

Global learning through collaboration

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ABSTRACT. Inter-campus, international cooperation online is the future of learning. I begin by showing the importance of online and blended learning. Then, I present three best practices: online collaboration between University of Illinois and Warsaw School of Economics, that started in 2006; Polish Consortium (Econet) of top economic academies, offering one certificate, based on five courses, offered by those five institutions; finally, an international project in computers and philosophy, coordinated by professors from Sweden, USA, Italy, and Greece, aimed at setting up the standards in this new and growing field. I also sketch out an idea of a worldwide academy, and what such a global program may look like.

KEYWORDS: *Accreditation, Blended learning, Course co-management, Inter-institutional collaboration, Standardization*

Online learning as a global mega-trend

Growing enrolments in online classes and degrees throughout the world present a stable trend. According to the 2007 Sloan-C Report, in 2006, in the USA alone, over 3.5 million students took at least one college course online. E-learning at 2.300 USA universities (that is 53%) is a part of the regular educational process - not just an experiment or continuing education project - while, in 2004, the market on higher education online crossed the mark of \$10 billions (Allen, Seaman, 2007).

These days, many universities no longer mark diplomas received through online studies in any special way, since their value is considered as equal to those offered on-campus (this is the difference between the dominant trend in the USA, and many programs in the UK), while 90% of employers do not mind if the student studied online, and, in some cases, if the job pertains to online services, they actually prefer graduates of online programs. Online education is very broad, and there is no doubt, in leading research, that there is no significant difference in quality between learning on-campus and online (Swan, 2003). This is the no significant difference thesis.

The opportunities for global blended learning

Certain learning skills are better taught online, and others on-campus. Hence, based on the multi-factor analysis, it is possible to figure out what factors are better taught online and what on-campus, and, therefore, to have a blended course with the focus on the appropriate factors, in every case. This provides a great chance for the so-called blended learning, which teaches the skills that are better taught online (such as reflection-based debates, that thrive in asynchronous learning environments, and research based on online resources), in an online environment, and those best taught on-campus (such as emotive, persuasive aspects of the course, that are enhanced by non-verbal communication), in the brick and mortar environment.

What is a blended learning environment? According to the recent classification, proposed by the C-Sloan Foundation, we can distinguish the following five kinds of learning, with respect to Web-based content:

1-20%	21%-50%	50-80%	81-99%	100%
Web content	Web content	Web content	Web content	Web content
Web-enhanced	Blended one	Blended two	Blended three	Online

Table I. Learning classification by C-Sloan Foundation

Blended one classes are those that involve a major aspect of online learning, for instance, weekly online discussion as major supplements to on-campus meetings, while the latter still play the main role. *Blended two* courses cover the gist of blended learning, with about 50% of the activities taking place on-campus and 50% online. Those are, for instance, the 16 session courses that meet on-campus 8 times, whereas the remaining 8 sessions are offered in the regular online mode, and so is most homework. *Blended three* classes are those casually, but misleadingly, called online courses with required face-to-face sessions. Those one-three meeting sessions are sometimes devoted to getting people started, often to do some hands-on work, for instance, lab practice, and, sometimes, to take the final exams. The reason why those courses should be viewed as a kind of blended courses is that online learning tout court, as we understand it today, allows people from all parts of the world, and in all predicaments of life, to take the course. While there may be synchronous or asynchronous learning modes, geographic mobility is out of the question. Otherwise, too

many students would be left out, including those who are unable to travel for various reasons, ranging from disability, through work and family-related reasons, to the reasons of incarceration or active duty military service. Therefore, online learning is defined as the learning that does not require any physical interactions. Blended learning is the spectrum of all kinds of learning, where on-campus and online learning serve merely as boundary conditions. Blended learning explores the strengths of both online and on-campus learning. It involves emotive meanings and persuasion, needed for students to open up to the new ideas, which are better conveyed on-campus, as well as the asynchronous discussion, as well as the ability to consult various resources, at one's convenience, which are the main strengths of online learning. With current ease in geographic mobility of students and faculty blended learning, it is an incentive to truly global learning that involves some travel and some online communication. It is proven to be more efficient than on-campus (as well as online) learning; it also satisfies human propensity to travel and to develop personal interactions. Hence, blended learning is compatible with truly global learning, at least in well-to-do nations. In the rest of the paper, I shall focus on strictly online learning, since it brings in the biggest promise of truly global education online; it also brings in a tangible promise of helping bridge major aspects of the global digital and informational divide.

Worldwide courses on the World Wide Web

Access to the Internet has made the traditional, enclosed structures of the campus obsolete, though it may take a generation for most people to realize this.

Global access to courses, degrees, and online resources makes it possible for people to abandon criteria of geographic proximity. This will soon make online educational markets by far more competitive than most local markets are. We can recruit a student from everywhere in the world, and vice versa a college located anywhere in the world is able to fish out a student living next door to our campus. Due to this lack of captive audience, universities require a very different, lighter, more business-like organizational structure, in order to meet the challenges. There is also relative freedom to recruit teachers worldwide: for instance, in the department of philosophy at UIS, we have adjunct faculty members, based in Oregon, NY, and Europe, who never had to come to

campus (I tend to teach from Springfield, IL, or Warsaw, Poland, but sometimes France, Greece, and other locations). Despite the lack of consensus, what exact implication those structural changes shall have on the university of the future, it is clear that the university of the future is going to be deeply influenced by online and blended courses and degrees.¹

On the other hand, the role of faculty governance is bound to change, so as to adapt to the new requirements of a new competitive learning environment. New course and degree offerings need to be approved in an efficient fashion; also, oftentimes, new content will have to be generated, not under direct faculty control, such as industry-generated content or even student-generated content. Finally, global learning more and more incorporates high-tech teaching media, such as podcasting, MP3-MP4, and especially online environments, such as Second Life. In this regard, see the Website of the Applied Research in Virtual Environments for Learning (ARVEL), the SIG Initiative, and the Virtual Reality Journal. See also Andrew Baxter's article, in the Financial Times (Baxter, 2008).

While the early stage of online education was based on faculty developing Websites for their courses, and the current stage has been dominated by asynchronous online learning environments, such as Moodle, BlackBoard or WebCT, the future of online learning brings in much more interactive technologies.

One aspect of the global trend that makes online learning environments more and more integrative, while making old-style institutional frameworks - slowly but surely - more and more obsolete, is visible through inter-institutional online collaborations and degrees (McCurdy et al., 2005). Inter-institutional agreements, combining courses of various origins, become the rule. For instance, the Sail project, supported by the Sloan Foundation, created a unified catalogue of Community College, and other courses, available to the joint student body of those institutions, although the project is still at the beginning stages (SAIL, 2008)².

GPIDEA - Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance is a forum of course exchange, which is somewhat bounded, geographically and culturally (GPIDEA, 2008). Some of the benefits of such online cooperation, listed on the latter Website, include: providing possibilities in program development, otherwise not possible, and creating a professional network for professors, who are often alone on their campuses; it also helps increase FTE

1. I am indebted to Tom Abeles, John Sener, and other participants in the University of The Future thread, in the C-Sloan serve, in the Fall of 2007, for their creative, up-to-date insights.

2. I am grateful to John Sener, and the Members of Sloan-C Listserv for updates on those developments.

counts (reduction of empty seats), while giving students, in all institutions, high quality education (<http://www.league.org/league/projects/sail/faq.htm#sail>).

A comprehensive review of inter-institutional and international online degrees must await another major article, and more transparency is much needed in this growing field. Most current search platforms devoted to global education have fiduciary connections to specific institutions, and hence fail to provide truly merit-based results. See, for instance, Online-Education.net at <http://www.online-education.net/>. Even search engines, such as Google and Yahoo, tend to sell the first 5-10 positions to the highest bidder and/or are vulnerable to skillful positioning strategies (it is a standard procedure to figure out the features that get a given Website a high position on a given search engine, and to construct it accordingly).

There is still no truly international market for online education on students and faculty, and sometimes the expectations are somewhat bizarre (for instance, the so-called American Global University makes it a condition of employment of foreign faculty to recruit 15 students with special requirements, which makes this institution anything but truly global), but two correlated processes shall speed up global integration in online teaching and learning: the first process is true internationalization of leading online institutions; the second process may be characterized as creation of far reaching inter-institutional and global collaborations and partnerships. In the rest of this article, I shall present brief case studies of three collaborations I am involved with.

An inter-Atlantic exchange

Let me focus on an exchange between University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) and the Warsaw School of Economics (SGH). We offer one class from each institution. UIS offers “Rationality and Moral Choice”, while the latter offers “Transformations in Eastern Europe”; both courses are offered from the SGH learning platform.

The former course employs an innovative educational approach to use theory of rationality, and elements of game theory for practical considerations, in business and environmental ethics. The latter course explores the strength of SGH in explaining the mechanics of system transformations in East-Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic), that allowed their economies

and societies to move from the Soviet style central economy to free market economies, and political structures making them fully fledged members of the EU. The courses have 15 students from the USA, and 15 from Poland, working in a collaborative learning environment - actually, many students taking classes in any of those institutions are still in different locations (recently in Spain, UK, Canada, Israel, India, Belarus, Malaysia); there are also guest students from Iran, Sri Lanka, and East Timor.

There were many issues in such exchanges, from accreditation all the way to the length of each institution semesters, that had to be coordinated. But, with good will, it took a few months to make the project happen, and a couple of years to make it a regular part of business, in both institutions.

It makes sense to have more of those kinds of initiatives crossing the regular institutional lines; on the other hand, the traditional institutional ramifications make less and less sense in the virtual environment, which may lead to even more radical changes in the structure of the university. The next two best practices seem like steps in this direction.

A national economics certificate in Poland

Warsaw School of Economics developed a *Merry Go Round* model among economic universities of Poland (ECONET, 2008). They offer five highly specialized courses, such as “Simulation decision game TEES-2” or “Creative non-standard strategies in marketing”, where only one member institution has a special strength, while enrolments at any given institution would be low. Hence, five institutions offer one course for 25 students each, with each institution having up to 5 spots in each course. This is a good model for a certificate, based on five courses, where the cost to any given institution is just one class a year (for every five students getting the whole certificate).

Beginnings of a truly international curriculum in philosophy and computers

The course in Philosophy of Computing, that Gordana Dodig-Crnković offered online, provides a great start of a truly global cooperation in this new and growing field (Dodig-Crnković, Crnković, 2007). Its original version had scholars from a number

of universities, in Sweden and other EU countries, working on the same topic; it resulted in a dozen or so papers published.

Currently, a team of professors from USA, Sweden, Italy, UK, Poland, and Greece are working together trying to prepare a shared learning environment, and study materials, for a class in philosophy and computers, to be offered in the Fall of 2008. It is listed in four different institutions for the coming Fall semester: in some, the online component will be just a part of the course; in others, the shared part will be the whole class.

This course seems like the first stage of a truly international cooperation in online teaching and learning in philosophy. To put it in a broader perspective, the two points - the need for a superb graduate degree online, and the facility of inter-institutional access - seem to present a synergy. In a long run, this or similar initiatives may lead to an inter-institutional graduate online certificate, or a degree.

More practices towards global justice

Sloan Foundation started a great educational project, aimed at helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina satisfy their educational needs, and UIS was one of the course providers. Currently, based on the same model, UIS provides guidance and cooperation to smaller, traditionally neglected colleges in the USA (<http://www.uis.edu/newsbureau/inthenews/200800229-WHECB-OnlineKey.pdf>). A number of courses have been offered, with professors and audiences from two different campuses; the model is similar to the UIS-SGH online exchange, though it is developed nationally, as a way to bring in more social equity through online education. Another best practice, recently developed by SGH, is aimed at providing empty spots in online courses to the students from developing countries, free of charge, especially those who need and deserve those kinds of rewards most. Currently, the university is hosting aid workers from India and East Timor, and students engaged in civil society initiatives in Iran. They can get credit for those courses, but only in their home institutions. This initiative helps have their voices heard, as well as allows for a truly global exchange of ideas. This project, which started with no external support, should become a global best practice and, with minimal external funding, would have truly global growth potential.

Concluding remarks: an electronic Agora

More international partnerships are bound to emerge, leading to international degrees, recognized at multiple institutions. The opportunities created by the virtual world are enormous, and there is room for at least one international institution to provide a true electronic Agora, a meeting space, for real empowerment of various global partners. This would be a place to trade, and re-certify, in a global context, courses (and empty spots in the existing ones), as well as to guide students to the classes that are best fit for their educational needs and interests.

The author believes that those truly global initiatives have the potential to bring in much needed global equitable prosperity into education around the world; yet, it is up to our generation to take up this challenge.

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Sintesi

Una recente classificazione elaborata dallo Sloan Consortium per la formazione blended e online si articola sulla relazione percentuale tra contenuti fruibili online e momenti di formazione in presenza. Da questa analisi si deduce che il blended learning, nelle tre variabili identificate, che prevedono percentuali di formazione online da un minimo del 21% ad un massimo del 99%, è di gran lunga la formula di formazione a distanza più diffusa nel mondo. Per formazione online tout court, secondo questa classificazione, si intende invece solamente quella in cui non ha luogo alcun tipo di interazione in presenza, né nella fase introduttiva del corso, né per lo svolgimento degli esami finali. Se da un lato la formazione blended così intesa riesce a dare una risposta efficace ai bisogni formativi ed emotivi degli studenti, i corsi erogati totalmente online hanno grandissime potenzialità per la creazione di un ambiente globale di educazione, libero da qualsiasi vincolo geografico. Il potenziamento di questa prospettiva porterà ad uno spazio virtuale della conoscenza, in cui sempre più studenti di ogni parte del mondo partecipano a corsi erogati da istituzioni anche molto distanti da loro con docenti che, a loro volta, si trovano in qualsiasi altra parte del mondo. Il livello di delocalizzazione e di internazionalizzazione, quindi, raggiunge il suo massimo, permettendo di sperimentare approcci innovativi per la formazione, favorendo la creazione di una agorà virtuale mondiale in cui persone appartenenti a contesti culturali diversi e lontani possono conoscersi e avvicinarsi. L'elemento da valorizzare per favorire questo tipo di sviluppo è la collaborazione

inter-istituzionale, sia per la creazione di nuovi corsi, prodotti in partnership, sia per il reclutamento di docenti e studenti. Le prospettive che si aprono sono portatrici di innovazione, non solo tecnologica e pedagogica, ma anche di tipo organizzativo, nel senso che l'Università del futuro sarà sempre più simile ad una struttura di rete ampia e flessibile tra istituzioni accademiche che operano a livello internazionale e che offrono i propri corsi ad una platea mondiale di possibili studenti. Del resto, nei soli Stati Uniti, gli studenti online sono stati oltre 3,5 milioni nel 2006 e circa il 53% delle università affiancano in maniera stabile e consolidata corsi online alla propria offerta formativa in presenza.

I progetti di cooperazione che si stanno attualmente realizzando a livello nazionale e internazionale costituiscono, quindi, passaggi importanti per identificare standard applicabili a contesti globali di formazione e spingere le università a dotarsi di strutture organizzative più flessibili e manageriali.

Alcune partnership maturate all'interno della Warsaw School of Economics (SGH) stanno sperimentando diverse forme di cooperazione inter-istituzionale per l'online learning. La SGH, per esempio, in collaborazione con l'University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS), ha realizzato due moduli di un corso per studenti provenienti da Polonia (50% circa) e Stati Uniti (50% circa), con alcuni guest students da Iran, Sri Lanka e Timor Est; ciascuno dei partner ha realizzato un modulo e il team di progettazione del corso ha affrontato problematiche di standardizzazione e di accreditamento. A livello nazionale la SGH, invece, ha realizzato ECONET per la produzione di cinque corsi di alta specializzazione in campo economico, inseriti nel programma accademico di altrettante università polacche che si sono divise i compiti in modo da potersi avvantaggiare delle conoscenze di un team di esperti e docenti più ampio e specializzato. Tuttora è in fase di realizzazione la nuova edizione di un corso di Philosophy of Computing che coinvolgerà docenti da USA, Svezia, Italia, UK, Polonia e Grecia e che sarà erogato da 4 università.

D'altra parte, la cooperazione inter-istituzionale può dimostrarsi anche un fattore determinante di equità sociale, come dimostra l'esperienza della UIS. Dopo aver aderito ad un progetto dello Sloan Consortium americano in favore dei sopravvissuti all'uragano Katrina che ha devastato New Orleans nel 2005, l'Università dell'Illinois si è impegnata in un progetto di appoggio a Università americane dotate di una offerta didattica poco sviluppata, allo scopo di migliorare l'equità dell'offerta formativa a livello nazionale tramite corsi online. Nello stesso quadro di interessi, si interisce l'altra iniziativa della UIS, quella di offrire iscrizioni gratuite a studenti meritevoli di paesi in via di sviluppo che, senza abbandonare la loro residenza, possono accedere ai corsi accademici dell'università USA.