

## ***Promoting E-learning in the Academic Environment***

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### **Abstract**

*The educational world changes rapidly. We can notice that the use of the Internet and of the Information and Communication Technology has become an important part of the learning and teaching strategies of many universities. Some are going to become global, virtual institutions; others are using the Internet, combining traditional methods of delivery with online teaching.*

**Keywords:** e-learning; digital library; information resources; educational platform.

At present the Romanian society is confronted with a series of challenges in the educational system: **globalization** (town- country – the whole world); **continuing education** (pupil- student- specialist), **e-learning** (traditional education- long- distance education); **informational revolution** (information- knowledge- information society).

In spite of what is believed, the practice of long-distance education does not totally belong to the present time. In the world, at least 100 years ago, instructors used to send typed materials by mail (mail correspondence). We must admit the fact that this system was rather expensive, if we consider not only the paper and the stamps, but also the cost of their handling through the mail system, this requiring time, equipment and room for the storage. Later on, the material device was replaced with the electronic one (disks, CD-ROM or even e-mail).

There also appeared other long-distance education means: radio, video and television (years ago, the national television presented foreign languages courses, and lately, some colleges have also developed their own TV network, in order to instruct and educate the students and the interested public). But these means of long-distance education did not prove to be efficient enough, because of the lack of an immediate feed-back and of a real interactive communication. Though, they played an important role in training and educating pupils and students at that time.

In the era of the new information and communication technologies, the Internet revolutionized almost all the professional and social life, fields, and education as well. Education through the Internet represents a new learning way for the pupil/student, and also a new teaching way for the teaching staff. It is vital that all pupils and students have access to the Internet, know the new technology, for this being necessary to introduce ICT in the school curriculum.

Long-distance education becomes at present a characteristic of the academic environment, more and more education institutions paying special attention to pedagogical and acknowledging activities, seen through the established relationships between new information and communication technologies and education aims. In this context, there is more and more talk about “virtual university”, “virtual library” or “e-learning”.

Many e-learning systems offer access to articles, electronic books, data bases, as well as extended learning opportunities without the need of a librarian.

The problem is that of integrating the content and the services into a **virtual e-learning environment** (1), being known the fact that this type of education become one of the segments of the web information space, which has extensively developed lately.

The term e-learning is a concept to describe education through media, such as DVD, CD-ROM, Internet, Intranet, wireless etc: “e-learning means using multimedia technologies and the Internet in order to improve

the quality of education, facilitating the access to resources and services as well as exchanges and cooperation” (2), and the Council for Education and Long-Distance Instruction defines it in the following way: “Long-distance education means registering and studying at an institution, which assures the teaching materials prepared in a sequential and logical order so that students should learn on their own. At the end of each stage, the students send through fax or e-mail the result of their work to the qualified instructors, to be checked, classified and tutorial orientated on the specific topic. The checked tasks are returned, this exchange assuring a personalized relationship between student and professor”. (3)

The e-learning initiative of the European Commission has as main goal to involve the educational and cultural communities as well as the agents in the economic and social field, in order to accelerate the changes in the education and training systems in the context of an knowledge-based European society (e-learning Programme) (4). This programme represents an important step towards fulfilling the concept of lifelong education, based on technology and has four directions:

*Promoting the digital knowledge*

This will allow the acquisition of new skills and necessary knowledge for personal and professional development, being of help for those who do not have an easy access to the education or traditional training because of the geographical area or because of the socio-economic situation or of the special needs. It also has in view the contribution of the information and communication technologies to the updating of the educational process.

*Forming European Virtual Campuses*

For this, the priority is in adding a virtual dimension to the European Co-operation in the higher education, encouraging the development of new organizational models for the European Colleges. This will be done on an already existing co-operation (5). It seems that the initiative belonged to an American College “The School of Continuing Education”, which since 1992 has introduced lectures entirely taught in virtual classes, using Windows, Net Ware, Lotus Notes, ISDN and digital video.

*Promoting professors’ training*

This experience may prove to be decisive for the European dimension of education and for the European model awareness of the multilinguistic and multicultural society.

### *Actions for promoting e-learning in Europe*

Their purpose is to promote excellency products and services from projects and programmes which successfully functioned at European level. The emphasis will be put on the dissemination of the e-learning projects' results and on other relevant information, on the European networks support, on researches, studies and specific events, and on co-operation within the existing international projects.

In order to achieve these goals it is recommended to avoid an academic language and to conceive practical materials for e-learning, fact that certainly implies elements, which are neglected as a rule when the e-learning strategies are set up: the social specific and the cultural context.

The characteristics of e-learning are:

#### *The direct access to information*

This aspect refers to getting information without a mediator or only having the role of an adviser. Any educational process supposes two fundamental elements: the instructive content to be transmitted and the ways in which this is done. For the long-distance education we can talk about **an asynchronous communication**: e-mail, discussion forum, news, electronic agenda etc., and about **a synchronic communication** as well: audio and video conferences.

Nowadays, students use multiple methods of continuing communication, passing easily from „face to face” communication to the online one, being used to working in virtual teams and learning through simulation. Their multiple communication styles, the easiness of using the web, opened new formal learning ways and especially informal ones.

#### *Students' freedom in choosing the means of information*

The student faces an infinity of information. Traditional assistance in choosing it is no longer efficient, the student having an ever bigger responsibility in choosing, sorting and evaluating the information.

#### *Validity*

In this respect the difference between e-learning and traditional education is little, because the same techniques prevail, but the problem remains open, as it is very important to find significant differences and opportunities.

E-learning is a complex phenomenon with social, technical, economic, managerial, administrative consequences, the fields involved in e-learning being of **educational nature, referring to** the pedagogical aspects (creating, annotating and discussing the documents (6); course modules (materials referring both to teaching and learning, available both in

printed and in digital format); Literality – information literality – digital information literality – media literality. The ability to identify, evaluate, organize and communicate the information and the knowledge is the main characteristic of the knowledge society. In this respect, library is one of the main responsables in preparing students in order to face new information challenges. Another field responsible for the successful implementation of an e-learning platform, is the **economic** one (who is going to pay and for what?; who maintains the necessary infrastructure? Developing a new market; Home access (do all students have access at technology?) Aspects concerning **social psychology** (group behaviour), **sociology** (the involved communities), **informatics** (knowing ICT and having the ability to work with ICT) and **quality management** (Standardization: OEBSP – Open e-book Standard Publishing, XML – **Extensible Markup Language**, LOM – Learning Object Metadata – describes a learning object, OAI – Open Archive Initiative – allows metadata gathering); Internet (How to evaluate and interpret the information?; How to index the information; How to face the permanent alteration in the web environment?) and **information and communication sciences** (using the information and its users, online resources, Internet search) are essential, one not being able to talk about e-learning without the involvement of these fields.

Within IFLA conferences, an important point on the agenda was the impact of e-learning on libraries, and also problems referring to the support given by libraries to "long-distance" students, the impact of e-learning in preparing the library staff, teaching and learning in electronic field; copyright problems. As well, the 5 C s involved in the implementation of an efficient e-learning system were tackled (7): **Connexion** – IT infrastructure; **Content** – information (digital information included); **Capacity** – the ability of turning information into knowledge; **Conservation** (preservation); **Co-operation** (the University library, editorial institutions, IT companies etc.).

The problem of improving the relationship between e-learning and the digital library (8) was also tackled and if the latter can be an answer to the challenges put forward but e-learning, the existence of an online catalogue being necessary; The existence of digital full texts resources (e-books, e-papers); Digital interactive media library; The possibility of electronic publishing; Selective dissemination of information.

**The advantages** of an e-learning system are those that allow students and other people be familiar with ICT; it also has the ability of supplying the students with more learning resources, in this way allowing them to get in touch with a global educational community; using an

e-learning platform with LMS functions (Learning Management System), course planning is much more efficient; the material is student-centered and on his knowledge level; the access to knowledge is done in real time anywhere and anytime and it does not imply travel expenses or the cease of the professional activity.

There are also **obstacles in the implementation** such as: some teaching staff do not feel prepared for using the new technology; the maintenance costs for the equipment are high; the preparation of an online course is more expensive and also the so called „dehumanization” of courses (the development of new technologies, prejudicing interpersonal communication).

The structure of an e-learning system presents more sections: The public presentation one; The section for students (Personalized web page: courses: information about the course, work teams, access to virtual classes, assignments; their calendar; announcements, services; resources: courses, software, web sites; GED: files, e-mail account, personal profile; possibilities of internal search/on the web); The section for the teaching staff (teaching resources Editing: courses, tests etc.: Adding / eliminating students; Announcements; establishing the calendar, assignments, virtual classes; web resources; online catalogue; statistics); Student – professor communication section (E-mail discussion forum; virtual class; graphic icon, chat section, possible questions section; the identification of the participants: names, personal information, web localization; teleconference, speaker/participant view, announcing one’s presence, modification / information saving); The section of finding the resources (each course indicates a series of resources). Further resources for students: needs an access code – an electronic journal; Further resources for professors: educational modules and full courses, online teaching resources, conferences, events, teaching support for students, academic requirements; Theme-structured searching facilities).

We emphasize that within the E-learning System, applied to some universities in the country, students’ training in the communication and IT field is more and more important, with accent on the possibility of using these technologies in learning and teaching. Thus conditions have been created for the students for access to the Internet, another aspect referring to the **”teaching”** specific to learning and teaching in a virtual environment:

– New study materials adapted to the new teaching – learning type have been created, materials where students find many problem situations, simulation occasions of some real situations.

- Specialized rooms, with real time access to information and data for certain themes within different study subjects have been created;
- The interaction professor – student is done through a system of video conferences.

Certainly, at national level, it is important to train both students and teachers on ICT (some do not know or do not implement correctly these new technologies in the teaching – learning – evaluating activity, and others do not adapt themselves to the new requirements, some institutions not having an organized way of continuing training for teachers in this field).

As a result of a study, (9) done by the E-learning Centre of Development and Innovation in Education, the conclusion was that we need much more information and resources in using ICT, and the most important role in developing e-learning in Romania will be held by: users, software companies, EU policies, and the Ministry of Education and Research. The same study proves that the main elements that must be taken in consideration in making such a programme (e-learning) are: the target group, the project's goals, the learning contents, the teaching strategies, the ICT instruments used, resources (budget, time, staff).

In conclusion we assume that at national level one can notice two approaches of the matter.

Commercial educational systems acquisition; the development of a local background of using teaching material in electronic format, especially for long-distance learning departments. We consider that interactive lessons represent an efficient tool teachers can make use of in order to complete the traditional teaching process, motivating and stimulating students at the same time to put theory into practice and experiment new things.

Nowadays, in Romania, we notice an ever growing concern of the executive, of the civil society and of the education system (universitary and preuniversitary), in the implementation of an efficient e-learning system, although, we must admit that there are still many flaws in this field. Even at world level, researchers ask questions that do not have a firm answer yet: Are there subjects for which long-distance learning is better required? Is it more suitable for certain categories of students? (age, social status, skills and deficiencies). Are there means for a correct evaluation? Are libraries and information sources enough? How could one tackle the long-distance education? Such as an alternative way or a complementary way of educating? etc. With or without answers to these questions, technology goes further, and the future belongs to it.

We hope in a near future all universities and schools in Romania witness a dynamic growth in educational software and in teaching techniques,

using the computer, thus encouraging the teaching innovation, the modernization of the teaching process and of e-learning programmes, and on a long term, graduates' opportunity for continuing learning and training.

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