

A social perspective of e-learning in the national education system*

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Abstract

Tapio Varis gives a speech in relation to the use and progress of e-learning in the European education system. He begins by expressing a need for the combination of new technologies and traditional working methods at university, despite the existence of these new technologies in our everyday lives. He argues that this is important at a national and global level. However, professor Varis also argues that cultural identities and traditions must be maintained with the use of the new technologies in the European educational sphere, and yet unifying European educational standard. He continues by discussing the lack of e-learning not only at university level but also in the education system as a whole, and questions whether secondary education is providing students with the necessary skills required for today's society. As a consequence there also needs to be greater support for teachers and professors in order to deliver these changes. He concludes by saying that universities should lead the way in educating the new technologies as the providers of information at a national and local level, as e-learning has become the only method of sharing knowledge in modern society.

Keywords

e-learning, cultural identity, pedagogical philosophy, higher education, european progress

INTRODUCTION

First of all thank you very much for inviting me again; the theme is E-learning en los sistemas educativos nacionales. Let me first say, for those who don't know my background, that at this moment I'm involved not only in the UNESCO's chair but I'm involved in the university system, helping people at university. I'm also involved in European projects, creating a European centre for media literacy, and I have been working two years in Latin America following the developments there.

E-LEARNING AND EUROPEAN PROGRESS

Talking on a national level is a little difficult because it is not a national phenomenon. Those of us who are working in universities realise that learning is so slow, always has been and always will be, but so far we haven't yet reached the understanding of combining learning with the new technologies. Speaking as a Finnish university professor responsible for organising the education, I have to be very proud because all the international comparative research findings tend to confirm that the education system in Finland has at least produced the best results when measured in a traditional

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methods, traditional measures or whatever piece of study. I don't think we have it any better than any other countries but maybe we have succeeded in something, which is worth taking as an example when speaking about national level. I think that as a European country we are a little bit sceptical about European slow progress in achieving goals by 2010. Particularly changes in Germany and France are not rapid and we are looking much more at what is happening in South Korea, India and maybe China. It is very strange to take that path. I have to say that we are worried. Europe is not making the progress that it is expected to do and very much depends on education and other things, political things. There are challenges for Europe that were presented at the most attended e-learning summit in 2001 in Brussels, combining enterprises, businesses with governments and academics. They noted that the public sector indication has produced very high educational standards in Europe and we are a bit proud, but this needs to accelerate speed of a pedagogical and an institutional change. It was recommended in the meeting that Europe should follow policies for the e-learning infrastructure and digital content based on open standards and proven co-operation.

EDUCATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

What I want to say first of all is that I'm looking at things from a national point of view, that education is a very strategic area for any govern and any country. One of the factors behind the success in a country like Finland is that educational strategies hold part of the overall strategy of the country in technology, in globalisation and in keeping nowadays more and more a human source of development. So we cannot look at the university if we don't look at the educational system as a whole. How is the education, basic at secondary level, providing young people with the competences and skills that are needed? I don't know if you know the piece I studied but it was pointed out by any measure that the performance of the Finnish schools wasn't good in

reading and writing; and mathematics is significantly higher than in any other country. So we think, looking at these findings, that one secret is what we call comprehensive school system. It's not only a technical solution to pedagogical philosophy and practice but there is an approach that sais the secret is the equality in the country, the equality in providing basic skills, basic competences for all.

A small country like Catalunya is another good example. We believe in culture and civilisation. It's a faith in learning and cultivation, which is the heritage of nineteenth century proponents of culture. So even speaking in favour of high technology and e-learning, behind there is belief of own language, own culture, own civilisation. As you can see I find it very comfortable to speak in English, it's not my language, but that means that I always have to speak someone else's language; it doesn't matter, and I take the easiest one, which for the time being is English. It doesn't matter if it changes for a time, I do change, that's good for me. But I do keep up my own language and my own identities using the new technologies. But there are also some other interrelated factors: students' own interest and leisure activity, the learning opportunity provided by schools and library system, for example (they also offer support and their involvement and better source of cultural context in learning).

I won't go into detail to the reform that we are carrying out in my country now, but in Finland there's a major fundamental reform in education, which started two years ago, introducing a no more subject-based approach to school. There are certain key areas: active citizenship and entrepreneurship is the first. Then there are security, sustainable development, cultural identity of members of cultures, media competence, technology and society. It is media and competence that I am involved in.

E-LEARNING IN SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY

Learning by e-learning is also learning competences how to work in modern competence. Media communication is an area that we do together. I would say teachers and education are the key issues in my country, where only half of the teachers have reached the pedagogical and technical level required by the information society and only one fifth of teachers feel that they have adequate skills. So there's much to do but also they have been encouraged to reach the objective by diverged methods of continued education. So it's a bit difficult to see how to guarantee and how to provide an incentive to support teachers to be able to guide and help students. Then about the university level: most European gradual education has remained national. There is a need at the moment for a European degree system, and there are lots of efforts to provide good virtual university models. What kind of competences are needed is a big national challenge, because the structure and thinking and the administrative jealousy, or whatever the reasons that are behind, are big problems to be solved. So in my case, for example, I'm not satisfied with national level e-learning approaches in the Finnish universities nor in any Scandinavian universities nor even in any German university for that matter. That's difficult to say but at least in the northern part of Europe we are not advanced at national level. In Germany there is a big discussion going on: Why do universities resist e-learning?

I don't think that the international level provides a good starting point unless we change thinking. We should be looking at a new type of faculty, which was not limited nationally, regionally or locally. That does not mean to undermine the efforts, the goals or strengthen the national culture maintaining and improving identities,

but it is necessary to combine the best research and teaching from where they are and of course to share the best students, the best courses, the best professors and learning about working together.

CONCLUSION

I may complete that I was very encouraged in a meeting of European school method which was held in Prague, in Czech Republic, last Thursday before coming here. They are not very satisfied with their existing schools but these young teachers are really learning a new way of thinking. They are not afraid of technology. It's part of their daily work. They create during this experience; it's a multi-cultural experience, sharing knowledge, feelings, art and whatever is belonging to learning. They learn creatively and innovatively, which I don't see has taken place in universities yet. There's a new generation coming to the university level. They are very selective, pioneers. But universities should feel like pioneers, they should be in the front of creating new knowledge, new awareness.

I think that looking at global level there's something missing in the process of globalisation. It's a source of dimension, human dimension, educational dimension, and we have to bring it one way or another to reflect the global creation of knowledge at any type of university. This is only possible, in my opinion, using this new e-learning type of learning, using new technology in creating, processing, analysing and sharing of information. And I could say I see no contradiction between being a national and being a local.

Muchas gracias. Thank you very much.

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