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DIDACTIC ASPECTS IN DISTANCE TEACHING

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Abstract: The aim and the content of the paper focuses on a few didactic aspects in distance teaching. In that sense the subject of interest are the questions concerning the clear thematic distinction, the essence and the characteristics of distance teaching, as well as the advantages and disadvantages. The model for distance teaching is not new, but the different forms that it takes are in accordance to the technical and technological development. Herein, in an era with dominance and expansion of the information and communication technology, the paper focuses especially on online teaching as a form of distance learning.

Key words: distance teaching, education, openness, flexibility, information technology.

Introduction

Modern didactics offers various ways for achieving the educational aims. It creates unbreakable bond between teacher's activities and student's activities. The most important is the aim to have active students and to enable active participation of the student in the relations with other members of the community. In that sense, it is especially important to have compatibility among the set aims and tasks in teaching, the structure of the process and the elements and assets for its realization. The notion of modernity as a feature of our environment has entered into the teaching process as well. Herein, appears the tendency to promote and insist on modality of teaching i.e. online teaching, where we emphasize its possibilities, assets, forms and advantages. This type of teaching has its own weaknesses, but the teaching technique and technology strive for even greater expansion. The intensive work toward the advancement of online teaching creates a promotion similar to an invasion in both theory and practice.

In modern conditions, there are two basic types of learning technologies: the first type keeps the usual classroom teaching model and improves it, while the second type changes the teaching process from its core. These two types differ enormously. Television, audio and video conversations have the classroom model as a base. They improve and provide a different teaching process, but their application is restricted in space and time so that they can be used only at school in a precise timeframe. The technology that is available at any time for the students are named asynchronous technologies such as: printing press, internet, compact discs, audio and video recordings; which all offer a quick feedback and better quality in interaction. The interaction is achieved in two different environments and it appears in two

basic models, an individual interaction (between the student and the teaching content) and social interaction (a conversation or a discussion among the students). The request for dominance of the two-way communication in teaching mustn't be excluded. It is a fact that the modern communication technology improves the teaching, it makes it more interesting, more rational and more efficient. Therefore, we need an appropriate technical support and flexible and creative teachers.

Didactic aspects of distance teaching

A. From an aspect of clear concept distinction

The question of a clear concept distinction is one of the basic didactic questions that are subject of interest in this paper. The didactic aspect of this question functions as a way of understanding the essence, the advantages and disadvantages, and also the possibilities for the application of distance teaching. This is the only way in which we can form a clear picture of the concept. In modern didactic literature, there are many concepts such as: online teaching, online learning, distance teaching, distance learning, e-learning, e-teaching, distance education etc. Although these concepts are often treated as synonymous, they are different in their meaning and their essence, but in some aspects they overlap. Herein, in the next section we will discuss a few characteristic features that concern these concepts.

The concept of distance teaching is determined as a teaching process without an immediate contact between the teacher and the student, because they are spaciouly distanced. They are connected by writing, radio and television broadcast. In that sense, the distance teaching can be divided into correspondence teaching (with the help of texts that contain manuals for studying, tasks, exam questions), radio-schooling and TV school (M. Bakovljević, 1999,53). Actually this is a type of teaching where the students are physically at a different place than the teacher, and they connect with a computer and other tools for communication. This type of teaching implies a flexible schedule of time and a high degree of independence for the teacher. The distance teaching enables a higher quality in education without visits or stays in the schools as institutions. The basic advantage is the possibility to study from any place in the world, in time that is suitable for everyone and in relaxed and comfortable conditions in their own home. Having in mind the fact that teaching is a process of teaching and learning, the terms used in the professional literature are distance learning and distance education. The basic definition of the concept of distance learning emphasized the basic characteristics in relation to the space distance of the teacher and the the students on one side, and the application of the technological resources on the other side (Casarotti, Filliponi, Pieti & Sartori, 2002, p. 37). The distance learning is a force that benefits the social and the economic development. It has quickly become an essential part of the educational systems whether in the developed countries or the countries in development. The globalization of distance learning offers many opportunities to the countries to completely realize the aims of the educational system. The increasing needs for continuous development and the prequalification through the development of the abilities and skills as well as the technological development have all resulted in an explosion of the interest for distance learning.

E-learning or the electronic learning is a term that describes the usage of electronic media, the digital content and the information and communication technology in teaching. That is an electronic form of distance teaching.

Online teaching is actually a variety of distance teaching. The adjective 'online' determines this type of teaching as a teaching on a line, through a connection between the teachers and the students.

There are different terms that are used to describe distance learning. The term distance learning (refers to the activity of the student) and the term distance teaching (refers to the activity of the teacher) are both part of the distance education. The usual variations include e-learning or learning through the Internet, when the Internet is used as a medium; virtual learning refers to teaching lessons that are realized outside the classroom with elementary or secondary school students (usually through the Internet); education with correspondence, a teaching of many years based on an individual approach and is realized through electronic mail; open learning, the usual system used in Europe through the so called “open” university.

Online teaching or if you prefer online learning mean online schooling. How are online schools functioning with distance education? Parents enrol their child at a school with distance education and the school assigns the child with an individual plan and study program (in accordance with school policies). Teachers are available to help the learning process of the child. The teacher is also obliged to follow the advancement of the student and to write a formal report to the school (as in regular schooling). The parent is a supervisor or ‘home-teacher’ for the child. The basic and main aim of these schools is to promote education. On the other hand, this initiates the question of the upbringing role that the school has especially in relation to the socialization of the child. This disadvantage is often emphasized by parents who see it as a problem, because it is a fact that online schools do not have the role of socialisers. The followers of this model of teaching and learning believe that this is not a problem nor a disadvantage. Although their attention and complete interest is focused on the educational role of the school, they think that the teaching strategy offers enough space for communication among the students.

B/ From an aspect of the basic characteristics in distance teaching

One of the determinants of schooling as a teaching and learning process is the part of distance teaching. The theoretical notions in relation to this question show the few basic characteristics of distance teaching which are the following:

- First, distance learning is by definition conducted through an institution; it is not an independent learning nor an academic environment for studying. Institutions can or cannot offer the traditional way of teaching based on the classroom and the traditional methods;

- The second characteristic refers to the geographical distance that is a feature of distance learning, and time can divide students and teachers as well. The accessibility and the practicability are important advantages of this teaching model. Well designed programs can also help transcend the intellectual, cultural and social differences between the students.

- The third characteristic refers to the formation of a learning community in analogy to the classes of students at schools. The interactive telecommunication helps connect the individuals in one study group and the teacher. Often, the electronic communication is used, such as e-mails, but the traditional form of communication such as the post can also be used (although this is rare nowadays). Regardless of the medium, the interaction is of essential importance for distance teaching as for any other teaching model. The relations between students, teachers and teaching tools/the didactic triangle become less dependent on physical proximity, because the communication systems are much more sophisticated and widely accessible. The internet, the mobile phones and the e-mail have helped the fast expansion of distance learning.

- Fourthly, the distance teaching, as any type of teaching, forms a study group that is sometimes called a studying community and is formed by students, teachers and teaching resources (such as books, audio, video and graphic materials) that enable the student to access the teaching content. The social connection on the Internet promotes the idea of building a community. On pages such as Facebook and YouTube you can make a profile, identify members (“friends”) with whom you can share different things and build a community. This

type of connecting can help students connect with each other and consequently to decrease the feeling of being isolated.

These were the most important characteristics. They are basic, but aren't final; because the list of features changes in accordance to the technology advancements. I believe that they will clearly mark the concept of distance teaching.

C/ From an aspect of the advantages and disadvantages of distance/online teaching

Distance teaching that is nowadays moulded as online teaching represents a new thing in our environment, and it has advantages compared to the classic classroom teaching. The level of technology development enables every individual to follow the curriculum and to expand his/her knowledge. The number of empirical findings point to certain advantages in distance teaching:

- The classroom is where the internet is. The classroom is mobile; where there is internet, there is teaching. For some students this is a positive influence that increases their productivity. The studying space is not implied, but can be individually created and designed.
- The atmosphere is relaxed, but it can have negative effects in the sense that there is lack of compulsion. On the other hand, this can cause lethargy and laziness, so being active is recommended. Herein, this model of teaching is a tool for creating endurance and self-motivation.
- The regular division of time is a basic precondition for an effective online teaching.
- Online teaching is similar to a concert – it is always better live, face to face. Regardless of the numerous advantages and naming it as a future of teaching, nothing can replace the face to face conversations. It is recommendable to view online teaching as a concert of your favourite musical group. When you listen to them on YouTube it is good, but the feeling on a live concert is completely different and cannot be replaced by any means.

Therefore, online teaching should be viewed as a possibility for easing the learning process for the students and should be used to a maximum. In that sense, the positive sides or the advantages are the following:

- Online teaching saves time; you learn from home, you shouldn't hurry anywhere, going and returning etc. and consequently the time for yourself and your obligations increases. All these stressful events are omitted, and online teaching and learning are more relaxed. Video conferences create a possibility for a virtual classroom. Although the feeling isn't the same as at a real classroom, it is very close and it is economical by saving time and money.
- It creates a relaxing atmosphere, helps the shy students, and the ability to turn off the video connection or the internet connection is an additional convenience. The personal choice of the student refers to whether the student is included in the video conference or not, which is a sufficient indicator for respecting each student as an individual.
- The teacher is always available; the student can contact the teacher in any time.
- The resources are always available;
- Beside learning and going through the basic contents, online teaching helps expand and improve the computer skills (the usage of certain applications).

If we talk about the negative sides or the disadvantages, it is understandable that:

- Online teaching means a compulsory Internet connection to enable the communication.
- There is not a possibility for as large interaction as in a real classroom, and especially in terms of an emphatic connection. The lack of a direct physical interaction influences the emotional development of the student and the feeling of belonging to a certain community. The well-known fact that the emotions are a consequence of a certain situation in which the person is, or that a concrete situation causes certain emotional feelings means that online teaching impoverishes the young person's emotional life. One of the key factors for a regular socio-emotional development of the individual is the direct non-verbal communication between the teacher and the student.
- Usually the activities that are possible in the home are not possible at the classroom (eating, drinking etc.). Also, the presence of certain obstacles in the home (such as members of the family, the ringing of the bell, telephone ringing...) are excluded from the real classroom.
- The elements of nonverbal communication are omitted from online teaching. The body language that sends certain messages to the receiver in online teaching makes the communication poorer.
- The application of certain teaching methods, that are emphasized in the "real" classroom and that realize their function completely, are transmitted through visualisation in online teaching. This doesn't create the same effect. For example, the demonstration of a certain experiment that is shown and explained in a real classroom on one hand and in the virtual classroom on the other hand does not create the same effect.
- The virtual classroom has the potential to encourage, develop and maintain the feeling of belonging to a community on levels that are comparable to the real and traditional classroom. The concept of a studying community is applied at the virtual classroom as well by a constant search of answers to the question of how to design and realize it in the best way. Online teaching that fosters the community between the students that are physically divided, in the designing process emphasizes then need for easing the dialogue and decreasing the psychological distance, and consequently increasing the feeling of belonging to a community. Beside these attempts, the reality and virtual reality do not have the same effect on the person's development and cannot satisfy the need for belonging.
- Online teaching depends on the age of the students and the degree of development of the computer skills. The supporters of online teaching emphasize that the content can be adjusted to the age of the student, but the early stages of teaching will be marked by a partially independent work of the student.
- Online teaching is not suitable for social interaction. One person can develop regularly in a small group. At school students learn how to socialize, how to be patient, to be free from disappointment and to compete, while competitiveness is being stimulated. Online teaching cannot offer human interaction.
- Online teaching is not suitable for all the content; it isn't functional in achieving all the educational aims of the curriculum. For example, it is restricted in relation to those subjects that include practical work.
- It is a fact that online teaching is realized through the Internet, and it cannot handle large number of students that want to enter the discussions.

Therefore, I think that online teaching cannot fully replace the real classroom, beside the fast development and advancement of technology. The virtual classroom isn't the same as

the classic classroom. The virtual teacher is not the same to the classroom teacher even in the video-conferencing activities.

Concluding remarks and recommendations

Whether we are ready or not, online teaching is now present!

Thanks to the tools for digital communication and the studying platforms, schools have various ways for organizing online teaching for students at home. The immediate change to distance teaching has obliged many administrators and teachers to accept the changes. The ongoing global experiment will probably emphasize the advantages and disadvantages of teaching through the Internet. As in any other aspect of everyday life, the response to the challenges in education's development includes the use of information and communication technologies conditioned by the needed organizational and political changes that can be conducted for creating effective technologies. The fast development of information technology has contributed to the creation of new educational methods. In accordance to this statement, the ways of learning and gaining new knowledge are no longer restricted by space and time. There are many technologies that can offer great flexibility in relation to when, where and how to distribute the teaching and to gain knowledge. Distance learning is being used more and more. The technologies that are used for this purpose can be divided in four categories: printing, audio (voice), computer (data) and video. The expansion of the World Wide Web together with the decreased costs for processing, saving and transferring information have all contributed to a large change in the perception of distance learning, its acceptance by the teachers and the way in which it is designed, delivered and conducted.

The effective online teaching means an integration of different tools and resources that help students follow the teaching process, to use the sources of knowledge and to adopt the needed content and finally achieving the planned aims. The teaching supported by the internet offers great flexibility and freedom of self-directed learning, without an academic endangerment in any way of the students. Distance learning and the application of information technology, especially the learning through mobile phones, is considered the present and the future of studying, as well as a constituent of any type of educational process in the future. Two of the most perspective fields need to be included in the development of distance learning: mobile computers and e-learning. We can use different gadgets such as mobile phones, personal digital assistant (PDA), smartphones, tablets or personal computers. For the requests of surpassing the limits of traditional model for organizing teaching, modern didactics offers a new template that is flexible to changes and follows the technical and technological developments. This new template is called online teaching as a variance and model for distance teaching, and it is an essential part of society development. The application up to now has pointed to some advantages and disadvantages as in any other type of teaching.

However, the question that remains is: online or offline teaching? What is better? Which model is more efficient and effective? Choosing one of these models is neither the most efficient, the most effective nor the best model. I believe that the combination of both models will lead us to the most effective, efficient, rational, economical and functional solution to a achieving the teaching aims at a certain timeframe. Therefore, the balance in the usage of both models is on one hand the response to the needs of the community, and on the other hand a response to the individual as part of that community. It also helps future development and prosperity.

In conclusion, online teaching should be strictly considered an addition and an extension of the classical forms and models of teaching. Even the best template for online

teaching cannot fully replace the personal contact with the teacher, or the human relations that are developed in a group. In other words, the traditional classroom and the classes of students in reality shouldn't be replaced with a virtual classroom, virtual community and a virtual teacher.

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