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THE MANAGEMENT OF TEACHING IN ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING APPLIED IN THE PROJECT “MODERN COMPETENCES OF ACADEMIC TEACHERS – THE KEY TO MODERN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS” – ACRONYM MOCAT

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Abstract. The management of teaching is connected and could be increased by using a wide range of different methods especially when we refer to Online and Blended learning.

In the first part, the paper is aiming at reviewing the literature regarding the concepts and benefits of Online and Blended learning.

Based on this considerations, 8 partner universities from 8 countries jointly developed the Project “Modern competences of academic teachers – the key to modern Higher Education Institutions (HEI)” – Acronym MOCAT. The paper underlines the goals and achievements of the MOCAT project that proposes a conceptual process to increase the management performance in teaching.

The paper shows in an organized manner the main deficiencies that are altering the teaching competencies of academic teachers and in connection with this, the project offers solutions to improve the methodological competency of the teachers regarding the development and use of modern approaches.

The outcomes of the project consist in the development and implementation of a Multicultural Model of an Academic Teacher Competencies and in 10 online courses that represent modern training materials in the field of teaching methodology.

In the end are exposed the way the results of the project can be evaluated in time as well as the anticipated effects of the project implementation.

Keywords: online learning; blended learning; multicultural model; training materials; technology in learning

Introduction

Online and Blended education represents an important change in education, with significant advantages and outcomes. The digital technology used extensively in this type of education changed the way in which lectures are delivered, the way in which training materials are organized, the way the learners involve in their own educational process and also the way that teachers and learners interact.

The role played by this type of education is strongly highlighted by recent lockdowns from many countries, when online and blended learning had a great chance to prove its contribution, results and success.

Online and Blended learning offers numerous advantages to learners, making them active participants in the educational process, giving more flexibility and accessibility to the entire process and also providing superior interactive options.

1. Online and blended learning – tools for the modern multicultural academic teacher

1.1. Definitions

For more than twenty years, Online Learning and Blended Learning have changed the traditional forms of education, particular in higher education.

A definition of online learning given in 2002 by Richard Curtin states that “Online learning can be broadly defined as the use of the internet in some way to enhance the interaction between teacher and student. Online delivery covers both asynchronous forms of interaction such as assessment tools and the provision of web-based course materials and synchronous interaction through email, newsgroups and conferencing tools, such as chat groups. It includes both classroom-based instruction and as well as distance education modes. Other terms synonymous with online learning are ‘web-based education’ and ‘e-learning’”.

According to many studies (Nguyen 2015; Kent et al. 2016), Online education has been demonstrated to be more effective than face-to-face teaching. This happens especially because online education benefits from the fact that it can include audio, video, text, animations, virtual training environments and live chats with professors and colleagues and also, because online classes don’t need physical presence, students need only Internet access and electricity for participation.

From a large variety of definitions considering different perspectives on Blended Learning (BL), “the basic principle of BL is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose” (Garrison & Vaughan 2008) expresses an existing worldwide point of view. An interesting observation of the two authors states that “BL courses in higher education can be placed somewhere on a continuum, between fully online and fully face-to-face courses” (Garrison & Vaughan 2008).

The reason of existing many definitions of BL is due to the fact that BL is a flexible term, used to describe all kinds of teaching consisting of integration of face-to-face and online courses.

BL seems to be in theory a simple concept; in practice it is a complex issue. Many researches tried to design Blended Learning courses. It is obvious that well designed blended courses, will transform the nature of teaching and learning. Future researches should focus not necessarily on analysing the fact the BL is good and useful, but mainly on models to design a successful course. BL offers a great chance to enhance higher education by redesigning the learning experience.

1.2. Literature review on benefits of Online and Blended learning for higher education

In the beginning of this paper we stated that Online and Blended learning have many advantages perceived by all parties involved: students, teachers, universities. These advantages were enunciated and identified by many researchers based on comprehensive studies.

The new education alternatives based on technology are fitted to continuing education, education of adults and generally for different categories of beneficiaries in accordance with the specific needs of the labour market which is in a continuous and fast changing, due to encouraging lifelong education and the fact that this system ensures the continuous acquiring of new knowledge and skills.

Lofstrom & Nevgi in their report based on a study on strategic planning and implementation of information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching at the University of Helsinki identified two main benefits of ICT in teaching namely distribution of course documentation via the web, and the creation of interactive and collaborative learning opportunities (Lofstrom & Nevgi 2007).

According to a recent research conducted in the US by Sloan Consortium that involved the impressive number of 990 educational institutions, the following important facts were found out:

- More than 90% of the students learning in virtual faculties are satisfied with this kind of education and acknowledged acquisition
- Furthermore, the number of students has increased, and a higher study efficiency has been achieved.
- All the faculties that provided an adequate training for the professors, as well as other members of the virtual faculties, have managed to adapt to the new method of work in a fairly short time and achieve the desired results
- The educational institutions have made significant savings in terms of human and other resources utilization, and thereby have increased their profits.

All these findings are supporting the conclusion regarding the benefits of web-based learning.

Some of the positive learning outcomes were identified also by Nyugen in 2006 in his paper “The Effectiveness of Online and Blended Learning: Beyond

No Significant Difference and Future Horizons” as follows: improved learning as measured by the test scores, student engagement with the class material, improved perception of learning and of online format, stronger sense of community among students, and reduction in withdrawal or failure. In his study he examines the evidence of the effectiveness of online learning by addressing in an organized manner positive, negative, mixed, and null findings.

Another relevant study regarding the web based education authored by Subhasni (2008) emphasizes important other reasons to adopt these new ways of learning among which may be enumerated: convergence of diverse global learners using web-based technology tools, such virtual communities can connect geographically and demographically disparate individuals, student users can access statistical data analysis, reference materials, continuous improvement problem-solving activities, market analysis information, and technical / software support at their own pace, time, and convenience, online learning significantly improved writing and computer skills, “rich” Feedback and Evaluation.

2. Project “Modern competences of academic teachers - the key to modern Higher Education Institutions (HEI)” – Acronym MOCAT

Considering all the advantages of Online and Blended learning, already highlighted in the previous chapter, WSB University in Poznan initiated the project Modern competences of academic teachers - the key to modern HEI – with the acronym **MOCAT**, in partnership with 7 partner universities from 7 different countries, at the beginning of 2019.

The project, which is in progress, is financed by the Polish National Agency of International Exchange – NAWA (Narodowa Agencja Wspolpracy Akademickiej).

The partner universities are from: Poland, Turkey, Kenya, Romania, Georgia, Indonesia, Iceland and Italy. The partner university from Romania is “Spiru Haret” University.

Online and Blended learning is a viable solution in the Romanian higher education. This fact was confirmed by several projects developed in the Romanian universities, regarding online and blended learning in higher education. The Romanian partner, “Spiru Haret” University stands, in the academic system in Romania, among the promoters of online and blended learning model in the higher education institutions.

“Spiru Haret” University uses in the educational process, in addition to the classical methods, the Blackboard e-learning platform, one of the most efficient existing platforms. Blackboard is used worldwide in more than 3,500 universities or educational institutions. The Blackboard platform consists of an e-learning software with an impressive spread (America, Europe, Africa, Asia), which offers the technical support necessary to teach the training informational content, created according to a precise didactic methodology, through the Internet.

The Blackboard System as well as the Schooling Record System have included, by design, mechanisms that ensure the traceability of interactions keeping track of any data intervention (who changed, when and what changed). Users can have different roles in the system (administrator, trainer, evaluator, tutor or student), roles according to which they can have access to various functions of the system.

Through the MOCAT project are developed modern methods, tools and materials for the academic staff in the field of teaching methodology.

The targeted groups are academic teachers, in particular those who teach in English, in intercultural groups, who are expected to improve their teaching and intercultural competencies. The project addresses in particular to those teachers without pedagogical/ methodological preparation.

The reason of developing and implementing such a project is that academic teachers have a broad knowledge of their subject, but most of them have insufficient teaching competencies to effectively teach students, which translates directly into the lower quality of education at the University.

Prior to beginning the development of this project, the team working in the project identified the problems that influence higher competence of teaching staff regarding teaching involving modern methodology.

The main areas of barriers influencing negatively the teaching staff were identified, based on the knowledge and experience of the team that works in this project.

The first identified area encompasses the **Deficiencies in teaching competencies of academic teachers**. This area includes the following difficulties:

1. Lack of awareness regarding their own strengths and shortcomings in the teaching competencies;
2. Lack of knowledge about the methodology of teaching and of using modern teaching methods and techniques (coaching techniques, interactive methods, etc.);
3. Lack of knowledge and skills in using modern technologies in teaching (Internet resources, presentations and online classes);
4. Lack of ability to diagnose the group and adapt the teaching methods to the needs and capacities of the group;
5. Lack of adaptation to the way students learn nowadays (outdated methods). Lack of knowledge about the characteristics and needs of the generation Y, Z (Millennials);
6. Lack of skills and knowledge about intercultural differences and the way to conduct classes in intercultural / international groups;
7. Lack of support or not knowing when to ask for support when implementing new things into teaching.

A second area refers to the recognition of **Psychological and mental barriers** and the following drawbacks are spotted:

1. Unwillingness to change the way of teaching – belief that their current methods are best (e.g., ex cathedra lectures as the only legitimate teaching method at university level)

2. Fear of change – resistance to modern teaching methods, often due to ignorance of modern technologies

3. Ignoring the needs of students, lack of awareness that the teaching style has a major impact on student motivation

4. Lack of faith and knowledge about ways and possibilities of dealing with barriers in the teaching work (problems with infrastructure, difficult students, university organization, etc.)

5. Fear of conducting classes in an intercultural environment.

A third category includes **Problems arising from the organization of the educational system at the university** and refers to:

1. Lack of pedagogical preparation to work with students and lack of methodical preparation - how to effectively transfer knowledge and how to teach. Lack of workshops/courses organized at the University for the future teaching staff.

2. Lack of preparation of academic teachers on cross-cultural issues and the specificity of conducting classes for students from different countries and cultures.

3. Lack of teacher assessment systems (student questionnaires). Disregarding teaching competencies when hiring or evaluating teaching staff.

4. Lack of infrastructure at the university allowing the use of modern teaching methods and techniques

All the observations related to these problems will be supported by questionnaires conducted by the project members, and recognized by the research, are available in publications and on the Internet.

In order to answer these problems and to find solutions for these drawbacks, the goal of the MOCAT project refers to development of know-how and sharing experience among partner universities. The way to reach this target will consist in the development and implementation of a Multicultural Model of an Academic Teacher Competences and 10 online courses that represent modern training materials in the field of teaching methodology.

The first task of the project consists in the preparation of a multicultural competence model of an academic teacher. This model will be developed together by the partner universities, and, most important, it will allow adaptation to the individual needs and possibilities of each partner universities in the project.

The Model is based on ATD teacher competence model and is taking into account the aspect of multiculturalism. The partner universities will present and evaluate the developed competence model in their own universities, collecting feedback for developing the own final version of the model, and eventually publishing it on the project website.

After the model development, in the next stage, based on the findings from this initial phase, the most important topics will be determined, regarding training to be prepared at later stages in the form of online and blended modules. The 10 most important topics will be chosen, and every partner will be responsible for the

development of the content of at least one topic. This content will be elaborated by teachers and staff of the partner universities with high subject-matter qualifications and methodological competencies – experts in particular fields.

In the following paragraph the topics will be presented that were prepared jointly by the partners at the stage of preparing the application, on the basis of surveys taken among teaching staff.

1. The learning process of adults

This topic will include: what it involves, principles of adult learning, theories and instructional design, learning and performance objectives, Bloom's Taxonomy, the Kolb cycle, CCAF, First Principle of Instruction. As part of this topic the participants will explain a student-centred approach and teacher-centred approach and the difference between the two and will apply these principles to designing a learning activity.

2. Adapting classes to the group's needs

This subject explains the tools useful for the identification of the needs of the group, how to work with heterogeneous groups, classes with large and small groups, how to deal with difficult situations in the group, generation Y and Z - their characteristics, behaviours, needs and ways of learning.

The expected result will consist in building awareness of differences and the ability to diagnose the needs of the group and to adapt the activities to its needs, building awareness and understanding of the young generation and of the generational differences.

3. Conducting classes with international and intercultural groups

Here the definitions of culture, intercultural differences in teaching and the essence of intercultural communication will be exposed.

The expected outcome will be that the participants will use intercultural competence for effective teaching within the intercultural and international students groups

4. Active learning strategies, new trends in didactics - interactive teaching

This theme will introduce the most relevant didactic methods and techniques, the explained principles of interactive classes and detailed new trends: e.g., gamification, storytelling, design thinking, academic tutoring, cooperative learning in higher education etc.

5. Using visual tools in teaching

The main visual tools depicted will include sketchnoting techniques, flipcharts in delivery of learning content, proper presentation techniques with PowerPoint or Prezi for supporting learning content delivery, recording own lectures and editing and what to look out for when recording own lectures.

6. Applying technology in learning

This item will show how to enhance learning with networking and videoconferencing tools for collaboration, Internet resources and learning management platforms.

7. Designing courses

This subject will describe using the instructional design models (i.e. ADDIE, SAM), the methodology of course design and how to prepare a class scenario.

8. Interpersonal communication

This topic will include: verbal and non-verbal communication, self-presentation, the art of public speaking, non-violent communication, the basics of coaching communication, coping with difficult situations in the training room, how to deal with problems with participants resulting from cultural and international differences, disabilities. The pursued result will be that the participants will be able to communicate with others on a win-win basis; they will be able to present themselves in public, give speeches of various types (informative, inspirational, didactic), will have the capacity to apply useful communications models and explain how to deal with difficult situations in the classroom.

9. Assessment of learning outcomes, methods of evaluation

This subject will introduce building assessment criteria, rubrics, selection of adequate learning activities to provide proof of achieving learning and performance outcomes, providing feedback on learning outcomes, peer assessment along with cooperative learning methods

10. Self-management in time

Solving this topic will analyse the efficiency of own work, methods of fast learning, use of technological solutions to organize own work and team work and as a result the participants will be able to optimize their own work and organize the work of the team facing a diversified task package (differing in volume and character) (e.g., in a joint project) and they will be expected to be able to use online technology for this purpose.

A methodology expert will give support content consultations as well as language support and text proofreading will be given by a teacher for developing all these topics to authors.

The subject-matter content prepared by authors will be converted to online form materials. When finished, the online materials will be implemented on Moodle platform.

The training, and teaching materials in online and blended form will be prepared on the basis of content developed by authors from the partner universities in the project. During the production process of the content, the authors will work together. Shooting a 20-60 minutes video with the authors' participation is also planned and a multimedia textbook will be prepared in an e-learning authoring tool.

In the course of implementing the materials on the distant learning Moodle platform all produced modules will be uploaded to the platform. They will be used for teaching. All modules will be tested and then made available for the use by the partners in the project.

3. Evaluation and planned effects of the project

After the elaboration of the 10 online modules, a 104-hour-long workshops will give “class samples” held by the content authors, on the basis of the courses prepared during the project in which the selected participants from the partner universities will take part.

At the same time, an international conference will be organized, promoting a modern approach to teaching that will help the development of awareness and knowledge on modern teaching and will drive the quality of teaching at the universities.

After the conference, the project results – materials – online and blended modules, as well as the competence model will be made available or provided (implemented on Moodle platform) to all partners in the project who will show them in the universities, and will be able to use them to educate university academic staff on teaching, methodology, and multicultural competencies.

Another activity will consist of 10 workshops given by the authors of content who developed the modules – to be held in a panel system – at the choice of participants.

After the project implementation a Competence evaluation (ex ante and ex post) will take place being carried out in 2 groups: on 18 project partner academic representatives directly engaged in the project and on 60 academic staff representatives – participants in the international conference and in the workshops.

The evaluation of the 18 project partner representatives will entail an ex ante and ex post study of their knowledge on modern teaching, methodology, and multicultural matters. This will be a comparison of their initial knowledge against knowledge gained during the whole project as a result of their participation in workshops, lectures, and implementation of tasks, joint development of the competence model, scope of an academic teacher, topic-specific matters for modules, methodology frameworks, and participation in workshops during the conference.

The evaluation of the conference participants will also entail the study of their knowledge on modern teaching, methodology, and multicultural matters. The study will be carried out ex ante – at the start of the conference, and ex post – after its conclusions, after their participation in the workshops. The evaluation will entail a comparison of the knowledge gained during the selected workshops on a given topic, with the knowledge the persons had before the start. The evaluation of the results will be based on the assessment by the participants and other users – academic teachers from the partner universities – of the prepared modules for their content, friendliness – ease of use, appeal and usefulness for the academic teacher.

The effects of the project – higher competence of teaching staff as regards modern methodology, teaching, and multicultural aspects, will be primarily seen

not immediately after the end of the project, but a year and more lately after the implementation of its results in the partner universities.

This is because competence is a compilation of knowledge and skills. The knowledge will be gained by the project participants and academic teachers during the training courses using online and blended modules, however, the development of skills requires real application of the knowledge in teaching practice, which requires time.

After the end of the project, the universities will be free to continue the use of the prepared results, in order to achieve a long-term effect in the form of high competences of the staff. Every partner university will be able to further use the modern competence module to motivate and evaluate teaching staff.

The universities will be able to use prepared modules for internal training of their academic teachers for years to come, which will prove the sustainability of the development results.

Conclusions

Organizing and managing education are based on the identification of teaching tools, actual teaching, receiving feedback, revising and summarizing, evaluation and reinforcement activities. It relies on the integration of teaching environment and learning experiences.

One of the main conclusions of the paper is the finding that many teachers have a lack of the management skills in terms of teaching activity. To counteract this fact the MOCAT project proposes a model of an Academic Teacher Competences including 10 online courses that represent modern training materials in the field of teaching methodology.

The MOCAT project contributes to promoting the innovative training using the development of technology that facilitates the use of digital technologies of learning.

The international cooperation of the universities is proving to be a way for joint developing of solutions that improve the quality of education in universities, through the development of modern methods, tools and materials for academic staff in the field of teaching methodology.

At the same time, international cooperation during development and implementation of the project will be useful in particular to academic teachers who teach in English, in intercultural groups, for improving their teaching and intercultural competences.

An important benefit of the project consists in the possibility of adapting the project solutions to individual needs and in the possibilities of the partner universities in the project and in the future to be used and by other universities from other countries.

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