



UNIVERSITETI I EVROPËS JUGLINDORE
УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ НА ЈУГОИСТОЧНА ЕВРОПА
SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY

Quality of Learning and Teaching Conference Proceedings

South East European University
Tetovo, Republic of Macedonia, 2013

Editor: Quality Conference Review Board

Layout: Mensur Mamuti

Print: "ArberiaDesign", Tetovo

Number of copies: 50

CIP - Каталогизација во публикација

Национална и универзитетска библиотека "Св. Климент Охридски", Скопје

37.014.5(062)

QUALITY of learning and teaching: policy and practice. - Tetovo: South East European University, 2013. -

128 стр.: илустр. ; 26 см

Фусноти кон текстот. - Библиографија

ISBN 978-608-4503-88-0

а) Образовна политика - Собири

COBISS.MK-ID 94767370

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University E-Studying in the Republic of Macedonia

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Introduction

Teachers of the 21st century live in the era of modern technology and globalization that brings rapid changes in all spheres of human life. As a result of the tendency to constantly create new information, objects and establish new relationships between objects and actions, as well as the on-going general development of technology, teachers are continually seeking new knowledge and skills. As links in modern society and being constantly surrounded by these kind of innovations, teachers must get used to this new and rapidly developing technological environment, combine technology and methodology, that is, adapt to the need for fast, timely and effective education that offers knowledge and information which are open and widely available.

The Republic of Macedonia has introduced (or is still in the development phase) modern information and communication technologies in all spheres of life, including education as a very important part of society. In education, this is taking place at a rapid pace, and we will focus only on the actual implementation of e-Learning by teachers and other associates and administrative staff of the University "Goce Delchev" Stip. Although this university is quite new – it has existed since 2007 - still with its commitment and focus, it is very close to achieving, perhaps, the most important goal of any educational institution, which is to provide better and more qualitative education for its students, by applying e-Learning as the most modern form of learning. e-Learning, i.e. learning by use of technical tools with all its software enhancements is the peak of modern education. This paper is based on the research methods and results of the application of e-Learning as part of everyday practice at the University "Goce Delchev " in Stip. It aims to give a presentation of the experience of the electronic interaction between teacher and student, electronic exercises for independent work, learning materials, forums, surveys and evaluation of results achieved. In particular, it identifies the benefits and possible drawbacks of this modern way of learning, and makes an effort to promote the positive aspects that could offer suggestions for improvement and development of this way of learning. This scientific paper includes the features, activities and steps to be taken from the creation of the course by the teacher, use by teachers and students to evaluating the achieved knowledge.

E-Learning as a Modern Form of Learning

There are many definitions of e-Learning, but the most common is the one that says "e-Learning is teaching and / or learning using the Internet."

e-Learning, as a type of modern learning, is enabled at Goce Delchev University through the electronic tool Moodle used to create interactive Web courses, which offer more opportunities for students and teachers. This e-Learning platform offers effective online courses and content that includes media in the form of text, image and video. In addition, it offers all kinds of forms of electronically supported learning and teaching, as well as opportunities for the highest quality digital communication.

In terms of access and security, a teacher logs on to the Internet with his/her username and password through the official website of the University, creates a course in his/her own way, for the appropriate syllabus. In order for students to have access to the course, they register as participants with their own user names and passwords. All courses are available to them, created by all teachers and all schools, and for ease of getting to the appropriate course, they are arranged in categories. The main categories are: undergraduate and graduate studies, which are further divided according to the faculties, then groups/directions and finally according to year of study and program. Some courses are password protected.

Moodle is an interactive way of learning through the Internet, which offers the following options:

- Highlighting image or text in the form of a statement, tutorial, lesson, etc.;
- The assignment of a task or activity such as a quiz, survey, workshop, project (individual or group), the theme for the seminar or topic for an essay;
- A reference to the sources of knowledge: web-page, the title of the book, dictionary, encyclopedia, other resources;
- Enabling social interaction through forums and social networks, where they write, arrange,

inform, discuss and post comments, with messages arriving on their e-mail. Social interaction is practiced by students and teachers.

Independent work of students is encouraged. The teacher regularly monitors the activities of students based on their comments, questions, discussions, quizzes, polls, results of written work and essays, and gets an insight on the students, specifically their interests, motivation, desires, skills and knowledge. Depending on the interests and abilities of each student, a teacher may propose a movie, a work of literature or music, or refer to a website, encyclopedia, book, dictionary or lexicon where he can find more information about the area. In this way, the teacher can make his/her own dictionary or lexicon, or give access to students to participate in the creation of the dictionary or lexicon and then use it as a source of information. The teacher may recommend a discussion topic in the forums and follow-up student opinions and views. Topics may be suggested by students. Moreover, the teacher may provide additional exercises and assignments to students to expand their knowledge. These do not necessarily have to be considered in formal evaluation, because such extra-curricular activities are aimed at expanding knowledge in accordance with the interests of the student.

The most important aspect of this is the open contact between teachers and students. However, although the teacher monitors each activity and the student's interest all the time, it must be recognized that the teacher does not always get the real picture. Sometimes a student can open courses without any special interest, but simply out of curiosity, or to leave a false impression of an active student.

e-Learning in the World

e-Learning is encouraged not only at the University "Goce Delchev" - Stip, but widely in higher education. Many believe that e-Learning can enrich knowledge, experience and learning, assist in cutting costs and, of course, increase opportunities for education. All forecasts concerning this area of education say that we will increase the number of students who learn on-line, unlike the classical approach which requires physical presence in the classroom. Accordingly, it is considered that the number of teachers who teach online will increase at the expense of teachers who will be using classical methods of teaching. There is constant evaluation and improvement in e-Learning systems.

According to some research, it is believed that the Internet currently has over 15 million online courses with the trend towards constant growth. In the U.S., the number of companies dealing with e-Learning is more than 1000. Some companies or institutions offer courses only for employed students, who may want to advance in their career or need to upgrade skills such as management, finance or IT. There is also an increase in the number of online training courses for teachers.

Thus, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has announced that all courses are available not only to students, but also for people who are not students of the University. The virtual University of Monterrey has provided a one-year course for 25,000 teachers by satellite TV or on the Internet since 1989. In June 2000, the European Commission formally integrated e-Learning into its global e-Europe plan, and provided 13 billion Euro for the development and strengthening of e-Learning in the European Union. There are universities in which the main curriculum is based on distance learning. This is also the case with countries that are not members of the European Union, such as Russia, Ukraine and countries of the Western Balkans. In China, over half a million students study at 38 online universities. The Republic of Korea has adopted a national doctrine which aims for an "Edutopia" - a state in which everyone will have the opportunity to learn through the Internet anywhere and at anytime. In the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, India, the number of universities that implement e-Learning is increasing day by day as it is in countries in Africa, where there has been an even greater use of the Internet and learning courses (see Joanne Capper: e-Learning: Current Status and International Experience, World Bank).

Moreover, associations, private institutions and centers offer training in using e-Learning platforms, monitor application platforms, upgrade systems, remove any software problems, and using positive and negative experiences of the past, promote this modern way of learning. There is a noticeable increase in the number of partnerships between higher education institutions and private corporations that use platforms for e-Learning, which is a positive signal about the future of this mode of education.

Implementation of e-learning at the University "Goce Delchev" - Stip

University "Goce Delchev" - Stip was established in March 2007, and an aim was to organize the highest level of use of computer technology in all areas of teaching, but also in management and administration. For this purpose, computers were provided for each employee, many classrooms and computer labs were opened

with interactive boards, with a modern computer network which is connected to all campuses with optical connection set between them. Apart from that, there has been a successful implementation of the systems: Document Management System and Learning Management System (Moodle).

At university level, an e-Learning center was established whose aim was to provide continuous support for all teachers and assistants, monitoring, development and implementation of new technologies for electronic supported learning and implementation of the e-Learning platform Moodle.

In order to ensure the successful implementation and integration of e-Learning at the University, several training sessions for teachers, assistants and administrators were conducted. For this purpose, the development of specific software was necessary that fitted the needs of teachers and teaching, and certainly the development of appropriate curriculum which would allow the integration of e-Learning in daily teaching activities. Therefore, in the creation of new curricula, all experience, both positive and negative, on the application of e-Learning, was taken into account.

Currently, this platform is successfully used by academic staff and collaborators on the one hand and students on the other. According to the survey entitled Implementation of e-Learning - Experiences from the University "Goce Delchev" - Stip by Dr. Zoran Zdravev, the current situation is such that the number of created courses in December 2012 was 930, the number of users about 13 548, the number of activities 41 397, the number of posts 34,047, the number of resources posted 8139, the average number of users per course 44.26 and the number of modules per course 12.70.

In order to achieve this high degree of success in the implementation of e-Learning at the University, we had to overcome some obstacles and challenges such as: lack of equipment and skills to use this advanced equipment, skepticism of some teachers and staff (especially the older members of staff) and lack of motivation which in turn was a cause of ignorance about this new method. Fortunately all these obstacles are now behind us and we can be proud of the success which was achieved. We have done this by ensuring that we had modern computer equipment and regular training to upgrade the skills of using IT equipment and resources. We also established a center for e-Learning which aimed at monitoring the state of computer technology (hardware and software), providing continuous training for users and monitoring and promotion of e-Learning.

e-Learning and Student Assessment

However, with regard to the assessment of students, although it is partially possible for the evaluation of students to be done electronically, the student's physical attendance in lectures / tutorials and mid-term and final exams is still regarded as the best and most reliable method. Experience shows that direct contact between teacher and student is still considered the most appropriate assessment method. In that way, we avoid any possibility of manipulation and cheating by students, because otherwise, the teacher is never 100% sure who is sitting on the other end of the electronic connection, and which tools the student is using at the time of evaluation (dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks, websites, etc.). Seminar work and student essays can be uploaded from home, but the teacher still has to read and evaluate them. Automatic assessment of written material is still not feasible because the machine can only take into account possible grammatical errors, and not content and stylistic value of the text. There is a possibility of participation in quizzes with automatic grading, but the practice at our university has shown that these results are not taken into account when conducting the final evaluation; they are done only for students to compete among themselves or to allow individuals to assess his/her own level of knowledge.

Benefits and Drawbacks of E-Learning

The current application of e-Learning in teaching in higher education has shown both positive and negative sides. The benefits are that the interaction between teacher and student is at the highest possible level, 24 hours a day, so the teacher can monitor student activity at any time. This way of learning offers a range of knowledge resources that are easy to use, and opportunities to activate and motivate students to actively participate in teaching at home, where they are quite comfortable, and everyone finds it simpler to sit in front of a computer, which today is a mandatory utility in every home, rather than travelling to the institution, to attend classes physically, or to go to a library where they work in a room with many other people and search materials to upgrade their knowledge.

This kind of learning is particularly well suited to part-time students who may be prevented from attending classes for justified reasons. It allows them to be updated with events and to complement teaching.

Despite many benefits, this kind of learning has its weaknesses. One negative side is that the teacher spends a lot of time in the preparation of the course (in particular if he/she has to make many courses), and he/she must have knowledge about the appropriate use of tools. Apart from that, the teacher must be able to adapt the contents of the e-Learning to the planned teaching material. Some teachers, especially the older ones, are not willing to change their classical methods of teaching which they have used for several years – which may not applicable nowadays and are considered as obsolete – or to replace them with new methods which include technical support.

Another downside is that there is no live interaction between teacher and student and that students remain a long time in front of the computer, not moving, and interaction through the Internet is not simultaneous and parallel, because the contact is in the form of sending emails. Moreover, many of the students did not use e-Learning seriously, as a way of learning, but more as a way of fun, interaction and so on.

Conclusion

Despite these challenges, our experience showed that interaction through e-Learning allows improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. It was a new experience in the way of studying but with excellent results. Even though this new mode of learning is still developing, with the advancement of technology and methodology, it is expected to become routine and distinct in its way of teaching, learning and assessment. In order to improve the quality of teaching, we propose the integration of e-Learning with classical teaching methods, which would include delivering some of the tasks assisted with Moodle during the lectures on the faculty premises. So, the teacher would be sure that students perform tasks independently and could include the results of the e-Learning in the students' final grade. We have to admit that the e-Learning system which we have today is not mature enough to be applied in assessment. For this purpose, it should be upgraded in terms of setting the camera for transmission of image and sound, so as to be able to monitor that the student is expressing his knowledge independently, and that s/he does not read and that nobody else is telling him/her what to write. Also, to prevent possible manipulation through students opening other tools on the screen (eg. Encyclopedia or textbook) during examinations, the system should offer the option to ban the opening of other tools. But even if we make a "perfect system" for assessment, information technology can never be safe from hacking which keeps pace with the development of technology itself. Another conclusion is that it is necessary to consider the development of platforms for electronic education by adding entertaining content that would hold the attention of students longer and thus facilitate the online learning method. Since research shows that students use the Internet primarily for reading, posting or downloading content from Facebook, YouTube or Wikipedia, and not primarily for their own intellectual upgrade, we think that there should not be an obstacle for further synthesis of e-Learning platforms and content with non-educative character.

By uniting e-Learning and fun, we would achieve perfect results.

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