



e-Learning at the Coimbra Group Universities

Task Force e-Learning - COIMBRA Group*

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This document is the result of a Strategic Workshop held in Leuven by the Task Force e-Learning (TF eL) of the Coimbra Group (CG), followed by a series of meetings with the TF members on this issue. It provides short information on the current state of play on learning technologies and related practices at the different institutions of TF eL. This brief focuses on the current knowledge and experience regarding the good use of educational technology at our institutions and describes what it is, why it matters, how it works and where it is going.

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1 Introduction

1 A rich but diverse term e-Learning

covers all forms of electronically supported teaching and learning. Although technology is an essential part of the term, e-Learning has implications beyond the technical and encompasses the actual learning that takes place using these systems.

The term should be used with great care as there are many different approaches to e-Learning, depending on which technology is being used or which processes are being supported. e-Learning is not only suited to distance learning, but it can also be used in conjunction with face-to-face teaching, in which case the term ‘blended learning’ is commonly used. Some authors use e-Learning in reference to the use of a computer (‘computer-based training’ or ‘computer-aided instruction’), while others prefer to emphasise the use of the networked technologies (‘online or web-based learning’), collaborative technologies (‘computer-supported collaborative learning, CSCL’) or even the use of mobile devices (‘mobile learning’).

This diversity in interpretations is also visible within the Task Force e-Learning of the Coimbra Group. Most institutions are familiar with e-Learning through the forms of blended or technology enhanced learning. There are only a few institutions active in the field of online, distance learning.

2 Relevance

The educational system must respond dynamically to the complex, global challenges of the 21st century.

Advances in technology are poised to meet these educational demands. e-Learning offers new learning and educational approaches and the possibility of redistributing learning experiences over time and space, beyond the classroom and throughout a lifetime. Hence e-learning can support strategies on open and flexible learning, lifelong learning and the internationalization of higher education.

The deployment of e-Learning also opens the debate on quality by stimulating a critical reappraisal of teaching and learning processes. Assumptions about the effectiveness of ‘traditional’ methods of teaching and assessment are challenged and learning technologies act as a catalyst for change. Ultimately learning technologies also offer a constructive outlet for staff and student creativity.

Across the Coimbra Group there are a variety of approaches to strategy and support of learning technologies.

In some cases, distinct e-Learning strategies have been developed whereas

in others the technologies are integrated into overarching learning and teaching policies as part of ‘mainstream’ activities.

3 Professional support

The design of e-Learning requires knowledge and skills about the interplay between the learning technology and the learning strategy that is being used. This is why many institutions, in addition to competence development, have invested in the creation of specific support centres with dedicated staff with a wide variety of backgrounds that include pedagogical experts, ICT specialists, academic staff from many disciplines and the relatively new synergistic profession of ‘learning technologist’.

Many CG institutions have set up dedicated e-learning centres which interlink educational development and technology services, whilst others have separate units but working collaboratively - local institutional needs, cultures and historical development shape the organizational landscapes. Across the network it is recognised that access to competence development and professional support is essential to successfully implement e-Learning.

4 More than technology

To ensure that the use of all these technologies is appropriate and effective, the primacy of methodology over technology is crucial. e-Learning has many promises, but it takes resources and commitment, and it must be done properly from the didactic point of view. This means that learning materials must be designed in a pedagogically coherent manner, with the learners and learning in focus, and adequate support must be provided¹.

There is a wide range of technologies available today to support teaching and learning. There are suitable tools to support all aspects of a learning environment: to deliver content, to facilitate activities, to organise guidance or assessment. Some tools are ideal for self-paced learning, while others are suitable for instructor-led, group-based activities. There are synchronous (chat, internet-based conferencing, videoconferencing) and asynchronous technologies (streaming audio, video, podcasts, discussion fora) and since the advent of web2.0 there is a range of online services that facilitate collaborative learning (wiki, weblog, social networks).

Within the Coimbra Group, e-Learning has become ubiquitous in the student learning experience, with all member institutions having a virtual learning environment to which students have on and off-campus access to course docu-

¹ Ally, M. “Foundations of Educational Theory for Online Learning” In: T. Anderson and F. Elloumi, eds. *Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. Athabasca, Canada, 2004. Available at: http://cde.athabascau.ca/online_book

mentation, lecture materials, communication tools and other learning resources. There are examples in every member institution of innovative approaches to teaching and learning through technology ranging in scale from individual academic staff to institution-wide initiatives.

5 Potential pitfalls

Some myths and misconceptions about e-Learning still persist and need to be challenged. Technology does not offer a cheap means of mass higher education, and e-Learning is not a quick and easy solution. Effective, high-quality e-Learning implementations require adequate resources and support by trained, qualified academic staff and technical experts. Implementations, which seek to make fast profits with little educational design efforts, risk incurring significant and long-term damage to quality and reputation.

For online distance activities, studies reveal that adequate support including personal tutoring, careful and professional facilitation of online discussion and participation, opportunities for formative assessment and access to high-quality resources (such as institutional electronic resources and digital libraries) are crucial to ensure learner engagement, and minimize drop-out rates.

6 Challenges

Although there is awareness across European higher education institutions that ICT plays a pivotal role in pedagogical innovation, truly effective use of ICT remains patchy. A lot of competent design and implementation work is needed in order to ensure that these technologies truly facilitate or realise 21st century student-centred, competence-oriented and flexible higher education rather than renewing and reinforcing purely instruction-based practices. Regarding the internationalization of higher education, there is a similar pattern. Many stakeholders are aware of the potential of using ICT to support student or staff mobility, or to realise joint course development, but not many of these ideas are mainstream practice in many institutions yet.

Similarly, as we find ourselves amidst voices of the Organization for European Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCO, the European Union (EU) and its Member States proclaiming the importance of learning throughout life, the rhetoric on lifelong learning does not always match a good understanding of how it can truly be put into practice. Focusing on universities, many are still searching to find appropriate strategies for (university) lifelong learning. A vital part of this debate is how we can reach out to learners beyond the classroom walls, throughout their lives, by using learning technologies.

The nature of e-Learning demands that educational institutions remain up

to date in their expertise. Their staff, particularly their e-Learning teams, need to be able to identify trends in both technology and education. They need to be able to keep up to date with all the latest developments internationally, share experience and perspectives through professional networks, specialist conferences, online seminars, continuing professional development programs and be key participants in national and European funded projects. Their expertise bridges traditional discipline boundaries and should be more widely recognized as a valuable asset to their institutions. Research undertaken and published by this community should be recognized and valued similarly to any other discipline-based scholar pursuit.

7 Looking ahead

In the near future we expect e-Learning to be subsumed into learning generally. Technology as a support tool will no longer be considered special or new. It will be a routine consideration in higher education for the design and delivery of most if not all teaching activities. It is likely to become widely accepted the fact that learning technologies need to be considered when addressing challenges such as open and flexible learning, lifelong learning and internationalization of higher education. For the CG institutions this will in most cases mean blended learning services, where ICT-based activities are integrated with practical or classroom-based situations.

A growing number of universities have begun to offer a select set of academic degree and certificate programs via the Internet at a wide range of levels and in a wide range of disciplines. While some programs require students to attend some campus classes or orientations, many are delivered completely online. Across the Coimbra Group network there are well-supported programs available. There is considerable scope for increasing the portfolio of offerings in the near future and potentially exploiting ECTS. The Bologna reforms form the basis for more collaborative, international programs whereby staff and students from Coimbra Group institutions are able to contribute to, respectively to select from online courses in each other's institutions.

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