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The Future of Learning and Teaching

Digital learning at ESCP: what we would like to do and what we will have to do

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Abstract

In the current crisis digital technologies have enabled us to guarantee the continuity of our educational service, but at the same time the lockdown linked to Covid-19 shows us the limits of digitalization. We experience that it is not enough to see and hear each other to have a complete human life. Other senses than hearing and seeing come into play. We are not brains in a box, contrary to some views coming from proponents of artificial intelligence. All this argues in favour of on-site teaching. However, as long as social distancing measures and the wearing of masks are maintained, on-campus social life and face-to-face teaching will likely be very limited. On this basis, this article proposes the main lines of the organization of teaching at ESCP during Covid-19 and later on, combining on-site and online teaching, making a clever and innovative use of digital technologies.

Keywords: Digital learning, Active learning, Online learning, Phygital, On-site teaching

Digital learning at ESCP: what we would like to do and what we will have to do

The limits of digitalization

My daughter celebrated her 15th birthday near the end of the lockdown. That day we invited her two best friends to spend the afternoon at home. For the first time in almost two months, she was able to hug, kiss, touch and talk with them just like before the Covid-19 outbreak. Seeing them happy to find themselves "as before" was a revealing moment. It confirmed to me what we have all experienced during this confinement: digital technologies help us a lot to maintain our professional activity, they also help us to maintain a social life, but that is not enough to live a full life as human beings.

On the basis of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hubert Dreyfus draws up the limits of online education (Dreyfus, 2008). Having a body means that to live fully as human beings we need all five senses to interact with our fellow humans. However, digital technologies only mediate hearing and seeing¹, but not smell, taste and touch. Moreover, experience shows that when the density of interactions (i.e. the number of interactions per unit of time) between people is high, the technologies we have do not allow us to properly mediate this type of conversation. In order to be fully socialized as human beings we need physical contact and to interact with other humans without the mediation of technology.

It follows from the above that for a complete learning experience it is best to have face-to-face teaching and a social life on-site, whether that site is an elementary school, a high school, a university or a business school campus. What is obvious for children and teenagers is also necessary for young people who are not yet fully socialized, i.e. (in our case) for Bachelor and Master in Management students (and even for Specialized Master or for Master of Science students). The case of participants in Executive Education programmes is different: these students are already socialized, work on a full-time basis, often have a family life, and unlike younger students, find advantage in not having to go systematically to campus in order to access education.

Learning innovation and digital technologies

In the field of business education a recurrent complaint regarding the effectiveness of the educational system has been observed (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004). The knowing-doing gap has been pointed as one of the main reasons for this lack of effectiveness (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). Some scholars made proposals to bridge this knowing-doing gap (Schön, 1987). Based on the distinctions made by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle on "know that" and "know how" (Ryle, 1949), I propose some distinctions on learning:

- Learn about... (e.g. negotiation, communication, history, medicine, software design, etc.);

¹As Dreyfus says, even in a videoconference looking at someone in the eyes through a screen is not the same than looking at someone in the eyes.

- Learn to do... (e.g. how to negotiate, how to communicate well, how to run a research in history, how to diagnose illnesses, how to design software, etc.);
- Learn to be... (e.g. a negotiator, a communicator, a researcher in the field of history, a doctor, a software designer, etc.).

Bearing in mind these learning distinctions and the knowing-doing gap, it can be said that in order to improve the effectiveness of business education we should focus more on educational practices that allow to learn how to do things and how to become a professional (a negotiator, a manager, etc.). These practices are not only traditional case studies, but also, and even better, assignments that throw students into professional situations. This is usually done in Problem-Based Learning (PBL), experiential learning, reflective learning, and sometimes a good use of gamification. In other words, when using active learning methods and techniques.

In this context (active learning methods and on-site teaching), how can digital technologies enhance business education? Before the Internet, all innovations in this field were devoted to on-site learning (Papert, 1984; Schank, 1995). Unfortunately, with the rise of the Internet and as a consequence the rise of online learning, few research and educational innovations have focused on on-site teaching since then. Computer-based simulations and business games are a notable exception. Moreover, these tools allow not only to apply general knowledge to specific professional situations, but also to train students as reflective practitioners (Vasquez Bronfman, 2013). However, technology-enhanced on-site learning is still a matter of future research.

What has been done at ESCP regarding digital learning

Since the 1980's, ESCP Business School has been using a computer-based business game to be played by all students of the Grande École program. During the 1990's several experiments were carried out using the Internet to support and improve on-site teaching. Later, in 2010, a new business game was selected, a Web-based one, but ESCP still did not offer online learning. It was in the fall of 2013 that the School launched some online courses in Executive Education at the Madrid campus. At the same time, on the same pioneering campus, the courses of ESCP's first 100% online programme, the Executive Master in International Business (EMIB), began to be developed. The EMIB was launched first in Spanish (October 2014), then in English (October 2016) and finally in French (September 2018). Other programmes and online courses have been created, such as the core courses of the Executive MBA and some catch-up courses, MOOCs, as well as several programmes in Executive Education. All this has created a base of digitized learning material, and especially a body of professors involved in digital learning, which were decisive when the Covid-19 crisis arrived.

When on Sunday, February 23rd, the director of our Turin campus informed us that the campus was to close its doors the next day, along with all the other educational institutions in northern Italy, this triggered a tsunami of activity that swept everything in its path. In a very short period of time we had to invent what had to be done in order to ensure the online switch of ESCP: digital technologies, telecommunications infrastructure, logistics, and above all training of all professors in the use of Blackboard Collaborate, the School's synchronous online teaching tool. During the week of March 16, all campuses were closed to students and hundreds of online courses were taught by all ESCP professors, thus ensuring the continuity of our educational service. This exceptional outcome was achieved

thanks to the involvement of the programme staff and of some particularly creative and innovative pioneering professors, the School's digital learning team action, the agile approach used to implement this transformation, the total support of the management for these initiatives, but also thanks to the creativity and learning capacity of the professors who were able to adapt to the new situation in record time.

Which digital learning in times of Covid-19 and beyond?

From the above we can specify a long-term digital learning strategy for ESCP Business School. In the programs aimed at the younger students - Bachelor and Master in Management, even MS/MSc and full time MBA) - we should favour on-site teaching focusing on active learning methods and the use of digital technologies to support and enhance these learning methods. Online learning should be offered when it is convenient for everyone: catch-up courses, the need to get ECTS while on internship outside Europe, optimising the use of square meters on our campuses, etc. It will be in all cases blended learning, where the online part must combine synchronous and asynchronous learning, but for these populations and in these programmes, the online part should remain a minority. Teaching must be "phygital" (physical and digital).

On the contrary, in Executive Education, the programmes must be fully online or blended, but in the "blend" the online part must be more important, usually the dominant part. Here, active learning should even more be a priority because it can also be based on situations that the participants experience in their own workplaces.

However, while in most of our programmes we should focus in the long term on on-site teaching and thus on a "phygital" approach to technology-enhanced learning, the Covid-19 epidemic situation suggests that we will not be able to implement this in the short term. As long as social distancing measures and the wearing of masks are maintained, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to implement active on-site learning methods. Indeed, what kind of on-site teaching can be carried out when students are required to keep a minimum distance of 1.5 meters from each other and wear sanitary masks? Mainly lectures with few questions from students. It will be difficult to do teamwork, interactions between students will be minimal, the permanent use of the mask will literally become suffocating, and as a result social life on campus will suffer significantly. We must try to implement interactive on-site learning activities, but it is possible that under these conditions students will prefer online courses, especially if these courses use active learning techniques and allow interactions between students ... in a safe environment.

Therefore, by September 2020 ESCP Business School should be able to offer an online track of all its programs, especially the Bachelor and the Master in Management. This online track should use active learning methods and cleverly combine synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Despite the short time we have left to implement it, the creativity and immense learning capacity of our professors, demonstrated during the school's online switch in March, makes it reasonable to bet on its success.

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