E-learning at the polish university in the opinion of students

Justyna Truskolaska\textsuperscript{a}, Magdalena Łuka\textsuperscript{b}, Nasturcja Toruj\textsuperscript{c}, Katarzyna Wrona\textsuperscript{d}, Patrycja Smagowska\textsuperscript{e}

\textsuperscript{a,b}The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, The Off-Campus Faculty of Social Sciences, Ofiar Katynia 6a, 37-450 Stalowa Wola, Poland
\textsuperscript{c,d,e}The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, The Faculty of Social Sciences, Al. Rakowieckie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland

Abstract

E-learning is a tool that appears on the Polish universities. Whether it is a form appropriate for all students? How to efficiently build e-learning course? The experiment made on a group of 20 participants of an on-line course answers these questions. The study consisted of two questionnaires which contain mostly open questions. The conclusion is that the students have positive attitude towards on-line courses. Their worries are mostly related to technical problems and their expectations are diverse. After on-line course the students' expectations were fulfilled and their concerns in the vast majority were not confirmed. In the opinion of students, teaching on-line is an attractive alternative to the traditional way of education.

1. E-learning and blended learning

“The term e-learning includes all processes related to teaching and learning in the environment and through modern information technologies, especially the Internet. E-learning is an interactive process of educating, which through the available technical means enables to realize the specific relationship between the lecturer (tutor) and student, and between students in the group” (Szawlowska, 2013). The process of teaching - learning can be carried out only through the Internet which can be done by using various types of educational platforms or it can be combined with teaching in a traditional classroom or hall of the university. In the last case we are dealing with the so-called blended learning or combined teaching which is also known as mixed.

It can be discussed whether e-learning and blended learning are methods, forms or means of teaching. The computer itself and the program as a material object could be treated as a mean of teaching. By remote teaching we

* Corresponding author. Tel.: \(+48 660 799 593\); fax: \(+48 15 842 49 51\).
\textit{E-mail address:} justyna.truskolaska@kul.pl
can use both verbal methods – objective, simulative or even problematic (Kupisiewicz, 2012), therefore, it seems that from the point of view of the theory of teaching, e-learning is much broader than teaching method – it can, in fact, use a broad spectrum of methods. So maybe e-learning can be understood as a form of education next to the traditional form of class-lesson or next to such forms as stationary and correspondence (Okoń, 2004). Taking into consideration the criterion of the number of participants of the learning process, e-learning includes both individual, group and collective work.

The characteristic feature of e-learning is to conduct educational process in a complete or partial separation from the physical framework of the existing school class. This form of learning can be carried out for individual users or dispersed group, where members do not have “face to face” contact with each other as it is in a traditional school or academic teaching. The very characteristic thing in e-learning is also a constant use of modern information technologies and technical means.

2. E-learning – recipients, subject area and tools

Nowadays in Poland, e-learning is used in the educational process at universities (e.g. Catholic University of Lublin), in selected schools (e.g. private Catholic High School and Junior High School. Fr. Casimir Gostyński in Lublin), it is also used for trainings in companies that are completely not related to education. It becomes popular among courses to acquire new skills, such as interpersonal linguistic ones. A very interesting thing is that e-learning is used to train educationalists (by Polish Dyslexia Association), to train teachers (by the Polonia Centre for Teacher Training) or to train correctional services (Kalaman, 2012; Kalman & Strzelec 2013).

In fact, every theoretical knowledge may be conveyed through e-learning and in conjunction with stationary meetings also the practical knowledge may be conveyed. The most important, however, are tools used for this purpose. The basic ones are articles, tests, quizzes, and placed links to external sources (such as books and magazines), but they can also be audio recordings, videos, puzzles, games, crosswords, discussions on forums, chat rooms or popular presentations or blogs. Recently very popular are so-called skills pills – pills of knowledge (Dżega, 2013). It all depends on the creativity and skills of the teacher.

3. Technical aspect of e-learning at the university

An academic teacher that wants to participate in e-learning must be open to new possibilities. This is the first and essential step, because this way of teaching is significantly different from the standard. First of all, it is precisely structured. The work on the preparation of the course in the subject begins even a year before the actual start of it. The aim is to determine the issues, scope of knowledge, literature and forms of knowledge to transfer. Currently it requires a lot of effort and commitment of the teacher. This course must be carefully worked out, teach what it is supposed to teach so cover all that is in the description of the object (Oziewicz, 2013). Such developed material can be used in the following years.

Naturally, the work of the teacher goes further than the preparation of materials and the course itself. Tutor is an authority, master and guide for his students. Not only verifies and evaluates their assignments, not only transmits the knowledge, but also takes an active part in discussions on forums, answers questions, assesses the activity and inspires you to work. In this form, with insight into each individual student's statement, in his or her every work done and the exact time spent on the platform, the teacher has the ability to individualize the work and perceive the educational needs of each student. Individual tutoring conducted by the lecturer is not nearly as laborious as it might seem. In fact - according to Oziewicz – it takes about four to five hours a day, and the work can be done from any place that has an access to the Internet (Oziewicz, 2013).

Eventually, what you should pay attention to is the relationship between the teacher and the university. The university itself must establish a general rule of using e-learning and compensating employees, as the leading way of working is very different than stationary teaching. But you cannot avoid introducing this method, and the sooner it happens the better, as the current society lives in the digital era (Oziewicz 2013).
4. Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

Undoubtedly, the advantage of e-learning is the ability to manage an individual learning process. It reduces the cost of travels and accommodation of people studying outside their place of residence, as well as the cost of educational materials. It also saves time – no complex organizational activities (getting to a place, checking attendance, planned and unplanned interruptions, etc.). E-learning also allows you to work at any time – for one it will be late in the evening, and for another weekend classes. The participation in the classes can be suited to an individual plan of the day, week and personal activities. One distinct advantage for conducting the course is the possibility of re-use of the once prepared resources. Multiple repetition of the same material, which for many people can be tedious, does not occur in the case of distance education. We provide them during the next edition of the same subject, but always with the possibility to change them for the next group. While deciding to teach in the form of e-learning, the lecturer actually devotes his time to students in a more valuable way because it is based on individual contact, discussions, transmission of additional knowledge and dispelling doubts. He also inspires them to work (even in groups) and develops their interest in a particular field of knowledge (Oziewicz, 2013). The attractiveness of the course, and thus enabling to assimilate the material depends on the creativity of the teacher. In a way, this undermines the objection about the impossibility of the impact of own personality – it is possible but implemented in a different way.

The form of the online classes allows you to transmit and acquire knowledge in a different way than it has been done so far. It is also reliable but collected interactively and systematically, what results from the experiences and opinions reported by students. This method of teaching additionally allows to use opportunities and resources of the Internet. Above all, however, it retains the authority of the teacher, while getting rid of anonymity that is typical for crowd of students and a rigid hierarchy between the lecturer and the student that often impedes the contact and the opportunity to deepen the knowledge acquired by the student-master relationship (Oziewicz, 2013).

This form of learning allows for an easy way of making new friends with people who are physically distant but may be close in terms of interests, problems and experiences. It favors to develop social contacts for people who are shy, taciturn or closed. Also, the contact with professionals is facilitated - in chat or forum we can talk with authorities in the field with whom we would not have a contact in real life or this contact would be very difficult. E-learning helps us to access the exciting online content such as lectures, films, presentations, articles that have been recommended to us by a professional and in an orderly manner put into the program of the course. Among other advantages of e-learning are also listed such things as high efficiency of acquiring knowledge and the attractiveness of the technical environment, especially for young people (Szałowski, 2013).

However, this advantage for some people becomes a drawback – especially for the older participants, the opacity of the designed tooled forces the necessity of learning new technical issues, operating a learning platform, program, etc. The disadvantage is also the lack of direct contact with the group and teacher, “face to face” relationship. This minus is especially important from the point of view of the students of the social sciences, where it is important not only to acquire knowledge but also social skills, such as communication skills, the ability to “play with a personality”, or create the right atmosphere in the direct professional contact – this is a serious dilemma while studying pedagogy and psychology and using e-learning platform. The big drawback is the lack of social and professional experiences appearing directly in the group. These are especially the experiences that are acquired during the workshops, some of the exercises and seminars. For the student of the social sciences, it is important not only to read the materials, listen to the lecture, but also to participate in the observation and to experience actively certain educational or teaching situation as well as to acquire skills in action (e.g. skills of teaching groups of children, young people or the elderly).

It should be added that the e-learning training requires more discipline from the student, because of the lack of daily activities taking place in the physical space of the university, during which the teacher stimulates the students to learn, for example checks for the presence, tests, encourages on the basis of his or her example, pulls to the scientific activities (conferences, research groups, research projects).

E-learning can be regarded as a particularly good form for young people which is especially irreplaceable while teaching territorially dispersed group that would have difficulty in meeting in one place. It is also a great form of education for people with some experience that do not need so much training of practical skills.
5. Methodology of the research

The primary objective of the study was to find the factors determining the effectiveness of e-learning courses and learning expectations and concerns of students before the concept of classes in the form of e-learning. The practical aim of the research was to improve the quality of education with the help of this form of teaching.

The study involved 20 students of the fourth year of pedagogy (not full-time) conducted in the form of e-learning. The overwhelming majority were women, which follows from the general structure of students choosing this field of study. Fourteen people of the respondents (70%) had never attended classes conducted in the form of e-learning.

The study was conducted anonymously over the Internet and consisted of two polls, mainly with open questions. The first of these was completed by the students before the beginning of the course and was designed to assess their attitudes to this form of learning and to get to know their opinions, concerns and expectations of the participants related to e-learning lessons. After completing a semester course participants were asked again to complete a survey in which they were asked the questions regarding their satisfaction with the course, the difficulties encountered during the course, the realization of their expectations of the course and the suitability of the materials provided by the teacher. Participation in the survey was not mandatory, nor taken into account in assessing. The only form of motivation was to ensure their students that the answers will be taken into account when constructing the schedule for the next semester.

Due to the fact that the participants were asked about various features of the classes, it is necessary to carry out a brief description of the course to understanding the context of their responses. During the course students get the materials available in various forms - written, graphic, audiovisual, and in the form of plays. The teacher regularly provided a new content for the participants of which assimilation he checked through a short test including 4 to 5 questions that could be answered several times. In addition, the activity was also scored on the basis of the forum, where participants could take part in discussions initiated by the teacher. There were also the tasks that regularly appeared and included for example watching a film about the teaching experiment, describing presented in study dependent and independent variables. Finally, the level of knowledge was tested in the form of a stationary oral exam.

6. Results of the research

Because of the breadth of the respondents’ answers, the results were divided into three thematic blocks: the opinions of the participants about the course in the form of e-learning before staring the course, the preferred forms of the available materials, the elements of the course, which in the opinion of the respondents contributed to the efficiency and comfort of learning.

6.1. The opinion of the participants about the classes in the form of e-learning

In the evaluation of the answers of these examined people, the use of e-learning allows people who work, live abroad, have a family, or come from a small village, near which there is no college education to study. In addition, the respondents decided on this form of education because of the opportunity to study in any hours (50%), low education costs (30%), and the comfort of learning at home (40%). These aspects the participants described as the advantages of part-time of e-learning studies. In contrast, the most frequently mentioned by them drawback of this form of education was the lack of direct contact with the teacher and other participants (55%).

Then discussing the expectations of the respondents, it was found that in most cases they concerned materials posted on the platform, they hoped that they would be understood, available, and transmitted in various forms - text, audio, video, links to websites, in an interesting and transparent way (55% of respondents). In addition, they expected that this form of education would enable them to acquire the knowledge and skills closely related to the
level gained at the full-time studies (10%). Most fears of the participants before taking the course focused on potential technical failures and fears associated with personal competences while using computers and e-learning platform (45%), a significant proportion of people also feared of the fact that the materials would be incomprehensible (30%).

6.2. Preferred form of the materials and tasks available

The most preferred forms are such materials as articles (50%), lectures in the audio form (15%), tests (25%) and illustrations and links to websites (10%).

6.3. Elements of the course that in the opinion of the people examined influenced the effectiveness and comfort of educating the most

The respondents were mostly satisfied with the way the message was sent, which they assessed as a clear, precise and understandable (60%). In addition, participants pointed here to such items as the possibility of contacting with the teacher (25%), conducting tests and giving them the tasks (20%). They also appreciated the regularity of the information provided and the opportunity to participate in forum discussions.

7. Conclusion

Analyzing the information obtained in the study it is concluded that e-learning is a good alternative way of working for people living abroad or having a family. Students expect from their classes that the information given will be clear and that the level of education will not differ from the full-time studies. The results clearly indicate that the e-learning courses can be conducted in an interesting and understandable way and that the level of assimilation of knowledge can be regularly checked by short online tests which is the additional motivation to participants to learn.

Studies allow to emerge a number of elements which determine the efficiency constructing e-learning courses, these are:

- the commitment and competence of the person offering the course because it depends on it if he can arouse the interest of the participants,
- the use of different forms of learning such as the providing the materials, initiating a discussion on the forum, creating tests and reference works,
- the richness of shared materials, including the bigger number of the written materials,
- the regularity of the shared content,
- openness of the teacher to a contact with course participants,
- the competences of the participants in the use of computers and e-learning platform, the university should offer voluntary course in this regard.

The studies show that, as well as the traditional forms of teaching and learning such, e-learning to the greatest extent depends on the competence of the teacher's, his ability to transfer his knowledge, commitment and innovation. If the person conducting the course has the appropriate skills and is sufficiently motivated to transfer knowledge in a clear way, the level of the education through the Internet does not have to different from the traditional education, but can provide an important alternative for people who for various reasons choose it.

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