

ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF THE E-LEARNING SYSTEM

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Abstract

This article is the result of a four years teaching experience in one of the largest and controversial Romanian Universities using the E-learning system: Spiru Haret. It is a well-known fact that this was the first Romanian academic institution that used the E-learning techniques in wide and systematic way. Numerous articles appeared in the press in 2009 when the scandal of fake diplomas first started. This article is the perspective of an insider, that is, of someone who taught information and communication techniques in this institution for several years. I consider my experience and my findings to be balanced and objective and I also believe that we have to analyze things in a more profound and rational manner after the 2009 media storm ended. My article provides very useful information in this area since there are no academic articles on the way this Romanian academic institution (mis)understands the power of E-learning tools.

Keywords: *academic capitalism, E-learning system, digital resources, ethical problems in higher education, e-learning and higher education.*

1. Introduction

I shall begin my article with a series of general considerations about the E-learning system. Since this new technological tool made its way into the university numerous scholars tried to bring forward its merits but also its pitfalls. The E-learning system covers a wide variety of technological instruments used in the educational process. The first section of my article consists in an attempt to provide a definition of the E-learning concept. The ways E-learning can be used are also numerous and this is why I consider it is very important to establish some of its most important functions. Without such conceptual clarifications it is not possible to argue for or against E-learning.

In the second section of my article I am concerned with a general perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of the E-learning system. It is of course common knowledge the fact that E-learning system is not a positive thing by itself. It is merely a tool and before embracing it as one of the most important elements in assuring the quality in higher education we must be aware of its downsides. This is why I shall focus in the second section of my article on gathering the most important arguments for and especially against E-learning educational tools. My perspective is rather pessimistic in terms of technological capacity of developing educational quality.

I consider the technological determinism to be a very naïve and misleading perspective. Using computers in the educational system is not a positive thing in itself. Quality in higher education has to do more with people than anything else. If the arguments in the second section of my article are not convincing enough I am almost certain that the data presented in the third part of my paper will prove that sometimes the E-learning system can be the worst enemy of quality in higher education. The way Spiru Haret University managed to use the E-learning against quality is the sad lesson of our recent educational history every fan of the E-learning system has to learn.

2. What does “E-learning” means?

The term “E-learning” has been used for almost two decades. *A bright future for distance learning: One Touch/Hughes alliance promotes interactive 'e-learning' service* is the article published in 1997 by Aldo Morri wrote an article in the “Connected Planet” review¹. Since 1997 this

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¹ Aldo Morri (1997) „A bright future for distance learning: One Touch/Hughes alliance promotes interactive 'e-learning' service”, *Connected Planet*, online document found at http://connectedplanetonline.com/mag/telecom_bright_future_distance/.

term has been used to designate several ways that modern computers can be used to make the educational process more efficient. The pioneers of E-learning were the major private corporations that had important financial resources and little time to invest in the training of their employees. No matter how loose a definition of the E-learning might be it has to do with the use of computers. Private companies had the ability to invest in educational hardware and software. Universities – the place where the Internet was first developed – soon followed this trend and began using more and more digital resources in the educational process. This is also the result of the fact that in today's academic capitalism the university is no longer the unique "provider of knowledge"².

I think it is crucial to have a general perspective on the way nowadays university works before understanding the meaning and the function of the E-learning system. The development of E-learning went hand in hand with the idea of making education a more efficient process. The ideal of efficiency in higher education is by no means the direct result of adopting a liberal perspective on education. We are no longer engaged in the difficult and vague task of building a character. The most important task of faculty members is to make "knowledge corporation" (the university) profitable. We no longer provide young students with insightful knowledge. Instead we sell profitable information to our potential "clients". Our efficiency is tested with the help of a dual "element": the student. He is a client, but also our product whose insertion on the market labor is the ultimate indicator of a well done job. The use of digital tools in the educational system is therefore the result of the private corporation pressure (the universities had to compete with other "knowledge providers") and of the liberal perspective on higher education (the university has to function as efficient as a major private company).

But what E-learning rely means? From a very general point of view E-learning is related to distance learning. The use of computers on a wide range as well as the technological advances of the Internet made distance learning a more feasible project than ever before. But the E-learning system is related to a series of activities that are not necessarily connected with distance learning. In fact, there are components of E-learning that can be used in any educational circumstances: forums, audio and video-taped educational materials, the use of informational supports such as the CDs. As all the definitions provided over the years mine is surely incomplete but I consider the best way of rendering the proper meaning of this concept is to think of E-learning system as *the process that uses digital resources in educating people*.

Broadly speaking there are three components of almost every educational process: teaching, learning and evaluating. The digital resources can be used in each of those training steps. Video and taped materials can serve as an excellent tool for a more vivid and provocative academic presentation. Virtual simulation of certain processes can provide very memorable representations for extremely abstract scientific concepts. And finally, tests can be taken on computers and students can be evaluated *online*.

The most important functions of E-learning are closely related to the main steps in the educational process. Therefore, the E-learning has the function of making teaching more provocative and cost-beneficial, easing the learning of abstract concepts and providing very powerful and useful tools for evaluation.

There are indisputable merits of the E-learning system. Those merits can be devised into two categories: educational merits as well as "business" merits. I shall not embark here on the difficult if not impossible task of providing an exhaustive list of those merits but I think it's important to focus our attention on the most important ones. The distinction between the educational merits and the "business" merits is difficult to grasp especially in the era of academic capitalism. I believe it is related to the intellectual and the financial value. The intellectual merits of E-learning are related

² Delanty, G. (2001) *Challenging Knowledge. The University in the Knowledge Society*. Buckingham: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.

solely to the educational process. When listing those advantages such an assessment should ignore the financial benefits. Such merits are:

- Asynchronous education: the teaching process is not necessarily done in real-time. The *online* lectures offer the student the possibility of taking a certain class at a later time during the day.
- Interactive education: the forum and discussion lists makes it very easy for the trainer to gain access to the students feedback;
- Connectivity: even if the student-teacher relation is digitally mediated, it offers both of them more ways of constructively interact. The digital tools provide multiple communication channels bringing the teacher and the student closer;
- Flexibility: the student has access more information than ever before and he/she can access it on its own time;

In the process of adopting the E-learning system those merits are not the most important elements taken into consideration. The financial benefits of the E-learning system are the crucial ones. In the era of the entrepreneurial university we often hear people speak in marketing terms. The famous concept of the return of investment (ROI) is used as the decisive tool of evaluating whether the E-learning system is used or not in an academic institution. Does it pay off to invest in computers, learning software and other software license? In the case I am about to present such an investment proved to be incredibly profitable.

I shall not end this section of my paper without presenting some of the most important downfalls of the E-learning system. Most of them are the result of adopting the narrow perspective of technological determinism:

- expecting the E-learning to function in the same way the classical educational system does;
- expecting the E-learning to replace highly trained professors;

I believe that the most important pitfalls of the E-learning system come from the main assumptions its creators and users are adopting:

- education should be focused on the individual and his/her needs;
- the students are rational clients in search of useful information that will allow them to find good jobs on the labor market;
- the educators are intellectual workers that provide useful and profitable information and are guided in their efforts to secure the profit of the university by the trends in the labor market;
- last but no least: education has to be cost-effective;

I shall now analyze each of those assumptions. Most of the advantages related to the E-learning system are related to the possibility of each individual to study in his own way and rhythm. Nowadays it seems the whole educational process is conceived and focused on the individual and its needs. The university is no longer a place where a group of people are following the same educational paths. The postmodern “multiversity” is a place where several individuals find their own way through the curricula. While this flexible perspective seems appealing it ignores the role of the academic community in the educational process. “The informal curricula” – being together with other students, following the same educational path in and outside the university is almost as important as the individual study. The main reason most of the long-distance students drop out is exactly this one: they lack the emotional support of others in the whole educational process. While flexibility is by no means important, the sense of belonging to a community that overcomes the same obstacles is also crucial to a good education.

This is surely related to the next assumption I underlined above. The neoliberal perspective on higher education assumes the fact that students are rational clients in search of useful information. The emotional needs of the students as well as the importance of the academic community are completely ignored. The emotional needs are closely connected to academic profit. In order to secure the institution’s financial welfare the educators have to “seduce” the students to *like* their courses. Being in a constant competition with each other and with educators in other institutions the faculty

members have to get the students to like their courses by all means necessary. In our consumerist and hedonistic society it seems only natural to appeal to the student's emotional needs.

This puts the educator in a very difficult situation: although the student is supposed to be a rational individual in search of useful information, the education provider has to get him/her to *like* the course he/she is teaching. The higher educator's ability to attract as many students as possible is connected to the last assumption: the main goal of any university is to place the higher numbers of students on the labor market using the lowest number of resources possible. If profit is the ultimate value of a university it makes it very difficult for quality to find its way into the educational process.

3. The Spiru Haret E-learning system

We may think fatalistically that what happened in Spiru Haret is merely another example on how Romanians manage to destroy any system that seems to work perfectly elsewhere. This is not entirely far from the truth, but there are also important aspects worth mentioning. Although this case contains almost surrealist and grotesque aspects it is merely the expression of the academic capitalist perspective taken to the extreme. But let us analyze what happened at Spiru Haret.

After the visit to several universities in the United States the former rector of Spiru Haret, prof.dr. Aurelian Bondrea, came home in 2007 with the idea of making radical changes in the educational process. Therefore he made a very cost-effective investment buying thousands of computers and opening dozens of long-distance learning centers all around the country and even abroad. He also paid a huge amount of money for the license of an otherwise very sophisticated educational E-learning platform. After two years of ongoing expansion a huge scandal started: the Ministry of Education received a solicitation for almost fifty thousand academic diplomas although this academic institution has systematically refused to be evaluated by the Romanian Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in order to receive accreditation for its educational programs. This unprecedented fact is the direct result of introducing the E-learning system against the quality assurance in higher education. Thus, in 2005 the number of students enrolled at Spiru Haret University was 90.000. After the introduction of the E-learning platform the number of enrolled students reached the astonishing value of 275.000. Almost one third of Romanian students were enrolled at Spiru Haret. The large number could only mean that the university was seeking to expand. But, the big problem resided in the fact that while the number of students grew beyond all conceivable boundaries, the number of professors remained almost the same. Thus, in 2005 there were 1081 faculty members (from teaching assistants to professors). In 2008 there were 1334 faculty members hired by Spiru Haret University. This led to the unprecedented situation in the Romanian education history where there was only one teacher to 206 students. For a comparison it is important to mention that the general ratio in Romanian state universities is 1/25.

Finally in 2009 Ecaterina Andronescu, former and current ministry of education, put an end to this situation by literally denying the right to enroll students for the long-distance learning centers of Spiru Haret University. This is the short story of a national educational disaster. I consider it is only fair to raise two questions:

1. How was this possible?
2. What was the role of the E-learning system in all this?

Although the first question could be addressed in a very complex and detailed manner I think there are some possible answers that can be considered as starting points for further research. The fact that a Romanian academic institution was able to enroll so many students without having the necessary accreditation forms proves a very simple thing: the Romanian institutions sent to control and restrain such behavior were not invested with enough money and power to do their job. They lacked the practical ability to control and stop such behavior.

I intentionally left at the end of my paper the most important question of my article: what was the role of the E-learning system in lowering quality standards at Spiru Haret University? After a careful examination of the arguments in section two we could be able to answer this question:

- The Spiru Haret management expected the E-learning system to function as the traditional educational system. No formal training for faculty members for the use the Black Board educational software was made before 2011 – almost three years after the E-learning was introduced;
- The Spiru Haret management expected the E-learning tools to replace highly trained academic personnel. Although the number of students exploded in 2008 only three hundred additional professors were hired;
- The Spiru Haret management was interested only in financial advantages: they paid no attention to any sort of quality assurance, nor formally or literally;
- The Spiru Haret students were only interested in buying a certification that could allow them to get ahead others in their careers;
- The very sophisticated Black Board educational software was used only to give multiple choice tests. The educators were forbidden to interfere with the testing methods and computer generated test results.
- The crucial “link” between teacher and student was severed since the evaluation was no longer in the hands of the teacher. The educators were not given the possibility of making other type of evaluation. They had to develop multiple choice items for all types of subject matters.
- The corruption of administrative personnel in the Spiru Haret University made it possible for the students to obtain in a black market system all the correct answers to the multiple choice items in their tests. All those answers were than published online³, so any effort to offer a fair process of evaluation was futile.

4. Conclusions

Academic capitalism cannot function to the benefit of the society as long as the financial profit is the only relevant value taken into consideration. The labor market is a poor regulator of the “diplomas free trade”. Although most of private companies do not value the Spiru Haret diplomas in the hiring process this decision is not the same for the state institutions. There are a lot of employees in the administration of our state that received important raise of salaries and climbed the institutional hierarchy as a result of such controversial diplomas.

The liberal perspective on higher education has to be tempered if we want to achieve quality in this important type of education. We need state founded institutions powerful enough to stop immoral academic behavior.

The university cannot function as a shoe factory. No matter how appealing the private management system may seem, education utterly transformed into some sort of capitalist trade is equivalent to the Spiru Haret “business” model. The university should be guided by other concepts than “return of investment”, “cost-effective educational strategies” borrowed from corporate management.

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³ <http://www.onlinestudent.ro/categ/referate/grile-rezolvate-referate> Here you can find a sample of the answers to the multiple choice tests.