CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN APPROACHES TO ONLINE QUALITY

Manuela Milani

Phd Student – Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Education

Manuela.Milani@ulp.u-strasbg.fr, +39 3478737145

Adresse professionnelle

Université Louis Pasteu ★ 4 rue Blaise Pascal - F-67070 Strasbourg Cedex

Summary: Within a context where we can see a continue increasing of virtual mobility and - at the same time - where the notion of "online teaching quality" is still under exploited, this paper aims to analyse the different approaches to quality.

The objective of this work is first of all to identify the categories of variables on which the different approaches focus their attention in order to evaluate the quality of a course, and then to define a methodology to understand which of these variables could be identified as cultural ones.

This paper is part of a PhD research aimed at exploring the impact of cultural dimensions on the design of online courses offered by universities from different European areas.

Resumé: Dans un contexte où la notion de « qualité de l'enseignement en ligne » reste sous-exploitée alors que progresse continument la mobilité virtuelle, cet article analyse les différentes approches de la qualité.

Ce travail a pour objectif premier l'identification des catégories de variables sur lesquelles se fondent les différentes approches d'évaluation de la qualité d'un cours. Il vise ensuite à définir une méthodologie permettant de cerner les variables pouvant être définies comme culturelles.

Cet article résulte d'un travail de recherche de doctorat visant à explorer l'impact des dimensions culturelles sur la conception des cours en ligne offerts par un panel d'universités de différents pays européens.

Key words: Quality, evaluation, cultural differences, virtual campus.

Cultural Differences in Approaches to online Quality

1 - INTRODUCTION

This paper focus the attention on the notion of quality of online education and aimed to analyse the different approaches to quality evaluation .

The objective of this work is to identify the main characteristics of the different approaches to quality evaluation and measurement and then to define a methodology to understand which of the differences emerged could be identified as cultural ones.

The paper presented to this conferences in 2006 described the first steps of our research, exploring the impact of cultural dimension on evaluation design in the online courses proposed by an European Virtual Campus.

2 – CONTEXT DESCRIPTION

As well described by Doufexopoulou (2008), Europe's tradition in Higher Education was established in Bologna in the 11th century. The history of European Education developed gradually as the very first academics (students and staff) were moving within Europe establishing the strength of a certain quality via academic mobility that was based on "value".

In the last decade, after some centuries from the first steps of the European Academic history, the funding policy of the European Commission was aimed to support initiatives to develop Virtual Campuses and to facilitate the exchange of learning material among different academic institutions in the form of learning objects. This policy seems to reveal a sort of "fear" of a possible domination of an American monopoly on higher education. This is not only an "European fear": the same kind of fear seems to emerge in UK, Australia and Canada. Three countries that, for ages, have been focusing their attention on the risk of a growing educational American imperialism ("American packaging of culture"), which finds in Internet its propulsive push. The extent and seriousness of these studies are indicators of the importance with which globalization is viewed by the higher education sector.

Moreover: the European Commission policy within this sector seems to have been focused mainly on the technological perspective of the phenomenon; as Pawlowski (2007) affirms standards have been discussed controversially in the last decade: different standards have been developed, but they are mainly useful for the description of content (Learning Object Metadata, LOM, IEEE, etc.) or for the interaction between LMS and learning objects (Sharable Content Object Reference Model, SCORM). Actually the main objective could be considered the re-use, recombination, and re-contextualization of learning objects.

However, the rather recent establishment of joint courses among different countries/institutions brings up the importance of the other face of the medal: the pedagogical one. For years, it had been almost removed from discussions, and – consequently - the notion of quality of an online course (as we will see in detail in the next chapters) becomes each day more relevant.

3 – CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING ONLINE

The simplest definition of culture includes values, beliefs and practices shared by a group of people. Going deeper, culture is recognized as an attribute of individuals, of small groups, of organizations, and of nations (even if normally the last one tends to be consider the most relevant aspect of culture, as also the fundamental work of Hofstede seems to affirm implicitly).

Our starting point is that each single person (teacher or student or tutor) can belong to a multiplicity of cultures, each one important at any given time (Brislin, 1993).

So different "categories of culture" can be identified. Margaryan, and Littlejohn (2007) recognised how organisational culture can be reflected in the ethos of higher education or corporate training; professional culture includes for example that of teachers or of learning technologists; disciplinary culture embodies both "hard" and "soft" sciences; and national cultures reflect ethnic diversity. Cultural impact is complex to detect and to

reveal, because each facet of culture can simultaneously influence a range of processes. For example, the ways in which learning resources might be shared and reused will be influenced by a range of organisational, professional, disciplinary and ethnic factors, such as community size, member proximity, roles, and the types of tasks for which resources are used.

Teaching practices are based, as human acts, on cultural values, but how can we let the awareness of this influence emerge? And how could we promote virtual mobility of teachers and students without a policy about understanding cultural differences and their impact on learning and teaching practices?

An analysis of literature, as well as an analysis of the projects financed by the different bodies, allows us to recognize how cultural factors have not been extensively taken into consideration in the conception of tools and eLearning systems so far, neither from the point of view of learners' varying cultural backgrounds, nor teachers' backgrounds or the influence that these backgrounds have on the choice of underlying teaching methodologies. Developing a cultural awareness could therefore contribute to lessening the potential for misunderstanding learner or teacher behaviour.

Furthermore, in a world in which interactions between culturally diverse people and groups are becoming usual, developing models for cultural interpretation is a valuable undertaking. Not only there is an increasing need in teaching processes for the ability to address individuals and groups with respect to culture, there is also a need to learn about culture itself in order to identify its rich and multi-faceted variability.

4 – THE NOTION OF QUALITY IN ONLINE EDUCATION

As well as described by Sanyal and MartinWhile (2007), traditional institutions are still playing a dominant role in providing higher education and – at the same time, in Europe like in the rest of the world, they are also changing their roles as follows:

- they are becoming partners in regional and international consortia;

- they have engaged in different forms of transnational education;

- they have joined virtual university initiatives;

- they are building partnerships with industries.

Bologna process itself aims to build a "Quality European Education", good enough to attract overseas students also. In the European Union scale the policy frame has been oriented to the goal of establishing an open geographical entity within which education will be implemented without borderlines in education and professional services.

These different trends are responsible of a growing interest on quality: internationalisation policies and practices are lacking a quality assurance dimension and quality assurance approaches seems to be too confined to national contexts.

Moreover: the concept of quality is not strictly defined and it evolved over time.

An analysis of the current literature (Milani, 2007) allow us to identify a lot of different definitions of the concept of quality: excellence, exceptionality, perfection or consistency, providing value for money, conforming to specifications, getting things right the first time, meeting customers' needs, having zero defects, providing added value, exhibiting fitness of purpose, transformation.

Going deeper into the definition of quality of online education, the trend is confirmed: a systematic, formative methodology to measure and ensure quality is lacking. The most common tools for gauging educational quality are surveys and course evaluations in which instructors, learners, or sometimes administrators provide their perceptions, opinions, or experiences.

On the other hand, the "quality language" is inspired by the business practice, words commonly applied in business are used, such as "customer", "service", "product" and "efficiency", but traditionally educational institutions consider such an approach as inappropriate. Nevertheless, this approach is still confirmed.

Following this trend, the term "quality" is often understood – even in the literature - as

shorthand for Totally Quality Management (TQM), thus adopting the business model associated with this term.

Another relevant way to think about quality is the reference to the ISO model: in 2005 the ISO/IEC 19796-1:2005, the ISO/IEC standard benchmarks for e-learning appeared and has been presented like the new international standard aiming at harmonizing the various approaches used around the world for assessing the quality of e-learning initiatives.

An important contribution that provide a complete analysis of the state of the art in this field as been provided by Pawlowski (2007) who distinguishes among three classes of standards:

- Generic Quality Standards provide concepts for quality management or quality assurance, independent from the domain of usage. As, an example, ISO 9000:2000 is used in different sectors and branches. As a generic quasi-standard, the Excellence Award by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) is widely used but not agreed on by a formal standardization body.

- Specific Quality Standards provide quality management or quality assurance concepts for the field of learning, education, and training. This means that specific requirements concerning processes or products are incorporated.

- Related Standards are used to manage or assure specific aspects of quality. As an example, learning technology standards are used to assure interoperability as a specific quality objective. As another example, ISO 9241 assures the usability of systems by providing specific requirements and guidelines for user interface design.

In his analysis Pawlowski shows how the new quality standards for learning, education, and training, ISO/IEC 19796-1 is used, implemented, and adapted (ISO/IEC, 2005).

The standard is an instrument to develop quality in the field of E-Learning. But to be understood it has to be splitted into three parts:

- a description scheme for quality approaches,

- a process model as a reference classification,

- reference criteria for evaluation.

ISO/IEC 19796-1 contains a comprehensive list of reference criteria for the assurance of quality of learning products. The catalogue contains functional, media and learning psychology related reference criteria. Furthermore, it includes criteria related to data security and criteria related to national laws in the area of distance learning.

The most useful part of Pawlowski's contribution is the suggestions about the aspects that have to be considered in order to distinguish quality concepts, in particular referring to the education community:

- "Context and Scope: For which context is an approach intended (e.g., schools, Higher Education, Vocational Training), which are the processes covered (e.g., design, development, realization)?

- Objectives: Which are the quality objectives which can be achieved by an approach (e.g., cost reduction, process consistency, learner satisfaction, product reliability)?

- Focus: Does the quality approach focus on 1) organizations / processes, 2) products / services, or 3) competencies?

- Perspective: For which stakeholders and from which perspective was a quality approach designed (e.g., developers, administrators, learners)?

- Methodology: Which methods and instruments are used (e.g., benchmarking, criteria catalogue, guidelines, information provision)

- Metrics: Which indicators and criteria are used to measure the success (e.g., drop-out rate, return on investment, learner satisfaction)?".

A step beyond, referring to our purposes, could be reached adopting a different point of view and analysing the process of quality focusing on the different levels of involvement (.Stracke and Hildebrandt, 2007):

- Level of the individual person (e. g. decision-maker, operational staff, learner): At this level the individual stakeholders of educational processes within or related to an organization are addressed to build personal quality awareness. Therefore, each individual user should be provided

with prepared and contextualised information and educational material on quality development related to the user's current situation, so that she or he builds and raises her/his own quality awareness gaining experience and expertise on quality.

- Level of the organisation: at this level the focus is on the whole organisation. Based on the quality awareness of all stakeholders from the step before (level of the individual person), a vision and mission statements, quality objectives, and a corresponding quality strategy will be defined. These definitions are the basis for all further activities in the field of quality development for this organisation. The organisation's activities on finding and defining a quality vision and quality objectives (e. g. workshops, brainstormings, discussions) will further contribute to each involved stakeholders' quality awareness. On the other hand, a certain amount of quality awareness as well as quality experience is a precondition for this step. In most cases, the initial input for these activities results from a quality expert (management or external consultant).

- Integration of quality development involving all stakeholders: After the organization has defined its quality vision and quality objectives and a corresponding quality strategy was chosen, these in itself abstract means have to be applied to the organisation's processes. It is crucial, that all stakeholders understand their roles and their contributions to the organization's success. At this level the organisational definitions from the step before are communicated to all stakeholders and corresponding concrete quality management instruments and measures have to be applied to all educational and business processes. The stakeholders have to be involved in all processes concerning the quality development to get an understanding of its importance and impact. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate the quality development objectives into the educational and business processes as well as to integrate needs and responsibilities of all stakeholders into the overall quality management. A meaningful definition and

documentation of the organisation's educational and business processes is the basic point to start any activities concerning quality development.

To be deeper understood this phenomenon has to be connected to the fact that there are two types of quality assurance: internal and external. So, as we can distinguish among different classes of standards, we can also distinguish among three mechanisms of quality assurance. The mechanism are: quality audit, quality assessment and accreditation.

The first and the last one are external mechanisms, while quality assessment could be both internal and/or an external mechanism.

Quality audits examine whether an institution or one of its sub-units has a system of quality assurance procedures and determines its adequacy.

Quality assessment involves evaluating (reviewing, measuring and judging) the quality of higher education processes, practices, programmes and services using appropriate techniques, mechanisms and activities.

Accreditation is a process that usually results in the award of a recognition status (yes/no, a score on a multipoint scale, a combination of letter grade and score, an operating licence, or conditional deferred recognition) for a limited period.

Accreditation is the most widely used method of external quality assurance. And the trend seems to go toward accreditation, being perceived as the mechanism able to ensure a specific level of quality according to the institution's mission, the objectives of the programme(s) and the expectations of different stakeholders, including students and employers.

Regardless of the quality model adopted, there are many methodological problems involved in measuring quality. Many characteristics of quality are not measurable and must be assessed through proxy variables.

Scores on ordinal scales are imprecise, and so are opinionated judgments.

Lee Harvey expressed serious reservations about accreditation when he stated: "Europe is rushing precipitously into accreditation and that the approach being taken is based on naïve views of what accreditation is and what it can

achieve. More fundamentally, there is an underlying but unspecified and unexamined set of taken-for-granteds that legitimate accreditation. Accreditation is neither neutral nor benign; it is not apolitical. Quite the contrary, the accreditation route is highly political and is fundamentally about a shift of power but a shift concealed behind a new public management ideology cloaked in consumerist demand and European conformity". (Harvey 2004).

Related to a country's as well as to organizational culture, the role and understanding of quality needs to be identified: adopting the standards, it is important, according to Pawlowski, to have a common understanding of quality in a terminological and methodological way. This needs to take into account a deep understanding of the educational situation in a country, a region, or an organization. As an example, from a European perspective the cultural diversity places enormous challenges on the quality debate. Timmermann et al. (2004) report that students are viewed from different angles in Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and southern European countries. In Anglo-Saxon countries, they report, students are seen as investors in their own carrier, in Scandinavian countries they are viewed as young citizens and in southern European countries as family members. It becomes manifest that the structure of educational systems determines the answer to the quality question to a high degree, and cultural diversity has t be taken into account.

In the same way a study aimed to investigate the images of teachers could be very useful. The most we obtain a clear picture of the educational scenario the easiest and most constructive the research could be.

So, as already affirmed about the need of a deeper cultural awareness, from our point of view also a growing consciousness about quality issues is needed, in particular among teachers and academics because even if this topic has acquired a relevant importance, it is expected to focus efforts in this way in the forthcoming period. In this sense quality must not stay anymore a concept at the level of mere bureaucracy. It should be able to signify something real and concrete that assures effective and measured results which will

facilitate the training institutions to go further in their tasks, but to do this the main actors involves should acquire specific competences and awareness of all the variables involved, in particular the cultural ones.

5 – OUR PROPOSAL

As presented in the Cemaforad Conference 2008, as the first step of the methodology adopted within my PhD research to investigate the notion of quality, we built a grid of description to help us collecting all the different variables that could be involved in the description of a course.

The second step is the validation of this grid of description.

The third step consists in the use of the grid to identify the variables assessed in order to evaluate the quality of the courses: that means investigate how a standard is identified and then used.

The theoretical framework we assume as main reference for this research is the "training octagon" developed by Albert Raasch in 1989. The octagon identifies the following categories:

- Learner;
- Teacher;
- Methods;
- Content;
- Media;
- Objectives;
- Evaluation;
- Institution.

Starting from the eight poles of the octagon we developed two grid of description:

- a theoretical grid, organized in different levels: the first indicate the pole of the octagon, the second a first level of variables related with the pole and then some important connected references and so on with deeper level of details;

- a practical grid, where we included the first two columns of the first one (the poles and the first level of variables) adding practical suggestions in the form of questions to evaluate the

course. After the questions, we add some "cross check alert": with this label we indicate the link among poles and/or variables that are indicators of coherence and so represent the real focus to check if a course designed coherently or not.

Our main focus, at this stage of research is to investigate how quality policies, adopted by academic institutions, became really – or not – part of each day teaching and learning practices.

Online education gives us an incredible opportunity to observe and analyse teachers' and students' behaviours. From our particular point of view, teachers' choices in terms of design of the course are particularly relevant.

In this direction, the specific work devoted to the construction of the grids has to be consider the first step needed to understand how courses are designed, how teachers evaluate the quality of the course, which are the relevant variables in the process of evaluation and which is their weight.

So next steps of this research will be: the analysis of different courses designed in different universities in Europe. After this we are going to interview teachers involved in the development of online courses asking them to provide us their view of what quality is.

Following this process we are going to compare different data coming from: our analysis of courses, the interview of teachers and – last but not least – from the analysis of the tools now in use to evaluate quality and to certify courses and/or universities.

6 – AN EXAMPLE

The theoretical grid is organized in different levels: the first indicate the pole of the octagon, the second a first level of variables related with the pole and then some important connected references and so on with deeper level of details.

As an example of what we are going to details into this grid we propose you the detail of one pole: the institution.

Here follows the variable related to the pole that is analysed to reveal the correlations and the impact on the other poles:

- Law (Privacy and Copyrights)

- Administrative issues
- Quality assurance mechanism (Internal - quality assessment and External - quality audit)
- Accreditation (Voluntary vs. compulsory accreditation; Fitness-for-purpose versus standard-based approach; Accreditation by geographical coverage; Accreditation by control of higher education
- Accreditation by type of higher education; Accreditation by unit of analysis; Accreditation for distance-learning higher education)
- National eLearning plan (Is there any? Details)
- Services (Centre of teaching and learning and eLearning centre: Which services? To who? In which stages (design, development, delivery)?

7 – CONCLUSION

Cultural differences as well as quality evaluation and frameworks are nowadays emerging as burning issues to face.

We focused our attention on the notion of quality because we strongly believe that it could be a litmus paper of some "removed" or implicit or tacit assumptions able to influence the results of a teaching and learning experience within a context of virtual mobility, being virtual mobility the new "slogan" of this years.

But, as Moore suggests, behind educational traditions lie philosophical ideas. "These can vary significantly from one culture to another, and it is in these variations that lies the root of problems in cross-cultural understanding – and misunderstanding (Moore 2005)".

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