E-Learning Versus Traditional Curriculum

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1. Introduction

Almost at all Faculties in Slovenia less and less students attend lectures in classrooms. Some of them can't come to the Faculty because of their work occupation; others simple want more freedom to choose where and when to study. That's why a few years ago an e-classroom was developed at our Faculty and gradually we introduced e-learning as an additional method to the traditional curriculum. Today we wonder if we facilitated the independent learning to students who cannot or do not wish to be present in classrooms; and further, if e-education and e-learning will prevail in the future. Do teachers have enough skills and competences to use new methods of teaching? Are students familiar with ICT enough to use self-study efficiently? These are only a few issues that are opened with dilemmas about e-education and traditional curriculum. The aim of the research at the Faculty is to determine what students think about e-learning and e-education compared with traditional curriculum. The results can be used for better planning and higher quality processes at the Faculty.

2. E-learning in Slovenia

Since Slovenia is a small country, e-education has not become as popular as they were forecasting at the end of last century. Slovenia will never have such an experience with e-education as large countries like U.S., Canada and Australia do, probably because of its small size and good communications. Many projects about the development of e-education have remained unfinished [1]. Today, Slovenia has only three faculties which offer a full formal e-education (online courses and exams). Informal education is more represented in the form of e-learning. In the recent years, it has been observed that many organizations in the field of higher education and lifelong learning offer a combination of the traditional and e-education/ e-learning (the so called blended education) as a new culture of learning [3] [4]. That's the way how to approach all students, those who like to attend the lectures in classrooms and those who are more motivated to learn independently. The feedback from the students shows that classrooms at the Faculty will remain, but there might not be very crowded.

2.1 Other practices

Providers of e-education emphasize the following advantages [6]: flexibility (student can choose the time and place of learning), communication such as message boards, online chatting and even videoconferencing, interaction (many online classes are taken by people from all over the world at the same time, offering an opportunity to make digital connections with people who would never meet on campus), learning and skills development (on an online class a whole new set of useful technical skills and writing practice can be developed).
In the survey in 2005 [1] it was found out that e-education in Slovenia is developed at high schools, universities, in lifelong learning and business environment. Increasingly the users of e-learning become people with special needs. It offers a formal and informal content, training and various courses. Information technology provides a number of e-learning platforms. Open source solutions, such as Moodle and SCORM standard are the most commonly used. The foreign educational portals are more popular as Slovenian, because there are only few in Slovenia and less known on e-skills market.
In Slovenia there are only three faculties that offer typical e-education [2] and many others that combine conventional learning and e-learning in their educational process (the so called blended education). This combination has been promoted as a new quality in Slovenian higher education.
Different researches of e-education and e-learning stress [5]: "An online education program can be a very rewarding experience for those individuals wanting to earn a degree in a non-traditional education environment. Studies have shown that students who are mature, self-motivated and organized are extremely successful in their online learning pursuits. By allowing students to control where and when they study, online programs are best-suited to those individuals who possess strong time management skills and are independent learners." A weakness of e-learning is certainly that a student depends of his habit and maturity [7], so it happens that some people do not finish the course due to lack of discipline.

2.2 E- classroom and e-courses

The experience of educators shows that neither all teachers nor students have a clear idea of what the e-classroom and e-course look like. The E-classroom would replace the classical one, so it should allow students and teachers to participate. Further, students should have methods and technics to study; they have to receive feedback of the learning objectives. E-courses should be made with purpose of individual learning and interacting with the subject content. Today we have multimedia technology available, which allows creating a very good approximation to the real learning environment in the virtual world. However, teachers need to know how to use this technology for preparing e-materials in e-classrooms and students have be familiar with using e-material and

all communication functions. These skills still represent a serious problem (the barrier) particularly for some older teachers and students,

2.2 The research in Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences

For several years the Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences has been developing e-education as an additional method of the classical curriculum. We practice both methods to make the study closer to those students who are unable or unwilling to attend all lectures and those who are motivated by new forms of study with the help of ICT. In addition, we want to offer the appropriate e-learning materials for independent learning. We use the licensed programme Wimba Create for the creation of e-courses and the open source Moodle environment as a platform of the e-classroom.

For the purpose of the research we published a survey on the faculty's website for two weeks. 72 students responded, 65% women and 35% men, most Ba- students, among them 51% full time and 49% part time students. Respondents assessed: the benefits of traditional and e-education, the working with a virtual classroom, e-learning material, their own experiences with e-learning, their knowledge about e-learning and its opportunities. The sample was not large, but the questionnaire delved into the depths. The survey included full time and part time students of all years and levels, so their feedback can be an indicator of the general student's opinion. It may serve as a basis for further design and development of e-education at the Faculty.

3. The results of research

Most of the respondents know what e-learning (76%) and what e-material (58%) is, therefore we can conclude that the survey questions were understood. 49% of respondents use e-classroom to supplement the lecture and only 24% of them for independent learning. The respondents consider that the tests for self-evaluation offer a good training to exams and because of getting feedback they present the effective learning (83% of the respondents). Among the answers to the question how students learn, if there are available traditional literature and e-courses, there was almost the same number of those who learn only from books and records, and those who also apply e-learning materials in addition to the traditional one. Similar results were obtained to the question, how students prepare for exams. Overall, 69% of respondents said that they prefer classical education, because: they are so accustomed to it, because it allows contact and socialization with people and because it seems easier to learn from books. The minority, who prefer e-learning, explained that main advantages of e-learning are free design and effectiveness of learning. The combination of both types of education, regardless personal preferences, was found the best by 93% respondents and 60% of them believe that the combination acquire more knowledge. Respondents believe that e-learning is more suitable for part-time study at all levels. They have heard about some providers of e-learning in Slovenia but only a few (24%) regularly review the available e-portals.

Students assessed the transparency, clarity, efficiency, convenience and usefulness of traditional and e-learning from 1 to 5 (1 is the lowest and 5 is the highest). The average score of all criteria for e-learning was 3.25, and for the classic one 3.87.

4. Conclusion

Given the small number of users of e-classroom for self-study (24%), it is reasonable to think about whether it makes sense to prepare special e-learning materials for independent learning. Perhaps it is sufficient to upload different study material in different formats to the e-classroom. Perhaps the licensed software for developing e-courses is not necessary.

The most respondents consider that the classical education is better than e-education, mainly because they are accustomed to it. The habits can't be changed very quickly, so it makes sense to introduce e-education gradually as a complementary method. As an advantage of the classical education the social needs and contact with humans were stressed. This is probably the main and real deficiency (weakness) of e-education. By a teacher's interactive participation as a mentor or coach in the e-learning this deficiency could disappear. On the other hand, students recognize the great attraction of e-education in the liberal planning of time and place for learning.

The evaluation of the classical and e-learning shows that students' learning habits really do have a strong influence on the choice of forms of education. Younger students, who are dependent learners, may find it difficult to assume the responsibilities required by an online program, but they don't have any problems with ICT use.

Older students and employees prefer comfort and independent learning, but they have more problems with the ICT use. Certainly it will take some time to move from underlining the text in the book to clicking on the screen. However, there are students, who, for personal or professional reasons can't or don't want to be present in the classrooms and for this population e-learning raises important opportunities. Clearly, teachers and students have to ensure the adequate knowledge of new techniques and ICT use in e-learning. Of course, a certain level of maturity is required for independent learning. A lot of effort will be needed to succeed and regarding this point of view, there is no fear that e-education will replace the traditional curriculum.

Most of the interviewed students supported the combination of both forms of education (a blended education) because they believe that the interaction of both provides them with more knowledge. So, it is worth investing efforts in further developing of e-education and e-learning.

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