

SCENARIO-BASED APPROACH TO THE EMERGING COMMUNITIES OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ONLINE EDUCATION

*Authors – Marc Jacquinet, Universidade Aberta, Portugal and CERIO, FUCAM
Bélgica, João Caetano, Universidade Aberta, Portugal*

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Introduction

The recent past has been of plenty of attempts and positive outcomes in online education. Most universities and tertiary education institutions are at least paying lip service to the trend and have teams working on extending training and education programs on internet or intranet-based schemes.

The trend is clear, online teaching and learning are the way forward. However, the way it will be and the interaction with other trends and processes are not that well known and clearly understood. The overall trend for online training and e-learning is quite clear, we are now entering in the mass take-off (SALMON, G 2005).

By online education, we mean internet-based interaction, between teachers and students, and computer-based learning (such as intranet training programs) that can be either fully online or partially online. The first of these cases is the 'radical' or full e-learning model, with only online activities and virtual classes, and the second case is the blended learning scheme that combines distant or asynchronous online education with traditional lectures in the classroom.

Our discussion of the challenges in online learning and teaching revolves around the prospective or scenario analysis that is often called the long view (SCHWARTZ, P 1998) and which is divided in two main strands of literature as we will see in the next section (JOUVENEL, BD 1964, JOUVENEL, HD 1999, GODET, M 2000, 2001, GAUDIN, T 2005).

Besides the discussion of strategy and prospective analysis, a word on the scope of our study must make it clear. We will not discuss the administrative and managerial aspects of the higher online education. These substantial problems are worth a special and in-depth attention that is beyond the objective of the current paper (see figure at the end of the paper). Problems of management will be referred to when they are central elements in the definition of some of the scenarios for the future.

Trends in e-learning and the usefulness of scenario analysis

This section tackles two issues: the statement of the problem (about e-learning) and the methodological issue (about scenario analysis and strategy formulation).

E-learning has recently emerged out of the limbo of traditional distance education, once an undervalued type of teaching and learning, to come to the front of the discussion and the very transformation of higher education institutions and their environment. Online education, e-learning and new modes of knowledge production are expanding beyond the traditional organizations (from open universities to almost any higher learning organization and private firms for e-learning and from universities to private firms and corporation for scientific research) to reach new actors and publics. Some authors distinguished, besides the traditional scientific knowledge produced in universities (mode 1), another way of producing and diffusing (scientific) knowledge beyond the traditional channels and actors, that is widely known now as mode 2 of knowledge creation (GIBBONS, M, C LIMOGES, H NOWOTNY, s SCHWARTZMAN, P SCOTT, and M TROW 1994).

In the last decade or so, one of the typical changes in e-learning and the new modes of knowledge creation is the increasing share of private corporations that in many cases are not just limited to vocational training and applied knowledge but are extended to post-graduate teaching and research.

Between traditional education (either at a distance or in physical presence), other varieties of teaching and learning modes have emerged, namely the blended-learning courses (or b-learning as it is increasingly referred to) in which students combine synchronous time in the classroom with asynchronous or with (less often) synchronous online sessions. Blended learning has at its center a valuable approach to learning (DRISCOLL, M 2002, OSGUTHORPE, R and C GRAHAM 2003, SINGH, H 2003, THOPNE, K 2003, GARRISON, D and H KANUKA 2004) that plain learning cannot answer properly (BROWN, J and P DUGUID 1996, 2002). This last point is argued by several authors, e-learning is not the new ad best size that fits for all: traditional classes have better learning outcomes than online packages for people that have the same preparation for both type of learning. Moreover, we are still at the first stage of the diffusion of e-learning and the change "will not be achieved by learning technology alone (SALMON, G 2005: 201).

According to our research, experience and reading of the specialized literature, one of the challenges for online teaching is to prepare adequately the students for the online learning environment and this preparation can compensate for much the difference.

E-learning is in need for a new public, much like the *nouveau roman* in the early 1970s, and a new context. This means that people teaching and learning online have to master new and distinct capabilities than with traditional learning or teaching, alongside with the central elements of good scholarship and, as we will see, this is often here that part of the problem appears.

Anyway, for successful learning, we have to be prepared, i.e., master new technology and tools, change attitude of teachers and students with one another, and keep up scholarship with what was and what is good about tradition; so these are the crucial aspects.

Diagnostics and some possible scenarios

Scenario planning divides itself in three phases: the analysis, the diagnosis, and the preparation for action. The analysis implies a multidisciplinary work that leads to the formulation of the general context of the issue under scrutiny. Secondly, a more precise study is done, this is the diagnosis of the issue at hand, and here the e-learning challenge. Thirdly, the diagnostic leads the way to the preparation for action and decision making and implementation of measures and adoption of new attitudes.

The diagnostic can be divided into two parts: first, the presentation of the analysis (diagnosis proper) and, second, the formulation of the scenarios based on the hypotheses about the future and characteristics of the organization or activity that we want to prepare for the future. At this point, the diagnostic has been outlined above briefly, so we will pass right away to the scenario part. There are four possible scenarios: slow growth (unlikely in the near future), high growth, breakdown of the expansion and a sustained or steady growth with some booms and troughs.

Given the scenarios, the main consequence is the adaptation of the organization, say a department, to the different possibilities. Consequently, the action today, the formulation and implementation of strategy will integrate the possible contexts and without noticing it the organization will be on a different path for change than one that ignores scenarios. A path, among the scenarios, could create new dynamics within the organization such as a community of practice (WENGER, E 1999, WENGER, E and WM SNYDER 2000, WENGER, E, R MCDERMOTT and W SNYDER 2002, WENGER, E 2004).

Scenarios and strategy formulation for universities

In this section, I limit the consideration to the Universities and leave aside the other higher education institutions for which much of the trends and the overall context is the same or very similar but whose aims and organizational structure differ and may need some more careful scrutiny that is beyond the present paper.

Scenario analysis is especially useful for organizations or any community, to get itself ready for the uncertain future. Long range planning, another word for prospective analysis, is not about prediction, not so much about the abstract future, but about understanding what the future can or could be and get prepared for action. The objective is not an intellectual task for its own sake but a way of preparing oneself for decisions and action.

After having outlined the possible scenarios for the future and the trends with their respective levels of plausibility, the context is analyzed and strategic action can be decided and implemented.

Conclusions

Scenarios are not just about strategy, they are also about people and communities, and, to be more specific, communities of practice, i.e. groups of people with a common interest that create new activities and explore uncharted aspects of group interaction, going beyond the routines of day to day or conservative organizations. The same people in a group, recreating

their job environment can build new traditions and foster different lands of learning and that is what is interesting with learning.

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Author(s) :

Professor Marc Jacquinet Universidade Aberta
Rua da Escola Politécnica 147 Lisbon, Portugal mjacquinet@univ-ab.pt

Professor João Caetano Universidade Aberta
Rua da Escola Politécnica 147 Lisbon, Portugal
jrc@univ-ab.pt

