E-LEARNING AND THE FULFILMENT OF CERTAIN POSTULATES OF CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY OF TEACHING

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Abstract. Psychological studies have been conducted in Poland for more than half a century. Only the University of Warsaw has psychological studies in the frames of an autonomous faculty. Appreciating the importance of modern technologies, the University of Warsaw has incorporated modern forms, including e-learning, in the teaching process at graduate, postgraduate and doctoral level. These courses are treated as complementary in relation to traditional ones. Three types of methods have been employed: distribution of knowledge, communication and checking of knowledge.

The author belongs to the supporters of harnessing the Internet as a teaching aid. She refers to two large educational traditions, namely, to preparatory teaching and lifelong teaching. She recalls selected theories of contemporary psychology of teaching, drawing from the cognitive current. The author formulates the thesis that distance teaching facilitates the fulfilment of the basic postulates of contemporary psychology of teaching.

Key words: e-learning in University teaching, complementary nature of distance teaching, e-learning and the fulfilment of the postulates of psychology of teaching
INTRODUCTION

The Faculty of Psychology at the University of Warsaw comprises the largest community of academic psychologists in Poland (Lewicka, Sosnowski, Trojan, 1998). University psychology had taken shape before the Second World War, almost synchronously in two academic centres: at the John Casimir University in Lviv (where Kazimierz Twardowski, founder of the Lviv-Warsaw school, established the psychology lab in 1901), and at the Jagiellonian University (here, Władysław Heinrich organised the psychology lab).

Several years later, psychology was also established at the University of Warsaw.

The start date is assumed to be 15 November 1915 when Edward Abramowski, graduate of the natural sciences faculties at the Jagiellonian and Geneva University, took the Chair in Psychology. The very same year, he organised a Psychology Seminar at the Faculty of Philosophy which constituted the original form of the latter Division. In 1920, within the Faculty of Philosophy, the Division of Experimental Psychology was established, headed by Władysław Witwicki. The second Division functioning next to Experimental Psychology, namely the Division of educational Psychology directed by Professor Stefan Baley, physician, pedagogue and psychologist, opened in the 1927/1928 academic year.

After the end of the Second World War, the University was reactivated, including both Divisions of Psychology. The year 1950 was a groundbreaking year for the development of the discipline as the first independent studies in Psychology was opened. The following turning point in the history of Warsaw psychology was the 1953/1954 academic year. This was when, inter alia, the Faculty of Pedagogy was established, within which psychology was placed. Warsaw’s academic psychologists achieved full administrative independence in the year 1979; this is the date when the Institute of Psychology was founded, which functioned on the rights of a Faculty. We became an autonomous Faculty in 1981.

1. STUDY ORGANISATION AT THE FACULTY OF PSYCHOLOGY

In the organisational structure of the Faculty, there are currently twelve Chairs, including: the Chair of Psychopathology and Psychotherapy, the Chair of Learning and Memory, the Chair of Rehabilitation Psychology, the Chair of Personality Psychology, the Chair of Clinical Child and Family Psychology, the Chair of Health Psychology, the Chair of Neuropsychology,
the Chair of Cognitive Psychology, the Chair of Social Psychology, the Chair of Individual Differences Psychology, the Chair of Biological Psychology, the Chair of Educational and Developmental Psychology. Education at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Warsaw is conducted as uniform Master’s studies performed on a full and part time basis.

The five-year system of teaching has a basic cycle (first two years) and an advanced cycle (year 3 to 5 of studies). During the last two years of studies, the students prepare a Master’s thesis and acquire knowledge and skills within specialist courses. Students can continue their education as participants of Doctoral Study courses or post-graduate courses. In the 2008/2009 academic year, the Faculty offered the following post-graduate courses: Cognitive Skills Trainer, Human Resources Management, Transportation Psychology, Psychology of Media Communications, School Careers Advisor (co-funded by the European Union), Rehabilitation Psychology, Psychology of Advertising. Psychological studies have for many years been very popular and the most talented, specially selected candidates undertake the studies. The post-graduate and doctoral studies are also very popular – the latter gathering at present over 90 persons.

2. DIDACTIC STATUS

The authorities of the University of Warsaw accentuate the specificity of a higher education institution which is expressed, *inter alia*, in combining scientific activities with didactic work. They also do their utmost to foster the highest level of both forms of activity, which is expressed in manifold ways.

1. Candidates want to work at the educational institution are accepted on a competition basis, selecting the best candidates. Analogous principles of recruitment are held for doctoral studies. The competition scheme for scientific posts open on a national level are announced by the Dean of the Faculty, and the assessment criteria primarily concern the achievements to date (publications, conference appearances, participation in scientific programmes) as well as didactic predispositions.

2. The work of all the academic tutors (including professors) is subject to assessment. Periodic evaluation of professional achievements encompasses the whole of their activity: scientific research, didactics, organisational involvement, popularisation of knowledge, etc. This assessment is made collegially by a special commission of the Faculty Council. This body analyses the documentation submitted by the employee (standard forms) supplemented by the opinions of their supervisors. A positive mark is
awarded only if positive marks have been received throughout all forms of work.

3. Each faculty has an independent team responsible for matters concerning the quality of teaching, the work of which is regulated by a special Regulation of the Vice-Chancellor. One of the existing Regulations stipulates that the didactic activity of all the academic tutors is subject to monitoring and appraisal. Those new to didactic work (e.g. doctoral students) are encompassed with special care. Students also participate in the didactic appraisal process by filling in special questionnaires at the end of each semester via the internet. The feedback received from the students reaches the employees conducting given courses as well as their superiors.

4. The employees of the University of Warsaw understand the significance of the newest technologies, not only in the institutional teaching process but in a broader field, namely, in the development of individuals and societies. On 1 February 2008, the founding assembly of the Polish Economic Chamber of Advanced Technologies (PECAT) took place, which affiliates over a hundred institutions. Among the members were ten higher education institutions, including the University of Warsaw. The mission of PECAT is to support entrepreneurship based on knowledge and the development of advanced technologies. One of the most important tasks remains the eradication of barriers hampering the development of a knowledge-based economy, *id est* legal, financial and environmental limitations. This is the first Polish economic chamber affiliating scientific institutions, industrial companies, banks and funds specialising in financing increased risk enterprises.

5. The employees of the University of Warsaw perceive the specificity and plethora of educational challenges of the period at the turn of the century. One of them remains the information revolution inclining to creating such an educational system that would encompass not only the transmission of information but also stimulate to transformation of information into knowledge. In the existing situation, knowledge itself comes to the rescue; its growth carries with it the simultaneous development of technology, the products of which become objects of everyday use. Academic tutors are fully aware that the use of information technology as an educational tool may constitute the answer to many problems of contemporary education. A perfect example of the educational solutions of our time is e-learning. This is commonly understood as assemblages of educational effects, comprising their own structure, based on such techniques of information and knowledge distribution that harness mediated communication via the internet (Winnicki, 2006).
3. E-LEARNING IN PRACTICE

E-learning is gaining in popularity at the University of Warsaw. Distance learning constitutes a significant complement to traditional education accomplished through the face to face method. The reason for its rising popularity remains without doubt the possibility of using modern technology, which are available thanks to the proliferation of the internet. We are mentioning those that are used by persons conducting classes at the University of Warsaw. Fundamentally, they are divided into knowledge distribution methods, ways of communicating, and techniques of exacting knowledge. The first include text files available online, multimedia presentations, audio-video files, links to materials available on the internet, specialist access programmes on the web. Distance learning uses the facilities enabling dialogue between participants of the course and in the tutor-participant arrangement (Wieczorkowska, 2004). The biggest problem of mediated learning is the methods of assessing the progress made in learning. The traditional form still dominates and falls short of the premises of e-learning. Among the mediated forms of verifying knowledge is, however, online tests (single or multiple choice answers), fill in the blank tests, individual tasks, open questions, etc.

The complementary nature of distance learning education emphasised earlier will most probably remain the dominant feature of teaching at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw. Psychology studies are connected not only with intellectual formation but also with shaping many other skills and abilities. It is difficult to imagine how they could be formed without the direct tutor/trainer-student contact. Thus, wherever concrete skills are required, there is a special need for teaching referred to as traditional teaching, id est, requiring direct contact.

Distance learning at the University of Warsaw is well coordinated and assumes two main organisational forms.

A. The popularisation of science (fields, disciplines, research currents, theoretical concepts, applications) is also done through regular broadcasts on Campus radio (97.1 FM). The station began its broadcasting activity on 1 June 2005 and the owner of the license is the University of Warsaw. The format includes, among others, original programmes by renowned scientists, news services, student news, music programmes, etc. Several dozen members of staff of the Faculty of Psychology representing almost all Chairs, presented their interests and research projects during this academic year.
B. Formal education on an academic level is coordinated by the Centre of Open and Multimedia Education: COME, acting from the year 2000. The number of participants of the courses in the first year of operations amounted to 37. By June 2004, approximately two and a half thousand people were educated thereby. At present, during one semester there are several thousand students participating in courses on a distance learning basis. From 2002, COME also offers post-graduate studies conducted entirely via the internet.

The didactic offer performed via the e-learning method encompasses two types of classes: general university classes and “local”, *id est*, intended for students and doctoral students of concrete educational units (faculties, divisions, institutes). Below are sample courses offered during the summer semester of 2008/2009 to the so-called broad recipient:

- Language courses
- The anatomy of propaganda – an introduction to manipulating public opinion
- The civilisation and culture of Spain
- Didactics of higher education
- Experimenting with economy
- Ethics of the public sphere
- Excel in financial and statistical applications
- Mathematics for students of arts and humanities
- Methodology of social studies – basic level
- Studies on globalisation
- Introduction to macroeconomy
- Introduction to Psychology
- Introduction to intercultural psychology
- Educational aspects of contemporary art

This brief list – serving as an example – reveals the specificity of the courses: generally formulated topics, broad approach and introductory nature. This manner of profiling enables students from different levels of education and with diverse interests to participate in the courses.

The offer directed at students of the Faculty of Psychology is equally interesting and abundant. (General 22 courses). The class topics remain, for
obvious reasons, narrower and more specialised. Below are some topics to illustrate this:

- Leadership
- Control-helplessness
- The psychology of a woman
- Practical statistics using SPSS
- Conscious and unconscious games in close relationships
- Mechanisms of psychopathology
- Practical ethics
- Psychology of slimming

Registration on all courses takes place at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw, through the internet. Students have informed us on numerous occasions that the enrolment for the distance learning courses is finalised very quickly. Sometimes the list of participants is filled up within minutes of launching the enrolment process. This is best proof of popularity of this form of learning, which is attractive for logistic as well as psychological reasons. The historical outline of the University of Warsaw as well as the Faculty of Psychology presented at the beginning reveals the intensive development of my educational institution. The modest beginnings and the great dynamics of changes are of great significance for both individual and social development. There is a well known saying in Poland that “there can be no school without pupils, but the school is based on teachers”. It should be added that it is based on tutors that utilise the methods of teaching offered by contemporary technology.

4. THE STIMULATING ROLE OF E-LEARNING

When writing about selected problems in distance teaching, fundamental issues cannot but be mentioned. The theory and practice of modern teaching concentrates around two traditions, which are most generally referred to as the concept of preparatory teaching and the idea of lifelong education, which has taken shape in the field of psychology in the form of cognitive positions (approaches) (Przetacznik-Gierowska, Włodarski, 1998; Ledzińska & Czerniawska, in print). The former, referred to as the traditional approach, is no longer current but is well established historically (generationally) and functions in the minds of many in the form of the so-called educational myth,
namely, false knowledge (Ledzińska, 2008, 2009). Thus, in the traditional perspective, the dominating understanding of the essence of learning and teaching consists in the passing on of knowledge, the acquisition of knowledge by pupils, as well as the transfer of knowledge from textbooks and the minds of teachers to the memory of pupils. The traditional approach to teaching emphasises the transmission of ready-made knowledge. This task is fulfilled by a carefully selecting content, dividing complex content into smaller units, formulating concrete learning goals and establishing an order for their fulfilment and, particularly importantly, by specifying the methods of verification of whether the set goals have been achieved by the learners. It is the teacher that plays the leading role in learning, specifying what, how and when is to be the subject of learning. They are not very interested in the type of mental activity that their pupils undertake and what should be done to instil in them the desired methods of action.

In the meantime, in the light of cognitive approaches, learning and teaching are referred to as processes: learning is the process of actively constructing knowledge in an individual’s mind (Czerniawska & Ledzińska, 2007). Dialogue-based teaching of others consists, largely, on creating the conditions for independent learning. It is indeed impossible to transfer knowledge and skills directly to a person’s mind. Learning is the result of the personal activity of the learners (Iran-Nejad, McKeachie & Berliner, 1990). The results achieved by them depend above all on the type of mental tasks carried out by them alone. Therefore, in teaching stemming from the cognitive current it is not the teacher that plays the leading role but the learner along with his/her cognitive activity (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy & Perry, 1991).

In the reported approach, learning is understood as leading towards the development of the ability to think and act in the direction of becoming an expert, a master in a given topic. An expert has knowledge and skills in a certain field at their disposal, which can effectively be put to use by them. They also possess the adequate mental models and concepts that capture their given field. Learning that takes this very objective or situational context into consideration, approached not as abstract “exercising” the mind but as cognition that has been incorporated into a concrete activity, is referred to by psychologists as situated learning. The endeavour to shape the ability of localized thinking, namely, set in a concrete field, the development of mental models of the studied area and their connection with the abilities to think that are characteristic for the given field of studies are the tasks and challenges of contemporary education (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989).
This kind of teaching, as was already mentioned, is sometimes referred to as process oriented because it makes the processes used by the learners its main point of interest. It also heads towards a cohesive teaching of the strategy of thinking and objective knowledge, promoting localized learning. In this approach, the significant tasks of a teacher still include initiating, supporting and influencing the thinking processes of the learners (Glaser, 1991). The above statements directly result from the cognitive concept, which informs that one cannot and should not learn “in place” of the learners or perform an incessantly strong control over their actions in the scope of learning.

Upon returning to the main phenomenon of distance learning, it is evident that scientific literature on e-learning is more abundant and becoming richer. The earlier polarisation of research positions (adherents versus adversaries) seems to be withdrawing and making place for substantive discussions directed at revealing a whole array of possible applications, removing obstacles accompanying its implementation, and the like. The voices of psychologists are becoming more audible in the discussions taking place. There are more theoretical elaborations and empirical analyses on learning and teaching in the internet environment. The official organ of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARL), the Learning and Instruction journal, includes articles on different aspects of e-learning almost in every issue. Many detailed issues are presented therein, concerning, for instance, the technical aspects of instruction.

The reported results reveal the need for a more general reflection and for the conduct of empirical studies inspired by such a reflection. A significant field of analysis seems to be above all the possibility of harnessing internet education in fulfilling the postulates of cognitive-oriented education psychologists. Even a superficial analysis of university courses reveals their great thematic diversity. We are sometimes ready to formulate judgements like “what narrow topics”, or “how restricting theses courses are.” However, such fears are insubstantial. In university level education – at least in the case of the home Faculty – e-learning supplements the courses that are run in a traditional way. Its advantage remains not only the attractiveness connected with crossing the boundaries of all too familiar convention or overcoming the barriers of time and space. A psychologist also notices other merits, including the possibility of stimulating, intensifying and individualising cognitive activity; the key is the number, the level of difficulty, the originality of the tasks, as well as the specificity of the demands that are set to the course participants. In light of the earlier mentioned characteristics, the extensive offer of courses constitutes above all an opportunity to actualise the postulates of situated learning. The internet environment facilitates the
selection of concrete study areas, issues and problems that a student would like to fathom and develop “here and now”, *id est* to reflect upon personally, connect with the knowledge acquired earlier, relate to everyday life situations. E-learning does not replace traditional teaching but supplements and enriches it, thus facilitating the fulfilment of certain indications of contemporary psychology.

**LITERATURE**


