Distance Education Teaching Methods in Childcare Management

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INTRODUCTION

The cultural and technical history of e-learning scenarios can be traced back to traditional forms of distance studies, CD-Rom learning programmes, audio-programmes or educational TV. But other than these forerunners, two closely related myths often shape policy towards ICT and education: the irresistible power of globalisation and the determining effect of technology. Both views present the success of e-learning throughout the education system as inevitable. The space left for practitioners in higher education is either to embrace the new media or to watch its inevitable unfolding. In this paper we take a critical stance towards that perspective and suggest that the shape and learning effect of new media in higher education is contested and evolves in communities of practice. No technologies are neutral and it is more appropriate to speak of economic, technological and societal features as interactively fostering the importance of e-learning through *distributed actions* (Rammert, 2002). From such a perspective, e-learning is perceived as a co-product of didactically and technically situated features (Wiesner-Steiner, Wiesner, & Schelhowe, 2006) that foster and enable but don`t determine human learning through the use of digital technologies. Main characteristics are:

- Interactive and multimedial design of content
- Learning via digital networks
- Netbased communication

The EU-Leonardo-project "European Enhancement of Early Years Management Skills—EEEYMS" (http://www.eeeyms.org/) was intended to enhance employability of people employed in the Early Years Childcare management sector by providing access to a high level qualification in line with the emerging industry requirements. This was achieved by developing distance learning materials available via the World Wide Web and other forms of media including CD-Rom`s, specific to the employment area which is also aligned to a degree pathway, and will be available within Europe. It was further achieved by the creation of a European network association for childcare to ensure sustainability after the project is complete. EEEYMS provides an accredited route for the attainment of a relevant degree level qualification for careers and managers within the childcare sector, and assist in attracting suitable people into this employment sector to meet the childcare demand over the next 10 years. With ODL materials, the project enhances employment opportunities and career status for a still predominantly female workforce. Research suggests that the increased status and professionalisation obtained through the availability of a high level qualification will make the industry more attractive to male employees. EEEYMS thus provided higher level qualification to people disadvantaged in the labour market and those who faced discrimination in accessing training due to disability, geographical location or family commitments. The use of ICT systems was thus thought to enhance knowledge and learning experience *and* the employability factors, as the knowledge will be directly transferable to the work environment.

The primary target group was that of childcare professionals actively working in the sector or entering this profession, where a niche in the market exists for a relevant specific degree award. EEEYMS thus wanted to attract more women into managerial positions, while encouraging more men to enter the profession by providing a credible award.

Because empirical evidence on the increase of e-learning-efficiency is both difficult and important, external evaluation of the EEEYMS e-learning modules via surveys has been an integral part of the entire project. The aim here was to include a more objective, independent feedback at every stage of the programme. According to the projects aims, the evaluation was conducted following the principle of gender mainstreaming (Wiesner, Kamphans, Schelhowe, Metz-Göckel, Zorn, Drag, Peter, & Schottmüller, 2004) and considering intercultural inclusion-aspects (Zorn & Wiesner-Steiner, 2006).

The article is divided into three main sections. After introducing the use of VLE and a problem based learning

approach, we discuss the effects of group work, the use of technology and the main learning experiences. As a result we come up with an overview of critical sociotechnical issues of distance learning materials.

BACKGROUND

In the development of e-learning for the early years sector through the EEEYMS partnership these key issues emerged: the importance of the use of a suitable VLE in delivering the learning programme, the use of problem-based learning (PBL) to enhance student motivation through collaboration, the need of IT skills development and the role of context as it relates to student success.

The VLE in use is Granada's "Learnwise". This VLE has as one of its technical features collaborative "forums" in which participants take part in asynchronous discussion in small teams and work on specific management and education problems The partnership decided that these forums would provide a prime vehicle for student support through "encouraging active learning", shifting from didactic to "facilitative teaching" or "building online communities" (Armitage, Brown, & Jenkins, 2001)

The stated aim of the EEEYMS project is that early years practitioners will develop knowledge and understanding of the educational and management issues pertinent to their sector, and that they will also develop the requisite skills to critically analyse, evaluate and apply this knowledge. As professional knowledge requires functioning knowledge that can be put to work immediately, most module designers for EEEYMS choose to adopt a "problem-based learning" approach.

Problem based learning simulates everyday learning and problem solving. Knowledge is acquired in a working context and is put back to use in that context. The learning and assessment on the programme will be aligned (Biggs, 1999) to learners everyday work experiences. Participants learn the skills for seeking out the required knowledge when the occasion arises during the process. They are motivated immediately by the interaction with a 'real' problem and are active early in the process.

Although on-line participants face time constraints as working practitioners and as parents with family responsibilities, the use of media-communicated communication has been used to build successful collaborative learning. As Salmon (2000) asserts, the Internet can change concepts of space and time: "*Working and learning with others who happen to live in a particular locale may become less important than finding shared professional and personal interests in online environment" (p. 492).*

The EEEYMS project aimed to provide learning opportunities at degree level, so that practitioners can develop the requisite skills to critically analyse, evaluate and apply knowledge. A large body of literature support the motivational aspects of collaboration on learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Sharan & Shaulov, 1990). Wenger (1999) also offers a perspective on learning that emphasises social learning processes within *communities of practice* where individuals engage in the negotiation of meaning and the mutual construction of knowledge. The EEEYMS participants often refer to this "community of practice" when expressing the relevance of the tasks to the everyday practice.

The issue of gender was also pertinent as with the exception of one male EEEYMS participant, all others were female. For example, a study by Kirkup and von Prumm (1990) comparing the experiences of women adult distance learners in Germany and the UK points to a pattern of preference for shared learning.

This type of social-technical interaction, learning and decision making is expected in the workplace today and this approach should ultimately therefore promote a desire for and ability to partake in 'life long learning'.

Meisalo, Lavonen, and Juuti (2005) also emphasise the importance of Web based community formation for off-campus participants in their study of primary teachers taking a science education course. Dron (2005) in his paper on the construction of e-learning environments to cater for the needs of diverse learners utilises Michael Moore's theory of transactional analysis. For Moore (1980), distance is a pedagogical more than a physical phenomenon, and transactional distance measures the amount and nature of dialogue. Transactional distance is said to be low when there is a lot of dialogue between learners and teacher, but where transactional distance is high, teachers often provide a highly structured learning experience. The use of PBL appears to ensure that student autonomy flourishes and dialogue is high not only between student and teacher, but also student and student.

This importance of web based community and the need to maintain a low transactional distance through constant dialogue appears to be a critical outcome of the EEEYMS project. Donohue (2002) analyses the challenges of teaching the target group for EEEYMS online, as the Early Years sector is characterised by "low tech/ high touch". While many Early Years Managers and Practitioners might only have little involvement with high tech equipment such as computers in their work place settings, much of their practice is concerned with managing relationships with colleagues, children and families. Donohue (2002) suggests the use of learning approaches aiding the building of a community of practitioners such as collaborative knowledge construction and group work. The evaluation results discussed now show that it has successfully utilised learning approaches to mirror that "high touch."