Teaching European Studies Online: the Challenge of Quality Assurance

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Abstracts

English

This paper will be looking into the issue of quality assurance in online learning from the perspective of the e-learning tool developed by the Institute for European Studies in Brussels- the E-modules. The E-modules have been designed with the purpose of offering a structured and interactive way of learning how the European Union functions. As European law and policies exert an important influence in the everyday life of European citizens, the E-modules aim at providing the essential information, helping, at the same time, the users to find their way through the complexity of existing information sources. Therefore, assuring the quality of the content is an essential feature for the developers of the E-modules and, at the same time, a great challenge, taking into account, on the one hand, the complexity of social science and, on the other hand, the quick pace with witch the European Union evolves.

Romanian

Acest articol analizeaza diversele aspecte ale procesului de asigurare a calitatii in invatamantul online, luand ca studiu de caz platforma de studiu "E-modules", creata de Institutul de Studii Europene al Universitatii Libere din Bruxelles. "E-modules" au fost proiectate cu scopul de a oferi un mod bine structurat si interactiv de a invata cum functioneaza Uniunea Europeana. Deoarece legislatia UE si diversele politici europene exercita o influenta din ce in ce mai mare in viata de zi cu zi a cetatenilor europeni, "E-modules" vizeaza furnizarea informatiilor esentiale, ajutand, in acelasi timp, utilizatorii să isi gaseasca drumul prin labirintul surselor de informatii existente. Prin urmare, asigurarea calitatii continutului este un aspect esential pentru echipa care se ocupa de proiectarea "E-modules" si, in acelasi timp, si o mare provocare, tinand cont, pe de-o parte, de complexitatea stiintelor sociale si, pe de alta parte, de ritmul alert cu care Uniunea Europeana evolueaza.

Keywords

E-learning, quality assurance, social sciences

List of topics

The Context: E-learning and Social Sciences

E-learning has become in the past decade a relevant learning method, bearing in mind the globalisation of services and the aim towards improving accessibility to information for all categories of population, regardless of their location and background. The quickly developing new technologies have been used more and more often in the educational field, be it in the academic environment or in a corporate context. They brought about the advantage of de-localisation and flexibility, allowing a departure from the "classroom paradigm" and using the virtual space as a facilitator of knowledge and information exchange.

The increasing use of online learning tools for various purposes and in a multitude of domains is a phenomenon worthwhile analysing, in order to grasp the essential features of the new teaching/ studying paradigm, as well as its influence on the teacher- student and student-student interaction. At the same time, it is important to note that, while in some fields, e-learning has developed more successfully, becoming a self-standing educational method, in others it is still in an incipient phase, being used mostly in conjunction with classical face-to-face courses, as support material.

Even though e-learning methods have been continuously spreading in the last years in the academic community, they remain confined, to a certain extent, to natural sciences, with fewer examples from the area of social sciences (Budka & Mader, 2006). This evolution can be explained by the difference in nature between the two fields of science, the type of knowledge they involve as well as the specific skills necessary for specific disciplines. While, in the case of natural sciences, the information to be transferred is precise, and so are the results of practical exercises, in social sciences, the content is much more subjective, open to interpretation, thus requiring extensive reading and debate and, implicitly, a more flexible approach, including permanent interaction. Moreover, from the point of view of quality assurance, online courses in social science require tight and continuous control of the content, in order to avoid any inaccuracy and to delimitate clearly between facts and opinions in order not to mislead the user.

Nevertheless, having in mind the latest developments that aim at "digitalizing" and, thus, "democratizing" education, it is becoming increasingly important to create suitable frameworks for teaching social sciences online. This can prove to be beneficial in the broader context of "life-long learning", as the new methods would address not only students but also citizens in general and could thus contribute to the development of civic and political culture.

In this context, the idea of designing online courses in the field of European studies can be seen as an educational initiative that is not confined to students, but is aimed at any citizen who wants to understand

better how the European Union functions. Nowadays, when the EU and its policies are becoming more and more relevant for the everyday life of millions of citizens, in Europe and beyond, it is increasingly important to have access to knowledge about the functioning of the EU. Moreover, taking into account the broad and diverse audience, the knowledge must take a user-friendly shape, the information has to be clear and concise, touching upon the essential issues.

Quality Assurance in E-learning

The issue of quality assurance (QA) has increasingly become a priority for Higher Education institutions. As universities compete to attract more students, but also to attract financing through various projects, quality represents one of the main criteria for ensuring a significant share of the educational market (Abdous, 2009, p. 281). Guaranteeing quality, however, is not always an easy process, first and foremost because the very concept of "quality" is disputed and many different, contextual definitions are used. Moreover, as universities have grown beyond their function of traditional education providers, enlarging their offer to encompass a large range of services, such as online courses, consultancy and training to public and private institutions, it is interesting to observe what new QA mechanisms have been established and how the old concept of QA has been adapted to the new roles of Higher Education institutions.

QA in e-learning has a specific status within the broader QA debate, due to the nature of online-based education. Unlike traditional, face-to-face education, e-learning development involves the cooperation of people with very different backgrounds (academics, instructional designers, IT specialists); moreover, as the tasks are very strictly split, according to competencies (with some of them being usually outsourced and, therefore, not fully controlled by the university), the process tends to be of a disaggregated nature, with the risk of lacking the sense of ownership and shifting responsibilities among the various actors involved (Jara & Mellar, 2009, p. 221). This specific set of circumstances requires a very good communication system as well as a basic understanding of each specific task by each member of the team, in order to ensure a meaningful and efficient workflow.

In order to be able to design and/or assess QA mechanisms in the case of e-learning, one has to take into account the context in which online courses are being developed (Abdous, 2009, p.283). It is important, in this regard, to look into the structure of the institution responsible and the place of online education within this structure, but also to bare in mind the quick changes in learning technology as well as budgetary constrains often imposed for e-learning development.

In some cases (distance education institutions excluded), the position of online courses within the university is a "detached" one, which implies, at the same time, a large degree of autonomy and a feeling of isolation, stemming from the fact that they do not represent the mainstream activity of the institution (Jara & Mellar, 2009, p. 225). Under these circumstances, the need to set up own arrangements for QA becomes apparent, which can be both beneficial and detrimental, insofar as the specifically designed mechanisms are coherent with the greater QA framework used within the respective institution. Another structural issue is related to the allocation of tasks in the e-learning development process. While some universities prefer to outsource the technological part to IT companies and, in some cases, also hire instructional designers, leaving to the academics the sole responsibility of managing the content (much along the lines of their role in traditional education), other institutions prefer to go for a more sustainable scenario, that of keeping the course development process in-house; however, this also implies that the academic staff has to acquire the skills necessary for designing online courses, bringing about the need for training as an implicit mechanism of QA (Ireland, Correia & Griffin, 2009, p.252).

The Institute for European Studies has chosen for the E-modules an approach closer to the latter scenario: while the purely technological development is done by an outsourced IT company, pedagogical and content related issues are left entirely with the academic staff. Moreover, the Institute and its E-learning unit being an autonomous part of the Free University of Brussels, the E-modules are not submitted to any broader QA mechanisms, and therefore an own methodology has been put into place to ensure a fruitful learning experience for the students following the online modules.

Baring in mind all the aspects discussed above, QA, and specifically in the field of e-learning is a "rather a complex web of interactions and dynamics" (Abdous, 2009, p. 284). Moreover, the success of QA also depends on external conditions, sometimes difficult to control by the respective institutions. Examples of such factors are: computer literacy of both the students and the academic staff and the willingness to embrace the new technologies for the purpose of learning and teaching (Abdous, 2009, p. 290).

E-modules: The Concept and Content

After looking into the broader context of e-learning and social sciences and the specificities of QA in online education, this paper will focus on analysing the E-modules, from the point of view of the concept they are based on as well as their content. The mechanisms that the developers are using in order to assure that the quality of the modules is maintained will be analysed.

The idea behind the E-modules [http://www.emodules.be] is to present relevant information about the European Union in a well-structured, clear and concise manner, avoiding the specific jargon and making it, thus, accessible to every citizen. However, within the main idea lies also the main challenge: keeping the content balanced and up to date and maintaining a certain level of academic nature.

This is what the designers of the E-modules had in mind when creating the online learning system. Acknowledging the fact that information on the European Union can be found in a multitude of sources, claiming a monopoly in the field was not regarded as an option. Instead, the E-modules tried to build on the advantage of the flexibility provided by the virtual environment, and profile themselves as a provider of essential and concise information on the various aspects of the European Union, compiled in a clear and user-friendly way and accessible at any time and from anywhere. Moreover, the E-modules can also be used as a reference tool and a practical guide to the many existing information sources on the topic.

Knowledge and skills acquisition

The concept behind the E-modules is structured in two pillars: knowledge acquisition and skills acquisition. While "knowledge acquisition" leads us thinking of classical learning methods, whereby the student is acquiring knowledge at various levels and in various fields, "skills acquisition" is a concept with practical connotations. It involves "learning to do something", rather than "learning something", bringing thus to the front the idea of skills development as a vital feature of the learning process. The two pillars are equally important and they complement each other to create a complete learning experience.

Flexibility

As mentioned before, being an online application, the E-modules were aimed to cater for the needs of people who have a full time job or do not have entire weeks or months at their disposal to dedicate exclusively to studying European Studies. Furthermore, since they can be accessed from anywhere, at any time, they can prove very useful for people who are active in a dynamic environment and who need a reference tool easily available at any time. The E-modules allow the users to study at their own pace, including useful tools of self-tracking and self assessment; users can also opt for taking an exam at the end of the chosen study period, leading to the issuing of an academic certificate. All these options and features make the E-modules appealing for people with various geographic but also educational backgrounds. That is precisely why the language has to be kept clear, focusing on explaining the essential notions and avoiding the technical jargon often found in other information sources. Moreover, the content has to be very well structured and the search engine extremely precise, to allow quick access to any piece of information at any time.

Learning by association

Unlike a classical textbook, the E-modules were conceived to encourage a process of "learning by association". The information is thus structured in chapters and pages, and there are multiple internal links that allow the users to browse through the tool in a personalised way, according to their specific interest. This principle also contributes to the afore-mentioned aim of skills acquisition, as the users are put in a position to find connecting elements among different issues and are being helped in the process by the recommended internal and external links.

Case studies and real-life scenarios

It is acknowledged that a learning tool, in order to be successful, needs a knowledge/ theory component, as well as a practical component. The latter can come in the form of case studies, examples or exercises. Addressing a topic that has an impact on everyday life, like European policies, the E-modules contain a series of examples and real-life scenarios that help users understand better the issues discussed. Moreover, the practical exercises included in the chapter tests are aimed at testing the skills of information retrieval and use acquired by users throughout the modules. In order to better illustrate the complex EU legal framework, the E-modules (and especially the one module dealing with EU law) includes reference to case law, explaining the essential implications of cases decided by the European Court of Justice.

The interactive component

Last, but not least, an online learning system, lacking the natural interaction between teacher and students and among students, has to develop other interactive components in order to keep the users connected and interested in the content. The E-modules were designed to have a user-friendly interface that allows the user to control the learning process. There are various mechanisms that point out what chapters have been studied and what new content has been added, as well as a "quiz" function that was embedded in the system in order to help users test the knowledge accumulated at any point in the course.

E-modules: Mechanisms of Quality Assurance

In order to ensure that all these principles are soundly respected and put into practice, the developers of the E-modules have set into place various mechanisms that allow for a regular check-up and quality maintenance. The main idea behind this methodology is that QA has to be seen as a dynamic process, closely linked to the various stages of the e-learning development, rather than a static, post-factum activity. In this respect, the model used is similar to the "process oriented lifecycle QA model" (p. 281) proposed by Abdous (2009). QA mechanisms are embedded in the design, production and delivery of online courses and all the actors involved (subject-matter as well as IT specialists) have to apply them at every stage of the process. Figure 1 shows the various QA aspects and their place in the E-modules lifecycle.

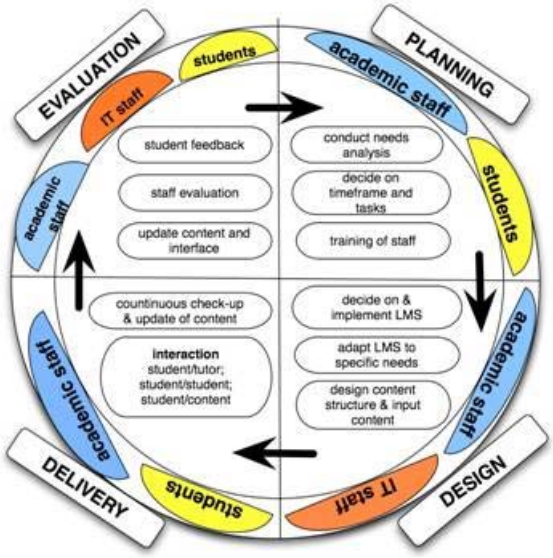

Figure 1. The E-modules lifecycle and QA mechanisms

Taking into account the content volume, currently reaching to two thousand pages, not counting the links and glossary that need to be considered as well, it becomes obvious that a regular check-up of all items is not possible. The key element here is a very thorough content management system, that allows the developers to structure the content in a meaningful manner, thus facilitating a permanent overview.

The biggest challenge for the E-modules is to be constantly updated to mach the ever-changing realities of the European Union. Without intending to replace a news website, the modules must nevertheless present the political and legal structure of the EU in an accurate manner, while mentioning the latest important events, Treaty changes and changes in portfolios. Moreover, the course must keep the pace with the policy

developments and, therefore, the content must be enriched to include relevant updates. All this is currently done within the content management system, by marking pages that need regular review so that they can be easily filtered from the rest of the content. In other words, the E-modules content is split between "stable" items that are not likely to evolve (e.g. history, biographies) and items that are changing constantly (e.g. institutions, names). A system of alerts can be thus linked to the items that need to be updated at certain intervals. As an example, the European Commission and the European Parliament change every five years, so all the pages related to their composition are to be reviewed at the respective time. However, even if this system works for the general updates, unexpected changes also take place (e.g. one Commissioner changed, a Treaty not ratified, etc), leaving no other option to the developers than setting up a personal information management system that helps them stay on top of EU developments in all fields.

Another issue that has to be taken into consideration is the regular check-up of the links included in the course. As mentioned previously, the E-modules are based on a "learning by association" principle that means that pages within the modules are related and they are also related with external websites that provide additional information. A system of automatic check-up for links has been set into place, ensuring that the readers can follow their "journey" of knowledge without interruptions caused by dead links.

Not less important is the need to keep the content's academic nature, while, at the same time, using an informative style, accessible to a large range of people with various backgrounds. Being a University department, the Institute has the resources to back up the E-modules with thorough academic research in specific fields. Moreover, the online courses provide the users with direct contact with specialists in numerous policy fields, both academics and policy makers. However, all this does not in itself guarantee the quality of the teaching methods, as the experience shows that, in many cases, there is a need for an intermediary level that can facilitate the transmission of knowledge through the online media. Therefore, the role of moderator in forums and chats and information filter in the case of written chapters is essential in ensuring a positive teaching and learning experience.

These are just a few of the most relevant issue encountered as regards quality assurance. With the continuous expansion of the content, this remains one of the main concerns in the further development of the E-modules. The lesson learned from experience is that an essential factor is to be able to establish a disciplined and straight- forward system of back-end administration that offers a permanent overview of what is already in the course, what needs to be checked regularly and what gaps have to be filled. Moreover, where teaching is concerned, great attention must be paid to the way information is conveyed in order to achieve clearly established learning objectives.

Challenges and Future Developments

Due to their very nature, as well as the topic they are addressing, the E-modules are placed in a continuously changing environment. On the one hand, as technology advances very quickly, the IT components have to be updated in order to provide full support to new applications. On the other hand, the European Union is also a moving target, thus requiring a regular thorough revision of the content and multiple updates to keep up the pace with the events and institutional developments. Both the technical and the content updates are extremely important to ensure that the E-modules are achieving their target. An outdated interface, lacking essential elements of usability, would surely put off potential users; similarly, information on the EU that is no longer correct or relevant would drastically reduce the value of the tool to that of an old newspaper.

Moreover, content-wise, apart from continuous updating, the E-modules developers have to refresh the approach in order to provide added value when compared to the increasing number of existing online sources of information on the European Union. Innovative perspectives are the ones that make a learning system stand out and, therefore, the content development of the E-modules has to be looked upon as a dynamic process of constant renewal. As mentioned earlier, the need to strike a balance between an academic approach and a tool dedicated to citizens in general is one of the ideas to be kept in mind when moving forward. Another challenge is the depth in which the topics are discussed: while some users prefer a very clear overview of the area, including all the essential facts, others favour a more flexible approach, whereby the facts represent just a starting point for debating various concepts. While, in the classroom environment, this dilemma is solved by the division between lectures (where knowledge transfer takes place) and seminars (where certain topics are discussed in depth, in smaller groups, based on reading materials), in the virtual world this division has to be clearly stated in the aims of the course and followed up by applications that allow, to a certain extent, the reproduction of the classroom experience.

This brings us to the main challenge facing the E-modules, which is interactivity. With Web 2.0 technology currently taking over various aspects of life, no e-learning system can afford to ignore the new developments. Social networking, collaborative knowledge creation, blogging are just a few examples of tools that gained an important place in many fields. The E-modules must seize the opportunity and make use of some of these tools, after a thorough evaluation of needs and potential, in order to continue to attract new users.

Interaction can take various forms of which two are relevant in the present case: the classical teacher-student interaction and the student-student interaction (Anderson, 2003). The first type, a natural occurrence in face-to-face education, can be replaced, in the virtual environment, by online support and evaluation, whereby the teacher can give feedback to the student. Moreover, an idea that is used already and gives positive results is to mix the online learning with face-to-face sessions, be it introductory courses or specialised trainings. They offer the opportunity for students and teachers to meet up and have direct contact, creating a feeling of familiarity, which proves helpful later on during the online studying process. Secondly, the student-student interaction is a rather difficult thing to achieve in e-learning, which is inherently an individual learning system. However, from an educational point of view, better results can be achieved if students collaborate and exchange views regarding the topics they study. That is why an important element that will have to be embedded in the E-modules is a tool for collaborative project work (Anderson & Garrison, 1998). That would enhance both the practical aspect of the course and the interaction among the users, proving to be also beneficial for further content development. This latter idea is touching upon yet another type of interaction, this time more familiar to online learning rather than to classroom education, namely student-content interaction. As the content of the e-learning course is constantly evolving, well-directed input from users can also constitute a valuable source that should not be underestimated (Ehlers, 2009, p. 302). Furthermore, the result of the student-student and student-knowledge interactions can be the creation of a "study community" that can bring about the benefits of peer review and the useful experience of group work.

From the perspective of quality assurance, interaction is both a positive sign, that users are scrutinizing the system and getting involved (be it in the form of feedback, debate or even new content creation) and a real challenge. In order to preserve the high academic level of the information presented, it is crucial that the

input is well filtered (not censored) and directed towards a constructive aim. Well-moderated debates and contributions from the users can certainly enrich the content, but special attention has to be paid to striking a balance between facts and opinions; labeling them accordingly facilitates the learning experience, as it enables the user to place every piece of information in the appropriate box.

Beyond the technical issues, the other great challenge that the E-modules are facing is that of communicating Europe and making its functioning well understood by the citizens. This is becoming, nowadays, an increasingly important task, that requires academic knowledge, but also communication skills and the ability to put complex realities in an accessible form and language. Using an online platform has proved so far an advantage, due to its flexibility and versatility. Making full use of the tools offered by the virtual environment in the learning process is the key to transforming challenges into opportunities and achieving the educational goals.

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