EQUALIZING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES BY ICT

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ABSTRACT

The Open University of Catalonia (UOC) is a pioneer university in the use of technology for online learning. The virtual teaching system enables to acquire professionalizing competences and facilitates the practitioners the update of knowledge in an optimum way. That is possible, on one hand, thanks to the resources for theoretical and practical knowledge that give technical communication tools. And, on the other hand, because of the flexibility that an asynchronous learning model entails. This allows a way of learning far away from classical teaching.

KEYWORDS

Internet, higher education, e-learning, practitioner teaching

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the environment of higher education is evolving and educational institutions are implementing more and more frequently in higher education the e-learning. This fact is creating new and exciting opportunities for both educational institutions and students. Initially introduced to allow individuals in remote and rural areas to gain access to higher education, distance learning has evolved significantly over time. As time goes by, more and more people gain access to the Internet, the cost of computer ownership decreases, and these trends provide educational institutions an ideal way for satisfy needs that traditional education it is not able to do it.

In this context, the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) is the first virtual University in Spain. It is an entirely online university and it follows the trail opened up by other virtual universities which appeared in other countries, in what is known as the third generation of distance learning.

The UOC was created by the Catalan Government in 1994, and from 1996, the School of Law began to develop the Degree Course in Law. Because the UOC is a distance learning institution, in which teaching takes place entirely through the "Virtual Campus" on the Internet, the development of teaching methods is a key part of its activities.

2. THE VIRTUAL EDUCATION. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF CATALONIA

From the very beginning, UOC University's mission was to ensure equal access to higher education and knowledge for all sectors of society using information and communications technology (ICT), making ICT an essential tool for democratising education in the knowledge society.

This university was born with a strong will to provide an adequate response to the educational needs of lifelong learning, and to make the best possible use of the great potential that the internet offers us when it comes to developing and providing education. In particular, the main distinguishing feature of the UOC, since its creation, is its educational model, which is learner-centered. This model responds to the need to provide the university with a strong identity of its own and to try to establish a methodology that can overcome the shortcomings of traditional institutions for distance learning in Spain. Moreover, the educational model also tries to suit university students' profiles, and it takes into consideration social and technological factors at the time of its creation, thus striving to guarantee non-discrimination concerning

accessibility to technology. In this respect, the students are the protagonists of the training process, by managing their own time, planning their own studying pace and building their own academic itinerary.

The pillars on which this educational model was built, based on learning activities, are flexibility of time and space, personalization, interactivity and cooperation. And the values that UOC is committed to are diversity, participation, quality, innovation, and sustainability.

The university has an online community of around 60,000 students, teachers, and collaborators, spread over more than 50 countries, making it a multicultural institution focused on an international environment.

3. ADVANTAGES OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNITCATION TECHNOLOGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The use of ICTs in higher education makes it possible to acquire knowledge at any time and place, depending on the availability of time and on students' educational needs.

Thus, the main advantages of ICTs are the following.
1. It is a way of adapting to students' needs, since it enables them to combine professional, personal and family commitments with their academic ones.
2. It is more flexible for students, who can study anywhere (at home, at work), and at any time (workday, weekend, holiday, daytime, night-time...). In other words, e-learning does away with inflexible timetables (asynchrony) and can overcome geographical obstacles.
3. It also saves travelling to the campus site, thus saving time (even administrative paperwork can be done via internet). This facilitates continuity in learning.
4. It also favours sustainability because it reduces transportation to the university, saving on energy and contamination by fossil fuels. Further, most of the documentation is stored and presented electronically and keeps from creating waste paper.
5. Thanks to all these factors, new possibilities open up for those who have little time or find it difficult to attend class, because of their job, a disability or another personal reason. Thus, there is a "democratization of higher education".
6. The learning process is not only more flexible, but also more personalised, attention is more individual, as students set their own pace for studying, according to their needs.

Education via the internet is a necessity, if we take into account current changes in our society. In its first years, on-line education was considered a poor alternative to classroom-based learning (Salmon, 2002). However, today the perception of this type of learning among the university community is increasingly positive. This is because on-line learning has proven to be an education model that brings students increasingly close to attaining the educational objectives of the knowledge society, given that the professional world has opted for the wholehearted incorporation of new technologies into its everyday activities. Furthermore, it is a model whereby methodologies and adequate educational resources that ensure quality learning are a key component.

The success of the model of virtual education can be seen, firstly, in the growing appearance of new virtual universities in a large number of countries; secondly, in the widespread use that all non-virtual universities are adding, more and more, of information and communication technologies in their training, so much so that nowadays they too offer exclusively virtual tuition as well as face-to-face and blended learning. Thirdly, because it is a model that, given its circumstances, has incorporated with great ease, the directives of the European Space for Higher Education.

Ensuring that students can navigate easily and confidently in virtual learning environments is no longer purely a tool that is very valuable for education, but is now an essential requirement of the new knowledge-based society in which it is necessary not only to have the sources of information available, but also to be in control of their increasingly complex management.

Distance education systems have always taken the profiles of their students into account more than classroom-based education systems. The explanation for this is that distance universities provided an alternative to classroom-based learning in the form of a system in which efforts were made to personalise the learning process as much as possible.

4. THE UOC'S LEARNING MODEL/EXAMPLE OF THE MASTER IN LAWYERING

The Master in Lawyering is in Spain a mandatory Master after the Law Degree, from 2012. It has a very clear aim: to prepare students to the future legal practice as Lawyers. This Master, according with the Spanish normative, has to be integrated by a training course of 60 ECTS and a practice course of 30 ECTS.

The virtual teaching system enables students to acquire legal professional competences and facilitates update of knowledge to legal practitioners. In fact, a lot of ours students are not only Law graduates but legal practitioners that want to update or to acquire legal competences.

Our 3D platform simulates a lawyer office, as you can see in the following picture.
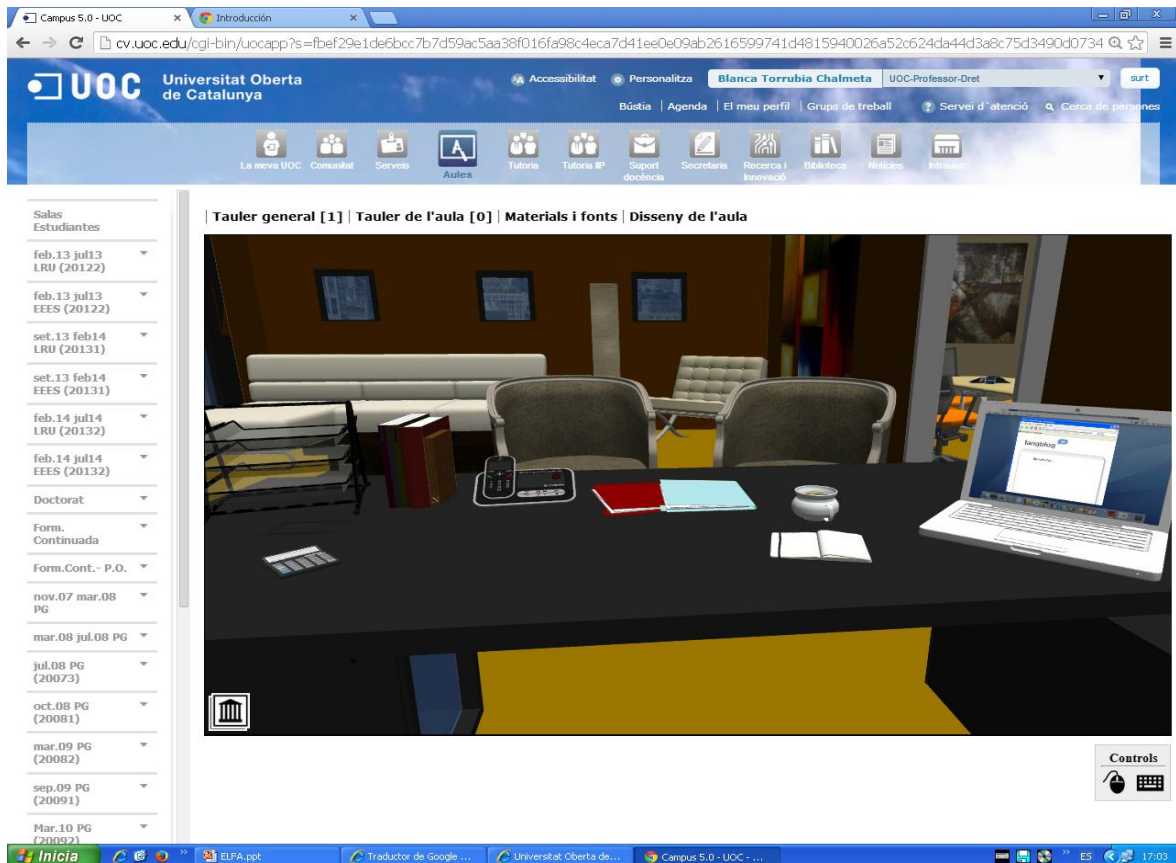

Figure 1

The study system is based on the continuous assessment activities (CAA) and a work plan that includes delivery dates and solution and correction dates. The Lawyer leaves notes to students and the notes refer to each new case, advices, questions etc.

Simply by clicking on a note, the students can read its contents. For example, a note can tell the students that they have "a new client": a man convicted of domestic violence. So the Lawyer asks the students to start working on the appeal against the sentence, as there is not conclusive evidence.

To work with the case the students will find all the documents relating to it. In the same example, the Lawyer can give the students the Preliminary Ruling in the criminal proceeding and the Forensic Medical Report….

To prepare the work, the students can ask the Lawyer whatever doubt they may have. Just by clicking on the telephone, they can write and send him an e-mail.

The forum is the space where students interact with their classroom's colleagues and the Lawyer. Clicking on the cup of tea the forum appears.

And they can meet with the Lawyer for a simultaneous videoconference (webbex).

To work in groups students use others synchronous and asynchronous tools too (skype, google apps, whats app etc.).

The Lawyer can direct the students to the Youtube UOC's Channel where they can find additional information related to the case, such as specific interviews, news, statements, and trials. They go to the face to face trials with the Lawyer too.

Clicking on the books, the students can access the library where they find sentences, obtain documents and books, contract forms, access databases etc.

In the library students have access to a lot of tools that aid them to solve any legal question and they can also learn to search in an optimal way

To practice oral competences we use Present@, an online tool that allows students and teachers to record their audio and video productions and to view each other's videos

When the work is done, the students click on the tray which allows the work to be sent directly to the Lawyer.

At the RAC (Continuous Assessment Register), the Lawyer registers the marks obtained by the students in all the cases. By clicking the link the student can see the Lawyer's comment to his work.

5. CONCLUSION

Today, in a world where students are becoming the focus of the model throughout the European higher education system, it is clear that ICT are an important tool to equalize educational opportunities. So, Universities should accept this fact and work in the implementation of *on line* educational models.

Our system let all kind of students to develop the same skills and acquire the same knowledge, both with a very satisfactory quality level. This is the reason why e-learning allows to equalize education opportunities and breaking down the physical, spatial and temporal barriers of traditional education.

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