Book Review

Book: Morten Flate Paulsen: *Online Education. Global Learning from a Scandinavian Perspective*. NKI Forlaget. Norway, 2003)

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Online Education aims to present an up-to-date review of online education from a Scandinavian perspective. The title is wide-ranging and aimed at a wide-ranging readership. In the words of the author himself, it is a work directed at a "wide and international public, people interested in education and the Internet, researchers, students of the field, teachers, designers of administrator courses and politicians searching for trustworthy information."

As the intentions of the book might lead one to expect, it is a lengthy volume, although it makes for agile reading since it constantly links theoretical articles (many of them drawn from research carried out by the author within the framework of European projects) and personal experience. As such, data, interviews, theories and examples are interwoven within four main sections.

The first section, entitled "Online Education, Teaching and Learning" is made up of four chapters. The first of these is a glossary which introduces a basic vocabulary on the field, as well as presenting the terminology which will be used throughout the work. This first chapter hits the right note from several points of view. First of all, it does not pretend to be exhaustive but rather relevant. Secondly, it includes both the author's own definitions and those of other experts in the field. Finally, its greatest originality lies in the way in which the concepts are structured; instead of presenting the definitions in the usual way, i.e. in alphabetical order, the concepts are introduced in a deductive way, i.e. a general semantic field is first presented, within which related concepts are added and later discussed in an interrelated manner.

In the following chapter, the author presents his "Theory of Cooperative Freedom" (TCF), situated within the framework of the theories of autonomy and independence which argue that distance education organisations should allow their students – ideally, at least – the maximum independence possible in terms of their objectives, learning activities, methods, rate of progression of studies and systems of evaluation. The term "freedom" in this theory refers to flexibility in respect of the restrictions which a rigid programme of distance education might impose, something crucial for the development of ongoing training. At the same time, the TCF establishes that, as well as individual freedom, distance students need cooperation, this being understood as the voluntary involvement of individuals in interactions during learning. While it is possible to recognise an ideal in collaborative learning which is being favoured by the development of communications technology, it is also recognised that it is a more difficult objective to attain than cooperation.

The resulting word pairing of "Cooperative Freedom" may appear at first somewhat contradictory; it expresses the tension between interpersonal dependence and group interaction while simultaneously promoting individual autonomy. As such, if we take the example of freedom in the rate of progression of study within a distance education system, it may be challenged by significant group communication techniques such as videoconferencing.In this chapter, the author argues that a system based on Cooperative Freedom is possible while at the same time pointing out its strengths and weaknesses.

The third chapter, "Online Teaching and Learning", is of special interest for teachers who work in virtual environments. Paulsen presents a succinct but accurate picture of the key aspects of online learning aimed at adults: the special characteristics and needs of students; comparisons (documented) between learning results in different distribution systems; as further proof of the practicality of the book, suggestions of means of intervention for reducing student desertion; methods, techniques and mechanisms for teaching online and the facilitating of online learning; evaluation strategies, incentives and barriers for virtual teaching; and systems for measuring overloads in teaching material, together with strategies for reducing them. Last of all, a review is made of literature on teaching techniques recommended by online teachers.

The second section of the book presents the author's research on Learning Management Systems. The first chapter presents the most relevant results of research carried out within the framework of a project financed by the Leonardo da Vinci European programme, which encompassed 26 countries. The report presents a profile of the institutional, pedagogical management and financial aspects, as well as those relating to the competitiveness of the participating institutions. It also highlights the barriers to a potential development of network-based education. Amongst the most notable findings are: the need to promote an international harmonisation of accreditations which facilitates online mobility; the need to modify the regulatory frameworks of some countries, which are to the detriment of online learning; the need to focus on sustainable online education; and the urgent need for greater research into online pedagogy and didactics.

In the following chapter, Paulsen summarises the analysis of the experiences of the Learning Management Systems (LMS) in Europe carried out within the framework of a European project conducted between 2001 and 2002. The highlighting of the time-span is necessary, since otherwise, the absence of certain references would be questioned, e.g. Moodle is not mentioned, which is natural, since its first version dates from August 2002.

As for the most notable results, we can cite the confirmation of the predominance of North-American commercial platforms, as well as the strength of locally developed LMS systems in those countries whose first language is not English and lastly the LMS systems developed by educational institutions themselves. According to Paulsen, this kind of development has been favoured on the one hand because the commercial systems are perceived as being expensive and complex and, on the other hand, due both to the need of institutions to meet special demands and to the facility of having local support in the native language, in the case of local systems or those developed by institutions themselves. Likewise, another significant result of this study is the

difference found in respect of sensitivity and perception concerning e-learning standards. While in Northeast Europe standards such as SCORM and IMS are considered a de facto norm, Paulsen's research points out that in Southern European countries there is considerable ambivalence and, in general terms, it can be said that there is an absence of standards both technical and tacit.

The third section of the book provides a general review of the Nordic online learning set-up. Amongst other aspects, it stresses that despite the early incorporation of a large sector of the population to the networks, its experience in online education and the cultural and linguistic affinity of the countries integrated within it, Scandinavia does not yet conceive of online education as an export industry, unlike Australia, for example. In this sense, Paulsen points out the need for the integration of Nordic countries as a form of resistance against the educational imperialism of the USA. While in the USA, "online educators tend to feel that the Internet is their natural market", in Nordic counties, educators see the Internet "as an opportunity for taking USA online courses". Factors of a political and linguistic bent influence at this point.

Key figures in the field collaborate in this diagnosis, analysing the issue in their respective countries. One example is Soren Nipper, who raises some provocative questions concerning the structural design, alien to Danish cultural and pedagogical tradition, which, as if in virtue of its scalability, was going to take over the future of online education in Denmark and confine its traditional approach, i.e. collaborative learning, to a privileged and trivial corner. The way in which universities will handle the tension between economic rationality and pedagogical autonomy and flexibility is also discussed. Carl Homberg, on the other hand, analyses how various governmental and non-governmental initiatives in Sweden designed to favour intensive Internet use in different spheres, along with traditional social expectations in this country concerning education, have given rise to a high "digital maturity" within Swedish society and a highly-developed technological infrastructure which do not seem to come up to expectations in the sector of online education.

The fourth and last section of Paulsen's book makes a forecast of future developments in online education, based on personal experience and the analyses carried out within the framework of the European research projects in which he participated. Paulsen points out that most of the changes which can be appreciated today in online education were foreseeable phenomena 15 years ago, with one important exception; the advent of the Web was not foreseen and yet this has been the most revolutionary innovation in education. He also highlights another point: the development of online pedagogy has developed less than was hoped for since the general tendency has been to apply traditional pedagogical practices within new settings.

Among the most relevant observable tendencies, the author cites the worldwide spread of e-learning and the progression from local experiments (typically, a traditional institution which offers a few online courses to a limited number of students) to large-scale operations. This is the tendency which determines all other tendencies and/or emerging needs: the tendency towards the integration of systems, e.g. the integration of learning management systems and student management systems; the tendency towards standardisation, which facilitates the easy identification of courses and contents in portals as well as the recycling of learning objects in different learning environments;

the tendency towards rationalisation in the use of technology and sustainable development schemes – an unavoidable issue when institutions are transformed into large-scale suppliers of online education; the tendency towards the multimedia enrichment of the content offered online – sustained by the increasing capacity of broadband; the advent of m-learning (mobile learning), with the spread of technology such as wireless networks, PDAs, tablet PCs, e-books and GPRS; and finally the tendency towards globalisation in the field of education, with clear indicators such as the harmonisation of grades and accreditations which is occurring in Europe, the commercialisation of education, the predominance of just a few online education platforms of North-American origin, the increasing acceptation of international standards (also clearly dominated by the USA) and the approach to education as an export industry (as in the case of Australia). Each of these tendencies raises new challenges and dilemmas. Are cultural aspects (language, educational tradition, national policies on accreditations and local support structures, to name a few) really adequately incorporated into these "globalised" courses? How will institutions face up to the challenge in respect of the restructuring of organisational aspects, human resources and division of work, which the process of transformation into providers of large-scale online education supposes? How may the perception of cultural imperialism or loss of pedagogical freedom be handled? This is a question which might be provoked by emerging standards, mainly from the United States, and likewise, commercial and professional training initiatives in the context of both European or underdeveloped countries and the university sector. Paulsen does not answer these last questions but to pose them with clarity is stimulating in itself.

As a whole, *Online Education* meets the objectives which it sets itself and, furthermore, does so in an entertaining and innovative fashion. It is entertaining because in order to provide greater context to each of the chapters, Paulsen offers a series of anecdotes within a Scandinavian context which include examples of good practice, e.g. the Globalskolen Programme in Norway, which guarantees primary education for 180 Norwegian children who live abroad, or the NKI Institution, in which Paulsen himself works, along with calamitous failures engendered by unviable consortiums or by ostentatious but unsustainable governmental initiatives, such as those related in the chapter entitled "Online Education Obituaries". As well as providing context, these examples make lighter reading of the data and at the same time contribute to bringing us closer to the real panorama of online education in Nordic countries.

It is innovative since the book itself was conceived of as an online publication making experimental use of multimedia. In this way, the work is not restricted to its paper version. Although it is central, the printed version works in harmony with the rich and up-to-date resources in order to build on the information which it provides through a variety of media: from the wide range of references to web pages in the book form to its multimedia versions; a PDF version with active links; a PDA version for e-books; MP3 audio content; and other multimedia presentation forms available at www.studymentor.com. In short, it is a highly recommendable book.