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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DISTANCE TEACHING

André Lorsignol

Project of the social department of the Haute Ecole Charleroi Europe within the framework of the “horaire décalé” education (which means: courses followed by the students in the evenings or during the weekends)

- The context
- The aims of the project
- How to get the adhesion of the participants?
- The means used to reach this aim
- The educational perspective
- Encountered difficulties
- Perspectives for the future

The context

The Haute Ecole Charleroi Europe was born when the decree about the higher and non university education was applied. This Haute Ecole groups together the schools

of higher education which are part of the independent and denominational network of the area of Charleroi. It also includes schools located in Mons or Louvain-la-Neuve.

According to the decree, the Haute Ecole should develop educational activities and research activities. It should also develop activities in collaboration with the economic, social and cultural world.

The Haute Ecole Charleroi-Europe groups together different kinds of education (“agricultural, economic, paramedical, educational, social and technical”). More than 250 people are working in this Haute Ecole and more than 2800 students are studying there.

We are going to focus on the Institut Supérieur Catholique (Catholic Higher Institute), Section Sociale Charleroi (Social Section Charleroi). For more than 50 years, “social workers” (protected title) have been educated there:

The education of the social workers can be considered as being divided into three important parts:

There is a theoretical part so that the students will get the necessary knowledge to understand men and society;

There is a methodological part so that the students will be able to use the appropriate means which are necessary when they have to intervene;

There is a practical part to enable the students to face social reality.

The staff of the social section includes, among others, Mitres Assistants (Masters Assistants), Maîtres de Formation Pratique (Masters of Practical Training) who are working in the various areas of knowledge related to the social field: sociology, psychology, law, economy, philosophy, medico-social,...

The teaching can be followed during the weekdays (*horaire de jour*) or during the evenings and the weekends (*horaire décalé*). This teaching is part of the short-term higher education.

The “*horaire décalé*” teaching is intended for the people who are already working or for the people who are looking for a job so that those people can follow the courses in the evenings or during the weekends.

We would like to point out that in the Communauté Française (French Community), there are only two schools where “*horaire décalé*” teaching can be attended. So, numerous students come sometimes from more distant areas.

The aims of the project

The direction of the school has noticed that the people following the “horaire décalé” courses generally encounter some difficulties to attend those courses. That is why the direction has decided to organize courses which could, at least partially, be followed “at distance”.

- The professional activities of some students prevent them from attending all the courses and educational activities.
- To go to the courses, some students have to invest a lot of time and money since they live far from the school. For them, the amount of time and money invested is really important when it is compared to the number of hours of courses given in the school. Owing to this, some people do not register.

The institutional investment for this kind of education is really important: there are less students who attend the courses in the evenings and during the weekends than during the weekdays. So, the number of hours/teachers necessary-number of students ratio is clearly higher as far as the “horaire décalé” courses are concerned.

So, a partially distance teaching aims at:

- enabling more students to register
- making easier the work of the students by providing them with new institutional means aimed at helping the students when they can not attend some educational activities
- enabling the students to spend less money to come to the school

It is also worth pointing out that the rapid evolution of the new technologies of information and of communication and their introduction in the educational world have to be considered as factors favoring the implementation of the distance teaching.

How to get the adhesion of the participants?

To implement this kind of project, all the people involved have to participate. The direction of the institution cannot carry out this task without the help of the other people involved.

If the students seemed to be really interested in those new perspectives, the teachers did not have the same kind of reactions.

Without concentrating on the problems which are always and everywhere related to changes in the processes, the main reluctance was based on:

- the teachers' fear that they would no longer master the transmission of knowledge
- the difficulty to check the acquisition of knowledge
- the difficulty to communicate without being physically present
- the teachers' fear that they could lose their human role at the benefit of the machine

The process we have followed includes several stages spread over several months:

- Description of the problems related to the “horaire décélé” courses and suggestions of potential solutions for those problems
- listening - debate about the remarks and the objections
- The decision of the direction

So, the decision and the implementation of a system of distance teaching was taken by the direction.

The educational perspective

In the traditional teaching, various tools are used: this kind of teaching is not perfect but it educates the students correctly so that they will be able to carry out their jobs during their professional lives. The feedback coming from the institutions, from the persons in charge of training and from the other people working in the social fields enables us to assess constantly the credibility of our teaching.

The implementation of new forms of teaching will not be detrimental to the quality of the formation.

For some courses, new forms of teaching can be used but it cannot become a generality. For some educational activities, a direct relation (in time and space) between the professor and the student will always be necessary.

The direction is aware of the potential difficulties related to those changes. So, we do not want to change too many things too quickly. On the contrary, we want to act carefully, pragmatically and we will constantly check the effects of those changes.

The professors have been free to choose how they were going to proceed so that at the end of the year, for some courses, only 2/3 of presence is necessary for the students. Which means that 1/3 of the time is devoted to a guided learning at home or in the institution.

The professors have only one obligation: during those periods, they have to be available for the students in the institution. The means to have a direct contact can be: the physical presence of the student, the phone communication, the fax, the e-mails.

The means used to reach this aim

The means we can use to reach those aims are varied and multiple. Some of them were already used before the introduction of computers and they should not be neglected. The perspectives created by computer science have to be added to the means already existing. So, we will have to choose the most useful and relevant in function of the aims of the course, of the capacity of the professors and of the students, of the investment of time and money,...

Means to use for the distance teaching

Aids:

- Books,
- Handbooks,
- Compilation of articles,
- CD-ROOM, on-line courses, video-conference, virtual class

Assessment

- Questionnaires
- Synthesis,
- Reports,
- Exercises

Contacts

- Mail, Phone, fax, E-mail, Chat

Means implemented for the professors Aids:

1. All the professors have at their disposal a portable computer that can be connected:

- In the institution: the professors can be connected to the internal network and they have a direct access to internet.
- In the classrooms: internal network, internet and projection equipment
- Aat home: internet

2. In the institution, people can use scanners, printers and software.

Logistics:

- Collaboration with the secretaries through typing.
- Secondment of a teacher (halftime) for direct help
- Contract with a specialized company for the realization of CD-ROOM

Formation

Participation in the project Did' ACTIC implemented by the department "teacher's training school" of the Haute Ecole Charleroi-Europe (implantation of Mons) and with the support of the European Social Funds. Tanks to this project, the professors should learn how the computer tools can be used to reach educational aims.

Means implemented for the students: Computer room unconditionally accessible during the opening hours of the institution.

Encountered difficulties

The transition towards a system of teaching partially "at distance" even if we act as carefully as foreseen, can be considered as a little revolution in comparison with the weight of the tradition of the transmission of knowledge.

We do not want to sign away the quality of our education, we do not want to compel the professors to use means that they would not master.

All the professors will not be able to acquire new skills simultaneously and at the same rhythm. It is important to respect the rhythm of each professor.

So we have decided to base our approach on the concrete reality, the course has to be created and mastered by the professor.

A first step consists in providing the professor with a computer form (a text file), which was already the case for most of the courses.

A second step consists in changing the computer styles and structures of the texts so that they can be straightway used “en mode plan” that enables to move in all the parts of the work.

A third step consists in establishing, from the main text, hyperlinks towards other parts of the work, or towards related files about complementary information, or towards websites offering other elements of knowledge.

A fourth step will consist in giving a more developed computer architecture enabling the realization of a CD-ROOM with those pieces of information or enabling an on-line access to those pieces of information (this work will be carried out by a specialized company).

With this kind of process, the professor will never be deprived from his property. In fact, this property can always be used in its traditional form and it is changing since its evolving towards a next step at the rhythm of the professor.

We have noticed that the professors generally try to put those new processes into practice and that they are generally satisfied (restructuring of their courses, clearer talks, feeling of mastering of the new tools).

The main encountered difficulty is related to the students: it is difficult for them to adapt to a new kind of teaching where the knowledge is no longer directly transmitted by the professor to the students in a specific place. The students’ need of the professor’s physical presence and direct speech goes hand in hand with the need of the presence of the groups of students.

Generally, the periods aimed at learning at home (according to the methods defined by the teacher and with the possibility to get in touch directly with the teacher) are rather considered as holiday periods since the constraint of the supervised work is absent.

We will have to implement some means to solve this problem.

It is also difficult for the student to consider the computer and the multimedia technologies as tools of learning and not only as a source of amusement or of superficial information.

Perspectives for the future

Eventually, we aim at having at our disposal (in the frame of the formation of social workers) “*an open and flexible system enabling everyone to educate himself in function of his needs*”. This system will not only be used by the “*horaire décalé*” students, but also by the students who attends courses during the weekdays or by the social workers who already graduated and who want to go on educating themselves.

The realization of this aim will obviously depend on the evolution of legal measures regarding education. The evolution seems to be ineluctable. So it is better to analyze all the aspects of those changes so that we will be able to choose the better way to implement this new kind of teaching. If we do not analyze all those aspects carefully, we could be obliged to implement this new kind of teaching without mastering it fully.

Development of the material means:

- Extension of the capacities of the internal network so that we can increase the number of connections (development of the use of portable computers by the students)
- Computers will be put at the disposal of the students as long as they study in our institution
- Reinforcement of the possibilities of the connection with WEB servers, FTP servers and mail servers
- Reinforcement of the possibilities of contact between students and between students and professors (virtual community like Smartizens, Kanari),
- Reinforcement of the stocking capacity to put courses on line at the disposal of the students
- Installation of a computer multimedia studio for the professors (digitizing documents - video sequences - sound sequences - editing)

Development of the means of formation:

- Collaboration with the public or private organisms specialized in the implementation of the distance teaching.

Conclusion

The required procedure to implement new forms of teaching is not easy. The main difficulty is not related to the new techniques and means, it is rather related to the calling into question of the role of the different people involved. The education has to evolve in the same way as our society, it must be adapted to this new evolution and it even has to become an active partner of this evolution. If we do not manage to reach this aim, those new and fantastic means could be used by other powers in an uncontrollable way.