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## **VISIBLE STUDENTS, VISIBLE TEACHERS: GOING BEYOND THE ACCESSIBILITY IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**

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### **Introduction**

The title of this paper points to the Hattie's study (2009) "Visible learning" that analyses critical success factors in learning by compiling more than 800 meta-analysis of successful learning. As with any large scale quantitative meta-analysis, of course, there are many methodological caveats. Nevertheless, the key findings of Hattie's study deserve attention and should be discussed in any reflection on what good teaching consists of: Hattie identified the central role teachers play as well as the utmost significance feedback has for students as of high impact on learning achievement.

What are the implications from Hattie's study now for distance education, especially distance education in the higher education sector? Are there any at all? At a first glance, these two educational realms might appear completely separate. At a second glance, however, Hattie's findings can contribute a lot to the refinement of distance education in the higher education realm – at least to distance education that strives to improve the quality of learning and enhancing the student's learner experience.

Distance education has been praised for a long while as it offers flexibility in time and place and thus enhances accessibility of educational offers for students. The increase of accessibility also promotes equity in the educational sector, in the European higher education area this added value of distance education is also discussed in terms of the "social dimension" of the Bologna Process (Leuven-Communique, 2009). With the constant refinement of technologies and their widespread uptake educational designs could also be refined and new affordances be leveraged (for the great variety of educational designs and the issues to be considered cf. e.g. Arnold et al., 2013). Within the European higher education these refinements became even more important when the goals for further implementing the Bologna process till 2020 focused on improving teaching quality and enhancing the student's learning experience (Leuven-Communique, 2009).

However, in addition to the praise of distance education for the raise in accessibility, there also has been put forward a lot of criticism: Academics feel they are losing their "teacher's presence" (Hanson, 2009), perceive themselves as "relegated to the role of knowledge workers whose primary task is to connect students with information" (McMurray, 2001, p.77). Online

teaching sometimes is less valued than classroom teaching. Universities thus often face difficulties in convincing their faculty to teach in distance education programs delivered primarily in online formats (Becker & Jokivirta, 2007; Salmon, 2005). Yet other scholars argue strongly that the increase of online learning might lead to standardization that does not cater for the required cultural diversity and different local practices, especially in fields of social science. They are concerned that content delivered in online formats will lack contextualization and localization and thus seriously reduces learning achievements and the learning experience of students (Askeland & Payne, 2007).

This discussion forms the backdrop of the case study presented in this paper: For 10 years by now, *basa-online*, a degree program of social work, is offered jointly by a network of higher educational institutes across Germany, as distance education in an online format. The program targets a special group of learners: Practitioners in the field of social work who lack a formal degree or training, but who can enrol in the program, study alongside their job in a combination of online modules and face-to-face lessons and can thus obtain a bachelor's degree in social work. The specific challenge of this study program is to carefully take into account the work experience of the students, enable the students to reflect critically on their day-to-day practice, and enrich their practice by applying new theories.

Within the case study, the basic educational outline of the *basa-online* study program is described and its success in increasing accessibility to academic education in the field of social work analyzed. In a second step the refinements introduced recently into the study program to improve the teaching quality and to enrich the student's learning experience, beyond accessibility, are outlined. An exemplary educational design is shared in more detail to flesh out the changes described before. Interestingly, many of the refinements introduced are in line with Hattie's findings on successful learning without having been designed with his findings in mind.

The structure of this paper is as follows: In the next section I will outline Hattie's main findings and the perspectives on learning that have influenced the *basa-online* study program (next section). Subsequently, the basic structure and educational design of *basa-online* will be described and analyzed. Section Four will give an overview on latest refinements and then focus on an educational design that encapsulates the efforts to attain "visible learning" by visible students and visible teachers (to use Hattie's terms again). Conclusions will highlight main insights and bring this paper to a close

## **Perspectives on learning – A theoretical framework**

### ***A 'community of practice' perspective on learning (Lave & Wenger)***

Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger, 1998) developed their social theory of "situated learning" with the key concept of "communities of practice" in contrast to prevailing cognitive learning theories. From a community of practice perspective, knowledge is embedded in social practice and therefore cannot be conveyed in a de-contextualized way, ignoring social relationships

intertwined with it. Communities of practice that develop, share and refine a specific practice are a key element of learning. More concretely, communities of practice can be described as groups of people that are connected by their passionate engagement in a joint enterprise, by a shared understanding of its purpose and shared artifacts, codes of conduct and rules for interacting (Brown & Gray 1995). Learning from a community of practice perspective is understood as a process of “legitimate peripheral participation”. A typical learning trajectory starts for an apprentice (or a newcomer) with peripheral participation and limited responsibility within the community but well supported and acknowledged by the expert community. Gradually, the apprentice’s involvement, range of tasks as well as responsibility within the community increases up to full participation. The important master-apprenticeship relation can be partially expanded to the whole expert community.

Taking this stance on learning has several implications for educational designs in distance education: To regard distance education as a quick and efficient format of knowledge delivery is not compatible with a community of practice perspective on learning. In contrast, educational designs created with a situated learning approach strive to create active involvement of students and instructors around a certain domain. They also entail sharing learning products created within the community. Furthermore, online learning in this approach is not focused on the presentation of content with multimedia but on the “legitimate peripheral participation’ as process, the master – apprentice relationship, interactions within the community to embed a certain content, and questions of identity. The content of a certain module (domain) is tied back to the actual practice. Assignments often are actual workbench cases where the newly acquired knowledge can be applied, tested and discussed within the community (Arnold, Smith & Trayner, 2012).

### ***A ‘critical psychology’ perspective on learning (Holzkamp)***

Holzkamp (1993) also developed his “critical psychology’ theory on learning in sharp contrasts to prevailing conceptions of that time. He argues that the idea that learning occurs where there is teaching is a complete misconception, labelled by him as the “teaching-learning short circuit” (Holzkamp, 2004). According to Holzkamp, learning occurs only if there are *reasons to learn*: “I take the view, however, that intentional, planned learning only occurs if the learning subject himself has reasons to learn’ (Holzkamp, 2004, p.29). Where do such “reasons to learn” stem from? Holzkamp (ibid.) elaborates: “Learning always occurs if the subject encounters obstacles or resistance in carrying out his normal activities’.

Holzkamp differentiates further between “expansive learning” and “defensive learning as key concepts”. “Expansive learning” occurs if the learner realized a problem in his or her active involvement with the lived-in world and wants to expand his competencies to be able to act in such a problem situation. In contrast to this, “defensive learning” is much more prevailing and occurs whenever I “learn” something just to avoid negative sanctions, either by purely memorizing it or by faking to know things etc. This kind of learning is ineffective; new knowledge, if acquired at all, will be forgotten soon (Holzkamp, 1993; Holzkamp, 2004).

Following Holzkamp, educational designs for online learning need to allow learners to realize their personal learning reasons. In addition, they need to showcase reasons for active involvement with the domain and to provide options. Resistance and failure in online learning settings can be explored by assessing whether the domain is perhaps not yet tied to a student's reason to learn. So any extra efforts on the teacher's side are better guided into highlighting the actual relevance of a knowledge area, its applications and its implications for the life of the learner than in multimedia refinement (cf. Zimmer, 2001).

### ***“Visible learning” – Hattie’s research findings***

In a nutshell, Hattie's (2009) results can be described as follows: Structural factors like school organization or class size are less important than personal factors. Student achievement is not dependant on staggering innovations but rather on thoroughly implementing effective teaching strategies, with a passionate attitude towards students, the domain and teaching itself. But it is not the teacher as a talented person as such but rather what teachers actually *do* that is most influential (*“what teachers do matters”*). According to Hattie (2009, p.243) teachers actions, teaching strategies and attitudes play a key role for students' achievements – “only minimal guidance [...] does not work”.

Among the most successful teaching strategies feature: clearly structured instruction, clarity as to success criteria and requirements, a broad spectrum of activating teaching methods and challenging tasks for students Equally important is an active, even passionate engagement of the teacher in the teaching process: Teachers that try to establish a positive and encouraging learning atmosphere, i.e. showing genuine interest in each students' learning progress as well as respect and empathy to all students regardless of their actual competencies, have greater impact on students' achievements than those who do not act in this way. Generally, it seems important to create an error-friendly and empowering classroom climate. In addition, formative evaluation as to assessing students' prior knowledge, their learning progress and learning success is important – giving students relevant feedback features high but also the constant monitoring and evaluation of one's own actions as teacher is of crucial importance. In addition to these teaching strategies, material and programs especially for less-achieving students have a great impact.

Hattie's interpretation of the results, favouring “teacher as activator” over “teacher as facilitator” is of great relevance for distance education with online formats. The changing teacher role in distance education and especially in online learning has often described as “from the sage on the stage to the guide at the side”. This change might have been mistaken sometimes in not acknowledging the important role such a “guide” has. Re-thinking teacher's roles in online learning from the perspective of Hattie's research results would clearly stress the critical success factor of these online “guides” and assign them an active and decisive role.

## **Case study *basa-online I*. – Increasing accessibility to degree programs in social work**

The case study is based on participant observation notes, minutes of coordination meetings, planning sessions, the accreditation process, and enrolment statistics due to the authors double involvement in the study program: as lecturer and as program director at one of the participating universities. In addition, results from a research program on study trajectories and study success in Bologna programs (USuS, duration 2009-2012, funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research) were included.

### ***Basic set-up of the distance education program basa-online***

The distance education program *basa-online* is a degree program offered jointly by a collective of seven higher education institutions across Germany. It was established by three universities in 2003, with the aim to increase accessibility to academic qualifications, and has been expanding ever since, in numbers of partnered universities as well as in students enrolled. Students registered in this program are a particular student cohort with a great amount of professional experience in the social field: Professionals who have relevant work experience in the realm of social work (at least 1.5 years with at least 50 % of the average agreed upon full-time working time in a field of social work) but lack a formal degree or training may enrol in the program, study alongside their job in a combination of online modules (75 % of the study time) and face-to-face tuition (25 % of the study time) and obtain a bachelor degree in social work in this way.

Face-to-face instruction is organized in regular seminars, taught by faculty, during the weekends for those subjects that are regarded as especially difficult to be studied in an online format, such as counselling techniques, communication skills etc. Online modules, also taught by faculty members, provide comprehensive study texts elaborated for distance education, enhanced with multimedia elements, presented in a learning management system (OLAT). The online modules are generally taught in a condensed, blocked period of time, between 8-10 weeks. The learning management system serves as the basic technological infrastructure for mainly asynchronous communication and collaboration around the learning content, primarily in a written format. Usually, during a module, students work individually, in pairs, or groups on several tasks that ideally link the content of the module directly with the students' work experience. As an overall design feature in the study program, the work experience of the students is used as a starting point to explore social work theories.

With this set-up contextualization and personalization of the diverse study subjects is aspired to. Work experience related to the subject as well as results from individual or group study efforts are generally shared within the learner community, regarding students' products as additional valuable learning resources. In addition, right from the beginning of establishing the program both a sense of learning community among learners and lecturer as well as amongst learners and personalized feedback was encouraged. In co-ordination meetings and planning sessions with faculty the important role of the lecturers were stressed – giving clear

instructions as to learning goals and tasks, delivery deadlines etc., choosing challenging tasks, best related to students work experience and facilitating a trustful atmosphere in the online realm. For faculty, teaching these online modules was accounted for with the regular teaching load equivalent that face-to-face teaching can be accounted for with university management.

### **Critical assessment**

As regards the aim of increasing accessibility *basa-online* can be regarded as very successful, straight from the beginning onwards. Drop-out rates are exceptionally low, considering that this study program is offered at a distance (average drop-out rate over all partners and cohorts less than 20 %). As impressive are the number of applicants: even though the number of universities offering the program has more than doubled over the years with student intake number increased even more as some universities start every semester as opposed to the original rhythm of once a year applications constantly outnumber capacities of the program. For Munich University for each study placements there are app. 8 applicants for each enrolment round.

Summarizing, the flexible study format of *basa-online* clearly raises accessibility to academic degree programs and thus contributes to realizing the “social dimension” of the Bologna Process in higher education in Europe.

Apart from this dimension, evaluation results generally also show a high level of student satisfaction with the program (compiled e.g. for the re-accreditation of the program in 2009). Among faculty, *basa-online* students on average are assessed as highly motivated and high achievers. Results of the research project USuS (including only students of Munich though) rendered a similar picture of above average student satisfaction. However, both the research project as well as the continuous evaluation routine also revealed scope for improvement and refinement (for details cf. Arnold & Kolbinger, 2013).

## **Case study *basa-online II*. – Refinements beyond accessibility**

### **Directions for refinement**

Three main directions to take for the further development of the basic educational set-up of the program were identified:

- *Incorporating live classroom sessions*: Teacher–student interaction as well as student–student interaction can be enriched by live classroom sessions. Video-conferencing systems (e.g. Adobe Connect) allow for synchronous live events that add another modality to the mainly asynchronous written communication within the online modules. Teacher’s presence can be fostered as teachers can present a topic, embedding it in their own working context and directly answer students’ questions. Students can present their work and share it with the learning community. Teachers can gather formative feedback on the teaching process and easily share it within the group by using in-built instant voting facilities. Live classroom sessions can be easily

recorded and provided this way to students who could not participate for time collisions.

- *Providing a network archive of videotaped lectures:* At many universities of the network, lectures of guest speakers, inaugural lectures, etc. get video-taped. By building up an archive of these videotaped lectures across the network students can tap into valuable learning resources, in addition to the regular study texts. The program thus will cater better for different learning styles.
- *Enabling e-portfolios:* E-Portfolios are increasingly used for documenting and reflecting on lifelong learning and to develop meta-cognitive learning strategies. In addition, they foster personalisation and visibility of learning as students can showcase their work and receive teacher and peer feedback.

**Exemplary educational design: “walking the talk” in adult education**

The online module on “adult education” was a module in which some of these refinements were piloted. For the study subject of adult education it seemed particularly adequate to implement measures to enhance “teacher and student visibility” and thus “walk the talk” in adult learning. Table 1 outlines the module’s set-up:

Table 6: Basic set-up of online module “adult education”

<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Method &amp; Tools (T=teacher activity / S = student activity)</b>
<i>Module Start</i>	T: Start module with personal learning biography and instructions (Audio-Podcast) T: Provide study text and discussion forums
<i>Week 1</i> Creating a Landscape of Questions	S: Summarize prior knowledge and experience in adult education & elaborate personally relevant questions T: Welcome students individually into module with pointers to possible relevant content and assignment options
<b>Live Classroom</b>	<b>T: Clarify questions on content, assignments and procedures</b>
<i>Week 2-4</i> A. Reflecting one’s own learning biography/ B. Discussion on Questions	S. Reflect on personal learning biography (forum) T: Generic feedback & cross-references to study text T: Structure discussion and prepare additional input according to landscape of questions S: Contribute to written asynchronous discussion
<b>Live Classroom</b>	<b>T: Deepen and summarize discussion on selected issues</b>
<i>Week 5-6</i> Preparing a “Fair” on Adult Education	S. Elaborate a concept for a seminar/workshop within the context of their work T: Provide further resources & answer questions
<i>Week 7-8</i> “Fair” on Adult Education	S: Present concept & provide feedback on another concept T: Provide generalized open feedback on concepts presented T: Provide personalized feedback and grade
<b>Live Classroom</b>	<b>T/S: wrapping up module, answering remaining questions, module evaluation</b>

The set-up focussed on making the teacher’s involvement with the topic visible, providing occasions for students to discover their own learning reasons and opportunities for contextualization and participation while at the same time having a clear structure, creating a

welcoming atmosphere and providing customized additional material and feedback on achievement on authentic tasks.

### ***Critical assessment***

Student evaluation data showed high appreciation of the strong teacher-student interaction. Especially the visibility of the teacher's involvement with the topic in a personal way was appreciated, even more so due to the audio introduction that related the teacher's own learning biography to topic. In the same way the thematic conversations in the live classroom were appreciated. The latter helped contextualize the methods and instruments for adult learning discussed. The start seemed to have set a standard of reflexivity and personal involvement that was also reflected in students' reflections on their learning biography. However, due to time constraints only a small number could make the synchronous event (max. 6 students). The recorded versions were appreciated but as they were not refined for non-participants they were reported as tedious to watch. As e-portfolios were part of the module's content it was regretted that e-portfolios were not integrated in this module due to technical problems.

### **Conclusions**

The case study shows that distance education programs can go beyond offering accessibility. With online learning elements, nowadays widely available, but even more so with a well elaborated educational design, an active teacher role, "teachers' presence", is possible in an online environment. The same applies to a warm, welcoming atmosphere and passionate involvement with the topic. In addition, personalization and contextualisation can be realized. However, it requires the same amount of commitment to teach online as it does to teach in a traditional classroom. Minimal guidance and involvement of the teacher just because there is digitized content does not work – to expand Hattie's argument. In order for teachers to commit to online teaching, however, structural factors gain importance: Teaching online needs to be valued like classroom teaching. If distance education programs are introduced merely for cost-efficiency, "visible learning" will seldom occur.

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