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TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE IN A ‘CRISIS MANAGEMENT’ E-LEARNING COURSE

TRANSFER WIEDZY PRZEZ KURS E-LEARNINGOWY ZARZĄDZANIE KRYZYSEM

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Streszczenie. Edukacja wirtualna zyskała na popularności w ostatnich latach. Zapotrzebowanie na kursy e-learningowe jest związane zarówno z postępem technologicznym, jak i z poszukiwaniem nowych, atrakcyjnych dla studenta sposobów nauczania na polskich uniwersytetach. Obecnie Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny we Wrocławiu ma w swojej ofercie 10 profesjonalnych kursów w języku angielskim, dostępnych na specjalnej platformie e-learningowej. W przyszłym roku oferta zostanie zwiększona o kolejne dwa nowe kursy. Artykuł przedstawia główne kwestie związane z przygotowaniem autorskiego, anglojęzycznego kursu e-learningowego Zarządzanie kryzysem. Omawiane kwestie dotyczą zaprezentowania przesłanek towarzyszących tworzeniu kursu, a także planowaniu celów nauczania, efektów kształcenia i struktury kursu elektronicznego. Na końcu artykułu podjęto dyskusję dotyczącą satysfakcji studentów z uczestnictwa w różnych typach kursów oraz różnic w funkcjach nauczycieli stosujących tradycyjne oraz nowoczesne techniki nauczania.

Key words: blended learning, crisis management, e-learning, e-teaching, virtual education.

Słowa kluczowe: e-nauczanie, edukacja wirtualna, mieszane formy dydaktyczne, zarządzanie kryzysem, e-uczenie się.

INTRODUCTION

Due to a growing need for a virtual transfer of knowledge, a function of a contemporary instructor does not limit itself to a role of a ‘sage on the stage’. Virtual education appeared as a result of growing capacity, flexibility and suitability of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to educational applications. These irreversible changes were accompanied by a decrease in a cost of hardware, growing interest in a life-long learning and increasing requirements towards flexible access to learning opportunities (Farrell 1999).

Over the years a great amount of research was dedicated to learning and teaching. Some researchers claim that three theories had an impact on development of e-learning, including: behaviorist, cognitivist and constructivist paradigms (Kybartaitė et al. 2007).

The behaviorist paradigm is based on a conviction that people learn when they experience a specific stimuli which trigger positive responses (Jung and Orey 2008). Due to specific behaviors in particular situations people can create their mental constructs. They learn through a trial and error-approach. However, this approach is not correct for development of all skills, since some problems are more sophisticated and require complex thinking and higher mental processes. This cannot be learnt through observations and practice (Darling-Hammond et al. 2001).

The cognitivist paradigm emphasizes a cognitive structure, where people receive, organize, store, process and retrieve information. Activity of learners during a learning process, their beliefs, personal reflections, values as well as a content and a structure of information provided determine a cognitivist approach (Anderson and Elloumi 2004).

The constructivist paradigm derives from a theory created by J. Piaget, which assumes that a learner is an active builder of knowledge which means that knowledge is not simply provided from teacher to students. Student create ideas, build external artifacts and then share them with other students which is an example of collaborative learning (Han and Bhattacharya 2001). Interestingly, the constructivist paradigm partially overlaps the cognitive approach. The difference, however, lies in a use of authentic contexts (contextual learning) and concentration on a social dimension of learning (Smeda et al. 2010).

This paper addresses the main issues connected with a creation of a 'crisis management' e-course. It presents step by step teacher's motivation, learning objectives, planned learning outcomes and a structure of the e-course. Finally, satisfaction of students with traditional, on-line and blended courses as well as differences in functions of teachers in e-teaching and face-to face teaching are discussed.

PROGRESS OF VIRTUAL EDUCATION AT THE WROCLAW UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS

Virtual education has increased in importance over last years, which is reflected in a number of e-learning courses offered by universities. In autumn term 2013 Wrocław University of Economics provides to its Erasmus and Polish students 10 professionally prepared e-courses taught in English and available on an ePortal platform. Two other courses are to be introduced in 2014.

Presently, the offer consists of the following lectures: Accounting, Crisis Management, Concepts of Management, Economic Policy, Financial Management, General Management, International Human Resources Management, Marketing Management, Psychology of Management and Strategic Management. The forthcoming offer will include: Controlling and Negotiations. It is worth mentioning that the said e-learning courses are developed with the support of 'Kuznia Kadr IV' project.

However, an idea of distance learning started to emerge at Wrocław University of Economics some years ago. A 'Business Creativity Module (BCM)' which is a blended-learning course was initiated by the Department of Controlling in cooperation with its foreign partners already in 2007. This course was dedicated mainly to Erasmus students. It was divided into 30-hours of in-class activities and another 30-hours of on-line teamwork. Teaching methodology of the Business Creativity Module went beyond a traditional model of academic instruction, where a single teacher provides knowledge and assesses students. In BCM both students' final presentations and reports were evaluated by two teachers instructing the course at different Partner Universities with support of local entrepreneurs and special guests (Eickhoff and Dyczkowski 2012).

THE RATIONALE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF A CRISIS MANAGEMENT E-COURSE

The effects of free-market economy, globalization processes and stiff competition induce a necessity of systematic scanning an external environment of a company and its inside and then monitoring signs which signaled an actual threat to continuance of business activity. In this

respect, while participating in a 'crisis management' e-course students may learn how to recognize potential threats to business activity and how to respond to them in an appropriate way and in a right time. Therefore, an attention is focused on identification of early warning signs of a crisis and on a diagnosis of current economic situation of an organization. Students are acquainted with preparation of a business recovery plan and recovery strategies which should be applied in a crisis situation. The course introduces the issue of a crisis communication. Students become familiar with different communication strategies. They learn how to prepare a crisis message and shape relations with stakeholders and media during a crisis situation. Finally, the course explains the sense of leadership and determines duties of a turnaround leader.

Although in a colloquial language the term 'crisis' has a negative connotation, since it is associated with unpleasant situations or troubles, the Chinese symbol for 'crisis' represents both danger and an opportunity. Therefore, a crisis may have a positive result, if risk is handled wisely. It suggests that in each bad situation one should search for advantages and try to cope with a plight. That concept summarizes the idea of the course.

While preparing e-course, a question of teaching style has to be considered (see table 1). Following five questions addressed by Felder and Silverman, a framework covering a teaching style for the whole e-learning course was determined (Felder and Silverman 1988).

Table 1. The teaching style in case of 'crisis management' e-course

Elements of a teaching style	Application to crisis management e-course
<p>1. What type of information is emphasized?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - abstract; - conceptual; - theoretical; - concrete, - factual. 	<p>Abstract and conceptual information is provided while discussing a general meaning of a crisis, a structure of an early warning system or dimensions of an organizational change.</p> <p>A theoretical approach is applied while presenting theories of a crisis communication.</p> <p>Concrete information is emphasized while talking about internal and external causes of a crisis, recovery plans and sanative strategies or crisis leadership strategies.</p> <p>Factual information is provided in two case studies. The first gives information on financial statements of construction companies which went bankrupt. The second one describes a turbulent story of Wrocław football arena.</p> <p>Factual information is also included in selected publications which are recommend to students as well as in a movie which is suggested as a complementary source of knowledge.</p>
<p>2. What type of presentation is stressed?</p> <p>a) visual:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - charts, - demonstrations; - figures; - formulas; - movies; - pictures; <p>b) verbal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discussions; - lectures; - readings. 	<p>The course uses various visual techniques of presentation; including: figures, charts, formulas and a movie.</p> <p>It is recommended to watch a documentary movie 'Enron: the smartest guys in the room' which tells a story of the collapse of the Enron Corporation in 2001. The movie was nominated for the Academy Award for the Best Documentary Feature in 2006.</p> <p>Verbal techniques include comments to slides which are recorded by a professional presenter. Students receive a list of readings, which includes textbooks, journal publications and Internet sources.</p> <p>Moreover, students get crossword puzzles, two case studies worked out by the author of the course and a set of 10 quizzes.</p>
<p>3. How is a presentation organized?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inductively (from details to generality); - deductively (from generality to details). 	<p>The inductive approach is applied while teaching students how to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - recognize single disturbing financial or non-financial signals and combine them into a syndrome of crisis; - construct a business recovery plan starting with its detailed components and actions that precede implementation of the recovery plan. <p>Deductive approach is applied while depicting a general meaning of a crisis and then presenting step by step factors of a crisis, early warning signs and effects of a crisis on business activity.</p>

Table 1. The teaching style in case of 'crisis management' e-course (cont.)

<p>4. What type of student participation is expected?</p> <p>a) active:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - students' presentations; - team working; <p>b) passive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listening to lectures; - reading textbooks; - solving checking tests. 	<p>It is expected to be active while preparing a final team project and presenting its results in front of colleagues.</p> <p>During a preparation phase students have to communicate easily and coordinate a flow of information between all participants of a team. This task becomes more difficult in culturally diverse team.</p> <p>During a presentation of a project students are supposed to be active by raising questions, sharing their ideas and giving feedback to colleagues.</p> <p>Passive participation consists of listening to the lectures, reading recommended references, solving quizzes and crossword puzzles.</p>
<p>5. What type of a perspective is provided on the information presented?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - sequential (step-by-step progression); - global (context and relevance). 	<p>A sequential approach is applied while presenting stages of a turnaround process or consecutive actions while preparing a recovery plan.</p> <p>Global context is underlined while referring to stories of bankruptcies of large, well-known American companies, including: WorldCom, Enron, General Motors and Lehman Brothers.</p> <p>Relevance of information is proved by reference to reliable sources of information including textbooks of top writers and journal publications.</p>

Source: own presentation based on: Felder and Silverman (1988).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND OUTCOMES OF THE 'CRISIS MANAGEMENT' E-COURSE

In order to obtain learning outcomes, some crucial objectives were established. My intention as an instructor is to provide knowledge on meaning of an organizational crisis and its effects for an enterprise. Secondly, I focus on internal and external reasons for deteriorating economic position of an organization and indicate a significance of an early warning system for recognizing financial and non-financial signals. Then importance of a diagnostic analysis and its key elements are demonstrated. The next objective is to present stages of a turnaround process. I explain how to construct a business recovery plan and provide knowledge on possible recovery strategies adjusted to particular stages of a turnaround process. Afterwards, I draw students' attention to key features and duties of a turnaround leader. Finally, my objective is to stress a role of communication in crisis management.

Table 2 presents learning outcomes I would like to achieve by the end of this course. They refer to three dimensions, including: knowledge, skills and social competencies, which are acquired through participation in the course.

Table 2. Learning outcomes of crisis management e-course

Learning outcomes	
Knowledge	<p>Students will acquire knowledge on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - different perceptions of crisis phenomenon; - terms describing escalation of crisis situation; - multiple crisis scenarios; - risks connected with an intensifying crisis situation; - internal and external reasons for crisis; - unfavorable financial effects of a crisis in different types of organizations; - structure and limitations of an early warning system; - early warning signs of a crisis; - role of diagnostic analysis in determining the economic position of a company; - roles of ratio analysis and discriminant models in diagnosing a financial situation of a company; - factors affecting the long-term survival of a troubled company; - potential solutions or scenarios in reference to the particular crisis situation; - corporate turnaround premises and stages; - principles which are applied at the initial stage of a turnaround process; - content of a business recovery plan and its structure and objectives;

Table 2. Learning outcomes of crisis management e-course (cont.)

Learning outcomes	
Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – rules of short-term cash management and principles of managerial and financial control in times of an acute crisis; – stakeholders' attitudes to turnaround strategies; – roles of organizational change and key processes improvements in a turnaround process of a distressed company; – dimensions of the organizational change, including strategic, structural, people-oriented and process-oriented changes; – phases of change implementation process; – reasons for resistance to change; – profile of a turnaround leader; – duties of a Chief Restructuring Officer and challenges that each turnaround executive has to face; – theories, roles and myths concerning crisis communication.
Skills	<p>Students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – construct a crisis barometer, which informs about potential intensity and probability of a crisis; – classify companies according to various business failure scenarios; – give examples of poor management, ineffectual financial control, poor working capital management, inadequate marketing activities, inappropriate financial policy, organizational inertia; – recognize early warning signs of a crisis; – determine trouble spots in an organization, where a crisis may emerge; – assess whether a company is able to survive in a short-term period; – evaluate managers and their ability to implement changes; – use traditional ratio analysis and discriminant models in order to diagnose a situation of a company; – explain the meaning of a turnaround process; – determine which actions are to be taken in order to stabilize a crisis, implement strategic and organizational changes, improve key business processes, initiate and conduct financial restructuring; – list short-term strategies directed at improvement of cash flows; – list activities which precede preparation of a recovery plan; – construct business recovery plan considering schedule of sanative actions, scope of duties, expected results as well as Gantt charts and reports on progression; – list reasons why a business recovery plan ought to be compiled; – distinguish and call four types of corporate transitions (such as developmental transition, task-focused transition, charismatic transformation and turnaround); – describe crisis leadership competency model; – tell the difference between leadership and management; – list core competencies of a good crisis leader.
Social competencies	<p>Students will acquire social competencies which enable them to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – perform as a professional crisis leader; – work in teams and involve effectively in a process of drawing up and implementing sanative strategies; – convince funders of capital to thorough and reliable recovery plan; – communicate effectively with stakeholders; – solve problems and conflicts when they arise; – formulate a crisis message to interest groups; – apply learning mentality in coping with a crisis; – apply traditional and social media in mitigating a crisis situation.

Source: own elaboration.

STRUCTURE OF THE 'CRISIS MANAGEMENT' E-COURSE

The crisis management e-course consists of 10 modules, which lead students throughout a difficult period in a company's life-cycle. The course shows that a crisis does not have to take managers by surprise, that it can be effectively controlled, and that it may result in positive changes in business culture. Students learn that in order to conduct a corporate turnaround process successfully, company leaders need not only a profound knowledge and a vast experience, but also great interpersonal skills and a spark of business intuition.

In order to reach the learning outcomes included in table 2, each module was organized as 25–30 minutes lectures covering 16 slides on average. Presentations start with an introduction to the topic. The introduction depicts an outline of a module, distinguishes its particular parts

and addresses problems discussed. In order to be transparent and achieve learning outcomes, only the most important things are placed on the slides. However, each slide is supported by necessary comments and explanations. The last slide is always dedicated both to sum up what was provided in the present module and to invite students to listen to the next module.

Table 3 presents a detailed structure of crisis management e-course. Although the course consists of 10 modules it may be divided into four sub-parts.

In the first part, student are made familiar with the meaning of 'crisis' and its various causes, which are discussed in modules 1 and 2. In the second part, in units 3 and 4, students learn how to detect a crisis and how to diagnose an economic situation of a distressed company correctly. The next four modules guide participants of the course through all stages of a business recovery process. Ultimately, the last two units are dedicated to make students acquainted with leadership and communication strategies in times of crisis, and so they put attention on developing social competences.

Table 3. The structure of crisis management e-course

Modules	No of slides	Recommended readings, %		
		text books	journal publ.	internet sources
Meaning of a corporate crisis	14	31	54	15
Causes of a corporate crisis	19	50	44	6
Early warning signs of a crisis	17	42	25	33
Diagnosis of an economic situation of a distressed company	19	33	67	0
Corporate turnaround stages	17	42	33	25
Crisis stabilization	14	75	12,5	12,5
Construction of a business recovery plan	18	67	16,5	16,5
Organizational changes and improvement of key processes	14	38	38	25
Leadership in times of a crisis	15	36	55	9
Crisis communication	16	53	29	18

Source: own elaboration.

It is worth mentioning that each presentation of e-course is supported with recommended readings of top business writers and practitioners. References based mostly on foreign text books (45%) and journal publications (39%). Internet sources accounted for an average of 16% of all references used. Finally, students always have an opportunity to confirm their comprehension with sets of test questions.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In the era of advancing technology some issues concerning impacts of technology development on educational experience, learning outcomes and relationships between instructors and learners arise. It is worth to know how effectively a new technology is incorporated into a learning system as well (Orey 2010).

Blankson and Kyei-Blankson (2008) examined the satisfaction of students with traditional, on-line and blended courses. The research results proved that students are more satisfied when they participate in blended courses, which combine a face-to-face instruction with a technology-assisted learning.

Diaz and Entonado (2009) investigated whether functions of teachers in e-learning and face-to-face learning differ significantly. They found out that a theoretical content in e-learning programs was considered to be more satisfactory and efficacious than in face-to-face courses. Interestingly, they discovered that a conceptual development of a subject is often neglected in a traditional teaching method. However, a face-to-face contact between teacher and students has certain advantages, including: direct communication, better motivation, and quick feedback. Despite these remarks, Diaz and Entonado (2009) stated that no significant differences were found between functions of traditional teachers and e-teachers.

Nevertheless, Anderson and Elloumi (2004) stressed that besides the fact that primarily a perfect e-teacher is a perfect teacher, there are also other features which differentiate functions of teachers in e-learning courses and face-to-face courses. Likewise a traditional teacher, an e-teacher should have sufficient knowledge of the subject. They are expected to demonstrate a pedagogical approach, be able to orchestrate the learning process, motivate students and evaluate learning outcomes as well. Unlike a traditional teacher, an e-teacher should have sufficient technical skills to navigate on-line learning and effectively face technical challenges which occur in practice. Moreover, an e-teacher is supposed to develop a sense of confidence and safety among e-students in order to encourage them to post their ideas and opinions on the forum (Anderson and Elloumi 2004). Participants of the crisis management e-course are strongly encourage to inform me about any obstacles connected with using the e-learning platform, even if these problems are not content-related and arise due to software crashes.

Concluding, e-teaching, which becomes more and more popular at the Polish universities, induces academic staff to revise their educational techniques. Teachers have to face a new wave of challenges which are inevitable in time of changes taking place both in economy and education.

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