

The Emergence of a Curriculum Model for Online Learning in a Context of Late Investment in Distance Education



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Session Information

[03 SES 07 B, Curriculum Design in Higher Education](#)

Paper Session

Time: 2015-09-09
17:15-18:45
Room: 430.Oktatóterem [C]
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Contribution

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This paper reports the development of MAPE - a curriculum model for virtual learning at the University of the Azores (UA). After being used for teaching Curriculum Theory and Development to graduate students and to second-year undergraduate students, the model was, in the academic year 2014/15, used, for the first time, in the first semester of an undergraduate program. The paper is focused on the lessons learned in this new context. E-learning is clearly expanding worldwide, as many studies have shown. In the USA, for example, roughly a third of higher education students took at least one online course in 2011 (Means, 2014). In Brazil, in 2013, over 15% of the graduate programs were offered via distance education (INEP, 2013). In Europe, findings from a recent study, which involved 249 institutions from 38 countries, reveal that almost all of them somehow practice e-learning, although in half of the cases e-learning is not clearly integrated into an institutional strategy (Gaebel, Kupriyanova, Morais & Colucci, 2014). Portugal follows this tendency for growth, but, according to a recent study (Dias et al., 2014), such growth still occurs at a low level of normalization and integration into institutional policies.

In the specific case of UA, e-learning is at a very early stage of development. The full virtualization of a program, or even a course, is still a rare phenomenon at this institution. The development of MAPE - which is supported by Moodle platform - is, so far, the most enduring e-learning experience carried out at UA. An institutional strategy for distance education can hardly be found at UA, although it has been suggested in official documents that such strategy should be developed, preferably a strategy that might consider the remoteness of the Azorean territory and the fact that it is an archipelago with nine islands, three of which have UA campuses.

Considering that e-learning is just emerging in this context, its development should include the study of how the first experiences progress, in order to generate knowledge that can contribute to a sustainable strategy of growth. Accordingly, the project reported in this paper addresses the following research question: what are the characteristics of a curriculum model for distance learning that meets the specific needs of UA?

MAPE model is **Modular** - because it supports the organization of instruction in modules -; **Asynchronous** - because it explores possibilities "beyond replication of the face-to-face classroom experience" (Maddrell & Morrison, 2013, p. 271) -; **Participatory** - because it is based on socioconstructivist theories and, therefore, values knowledge construction "through the joint discussion of conceptions and meaning-making" (Hmelo-Silver, Jordan & Sinha, 2013, p. 457) -; and **Emergent** - because it is still at an early stage of development and uses "phronetic (local, contextually constrained) knowledge" (Willis, 2009, p. 17), which means that expectations about the adoption of the design principles that it might generate have been, so far, limited to the local scale.

Student satisfaction with MAPE was excellent between 2011 (the year when it was implemented for the first time) and 2014. In the academic year 2014/2015 the model was implemented, for the first time, with first-year undergraduate students, who have not been so enthusiastic about its participatory nature. Other research projects, including a recent large-scale study conducted with thousands of Spanish students (Fernández, Blanco, Corbella & Aretio, 2014), suggest that first-year undergraduate students indeed tend to resist participation because they are not yet familiar with the dynamics of academic debate. Accordingly, the next version of MAPE will be based on the assumption that some circumstances require a gradual rather than immediate enhancement of student participation.

Method

Curriculum design research has been used to study the development of MAPE. This approach is a variant of educational design research - "a genre of research in which the iterative development of solutions to practical and complex educational problems also provides the context for empirical investigation, which yields theoretical understanding that can inform the work of others" (McKenney & Reeves, 2012, p. 7). It is an interventionist approach, which "aims at designing an intervention in a real world setting" (Plomp, 2010, p. 15), especially if in that setting there is a problem "for which no or only a few validated principles ('how to do' guidelines or heuristics) are available to structure and support the design and development activities" (Plomp, 2010, p. 13). Already consolidated models of e-learning and guidelines for online course design can be found in the literature, but they can hardly be immediately applied to the specific case of UA. What is needed in this case is a continuous construction of solutions based on the study of the local reality. The development of MAPE has been studied through the evaluation of a succession of prototypes of the virtual learning environment through which it has been implemented: P1 (2011/12); P2 (2012/13); and P3 (2013-...). The specific context in which P1 and P2 were implemented was a course on Curriculum Theory and Development, taught to second-year students from an undergraduate program in Elementary Education. In 2013/14, P3 was implemented through a more advanced course on Curriculum Theory and Development, in the context of a Master's program in History and Geography Education. In 2013/14, the adoption of MAPE, through P3, is being, for the first time, extended to other courses, beyond Curriculum Theory and Development, including a course entitled "Organization of the Educational Systems", attended by first-year students from an undergraduate program in Elementary Education. The evaluation of MAPE has considered three dimensions of an educational intervention usually considered in the context of educational design research - validity, practicality and effectiveness (Nieveen, 2010). Various evaluation methods have been used in this process, including expert appraisal, screening, micro-evaluation and try-out. In the specific case being focused through this paper - the aforementioned course on Organization of the Educational Systems - data on students' perceptions of MAPE's practicality and effectiveness was collected through an online questionnaire.

Expected Outcomes

Students evaluated the effectiveness of MAPE very favorably in 2011/12 (P1), 2012/13 (P2), and 2013/14 (first implementation of P3 - course on Curriculum Theory and Development, Master's program in History and Geography Education). In that period, there was only one case in which a student stated that she had learnt less from the virtual learning environment designed according to MAPE than she would have learnt from face-to-face instruction. Furthermore, all the students except one stated that, if they could go back in time and decide how to take the course, they would take it online. P3 was implemented for the second time in the first semester of 2014/15. The context was a course on Organization of the Educational Systems, taught to first-year students from an undergraduate program. The class had 50 students, 22 of which responded to the aforementioned online questionnaire. 15 of them stated that, if they could go back in time and decide how to take the course, they would take it online. The other seven students stated that they would rather take the whole course via face-to-face instruction. In addition, one student stated that she had learnt much less from the virtual learning environment designed according to MAPE than she would have learnt from face-to-face instruction, 3 students stated that they had learnt less, eight students stated that they had learnt roughly the same, six students stated that they had learnt more, and four students stated that they had learnt much more. Students' responses to open-ended questions suggest that some lack of satisfaction with MAPE at this stage was related to first-year students' lack of acquaintance with the dynamics of participatory approaches to education, which deserves to be discussed in terms of the construction of a more gradual approach to participation within MAPE.

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