Chapter 20
Beyond the Walls:
Project–Based Learning and Assessment in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Main goal of the chapter is to focus on project based learning (PjBL) as an effective learning and assessment method effectively used in higher education. Chapter provides an understanding of Romanian higher education contextual challenges, current pedagogy trends and specific examples to support the idea that PjBL leads to the type of authentic learning needed for nowadays students. Theoretical framework and examples are enriched by reflections on undergraduate and master degree students' perceptions on learning process and learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, teaching and learning in higher education is dominantly focused on content, on the process of making an informed selection of most relevant and updated information, in the attempt to satisfy both epistemological routes of the disciplines and recent research advancement in the field. A new conditionality was brought into the scene by the needs of the qualifications from the perspective of job-related skills. A consistent movement in designing learning in higher education can be identified under the generic name of outcome-based education, changing somehow the focus from contents to learning achievements. A whole range of learning outcomes started to be defined and set as ground for higher education program design and delivery: standards, competences, qualifications etc. The "new managerialism" made its impact in conceiving the university degrees in terms of content, outcomes and assessment. One of the challenges of these two "waves" or perspectives in thinking higher education teaching and learning is the fact that pedagogy is somehow left behind, meaning that learning process through meaningful interaction among key actors was somehow taken for granted as happening if good quality structural conditions are in place (i.e. relevant content and well-defined outcomes).

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION. CHANGES AND PARADOXES ANALYZED IN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT

The need for more focus on learning experiences from the perspective of the new type of learners became more acute in the last years. Even when taking about more generic trends of higher education, such as internationalization, the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding in Romania highlights in a recent report (UEFISCDI, 2013) the specific aspects of teaching as pedagogy, learning environment and learning resources. According to the report, the above mentioned aspects are connected to knowledge-society requirements and scientific evidence. "Curriculum review and course content updating have to be accompanied by an extensive reconsideration of the pedagogy applied in the teaching and learning process. In the era of global communication and unlimited access to knowledge in the virtual space, the traditional instruction paradigm (transfer of knowledge) is more and more replaced by a new model: the learning paradigm based on a holistic approach of all the elements and drivers which contribute to the construction of knowledge and skills through a student centered process (Barr &Tagg, 1995). Universities create a favorable learning environment with wide access to the newest learning resources and to the cutting-edge knowledge and with a more or less individual guidance of the students in their effort to achieve best learning outcomes". (2013, p. 70).

Not only students are changing, as the new generations of digital natives are coming into higher education, but academic staff is changing as well, both in terms of professional identity (see, for instance, Kember & Kwan, 2000; Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2011), and in terms of the pedagogy they employ for creating authentic learning experiences (Jenkins et. al. 2003; Hannon, 2009; Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Herrington, 2006).

Quality teaching became an issue of significant importance as the landscape of higher education has been facing continuous changes. The student body has considerably expanded and diversified, both socially and geographically. New students call for new teaching methods. Modern technologies have entered the classroom, this modifying the nature of interaction between students and professors. (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2011, p. 3).

But how are the teaching and learning practices changing in higher education in Romania under all these new and challenging local and international circumstances? How is students' participation seen and encouraged in the daily life of the organization and how they take ownership of their own learning?

Although the system-level and institutional changes are numerous and significant in nature, there are many learning paradoxes, situating higher education reforms in Romania on the edge between solid achievements and (temporary) failures: impact of quality assurance mechanisms on quality of learning and research, the correlation between qualifications framework and level of employment etc.

Some of the key challenges of teaching and learning today in our higher education institutions are briefly described below. Although they are very much visible in Romania, there is no doubt they apply, maybe in different ways and magnitudes, everywhere.

Given the purpose of this chapter, four challenges are selected: one referring mainly to students, one coming from academic staff, one from the learning context and one from learning process itself.

1. Taking Responsibility and Ownership on Students' Own Learning

This first challenge refers to our students, as their independence in learning process is higher now than ever before, due to ubiquitous distribution of knowledge and instant access mechanisms to knowledge.

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