

Setting Up a Course in ICT for Language Teachers: Some Essential Considerations

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Abstract

This article takes a close look at an in-service teacher-training course that was designed to train teachers of languages in the use of information and communications technologies in language teaching. Participants' reactions are examined, and an analysis is given of those parts of the course that worked well and those that did not. As a result of this analysis, a list of general recommendations is drawn up for others interested in running teacher-training courses in computer-assisted language learning. These recommendations are directed at both organisers and tutors.

Introduction

Given a large number of recent developments in CALL and the fact that established classroom practices cannot automatically be transferred to CALL (Chapelle, 2001a), there is an urgent need for teachers to be trained effectively in the use of new technologies in the language classroom. It is also important that the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in language teaching is not technology-driven and that pedagogical considerations (such as learner training, methodological appropriateness, and so on) are taken into account (Johnson, 1999).

In the light of the above, the European Union has just financed a three-year Lingua project in which a group of European specialists in ICT and language teaching worked to create an “ideal” course in which language teachers could be taught different ways of using ICT in their classes¹. The course that they put together was entitled “TALLENT” (Teaching and Learning Languages Enhanced by New Technologies). This course was designed to introduce participants to various ICT applications in the context of relevant pedagogical theory. As well as ICT, it focused heavily on concepts such as learner autonomy, learning to learn, and language learning strategies.

The course was piloted in July 2001 at three European institutions (the University of Limerick, Ireland, the University of Lille, France, and the University of Birmingham, UK). An in-depth evaluation of the Birmingham course was carried out to identify strengths and weaknesses in the course design to improve it for future use. This evaluation resulted in a long list of recommendations, many of which were not institution-specific. When they saw this list, a number of the course organisers expressed their regret that such a list had been available to them before running the course! I have therefore decided to publish the recommendations, as they may prove useful to anyone involved in running this type of course. In this article, I will, therefore, present the main findings of the Birmingham evaluation, and list its recommendations.

First of all, the course is briefly described and its objectives are outlined, in terms of recruitment, teaching, and course content. Then the results of the evaluation are presented. This evaluation covers the course components and a number of organisational issues. In the final section, the course's strengths and weaknesses are assessed, and several recommendations are made for future courses.

The course

The course was a sixty-hour in-service module for teachers and trainers in European languages as a second/foreign language. It took place in the first two weeks of July 2001. An outline of the course content can be found on the project's website, < <http://www.solki.jyu.fi/tallent/english.htm> >. The aims of the course are outlined below Figure 1. This figure shows the information that was sent to anyone enquiring about the course.

The TALLENT course is a sixty-hour in-service module for teachers and trainers in European languages as a second/foreign language. It aims:

To familiarise participants with the major applications in Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and language learning.

To guide the use of the technologies in the light of recent theoretical and empirical research in the area.

To enable course participants to integrate Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) into their teaching.

Through the application of concepts such as learner autonomy and learning to learn, to provide course participants with transferable skills that they can subsequently apply in their own professional and personal development.

The course consists of seminars and workshops. The workshops, in particular, are designed to enable participants to practice using the applications introduced in the seminars, to reflect on how to integrate technology into their teaching and their students' learning, and to develop a pedagogical project in the area of their choice.

The course follows a negotiated syllabus, i.e. the syllabus will be finalised following an analysis of the needs and interests of the group. Topics include:

Self-directed learning and ICT.

Setting up and running a self-access centre

Using the Internet.

Creating a web page for language learning.

Authoring tools: evaluating, selecting, and using them.

Concordancing: data-driven learning, using, and creating corpora.
Using ICT to teach speaking and listening.

Figure 1: The course aims, as presented to all possible participants.

The participants

The participants were from Greece (3), Belgium (1), Slovakia (1), Hungary (1), the UK (4), Italy (2), and Ghana (1). Nine of the participants were teachers of languages in Secondary Schools and four were teachers of languages or linguistics in universities. The participants typically had computers at home and were interested in using them for teaching, however, they had very little experience of teaching languages using ICT.

The evaluation

The information presented in this report was derived from a number of sources. I attended classes with the participants, interviewed the teachers and the participants both formally and informally, and handed out a comprehensive questionnaire to the participants (see [Appendix 1](#)). In this questionnaire, participants were asked to rate, on a scale from 1 to 5, the usefulness of the course content. They were also asked to use the same scale to rate several other aspects of the course, such as organisation, appropriateness, and relevance. We shall first look at the evaluation of the course components, before moving on to more general issues. In each of these cases, recommendations are made where appropriate.

The course components

The needs analysis and course introduction took place on the first morning of the course. The instructor presented the general findings from the needs analysis to the participants and outlined how the course had been adapted to meet these needs. She then introduced Warschauer's (2001) notions of accuracy, fluency, and agency, Mills' discussion of mechanical and meaningful practice in CALL (<http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/resources/possible.roles.html>) and Chapelle's (2001b) criteria for the evaluation of CALL tasks. This introduction was intended to provide the course participants with a theoretical framework, within which the various ICT applications could be presented and evaluated.

The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of the needs analysis was 3.4. They appreciated the fact that its findings were well reflected in the course content, but some participants felt that the findings from the needs analysis could have been discussed before the course began via an electronic mailing list. I would recommend this approach, where possible, for future courses. The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of the course introduction was 3.6. Although they liked the content of the introduction, some participants felt that it had been slightly too long.

However, I would hesitate to recommend that the course introduction be shortened. The course organisers were seeking to avoid, at all costs, a course in which ICT applications were simply presented, without any consideration of their pedagogical worth. This is because research has shown that the introduction of technology into the language teaching curriculum is much more likely to be successful if full consideration is given to the pedagogical needs that the technology is fulfilling (Litlemore, 2001). The issue here is one of balance. In future courses, the information in the introduction should perhaps be presented slightly differently. It could be given a more practical focus if participants can assess short ICT-based activities, using Warschauer's, Mill's, and Chapelle's concepts and criteria.

Module 1, which took place on the first afternoon, focused on Setting Up a Self-Access Centre. Its objectives were to familiarise participants with current practices, trends, and developments in learning resource centres, to encourage best practice in resource centre management and organisation, and to enable participants to acquire basic skills in the organisation of resources. The programme consisted of a tour of Birmingham University language centre, followed by a presentation and discussion on language resource centres, using the language centre at Birmingham as a case study. Topics included accommodation and access arrangements, budgetary and funding issues, copyright, equipment (audio/IT/new technologies) - acquisition and maintenance, publicity and promotion, the acquisition and maintenance of resources service development and activities (for example, language advising) and staffing. The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of this module was 2.8. The participants said that they had been provided with a lot of useful information in this module. However, some felt that the presentation was based too heavily on the self-access centre at the University of Birmingham and that not enough coverage was given to other types of centres, for example, digital language learning labs. I would, therefore, recommend that future courses should include consideration of various types of centres, other than the one in the institution where the course is being held. I would also suggest making use of some the ideas mentioned in Gardner and Miller's (1999) excellent book "Establishing self-access" [2](#).

Module 2, which took one day, focused on The Self-directed Learning Environment and ICT. The objectives of this module were to introduce and explore concepts such as learner autonomy (Little, 1991) collaborative learning (Nunan, 1992), and task-based learning (Willis, 1996), and to investigate the role of ICT in enhancing the self-directed language-learning environment. Participants were asked to evaluate existing pieces of software or web materials about their promotion of self-directed learning, and explore how such materials might be more closely integrated into their current teaching practice. The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of this module was 3.3. They liked how the concepts were discussed about ICT applications. There was, however, a feeling that slightly too much time had been allocated to theory, and that the whole of this module could have been covered in half a day. Again, as with the introduction, we see that the aspects of the course that were perceived as "purely theoretical" were not popular. However, as we saw above, it is important to maintain some theoretical perspectives in the course. One solution might be to get participants to evaluate the software in groups, rather than in a single group, together with the instructor. Alternatively, ideas on learner autonomy could be more fully integrated into other course modules.

Module 3, which took two days, focused on Using the Internet for Language Learning. Its objectives were to familiarize participants with Internet services which are of particular interest to language teachers and learners and to consider some of the obstacles to the use of World Wide Web (WWW) as a language teaching. The module looked at various websites, some of which are designed for language learning purposes, some of which are not. It then looked at three practical ideas books (Dudeney, 2000; Teeler and Gray, 2000; Windeatt et al., 2000), and discussed ways in which the ideas presented in these books could be adapted to different language learning contexts. The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of this module was 3.8. They particularly enjoyed adapting the teaching suggestions from the practical ideas of books. One small weakness of this module was that, in the computer lab, the course participants had no access to sound files. This meant that they couldn't carry out some of the activities suggested in the practical ideas of books. In future courses, care should be taken to ensure that all necessary Internet facilities, including sound files, are available.

Module 4, which took one day, focused on Authoring Tools. The objectives of this module were to familiarise course participants with authoring software, through the use of commercially available authoring tools, and to raise awareness of pedagogical issues involved in the design and use of language learning courseware. A presentation was given of the "Wida" authoring suite, and participants were allowed to create their own exercises using this software. The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of this module was 3.8. They liked the practical orientation of this module, although some of the participants felt that they would have liked to have had more time and supervision to explore different types of authoring tools. This is tricky, as there has to be some kind of trade-off between the variety of packages considered, and the extent to which the participants can explore the possibilities within the packages. In future courses, it may be worthwhile giving participants a brief outline of the pros and cons of several packages (such as "Question Mark", "Fun With Texts" and "Author Plus"), and analysing them along the lines of Tippet and Cook (1998) or Bickerton et al. (2001), before allowing them to choose which one they would like to explore in more depth. It might also be worth introducing participants to Hot Potatoes (<http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/>), which provides free authoring facilities for teachers who are prepared to make their materials available on the Internet.

Module 5, which took two days, focused on Corpora and Concordancing. The objectives of this module were to familiarise course participants with the use of corpora and concordancers in the language classroom, and to encourage reflection on their use as a cognitive tool in language learning (see Sinclair, 1991). The participants were shown teaching activities that have prepared using a concordancer, such as those described in Johns (1991) and Tribble (2000) and on Tim John's website. They were then introduced to Microconcord (monolingual) and Multiconcord (parallel concordancing) software and asked to prepare their own teaching material using this software. The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of this module was 3.3. The participants were impressed by the teaching material presented in this module but found it difficult to use the software to create their own material. Teachers of languages other than English felt that there was not enough material for them to work within their languages. I would recommend that, in the future, short courses such as this should focus on software that is slightly easier to use (for example, Wordsmith Tools), and adequate corpora should be provided for teachers of all languages, as far as possible.

Module 6, “Speech in Action” which took one day, focused on ways in which ICT can improve the teaching of pronunciation and listening. Its objectives were to demonstrate ways in which participants can find sources of authentic spoken English on the Internet, and use them in teaching, and to enable participants to evaluate standard methodologies for teaching pronunciation and listening. The session involved a study of empirical evidence, in the form of sound recordings, suggesting that received wisdom, such as “question intonation” and is not always accurate (see Cauldwell, 1996; 2000). The average score given by the participants for the usefulness of this module was 3.3. They commented on the far-reaching applications that “motormouth” might have for language teaching. The university-level teachers participating in the course gave the module a much higher rating than the secondary school teachers, and again, the lack of participant access to sound files was a problem. I would, therefore, recommend that in future courses, this type of module is offered, in a dedicated computer lab, as an option for teachers of advanced learners.

Module 7, which took two days, focused on Designing a Web Site for Language Learning Purposes. This module aimed to familiarise participants with the concept of self-created web pages for language learning and teaching, to consider the types of language learning activities web pages can support, and to investigate ways in which teachers and students can develop web projects together. The first session began with a step-by-step introduction to “Frontpage”, during which the participants created their limited web sites. They were then given time to incorporate language learning activities and links into their pages. One of the course instructors then described how he had created a web page with his students for language learning purposes. The web sites created by the participants were made available online for six months after the course had finished. The average score given by the participants for this module was 4.4, making it by far the most popular module. They felt that it provided something practical that they could take back and implement immediately in their teaching. They also felt that the software had been presented very clearly, in a step-by-step manner and that they had had plenty of opportunities to practise using it. Finally, they claimed that it was highly applicable to their teaching situations. I would, therefore, recommend that future courses should start with this module and that participants should be encouraged to link teaching material created during subsequent modules to their web sites. This would enable them to gain experience in website design throughout the course. They would also have a significant amount of teaching material to take away with them at the end of the course.

In conclusion, I would say that, in this type of course, the teaching approach used in Module 7 should be adopted, as far as possible, for all the modules. In other words, where possible, instructors should present real examples from their own teaching experience; programs should be introduced in a “hands-on”, step-by-step manner, allowing participants to create their materials as they go along; and participants should complete each module with a piece of teaching material that they can use with their students. Having discussed the individual components of the course, we now turn to more general issues concerned with the course organisation.

General organisational issues

The recruitment of participants for this course was generally successful. The university's publicity channels were used, as well as those of European Union organisations, such as Socrates and Lingua. The Internet was used as well as more traditional channels, such as direct mail. There were 221 enquiries in total from a wide variety of European countries, and thirteen of the fifteen places were filled. Most of the participants had found out about the TALLENT course on the Internet, in many cases through the Socrates website, and some had heard about it through personal contacts. The direct mail campaigns produced very few responses. The participants gave the course publicity an average score of 3.5. Several made the point that a local and national advertising campaign would have been useful. I would recommend that these types of courses be publicised widely on both a national and international basis. I would also recommend that course advertisers use the Internet, rather than conventional channels.

The TALLENT course was delivered through lectures, discussions, and hands-on sessions. The participants were asked to assess the usefulness of each of these modes of delivery. They found the hands-on sessions to be the most useful (4.4), followed by the discussion sessions (3.5), and the lectures (3.1). The participants also felt strongly that the best courses were those where information was presented in a step-by-step manner. I would, therefore, suggest that, in future courses, all material is presented in a clear, step-by-step manner and that participants are given plenty of opportunities to try things out for themselves.

One difficulty in setting up a course such as this lies in deciding whether to focus on the use of ICT for teaching just one language or for teaching a variety of languages. The former approach is certainly simpler in terms of choice of software. However, by focusing on a variety of languages, the course can be opened up to a larger number of teachers. The participants on the course gave its language focus a rating of 2.9. There was some concern among the participants that the focus on English had been slightly too heavy. If a course is to be made available to teachers of many languages, it is, therefore, essential to ensure that a multi-lingual focus is maintained. It is not good enough simply to present a piece of software in English, and to ask the participants to infer its applicability to their languages.

The average score given by the participants for how the course dealt with differences in their ICT abilities was 3.3. There was a wide variety of ICT expertise amongst the participants, which some of the tutors found difficult to deal with. The participants themselves felt that, in general, differences in expertise were well dealt with by the course tutors, but that there were occasional problems. I would, therefore, recommend that, in future courses, participants should be occasionally grouped according to their ICT knowledge so that those with more experience could make more rapid progress.

As we saw above, this sixty-hour course took place over two weeks. This meant that the participants studied for six hours a day, Monday-Friday. The average score given by the participants for structure and timetabling was 2.8. At times, they felt that they did not have enough opportunities to try out the applications, and they felt slightly overwhelmed by the number of hours that they had to spend in the computer lab. In future courses, I would recommend that a significant amount of time (more than half the course) should be dedicated to trying out the applications and that some of the teachings should take place in a room containing no computers.

The average rating given by the participants for the course length was 3.5. Many of the applicants felt that a one-week course might have been better as they had to sacrifice part of their annual leave to attend. In future courses, careful consideration should be given to the commitments of the participants (both work and non-work-related) and the length of the course should be determined accordingly.

The participants rated the relevance of the ICT tools for their teaching as 3.3. They felt that although they would not use all of them, it was useful to be introduced to such a wide range of tools. They were happy with this aspect of the course.

The impact of the course on the participants' future teaching

Many of the participants felt that the course would have a major impact on their future teaching. They felt that they had plenty of ideas, many of which could be incorporated into their teaching immediately. They felt able to use ICT in research, class preparation and execution, and career development.

There was a general feeling that the most useful aspects of the course had been creating a web page for language learning purposes, authoring tools, and Using the Internet. The university language teachers also rated “Corpora and Concordancing” and “Speech in Action” quite highly, but many of the high school teachers felt that it would be difficult to use concordancing with their students. The participants were emailed eight months after the course and asked which of the course components they had successfully implemented into their teaching. Interestingly, those who replied (eight out of a possible total of thirteen) claimed that Modules 5 and 6 (“Corpora and Concordancing”, and “Speech in Action”) had proved the most useful. This is interesting, as these modules had received only average evaluations immediately after the course. One reason for their delayed popularity might be that both concepts were completely new to the participants. It may have taken time for them to fully understand them and appreciate their possible teaching applications.

None of the course participants said that they would gain any official recognition in their institutions for completing this course. They said that they would be expected to help others by giving seminars on what they had learned on the course. It may be worth investigating the possibility of there being some kind of official accreditation for the course, possibly at a European level.

The strengths and weaknesses of the course

The strengths of this course were that the participants were introduced to a wide range of applications. In most cases, clear step-by-step instructions were given, which the participants found easy to follow. They were then given plenty of opportunities to try the applications out for themselves. The tutors encouraged them to think of ways in which they could be applied to their own teaching situations. The participants felt that they had learned a great deal from the course, most of which they could take back and apply in their own teaching situations. All the participants said that they would recommend the course to their colleagues.

The participants appreciated the fact that course consistency was maintained throughout the course by the presence of the tutors. The tutors used a variety of approaches to introduce their material, thus ensuring that different learning styles were well accommodated. They also taught in ways that encouraged self-directed learning. All participants left with a number of products (demo software, text for use with concordancing programmes, unlicensed software, etc). They all maintained that the course would change their approach to teaching in some way and that they had the confidence to make immediate use of at least some of the aspects of ICT to which they had been introduced on the course. The participants also appreciated the permanent presence of the computer technicians and realised that they would need such support if they were to integrate ICT into their teaching in their institutions.

In general, the course was successful and was strongly appreciated by the participants. There were, however, a few areas in which, according to the participants, it could be improved. The main weakness of the course appears to be that too much time was spent learning about the software and not enough time was spent using it, or evaluating its usefulness. Another weakness of the course was that it did not appear to cater well to the diverse teaching backgrounds of its participants. Five of the thirteen participants were teachers of languages other than English and this was not adequately catered for. Finally, the computer cluster in which the teaching took place was not ideal. As the participants were seated in rows, behind computer screens, they found it difficult to engage in discussion. Furthermore, the computers were rigidly controlled, meaning that it was difficult to use the software, unless it had been installed in advance. In future courses, a more student-friendly classroom layout should be used, with participants seated around the edge, on swivel chairs, with a discussion table in the centre of the room. Moreover, Internet-based sound files should be accessible to the participants.

Conclusion: Recommendations for future courses

Although in-service teacher-training courses in CALL are likely to vary across institutions, judging by our experience here at the University Of Birmingham, there would seem to be a number of general recommendations that are relevant to anyone interested in setting up such a course in the future. These recommendations are presented below. They are divided into three groups, recommendations for course organisers, recommendations concerning course design, and recommendations for course tutors.

Recommendations for course organisers

- The course should be advertised at national and international levels
- The course should be advertised on the Internet
- Access to the course should be restricted to participants from similar backgrounds (for example, language teachers in secondary and higher education)
- A seminar room should be available for teaching as well as a computer lab
- Access should be allowed to the computer lab outside teaching hours
- All hardware and software requirements should be met
- Adequate Internet facilities should be available

- A well-designed computer lab should be used, preferably with computers around the outside, and a table for discussion in the middle
- Technicians need to be available at all times
- The length of the course should be determined according to the commitments of its likely participants
- The impact of the course on the participants' approach to teaching should be evaluated several months after the course

Recommendations concerning course content

- The course should have either a monolingual or a multilingual focus
- If it has a multilingual focus, any software studies should be available in all languages
- The course should begin with a practical introduction
- The module on “Self-directed learning environment and ICT” should be practical or spread over the entire programme
- Theory and practice should be integrated throughout the course
- There should be no “theory-only” or “practice-only” sessions
- At the beginning of the course, there should be a module on creating a website for language learning purposes
- There should be adequate time for hands-on sessions
- Where possible, participants should be given software demos to take away
- The findings from the needs analysis should be reflected in the course
- Adequate time should be spent evaluating the software

Recommendations for course tutors

- Easy step-by-step instructions should be given for all ICT applications
- Participants should be given adequate time to try out the applications
- Every module should have a handout
- Every module should result in a piece of teaching material
- Participants should occasionally be grouped informally to allow for differences in ICT knowledge
- Tutors should be available throughout the course
- Participants should be asked to evaluate software in groups
- Practical ideas should be provided showing how concepts such as learner autonomy and self-directed learning can be promoted through ICT

Notes

- Project Number: 56563-CP-1-98-1-IE-LINGUA-LA, headed by Dr Angela Chambers of the University of Limerick.
- These include ideas on ways in which learners can become involved in the running of the self-access centre, and interesting techniques for learner counselling and assessment.

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Useful software and websites

- Clarity Language Consultants Ltd: Author Plus <http://www.clarity.com.hk/>
- Fun With Texts: Available from Camsoft UK: <http://www.camsoftpartners.co.uk/>
- Microconcord: Available from Tim Johns at Birmingham University <http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/homepage.htm>
- Question Mark Computing: Question Mark Designer <http://www.qmark.com>
- Tim John's website: <http://web.bham.ac.uk/johnstf>
- Wida software: Wida's Authoring Suite <http://www.wida.co.uk>
- Wordsmith Tools (Oxford University Press): <http://www1.oup.co.uk/elt/catalogue/Multimedia/WordsmithTools3.0>

Appendix 1

1) Internal evaluation questionnaire

TALLENT
Teaching And Learning Languages
Enhanced by New Technologies
University of Birmingham
2nd - 13th July 2001
Evaluation questionnaire
To be completed by all participants at
the end of the course

NAME.....

If you would prefer to remain anonymous, please supply the following information:

Age (20-30) (31-40) (41-50) (51+) (please circle)

Gender:

Nationality:

In some parts of this questionnaire you will be asked to indicate your views on a scale from 1 to 5.

When asked to do so, please remember:

1 = Very poor

2 = Quite poor

3 = Average

4 = Good

5 = Excellent

2) Course components

For each of the course components, please indicate, on a scale from 1 to 5, how well the material was presented, and how relevant you feel it will be for your teaching. If you have no particular opinion, leave the section empty.

- 1 = Not very useful

- 5 = Extremely useful

Course component	Usefulness
Course introduction	1 2 3 4 5
Needs analysis	1 2 3 4 5
Setting up and running a Language Resource Centre	1 2 3 4 5
The self-directed learning environment and ICT	1 2 3 4 5
Using the Internet in language learning and teaching	1 2 3 4 5
Authoring tools	1 2 3 4 5
Corpora and concordancing	1 2 3 4 5
Speech in Action	1 2 3 4 5
Creating a web site for language learning purposes	1 2 3 4 5
Do you have any specific comments about any of the course components?	

3) Overall issues

Please give your opinion concerning each of the following overall issues to do with the course.

- 1 = Very poor
- 5 = Excellent

Issue	Evaluation
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Course publicity	1 2 3 4 5
Organisation of pre-course registration and availability of information	1 2 3 4 5
The use of lectures as a learning and teaching mode	1 2 3 4 5
The use of discussion as a learning and teaching mode	1 2 3 4 5
The use of hands-on sessions as a learning and teaching mode	1 2 3 4 5
The language focus (English/French only/mixed languages etc.)	1 2 3 4 5
The appropriateness of the level of the course	1 2 3 4 5
The way in which differences in the participants' levels of ICT expertise were accommodated	1 2 3 4 5
The way the course was structured (time-tabling)	1 2 3 4 5
The length of the course	1 2 3 4 5
Relevance of the teaching tools looked at	1 2 3 4 5
Do you have any comments on any of these overall issues?	

4) General questions

How did you initially find out about the TALLENT course?

Now that you have finished, what kind of an impact do you expect the course as a whole to have on your teaching?

How might you now promote learner autonomy in your students?

What have you found to be the most useful aspect(s) the course?

What have you found to be the least useful aspect(s) of the course?

Do you have any suggestions for improvements in the course?

What kind of recognition (if any) will you receive within your institution for having attended this course?

Would you recommend the course to your colleagues?
Yes/No

Any other comments?