SYMPOSIUM

the virtual classroom: teaching european studies through webinars

alexandra mihai

Institute for European Studies, Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Pleinlaan 5, 1st floor, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

E-mail: Alexandra.Mihai@vub.ac.be

Abstract

This article analyses the impact of the use of synchronous e-learning tools on educators, in terms of achieving their teaching goals, taking as a case study the webinar series on current European Union affairs of the Institute of European Studies in Brussels. There is currently a gap in researching the use of technology-enhanced learning in social sciences, and this article aims at filling this gap by evaluating the pedagogical experience of teaching European Studies, a complex interdisciplinary field, through web-based seminars (webinars).

Keywords   Webinars; online learning; online interaction; European Studies

SETTING THE SCENE

Throughout the past decades, education has been in a constant process of redefinition. Both teachers and learners had to thoroughly reassess their roles and try to incorporate, to a certain extent, the societal and technological changes in the educational process. New teaching and learning tools emerged, and a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning became apparent (Hannafin and Land, 1997). Moreover, the learning process has been slowly transcending the class-room walls, as the traditional setup gave way to the much more open and flexible personal learning environment (Attwell, 2007). By adopting more and more technology-enhanced learning elements, distance learning turned into e-learning, offering the advantage of de-localisation and flexibility, allowing a departure from the 'classroom paradigm' and using the virtual space as a facilitator of knowledge and information exchange (Mihai, 2009). Blended learning has developed as a 'middle way', building on the added value of both traditional and online learning methods and minimising the feeling of

isolation experienced by the distance learners (Christova and Mihai, 2011).

In order to lead to a positive experience for both teachers and learners, all these changes at the level of educational tools need to be accompanied by a thorough revisiting of the pedagogical underpinnings of the teaching and learning process (Park and Bonk, 2007). However, due to the very quick technological progress, many of the new tools are often used without prior reflection on their pedagogical merits. Online learning platforms are used as mere repositories of documents (Budka and Mader, 2006), while teaching methods that are specific to the traditional classroom setup are being transposed one to one, without further reflection or adaptation, to the virtual environment. Often, the lack of a pedagogical and institutional strategy in adopting and using the emerging tools prevents them from reaching their full potential and determines both teachers and students to prematurely label them as insufficient or inadequate for the educational purpose.

Moreover, in some disciplines, the adoption of technology-enhanced teaching and learning has been taking place at a slower pace than in others. Such examples can be found in social sciences and more specifically in political sciences and international relations. An explanation for this cautious attitude can be found by looking at the type of knowledge involved: in social sciences, the nature of the content is rather subjective, requiring a constant debate beyond the factual level, which, in its turn, implies the need for a teaching approach based on permanent interaction (Christova and Mihai, 2011). A flexible mix of traditional and innovative tools and methods, following a pedagogically sound strategy, appears to be a suitable solution. However, little research has been done to analyse what innovative tools are more efficient in teaching social sciences and at what stage of the teaching process they can bring added value.

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This article aims to address this research gap by looking into the use of synchronous e-learning tools in political sciences, taking as a case study the webinar series on current European Union affairs of the Institute for European Studies (IES) of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Webinars are seminars, workshops or conferences held via a web-based interface; they constitute the most common form of synchronous e-learning. While the majority of the existing literature on the use of webinars looks into the learner's experience, the focus of this article will be on the teachers' perspective. Their perception of and experience with the webinar tool will be analysed, as well as the extent to which this synchronous online teaching method has enabled them to reach their pedagogical goals, as compared with the traditional face-to-face setup. Teachers' perception of the tool, its functionalities and its usefulness are relevant in order to both establish the suitability of webinars for this particular discipline and increase the likelihood of the tool being used by the teachers in their future activity.

SYNCHRONOUS E-LEARNING AND THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

E-learning has become a popular channel for the delivery of educational content, be it in an academic context or in the corporate world. The advantages of self-paced learning, detached from a single geographical location, bring added value to the educational process, providing opportunities to use a flexible mix of teaching

and learning methods. The initial form of e-learning, and still the most commonly used one, is asynchronous e-learning. This consists of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS) that acts as a central point for the dissemination of the content. The VLE/LMS fulfills the role of an 'online book', providing the students with the essential information, but at the same time, also an 'online library', a repository where various related documents are posted, for further reading and reflection. Systems of self-testing and progress monitoring are also made available, aiming to facilitate the learning experience. Moreover, the e-learning platforms also try to ensure the communication flux between teachers and students and among students by means of online forums and announcement boards. These are asynchronous e-learning tools because the interaction does not occur in real time, and both teachers and students have the opportunity to spend more time for reflection before interacting with others. The flexibility of self-paced communication – undoubtedly one of the main advantages of e-learning – is counterbalanced by the lack of immediate feedback, leading to a sense of isolation and ultimately to the decrease in motivation (Rovai and Jordan, 2004). This is one of the reasons that led to the increased adoption of synchronous e-learning tools in the past years, enabled by the technological progress and increased internet speed (Wang and Hsu, 2008).

Synchronous forms of e-learning go a step further, adding to the VLE/LMS the real time communication. Thus, they fulfill the function of bridging the gap between the traditional classroom and the e-learning platforms, by providing increased interaction capacity, at different levels, in the absence of face-to-face contact, allowing teachers and students to communicate live, via Voice over IP (VoIP) or chat (Wang and Hsu, 2008: 176). The two forms of e-learning – asynchronous and

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synchronous – are complementary in their roles and functions, and, therefore, it is extremely important to assign each of them to specific teaching and learning activities to which they can best contribute (Hrastinski, 2008: 56). Due to its essential feature, that of ensuring real-time communication, synchronous e-learning is often seen as being more similar to the face-to-face setup than asynchronous e-learning. There are, however, obvious differences between the two media and these differences have to be taken into consideration when designing pedagogical strategies.

When analysing synchronous forms of e-learning, such as webinars and online tutorials, several advantages become obvious. First, they facilitate social interaction, which can be, at times, even more dynamic than in the traditional classroom (Park and Bonk, 2007: 308). The interaction that takes place online can be characterised as 'parallel interaction' (Lobel *et al*, 2002), whereby various participants simultaneously communicate with each other, using the tools available (chat, VoIP). This offers the discussion a special dynamic that differs from face-to-face interaction, which is more structured and unilateral. Social interaction is directly linked to the development of learning communities (Hrastinski, 2008: 52); synchronous e-learning provides learners with the feeling that they belong to a community, within which they can exchange ideas with their peers. This type of communication is similar to the one that takes place in a face-to-face context, and thus it proves to be a motivating factor for the participants to share both content-related

and non-content-related contributions. Hrastinski (2008) labels this 'personal participation', as seen in contrast with the 'cognitive participation' encountered in asynchronous e-learning, which lacks the real-time component but offers the participants more time to reflect before contributing. Last but not the least, an important advantage of synchronous e-learning is the teacher immediacy (Park and Bonk, 2007: 308). Unlike in the case of the VLE/LMS, the educator is present for the entire duration of the webinar and can have a real-time dialogue with the participants. This increases the motivation and attention levels and helps diminish the sense of distance and isolation experienced during an asynchronous e-learning course (Salmon, 2000).

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned advantages, synchronous e-learning also presents a few challenges. First, it cannot fully replace the face-to-face setups due to the lack of non-verbal communication cues, which are very important in maintaining the level of student motivation. Second, it can be argued that the real-time communication enabled by the synchronous tools does not automatically translate in online collaboration (Park and Bonk, 2007: 309). This is mainly due to the low level of group coordination and the weak coherence of the various contributions. However, an experienced moderator can help overcome these issues by providing clear rules and guidance as well as pointing the debate into the intended direction. These factors are very relevant and they have to be taken into account when using the webinar format because they require special attention for designing new, innovative pedagogical strategies that depart from the traditional classroom paradigm.

A thorough analysis of the different e-learning forms points to the fact that no single medium can offer the ideal teaching and learning experience on its own, as they each focus on one or several aspects of the process. That is why the most important thing to consider when adopting e-learning tools is how to best combine the various formats – asynchronous and synchronous – in order to provide a suitable learning structure for different learners, contexts and contents (Park and Bonk, 2007: 309). Moreover, bearing in mind the complexity of the educational process, the use of these tools is not an aim in itself; they are the means for providing a fruitful teaching and learning experience. The way they are used requires a great emphasis on the underlying pedagogical aspects and the role of the teacher.

Unlike in the case of the traditional classroom setup, where they mainly have to concentrate on delivering the content, in the virtual environment the teachers have to fulfill various other roles that are equally important (Ng, 2007). One of these roles is that of a facilitator, which exists to a certain extent in the classroom as well, but which takes a different dimension online, where body language and physical presence are missing and new rules and protocols need to be established and respected. Another aspect that cannot be overlooked by the online teachers is the technical mediation. Often an awkward and uncomfortable role that takes them out of the comfort zone of their discipline, offering technical assistance is essential for the smooth running of the asynchronous and especially synchronous e-learning tools.

CASE STUDY: TEACHING EUROPEAN STUDIES THROUGH WEBINARS

The IES of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel has developed a blended learning approach for teaching European Studies. Starting with an e-learning platform – the E-modules – with a limited number of interactive elements and moving on to a

mix of online and face-to-face methods, it became apparent that what the courses were missing was a real-time interactive component to act as a bridge between the asynchronous VLE and the traditional classroom sessions and enhance students' engagement (Christova and Mihai, 2011). Thus, the latest addition to the blend is the use of a synchronous e-learning tool that accommodates the increased geographical spread of the target audience.

The synchronous online interaction is used to fulfill various pedagogical goals, ranging from virtual office hours to online seminars that are part of courses delivered through blended learning and self-standing webinars offered to a wider audience. In 2011, the Institute launched its 'Wednesday Webinar' series, consisting of short online seminars (one and a half hour long) on specific institutional or policy aspects of the European Union. Within this series, two mini-strands developed: one focusing on various policies of the EU (competition policy, EU budget), as well as EU's relations with external actors (China, Taiwan) and another strand dedicated to EU foreign policy, the 'Quo vadis EU?' series. While the first strand is addressed to a larger audience – anyone with an interest in EU affairs – the second is more targeted, as the seminars are part of a Master level course on EU foreign policy. Also, while the first category of webinars is usually run by one presenter and one moderator, the 'Quo vadis EU?' webinars are taught to be a series of presenters (up to five in one session), including the regular tutors, external speakers, academics and policymakers.

The webinars are organised using Blackboard Collaborate™. Being designed for educational purposes, this web conferencing tool provides various functions that facilitate an interactive learning process. Meetings are set up and can be joined through a single click on a link sent by the teacher/moderator to the students; no

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additional software is necessary and the technical support needed on both sides is very limited. There is an increased focus on accessibility, the virtual classroom being compatible cross-platform and optimised for low bandwidth. Interactivity takes place both in an audio (and video) format and in written format. Teachers and students can share applications, files and documents and give presentations. Moreover, all sessions, including all materials and forms of input (written, oral, visual), can be recorded and sent to the students who could not attend, but also to the students who did attend, as support for the revision of the course (Christova and Mihai, 2011).

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research focused on the teachers who provided lectures using the webinar tool, in any of the above-mentioned contexts. An online survey was conducted in order to provide insightful information on the way teachers perceive the webinar format and the experience they had while using it, bearing in mind they have all been delivering lectures on similar topics in the face-to-face setup. The number of teachers who delivered webinars and answered the survey ($n = 15$) is too small to generalise the results of the case study, but taking into account it represents more than half of the academic body of the IES, and that we are analysing the use of an innovative teaching method, we believe the research can be a useful illustration of the teachers' experience with the

synchronous e-learning tool. Moreover, due to the fact that such pedagogical approaches are still quite rare in political science, the case study can prove a helpful insight into the adoption of innovative, technology-enhanced teaching tools that can bring added value to the traditional setup.

RESEARCH RESULTS: SYNCHRONOUS E-LEARNING TOOLS – JUST A PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

The teachers who participated in the survey belong to the disciplines of political science, international relations and economics, with specialised interests in topics such as EU foreign affairs and foreign policy analysis, transnational governance, EU environmental policy, EU budget and cohesion policy, public administrative governance. The sample includes junior lecturers as well as experienced professors, and most of them used the webinar tool between two and ten times, with some of them only having used it once. They all assessed themselves to be generally open to innovative teaching tools and methods. While teaching in the webinar format, they used all the main functionalities available: presentation tools, video, audio, as well as chat in order to interact with the students.

From a pedagogical perspective, most of the teachers agreed that the webinar format enabled them to reach their teaching goals. However, opinions were split concerning the teaching methods supported by the synchronous e-learning tool; some of the teachers felt they could not use all the methods they use in the face-to-face setup. Most of the teachers said that they did not prepare their lecture differently than a traditional lecture, by using any innovative pedagogical approaches. What they all agreed with is that teaching in a webinar format

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requires more effort to stay motivated than a face-to-face lecture, due to the absence of a real audience and that during a webinar the teacher needs to make more effort to capture the attention of the students. Also, while they all considered the recording and archiving facilities a valuable feature and agreed that coordinating with a group of colleagues in preparation and during a webinar was a useful experience, the teachers felt that they could not engage with the students in the virtual environment in the same way they do in the face-to-face lectures.

From the technical point of view, the majority of the teachers agreed that the use of the virtual classroom was easy and intuitive and that, in their experience, most of the integrated tools worked well, allowing them to conduct the lecture as planned. The majority of the teachers agreed that the likelihood of technical problems arising increased their anxiety while teaching in the webinar format, while all of them found it very important to test the system with all its functions, the internet connections as well as their microphone and camera before starting the webinar. Moreover, a very important aspect is that most of the teachers felt more confident using the webinar tool in the presence of someone who can offer them technical support, while they all believed that specialised training is necessary in order to use the tools in a correct and efficient way. The teachers at the IES received one-to-one training before the webinar, as well as a written handbook detailing the main functionalities of the platform.

Overall, the teachers found synchronous e-learning to be a convenient, flexible tool for both students and teachers and especially useful for reaching students in remote locations. The majority thought the webinar experience was rewarding from the pedagogical point of view, though some of them found it quite stressful, because of the novelty and the possibility of technical problems. However, a few of the teachers expressed the feeling that the webinar provides an awkward experience, due to the lack of direct contact with the students. While the majority was overall satisfied with the use of the virtual classroom, planning to use it in their future activity and to recommend it to their colleagues, not all the teachers considered it as having great pedagogical value in itself. One very interesting consideration that comes to confirm the assumption that the adoption of innovative technology-enhanced tools needs a very thorough pedagogical strategy is that they identified more pedagogical than technical challenges in using the webinar tool. Some of these challenges have to do with the very nature of the medium, implying the lack of non-verbal communication and the high level of anonymity (students are reduced to a list of names and sometimes a webcam image), while others are linked to the teaching methods that can or cannot be used successfully in the virtual environment. Some of the teachers felt they could not engage in conversation-type teaching, while others found it difficult to react quickly to questions to avoid long breaks, with silence being amplified in the virtual classroom as compared with a traditional setup. Other challenging aspects identified were being able to control and motivate the group without having direct contact, as well as the novelty of the tool and all its functions, being constantly discovered by both teachers and students.

On the whole, the teachers consider the virtual classroom as a useful tool for remote lecturing and conferencing, one that should be strongly promoted, but a tool that can best fulfill its potential in conjunction with other – asynchronous – e-learning tools and face-to-face lectures rather than as a replacement for the traditional lecture.

CONCLUSION

Synchronous e-learning represents a form of online learning that goes a step further than the VLE, by adding the real-time interaction element, aiming, at the same time, to become a suitable replacement for the face-to-face teaching. While having developed many of the functionalities that contribute to a dynamic debate between teachers and students and among students, our small-scale survey suggests that webinar platforms cannot yet be considered an equivalent to traditional lectures, due to the fact that the particularities of the virtual environment – lack of real presence and non-verbal communication – require special effort from both teachers and students in order to maintain the attention and motivation levels. Moreover, the adoption of such tools has to be accompanied by a thorough pedagogical strategy, including specific methods to engage with the participants and to make the most of the features available. Last but not the least, the change of mentality is also an important factor, as educators need to re-think the way they approach teaching and the various activities involved – before, during and after the lecture – in order to have an efficient and successful performance in the virtual classroom.

For a course in European Studies, in an environment with an overwhelming amount of freely available information, synchronous e-learning brings added value by creating an 'event' element and offering a forum of debate and experience sharing

for people studying and/or working, or interested in European affairs who are in various locations. Webinars make knowledge and expertise more easily accessible, with geographical borders, disciplinary borders, but also the traditional teacher/student border becoming irrelevant within a common 'learning space' (Christova and Mihai, 2011). Nevertheless, the experience of the webinar series has shown that teachers perceive the virtual classroom as a complementary tool, and not as a replacement, for the face-to-face lectures, especially useful for reaching out to broader audiences. The flexibility and interaction are seen as added value; but in order to fully suit the various teaching styles and the complexity of the discipline, synchronous learning is best placed as one piece of the learning puzzle, one method in the blended learning approach. It is, in fact, a story of adaptability that goes both ways: teachers need to be prepared to think out of the box and adjust their teaching methods to the new tools and discover how these can make their experience even better, and the webinar platform must be used in the teaching activities where it can bring added value and in conjunction with other tools that complement it best.

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About the Author

Alexandra Mihai has a Masters degree in European Studies from the University of Bonn and has been working as a Researcher at the Institute for European Studies/VUB since 2007. Besides lecturing on key aspects of the EU (EU institutions, the decision-making process and multi-level governance), she has researched and published on the conceptual and pedagogical underpinnings of technology-enhanced learning, focusing on the methodology of teaching European Studies through a blended learning approach.