Chapter 18

Creating a Global and Innovative Higher Education Environment: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Since the first generation of distance learning the format of distance education has changed a lot. Actually, with the increasing use of web technology to interact online the learning environments have been radically changed. The emergence of MOOC and its adoption by well-known universities has also influenced the change. Of course, the adoption of technology in education is not happening in the same way and at the same time and pace in all educational institutions. In fact, the success of adoption of technology depends on several factors related to the organization where it is implemented and with the individuals involved. In this chapter, the authors present the creation of a global and innovative higher education environment case study, the evolution of the solutions offered concerning distance learning, the actual offers, and the concerns for the future. They identify the factors that enabled or constrained this evolution as well as raise some questions that are still unanswered and point out some clues for future research in the field of creating a global learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, higher education institutions have continued the tendency to adopt technologies for a diversity of purposes. More and more these institutions want to be recognized as modern and offering a diversity of educational options, being the combination of face-to-face with technology-mediated instruction as the preferred solution (Porter et al., 2014).

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Nevertheless, the pace of the adoption of technology in education is not the same everywhere. Solutions found differ also from one institution to another. For instance, some teachers might adopt technologies in some curricular units and offer the course in a blended-learning (BL) regime and not in another one. At the same time if we analyze the overall institution offers, we attest that officially it does not adopt the blended-learning systems. In fact, BL may have started in a bottom-up way, being adopted by “individual faculty interested in using both online and traditional strategies to improve student learning outcomes rather than as a strategic institutional initiative” (Graham et al., 2013).

It is possible to identify a spectrum of course delivery modalities that goes from traditional face-to-face to completely online courses (Figure 1). Moreover, there are several solutions that can be found when we refer the use of technologies in education. The format depends essentially on the objectives of the course and target audience. In the literature there are several references to the available technologies for distance learning. These solutions comprise online meetings, the webcast (equivalent to presentations in a face-to-face situation), the webinars corresponding to the face-to-face seminar, till the used in “pure” training. As technological developments are happening at a very faster pace, “…every new technology brings in its own set of rules that needs to be followed and adapted to use that technology in a better way for teaching and learning” (Sharma & Mishra, 2007, p.6).

Distance learning can be classified as synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous sessions involve communication in real time, chat or teleconference while asynchronous sessions comprise in training, the study of learning materials and the establishment of deadlines to deliver activities, allowing the trainee to study at his / her own pace.

Generally speaking, the use of technologies in higher education does not correspond to a unique formula. Bologna declaration forced to several changes and adaptation of education. In Portugal, there was a reduction in the number of contact hours between teachers and students. There was an expectation that the number of hours of autonomous work would increase. However, this did not happen, probably due to the absence of a formalization of asynchronous learning spaces or the need of tutorials, which have never been formalized. We witnessed as well a reduction in the objectives of the courses and in some cases to a limitation in learning. The number of hours of the courses were reduced but the pedagogical methodologies remained the same. This scenario was in contrast with the growing of the diversity.