Mediated Quality: An Approach for the eLearning Quality in Higher Education

Patrizia Ghislandi, Department of Educational and Cognition Sciences, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

Juliana Raffaghelli, Department of Educational and Cognition Sciences, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

Nan Yang, Department of Educational and Cognition Sciences, University of Trento, Trento, Italy

ABSTRACT

Even if the question of eLearning quality has been intensely discussed in the recent years, with several approaches and models arising, consistent transferring of concepts into practices is still difficult (Elhers & Hilera, 2012). In fact, eLearning is given different importance by the several stakeholders; consequently, the educational institutions’ culture of quality – meanings, discourses, representations and practices - is highly variable (Ehlers & Schneckenberg, 2010) and adapting to external frameworks and models of quality could be difficult. As a result, the implementation of quality eLearning in HEI is slowed down or blocked (Conole, Smith, & White, 2007). This article analyzes three quality models taking into account the different underlying values and quality cultures underpinning practices, in an attempt to show how the embedded epistemological values generate technical practices that may or may not respect the complexities of quality as a contextualized, multiperspective, multidimensional process. Drawing on this analysis, the authors introduce the concept of "mediated quality" as approach that takes into account the participants engagement as insiders of a (quality) learning culture. An example of this approach is given through the case of quality of teaching/learning, and the mediation introduced through Learning Design.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis, eLearning, Higher Education, ISO/IEC, Quality Culture

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INTRODUCTION

eLearning in the Context Higher Education Change: Different Perspectives for a Quality Approach

It is already consolidated that the integrated technological and social shifting is deeply questioning pedagogical traditions, opening to a dialogue where technologies development feed the pedagogical innovation and reflection, and vice versa (Anderson & Dron, 2012). In fact, this evolution has made possible, more and more, to pass from a “one-to-many” perspective to participatory processes, as it is the case of Web 2.0, being the educational field particularly sensible to this socio-cultural dynamic (Downes, 2008). One of the most important goals of the above mentioned changes is the participation of a higher number of people to new forms of learning. In the case of eLearning in the context of Higher Education (HE) it is considered an important mean to reach better HE system performance (Dittler, Kahler, Kindt, & Schwartz, 2005).

In fact, eLearning is connected to vast and quality access to Higher Education. As Laurillard (1992, 2002) pointed out, eLearning in Higher Education plays a crucial role since technologies, supporting interactions, could be also the way to create new learning environments with the potential of access to digital versions of materials unavailable locally, generate interactive resources, provide students and teachers with tools for creativity and design, personalize information and guidance for learning support, facilitate teacher and students collaboration, facilitate data analysis, modelling or organisation tools and applications, among others. This idea is also widely accepted around the world, as it was expressed early in the works of Baumeister (1999) for Western Europe, King (1999) for Australia, Mmari (1999) for Africa, Chacón (1999) for Latin America. Nowadays, the international educational policy context is attempting to mainstream the benefits of eLearning, with the European 2020 Strategy (EU2020) as just an example. According to this policy context, the main reason to promote eLearning in HE is that it empowers digital competences connected to new forms of citizenship where social media and technological environments are crucial. To paraphrase the EU2020 strategy, digital competences or new skills lead to new jobs, or competitiveness, employability, social cohesion and cultural development, etc. (EU-RYDICE, 2012).

However, these promising results of eLearning face tensions and contradictions within Higher Education Institutions, depending on the values (educational, deontological) and interest of stakeholders (Bates & Sangra, 2011). One of the main hazards for the implementation of eLearning, with its connected impact on the achievement of digital is indeed, the quality of eLearning experiences: how the standards of learning effectiveness are conceived, the way in contents are delivered connected to teaching strategies, and how assessment is finally implemented, are key issues that go beyond technologies and regard institutional and stakeholders values, as learning culture.

What we mean is that the conception and implementation of quality in eLearning projects, shows consistent differences that regard the way stakeholders, HEI and the policy context search for quality (Ghislandi & Raffaghelli, 2012). Let’s take the European case. To overcome the many problems regarding the harmonization of different higher education systems, the Bologna Process, started in 1999, has supported an intensive work of European institutions for the definition of a framework of cooperation regarding several issues, among which one of the most relevant is quality into HEIs. This is particularly expressed in the context of the Education and Training Programme (2010/2020) goal, where social inclusion, international academic and students mobility, as well as innovation are considered crucial for bringing new breath to HEIs and to contribute to the smart growth strategy (EU2020). Particularly, the Digital Agenda (set up within the EU2020) emphasizes the role of...
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