WCIT 2010

Designing E-learning courses in humanities and their use in the interuniversity study programmes

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Abstract

Since 2005 the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove, has been running interuniversity study programmes within the framework of the selected Czech universities. In co-operation with the University of West Bohemia, Plzen, and Tomas Bata University, Zlin, several subjects are offered to students in the form of e-learning courses. The courses are run by teachers from the above-mentioned partner universities. In the project the author personally deals with e-courses “Ethics”, and “Philosophical seminar”. Both courses are organized every year in winter and summer terms, often at both universities, which is very time demanding.

The courses are supported by the virtual learning environment WebCT which enables teacher-supervised self-study, and provides tools for multimedia presentations of the learning content. Contacts with teachers are supported by technical communication means, both asynchronous (mail, discussions) and synchronous (chat, whiteboard). WebCT is an environment which integrates various tools, and it is easily operated and accessible through the internet web browser.

While designing courses in WebCT, one has to be aware of the danger of depersonalization and simplifying algorithmization of the educational process. Therefore, in all phases of didactic and technological processing of the appropriate contents, we take into account the necessity to form sets of questions, reflections, or even self-reflections.

This dimension of the hermeneutic approach strengthens communicative competences and develops the ability to distribute and share information and knowledge. The contribution in detail deals with constitutive elements of designing e-learning courses in humanities in relation to the requirements of the interuniversity study programme.

Keywords: e-learning; humanities; courses; WebCT; interuniversity study; ethics; philosophy

1. Introduction

Since 2005 the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove, has been running interuniversity study programmes within the framework of the selected Czech universities. In co-operation with the University of West Bohemia, Plzen, and Tomas Bata University, Zlin, several subjects are offered to students in the form of e-learning courses. The courses are run by teachers from the above-mentioned partner universities. In the project the author personally deals with e-courses “Ethics”, and “Philosophical seminar”, which started in the academic year of 2002/2003 and were formerly designed to support full-time studies and individual teaching of students studying abroad on exchange programmes. Several organisational changes enabled us to offer the courses

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of the Guest Editor.
to students of the above-mentioned universities; these programmes are run in summer and winter semesters concurrently at all these universities. At the beginning, i.e. before the students got used to e-courses, the number of course participants was small (about 5-6) and it was easy to run such courses concurrently with doing all other educational and scientific duties. The highest acceptable number of the course participants seems to be 15; nevertheless in some semesters there were even more than 30 participants. However, some students (ø 10-20%) in the course of 8 semesters never completed the course. The reasons for this failure were due to their unsystematic work, the required tasks were simply not accomplished.

2. Virtual Learning Environment WebCT

The courses are run in the virtual learning environment WebCT which enables teacher-supervised self-study, providing presentations (also multimedia) of the learning content. Contacts with teachers and other students are supported by technical means of communication. The communication tools are both asynchronous (mail, discussions) and synchronous (chat, whiteboard). WebCT can be characterized as the environment which optimally integrates various tools, it is easily operated and accessible through the internet web browser (the courses after getting the access login can be found on www.oliva.uhk.cz). WebCT enables to run and lead the course of studies via content and time plan. The content plan is to be found in the syllabus providing information on the course, its objectives and requirements as well as on tested skills and the criteria, which are to be accomplished to pass the course successfully in the final assessment. Another essential part of WebCT are the study materials and displayed students’ works. The glossary of professional terms is also included.

3. Axiological and ethical dimension of virtual learning environment

Implementation of information and communication technologies into tuition and creation of virtual learning environment are, these days, essential moments in the development of educational projects, forms of education and creation of e-learning educational products. These processes are limited by the schools’ technical equipment and the level of computer literacy on the part of both teachers and learners. Psychological, pedagogical, didactic and didactic-technological aspects of preparation, implementation of courses and evaluation of different learning environments are very often the subject of examination. Conferences, seminars and competitions focusing on e-learning, distance education, on e-communities are often organized. E-learning courses evaluation criteria in specific virtual learning environments are usually divided into four groups:

- These are the basic features of a course, especially expressing the course objectives, the overall design of the course, clearness of its layout, originality, implementation of multimedia elements, quality and adequacy of complementary study materials.
- What is also assessed, is the way the course encourages the students’ own activity through the tools of communication, team work and samples of application of the subject matter on specific examples.
- An essential part of evaluation assesses the level of planning and organizing activities based on the syllabus and calendar.
- Also the feedback provided by the self-tests, assignments and tests, are examined.

This “operating” framework, created ahead in the virtual learning environment (related to the necessity to accept precisely algorithmized procedures) represents the pragmatic aspect of the courses, their success, efficiency, accessibility, linking and relation to other sources. Creation of self-educating, cooperating e-communities results from the activity of the creators of virtual learning environments, as well as individual courses. The possibility to constantly complement and update the content of courses, active participation and connection of individual participants in the course, widening the space and prolonging the time which the students can use for studying, can definitely be seen as a big contribution. Positive characteristics also include the fact that more people can educate themselves in this way; that it also makes systematic education accessible to the groups of the handicapped people. On the other hand, one can come across a whole range of objections against the stronger and stronger trend to incorporate ICT in teaching. These objections result from general neophobic attitudes, as well as from the fears of technization, depersonalization, algorithmization, excess rationalization, economization, and possibly simplification in the approach to the world, people, and oneself. Technical scientistic civilization perceives ICT as an optimal tool for efficient and productive education in the direction of its further development. The question asked by philosophers, educators, psychologists, and even some of the authors of e-learning courses (especially in the courses focused on human subjects) and their participants, is a question about the content of education within the varied
world, and the question about the consequence of the reduction of the “essential education” (education of a man as a whole being) to the education for the technocratic, bureaucratic civilization, for the roles which people adopt and have to adopt if they want to succeed.

Thanks to its potential, however, ICT and educational courses created through them do not have to contradict “essential education”, as they can significantly respect the need to set the teaching objectives from the learner’s, the teacher’s point of view, as well as with regard to the content of the subject. They can make tuition distinctively individual, both with regard to its pace and to the range of the above-standard offers, apart from the education standard. In future, therefore, people do not have to be accompanied by ICT as a symptom and a tool of a technocratic diktat. ICT and virtual learning environments based on and operating through them can also respect value, emotional, ethical and aesthetic relations and connections of cognitive content, thus contributing to personality development. In e-learning courses one can open space to both explanation and asking questions, including questions about meaning and meaningfulness. Cognition implies open and reflected understanding; its essential part being feedback mechanisms, clarifying the common ground for communication as a precondition of cognition, and its essential feature being incompleteness. New knowledge is constantly emerging and continual updating is needed in the pedagogical process. Such updating can be very well implemented in virtual learning environment, which does not present the subject matter, the topic to be mastered, only through the methods of explanation and description.

4. Hermeneutic approach

For the hermeneutic approach, pointing out the necessity to go behind the area of verbal explanation (both oral and written), a virtual learning environment is such a bearer of cognition that makes it possible to reconstruct potential questions. Moreover, that also makes it possible for the arising questions to be formulated and asked immediately. In a virtual learning environment, with the tools which we have at our disposal, we can grasp concurring connections in different dimensions. Partial pieces of knowledge can be understood from the whole of connections which are the starting point for the author of the course and which are formulated in the form of objectives that are to be reached with regard to him/her as a teacher, with regard to the pupil/student, and with regard to the topic which is the subject matter of teaching and learning. Reflection on the topic, explicit wording of its meaning with regard to the competences required from the pupil/student, and self-reflection of the teacher’s own predispositions to communicate the topic, contemplation on the different levels of the subject matter are the necessary prerequisites of teacher’s preparation. The application of the hermeneutic approach in a virtual learning environment will result in making more specific the ideas of education for the 21st century covering the “Myself – You”, “Myself – World”, “Myself – Myself” relations, “Myself” not being perceived as superior and egoistic, but in its experience, and knowledge set-out as a starting point for formulating the objectives of education. “Myself”, which is more oriented, more reasonable, richer in feelings, with values derived from responsibility, “Myself”, which is active, capable of self-reflection and reflection, is then the goal of education. While reaching this goal we can use ICT, which can also help us - if incorporated adequately into the process - to look for “the truth, the good and the beauty”. [1]

5. Constitutive elements of designing e-learning courses in humanities

The course “Philosophical seminar”, which after the introduction into philosophy focuses on the care for language and communication and the course “Ethics”, which traditional ethical problems and current discussions in ethics lead in communication and hermeneutic ethics are in the interuniversity study programme based on the following strengths of virtual learning environment:

• continuous option of updating study material;
• in addition to standardized course content stated in “requirements for credits” students can choose from additional materials tailored to their individual needs and interests;
• setting the individual rate of progress;
• option to integrate and display students’ papers, essays, presentations and seminar papers;
• collection of all documents, information and information oriented advice and instructions aiming at passing successfully;
• option of consistent application of hermeneutic approach, which understands knowledge as open and reflected comprehension, the inevitable part of which are feedback mechanisms; this approach, emphasising the need to go beyond the sphere of verbal interpretation can find in the virtual learning environment such a holder of knowledge
which enables to reconstruct relevant questions while at the same time enables the emerging questions to be formulated and asked:

- development of communication competences;
- application of multimedia tools, which cover not only cognitive, but also the value and emotional component of the educational process.

For the inevitable constitutive elements of the e-learning courses in humanities the author considers:

- specifying educational goals at various levels of generality;
- reference on literature and other study materials - logical structure of the course content;
- adequate timing of the course;
- creativity and attractiveness of presentation of the covered topic;
- motivation and assessment dimension;
- procedures and precise instructions;
- glossaries;
- space for communication;
- set of questions and tasks;
- guided reflections and self/reflections.

These constitutive elements and their classification and significance in specific courses in general should be adequately addressed. [2]

6. The use of e-learning courses in interuniversity study programmes

The specificity of the use of the e-learning courses in the interuniversity studies is based on exact and precise formulation of goals, tasks, self-tests and good training of students in adequate use of all options of virtual learning environment. In our conditions we run the initial and final tutorial face-to-face, the course itself is run in the distance form. I would like to share my experience with my courses and emphasize outputs resulting from the evaluation questionnaire surveys on the course and its benefits.

We present the questionnaire for students. [3]

The questionnaire was responded by 108 students who passed the e-learning courses “Ethics” and “Philosophical seminar” in 2006-2009.

Students express their opinion in the degree scale from 1 to 5 (from the best to the worst evaluation) on the following issues:

1. Course documentation was accessible and comprehensible.
2. The course objective was clearly formulated.
3. The tutor explained the course structure and its organization.
4. The tutor was able to strengthen my motivation for the course.
5. The learning material was well and systematically arranged and presented.
6. The methods used stimulated my study activity.
7. Self-study tasks were formulated unambiguously.
8. The tutor provided sufficient methodological instructions for self-study.
9. Requirements for the exam/credits were met and formulated unambiguously.
10. The tutor treated us fairly.
11. The tutor was interested in our opinions.
12. The course meant a reasonable load for me.
13. Unambiguous information on the interuniversity study programme project was provided in time.
14. The technical aspect meant no special burden for me.
15. The contingent technical problems were solved effectively and duly.
16. The obtained credits were acknowledged without problems at my home faculty.
17. There were no problems with signing up for the course in the information system.
18. The contingent problems with acknowledgement of the course were solved in time.
19. The studies within the frame of the project of the interuniversity study programme were beneficial to me.
20. In the next academic year I’ll make use of this opportunity again.

Students are satisfied with the course content and are pleased that apart from virtual study material they can also make use of the university textbooks.

They feel comfortable with the individualization of the pace and the option to make use of additional materials.
They comply with the option to use e-mail communication with the tutor. The overall evaluation is 1-2.
Problems emerge only when students (even when they have the manual how to work with WebCT) cannot make use of all possibilities connected with the virtual learning environment and they fail to submit their tasks. It is a problem for the teacher if students use electronic mail instead, which, with the number of students and volume of assignments, is very unfavourable. The initial tutorial serves to the purpose of mutual acquaintance and discussion about content and aims of the course as well as demonstration and practice of WebCT tools. We explain the content and range of requirements to be met to finish the course successfully. In the course tutorial the tutor assesses assignments the students were to submit to a certain date. The final tutorial is run as a dialogue or colloquium with regard to the results of students’ seminar papers.

7. Conclusion

As the main contribution and benefit of the interuniversity study programme project I consider the extended option to study the courses which are not offered by students’ own faculties. In humanities students in their self-studies following the formulation of educational goals and the definition of competencies goes beyond the factual knowledge. Education results in logically organised, coherent system of knowledge, which is interconnected to the system of knowledge of other subjects.
The participants also develop their knowledge of methodology, they learn to compare, analyze, synthesize, draw conclusions for particular application in their learning tasks and also in the practical tasks. On the grounds of consistent reflections and self-reflections the learners adopt a certain insight, so significant for the courses of “Ethics”, and “Philosophical seminar”. They strengthen the opportunities for orientation and adequate response to various situations in their lives and professions.

References