migrants)

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Abstract

This paper reports on the good practices followed by the tutors of HOU new Master's Programme, entitled "Language Education for Refugees and Migrants" (LRM). After presenting the profile and rationale of LRM, we focus on the online Tutor-Students Sessions (TSSs) and present the tutors' practices before, during and after the programmed TSSs, as well as their practices to support the development of the students' academic literacy. The data is drawn from 10 interviews, ie 8 with LRM tutors, 1 with one module coordinator and 1 with one member of the Digital Course Development Team (DCDT). The findings provide a comprehensive view on the varied practices, techniques and tools used by tutors in dealing with the TSSs as well as in helping students develop academic skills. New insights can thus be gained into the different ways tutors can respond to their students' needs concerning TSSs and the enhancement of the

their academic literacy.

Keywords: *Best practices; distance learning; online tutors; tutor's role; Tutor Student Sessions (TSSs)*

Περίληψη

Η παρούσα έρευνα μελετά τις καλές πρακτικές τις οποίες εφάρμοσαν τα μέλη ΣΕΠ του νέου Μεταπτυχιακού Προγράμματος Σπουδών του Ε.Α.Π. με τίτλο “Language Education for Refugees and Migrants” (LRM). Μετά από μία σύντομη παρουσίαση της φιλοσοφίας και της δομής του LRM, εστιάζουμε στο ζήτημα των online Ομαδικών Συμβουλευτικών Συναντήσεων (Ο.Σ.Σ.) και παρουσιάζουμε τις πρακτικές των μελών ΣΕΠ πριν, μετά και κατά τη διάρκεια των ΟΣΣ όπω και αυτές που αφορούν στην ανάπτυξη του ακαδημαϊκού γραμματισμού των φοιτητών/ριών. Τα δεδομένα της έρευνας προέρχονται από συνεντεύξεις με 8 μέλη ΣΕΠ, μία συντονίστρια ΘΕ και ένα μέλος της Ομάδας Ψηφιακής Ανάπτυξης του Προγράμματος. Τα ερευνητικά δεδομένα παρέχουν μία ολοκληρωμένη εικόνα για τις ποικίλες πρακτικές, τεχνικές και τα εργαλεία που χρησιμοποιήθηκαν από τα μέλη ΣΕΠ στη διαχείριση των ΟΣΣ αλλά και για την ανάπτυξη των ακαδημαϊκών δεξιοτήτων των φοιτητών/ριών. Αναδεικνύονται έτσι νέες διαστάσεις στους τρόπους με τους οποίους ανταποκρίνονται τα μέλη ΣΕΠ στις ανάγκες των φοιτητών/τριών τους σε σχέση τόσο με την αποτελεσματική λειτουργία των ΟΣΣ όσο και με την ανάπτυξη του ακαδημαϊκού γραμματισμού.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: *Βέλτιστες πρακτικές, εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευση, μέλη ΣΕΠ, ρόλος μέλους ΣΕΠ, Σύγχρονες Συναντήσεις online*

Introduction

The Hellenic Open University (HOU) has been a pioneer distance education provider for over 20 years in Greece, with numerous achievements and a great impact on the broader academic landscape. Addressing issues of sustainability and seriously considering current emerging and growing social and academic needs, a strategic plan for academic development of the organization is in progress, under an initiative undertaken by the new Board of Directors appointed in September 2015 (Spyropoulou, Kalantzi, Sideris & Androulakis, 2016). In this direction, the development of six new postgraduate programs, offered for the first time exclusively online, with a total of 1800 enrolled students, formed a project of high priority. Language Education for Refugees and Migrants (LRM) is the only program offered in the English language while the other five are offered in Greek.

This paper reports on two issues that have posed a challenge to all involved in the development and implementation of the program: a) LRM tutors' practices before, during and after the programmed online Tutor-Student Sessions (TSSs), b) the students' guidance in terms of the development of their academic literacy.

1. LRM¹ profile and rationale

LRM is designed for teachers and graduates who wish to complete or deepen their knowledge

¹ <https://www.eap.gr/el/programmata-spoudwn/394-language-education-for-refugees-and-migrants-lrm/4530-language-education-for-refugees-and-migrants-lrm>

and skills of teaching various languages, as well as developing new resources they can later apply to specific contexts and levels. Its conception constitutes a serious answer to the needs for further training of educators who are currently facing various challenges in the multilingual formal classroom, but also in other non-formal or informal educational contexts, especially taking into account the current sociopolitical conditions that render more people refugees or (forced) migrants internationally. The interdisciplinary nature of LRM including nine modules², aims at providing postgraduate students with a strong grounding in language teaching/language learning theories as well as appropriate classroom methodology, course design and an introduction to the key research tools through a critical pedagogy lens, preparing language educators for action and critical language teaching which serves linguistic justice (Piller, 2016). LRM encourages students' deep engagement in language teaching through visits to schools, refugee camps or other institutions related to formal and informal education for refugees and migrants in different sites of Greece and other countries, activities encouraging team-work and working on projects. Through its content and structure LRM aims to encourage students' continuous engagement with the educational material within interactive and collaborative learning contexts, and the development of strong academic and critical thinking skills, leading to a language educators' international community who works with and for refugees and migrants while encouraging the active participation of the latter³. To this end, weekly activities have been designed for each module and research papers followed by online presentations have taken the place of traditional exams. There are six codes of these weekly learning activities for LRM Modules [S]: Study material: This is material that the student has to study in order to participate in the relevant activities, [P]: Participation: Students are required to participate in these activities without being evaluated, [E]: Evaluation: These activities are evaluated based on specific criteria, [SA]: Self-Assessment: These activities are self assessment, where students evaluate their progress, [PA]: Peer-Assessment: These activities are peer-assessed, where students evaluate their peers' work and have their work evaluated by peers, [O]: Optional: These activities are optional. The final grade of each module is the sum of the students' completion of the following components: Participation Activities (15%), Evaluation activities 20%), Short Essay (20%) and Final Essay (45%). One of the basic roles that the tutor has is to provide evaluative and/or descriptive feedback on the Participation and Evaluation activities submitted weekly and on the Short and Final Essays submitted online on the educational platform.

2. Online Tutoring: Tutor-Students Sessions (TSSs)

The role of the online tutor is a much discussed issue in the literature involving distance education, while several models and frameworks are provided directly addressing it: Salmon's four stage and e-tivities model (Salmon, 2011; 2013), the phases of online engagement framework (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011), the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), the Read, Reflect, Display, and Do (R2D2) model (Bonk & Zhang, 2008) and the TEC-VARIETY framework (Bonk & Khoo, 2014). What these

² LRM 50 Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition, LRM 51 Migration, Multilingualism and Intercultural Communication, LRM 52 Critical Pedagogy, LRM 53 Language Teaching for Adult Refugees and Migrants, LRM 54 Language Teaching for Children with Refugee or Migrant Background, LRM 55 Design and Development of Educational Material for Digital Media, LRM 60 Introduction to Arabic Language and Culture, LRM 61 Human Rights and International Law for Refugees and Migrants, LRM 62 Research Methodology in multilingual contexts

³ The Hellenic Open University (HOU) offers full grants to 15% of the students enrolled with a priority to asylum seekers and non-EU citizens.

(and other similar) works have in common is that they have an overtly empirical character, directly addressing the online tutor and proposing specific feasible activities and related tools.

Despite the almost global acknowledgement of the role of the online tutor and the rich repertoire of suggested activities and guidelines, challenging, recurring questions still prevail in the field. Indicatively: “How can the communicative and educational intangibles that exist in the face-to-face educational experience be recreated in the virtual classroom?” (Poll et al, 2014: 59).

In this paper, we mainly address this question by focusing on tutors’ actual practices during Teacher Students Sessions (TSSs), which totally substitute face-to-face interaction in the new HOU post graduate programs.

The role of the tutor in HOU is twofold, as indicated by the double acronym (in Greek: tutor-counselor, TC). First, as a tutor, the TC mediates academic content, evaluates written assignments and generally offers academic support in issues stemming from the subject matter of the TU (thematic unit). Second, as a counsellor, the TC empowers the students’ self-discipline so that they end up fulfilling the TU and in effect, their studies. He/she communicates with students based on his/her own initiative, informs, advises, encourages and guides them. He/she has to answer all student emails in reasonable time, prepare and implement TSSs (teacher student sessions) and inform the TU coordinator on their content and outcomes. Papadimitriou & Lionarakis (2010) present a number of arguments on the complexity of this role, characterizing it as multi-faceted and demanding work which needs a great deal of tutors’ time, effort and creativity, considering that, usually, this is not their sole occupation.

Focusing on TSSs, the challenges of the tutor’s work are numerous. Critical emerging questions are, indicatively, how to sustain students’ interest in a 4-hour synchronous session, how to invent and employ participatory learning strategies, including the use of online applications while,, at the same time, catering for different students’ needs.

Previous TSS needs analyses (Antonelou et al, 2015; Panagiotakopoulos et al, 2013) attest to the students’ need for participatory learning techniques, which is a tradition in the blended TSS model adopted by HOU for several years. A first analysis of tutors’ and students’ interaction during TSSs reports promising results in the transition from a blended to a fully online TSS model (Spyropoulou et al, 2017). This work provides empirical data to inform this emerging body of research and propose ideas that have actually worked in practice.

3. Online Tutoring: Academic literacy

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a rapidly developing field of inquiry and practice “that focuses on the communicative needs and practices of individuals working in academic contexts” (Hyland & Shaw, 2016, p. 1). The development of several language skills are required so that a person is successfully engaged in academic communication. Firstly, study skills need to be cultivated, such as adjusting one’s reading speed to the reading purpose and text type, note taking, and evaluating (Jordan, 1997; Richards & Schmidt, 2010).⁴ Moreover, as Hirvela (2016) points out, intertextuality is a key characteristic of academic discourse that closely relates reading to writing. Students are engaged in reading as writers, since almost all allotted tasks involve some kind of reading related to an assigned written production (*reading for writing*). Skills of reporting, summarizing, paraphrasing and synthesizing, along with referencing and avoiding plagiarism are of utmost importance in this context. Academic writing also requires

⁴ A list of study skills (e.g. note-taking, skimming and scanning, summarizing, using quotations etc) in the study situations (e.g. lectures, laboratory/field work, private study/reading, reference material/library use, essays/research papers etc) in which they are likely to be needed and used is provided by Jordan (1997, pp. 6-7).

familiarization with the purposes and structural as well as linguistic characteristics of a variety of discourse genres. Presentation and interaction skills, which involve oral communication, are also important in an academic context. Finally, field specific skills are required, such as the acquisition of discipline-specific vocabulary.

LRM, with its new modules' structure and content, explores a wider range of academic literacy practices compared to more traditional university programs (Kitis, Hatzitheodorou, Kontouli, & Mattheoudakis, 2016). Additionally, the fact that the program is offered in English, while the vast majority of students are of non-English speaking backgrounds, calls for the development of support measures that would help students develop academic language proficiency. Since HOU does not offer a separate module dedicated to EAP, shared among English medium postgraduate programs, LRM tutors provide the necessary guidance.

In distance learning on a graduate level, students are expected to learn independently, taking responsibility for their own study and their own research. Therefore, the necessary skills are developed through relevant guidance by the tutors, through the use of adequate sources for self-study but also through real practice on a regular basis, allowing students to arrange their learning at their own pace. This paper discusses the actions taken by coordinators and tutors in collaboration in order to promote all skills required for academic literacy development.

4. Methodology

The reported practices were derived from interviews with 8 LRM tutors teaching modules 50-55, during the 2016 and 2017 academic period of two semesters, 1 module coordinator and 1 member of the Digital Course Development Team (DCDT), specifically involved in instructional design and activity development for LRM. The data set included: a) 10 interview transcripts, b) 20 items derived from the interviews and provided by tutors from their own archives as well as the common sharing space used by all LRM tutors. These were in various forms: web links, analytics and metrics from the Moodle platform, screenshots of forum or IM discussions, student products, rubrics created by tutors (in MS Word and PowerPoint), PowerPoint presentations and other academic materials (papers and book chapters).

5. Tutor practices in TSSs

Tutor practices related to TSSs took place before, during and after the sessions.

5.1 Before and after the TSS

Practices before a TSS are: a) discussing the agenda with the module coordinator, b) sharing the agenda with other tutors (e.g., in the tutors' Facebook group) and c) creating an Outlook Skype event where an outline of the meeting's agenda was sent to the students inviting them to fill in any potential themes to be discussed, encouraging them to explore some material/the topic of the agenda on their own as well as sending an email to the tutor with queries that came up from the thematic sessions that have been taught so far. In case where more than one tutor taught the same module, the tutors collaboratively created, shared and used a PowerPoint presentation before each TSS, as one of the aims of the programme was to encourage tutors to share the good practices with their colleagues.

Ice-breaking activities were also prepared prior to TSS meetings. The tutor invited the students to take photos of their immediate surroundings, ie. the view outside their window or a photo of the coffee mugs they would be using for their coffee during the TSS (photo below). The photos are shared before the meeting. and they are later briefly presented during the TSS by each

member, including the tutor. This practice, apart from creating a more playful, friendly atmosphere, it also bridges the geographical distance between students and tutors by creating proximity and familiarity among participants.

After a TSS, the PowerPoint file and any other materials used (links, articles, shared whiteboard materials) were collected and sent to the students' e-mail list. In addition, after the TSS the students are invited to send to their tutor an e-mail with their questions, any difficulties or points which have not been clear to them during the TSS and arrange an online private tutoring with him/her.

5.2 During the TSS

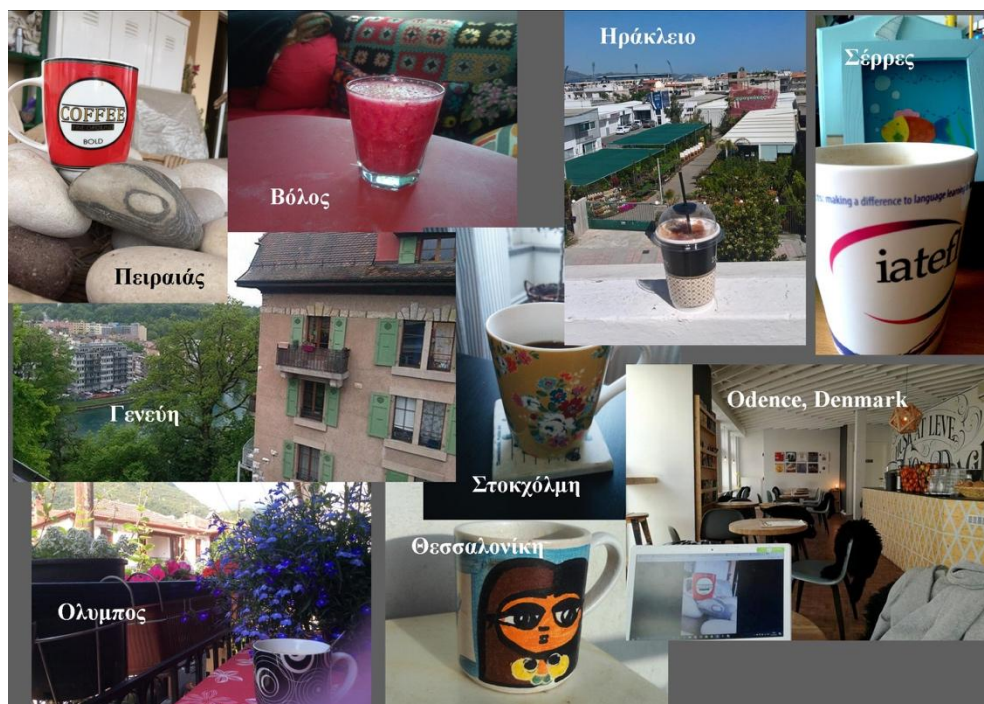
The following techniques and digital tools have been used by tutors during the two semesters:

Discussion: The tutor gives students either a link to a YouTube video or link(s) to authentic online materials. Students watch or study links individually within an agreed time period (e.g., 10 minutes). The class comes together for a moderated discussion on the topic under question.

Students' short presentations: During the last TSS, students are given a few minutes each to rehearse a sample of their final presentation (one or two slides each) and practice their public speaking skills. The tutor keeps notes and wraps up the activity, discussing a list of good practices.

Figure 1: A collage of the coffee mug photos shared by students and teachers before the TSS

Virtual tour – interactive documentary: Students navigate the Refugee Republic site⁵, an interactive documentary that allows users to explore everyday life in Camp Domiz. Students can scroll through hand-drawn maps, drawings, photographs, and short video impressions. This is an



immersive experience, allowing students who haven't had previous experience with camp visits

⁵ <http://www.submarinechannel.com/refugee-republic-camp-domiz/>

to form an idea of the reality of the phenomenon, discuss their thoughts and share experiences with their colleagues and the tutor.

Debate: The tutor chooses an interesting and contradictory theme, possibly related to a real-world problem or issue. Students are separated in two groups and prepare an “in favour” or “against” position speech. The groups can then change roles, so that multiple perspectives are shared by all participants.

Experiential workshop on research methods: Having shared a presentation on the principles and key issues of ethnographic observation during the Skype meeting, the tutor invites the students to individually go out in a public space of their choice following their preferred recording technique (i.e. notebook, voice recorder etc). The meeting breaks when students are given 30'-45' to perform their observations in a cafe, the park, the street etc. The group reassembles and each shares their field notes as well as their reflections on the experience and the ethics of observation. The discussion is guided by questions shared with the group on Skype Whiteboard.

Group work: The tutor separates the class into small groups of 3-5 and sets up separate Skype meetings for each group. The groups take their time to discuss and/or collaborate and come back in a single whole class Skype meeting, where the tutor wraps up the activity by moderating a whole-class discussion.

Online survey: Students complete (individually) an online questionnaire during the TSS. The tutor collects results and presents a first analysis during the TSS. The same questionnaire can be re-visited at a next TSS to compare students' responses.

Guided online bibliographical search: Students are given specific search guidelines and are assigned to search (individually) for materials. They then discuss the process in the whole class.

Exercises: The tutor provides basic guidelines on the use of APA style and then assigns students to do exercises online (individually).

Interactive game: The tutor designs a game in the Kahoot⁶ platform, a free online application. Students are given a key to enter the game, answering questions on a thematic area they have previously studied, and reaching a score. They then discuss the experience with the whole class.

Invited speakers: The tutor invites two known personalities in the field (in this case, they were Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis). Students study suggested texts and visit websites and compile a list of themes or questions for discussion. Then they decide who will “interview” the invited speakers. The tutor moderates the discussion and wraps it up in the end.

Interactive shared whiteboard: The tutor sets up a public interactive whiteboard, using Padlet⁷. Students pin their texts, images or videos on a selected topic. The tutor shares his/her screen, and students can watch the board take shape in real time. An example presented in figure 1 is a warm up activity. Students designed their “avatars” online, and then shared them providing a brief description of one or two things they like to do (stage 1). In stage 2, they discuss the experience on the group chat and then, in stage 3, they discuss further uses of the digital tool for their own (future) practice.

⁶ https://kahoot.com/?utm_name=controller_app&utm_source=controller&utm_campaign=controller_app&utm_medium=link

⁷ <https://padlet.com/>

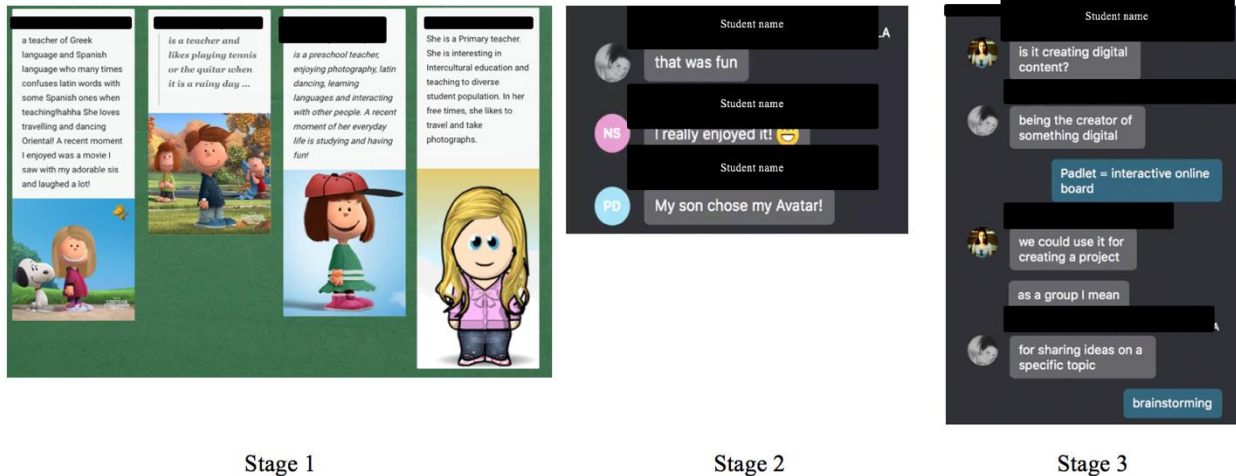


Figure 2: Example of warm up activity in three successive stages

The interactive whiteboard was also used as a space for brainstorming with students about the modules' key concepts (figure 3).

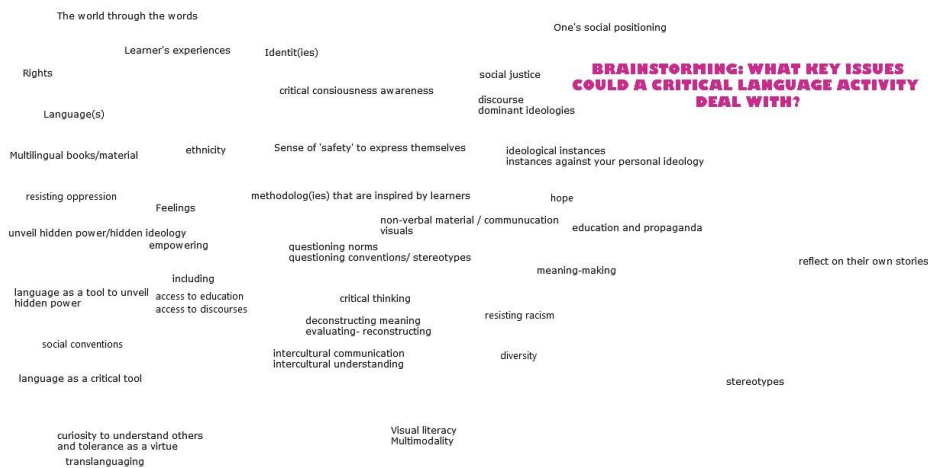


Figure 3: Use of the whiteboard for brainstorming key ideas

6. Practices for the development of academic literacy

Coordinators and tutors have concentrated their efforts on providing targeted support that would enable students to successfully complete the modules' assignments, while introducing them to the field of academic communication. In particular, the support actions undertaken are presented on the basis of the targeted skills:

Study skills: A considerable part of the TSSs take the form of hands-on workshops, in which students exercise the skills of searching for literature using various sources (e.g., the HOU library) and search engines (e.g., Google Scholar), evaluating their findings, keeping track of the collected sources, as well as taking notes in a systematic way.

Reading for writing: Part of the program's initial TSSs is devoted to the linguistic skills necessary for referring to and reviewing the literature in an academic text. During these workshops, students discuss issues of academic integrity and plagiarism and get engaged in

activities, using external sources that aim to help them practice the skills of reporting, paraphrasing, quoting, referencing and avoiding plagiarism.

Academic Writing: The written assignments included in the program's modules involve a large variety of academic genres, ranging from summaries, reflective response papers and literature review papers to research papers. With regard to research papers, students are given detailed written instructions on the structure and content of this genre, when the relevant assignments are given. Moreover, sample papers included in the modules' reading materials are reviewed during the TSSs with a focus on their structure. Additional advisory online sessions are held, in which students can ask any question they have regarding their ongoing work. As far as the weekly assignments are concerned, when a new text type is introduced, tutors provide students with extra material (usually links to carefully selected free online resources), containing guidelines for the particular discourse genre.

To support the students into this venture, a powerpoint presentation (figure 4) has been composed covering a range of topics, from understanding the different genres of writing to preparing and writing an academic essay, using sources, research ethics, using academic English etc.

Starting off an essay

Setting the research question (RQ): what do I want to find out?
Deconstructing RQ to key terms: what leads do I have to get there?
Reviewing literature: what background knowledge do I have for my key terms?

How to work with sources:

- **Looking for scientific sources:** Google Scholar, Library, HEALINK, Academia, Research Gate.
- **Taking notes:** of concepts, research results, interesting quotes.
- **Keeping track of notes (!):** note down where each information came from by collecting full bibliographical references: author(s)' name(s); year of publication; title of article/book; publishing house and place; page numbers for chapters in edited volumes, journals and quotes
- **Knowing what you note (!):** Are your notes copied word-by-word or did you paraphrase/summarise original meanings?

How to use sources: paraphrasing

- Summarizing articles, books, conclusions etc., by paraphrasing
- Proper in-text citation and the full reference at the end of the text is required.

Original (in journal)
To the extent that a woman's self-image is challenged or threatened by an unattainable ideal of an impossibly thin female physique, she may well become susceptible to disruption of her self-regard, and may be more likely to develop an eating disorder.

Paraphrased (in essay)
If a woman interprets the media's representation of thinness as the ideal she must achieve, her sense of self-esteem might be threatened and even damaged, making her more likely to exhibit disordered eating patterns (Polivy & Herman, 2004).

Reference: Polivy, J., & Herman, C. P. (2004). Sociocultural idealization of thin female body shapes: An introduction to the special issue on body image and eating disorders. *Journal of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 23, 1-6. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.134.3.460

(Williams College, n.d.)

Figure 4: Indicative slides from the PowerPoint Presentation

Presentation skills: The final examination procedure in LRM involves not only the submission of a research paper but also the synchronous oral presentation of this work to the tutor and co-students. A short discussion, including questions and answers, follows and, thus, an academic speaking simulation activity takes place. The students' preparation for this is implemented through online tutoring (during the TSSs) but also through supportive material on rhetorical functions (for example, how to prepare successful ppt presentations). Also, during the 2nd TSS an optional oral presentation of the short essay is asked of the students.

The above actions are complemented with a comprehensive evaluation system. More specifically, with regard to the two major components of the modules' assessment scheme, the midterm short essay and the final research paper, students are provided beforehand with detailed assessment rubrics, in an effort to increase transparency and promote students' autonomy, self-assessment skills and academic awareness of the writing process.

Regarding the rest of the activities, the assessment criteria (and their components) adopted are as follows: Content/Argumentation 50% (Relevance and to the point, Up to date research/literature review, Outline of main ideas, Arguments-explanation-critique) , Structure 30% (Cohesion and

coherence, Correct textual organization, Use of appropriate references in the text and bibliography in the end following APA style), Presentation 20% (Use of academic language & language accuracy, Respect of word limit, Text formatting).

Different Grids/specific rubrics for each different type of assignment were designed and developed ad hoc by the tutors, as the PPT assignment would follow a different evaluation framework than the text assignment or the forum discussion.

At this point, it should be mentioned that evaluative Feedback was provided to the Evaluation activities, detailed Descriptive Feedback was provided to the Participation activities and both Evaluative and Descriptive feedback were provided to Short and Final Essays. Grades and Feedback comments are provided through the online platform and are organized according to the above specific assessment criteria. The whole Continuous Assessment scheme and the detailed feedback comments focus on learning to learn, encouraging creativity and developing autonomous, self-motivated individuals but also active members of an academic community.

7 Discussion and conclusions

LRM is a new and innovative program, one that takes into consideration the new educational trends at an international level, i.e. new language teaching methodologies addressed to multicultural settings. As mentioned earlier, LRM aims to cover the new needs that have arisen at the Greek education system with the participation of new student populations, specifically the Newly Arrived Migrants and Refugees. To sum up, we could conclude that the first year of the implementation of LRM was a successful one, with a positive impact on its students and tutors. TSSs have provided an arena for tutors to invent and use new online tools and applications, alongside participatory learning techniques, the latter being an expressed students' need in previous TSS needs analyses (Antonelou et al, *ibid*; Panagiotakopoulos et al, 2013). Furthermore, empirical data of what actually takes place before, during and after a TSS can be used to complement the existing model for TSS in HOU (Antonelou et al, *ibid*). Beyond tools and techniques, which are shared and spread among tutors, further analysis of tutors' and students' interactions during TSSs could provide useful information and guidelines for the transition to a fully online TSS model (Spyropoulou et al, 2017).

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