# Teaching Area Studies through Two Different On-line Platforms

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**Abstract**

E-learning includes forms of teaching supported by the Internet, computers, mobile devices, video tapes, and satellite TV. The term can apply both to out-of-classroom and in-classroom teaching. In recent years e-learning has become increasingly popular at universities around the world, because technology is a part of virtually every aspect of life.

Rapid evolution of communication has changed language pedagogy and language use, enabling new forms of discourse and new ways to create and participate in communities (Kern 2006, 1). Under such circumstances it is important to explore new possibilities in teaching new topics and to give students a taste of new challenges. According to Blake (2008, 2) technology, if used wisely, could play a major role in enhancing L2 learners' contact with the other cultures and languages, especially in the absence of studying abroad. Traditional classes can become more interesting when combined with technology. Wong and Looi (2010, 14) claim that online-learning can fill in the gaps between formal learning styles.

The present article presents the opinions and attitudes towards on-line set of courses for a sample of 80 Romanian students who were enrolled in an on-line learning project in "Area studies" - namely, East Asia Studies. The project covered two Academic years (2015 and 2016) and leads to the establishment of a virtual network of East European and Central Asia Universities on "Area Studies". At the end of each course students were asked to fill a short questionnaire about the online course they attend. The results of this small-scale survey showed both the positive character of using e-learning tools for teaching "Area Studies" and their limitations. At the same time, due to the length of the project (e.g. two years covered through different courses) the results allowed to make a comparison between two online platforms used during classes – Bluejeans and Cisco Webex – and to devise the ways of improving the future uses of online platforms during the next Academic year' courses.

**Key-words:** e-learning platforms, learning, students' assessments.

## 1. E-learning and Online platforms in Romania

Studies conducted in recent years have shown an increasing demand for distance learning programmes, especially those programs that primarily use e-learning solutions. The percentage of students preferring the part-time education has increased during 2000-2009, on average, from 17.6% to 25.3% of all students in the European countries which had adopted the Bologna system in tertiary education (EACEA, 2012).

E-learning includes forms of teaching supported by the Internet, computers, mobile devices, video tapes, and satellite TV. The term can apply to out-of-classroom and in-classroom teaching. In the twenty-first century, e-learning has become increasingly popular at universities around the world, because technology is a part of virtually every aspect of life. Rapid evolution of communication has changed language pedagogy and language use, enabling new forms of discourse and new ways to create and participate in communities (Kern, 2006: 1). So it is important to explore new possibilities in teaching foreign languages and to give students a taste of new challenges.

According to Blake (2008: 2) technology, if used wisely, could play a major role in enhancing learners' contact with the target language, especially in the absence of studying abroad. Traditional classes can become more interesting when combined with technology. According to Wong and Looi (2010: 14) e-learning can fill in the gaps between formal learning styles. Of course, studying foreign languages only through Internet media cannot entirely replace teachers. Instructors

and attending lectures are very important. Furthermore, if the preferences and needs of language learners can be allowed to have bearing on what is learnt and how, mobile technologies have a clear role to play in the realization of such an objective (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009: 164).

In recent years, Romanian higher-education e-learning has been developing, but is still at an early stage. Thus, the first Romanian online educational portal, www.1educat.ro, was developed in 2001 and its success had led to the launch of Academia On-line eLearning system, in 2003 (Falcescu and Istrate, 2003). At the same time, learning with ICT or online support have seen a strong development in recent years in Romania, most universities having their courses on e-learning platforms – of Moodle or other open source environments (Tuomi, 2013; Siemens, 2005), but only after login in with an affiliate student or teacher account.

In the same time, the Internet penetration in Romania is now up to 55%, the mobile internet use doubled in the last years and its broadband speed situated Romania on top 1-3 in the last years (Vasiu and And one, 2014).

Over the last decade, there has been a tremendous amount of distance education research (Anderson and Rourke, 2005; Hanor and Hayden, 2008; Saw et al., 2008), with a common focus on the use in education of video, videoconferencing, and video streaming systems on demand. This research shows that interactive videoconferencing and video streaming technologies can be extremely effective media for delivering quality education to geographically dispersed student populations.

Video conferencing involves a two-way video, audio and data communication between two or more parties over a remote connection (Jeong and Lee, 2007). Video conferencing is carried out over a variety of media, the most popular of which uses Internet Protocol (IP) technology. The cost of video conferencing over IP is getting so low that it has become the most popular means of video conferencing (Surender, 2007).

In the existing scientific literature, there has been an emergence of papers analysing the impact of instructional ICT-based innovations on student performance. These works can be divided into two different groups, depending on the methodology used in the analysis of digital effects and on the conclusions about the efficiency of online courses.

On one hand, there are studies that have assessed that online students perform worse than their face-to-face counterparts (Brown and Liedholm, 2002; Coates, Humphreys, Kane and Vachris, 2004). Works in this group compare online with on-campus courses and share a common trait: they define online courses as a homogeneous commodity, without a detailed specification of the methodology and technology used in teaching and learning processes; this constraint does not allow them to capture differences in performance for different complementarities of teaching method, ICT uses and student profile.

On the other hand, some works defend the idea that the discussion about whether or not to use technology in higher education courses is no longer of concern because the real significant issue is in what manner technology is used at the university, teacher and student level (Deed and Edwards ,2010; Sosin, Blecha, Bartlett and Daniel, 2004). In other words, the benefit for students' performance derived from the adoption of innovations in the technology of teaching and learning does not affect all teaching and learning methodologies equally, because this benefit is based on a necessary equilibrium between institutional policy towards ICT adoption, students' abilities, technology uses in the educational process by teachers and students, and the selection of a methodology that matches with digital uses.

## 2. Research methodology

The present study is focused on the analysis of students' opinions and assessments regarding the content and ways of presenting an on-line set of courses for a sample of Romanian students who were enrolled in an on-line learning project in "Area Studies" - namely, East Asia Studies.

The on-line courses were delivered by and within a network of European and Asian tertiary education institutions starting with 2012 until 2016. The network covered twelve countries,

including Romania, and it functioned as a virtual network of East European and Central Asia Universities on "Area Studies".

Courses were delivered one lecture per week on a virtual platform and each course last one Academic semester. Various professors delivered courses and the evaluation of students took into account both physical presence and activities within the off-line environment (individual and group assignments in the classroom) and on-line platforms (forum discussions, on-line debates etc).

At the end of each course students were asked to fill a short off-line (printed) questionnaire about the course they attend. The questionnaire had a standardised shape and focused on the opinions and assessments regarding the content of the course, ways in which the topic was presented, technical issues related to on-line platforms. No socio-demographic data regarding the respondents was recorded in all successive 'waves' of questionnaires' application.

The sample used in this study has a volume of 80 students, 62 women and 18 men, all aged 20-30 years, from different faculties of the University of Bucharest - namely, Sociology, History, Political Sciences, Foreign Languages, Letters, Law. The data were collected in four 'waves': May 2015, December 2015, May 2016 and December 2016. Both deductive and inductive statistics were performed in analysing the set of data with the help of SPSS package.

### 3. Research Hypothesis

We have the following research hypothesis for our analysis:

H1: Romanian students will favour on-line courses over off-line courses in their overall academic assessments of East Asia Studies programs.

H2: Romanian students will positively assess their performances derived from using the e-learning platforms in teaching and learning about East Asia.

H3: Romanian students will assess off-line courses as homogeneous whole, without paying attention to the technological aspects (e.g. e-learning platforms) used in teaching and learning about East Asia.

### 4. Data Analysis

During the two years considered 40,6% of the students had used the Cisco Webex platform, while 59,4% of the sample had used Bluejeans for on-line courses. As regards the courses they have followed, 28,1% of the students followed a course on "International Relations", 25% of them were enrolled the introductory course on "Arts in East Asia", 18,8% of students were enrolled in "Research Design in Social Sciences", 15,6% of respondents followed the course "Identity politics in post-Soviet space" and 12,5% of the students have attended the course "Political Economy in Central and Eastern Asia". When we consider the e-learning platform on which the courses were delivered the results showed that 40,6% of the students attended courses delivered using Cisco-Webex platform and 59,45% of them were enrolled in courses which had been delivered through Bluejeans platform. Only two courses ("Political Economy in Central and Eastern Asia" and "Research Design in Social Sciences") used a unique platform in both years considered and the rest of them had been delivered via both Cisco-Webex platform and Bluejeans one (See in this respect Table 1).

Table 1. Type of the platforms and Name of the course delivered

| Name of the course attended | Name of the platform | |
|---|---|---|
| | Cisco-Webex Platform | Bluejeans Platform |
| Identity Politics in post-Soviet Space | 40 | 60 |
| Arts in East Asia | 37,5 | 62,5 |
| International Relations | 22 | 77,8 |
| Political Economy of Development in Central and Eastern Asia | | 100 |
| Research Design in Social Sciences | 100 | |

When asked about the degree of satisfaction with the course they attended 37,5% of the students strongly agreed with the sentence "Overall the course was satisfactory and I would recommend this course to other students", while 28,1% of them "agreed" on that and only 12,5% "disagreed" with this sentence. As regards the satisfaction with a specific course delivered online our data showed that the students enrolled at the courses "International Relations" and "Identity Politics in post-Soviet Space" had a higher degree of satisfaction: 66,7% and, respectively, 40% declared that they "strongly agree" with the sentence "Overall the course was satisfactory and I shall recommend it to other students". At the same time, "Political Economy of Development in Central and Eastern Asia" was the course less appreciated by the students, with only 25% of them "strongly agreeing" and "agreeing" on the fact that it was satisfactory (See also Table 2).

Table 2. Overall the course was satisfactory and I shall recommend it to other students and Name of the course

| Overall the course was satisfactory and I shall recommend it to other students | Name of the course | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Identity Politics in post-Soviet Space | Arts in East Asia | International Relations | Political Economy of Development in Central and Eastern Asia | Research Design |
| Strongly agree | 40 | 12 | 66,7 | 25 | 33,3 |
| Agree | 20 | 50 | 11,1 | | 50 |
| So and so | 20 | 25 | 11,1 | 25 | 16, |
| Disagree | 20 | 12,5 | 11,1 | 25 | |
| Strongly disagree | | | | 25 | |

When the degree of satisfaction about the course is assessed together with the e-platform on which it was delivered one could notice that those streamed live on Cisco-Webex platform received a greater percentage (77% - "strongly agree" and "agree" with the fact that the course was satisfactory) than those which used Bluejeans (57,9% "strongly agree" and "agree" with the same sentence) (See in this respect Table 3).

Table 3. Overall the course was satisfactory and I shall recommend it to other students and Type of platform

| Overall the course was satisfactory and I shall recommend it to other students | Name of the platform | |
|---|---|---|
| | Cisco-Webex Platform | Bluejeans Platform |
| Strongly agree | 38,5 | 36,8 |
| Agree | 38,5 | 21,1 |
| So and so | 7,7 | 26,3 |
| Disagree | 15,4 | 10,5 |
| Strongly disagree | | 5,3 |

The percentage of the students who assessed that the quality of on-line instruction was similar to classroom based instruction was very high – 73,1% of the total sample. 72,5% of the students who were enrolled in a course delivered via Cisco-Webex platform and 57,9% of those who attended a course presented on Bluejeans platform agreed that they could not find any difference between off-line lectures and their on-line courses in East Asia Studies. From here we can conclude that our first research hypothesis (H1) was not validated by the empirical data.

A set of questions from our questionnaire referred to respondents' self-assessments of own performances related to attending the on-line courses on East Asia Studies. Our results showed that a difference in personal assessments of performance in learning between the students who attended their course on one platform or another was recorded. Students who were enrolled in courses

delivered via Cisco-Webex platform "strongly agreed" with the fact that "The textbook and course materials helped me to acquire knowledge" (53,8%), with the statements "The course assignments were manageable and helpful for the learning process" (46,2%) and with "I was comfortable by taking the course via the videoconferencing" (46,2%). For those students who attended the courses which used Bluejeans platform the sentences with which they "strongly agreed" in a higher percentage were "The textbook and course materials helped me to acquire knowledge" (68,4%) and "I was comfortable by taking the course via the videoconferencing" (63,2%) (See Table 4 in this respect).

Table 4. Assessments of performances related to attending the on-line courses on East Asia Studies and Type of platform - Strongly agree on the fact that…

| | Cisco-Webex Platform | Bluejeans Platform |
|---|---|---|
| The text book and course materials helped me to acquire knowledge | 53,8 | 68,4 |
| The level of difficulty of this course was challenging and appropriate | 38,5 | 21,1 |
| The course assignments were manageable and helpful for the learning process | 46,2 | 15,8 |
| I was comfortable by taking the course via the videoconferencing | 46,2 | 63,2 |
| The lectures were conducted in a punctual manner. A substitute class was offered for any cancelation of the class | 30,8 | 36,8 |

Moving beyond the descriptive presentation of data and using the inductive statistics we can notice that the positive assessments of the course assignments, the use of e-learning platforms and the ways in which the courses were conducted were positively correlated with the platforms used to deliver the courses (See in this respect Table 5).

Table 5. Assessments of performances related to attending the on-line courses on East Asia Studies - Bivariate Correlations

| | | Platform |
|---|---|---|
| The text book and course materials helped me to acquire knowledge | Pearson Correlation | -.051 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .624 |
| | N | 96 |
| The level of difficulty of this course was challenging and appropriate | Pearson Correlation | -.045 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .666 |
| | N | 96 |
| The course assignments were manageable and helpful for the learning process | Pearson Correlation | .330(**) |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .001 |
| | N | 96 |
| I was comfortable by taking the course via the videoconferencing | Pearson Correlation | .273(*) |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .015 |
| | N | 78 |
| The lectures were conducted in a punctual manner. A substitute class was offered for any cancelation of the class | Pearson Correlation | .115 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .263 |
| | N | 96 |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

When a logistic regression was modelled with the same set of data one can notice that the textbook and course materials play a significant role in the degree of positive assessments of students' own performance at the on-line courses, with every addition of such materials resulting in a 9% increase in the odds that the e-learning learning and teaching would be highly appreciated and, on the other hand, in a 3% increase in the odds that the students will assess the level of the course as challenging and appropriate. The fact that the lectures were conducted in a punctual manner and a substitute class was offered for any cancelation of the class leads to a 1,5% increase in the odds that the students' would positively assess their own performance at the on-line courses on East Asia Studies.

We can say, as such, that our second research hypothesis (H2) was validated both by the descriptive and inductive statistics.

Table 6. Assessments of the on-line courses as a whole and Type of platform - Strongly agree on the fact that…

|  | Cisco-Webex Platform | Bluejeans Platform |
|---|---|---|
| The professor was good at motivating the students to participate in the class | 23,1 | 31,6 |
| The course was delivered in accordance with the syllabus | 46,2 | 47,4 |
| The professor clearly explained the evaluation methods; objective grading standards were applied | 61,5 | 47,4 |
| My participation in the classroom was the same as in a regular classroom | 42,9 | 10,5 |
| I think the quality of instruction was similar to classroom based instruction | 85,7 | 31,6 |

The courses which were delivered via Cisco-Webex and Bluejeans platforms had been assessed mainly as a whole, the students did not pay much attention to the technological aspects (e.g. e-learning platforms) used in teaching and learning about East Asia. Thus, 61,5% of those students who used Cisco-Webex platform and 47,4% of those enrolled on the courses delivered through Bluejeans platform "strongly agreed" that their participation in the on-line classes was the same as in a regular one.

Also, 85,7% of the students who attended a course on Cisco-Webex platform and 31,6% of those who were enrolled in a course which used Bluejeans platform "strongly agreed" that the quality of instruction in those on-line courses was similar to classroom based instruction (See also Table 6).

The professor's involvement in the lectures delivered, personal evaluation of the online courses as similar with the off-line ones and the assessment of on-line instructions' quality was positively correlated with the platforms used to deliver the courses (See in this respect Table 7).

As the data shows, in terms of the assessments of the on-line courses as a whole, the teacher's abilities to motivate the students to participate in the class plays a significant role, every additional effort of the teacher in this respect resulting in a 7% increase in the odds that the on-line course will be assessed as a homogeneous whole.

The fact that the professor clearly explained the evaluation method and he/she applied objective grading standards at the end of the course leads to a 4%increase in the odds that the students will neglect the technological aspects (e.g. e-learning platforms) used in teaching and learning about East Asia.

One can notice, again, that the third research hypothesis (H3) was validated both by descriptive statistics and by inferential modelling of the empirical set of data we have analysed.

Table 7. Assessments of the on-line courses as a whole - Bivariate Correlations

|  |  | Platform |
|---|---|---|
| The professor was good at motivating the students to participate in the class | Pearson Correlation | ,133 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,196 |
|  | N | 96 |
| The course was delivered in accordance with the syllabus | Pearson Correlation | ,079 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,442 |
|  | N | 96 |
| The professor clearly explained the evaluation methods, objective grading standards were applied | Pearson Correlation | ,011 |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,917 |
|  | N | 96 |
| My participation in the classroom was the same as in a regular classroom | Pearson Correlation | ,238(*) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,036 |
|  | N | 78 |
| I think the quality of instruction was similar to classroom based instruction | Pearson Correlation | ,302(**) |
|  | Sig. (2-tailed) | ,007 |
|  | N | 78 |

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

### 5. Conclusions

Pedagogical researches and the existing academic literature (Allen, 2002) have proved that e-learning technologies not only influenced student learning capabilities and teaching methods, but globally supported the development of the student centred learning model, by having a strong impact on both teaching and learning (Allen, 2002).

Therefore, e-learning systems tend to be viewed more and more as advanced tools which assist teachers in creating a cooperative, multidisciplinary and explorative learning environment and students in accessing these learning facilities and developing learning interactions within this environment (Holotescu, 2014). Those changes in the educational model are clear exemplified by our empirical results.

Our first research hypothesis (H1) was not validated by the descriptive statistics. The Romanian students did not favour on-line courses over off-line courses in their overall academic assessments of East Asia Studies programs. On the contrary, in 2015 and 2016 they tended to equate the quality of on-line courses with that of off-line ones.

Instead, the second research hypothesis (H2) was validated both by the descriptive and inductive statistics. The Romanian students positively assessed their performances derived from using the e-learning platforms in teaching and learning about East Asia topics.

The same situation was recorded in the case of the third research hypothesis (H3), which was validated by our analysis. The Romanian students had assessed the courses delivered via e-platforms as homogeneous wholes. They did not differentiate between the quality of the off-line and on-line courses, paying little attention to the technological aspects used in teaching and learning about East Asia.

Our analysis showed that video conferencing enabled learning is a new way of acquiring knowledge, which is highly adaptable to different kinds of student profiles, from people that do not have time to attend normal courses to a practical enhancement of ordinary courses with additional access to the knowledge. As the results of our survey showed, the use of e-learning platform in

teaching and learning about one domain (in our case, East Asia Studies) co-operation, exchange of knowledge and consultation processes among students and available expert authorities (professor/instructor) were considered as having the same importance as other aspects of learning, such as the contents that are provided in books and materials for the courses.

Beyond methodological and practical implications, the present study has some elements of theoretical relevance. As the results showed, the "new" educational model developed through the use of e-learning platforms encouraged students to become more responsible of their educational path and modified the teachers' role: the professors were tutors who guided the students in the educational universe created by the e-learning system and emphasized cooperative and project learning. For future studies in the field of on-line education, our results suggest that more refined items could be inserted into analysis to measure more specific the impact of e-learning platforms on teaching and learning Area Studies.

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