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**e-Competence: Needs and Demands
of Innovative Education**

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Akdeniz University

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NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF INNOVATIVE EDUCATION**

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Running after the students – teaching on sale on Facebook

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Hedmark University College

Abstract

Teaching in higher education isn't always that "fun" because of the simple fact that in many cases attending classes isn't mandatory. More and more students grasp this opportunity to study certain subjects while working full time – which is good for higher education in general. But the result might be that despite of full-signed classes the classrooms may be rather empty which may make teaching – and learning – quite a challenge. Another aspect of this scenario is the fact that students who fail their exams only generate expenses and no income for the teaching institution. To rephrase Adam Smith: There is no such thing as a free education.

One strategy, then, is trying to meet the students where they actually are: online on social platforms. But what kind of e-competence is needed on either side; the teachers' and the students'? What are the needs and demands of innovative education? Another question arises in this context: does the teacher have to "sell his soul" on Facebook in order to help the students pass their exams? And are we seeing the contours of a 24/7 teacher ahead?

The scenario is discussed with Norwegian students studying Norwegian grammar and language history as a case, but the topic should be of general interest within the e-teaching/e-learning field.

Keywords: e-teaching, e-learning, online teaching, Facebook, YouTube

Geography, Demography and Education

Norway, literally speaking, lies "on top to the world". It is located far north in Europe and despite its considerable size in areal (almost 400 000 km²) the population is only a little over five million, which corresponds to an average of 13 inhabitants/km². In comparison, Germany has slightly less areal than Norway and a population of more than eighty million, which corresponds to an average of 230 inhabitants/km².

Norway consists of twenty counties (including Svalbard), but the educational politics are centralised and the same for all counties. Hedmark University College is located in Hedmark County in the south-east of Norway. Higher education in Norway includes universities and university colleges. Full

universities may possibly have greater prestige among students than university colleges, but in most cases students choose a higher education institution as close from home as possible, as long as it can meet the educational desires of the students. For the time being, there are eight full universities in Norway, located in, starting from the south-east and following the coast up north: Ås, Oslo, Kristiansand, Stavanger, Bergen, Trondheim, Bodø and Tromsø. Most of the universities are located in larger cities (by Norwegian standards), i.e. from more than 600 000 inhabitants in Oslo to about 100 000 in Stavanger and Kristiansand. Then, there are more than twenty university colleges in Norway, basically filling the same functions as full universities, but they are usually also having a regional focus.

The “inner east” (Innlandet) of Norway consists of two counties, Hedmark and Oppland, with three university colleges: Hedmark University College, Lillehammer University College and Gjøvik University College. But only Hedmark University Colleges offers teacher education and Norwegian language and literature, and only on Campus Hamar, since Hedmark University College has four campuses.

Hedmark County has a population of about 190 000, with Oppland County about the same size. This means that these two rather large counties, when it comes to areal, have fewer inhabitants than Oslo. The four “major” cities in Hedmark and Oppland, Hamar, Gjøvik, Lillehammer and Elverum, have a population of 20 000 – 30 000 each. All four cities together make only a sixth of the population of Oslo. Still, if a student wants to take teacher education or study Norwegian language and literature in Hedmark and Oppland, the only possibility would be in Hamar at Hedmark University College. Hedmark University College has about 5000 students and about 1700 of those at Campus Hamar (the University of Oslo has about 27 000 students).

Teaching in Higher Education

As a teacher in higher education one might dream of large auditoriums filled with enthusiastic students. But quite often we face new groups consisting of only a few students and most of the seats in the auditorium are empty – even though the student list should indicate otherwise.

The course in Norwegian language and literature at Hedmark University College usually has 20 – 40 students enrolled. But attending class is not mandatory. The students can take their exams without following lectures as long as they meet the requirements, like passing obligatory student papers. For many students this is the only possibility to take higher education. They might be working full time as teachers or in other occupations, or they have small

children and don't want to "waste" their time by sitting at home waiting for the children to get older. So they take a course, but they don't attend classes. Sometimes students attend other classes, and sometimes they don't feel they learn anything by attending classes. In effect, a group of 20 – 40 students might be reduced to 5 – 10 active students that attend classes regularly. One might ask: isn't this the ideal situation for the teacher(s)? Small groups usually yield better learning results. For the educational institutions, however, every single student is important due to state financing policies. A part of the financing system is based on a kind of "refund" for study credits. This means that the educational institutions don't get their money based on how many students they actually teach, but on how many students that pass their exams and "produce" credit points.

Money, of course, always plays an important role. But most teachers are first of all idealists. We are not in education for the money. Personally, I would also consider myself a kind of a "gardener". I want knowledge to grow inside my students and, therefore, I have to use all the "gardening tools" available to make that happen. One of the modern standard tools in higher education is a so-called learning management system (LMS). At Hedmark University College this is Fronter.

Learning Management System

The development and integration of learning management systems (LMS) started when Internet became common in the 1990s and accelerated after 2000. During this period, two commercial LMS gained ground in Norway. Fronter and It's Learning more or less dominate the educational sector. Hedmark University uses Fronter. A learning management system typically consists of virtual classrooms where documents, lectures and discussions are shared within defined groups. This sounds rather appealing, but most learning management systems have their main function as management systems and not as learning systems. Students download or upload documents, but it is difficult to make the LMS a natural learning environment for the students – or for the teachers.

As a teacher I usually teach several different courses, which means that I have a long list of Fronter rooms to follow and maintain. Administration – the word alone gives a teacher the shivers. There are folders for different topics within the courses, there are general messages and there is usually a discussion forum. Personally, I prepare all of my lectures as PowerPoint presentations and upload them to Fronter after ended class in order to give all those students who cannot attend the ordinary lectures the opportunity to follow my progression. This is, in principle, a good deal for the students. On the other hand, the

students consequently have to read hundreds of extra pages in addition to their text books and not all students bother downloading this extra “service”. There is a feature in Fronter that lets the teacher know which documents that are downloaded when and by whom. Statistics show that the use of the LMS usually declines during the term with a new peak short time before the exams.

Downloading lectures from the LMS is just one part of the learning process. A much more important part is reflection. Reflection is enhanced through dialogue with other students and/or the teacher. The discussion forum in the LMS is supposed to offer this opportunity, but most online teachers report that discussion forums are not easy to moderate. They simply won’t work like real discussions in most cases. I always organise a discussion forum for each course I teach, but the forums usually “dry out” rather quickly. One reason for this might be the technical threshold. The students have to make an effort to participate in the discussions. They have to log on to the website of Hedmark University College; from there they have to choose the Fronter site; inside Fronter they have to find the right virtual classroom and then the right folder for the discussion forum. Sometimes there are several discussion forums for different topics or subjects. Having come this far, the student might realise that no one else has contributed to the discussion, and the student will probably wait some time before the next time he or she checks the discussion forum. This behaviour, of course, reinforces the situation with a discussion forum without any discussions.

So, here I am as a teacher with 20 – 40 students and only a few of them actually in the classroom. I want to teach, therefore, I need to reach the students one way or another. Where do I find my students? They are on Facebook! So I have to run after them to “sell” my teaching – and possibly myself.

Facebook

Facebook is first of all a social online community. After Facebook extended its network and became global in 2006, this social network soon became a part of most peoples’ lives. Norway is among the countries with most users. About 60 % of all Norwegians are on Facebook, and I would guess that about 90 % or more of my students use Facebook. This means that the best chance to talk to my students is actually on Facebook, not in the classroom and not on Fronter. So I created a closed group for Norwegian language studies on Facebook and soon got more than 50 members (the group also attracts “normal” people who are interested Norwegian language).

Facebook has a number of advantages over a standard LMS like Fronter. The main advantage is that the students use it anyway. Facebook is where the

students are. Most students log on to Facebook every day; it is not an extra effort like logging on to the school LMS. Furthermore, the students are not just a name on a discussion list; they have profile pictures and the possibility to build an online identity. But the most important advantage is that one gets a message every time something is posted in the group; i.e., every time the students log on to Facebook they will also notice that there has been activity in the “classroom” and they will most likely choose to check this. Another “neat” feature of Facebook is the possibility to share content very easily. When “stumbling” over relevant links on Facebook or other websites the way is rather short to sharing this information with fellow students. The only feature lacking to make Facebook the optimal online classroom is the possibility to share text documents in an easy way. But this is probably only a matter of time.

Teaching Online on a Social Platform

I have been using Facebook as the main communication device outside the classroom in teaching Norwegian grammar for one year and I would say that it is a success. I regularly post links to relevant articles and sites and most members choose to check out these links. After the students got used to this way of teaching, they also like and comment on links more frequently. More importantly, it is easier for students to ask question in this more informal setting. Sometimes the questions are directed to the teacher, but more often they are addressed to all members. Usually, I try to encourage my students to answer before I interfere. My vision is to create a learning environment more like a workshop where knowledge is constructed through contribution from the whole group. Students helping other students online on Facebook is a much better way of teaching and learning than what I can do with the limited amount of time I have during classroom lectures.

Yet another aspect of using Facebook as a teaching and learning platform is the psychological support function. Now and then, some students are frustrated because of the work load or because they don't understand what they read in their text books. Especially during the weeks before the exams, some students need to get emotional support and feedback online. It may seem that using Facebook as a student support device actually prevents some students from dropping out of class. Students that don't attend classroom lectures lack the social contact and support and are extra vulnerable in this respect. Some supporting comments in the group or in a private message may be the medicine needed to complete the course.

From time to time, I post relevant questions or tasks to inspire my students to work a little extra and to prepare them for the exams. “Normal” student life has

a tendency to consist of procrastination. Most students seem to pretend that they have an ocean of time to get prepared for the exams and they don't spend enough time on actually solving relevant tasks on their own. Facebook can function as a reminder and inspiration to do an extra effort while there is still time to learn something.

Now and then, I have foreign students attending the Norwegian language course. Naturally, the foreign students feel inferior to the Norwegian native speakers. When understanding that the Norwegian students quite often find grammatical analysis more difficult than they do themselves, the foreign students can get a "boost" from being on Facebook since this fact is not that visible in normal classroom teaching. Most students are reluctant to showing their own incompetence in the classroom, while Facebook seems to be an arena where showing – or pretending – to be average or having difficulties seems to have a social function. Admitting not to understand grammatical analysis is easier than claiming that you actually have a total grip of it. On the other hand, I also have a post from a student who wrote that doing syntactic analysis was so much fun that he forgot eating. This student had been working all by himself for weeks and finally started to understand what he was supposed to learn during the course. Sharing this with the other students on Facebook gave him the feeling of being a member of a learning community and the social context of a real classroom. Three other students commented on his post.

Two months after this learning group on Facebook was established, some students started asking for similar groups in other subjects. This shows that the group is serving a function that is important to some students, at least. Another student posted that he was analysing his own sentences posted on Twitter. This is a clear sign of increasing grammatical awareness due to the participation in an informal online learning community.

YouTube

Still, while reading mandatory student papers close to the end of the term I realised that most students were lacking some of the basic grammatical skills needed for the exams. All the information was in the text books and the PowerPoint lectures uploaded on Fronter (which were not used very much by most students since the students were on Facebook and not on Fronter). In order to help the students getting the rest in place I, as the teacher and "gardener", decided to use yet another online tool: YouTube. I sat down and wrote a poem about sentence analysis and turned it into a song that I recorded and uploaded to YouTube ("Setningsanalysesongen"). The song became an immediate "hit" among the students and actually outside this particular student group. The

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Norwegian radio came to interview the students and students from other universities/colleges sent messages telling me that they appreciated this way of learning. The two (visual) versions of the song have more than 2 000 hits on YouTube! This isn't all that bad for a song on Norwegian sentence analysis. – The way of spreading the link to the song was, of course, Facebook. Syntax is cool and learning on Facebook is cool!

The Downside

So, what is the downside of teaching on Facebook? As for today, there is still a lot of scepticism about Facebook among fellow teachers. Spending time on Facebook is normally considered either wasting time or, even worse, illegal during working hours. Some schools even decide to block Facebook. Showcases like mine may possibly change the opinion of Facebook as a learning environment over time. But another challenge of this form of online teaching is the fact that the teacher has to be there relatively frequently. One reason why my Facebook group seems to work fairly well, according to the intentions, is that I can have Facebook in the background while working in my office, and I usually also log on to Facebook during my spare time at home. Therefore, students normally get instant feedback on questions and comments; something they appreciate very much. The problem with the LMS (Fronter) was, as mentioned, that there was not enough mutual activity. There is constant activity on Facebook and as a teacher I have the possibility to catch a moment now and then and actually come through to the students. As a result I, as a teacher and a part of a study credit system, can produce better exams and prevent more students from failing the exams which, consequently, generates more income to the educational institution. This could be a win-win situation, then. The question is whether you get your employer to appreciate the time you spend on this extra student service.

Links:

www.facebook.com/ – Facebook

com.fronter.info/ – Information about Fronter (LMS)

www.hihm.no – Hedmark University College

www.itslearning.com – It's Learning (LMS)

www.wikipedia.org – Information about Norway, Hedmark, Oppland...

www.youtube.com / <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0HGlprbu8E> – Norwegian Syntax