BLENDED LEARNING AND SELF ORGANIZED LEARNING, KEY ISSUES IN ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

The blended learning can combine face-to-face interaction, an online course, and computer-mediated instruction. It also applies IT activities. We think that *the blended learning* have realistic opportunities to make learning independent (self organized learning). The paper offers some considerations of educational perceptions in that field of study. It is a challenge to us like pedagogues to provide the correct amount of guidance without providing too much direction in lifelong education. In today's adult education institutions, such as universities, *the blended learning, the self organized learning*, and its impact on education is just beginning to be understood. We think that also some disadvantages of e-learning have been identified such as lack of peer contact and interaction, high initial costs for preparing multimedia content of learning materials.

Keywords: blended learning, interactive learning, independent learning, e-learning

Introduction

Training for lifelong learning, for continuous improvement is now a widely accepted necessity. Education can't be reduced in schools anymore and can't be restricted to a single time period.

Currently, information is obtained, distributed and used through the possibilities offered by the *web* technology [Grant, 2006]. H. Siebert notes that in the last decade of the last century, "a global political revaluation of lifelong learning" shines on, a reality that must be understood both as "human resource and coping strategy" [Siebert, 2001, p. 79].

The emphasis of the adult's responsibility in learning, the development of his self-sufficiency are objectives that must be considered when building the teaching act, especially since one of the fundamental trends of global education development can include:

- *individualization of training;*
- *ensuring flexibility in organizing learning, allowing the reconnection of adults of all ages to influence educational systems;*
- *computerization of education at all levels* [Maciuc, 1998, p. 88].

The integration of new information and documentation technologies in learning can enhance the quality of education, especially since "the teaching demarche of the initial training is one focused on educating, so the trainer's

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role is to set the context, the framework in which teaching is self-formed. Thus, in view of sustained training, education enfolds on the patterns of an action located in the confines of education and self-education" [Ştefan, 2008, p.47].

Blended Learning combines on-line training methods, traditional formal training, tutoring, a learning/teaching system that integrates multiple aspects and approaches specific tot the study, being, according to experts, *a product, a purpose and a process*. In this way, we can address adult learning opportunities as a combination of classical methods and/or interactive, with materials based on IT technology, e and m-learning, autonomous learning techniques, etc. To ensure the accuracy of the terms used, we point out that *E-Learning* or *electronic learning* is that type of learning/teaching whose support is represented by computer technologies, and *m-Learning* is using mobile devices such as *MDA, PDA* or even mobile phones. Combining face-to-face training and computer-mediated learning has as result the *blended learning* [Graham, 2005]. It is a challenge with an infinite number of possible solutions [Bonk & Graham, 2005]. At the same time, social aspects are also important [Ileana Hamburg *et alli*, 2003].

Projects and Partnerships

"ViReC e-Initiative" Project, a virtual learning resources center, with a reproducible structure, is a European attempt to build a virtual learning environment through *ICT* and *ODL* in higher education institutions. The main objective of the project is to create a high quality learning environment as a network of European universities. This will ensure access to new better forms, methods and learning resources, by harnessing the best practices in the field. It is a project aimed at developing innovating practices and services. It was designed to enable integrated learning based on intra and interdisciplinary units. It presents wide possibilities to stimulate group learning and optimize collaboration between teacher/trainer/tutor and trainees. It also allows rigorous planning and careful monitoring of the study.

ECASME is a project developed under the *Leonardo da Vinci European Initiative*, a collaborative project involving partners such as the University of Limerick, AMT, University of Craiova, University of Suceava, University of Aveiro, ICDC / ITT in Sweden and the Foundation for Development *(CEDeF)* in Latvia. The project involves the research of training needs that exist within SMEs in Europe. The main objective is to identify the best practices in learning and in specific content needs analysis in a friendly user under an online format.

The general objective of the *COMBLE* Project (*Community of Integrated Blended Learning in Europe)* is to improve the quality of *Blended Learning*, in order to ensure quality education in business environment, through *training*, consultancy, learning facilities in three areas: higher education,

permanent professional / continuous education and business education. The project is coordinated by Prof. Dr. Margit Scholl (Recipient Organisation: *Technische Fachhochschule Wildau*), having German, Danish, Dutch, Polish and Estonian partners (http://www.comble-project.eu http://www.comble-project.eu). In any of these cases, *network administrators*, *educational administrators* and *developers of learning materials* have a role that can't be challenged (also see *ABCD-Advanced Blended Learning and Didactics*, Grundtvig Project, 2005).

It is estimated that there are 8 dimensions involved: institutional, technological, interface, pedagogical (setting goals, learning needs analysis, content analysis of learning, establishing the strategy and mainly the methods, etc.), evaluative, support (resource) and ethical dimension. [Singh, 2003, http://asianvu.com/digital-library/clearning/blended-learning-by_Singh.pdf].

An effective *blended learning* solution includes a mixture of three types of learning with the following ingredients:

1. An instructor who directs the learning;
2. *E-mail* and telephone support;
3. Virtual classrooms through *videoconferencing*, where the instructor explains subjects specific in group learning and proposes issues/questions.
4. Interaction between adult learners and the instructor/tutor/mentor, and between adults themselves is done through chat to foster group learning;
5. Help and query topics related to learning management/administration (subscription, *LMS platform* issues, etc.);
6. Examination and certification [Alonso, López, Manrique and Vine, 2005, [http://aulatika.net/app/download/1629822702/An+instructional+model+for+web-based+e-learning+education.pdf].

The Results of an Empirical Research

The investigation we conducted seeks rather an effort to reflect and tries to open perspectives for future challenges. It is mainly based on subjective data, i.e. perceptions and representations of students and teachers. Learning proficiency may play, as is known, a central role in the social integration and professional success. In our case, we set explicit goals and realistic objectives. The objectives were:

- defining the main characteristics of the new forms of learning, according to the vision of the adults investigated and students-future teachers;
- highlighting potential problems in the continuous training plan for teachers and adults generally. The explanatory framework of our

attempts was constituted of preparing to meet the changing knowledge society, by watering their creative and active learning.

Based on the above allegations, in the course "Psycho-pedagogy of learning" we applied a questionnaire aimed at student views on "blended learning" and "self-directed learning". We started from the assumption that today's students will be more prepared for an alternative approach of *blend*-type learning. In the course, *blended learning* and *self-directed learning* were defined, and types and specific learning contexts were presented [Maciuc, 2005, 2006]. Unlike today's Romanian adults, students were informed and sensitized to specific issues.

Data for the hypothesis of the study were subjected to a comparative analysis between categories of subjects and interpreted by reference to several criteria.

We present below the results obtained by applying the questionnaire to identify students' perceptions about their *blended learning* and their training needs analysis.

During one year (2008/2009), we discussed the impact of new forms of learning with inspectors, trainers, future teachers of different specialties. The sample included 111 subjects, students at the University of Craiova (History - 39, Theology - 22, Law - 26 and Biology - 24) and 26 trainers, inspectors, female kindergarten teachers. Sample selection criteria used were:

1. education level;
2. social recognition of the expertise in the field of work;
3. academic performance for students-future teachers.

Data was collected through semi-directive or informal interview, focus group, theoretical documenting and empirical research, group discussions and interpretation of data obtained by applying the questionnaire, but also through some recent curricular documents (provisions on testing/certifying digital skills). As for us, we found that the information gained by adults involved in training programs and students-future teachers who have received a course of psycho-pedagogy of learning is significantly higher in the areas indicated. Obviously, more research data are needed to elucidate the importance of paradigm changes in learning science. To develop the questionnaires, a simple questionnaire containing 8 questions, we initially conducted a focus group, identifying specific problems and situations. Using a 5-point scale, subjects were asked to respond: 1. To what extent are the Romanian adults involved in the organization of their learning?; 2. To what extent learning environment in our country is compatible with: *a) blended learning? b) self-organized learning?;* 3. Do you appreciate we have the resources necessary for this purpose?; 4. To what extent core competencies of adult can be developed through these learning activities?; 5. To what extent is it possible to assess progress in this type of learning *(blended learning),* in view of its optimization?; 6. To what extent, in Romanian adults' education, success in self-directed learning is registered / certified?;

7. To what extent the education methods that we currently use are adjusted to the mentioned forms of learning *(blended learning, self-directed learning)*?; 8. Do you think that there is a positive trend in the relevant areas *(self-directed learning, blended learning)*? (scale: To a great extent=5; Moderately=4; Somewhat=3; A little=2; Very little=1; Not at all=0).

Group discussions with trainers and inspectors regarded:

Relevance: To what extent the implementation of blended learning can meet our needs? What do we want to obtain through it?

Will: To what extent are we ready to demonstrate initiative in organizing our own learning? What are the conditions necessary to ensure its success? Things may be different in another time?

Resources: What are our time, staff and financial resources for the launch, implementation, control and evaluation of such initiatives in achieving learning?

Adult participants in the discussion appreciated:

- the stimulation of the interaction and learning motivation;
- the acquisition of the training autonomy;
- the profitable relationships at the workplace;
- the enhance of the effective participation and learning/collaboration intensity;
- the time and space flexibility given to the exchange of ideas;
- the open and distance learning;
- the interactive, open and flexible learning;
- the real opportunities for continuous improvement of study and personal development.

Results

Researches in the specialized literature showed that, as a person makes progress in his education attainment, he becomes more capable of self-organization in learning, becoming more able to influence his own learning outcomes.

The concept of "self-organization" is based on the premise that these systems are too complex, too rich in variations to be represented by simple explanatory models. Because of their extraordinary complexity, the systems are hardly appraisable to be successfully routed to one particular purpose only by controlling the central factors [Arnold, 1993, *apud* H. Siebert, 2001].

To *Question 1* – "To what extent are the Romanian adults involved in the organization of their learning?", most subjects (51.3%) have chosen the answer "somewhat", which highlights the awareness of weaknesses in the organization of the learning process. Although the responsibility for learning is a new target to be considered by the learner, although emphasis should be on the assertion of independence in managing internal and external learning

resources, in organizing their learning, subjects in the experimental group believe that they "somewhat" participate in organizing their learning.

Answers to *Question 1* may be correlated with those to *Question 2* – "To what extent learning environment in our country is compatible with blended learning?".

If 51.3% of the respondents considers that Romanian adults participate only "somewhat" in the organization of their learning, 43.2% believe that the learning environment in our country is compatible with *self-organized learning*, as well "somewhat". It means that subjects in the group blame the less conducive learning environment. In contemporary approaches to learning and especially in academic learning approach, the self-organization in learning ability was put, although not always explicitly, in relation to personal autonomy.

Thus, it is a must to provide learning experiences that lead to a certain psychic instrumentation, the assertion of *self-determination, self-organization, self-direction* competences.

Compatibility between the learning environment of our country and blended learning is assessed by the same majority share of 46.8%, but this time only "a little". It would result that students identify few opportunities to call this type of learning whose support is the computer technology, although the current observations and conversations show that Internet access is a common concern to young people. We can draw the following conclusions: Either the Internet is not used for a self-organized learning, or students do not have clear in mind the concepts of *blended learning* and *self-organized learning*.

Because the answers to the following questions reveal, in the students' case, highly scattering, demonstrating uncertainty and confusion in the mastery of concepts, we will discuss further the answers of inspectors and trainers having a genuine experience in both areas.

The answer to *Question 3* reveals that most students believe that we have the resources needed to use the two forms of learning subject of our analysis only "somewhat" (22.5%) or "a little" (27.9%) and 19.8% "very little". Adults interviewed are more optimistic, approximately 40% considering that "somewhat" there are resources (38.9%).

In the literature specialized [Friedrich and Mandl, *apud* Siebert, 2001], two major categories of competencies are described as "components" of the *self-directed learning*, each with a structural and a procedural side:

a. cognitive skills;
b. motivational skills.

Results to *Question 4* show that the learning activities under analysis are appreciated positively by adults in adult basic skills development: 53.8% - moderately, 42.3% - to a great extent, as opposed to students who assessed at a rate of 34.2% - moderately, respectively 28.8% - to a great extent. Among

the advantages mentioned by the subjects during our investigation are included:

- allows teachers and students to actively exchange ideas, information;
- enables collaboration in carrying out projects of any kind, using multiple modalities of communication;
- stimulates active participation and individual production of knowledge;
- enhances performance in learning.

Comparing the results of the Question 4 to those of *Question 7* – "To what extent the education methods that we currently use are adjusted to the mentioned forms of learning *(blended learning, self-directed learning)*?", we can capture the following idea: although students realize the effectiveness of the two forms of learning in adult basic skills development, they do not grant the same vote of confidence to the methods used currently. These methods, according to subjects, are compatible with *blended learning* and *self-directed learning* "somewhat" or "a little". However, a significant number of subjects, both students-future teachers and adults, believe that there is a positive trend in the relevant areas *(self-organized learning, blended learning)*. Thereby, a slight discrepancy between the responses of subjects to questions 7 and 8 can be noticed, discrepancy that can be justified by the use somewhat ambiguous of the concepts of *blended learning* and *self-organized learning*. In other words, the subjects of our investigation rather guess the area of the two concepts, without having in mind a clear definition of the terms.

To *Question 6* – "To what extent, in Romanian adults' education, success in self-directed learning is registered/certified?", 9.9% of subjects responded "to a great extent", 13.5% - moderately, which shows that, on the one hand students show their confidence in the effectiveness of the two forms of learning in personal development, affirmation of basic skills; on the other hand, they believe that these forms of learning are not sufficiently used in the adults' education.

The *record and evaluation* of the progress in learning are steps in self-organized learning more difficult than the self-monitoring because it involves value judgments on the quality of work. Current observations have shown that students are able to assess their progress with sufficient accuracy and the self-evaluation ability can be optimized by the feedback provided by the teacher. However, students' opinions about the extent in which the assessment of progress in mixed learning can be measured, in view of its optimization (*Question 5*) are split as follows: most answers are centered around the following values: "somewhat" and "a little".

Conclusions

Each type of training for adults can be classified in different ways of organization of the educational process (modular organization, distance learning, programmed instruction or computer assisted instruction, summer school, conference, counsel, symposium, forum, seminar or TV debates, etc.) [D. Schipor, 2003]. This combination or blend of various technologies with the "face to face" traditional approach of teaching and learning has given rise to a new paradigm in the educational environment. Innovative use of technology has led to the distortion of differences between the two areas, the classical teaching and the much more recent ODL [Osguthorpe and Graham, 2003, p. 227-233].

Conclusions with respect to students and teachers:

- ✓ although the term "blended learning" is not a new concept, increasing in popularity especially in the training and retraining area, its use with students is somewhat made with confusion. Subjects infer the extension of both concepts *(blended learning and self-organized learning)*, but do not have clear in mind the concepts;
- ✓ most subjects appreciate that the learning environment in our country does not support the use of the two forms of learning (blended and self-organized) in universities;
- ✓ most people are aware of the benefits of combining traditional and electronic systems, but also with independent, self-directed learning;
- ✓ empirical research reveals that students are still confused or neutral towards Internet-based training.

For teachers, both *blended learning* and *self-organized* learning represent real challenge as the need to provide real guidance for adults in their study, without giving too much information or without inhibit the initiative in learning and the intellectual autonomy. Studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of interactive and multimedia training materials. These foster creativity and promote learning through exercises and discovery.

We believe that this paper was able to identify some *issues, but also critical condition*, all in order to open discussions based strictly on the future dynamics of higher education and adult education institutions. We proposed, in fact, a contextual framework for further analysis and debate on the issue of *blended learning* and his new form of learning supports *self-directed learning.*

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