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e-LEARNING- REALITY AND/OR DREAMS?

A review of the WBLE 2nd 2001 conference on e-Learning in a lifelong learning perspective, merging the physical and digital learning space, Lund University, Sweden, October 2001.

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Abstract

Based on experiences and research presented during the WBLE 2nd 2001 (Web Based Learning Environment) conference on e-Learning at Lund University, Sweden, October 2001, one wish to obtain a glimpse into the status and future of e-Learning. During the conference a large number of worldwide research, experiences and dreams were presented. Thus, this conference gives us a good idea of the status today – and what we may experience in the future concerning lifelong learning. e-Learning is, on a global basis, increasingly being introduced on campus – who would expect that? The fact is that the physical and the digital learning space merge. We also observe myths around e-Learning, *eDreams* and *eFears* that influence the views of society on e-Learning.

Key words: e-Learning, distance learning, ODL, Internet-based education, ICT, flexible learning, standardisation, evaluation, web based learning environment, lifelong learning

Introduction

The WBLE 2nd (Web Based Learning Environment) 2001 was implemented at Lund University, Sweden, October 2001, under the title: ***e-Learning in a Lifelong Learning Perspective, Merging the Physical and Digital Learning Space***. About 175 people from more than 20 countries and nearly 70 universities, from all over the world, participated at the conference. In the preface of the proceedings [1] the Vice-Chancellor of Lund University said: *The new technology changes the way we teach and learn, and it is important to share and exchange experiences and ideas regarding internet-based education. The conference will provide an excellent opportunity for such sharing and exchange. The intention is that the conference shall contribute to the development of new and better methods of e-Learning.*

Considerations

We would like to look into some critical issues presented at the conference, and even other sources, mainly the recommendations from the European Commission [2,3,4,5] and survey: e-Learning in Europe [6], as initial position for this paper.

Among the titles for keynotes we can mention: *e-Learning - Designing tomorrow's education. What's new?* [5], *e-Learning to mobilise resources for lifelong learning*, *The adventures of e-learning in Wonderland*, *e-Learning*, *ICT skills shortage and the SISCO networking Academy program*, *Embracing e-Learning in the developing world: Socio-economic perspective* [Al Rawas, p.36], *How to achieve understanding with the aid of e-Learning*? *e-Learning: Management before teaching and learning* [Wagner, p.51] and *e-Learning back to the future*?

Besides keynote speeches, the conference was sectioned into four main different challenging themes concerning e-Learning; *Awareness/Acceptance*, *Standardisation/Harmonisation*, *Convergence of e-Learning/campus learning* and *Evaluation/Assessment*. Besides the four themes mentioned above, issues such as: *Evaluation and experiences from a Leonardo project Merlin 2000*, some regional projects as *The Northern e-Dimension, Baltic Virtual Sea Campus*, *The Swedish Net university* and *e-Learning as a driving force in the Öresund science region* were presented. A special workshop was held concerning critical success factors for managing and developing e-Learning: Khakhar, Lindqvist, and Poumay [p.367, 383 and 388].

Holmes [5] addressed the message *By mobilising and co-ordinating Europe's efforts´ the e-Learning initiative is playing an important role in helping Europe to realise it's potential to be the world leader in learning products and service*. Wagner [p.51], who also is the president of EDEN, discussed such issues, as *will management replace teaching and learning and the consequences of this*. Al Rawas [p.36] discussed the challenge for developing countries switching to e-Learning.

Manninen [p.110] introduces the interesting concept eMyths as ***eFears and eDreams. eFears*** related to e-Learning can be summarised as following; Q*uality of learning is lower, Learning is a b-class teaching method, Learners are isolated, Learning on web is a self-study method.* ***eDreams*** related to e-Learning can be summarised as follows; *Web enables mass training,* W*eb teaching is cheaper, Web will free us from time and place, Basic courses can be easily moved to web, Web is an open learning environment, Learning becomes easier and faster, Learning can be organised at the workplace.*

Manninen gives answers to those issues, by considering the pedagogic methods used, such as whether web is used as a bank for lecture notes and self study material only, or if the on-line possibilities for interaction and two-way communication are utilised. When the teacher interacts with the students the amount of students per teacher will be quite small (e.g. 15) – there will be no *mass-education*. Costs for implementation will usually be higher due to the necessity for detailed planning, material developments, teams, tutors and technical support. Another consequence, taken the eFears and eDreams seriously into consideration *the fact is, that for the first time trainers have to think in more detail what they are teaching, why, how and to whom.*

Khakhar [p.367], Lindqvist [p.383], and Poumay [p.388] stress some critical factors or issues for e-Learning. Khakhar discusses concepts such as; *Policy issues on all levels*, *managerial issues*, *ethics*, *cultural, social and language issues*, *source development and maintenance*, *design and delivery issues*, *supporting student's activity and technological issues*. Lindqvist uses the factors; *Modalities for service provision*, *framework for knowledge management*, *making knowledge/learning more accessible to managers* and *exploring quality standards for learning*. Poumay discusses the similar concepts. She even stresses the transformation process, going from *traditional courses* to *net courses*. The transformation implies a series of switches, such as *from teaching centred to learning centred approach*, *from a receptive mode of message transmission to an exploratory mode of information processing*, *from a top-down communication to lateral exchanges*, *from large chunks of un-partitioned content to smaller mouthful portions of disciplinary materials* and *from a rote learning approach to constructive assimilation of content*.

The conference themes

Awareness/ Acceptance

The following topics were covered in this theme; *The fit of design and technique to the users, Motivation and the drop-out problem, Can the universities moral and cultural mission be recurred in a virtual world? The flexible university, extending the frontiers of learning beyond the classrooms, eMyths and eReality.*

Aviram [p.62] discusses in his paper that traditionally, universities have been *Ivory towers for theoretical knowledge and research* and *service stations for supplying society with practical services and cultural citadels*. Do we loose these concepts? Aviram and Cadoso [p.74] believe that the *virtual university* can be a vehicle for the revival of the humanistic ideal of human development and the University, even if there is a long way to go in the redesign of universities for full exploitation of the opportunities of learning technologies.

Braimoh et al [p.86] discusses that the new technological advancement has not only reduced the whole world into a form of *global village*, but also facilitated the expansion of access to knowledge. He pleads for the needs to break down the wide knowledge-gap in developing countries. This is also stressed by Al Rawas [p.36]. Acceptance and awareness of e-Learning will be crucial for this issue.

The survey: *e-Learning in Europe* [6] present views from a sample of 120 European higher education institutions – such as: *e-Learning appreciation, e-Learning implication, Comparative advantages*, *Durable constraints* and *Possible outcomes.*

About one third of teachers and students prefer traditional education and research methods. More than half of the questioned institutions yield resistance or are passive to e-Learning whilst 40 % consider e-Learning to have an important role in teaching methods – and even feel that e-Learning is in a position to compete with traditional methods. A small percentage have adopted a very offensive strategy where e-Learning has become the main axe of their teaching methods. The survey further states: With regards to traditional teaching methods, e-Learning generates a real about-turn in perspective. From vertical hierarchical logic (teacher/ student), we leap to a cooperative and flexible situation (coach, tutor / student). Students have acquired more responsibility in the learning process. The learner becomes more a partner than a subordinate and the teacher becomes more a coach and a tutor [6].

A final interesting issue is the fact that children enter schools with an entire *techno cultural* experience, which can be compared to reading and writing. It therefore falls to the educational world to rely on this experience in order to enhance its learning value. Even the reluctant institutions admit this [6].

Standardisation/ Harmonisation

The following topics were covered in this theme*: Electronic portfolios and content archives, Generic systems for reusable learning, Building virtual learning spaces – from e-Learning models to web based component services, e-Learning components – reusable elements for teaching materials, The kitchen for e-Learning – on the architecture of collaborative learning labs, e-Learning in the semantic age, Design of multimedia brokerage platform for distance learning.*

The idea is to design re-usable learning objects, which allow customised modules of learning to be tailored to suit the individual SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) learning

requirements and flexibility delivered to provide *just-in-time* and *just enough* learning [Hall p.131]. Hall refers to current industry standards for learning object standardisation such as AICC (Aviation Industry CBT Committee), IMC (Instructional Management System) and SCORM (Shareable Courseware Object Reference Model from US Department of Defence). AICC is, at the moment, the most active standard; defining how computer based learning should be accessed and managed by external systems such as Learning Management Systems (LMS). In longer term IMS and SCORM are likely to take centred stage. In particular, industry is interested in such solutions for developing self-training facilities for their employees, involving as few experts and academics in the competence development process as possible.

Wallin [p.136] states that ….the educational system in general and the academic educational system in particular, is in need of a profound *learning process re-engineering*. He introduces the metaphor *kitchen*, with it's associations to eating and food industry, as a new paradigm for lifelong learning environment. As an example, we should not be surprised to find a number of economic markets operating in the learning field, corresponding to such things as the global fresh fruit market, regional markets for fine evening dinners and the local take-away pizza and fruit market. Wallin further states: *We have to consider learning as an investment in human, intellectual and immaterial capital from a lifelong perspective, rather than a public financed consumption of teaching hours during a restricted period of life.*

Naeve [p.150] discusses conceptual organisation and exploration in the context of a Knowledge Manifold. He introduces a new kind of knowledge management tool a *concept browser,* called Conzilla©. He discusses a set of design principles for such browsers. These principles include a strict separation of *context* and *content.* Contextual descriptions in terms of a collection of semantically visual context maps, maps that can be navigated by moving through contextual neighbourhoods, presentation of the content components through context-dependant aspect-filters, and contextualisation of content components that are themselves context maps.

Convergence of e-Learning and campus learning

The following topics were covered in this theme: *Simulation and games as pedagogical and learning methods, Net resources for collaborative learning and project-tasks, Pedagogical possibilities with mobile Internet, Course design, referring to the variables time and space, Tutoring and management by objectives in e-Learning, The dual-mode university, Configurations for learning (study centres), Configurations and interfaces for interaction and flexible learning.*

Andersson [p.257] describes and analyses a course, *e-Learning on University*, with a new pedagogical design. The pedagogy move on from teacher controlled to existent learner control where the students to a great extent generate their own learning material and to a lesser extent rest on pre-existing material. Thus the user activity is generative – interesting. Is this the future of learning methodology? The authors of this paper and even Hall [p.287] Stenzelius [p.35] and Nilsson & Nilsson [p.269] find it interesting to see how research and experience from distance education, which is more student centred, lead to pedagogic discussions for in-campus learning – and possibly leading to the introduction of quite new pedagogic approaches for the University student. Eneroth [p.212] addresses the benefits of usability and the advantages of merging net-learning methods even for on-campus learning.

In the BRODD report from the Norwegian National Library [7] they state: Distance education, more and more, will become part of *normal teaching* (flexible teaching) and the border between distance education students and *normal* students will vanish, we get *flexible students*. This is also stated in the Swedish Government Bill [8].

Evaluation/ Assessment

The following topics were covered in this theme: *New forms of assessment in e-Learning, Quality assurance of e-Learning courses, Criteria and methods, Comparative studies of different types of course structures.*

McPherson, [p.307] found that it is possible to create rich learning environments for group work in virtual workplaces. She further state: *However, the content and expectations of group work might need to be altered to reflect the constraints and difficulties inherent to a virtual environment.* Sponberg, [p.283] also finds, that it is possible to create extremely close relations between students and teachers in online learning. He mentions an episode during a planned net meeting, when one student wrote: *I never learned my teachers to know so well in any classroom as I did through this course...* An analysis behind this statement show that, during net meetings one often, talk (write) just as much about private/social events as about professional matters. The ratio social/professional vary a lot, but the social is always there. This does not happen so often in the classroom, where the professional dialogs occupy practically 100 % of the time. This is also found by Nilsson & Nilsson [p.269].

Russel, in Paulsen [9] found that *there is no significant difference in learning achievements, no matter what media you use for learning.* We may say that technology, after all, only is a tool. The learning process is an inner process in the mind and soul of humans and the intrinsic motivation is crucial and has nothing to do with the tools- all new technology must obey the general pedagogic laws – and these are everlasting. Paulsen further states that, generally, the results are better than for ordinary students. This is demonstrated even by Stenzelius [p.35] and Nilsson & Nilsson [p.269].

Paulsen [9] stresses that evaluation is important, both for students and teachers. Using traditional classroom type exams remove some of the benefits of e-Learning. One should find methods for net-based evaluation. He gives some few strategies for net-based evaluation among which we find: Evaluation of the students' ability to find information and apply knowledge – not the ability to reconstruct and memorise from the curriculum, consider computer-based evaluation, Compulsory evaluation.

Discussion and final conclusion

From WBLE 2nd 2001 and even other related surveys we may conclude that the future of e-Learning is full of promises. It induces a reflection on education, learning, culture management and modes of knowledge transmission. Maybe for the first time, trainers have to think in more detail what they are teaching, why, how and to whom. We find that many people and Universities believe that the future for on-campus students will become influenced with e-Learning and other flexible methods. The terms *distance education*, *e-Learning*, *distance education students* and *on-campus students*, slowly may disappear. Dual- mode institutions will be more and more common and maybe this will be the answer to the *Gordic knot* concerning e-Learning. Even inter-University co-operation conjure up the Dual-Mode concept. One may engage well-known professors from anywhere; the institutions may share competence with one another. e-Learning enables us to access more easily and *without borders*, the sharing of knowledge. The concepts of distance education are also in a way going to be dissolved. What is distance in this new concept? Distance is e.g. just 0,60 m from the computer. So, who are DE students and who are campus students?

The new challenge in education is also the management of education and how it will be *wrapped*. This was showed in many of the papers from the WBLE 2nd 2001, for example Al Rawas, Holmes and Wagner. Some authors fear that the learning process may become more, a business process rather than a human related development process. Management and policy making has taken a great part in the discussions concerning e-Learning, presumably with all

rights. It is not just a question of how to put learning materials into the computers. The question is to take advantage of the possibilities of interactions, learning styles, learning without limits of time and space etc. The question is also to use the concepts introduced by Manninen eFears and eDreams in constructive solutions.

Other challenges are developing countries. Al Rawas and also Braimoh discussed how the great knowledge-gap might become smaller. Nowadays, we talk more about the digital divide than about the knowledge-gap. It is a question concerning human rights and democracy. Aviram also stressed the human perspective. Wallins framework about investment in human, intellectual and immaterial capital from a lifelong perspective will be of great importance.

We want to conclude with the issues raised by Holmes. He states that future direction for e-Learning is to realise its potential. Furthermore, as we are moving towards the knowledge society, Europe - at least with it's excellent education and training systems - is well placed to take advantages of the revolution in learning. e-Learning is now the top on the political agenda, but many key issues still need to be addressed if the potential is to be realised.

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