

# The Pedagogical Challenges Facing French Business Schools in the Implementation of E-learning Initiatives

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This paper will reflect on the pedagogical challenges facing French Business Schools in the implementation of e-learning initiatives. I will show that the top French Business Schools are not the main providers of e-learning in business education, as the task is mainly assigned to private companies or government-subsidized organizations. Some fragmented e-learning initiatives do exist but the usefulness of this technology to enhance the learning and teaching experience is often overlooked in a drive to provide e-learning at all costs. I will argue that e-learning development should be grounded in a comprehensive pedagogical framework. The various challenges facing educators will be analyzed, such as their epistemological beliefs, their roles as teachers, their ability to create a community of inquiry, and their ability to choose pertinent knowledge. In order to put learning on the agenda in French higher education and help the educator understand how students learn, a more detailed understanding of the generational characteristics of student cohorts, their epistemological beliefs and conceptions of learning, as well as their learning styles and preferences is advocated.

## E-learning in France

For some, e-learning means a fully online course; for others, it means the use of a course management system. For the purpose of this paper, the European Union definition of e-learning will be employed: "E-learning means using new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to facilities and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration" (EC Publication, 2003, p. 3). While this definition is quite broad, it does contain some key concepts such as *quality of learning, facilitation, exchange, and collaboration*. Therefore, this definition presupposes that the learner is at the center of the learning event facilitated by an educator in an exchange of knowledge that is acquired via collaboration. Ledru (2002) set out four dimensions of e-learning: pedagogical and psychological; technological; economic and legal; and organizational and change management issues. If we apply these four dimensions to e-learning implementation at French Business Schools, we can see that the technological dimension is the only one to have received any serious consideration with business schools investing massively in learning platforms such as Blackboard®, WebCT, or Crossknowledge. While they may purport to be involved in e-learning, a closer look at the French e-learning market tells a different story.

At the moment, the main provision of e-learning in France is divided between: (a) e-learning in firms, offering customized content developed internally or by large companies and then outsourced to private suppliers and (b) e-learning provided by the central government or by regional and local authorities or associations receiving government subsidies.

In the first sector, termed here as the *private e-learning market segment*, Gil (2003) provides an impressive list of the major players such as software

editors (e.g. Sybase, Lotus, Oracle); publishing houses (Foucher Editions d'Organisation, McGraw Hill, Ziff Davis); consultancy firms (Arthur Anderson); TV channels (M6, France 5); and start-ups (SABA, Centra, Online Formapro), all of whom are vying for a slice of the e-learning market. However, many of these providers lack credibility as they are not attached to a reputable business school or university. In France, e-learning in business education will not be successful unless the major players (Grande Ecoles, i.e. public or private higher education institutions that admit students by competitive examination following a two- to three-year preparatory course, and the three or four most prestigious universities) get involved.

The second segment, which I call the *public e-learning market segment*, is served by four main provider organizations as outlined by Baudouin (2005):

1. AFPA (Association nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes [National Association for the Professional Training of Adults]) is the main operator of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Solidarity and aims to guide and train principally the unemployed with no or few qualifications ([www.afpa.fr](http://www.afpa.fr)).
2. CNAM (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers [National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts]) is affiliated to the Ministry of Higher Education and offers training in economics and management, science and industrial techniques, information and communication technologies, as well as training in work and societal issues (<http://www.cnam.fr>).
3. GRETA (Groupement d'Etablissement du Second Degré [Group of Secondary School Establishments]) provides their public

school facilities and staff in order to offer further vocational training to both employed and unemployed adults. (<http://education.gouv.fr/fp/greta.htm>).

4. CNED (Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance [National Center for Distance Learning]) is part of the Ministry of Education and provides distance education to all educational levels. It is similar to the Open University in Britain. Two thirds of the users are adults, and the CNED had 350,000 users in 2002, 30,000 of whom reside outside France. (<http://www.cned.fr>).

These organizations deal mainly with adult education and further training to individuals wanting to get back into the workforce or those already in gainful employment wishing to upgrade their skills.

Business Schools, the elite in French business education provision, seem to be absent from the e-learning market with only some sporadic and fragmented e-learning initiatives. Boudon (2004) claims that the French Business Schools are "afraid to sell their souls on the net" as they do not want to make their elite content available as this would jeopardize their exclusivity and the added value of a business school qualification. He adds that by making this content public, business schools would inevitably pauperize their brand. Gil (2003) puts the resistance to adopting more Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education down to the disappointing results of Computer-Assisted Learning (CAL) in the 1970s and 1980s.

However, business schools are beginning to realize that e-learning is something that is expected of them as well as being a very lucrative endeavor, and as a result, all the major business schools cite e-learning as an integral part of their educational strategies. Lewandowski, (2003) has set out some of the main objectives of e-learning in French business education:

1. To complement traditional education by employing a learning platform such as Blackboard® or WebCT, which facilitates self-evaluation, discussion forums, email access, and online tutoring
2. "To immerse the students in a technological environment with the aim of preparing the student to adapt to the workplace of the future" (p. 92). Therefore, the benefits to the students are twofold: they become familiar with the electronic tools (the *e* in e-learning) by using them intensely and regularly as well as learning at their own pace and in their own time.
3. To maintain regular contact with the students when they are away from the home institution during exchange periods abroad or work placements in industry during their

gap-year. This is considered to be a way to reinforce the various social links between the different stakeholders within the institution such as professors, students, alumni, etc. Alumni networks are very powerful at French Business Schools and many business schools believe that alumni are an education market niche of the future as their skills and competences become outdated.

4. "To enhance further education programs in order to capitalize on the distance learning markets for executive managers, who are mobile, demanding, and not very free to access education" (p. 92). This is a major market that French Business Schools intend to capitalize on over the next few years, as the benefits of such executive education for the business schools are enormous: short-term benefits such as revenue for the provision of executive education courses and teaching experience for business school faculty as well as long-term benefits to include partnerships with key industries to provide work-shadowing and career opportunities for their graduates as well as increased credibility and notoriety in key business sectors both nationally and internationally.

Unfortunately, for the most part, professors tend to put their lecture notes online in the form of PowerPoint presentations, a practice which could consolidate the view that good teaching is the transmission of information (Biggs 2003, p. 218) and as a result fosters even more surface learning. In reality, very little contact is maintained with the students on their gap-year or year abroad, and the interaction between students and teachers is usually carried out via e-mail. As regards executive education, in a French context there is a strong argument for maintaining some face-to-face teaching as the majority of executives are conditioned by their previous educational experience to be passive recipients of knowledge.

#### E-learning Initiatives at French Business Schools

Different e-learning initiatives can be observed at French Business Schools. Three different types of e-learning initiatives can be observed: the development of virtual campuses; closer collaboration with partner universities in order to offer European online degrees; and blended learning solutions.

#### *Virtual Campuses*

Ecole de Management Lyon, a business school which is ranked fourth in France, has created a Virtual Campus. They have divided their online

environment into six sections: *an assessment center* for skill evaluation; *an e-school* with learning support and courses online, forums, email, information sharing space, lists of tasks to accomplish, program information, etc.; *a knowledge center* with practical information and reports; *an advice & support center*; *an entrepreneurship center* – with knowledge bases, practical files and creation tools; and *a service center* with a library, virtual community, course catalogue, diary, internship and employment information, etc. ([www.emlyon.net](http://www.emlyon.net)). Audencia Nantes School of Management inaugurated their “Campus Net” (<http://www.audencia.com/index.php?id=73>) in 2003, using a learning platform with rich media such as video, speech, text transcription (with the possibility of subtitles in different languages), as well as appendices with email, inventory of data, forums, etc. Campus Net also uses text messaging to inform students of timetable changes.

#### *Collaboration with Partner Universities*

The majority of French business schools have partnerships with foreign universities, who offer similar business programs. Audencia Nantes School of Management collaborates with a consortium of seven other European institutions: GSIM – University of Maastricht; Open University in the Netherlands; IAE Aix (Institut d’Administration des Entreprises d’Aix-en-Provence), a Graduate Management School and Research Centre in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France; University College Dublin in Ireland; Akademie für Weiterbildung e.V. EuroStudyCenter in Germany; EADA Barcelona in Spain; and Leon Kozminski Academy of Entrepreneurship and Management in Poland, to offer a Euro-MBA. This 24-month course offers both face-to-face teaching and an e-learning component given by staff at the various aforementioned schools. This type of initiative is innovative in France and exploits e-learning to provide an international qualification.

#### *Blended Learning/E-Learning*

Almost all of the French business schools claim to have some kind of blended learning format in their institutions, that is, a combination of online and face-to-face learning approach. Since 2004, professors at HEC (Haute Ecole de Commerce) in Paris, the leading French Business School, have co-developed courses with Crossknowledge, an e-learning company, to offer blended solutions. HEC also offers blended learning on their executive education programs, as does ESSEC (Ecole Supérieure de Sciences Economiques et Commerciales), a rival business school in the Paris area. ESCP-EAP (Ecole Supérieure Commerciale de Paris), a business school with campuses in five cities (London, Paris, Berlin, Torino, and Madrid) has also reported offering some

sporadic online courses in partnership with other institutions (Vasquez Bronfman, 2003). INSEAD in Fontainebleau initially launched a platform called “Insead Online,” only to drop it and to continue using ICT tools to complement their traditional programs in a blended learning format. Lewandowski (2003) mentions other smaller business schools, which offer e-learning courses. These include CESEC (Centre d’Etudes Supérieures Européennes de Caen, in the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce Normandy group), which has offered an online Euro Bachelor’s degree since 2003 aimed at middle management in small and medium sized enterprises. Another small school, IAE (Institut d’Administration des Entreprises) Poitiers, offers two distance learning qualifications: a Masters in Management Science and a DESS CAE (Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures Spécialisées - Certificat d’Aptitude à l’Administration des Entreprises) a third level specialized professional qualification in business administration.

These blended and e-learning courses are provided to students already at the business school but do not respond to the needs of company employees for tailor-made management programs. Therefore, business schools need to provide e-learning solutions to clients outside the classroom to enable the managers to continue learning within their organizations.

#### *Pedagogical Considerations for E-teachers*

Having mapped out and situated e-learning in a French context, the pedagogical issues facing teachers will now be addressed. The French education system is unique in European terms in that students usually spend two or three years in post-secondary school courses (called *classes préparatoires aux grande écoles- CPGE*), where students prepare for the entrance examinations to the top business schools. The students are essentially training for an examination and work on average 70 to 80 hours per week. This learning and teaching environment breeds competition, individuality, and passivity in the students while positioning the teacher as the expert and purveyor of knowledge. Once the students arrive at business school, one of the major challenges is to break this learning cycle in order to develop the managerial competencies required in the future workplace. While it is difficult to generalize about teaching styles at business schools, it is true that the profile of the business educator in France is changing following pedagogical reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, with schools aiming at closer cooperation with industry and a greater awareness of the importance of the student personality, all the while respecting the elitist nature of business school education (Lazuech, 1999). With this new style of teacher comes a different pedagogical style with case studies, project-based learning, problem-based learning, and student-centeredness being some of the

methods adopted. However, even if new pedagogical styles can be observed at business schools that place the learner at the center of the learning event, the immediate push and overambitious zeal to offer e-learning programs at all costs means that pedagogical considerations as well as the educational intentions are often overlooked. As outlined earlier, in a French context e-learning policy is often driven by technology. Vasquez-Bronfman (2003) advocates a rejection of this techno centrism, which views all e-learning questions through a technological lens, and he would like more emphasis placed on pedagogical issues and innovation in business education.

#### Institutes of Learning and Teaching

In order to put learning and teaching on the agenda at French business schools, some kind of Institutes of Learning and Teaching similar to the those following the Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) in the UK need to be set up. These institutes (sometimes termed as Centers for Teaching and Learning) could have two distinct functions: (a) an e-teacher training function to include the explicit training of e-learning and e-teaching models, which would incite e-teachers to re-evaluate their roles as teachers and raise awareness of key concepts such as “community of inquiry” and “teaching presence” in an online environment; and (b) a pedagogical research function to ensure greater understanding of student learning by studying generational characteristics and qualities and learning styles and preferences.

#### E-teacher Training

##### *Explicit Teaching of E-learning Models*

The most pervasive models employed to describe teaching and learning with technology are constructivist and conversational in nature (Laurillard, 2002; Bates & Poole, 2003; Salmon 2003; Paulsen, 1995). Some of the frameworks and models for the effective use of technology in higher education are outlined below. Laurillard (2002) argues that teaching at university should favor reflection on analysis and explanation of the student’s direct experience of the world, an activity she describes as mediated learning (p. 22). Her conversational framework advocates dialogue as a practical and theoretical level between teacher and student. The interaction between student and teacher are made explicit and the technology supports this interaction in that it can be a) discursive: teachers and students exchange their conceptions and set learning goals; b) adaptive: the focus of the dialogue is amended based on student feedback; c) interactive: teacher provides feedback on tasks undertaken and students endeavor to achieve the task; d) reflective:

the learning process is supported by the teacher, who helps the students to reflect on their learning (Laurillard, 2002, p. 78). Therefore, teaching and learning is seen as a dialogic and interactive negotiation of meaning between the tutor and student.

Bates and Poole (2003) advocate that teachers assess their epistemological position in higher education, as technology can accommodate a wide variety of positions such as objectivist or constructivist approaches, and this will ultimately influence not only online teaching but the design of technology-based instruction. They proffer a model for selecting and using technology entitled the SECTIONS model: Students, Ease of use, Cost, Teaching and learning, Interactivity and user friendliness, Organizational issues, Novelty, and Speed. This model is useful for teachers as it encapsulates: a) Learning and teaching issues: student demographics, student styles and preferences, teacher epistemology and conception of teaching and learning, presentation requirements in course content, etc.; b) Technological issues: ease of use and reliability, speed of connectivity, mounting and changing of courses, interface design; and c) Institutional issues: cost of resources and technical support, institutional support, unit cost per learner. The advantage of this model is the sound theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings which help teachers to make critical decisions on technology use in higher education.

An extremely helpful model to understand the online learner development is Salmon’s (2003) 5-step model. This model provides a structured, incremental approach to the various stages of participation in an online course and displays how the teacher (or e-moderator in this case) masters the various e-moderating pedagogical skills while the student gains valuable technical skills. The amount of interactivity increases through the five stages: 1) access and motivation: where the student is welcomed and encouraged to become an integral part of the new learning environment; 2) online socialization: where the learning community is consolidated by requiring the student to post synchronous and asynchronous messages; 3) information exchange: where course-related information is provided and collaborative learning really begins; 4) knowledge construction: where knowledge is built due to increased online interaction and discussion; and 5) development: where the acquired knowledge is further consolidated and there is increased reflection on whether the various learning outcomes have been reached. Salmon (2005) has described various interactive synchronous and asynchronous activities with the aim of fostering group and individual learning goals online. Paulsen (1995), as one of the early pioneers of communicative online education, has also provided a very full and informed outline of definitions, techniques and practical advice on pedagogical techniques for computer-mediated communication.

I would, therefore, suggest that the Institute of Teaching and Learning train the business educators in all the aforementioned models. The models should be taught online using a learning platform as this would have a twofold effect: provide the business educators with the necessary online pedagogical knowledge and familiarize the educators with the learning platform so that they experience the technology as students.

#### *Identification of E-teacher Role*

French educators cannot maintain their traditional role of expert and purveyor of knowledge in an online environment, and therefore, there needs to be a cultural shift. Ryan and Hall (2001) have described this cultural shift in higher education as a “move away from teacher-centered didactic exposition to a more resource-based immersive and learner-centered environment” (p. 4), with a key challenge being staff awareness of this shift, which should form an integral part of e-teacher training. Berge (2000) has outlined some of the changing roles of teachers in an online environment and this would suggest that the teacher becomes a questioner rather than provider of answers, a part of an instructional design team rather than an isolated teacher, and an equal in the learning event thereby deconstructing the teacher-learner hierarchy.

A discussion of the various different terminology associated with the new role of teachers could be initiated by referring to the work of Salmon (2003) for example, who sees the teacher as an e-moderator that presides over an online discussion and uses expertise in order to promote human interaction and collaboration with the aim of facilitating, conveying, and constructing knowledge and skills. Salmon (2002) goes even further in her explanation of the role of university teachers in the knowledge media age by describing four planets: *Contentious*, which favors the expository method of teaching; *Instantia*, which meets the requirements of a protean society by offering a learning object approach; *Nomadict*, where the preferred approach is mobile learning (m-learning) and finally *Cafélatia*, a planet built on learning communities and interaction. All of the planets described define the differing roles of teachers as content expert, flexible and spontaneous online trainers, mobile portfolio teachers, and e-moderators. The business educator must be confronted and cater to all the aforementioned planets and not just the transmission expert position. Laurillard (2000) sees the role of the teacher as a *guide* as her conversational framework is strongly influenced by Vygotsky (1978), whereby the teacher or the more able peer offers guidance and acts as a “scaffold” to enable the learner to achieve task accomplishment.

The nature of online collaborative learning and online discourse will also require some elaboration.

Here Pincas’ (2000) research will be helpful to delineate some of the features of online discourse, which she considers as problematic in e-teaching because online “talk” is in fact written language, and there is a fear that the interaction will be cold and impersonal as the non-verbal cues are missing. Educators will therefore need to learn to structure the online talk to enable the learner to develop comfortable interactions online. The online discourse will need to be managed to ensure that turn-taking, sequencing, group discussion, and referencing do not hamper learning. This shift in teaching methodology is not easy for business educators, who are used to the expository method. This is why I see one of the main missions of the Institute of Teaching and Learning as providing the educators with both a theoretical and practical pedagogical program.

#### *Awareness of “Community of Inquiry” and “Teaching Presence”*

Business school educators need to be particularly aware of two key concepts in e-learning, namely “community of inquiry” and “teaching presence.”

As e-learning is not inherently learner-centered, there is an onus on the teacher to create the learning environment that motivates students and facilitates worthwhile learning activities and outcomes. Garrison and Anderson (2003) ascribe the success of this virtual learning environment to the establishment of a community of inquiry with three underlying elements: social, cognitive, and teaching presence. A community of inquiry creates the learning space where students accept responsibility for their learning through “negotiated meaning, diagnosing misconceptions, and challenging accepted beliefs” (Garrison & Anderson, 2003, p. 27).

The teaching presence is the element that brings all other elements together in that the teacher designs, facilitates, and directs the cognitive and social processes in order to achieve the desired learning outcomes. This puts the teacher in the role of designer, facilitator, and learning director. In addition to the principle of teaching presence, Pelz (2004) provides two other principles to ensure effective online teaching: put the students in charge of their own learning, and ensure interactivity between all those involved in the learning event.

#### Pedagogical Research

##### *Generational Characteristics of Student Cohort*

Prior to implementing an e-learning program, the educator must consider the characteristics of the students they have before them, and this involves pedagogical research into the student experience.

Some research has attempted to categorize student generations and attribute them various characteristics. Students born between 1980 and 2000 are referred to as *Millennials* (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Raines, 2002). Howe & Strauss (2000) attribute various characteristics to students in this age bracket such as a close proximity to their parents and a great respect for their values, a fascination with technology, a focus on grades and performance, and an interest in social interaction and group activity. Oblinger & Oblinger (2005) describes this generation as digitally literate, connected, and immediate with a keen ability to multitask. They also stress the desire for social interaction in classroom activities where team-based learning and experiential learning is preferred. While some may discredit this type of research as being anecdotal in nature, there is a strong argument for using the learner as a starting point in the implementation of e-learning in higher education. This requires an understanding of what the learner brings to the learning event so as to achieve what Biggs (2003) describes as constructive alignment, whereby various components are aligned such as the curriculum, teaching methods, assessment procedures, climate in student interaction, and the institutional climate.

#### *Learning Styles and Preference Research*

Students exhibit different learning styles and preferences. To what extent testing these learning styles can influence pedagogical and instructional design is questioned (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). However, there is an argument that awareness-raising of learning styles will result in increased self-reflection of learning strengths and weaknesses and will help students comprehend the idea of metacognition and enable them to enlarge their repertoire of learning styles. A great quantity of learning style inventories already exist (e.g., Allinson & Hayes, 1996; Myers & McCaulley, 1985; Honey & Mumford, 1986; Kolb 1999) and they can be employed to research the student learning experience. The two most cited in the literature are Kolb's (1999) Learning Style Inventory and Honey & Mumford's (1986) Learning Style Questionnaire. Honey & Mumford's (1986) questionnaire probes attitudes and behaviors of learning preferences and is used for personal or organizational development rather than for assessment or selection purposes. The questionnaire has been widely used in business contexts and there is no reason why it cannot also inform pedagogical development. Therefore, I would suggest that empirical research be carried out using the available instruments and existing research employed in order to ascertain the learning profiles and styles of French business students prior to embarking on costly e-learning initiatives. These research

findings would inform the e-learning pedagogical design.

#### Conclusion

French Business Schools are relatively absent from the e-learning market and have only offered sporadic and fragmented courses. There seems to have been a focus on using technology as simple notice-boards to complement face-to-face classes rather than offering full courses that are delivered, supported, and assessed online. This phenomenon has been attributed to the prestigious nature of business school education and to the fear that the "elite" content would be offered up to public scrutiny as well as the deception experienced with computer-assisted learning. While some business schools have gone to great efforts to create virtual campuses, others content themselves with collaborating with foreign university partners or offering blended learning solutions. The majority of business educators exploit some kind of learning management system such as Blackboard® or WebCT, which bring with them the danger of a techno-centric vision of e-learning and a lack of pedagogical innovation and consideration. In order to face up to the pedagogical challenges in e-learning implementation, Institutes for Teaching and Learning should be set up within business schools to provide e-teachers with the key skills required to teach online. This institutes should also take on a pedagogical research role to inform teachers of the student experience, which is argued here as the starting point in the implementation of any e-learning initiative.

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