Pedagogical dilemmas in the simultaneous education

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Abstract

In the past few years, Swedish higher education institutes are increasingly co-opting distance education by broadcasting lectures, given to campus students in traditional classrooms, in real-time for distance students. We call this phenomenon simultaneous education. Irrespective of the obvious benefits, there are many dilemmas associated with this pedagogical mode and yet many university teachers remain rather reluctant to embrace this model of education. Adopting a qualitative approach and conducting semi-structured interviews in a department of Linnaeus University, we have identified some pedagogical dilemmas that arise in the simultaneous mode. Our results indicate that online and campus education bear fundamental different assumptions and combination of both modes often becomes problematic in the design, delivery and course examination.

Key words: Simultaneous education, pedagogy, technology, dilemmas, campus education, distance education.

Introduction

Advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has affected every aspect of our everyday life and activities. Technological developments have driven innovations that previously were unthinkable in education. This has resulted in a shift of traditional boundaries of universities moving beyond brick and mortar education institutions. London and Draper (2008) argues that this phenomenon, the *'silent revolution'*, has a potential to transform the academic system. They argue that revolution refers to neither curriculum nor requirement revolution, but rather the way that education is delivered.

Last decade was marked with a tremendous growth of online education (Aly, 2013). Many factors such as expand access, supporting the disabled students, improving quality of teaching and learning, increasing flexibility and reducing costs (MacKeogh and Fox, 2008) have led Universities into adopting distance education.

After the introduction of the tuition fee into the Swedish Higher education system for a proportional segment of students, some universities faced declining number of enrolled students. Many universities began to provide online courses and programs simultaneously with campus based education. This mode of teaching and learning is often known as the dual mode (Högskoleverkets, 2008) or simultaneous teaching and learning (Popov, 2009). Based on this we call this mode of education as *simultaneous education*.

Regardless of the benefits, there are many dilemmas associated with this mode of education. Many university teachers remain reluctant to embrace distance education (Yick, Patrick and Costin, 2005). The pedagogy of online learning is very distinct from the traditional one. The former is argued to be learner centric whereas the latter formed as teacher-centred. This contradiction of two modes of pedagogies is assumed to be challenging for teachers involved in both modes simultaneously. Online is more time consuming (Bates and Poole, 2003) and involvement of teachers simultaneously in both modes requires extra efforts (Popov, 2009).

Results of the study conducted by Popov (2009) indicate that merging the two modes of education, campus and distance is pedagogically problematic for both students and teachers with distance students appearing to be more disadvantaged in the program. Another pedagogical dilemma is that despite the fact that there is an agreement that the two modes of learning, online and campus based are intrinsically different(Högskoleverkets, 2008), the same fundamental quality requirements should apply to both (Högskoleverket, 2008). Regardless of the increasing importance and adoption, traditional teaching pedagogy has remained significantly unchanged (Bramble and Panda, 2008). It is challenging for teachers to adapt their teaching style to the diverse socio-cultural contexts of distance students.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the pedagogical dilemmas related to the simultaneous education.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, an outline of theoretical considerations will be presented. Next, we present an overview of the research design and method that study employs, to be followed with analysis. We conclude by discussing the results of the study and its theoretical and practical implications.

Literature Review

Distance education

Compared to the conventional classroom based model, distance learning is a mode of delivering education and instructions when learners and information sources are scattered by time and distance (Miller and Honeyman, 1993). Students who are not able to participate in physical classroom settings have been able to get distance education from the 1840s (Tait, 2003), however it did not become a serious rival for the traditional mode until the advent of ICT in the classrooms (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999, Draper, 2008). The Internet and ICTs have fundamentally changed the ways education is provided. Previously, distance students received printed, audio or video material via postal services with limited attendances. Learning was perceived as an individual activity performed by students with the help of mass-produced guidelines and instructions. Application of the digital social technologies in the distance education sector shattered this perspective by providing means of interactive communications over the course material and learning issues. In this mode, learning is perceived as a social activity that is achieved over collaborative problem solving and rich discussions in various forms (Lever-Duffy, McDonald and Mizell, 2002). This new mode is also called online learning and is defined as any learning process in which at least part of the curriculum, transmission of information and/or communication offered in the online delivery mode, where instructors and students are not necessarily connected at the same time (Berge and Collins, 1995) Online learning can involve synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning. Synchronous mode refers to those applications that enable real time communications between teachers and students. This can include videos, audio conferences, chat forums etc. Asynchronous mode refers to the communications that does not occur in the real time.

Advantages and disadvantages of distance education

Emergence and adoption of online learning is continuously followed by a debate over its advantages and disadvantages. Online mode increases access to education for general public and professionals. Its inherent flexible structures allow students to fit education around their responsibilities and commitments. Additionally, as the population at large is increasingly involved in lifetime learning beyond the normal school age, online education can be seen as an efficient approach to adults education (Oblinger, 2000). Students can rewind the videos to listen again to the topics that they did not understand the first time or fast-forward those topics that they are familiar with already. This allows students to obtain higher satisfaction

with their online learning beyond what is possible in a normal classroom (Kirtman, 2009).

Moreover it has been argued that the diverse geographical, social and experimental backgrounds that students bring to such settings can increase access to more expert and rich knowledge in online courses (Maggio, Chenail and Todd, 2001). Furthermore, online education can cut tuition fees, transportation and textbook costs (Aspillera, 2010) and provide easier means of education for people with disabilities or special needs.

On the other hand, it has been mentioned that domestic distractions, unreliable technologies, inadequate contact with teachers are the main barriers of successful distance education (Östlund, 2005). Often students enter the courses without sufficient training how to use the underlying technology and interact in online sessions, which in turn could limit their learning opportunities to the point that they drop out. In the online courses, dropout rate is significantly higher compared to the classroom based courses, due to difficulties in language, time management, and study skills (Xu and Jaggars, 2011).

When it comes to the institutional side of the discourse, it has been argued that the time and resources are not allocated sufficiently for online students, cost and capital investments are high, large number of participants can provide pedagogical challenges and it is hard to adequately evaluate students whom they have never met (Hellman and Development, 2003).

Quality of Online learning

Quality has different connotations for different people and it is quite hard to define it in the higher education regardless of the underlying delivery mode. Different stakeholders such as students, their parents, administrators, teachers and other faculty members have different perspectives about quality, therefore it is hard to achieve consensus on what constitutes quality (Hathaway, 2009). Despite countless guidelines and best practice documents offered by authorities to protect students' rights to get quality online education, critiques claim that none of them provide actual measurement tools to conduct quality assessment. In an attempt to clarify eras of concern for delivering quality online education, Hathaway (2009) provides a theoretical framework that places meaningful learning in conjunction to teachers' pedagogical skills, technological framework, delivery modes and institutional strategies. Six learning dimensions emerged in her research, instructor-learner, learner-learner, learner-content, learner-interface, learner instructional strategies, and social presence.

Teachers offering courses in the simultaneous mode are dealing with pedagogical dilemmas offered from the online mode as well as specific issues emerge from combining traditional classroom norms and online mode. These dimensions can provide a benchmark for gathering empirical data to see how pedagogical challenges emerged in the simultaneous mode differ or comply with these.

Research Design and Context

The study focuses on a specific master program in Linneaus University that offers simultaneous education for both campus and distance students. It is important to mention that distance students are scattered throughout the world and not sitting in a particular room together. Program course syllabuses mainly are designed with the same format for both asynchronous and synchronous modes of teaching. An asynchronous platform that is used is Moodle, where students can find all the relevant information and content of the courses. Lectures are mainly given simultaneously to campus students and distance students through Adobe Connect. Adobe Connect is a synchronous platform used to deliver lectures in real time. It has much other functionality such as breakout room creation possibilities (creating space for group work and discussions), chat options, file and media sharing, whiteboard, video recording potential.

In order to address the purpose of this study, qualitative research approach is deemed to be the most appropriate approach. Qualitative research provides deep insights on the studied phenomenon through understanding the social reality of participants of the research, their experiences, beliefs and values (Denzin and Lincoln, 2009). The data is collected through semi-structured interviews with three teachers that are involved in the simultaneous education. Questions and challenges revolved around three main aspects: course design, course delivery and examination.

Analysis and Results

Data from the interviews were analysed based on the three phases: planning, budgeting and designing the course, delivery of the course and feedback and examination.

Planning, budgeting and course design

Analysis shows that designing simultaneous courses is more challenging than conventionally assumed. Teachers have different approaches towards designing course for simultaneous teaching. One of the teachers has decided to treat everyone as distance students and redesign the course over activities, assignments and reflections, instead of too many lectures. In his opinion, lectures are less and less important and they should not dominate the course design anymore. The other approach used from other teachers is to divide campus and distance students. This in turn is time consuming because the same content is delivered twice through two different contexts.

In general, technology is seen as the weakest link in the chain and courses would have been designed differently if the technology could provide easier interactions, such as easy on/off sound and video, rather than text based conversations. Teachers are aware of the fact that assignments need to be designed in the way to meet individual students needs and although some have moved towards that direc-

tion, it is not always easy to do that in the simultaneous mode because teachers feel that the campus students needs, specially those who pay tuition fee, could be neglected.

Teachers consider the importance of peer-to-peer work when they design the course. '*We have to structure it well if we want it to work properly. Just asking them please work together doesn't work*'. Some try to trigger this by designing broad assignments so students could choose their own personalized course from the realm of possibilities and pick peers with different backgrounds to tailor a unique experience. This is argued to have positive effect on the learning and students' satisfaction.

In terms of the course material, this was not perceived as challenging. Teachers mostly use papers instead of books. Nonetheless, when they decide about the course literature, they need to coordinate with the University Library to make sure that articles are accessible and books are provided as eBooks from university and available for sale as well.

All of our interviewees mentioned that budgeting simultaneous courses is more challenging, as there are different unknown factors such as students' participations, miscommunications and dropouts. As one of the teachers said, "*There is not a good strategy for budgeting, you have to plan and hope for the best.*"

Course delivery

Instructor-learner interaction is what turned out to be as the one of the problematic issues in the simultaneous teaching. This interaction is so impersonal and often '*I don't even know whether the distance students are actually there*'. The same applied for the other teacher who argued that '*technology creates a wall that makes interactions hard*'. During the lecture distance students tend to use chat functionalities that have an impact on the flow of the lecture and makes it very hard for the teacher to give the lecture, discuss and follow the chat. Also textual conversations that take time and problems with technology tend to affect and displease the campus students. This in some occasions has lead teachers to divide campus and distance students. A common pattern that emerged was students' confusion in working with the technology in real time. Sometimes they have problems with bandwidth and some use below the required standard equipment despite it is explicitly mentioned and required in syllabi. Nonetheless it is difficult to enforce this policy in every occasion. Some students, mainly distance, have a tendency to double-check the written information with the teachers, because in contrast to their campus peers, they do not have the active peer interaction.

Feedback and examination

Grading was not perceived as challenging for teachers, although they had somewhat slightly distinct approaches. One of the teachers argued that it depends from the type of examination. In written assignments students get the same feedback

regardless whether they are distance or campus students. Oral presentations and examinations tend to be problematic sometimes, due to the technology '*It is important for me to see the facial cues*' and this is what is missing with distance students. If distance students have problems with technology '*we don't continue with the oral examination*' in order to avoid misjudgements. The other teacher claimed that campus students are more 'privileged' in this regards, since they get to have more thorough insights. The other teacher argued that to provide fair grading student evaluation is broken into different parts that leads to identification of pattern of writing of students. This is turn facilitates the fair grading, although that tends to be difficult in case of large group of students. Providing comprehensive feedback for distance students is hard. In the traditional classrooms, verbal conversations are faster and more effective, while distance students require text-based feedback. Therefore, teachers have to use both mechanisms simultaneously.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to identify the pedagogical dilemmas that teachers encounter in the simultaneous teaching. Simultaneous teaching we call the mode of co-organizing both campus and distance students in the class simultaneously. The study focused on a master program in Linnaeus University that is involved in simultaneous education. Data was collected from interviews with three teachers, all involved in this mode of teaching.

Analysis indicates several dilemmas that teachers face when they are involved in this mode of teaching. Dilemmas emerge in all the three phases: course planning, course delivery and examination. Campus and distance education are based on significantly distinct philosophical assumptions on teaching and learning process. It appears that combining these two incompatible modes is challenging and results in somewhat unequal inclusion of students. As the literature suggests, most of the teachers felt and were aware that distance students are somewhat left out. Technology was perceived as the weakest point that affects all three phases. With a proper technology that enables the simultaneous mode, courses would have been designed differently to meet the requirements of both student groups. Teachers find themselves in situations where they have to troubleshoot technology in order to continue the lecture and that have a distressing effect on teachers. In this regards, suitable rooms with a technology designed to support this specific mode need to be acquired. This would also result in better opportunities to activate silent students, which is another challenges that teachers face. The other dilemma that emerged is the difficulty of transferring old pedagogical skills to this new mode. Teachers need to go through a learning curve to handle the challenges and this requires a lot of trail-and-error learning. Despite the fact that simultaneous courses are encouraged by the institution to expand the university reach, mandates or proper technological infrastructures are not provided sufficiently. This provides

huge pedagogical and operational dilemmas that we believe affect both students and teachers experience of simultaneous education.

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