A Qualitative Approach to E-Learning ? A Dynamic Situation in Montpellier Business School.

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes a more productive way and approach for an e-learning research methodology. The e-learning tools: the computer and the Internet are serious obstacles for sense making in the student's behaviour context. Their use defines in a way the user's behaviour. This article underlines the advantages of qualitative methods for this kind of research and vote for an ethnographic method. Our suggestion has many assets in order to understand and consider interactions. Communication processes tend to have a strong influence on learning behaviour and are almost neglected during quantitative methodology. Accurate and corrective feedback is essential for establishing and performing e-learning techniques. Our suggestions are highlighted by lessons learnt from Montpellier Business school experience.

Keywords: E learning, qualitative methodology, context, interaction, business school, France.

This article is an attempt to present the context of a long-term study conducted in Montpellier Business School. We are interested in the e-learning tool and how both teachers and students perceive it so that best results will be potentially attained. We are going to show you the different aspects of the subject by exposing it in terms of a system. A system whose complexity is obvious and thus the difficulties are numerous. The choice of our methodology was made by taking into account this complexity and we have no choice but being post-modern and transdisciplinary. Although results are not yet publishable, many lessons learnt from this experience can be presented. We are in the first phase of our research where context and methodology have an important role in making choices for the project in the future. In a global forum where both researchers and practitioners come together and share ideas as defined in the goal of this congress, our ambition is to share these ideas and exchange point of views and lessons learnt in the same field from colleagues. Theoretical significance is an important issue in academia, where construct validity, internal validity, generalizability and reliability of the research finding are hallmarks of good quality research. (e.g. Tahai and Meyer, 1999; Scandura and Williams, 2000)

1.THE CONTEXT

Montpellier Business School is doted with an e-learning tool since 2001. The first initiative was made in order to help students that during an exchange one-year-program with affiliated business schools all over the world could "attend" the same course with the ones in the Montpellier campus. As the years went by, e learning was introduced to all students regardless of their place of stay as a new learning tool. Both students and teachers were reluctant to this change. We'll see how we overcame this resistance to change progressively by measures taken for motivating both students and teachers to use this new tool.

"Our conceptual point of departure is that activities of individuals become meaningful only if they are studied in a systemic context, within the comprehensive social system. Research inspired by the qualitative paradigm strives at doing research in, rather than on organizations and has specially made use of the case study methodology."(Rouse and Daellenbach, 2000; Mintzberg, 1999; Eisenhardt, 1989).

Goffman as a product of the Chicago School emphasizes a qualitative analysis of the component parts of the interactive process. He explores the details of individual identity, group relations, the impact of environment, and the movement and interactive meaning of information. Interaction is viewed as a "performance" shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with "impressions" that are consonant with the desired goals of the actor. It is not the interface that counts but the interaction. And most specifically we are interested in situated interactions/artefacts (in situ) and understand the users during these situations.

A learning situation is quite complex to comprehend. Jean Piaget is one of the most important theorists in the field of learning. According his studies, the central mechanism for the child to develop his intelligence depends on two complementary operations: assimilation and adaptation. The first consists in integrating new data in mental structures that already exist. The second is about changing the established structures and adapting to more complex structures. The young child explores his universe by tools he disposes such as his hands, his mouth and all five senses. We have observed the same mechanism on young students during class. As observed by René Spitz this type of mental and cognitive activity necessary to our personal development can be blocked by affective perturbations.

Another mechanism reinforces learning: the transfer between student and teacher.

It is not about the knowledge transfer but the affective "charges" of the student projected to his teacher. It is a mechanism that reminds us the psychoanalytic transfer. In all relationships this transfer exists even if actors are conscious or not.

This mechanism can be compared to what is commonly known as the Pygmalion effect. Robert Rosenthal studied this mechanism in the 60's at the University of Harvard. He concluded that if the teacher believes in students' chances for succeeding he could positively influence their performances. If on the other hand he has doubts, students are very likely going to confirm his belief. How is this Pygmalion effect going to be transposed in an e-learning situation?

We chose not to study cognitive activities such as memorization and motivation and their impact on learning. It is obvious that they play a key role. We should underline the paradox between the necessity to adapt and at the same time the resistance to change for seeking security. Man is between two opposed urges: life and death, Eros and Thanatos.

The e learning has a shattering effect on our way of learning and teaching as well. We are continuously seeking to adapt to a new environment. But what type of change is at stake? By putting aside financial stakes that will not be studied in this paper, we will be mostly interested in a comprehensive approach to established practices. What is the future of teachers? What are we expecting from them? Should they be the course "designers", the tutors or both? What will this change bring about to their every day habits?

The massive use of information and communication technologies, as the Internet and the pedagogy used to accompany this tool ought to be innovative. The teacher is looking for means to achieve the best results and establish a particular methodology. He is constantly searching tools for his pedagogical activity. The innovative technology, the teacher's distance and the differences compared to a traditional class impose new findings to manage this new learning situation.

Teachers must become information architects. Elaine and Roger Everden have focused their work in this area defining their branch of information architecture more generally:
"Information architecture is the foundation for managing information in general as a corporate resource. It describes the theory, principles, guidelines, standards, conventions and dimensions that are necessary to design an effective management framework for information. Its purpose is to design information structures that help people to use information in effective, productive and innovative ways." (Everden and Everden, 2003)

A community of teachers is born where cooperation and solidarity are omnipresent not only between teachers but also between them and students.

Each student creates his own "strategy plan" for achieving the goal of the course. He is his own manager of time (rhythm) and pedagogy. They have the total freedom to proceed as they wish. Students are encouraged to evaluate themselves by quizzes (self-evaluation). The simplified teacher-transmitter, student-receiver sketch was replaced by the system teacher-student where the first is not the only knowledge holder but also a mediator.

2.CHANGE AS CO-EVOLUTION

"Resistance to change is considered as an obstacle to change implementation. People resist change because they feel uncertainty about their future, are concerned with potential loss of territory or are afraid to fail in front of new expectations and tasks." (Wanberg and Bans, 2000)

Some key elements to successful change management are:

- "Assessing organizational culture with an emphasis on informal and formal communication and structure
- Supporting participation and involvement
- Understanding people's fears and concerns and
- Setting up a training strategy aiming at offering education and support.

These tactics all take into account the importance of the human factor as a critical success or failure factor for understanding and managing change programmes."(Vakola, 2002)

Technology is a key enabler for implementing change. Students already familiar with the Internet, game boy and other videogames shouldn't have many problems to adapt. A study conducted by Sherry Turkle shows that the reaction in front of the computer varies and is very personal. French psychiatrists have used computers in a therapeutical context and can enumerate many advantages.

The computer is the mediator, the artefact that facilitates interpersonal exchange.

"Change is a never ending process of continuous transformation, as it ought to be in a world where Darwin's motto about the responsiveness to change seems more "updated" than ever: It is either the strongest species that will survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change". (Prastacos, 2002)

The direction of Montpellier Business School taking into account the importance of the project is establishing a new organizational structure in order to motivate all the

personnel to take part in it. Teachers need to attain a certain level of confidence on this tool as Watzlawick has underlined in order to obtain change. The hierarchy of the institution is doing everything for helping them to obtain this confidence. Advantages for teachers included less class hours, training and technical support, more research activities and free Internet access.

3.METHODOLOGY CHOICES

"Despite the so-called interpretive or hermeneutic turn in the social sciences that has also influenced and, some would argue, undermined this discipline (Reinhardt, 2002), ethnography has clearly established itself as an important alternative to other qualitative approaches as a method for the applied social sciences."

The definition of ethnography by Hamersley & Atkinson (1995) is one of the most quoted in the field: "... we shall interpret the term "ethnography" in a liberal way, not worrying much about what does or does not count as examples of it. We see the term as referring primarily to a particular method or sets of methods. In its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens; listening to what is said, asking questions—in fact, collecting whatever data is available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research".

According to Garfinkel (1991), "there are good reasons for ethno methodological studies to specify the production and accountability of immortal, ordinary society—that miracle of familiar organisational things—as the local production and natural, reflexive accountability of the phenomena of order. Among those reasons is making discoverable one of those phenomena of order, but only one, namely what analysis incarnate in and as ordinary society, as practical actions locally and interactionally produced and witnessed embodied details, could adequately be".

Observational methods by which an individual or individuals gather data on processes and behaviours are being chosen. They provide us with the opportunity to collect data on a wide range of behaviours, to capture a great variety of interactions and to openly explore the evaluation topic. We can develop a holistic perspective, an understanding of the context within which the projects operates. This may be especially important where it is not the event that is of interest but rather how the event fit into or is impacted by a sequence of events. Observational approaches also allow the evaluator to learn about things the participants or staff may be unaware of or that they are unwilling or unable to discuss in an interview or focus group.

The most fundamental distinction between various observational strategies concerns the extent to which the observer will be a participant in the setting being studied. "The ideal is to negotiate and adopt that degree of participation that will yield the most meaningful data about the program given the characteristics of the participants, the nature of staff participant interactions, and the socio-political extent of the program". (Patton, 1990)

As Hamersley suggests: "to rely on what people say about what they believe and do, without also observing what they do, is to neglect the complex relationship between attitudes and behaviour."

It is not uncommon to think of organisations as systems (Parsons, 1951; Luhmann, 1971). More precisely: "a system is a structure of interacting, intercommunicating components that, as a group, act or operate individually and jointly to achieve a common goal through the concerted activity of the individual parts" (Thomas 1979). The study of ethnography is automatically the study of some form of organisation or system.

The relationship between people, events and activities is not context free. It can only be understood fully by an appreciation of the context and way in which people interpret their world. Starting by questioning how we make sense of our world in terms of our values, attitudes, actions and interpretations is an essential first step. Theories about what should be done and ways of acting are themselves the product of previously "taken for granted" action. Questioning assumptions and unravelling taken for granted views and perspectives helps to set new co-ordinates and thereby re- defines problems and issues (Aguinis, 1993; Schein 1992; 1996).

Orlando Fals Borda had written about action research: "action research as investigating reality in order to transform it". "Action Science seeks to change work based and interpersonal behaviour and as such is particularly relevant for business organisations (Argyris, 1999; Argyris & Schon, 1991; Putman, 1999). It is an inquiry approach suited to an organisational culture, which appreciates double-loop learning and is committed to interpreting knowledge in a way that reveals organisational patterns, processes and defensive routines. In Action Science, intervention is psychological since it explores innermost feelings and emotional reactions, some of which are protected by personal defence mechanisms. As these defence mechanisms break down individuals may feel vulnerable and exposed. Risks to self and others involved are reduced if the group themselves are sensitive to others feelings and ensure participants finish sessions on a positive note."

Dialogue between researchers and teachers and students was conducted during the three years in form of interviews. The research report is said to be a joint construction as a result of these dialogues. Each student is a different case study and all we can conclude is some trends. "Case to case generalization is based on

analogical reasoning. Such reasoning is only plausible when there are solid arguments that, when a particular researched case has characteristics which are relevant for the research conclusions, another case that has not been also researched also has these characteristics."(Miller, Fredericks, 2003) How qualitative data become evidence for a claim? By blending observational methods for studying dynamic phenomena that change over time.

In order to comprehend an e-learning situation, we will conduct interviews, we'll make a case study that will be in situ and also take part in observations. We are in the first stage where about 20 interviews were made with teachers involved and reluctant ones as well as students. The sample of students was considering a large variety of behaviours: the enthusiastic, the indifferent, foreign students as well as potential students not familiarised with the tool yet

4.CONCLUSION

Rapidity, adaptatability, flexibility and autonomy are some of they key qualifications in the beginning of the third millennium. A good manager ought to be "intelligent" and proactive. In this context, students in business schools must learn to manage "change" and being able to adapt in different situations

It is quite delicate to make any kind of conclusions in this stage. It is more about asking a series of questions. If this questioning is pertinent our ambition is fulfilled.

Frontiers are abolished and distance is a key term we should not continue ignoring. E-learning education not only offers us the possibility to learn more and differently but also familiarizes us with the notion of distance that is no more an obstacle but a "banal" element of every day life.

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