EDITORIAL PREFACE

Successful E-Learning Case Studies in Spanish Universities

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E-learning solutions became popular some years ago, since knowledge could be captured and accessed instantaneously through the technology revolution. This was an excellent solution for the old problem of mass education, beyond that of an impractical apprenticeship since there were far too many knowledge seekers and not enough knowledge providers.

The initial euphoria for the e-learning gave place to a generalized disillusionment because results and ROI were not really satisfactory. Actual perspectives about e-learning initiatives are more realistic and show a more mature conception of this field, but there is still a long way to go.

In this sense, Rosenberg (2006) talks about three phases of e-learning. The first concerns itself with contents, that is, with the quantity of courses, and with the investment in technology needed to deliver them. This effort is focused on technology itself, taking as criteria for success—how much you do, how quickly you do it, and how many courses you offer. A second stage is about quality and impact factors, this way success is related to innovative instructional applications, learning by doing models, and higher cost-benefit ratios. Finally, the third phase tackles business performance to design more comprehensive solutions that span training, improve knowledge sharing, and offer more intelligent ways of collaboration and interaction, all in the context of work. Business measures like productivity, customer and employee satisfaction, organizational agility, and marketplace performance are the metrics that matter here.

The real situation is there are many organizations that are bogged down in the first stage, they have introduced different kinds of technology artefacts in a variety of innovative ways and met with widely varying levels of success. However, unfortunately, there are too many examples that demonstrate a very worried situation: these organizations have not put in relation their investments in training with the obtained results. This situation presents us a black and white e-learning, as Martínez (2006) says.

Higher education is not an exception. Universities know the increasing importance of the e-learning-based models, but they generally suffer a lack of strategic planning about the implementation of these technological learning processes in its conservative world.

However, European universities are being shaken by a new trend, the so-called Bologna Process (European Ministers of Education, 1999). This political bet aims to establish a European Area
of Higher Education by 2010. The general objectives are the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all countries, with first degrees no shorter than three years; a European Credit Transfer System; and finally the elimination of remaining obstacles to the mobility of students and teachers. But in a deeper sense, this process represents a philosophical movement; it is a unification of the European university model that goes toward a more active learning model (i.e., a transformation from a Napoleonic model centred in the teacher figure (deeply rooted in the South of Europe), to an Anglo-Saxon model, centred in the student figure (deeply rooted in the North of Europe).

In this model, active learning implies that a teacher must also play a tutor role instead of just being a simple fact-of-knowledge transmitter. Hence, teachers need technology-based tools that help them improve their teaching/learning processes.

In this situation, e-learning solutions could be a very good helping tool, but only if they are understood as the medium to improve and make the learning process more flexible rather than understanding the technology as the centre itself.

This generalized situation does not prevent the development of fairly successful e-learning initiatives and models. There are lots of quality and interesting e-learning cases in both Enterprise and University. In the 2006 International Expoelearning Conference (http://www.aefol.com), a special university workshop was held, Virtual Campus 2006 (García, Lozano & Lamamie de Clairac, 2006). It had two main objectives: first, to present the latest advances in applied e-learning to the university world, and secondly, to build a bridge of collaboration between enterprise and academia. During this workshop, several interesting cases were presented and the international committee selected the five most relevant successful examples in order to create this special JCIT issue.

These case studies are a very good representation of the adaptation process that is suffering in the Spanish University in order to converge with the guidelines of the Bologna model, showing a clear example of the role played by the e-learning solutions in this hard and deep change of reference model.

The first case study is about the ODISEAME (Open Distance Inter-University Synergies between Europe, Africa, and Middle East) European Research Project. After 4 years of work, this article presents the conclusions and experiences of this interdisciplinary and intercultural e-learning project that has created a Euro-Mediterranean network of universities for the cooperation in the design and development of e-learning experiences.

The second case presents the successful creation of the e-learning division in one of the most important Spanish universities, the Polytechnic University of Valencia. This was how the Open Polytechnic University was born six years ago. This section has developed its own pedagogic-based methodology in order to implement online courses, and teachers are put in contact with an expert team that helps them with all their problems in the design of an online initiative.

The third and the fourth cases are developed in the Autonomous University of Barcelona. The first case shows the virtual campus of this university, which offers an essential tool in order to adapt its learning/teaching processes to the Bologna guidelines. The second one is about an innovative didactic project concerning the use of e-learning technologies in the European convergence process. Specifically, the Virtual Veterinary Science, which is detailed in this article, highlighting the great potential of the e-learning systems when they are strategically applied.

The last case study is developed by the GRIAL research group of the University of Salamanca. It demonstrates, with the experience of an e-learning Diploma, that the human factor in e-learning processes is an essential condition to achieve excellence in e-learning training, and that it is an indispensible element to arrive to the third phase of Rosenberg’s proposal. In this article, this group expresses its experiences through four editions of a crash online course that is oriented to provide participants with a high-level professional course regarding networked training, whether for academia, business, or the working world.

In order to wrap these case studies with an introduction to good practices in e-learning solutions, this special issue starts with the reflections of the one of the most representative figures in the distance education area, Marta Mena, who is an international reference for the UNESCO in educational
terms. In her article, she talks about the subjective term of quality in e-learning environments and experiences, and she gives us a very valuable list of indicators to recognize a good practice applied to e-learning.

With this special issue, we present a very interesting reference framework of good practices in e-learning, but we have to work hard if we want to go beyond the actual e-learning state in order to achieve a more coloured picture of possibilities and practices in our actual black and white e-learning panorama.

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REFERENCES