FLEXIBILITY AND CREATIVITY IN DESIGNING COURSE NOTES THROUGH VIRTUAL CAMPUS

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Abstract*: The dynamics and competitively of contemporary labour market is asking for up-to date and pragmatic university courses which has to take into consideration a lot of factors, among which the students' opinions as well as their background. In order to design a competitive course a real dialogue between the two factors: tutors and students should be initiated from the very beginning. Dialogue and discussions are attitudes that always stimulate and improve didactic strategies, but establishing a constructive dialogue is not a very easy task, especially when working with students enrolled in distance learning courses. Generally speaking, students, mainly in the first year are quite redundant in expressing their opinions and facing their needs. Most of need analysis designed in the first course turned into formal attitudes. Taking into consideration the above aspects and being aware of the importance of using the new pedagogical and philological support in distance learning environment we thought that some facilities of the virtual campus can be used in order to reinforce students' role in designing a course and clarifying the its main objectives. This paper presents the way in which we used existing facilities of the Credis Virtual Campus and the way in which we want to develop it order to establish a real dialogue with our students, as a leading step in designing a competitive course. Due to the fact that they belong to the faculty of Nursery and Primary School Pedagogy our aim is to teach them not only our particular academic curricula, but also how to use those facilities for their future students.*

Keywords: *virtual campus, dialogue, didactic strategies, course design, creativity*

I. LEAD IN

The dynamics and competitively of contemporary labour market is asking for up-to date and pragmatic university courses which are appealing from both students and tutors point of view. Exploration of the steps the students take in assimilating new knowledge and the strategies they may employ while learning, as well as the complexities involved in designing the curricula in distance learning have been extensively researched lately as this is a main way of developing in Romanian academic environment. Distance technologies have opened up new potential and offer new ways to access and combine information using the limitless resources of the web, allowing blending with academic resources. Moreover it helps people to study and to work at the same time. ITC and virtual campus helps us to ignore distance, to receive all learning materials from tutors and to learn from home, to create new learning supports.

In order to design a competitive course, a real dialogue between the two factors, tutors and students should be initiated from the very beginning. In distance learning students used to be separated from their peers whom they met for a short period during tutorials and exams, when they do not have

enough time for socializing or debating. Today situation has changed as they are able to join other learners and to be in contact with their tutors or course managers along the whole learning period, due to digital technology, in virtual communities. These developments offer the possibilities to develop greater self-direction in learners and to move away from teacher-directed approaches to teaching and learning one and may lead to encourage students to look for information themselves [1] and to ask questions. The danger of being flooded by a great variety of questions coming from the students or by a large quantity of unclassified information still exists, but a virtual campus well designed and organized may reduce it to monitored level.

Despite the etymological sense of the term pedagogy which connects this science to children, the contemporary use of the term has lost its exclusive reference to childhood while referring to long life learning and self-directed adult learners [2] and now it sense is enlarged according to the generous frame o eLearning.

II. GENERAL BACKROUND

Around 2000 a lot of universities have started long distance programs, now after almost 11 years just a few of them are still working. At Bucharest University the activity started as an international program concerning long life learning and turned into a permanent section under the name Credis. Credis, the Department for Distance Learning – Bucharest University initiated in 2005 a learning program for up-grading teachers of nursery school and primary school psycho pedagogical training. This study refers to its authors' experience in **The Program for Pre-school and Primary Teachers,** an academic program involving a large number of students from various regions (mainly Bucharest and the surrounding countries) and it provides education to geographically distributed groups [3]

When the program has started everybody was aware of some of difficulties concerning a distance learning activity with people of very different background (age, initial knowledge level, professional experience), mainly those concerning a good communication and an effective course design. Learning should be an active process and distance and asynchronous communication should not change this major characteristic, especially nowadays when eLearning is regarded as a mobile learning as well and when the technical support offers us a large number of possibilities. The virtual campus is only one of them, but it has the advantage of being an official platform administrated by the university, capable to host and gather all kind of resources. The virtual campus may integrate: academic courses, use of periodicals and reference books, audiovisual lessons, tutorial activities, evaluation activities, debates, correspondence, social interaction, meaning that the communication develops vertically (student-teacher) or horizontal (student-students).

The academic success of our students is due to how well content is designed, developed, organized, and delivered to students in order to have a significant impact and effectiveness and usability [4]. Designing a learning strategy appropriate to be use for distance learning students of **The Program for Pre-schools and Primary Schools Teachers** and capable to develop the students' creativity, the tutor have to take into consideration certain factors concerning their learning attitude, learning routine and general background and to use an appropriate methodology to meet their expectation and to fulfil their own goals.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question refers to students' ability to identify their needs and to express questions that can improve the creative side of the course, mainly in the first academic year when they are a little bit redundant in communication. At the same time we have to ask ourselves if our strategies are effective in leading the students to identify their needs and consequently if we fulfil their expectations

Starting with this main question some side questions should be formulated

1. Have students from the first year PPP ever face need analysis in order to improve their knowledge?

2. Are they familiar with communicative strategies that encourage them to formulate personal opinion about how they can improve the course content, in distance learning?
3. Do they consider the virtual campus a friendly environment where they feel that they can develop their creativity? Or should we say that they should ask themselves how technology may increase their creativity?

The above research question were considered to be the working hypothesis on which this study was developed.

IV. METHOD

The research methods used in order to complete the analysis which is the base of this study were those specific for most of case studies. This means that after formulating the research questions and establishing the main work hypothesis, direct observation and work analysis based on psycho-pedagogical approach were used. Direct observations are interpreted according the recent theoretical approaches.

The study is based on a quantitative research (first year students registered between 2009 and 2011 were evaluated and compared to previous peers). The communication took place in both synchronous and asynchronous environment. Once a month, during synchronous meeting discussions between tutors and students were organized in order to improve the Campus way of working. The fact, that today certain digital supports, such as Skype or different chat programmes offer the possibility of communication in real time, are aspects that were taking into consideration when designing the courses and when analysing their feedback.

V. MOBILE LEARNING AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING SUPPORT

A modern flexible and creative course for distance learning students represents a challenging task for both teacher and students. When teachers have to propose rigorous models based on theoretical and practical support, new knowledge and a serious professional background, students are interested in clear ready to apply or practical models, perhaps a computer specialized program which can help him to learn and to solve their homework. Modern pedagogical approaches underline the fact that a good communication between students and tutors is increased by the fact that students are correctly motivated to learn. An effective learning is reached if the information flow is monitored and when the balance between scientific (academic) content and practical applications is correctly designed so that the student is not overloaded by the learning task, aspect which may lead to abandonment of study program. [6]

In order to reach the above mentioned goals tutors have to set very clear objectives from the very beginning, objectives that are mentioned at the beginning of each learning unit. Elearnig methodology and digital support offers the ability to create units which are available for students at any time and can be tailored according to their specific needs. Beside this a learning unit can be changed and enriched, if the feedback from the students asks for it. A traditional academic course turns into an interactive and collaborative action, which leads to a better understanding and consequently to an effective learning. The negative impact of difficult knowledge is therefore reduced and so is learning anxiety.

5.1. Tools for Developing Students' Creativity

To develop any kind of skill or ability the students have to be provided with specific tools. A large variety may be sometimes confusing, leading to anxiety instead of clarification and effectiveness, to say nothing about creativity, a process following a good understanding. Within mainly asynchronous environments, as the case of Virtual Campus for of *The Program for Pre-schools and Primary Schools Teachers,* how students utilize the resources is a factor leading to

achieve their academic goals. Therefore the course manager has to be selective in managing information and supportive in disseminating it. In order to be effective any learning support has to access by a large number of learners, in other words its value is measured by the access number and the generated interaction.

A good choice of appropriate tools means that they are adequate to the content, context and the tutor is aware if his students are familiar with their use in that course or in others. If the students are not familiar with some tools (for example blogs or wiki) this does not mean that tutors have to replace it. Their use must be clarified for students and they should be motivated to use them.

Wiki is a kind of tool which students are not familiar with. The tutors have to explain that this is a website which anyone can edit. Used for collaborative writing or for publishing resources, pictures and links to favourite sites, including a discussion area [7], wiki is not a successful tool if used at the very beginning of the first year. After editing his course the tutor may encourage the students to look for additional material and to post their own contributions, if considered to be interesting, actions leading to a better understanding of the topic and encouraging the students to develop independent learning abilities. According to the received feedback the students' aria of interest is clarified and the content as well as the practical examples of the course may be improved. In the particular case of *The Program for Pre-schools and Primary Schools Teachers,* this tool offers the possibility for those students who are already working as teachers to share their practical and theoretical educational experience and to help their peers. Compared to forum which was largely used in the first years, wiki offers better possibilities for communication, mainly between students and according to the students' feedback, once understood is easier to use for a larger variety of learning materials.

The blog as a communication experience has been analysed in various contexts and has its pros and cons. In literature, for example, the blog literature, as controversial as it was at its beginning is now accepted and considered to be subject for academic research. Both characteristics of a blog, on line diary and a place to express personal opinion as well or sharing ideas with a group [8] can be used on the Virtual Campus in order to encourage students to develop their creativity or to make the content of a course more flexible. Students are often encouraged write a personal diary (ethnographical method) where to list the difficulties overtaken in the learning process [9]. In blogs, entries appear in reverse chronological order and it may be a comment for each entry, so the evolution of the students is quite clear. The blog content, once published cannot be revised, wiki, on the contrary offers opportunity for collaborative writing and or revision/removing of the content, therefore is more flexible. Probably that is why they seem more attractive to our students.

5.2. Learning Content between Tradition and Virtual

Since the computer and all digital resources have been used for teaching and learning, quite a long period passed. The question now is not if we have to use them, as everybody agreed that we have to, but how to use and which to use. One of the main concern still is how to help students to use the in an efficient way. In other words we have to be aware of how to give the "information literacy" in order to identify their information need, evaluate their information, organise information and use it effectively [10]. There are different types of information that students may need to fulfill different academic tasks, such as theoretical approaches, practical activities pattern, types of assignment or evaluation, to list just the most important. Students that try to be self-directed study, as those in distance learning should be even more than traditional students, are good investigators. Their pleasure for investigating and finding has to be used by tutors and encouraged through Virtual Campus tools. They also have to be guided to make connections between different types of resources (academic courses, electronic academic library, data bases) and to share their findings with peers.

On the virtual campus the course manager posts the course which can be easily identify due to key words and an abstract. The course content is similar to traditional academic courses. The difference is due to the fact that the Virtual Campus unable us to diversify the traditional content and to be more flexible versus the students' demands. At the end of each unit students are invited to question themselves and some themes of reflection are suggested. Each learning unit is provided with evaluation units. Both evaluation and reflection generates questions and debates. The role of those debates is to clarify the content of the course and to identify possible communication gaps. Using the above listed tools the tutors are able to enlarge and to diversify the content of the learning support.

Offering students all kind of examples and reports on practical activities is easier for them to complete their assignments and to become independent learners.

At the same time in order to avoid an invasion of unclassified or irrelevant materials, students should be taught how to write and how to avoid plagiarism, by quoting correctly their sources. Staff and students currently make use of different electronic resources, some of being so called open sources, nevertheless each source should mentioned and all the details leading to their original author have to be mentioned as well.

The process developed to make the learning process effective and student centred. It should be visualised according to the following image:
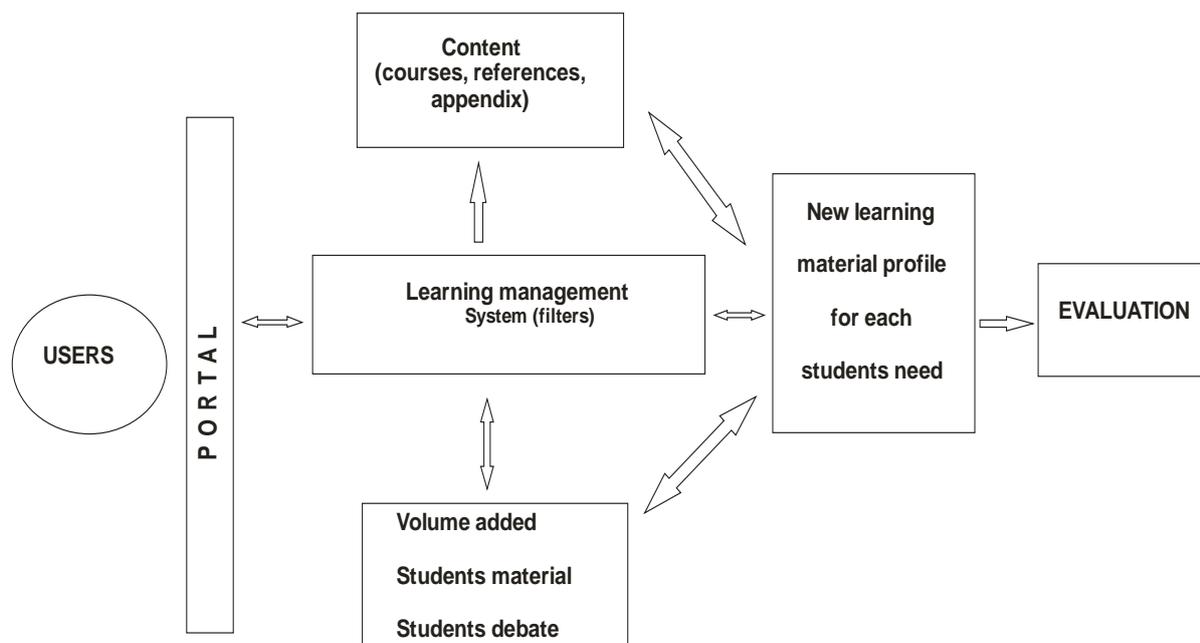
Figure 1. Communication management cycle

It is quite obvious that our main concern is the information management so that students should benefit for as much support as possible in order to pass the evaluation. At the same time this way of providing course support is flexible, because it is tailored according to each group. The volume added role is to offer reference materials and to allow students to take advantage of their professional experience and their knowledge as well as to initiate debates which are going to clarify the learning content. The arrows point the fact that it is not a one way communication, but one which will help the tutor to take advantage of his students' interests and experience. In such a learning system the role of the course manager is crucial [11].

Courses in distance learning system should be more flexible and opened to students' requirements. Compared to traditional one their role in communication is increased by the fact that they represent the tutors' opinion and they have to be assimilated by students just by reading them on the Virtual Campus. Unlike the traditional course the tutor possibility to correct his course either by further explanations or by compressing it limited. Due to the Virtual Campus the tutors may have a quicker feedback.

VI. CONCLUSIONS. DIRECTION FOR DEVELOPMENT

To conclude it was quite clear that our students were not familiar with need analysis as a learning strategy, but nevertheless they welcome it and quickly adapted to the tutors requirements.

Evaluating the students' understanding after each unit offers the possibility to adjust the content of the next course if needed. So the learning material has a flexible part according to different groups need. The need analysis can underline each group expectations.

Even if at the beginning of the Virtual Campus activity, students were a little bit redundant in expressing themselves, after several years they consider the virtual campus a friendly environment, a kind of home for learning and expressing. They learn from their peers that this is a major help in overtaking learning difficulties.

As a direction for development our intention is to re-organize the site and to introduce some selective filters so that posting additional materials as well as searching for information should be facilitated. After three year of using the Virtual Campus and its tools in order to develop students creativity a lot of materials have been produce and using them in a proper way has become quite difficult.

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