

The Impact of New Forms of Learning in the Educational Process. The Development of Key Competencies in Sociology

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Abstract

The current educational system disclaims the idea of existence an absolute and universally learning model by supporting a flexible, adaptable, and effective methodology. The accelerated pace of life and the new vision about learning have opened many ways to diversify and to improve the educational actions. This paper aims to analyze the impact of new learning methods (e-learning and m-learning) on teaching activity and peculiarity, to identify different ways in which the new forms of learning contribute to the development of social and civic key competencies on Sociology discipline.

Keywords: *education, information, e-learning, m-learning, key skills, social studies*

1. Introduction

Today, learning using technology is a way to improve human capital. Education is one of the priority areas where technology can produce major changes. For this constantly changing social environment, new forms of education represent efficient means of satisfying the

educational needs of all stakeholders involved in the didactic activity.

The accelerated globalization of the education system has opened new perspectives for teaching practice. Thus, teaching activity was completed with modern methods of teaching, learning and assessment. This approach is able to facilitate the development of

key competencies, which are necessary for a successful integration of graduates in the social and professional life.

Initially used as a generic term related to the development of an electronic environment for providing flexible education, e-learning has become more than just an experiment. Scientific researches and experimental projects have shown that the use of e-learning and the new opportunities offered by using m-learning contribute to a significant improvement of the educational process.

2. The importance of using new forms of learning in the educational system

Education can be defined as the process of knowledge and skills acquisition. It involves three basic forms of interaction: student-student, student-teacher, student-content information.

Traditional methods used in the educational process tend to overlook the diversity of students in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies (Alshammar, Ananias and Hendley, 2014, 1).

The emergence of technology has produced major changes in the quality and form of teaching. According to a report by the International Commission on Education of the XXI century (Delors, 1996) "teachers and schools have largely lost leadership positions in educational formation of children. They are forced to face a new challenge: to make schools more attractive to children." (Botnariuc, 2009, pp. 24-25).

2.1 E-learning and M-learning – A short theoretical perspective

The new forms of education broadly termed *Adaptive E-learning Systems* (AESs) are increasingly present in the Romanian educational system. The need for a flexible and efficient education - adapted to the needs of all those involved- has generated numerous concerns about the use of new means and forms of teaching. (Diaconu, 2011, p.1).

A possible definition of e-learning is the interaction of the educational process and information technology, covering a wide range of activities, from computer-assisted education to an entirely online education (Brut, 2006, p.

120) . Most of e-learning systems require the presence of PCs using fixed-line Internet access. Due to the existence of broadband wireless channels such as GPRS (General Packet Radio Service), 3G and 4G infrastructure and WLAN (Wireless Local Area Network), e-learning systems can certainly be transformed into m-learning (Stan, 2010, p. 121).

Various e-learning platforms have been so far developed in Romania: AEL e-learning platform (Advanced eLearning) developed by SIVICO Romania, e-LearnTS Environment developed by Timsoft, SoftExpert, a platform developed by Comsys, etc. (Florea, 2011, p. 35).

It is well known that in the secondary education system, one of the best educational platforms is the EDU Moodle Romania Network. Over 14,500 users have registered on the network and over 650 courses have been elaborated in the Moodle format. By now, the EDU Moodle Romania Network has over 350 affiliated schools from the state or private education system. Besides courses for many school disciplines or training courses for national exams, there is a wide range of activities:

projects between schools, online conferences, contests, a magazine, a theater festival and also training courses in various fields of interest, aimed at teachers. (Avramescu, 2014).

With regard to educational software, this is the e-learning reference product, being a booming field and causing mutations in the training activity. One of the most valuable contributions of the e-learning platforms is related to the democratization of the education system (SIVICO, 2004).

Making the transition to *Mobile Learning* (M-Learning), this is a relatively new concept in the vast field of education. M-learning involves the use of mobile and portable devices (mobile phones, PDAs, digital audio players, digital cameras, recorders, pen scanners, etc.) in order to facilitate learning. This new form of education aims to streamline time and resources available to people. (Chicioreanu, 2007, p. 3-4).

According to the same author, Mobile learning must be seen as a complementary form of learning that manages to diversify conventional lessons, to give the

student flexibility, to encourage individual work and collaborative relationships. Lately, M-learning has become quite popular as it encourages the development of a personalized learning process, providing students opportunities to access information from anywhere, at any time ("anyone-anytime-anywhere-anything" (Chicioreanu, 2008, p.61).

Compared to e-learning, where the user depends on a computer and an internet connection, m-learning gives the student that feeling of "attendance", when because of real and compelling reasons he is not present during course hours. Thus, in addition to simple text or image options, m-learning is a modern way of communication on the universal scale (Stan, 2008, p. 121).

2.2 Advantages and disadvantages of using the new forms of education in teaching activity

Currently, the problem of developing educational key competencies is regarded by many specialists as a task of great importance, but exceptionally difficult. In the context of information explosion, acquiring knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for the further social and

professional life of the student, is not enough if these do not focus on the harmonious development of the individual in all aspects of life (Botnariuc, 2009, p. 20).

Relating to the postmodern values, traditional teaching in secondary education, based excessively on theory and memorizing, prove to be outdated and inefficient. According to Edgar Faure, the traditional academic model fails by giving a privileged role to the conventional expression, written and repetitive to the detriment of spontaneity and creative research by isolating the humanist domain from the scientific one, by separating the general education from the technical education, by showing a preference for abstraction at the expense of practical activities (Botnariuc, 2009, p. 25).

Among the advantages of using e-learning methods are included: increasing the quality and complexity of educational products; stimulating the learning ability adaptable to the fast changing social conditions, developing scientific research skills; stimulating the imagination and logical thinking; promotion of independent work style;

strengthening students' motivation in learning; improving participation in classes, interaction with peers and teachers (Mărgean, 2012).

One of the most valuable contributions provided by e-learning methods is the one related to the democratization of the education system. Students become creators of lessons and are transformed into active participants in the learning process. Also, AESs learning methods ensure the students preparation for a society based on the concept of lifelong learning, determines a positive attitude of students towards educational disciplines, towards cultural and social values of society. These values are essential in the effort to democratize the system education (Constantin, 2006, p. 298).

Moreover, experts believe that e-learning fully meets the requirements of the labor market and the modern society, helping to create more economic and social opportunities (Mărgean, 2012). The utility of using e-learning methods in the educational process can not be contested. However, the risks involved by these modern forms of education are numerous:

the uncertainty of information access, dependence caused by their excessive use, suppression of imagination and creativity, adoption of a passive learning style etc.

The introduction of the Internet and modern technologies in schools have produced significant changes in the education process. Excessive individualization of the learning act has the effect of amplifying the lack of dialogue between teacher and student and maintains a decreased level of mental activity of students due to the controlled manner of the educational process.

In addition, although these forms of education are becoming more common in teaching activity, teachers still maintain a hostile and rigid attitude on it. Lack of awareness and openness to the new forms of teaching and especially, shortage of teachers trained in the use of these educational softwares contribute to the manifestation of a reluctant attitude among actors involved in teaching.

According to several studies regarding the impact of technology in the educational process, using

PCs should not exceed 50% of the content of school disciplines. In a study on the quality of education, achieved in advanced OECD countries, is mentioned another element of caution, as follows: digital materials are useful only when they relate directly to curricular contents (Trucano, 2005). The same report states that importing learning materials from other countries should be avoided. (Bagnis, 2008 cited in Istrate, 2010, p. 62).

Increased learning performance is the effect of a number of factors over which we must intervene in a uniform and constant manner. However, the key to success in the effort to increase participation, motivation and school performance is related to harmonizing interventions at the level of teaching methods, curriculum and teacher training (Istrate, 2006, p. 65).

According to prof. Mircea Miclea, with the emergence of the Internet and other digital media, the school is a social institution that faces not only the greatest opportunities, but also "the greatest threats in its history. The school has definitively lost the monopoly on learning and, unfortunately, its

social prestige. (...) School is no longer a taboo which must be unconditionally venerated." (Velicu, 2008, p. 479). It remains to be seen whether the balance is in favor or against the use of these new forms of education, but comparing with educational alternatives offered in other countries, we can state that we are still in an era of pioneering.

3. The impact of new forms of learning on developing key competencies in Sociology

Sociology is the rigorous and methodical study of society that investigates the structure of groups, organizations and how people interact in various contexts. According to Anthony Giddens (2013), sociology is a dazzling and compelling enterprise, having as its subject matter our own behaviour as human beings. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of global social processes.

Social and humanistic disciplines belong to the *Man and Society* curriculum area. They are present in the educational framework plan beginning with 3rd and 4th grade,

through the discipline *Civic Education*; the study of social and humanistic disciplines is resumed in 7th and 8th grade, through the discipline *Civic Culture* and continues throughout the high school years (The curriculum model for social and humanistic disciplines, p. 1).

The aim of social and humanistic disciplines is to harness their interdisciplinary and integrative potential, shaping students a comprehensive representation about themselves, about others and about society. Social and humanistic disciplines also aim to prepare students as future informed citizens, able to take social action and to assume responsibilities in a society founded on the principles of democracy.

3.1 Overall perspectives on key competencies in social disciplines

Among the aims of studying social and human disciplines in secondary school, there are included:

- participation in economic and social life, according to the rights and responsibilities that students have as citizens and members of various communities;

- developing the capacity to reflect on the economic, social, cultural and political realities, based on learning acquisition;
- developing the entrepreneurship and a proactive attitude in order to display initiative in personal and professional life;
- developing some functional skills such as: efficient communication, critical thinking, negotiation, conflict reconciliation, decision making;
- developing positive attitudes towards themselves and towards others, based on the principles of tolerance, responsibility, etc. (The General Framework of the Curricular Model for Social and Human Disciplines, pp. 1-2).

Key competencies are learning acquisitions that facilitates a flexible and rapid insertion of graduates on labor market. It is a multifunctional and transferable package of knowledge, skills and attitudes that all individuals need for personal development and social inclusion. These should be developed at the end of compulsory education and should act as a foundation for a *lifelong learning* (Orza, 2011).

A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves

the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context (OECD, 2005, p. 4).

Developing social skills related to the humanistic disciplines involves acquiring knowledge which concerns: learning behavioral codes accepted in different societies and environments; comprehension of basic concepts such as: equality, justice, freedom, non-discrimination. Also, the social skills concern: the ability to communicate in different environments; articulation and understanding of different points of view; negotiation and the ability to create a climate of confidence. Furthermore, social attitudes are based on: collaboration, assertiveness, interest to intercultural communication, openness to overcome prejudices and to adopt a compromise attitude (Orza, 2011, p. 4).

Regarding civic competencies, these contain sets of knowledge related to: concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights; awareness of the aims and values of social and political movements; knowledge about EU

values and objectives; awareness of diversity and cultural identities. Moreover, civic skills refer to the involvement of citizens in public area, in order to find solutions to problems affecting the community.

Civic attitudes take into consideration the respect for human rights including: equality as a basis for democracy; consciousness and acceptance of differences between various value systems of religious and ethnic groups; openness to the others values and privacy life; sense of responsibility, expression of respect for common values necessary for social cohesion; involvement in civic activities; support for diversity and sustainable development (Orza, 2011, pp. 4-5).

3.2 The development of key competencies in Sociology by using the new forms of learning

In accordance with the curricular model for the social and human disciplines, sociology has as fundamental objectives: a) training students in their system of values by reporting on social values b) ensuring the premises for an active and responsible insertion in social life by understanding the

organization and functioning of society as well as the internalization of democratic values (The curriculum for social and human disciplines, p. 3).

The Sociology curriculum aims to encourage teaching creativity and to adapt the didactic approaches to the particularities of students. Teachers have their own vision of how to put into practice learning activities. The curriculum proposals have a flexible character which justifies the need for a balance between different approaches and solutions adopted by teachers (Curriculum for Upper Secondary Education: Sociology XI grade, p. 3).

Civic competences are based on the concepts of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights in accordance with how they are expressed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and international declarations. Skills contained within this competence are related to effective public engagement, solidarity and interest in solving problems affecting the local or national community (Gabriel, 2009, p. 48).

In connection with the informative dimension, one of the Sociology

purposes consists in acquiring knowledge about society and social life. By studying sociology, students develop a critical awareness and understanding of social issues in both local and global contexts (NZQA, p.1).

In this direction, it is necessary to achieve specific competencies like identifying methods, techniques necessary for sociological investigation. Individual documentation through specialized digital platforms, but particularly, the use of some software programs helps students to design sociological research tools such as questionnaires, surveys, focus groups. This facilitates the acquisition of several practical skills necessary for a valid sociological investigation.

By its nature, sociology requires a strict monitoring data and a valid interpretation. This is precisely why, the student need for learning through digital media is fundamental. Moreover, doing homework, in a digital format, facilitates the teaching activities of coordination and evaluation and delivers an efficient feed-back, but also facilitate the individual work of students.

Within this discipline, the students acquire and consolidate knowledge about the role of socialization agents such as: family, mass-media, educational institutions, social groups etc.

A purely theoretical approach, devoid of an interactive character, generates students' lack of interest, creativity and involvement in school activities. The e-learning and m-learning methods support the teacher in carrying out activities to mobilize students. For instance, in the effort to achieve a presentation, it can be used pictures, audio-visual records, etc. Also, students can organize digital exhibitions on various social, cultural topics etc. In this way, new forms of education stimulate students' creativity, originality and interest for school and extra-curricular activities.

E-learning methods encourage an integrated approach (cross-curricular). A good example is represented by eTwinning projects that "provide additional opportunities for a better understanding of community life" (Birzea quoted in Orzea, 2011). Thus, through modern technologies, educational activities acquire an interactive and dynamic

character, ensuring safety and autonomy to students in order to accomplish different tasks.

Sociology as a school discipline aims to educate future citizen of the country. For this reason, the approached themes intend to encourage an autonomous, creative and innovative student personality. One of the key competencies related to this discipline consist in the student familiarization with the basic concepts of this field, but it is also the expression of an active and responsible social behavior, adequate for a changing world.

In this direction, in accordance with the settled themes, establishing partnerships with media institutions, with several NGOs or associations are non-formal activities which favor the growth of teaching acts efficiency. Real understanding of issues connected to the local community - such as local health system, insertion in the labor market, delinquency, poverty, public space cleanliness etc. - requires access to e-learning forms of learning. For example, it can be organized video conferences with local/regional actors, responsible on various areas of interest (Eşi, 2000). Also,

it can be started online campaign in order to bring to the fore the problems that micro-communities face.

One of the biggest opportunities offered by AES forms of learning is the online mobilization of students in different social, cultural actions. These activities can be put into practice through digital platforms, online forums and discussion groups. In this way are encouraged civic activism and responsibility of taking actions with a great social impact among students.

An e-learning educational project which focuses on the development of civic competencies is *Student Voice Romania*. The project developed by *British Council Romania* proposes new learning tools, which can be used both in formal and non-formal education. Through new technologies, especially the Internet, the project encourages participative learning and involvement of students in decision making actions. (Eși, 2010)

Furthermore, there are several educational platforms that promote the development of social and civic competencies, set out in the

social and human sciences curriculum. One of the most used and accessed is Moodle e-learning platform. At the upper-secondary school level it focuses mainly on organizing and coordinating school competitions. The platform benefits from numerous resources useful to carry out teaching activities, especially in the evaluation activity and can successfully contribute to the implementation of demonstrations for school competitions. In addition, by organizing various exchanges and thematic partnerships between schools from different countries, it is absolutely necessary to cultivate civic values such as: community affiliation sense, respect for cultural, ethnic, religious diversity, etc. (Avramescu, 2015).

Another particular competence consists in assessing anti-social behavior like: corruption, criminality, etc. by reporting them to desirable values. Firstly, to achieve this competence is necessary to understand the depth of the anti-social behavior through a cause-effect overview. The traditional approach of the thematic contents doesn't favor activation of the student social behavior. By this way, the student becomes a passive actor in the

educational activity. In this direction, e-learning teaching methods support teachers and students activities. Through the digital presentation of some documentaries, thematic films or social surveys, the student becomes an active participant in class, by stimulating his interest and attention.

To increase the efficiency of teaching activity, it is required to furnish classrooms with technical devices such as: computers, video projector etc. Transferring a certain amount of information becomes easily perceived by students when the teacher confers a visual dimension to a specific theme. For example, watching documentaries, media reports, humanitarian campaigns on issues such as domestic violence, global insecurity or ethnic discrimination facilitate the way to achieve a fruitful school debate. In this way, personal initiative and freedom of opinion are encouraged. (Eşi, 2010, 27-38).

It is noteworthy that the new technologies used in the educational process has considerably increased the ability of teenagers to express themselves in public, to reflect and think

critically, to adopt efficient methods to negotiate and resolve various problems. Sociology is interested in new or altered forms of sociality that are associated with the internet, such as the ways social networking media greatly expands the ways in which people can relate and interact with each other and respond to information (NZQA, p.8). Moreover, the Internet, as a means of learning, has great potential in stimulating social participation, giving students the opportunity to interact directly with public institutions and political actors or with other members of different communities. Eşi, 2011, 72-83). Consequently, students learn in an efficient way about how to interact with other people, to expose problems in a different extra-school environment, to join a group and advocate for various social problems. Without hesitation, we can admit that e-learning methods facilitate and increase the interaction between local institutions and students as future responsible citizens of the community (Beciu, 2003, p. 7; Eşi, 2010, 140-146).

4. Conclusions

As it results from this integral approach, new forms of teaching

(e-learning and m-learning) improve the quality of education, both on competitiveness and performance dimensions.

The success of achieving the finalities and key competencies is the result of many factors over which we must intervene constantly and consistently. It is imperative to harmonize interventions in the didactic methods, school programs and teacher training.

While the issue of educational system quality remains the subject of numerous scientific researches, the new educational techniques continue their way towards the achievement of a genuine educational revolution.

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