The Politics of E-Learning:  
A Game Theory Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is on how the negotiations between professors and students that are part of the eLearning political process can be interpreted through the prism of game theory. The source of data for the case was a series of in-depth interviews with the professor and an analysis of the e-mail messages exchanged between the professor, the students, and management. Each round of the game represents a different combination of positions, strategies and outcomes, yet, taken as a whole, the case events suggest underlying themes that, if been identified by the two sides, could have led to different outcomes. The discussion and conclusions section outlines the rules that governed the behaviour of the actors from a game theory perspective. This case is unique and, hence, the conclusions from it are not necessarily generalizable. Management’s role in the games that people play in the eLearning area is crucial in the newly emerging corporatized university. Game theory analysis is applied in this paper to a four-round negotiation process between students and their professor in the context of an eLearning case study.

KEYWORDS

Case Study, Conceptual, Corporatized University, eLearning, Game Theory, Politics, Qualitative Methodology

INTRODUCTION

The major premise of this research is that like all other educational settings, eLearning is a political arena. As such, it involves conflicts between a range of stakeholders groups, including, professors, students and management. While students and professors can be seen as the main actors in the games that people play during eLearning, management often plays a “mediating” role that can tip the scales in the direction of one or the other group of players.

The focus of this paper is on how the negotiations between professors and students that are part of the eLearning political process can be interpreted through the prism of game theory. The
underlying assumption is that a negotiation process is also a decision making process because in order to formulate and modify their positions the stakeholders constantly and continuously assess their options, select the ones that they consider optimal and implement their selected choices – all of which are part and parcel of decision making.

Considering the totality of the decisions made by the two sides in the following sections of this paper, our ultimate goal was to identify their utility function, namely, to discern the best strategies that they could have utilize to maximize their outcomes. In doing so, we do not only analyze the process of decision making that they undertook but also attempt to prescribe the ideal solution for future actors in similar situations. In this sense, our goal in this paper was not just to understand the decision making process undertaken by the stakeholders but to recommend the ideal course of actions for others.

Following the tradition of much of the literature on Game theory, ours is an analytical paper in that other than the case data, we do not present empirical data to support our analysis. At the same time, following the tradition of qualitative research in the area of management of information systems, we do not analyze the “game” mathematically. Instead, we employ a qualitative, interpretive approach that is intended to highlight the main features of the decision making process with a view to offering insights on how this process can be optimized.

Following a review of the major concepts in game theory that are relevant to the discussion, we explain how the politics of eLearning can be enlightened by applying game theory to a typical conflict between a group of students and their professor. The case study consists of four rounds, with each round featuring a different set of strategies utilized by the players and a different set of outcomes. The paper concludes with a discussion of the strategies and the outcomes through the prism of game theory and a set of suggestions as to which strategies would have helped each player or player group maximize their outcomes.

THE POLITICS OF E-LEARNING

Before we consider the role that politics may play in eLearning, it is important to define eLearning. Cross (2004) is considered the person who coined the term eLearning. Since then, a range of definitions have been offered for this term. The first type of definitions focus on the fact that eLearning is based on the Internet. For example, Rosenberg (2001) defines eLearning as: “the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance, Rossett and Kendra (2001) defines eLearning as: “Web-based training (WBT)”, and Adrich (2004) defines eLearning as: “a broad combination of processes, content, and infrastructure to use computers and networks to scale and/or improve one or more significant parts of a learning value chain, including management and delivery”.

Other definitions of eLearning have been so general that they include just about all interactions and experiences in organizations. For example, Manville (2003) defined eLearning as not only Internet-published courseware, but also the tools for managing, modularizing and handling: different kinds of content and learning objects (including both electronic and non-electronic forms, and even traditional classroom instruction), just-in-time and asynchronous learning, such as virtual labs, virtual classrooms and collaborative work spaces, simulations, document repositories and publishing programs, tools for prescribing learning, managing development pathways and goals and handling e-commerce and financial transactions related to learning, and the utilities and capabilities for supporting informal learning, mentoring, communities of practice and other non-training interventions”. In other words, according to Manville (2003), eLearning includes just about everything that happens in the corporate world except training.

For the purpose of this paper, we define eLearning as both electronically based and related to teaching and learning. However, this does not mean that we restrict eLearning to activities that occur in a classroom (even an on-line classroom) or that we consider eLearning a process that takes
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