

Chapter 6.2

Blending Virtual Campuses Managing Differences Through Web 2.0 Experiences in Transnational Cooperation Projects

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the increasingly widespread need to develop effective teaching in complex transnational settings, this chapter presents an innovative blended model with Web 2.0 collaborative learning strategies built in. The model balances pedagogical, technical and content related issues into an ad hoc institutionally designed 60 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) curriculum of the European Masters in Comparative Urban Studies (E-Urbs). The chapter aims at disentangling the different dimensions involved in the curriculum delivery, highlighting the pros and cons of all

dimensions of the model adopted. In doing so the chapter is divided into three sections. The first section addresses the challenges that effective teaching in complex transnational settings has to face, in particular it highlights the crucial need of managing differences. In the E-Urbs project we had 24 students from 14 countries, 5 continents, 6 disciplinary backgrounds, 32 scholars from 9 partner institutions in 8 countries. The second section deals with the way in which challenges and differences have been addressed and describes the dimensions of the blended model the authors adopted, arguing that a sound virtual campus arrangement should address the pedagogical, technical and content related dimensions in a balanced way considering the institutional set-

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ting within which they are embedded. The third section addresses the way in which the blended approach has been enriched through a Web 2.0 perspective, promoting p2p (peer-to-peer) collaboration in the generation of knowledge. The main argument is that an increasingly fluid society generates and treats information differently and learning agencies should not only acknowledge these differences but should address them with balanced learning models which take advantage of the new 2.0 paradigms. The authors argue that the result of a balanced blended Web 2.0 approach helps to transform the challenges into a resource for each of the stakeholders involved (e.g., students, scholars, partners, institutions) providing an added value in each dimension of the learning process (pedagogical, technical, content related and institutional).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter proposes an innovative blended model in which Web 2.0 collaborative learning strategies have been coupled with a blended approach in order to cope with the difficulties normally faced by online courses such as declining attention over time and the potentially increasing social distance among participants. The model has been developed and implemented during the first year of E-Urbs, a European Master in Comparative Urban Studies¹, funded within the virtual campus stream².

The distinctiveness of the model is to provide a balanced system in which different aspects are calibrated in order to provide a 2.0 blended learning environment, based on a very strong tutoring activity. Pedagogical, technical and content related issues have been balanced to construct and sustain an *ad hoc* institutionally designed 60 ECTS curriculum. In the chapter, each dimension has been separately analysed, highlighting the potential problems arising from an “unbalanced” distribution of weights and priorities.

THE CHALLENGE OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN TRANSNATIONAL SETTINGS

During the last decade, E-Learning in its various facets has considerably grown (Fletcher, 2004; Waterfield, 2002). Industry, universities and professional schools have experienced the advantages and difficulties derived from this kind of learning arrangement. Some argue that this expansion of E-Learning models is due to the reduction in costs and infrastructure (Munro & Munro, 2004) in particular when compared to traditional face-to-face (f2f) arrangements. Others relate it to the possibilities that the new technology, including Web 2.0 and learning-object style of learning, gives to didactic innovation.

Universities are among the institutions that have used and experienced the most different E-Learning models, exploiting the benefits that virtual arrangements have on campus life (Bacsich, 2004). Increasingly, technology based solutions, including E-Learning and Web 2.0, are considered an answer to the Bologna process³ and the Europeanisation of higher education systems. The latter ask for new means by which students can experience innovative ways of studying and learning together in a truly European learning community. The European Commission considers this – according to the resolution of the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000 – as a necessary step in order to foster growth and competitiveness in a knowledge-based society (Kok, 2004).

The “virtual campus” becomes, therefore, a new organisational solution for enriching the transnational offer of universities where, thanks to the use of a LMS (learning management system), learning activities are completed either partially or completely online, with the distant/online assistance of the professor and tutors. Different from other kind of arrangements, the virtuality of these campuses facilitates the creation and development of distant learning communities and research programmes. Thanks to technology,

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