The quest for strategies to integrate e-learning in social anthropology:
first experiences from Austria

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Abstract
In the transforming European educational landscape, e-learning is often considered as universal solution. This paper critically discusses, with analysing an e-learning project at the University of Vienna, how e-learning can be integrated into anthropological teaching and learning practices.

Introduction
The higher educational landscape in Europe is changing. Different programmes, initiatives, and projects aim to create learning and teaching environments, which allow students to study abroad, attain standardised credits according to the ‘European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System’ (ECTS), and qualifications (bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees). This European educational harmonization process is named after the place where it was proposed in 1999: Bologna. As European countries are growing together politically and economically, so they do in the field of higher education aiming to form what is called the ‘European Higher Education Area’ in 2010. Universities across Europe participate in student and teacher exchange and mobility programmes – e.g. ERASMUS and SOCRATES – fostering this way early networking between students and ongoing researchers and teachers. Within the discipline of social and cultural anthropology the Joint Master programme CREOLE is a good example of European universities’ efforts to collaborate and network (http://www.ned.univie.ac.at/creole/). Professional and personal networks are necessary for researchers and teachers to cooperate, apply for projects and funds, coordinate conferences and workshops or publish books.

Besides its ambitious objective of creating a ‘European Higher Education Area’, the European Union also wants Europe to become the world’s leading information society in 2010. These two projects overlap in the field of information and communication technology assisted learning and teaching or short: e-learning and e-teaching respectively. Since this dimension of the harmonization process of the European educational landscape was neglected at the beginning, the ‘European Association of Distance Teaching Universities’ (EADTU) launched a strategy called ‘eBologna’ in 2003 (Bang 2005, Van den Branden 2004). Two main aspects of this initiative for the integration of e-learning and e-teaching into the Bologna process are the internationalisation of e-learning and the promotion of the ‘virtual mobility’ of students, teachers, and courses (Bang 2005).

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as e-mail and the World Wide Web have contributed heavily to the networking efforts of students and teachers alike. Whereas these technologies are used by virtually all students and teachers at universities to communicate and gather information, learning and teaching with the help of ICTs has just started to become part of universities’ every day life. Especially at so called ‘mass
universities’, computer-assisted learning and teaching raises high hopes for an improved handling of increasing student numbers and for supporting stressed out teachers. How e-learning can be integrated into anthropological teaching and learning practices shall be discussed in the following sections.

The University of Vienna Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology: educational background and e-learning

Austria, a country of 8 million inhabitants has 25 universities, of which the University of Vienna is, with currently 63,000 students and 5,400 researchers and teachers, by far the largest. The Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna Faculty of Social Sciences is the only university department for social anthropology in Austria and with 2,000 students the biggest in the German speaking countries. Despite this mass of students on the one hand and a relatively small staff (two chair-holding professors, five professors, two assistant-professors, and one scientific officer) on the other, the Department’s scientific output is, according to an international evaluation report, one of the highest in Europe (Burckhardt-Seebass et al. 2001). To teach this huge number of students, the Department relies heavily on external non-staff lecturers who ‘assume around 50 percent of the overall teaching burden’ (Fillitz 2003: 110).

First steps in the integration of e-learning at the University of Vienna were undertaken with the strategic project ‘New Media in Teachings at the University of Vienna’ (Neue Medien in der Lehre an der Universität Wien), which resulted in what is now the technological, organisational, and political infrastructure for e-learning and e-teaching at the University. Basically, the University of Vienna officially considers e-learning in terms of ‘blended learning’, meaning the expedient mixture of face-to-face and online phases in education.

At the didactical level an e-competence curriculum, amongst others, was established, which aims to prepare teachers to design, organise and realise their own e-learning courses. A dedicated ‘New Media Support Bureau’ and e-tutors provide permanent support for teachers who have decided to implement an e-learning course or lecture. The project also resulted in the purchasing and the implementation of the e-learning platform WebCT Vista in 2004. Thus all e-learning courses are standardised and easier to administer by using this tool. Teachers and students can participate in free training courses in which the main features and components of WebCT Vista are elucidated.

Whereas the University of Vienna is continuously fostering the integration of e-learning models and elements into the education of its students, the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and its teachers, as the entire Faculty of Social Sciences, has been quite hesitant in applying e-learning tools, methods, and technologies. This may be due to the tendency of social anthropologists to distance themselves from the usage of ICTs within teaching by ‘emphasising the ‘human’ aspect of anthropology where personal relations and socialisation are privileged’ (Mills et al. 2004: 10). Other reasons why some anthropologists have decided to stay away from e-learning and e-teaching are the lack of established strategies to implement e-learning tools into the educational practice, the absence of information about e-learning basics, and the insufficient promotion of examples of best practice and their evaluation. The same is true for anthropology students who seem to have a very critical attitude towards e-learning and therefore need to be informed and included in the creation of e-learning models and concepts right from the start (e.g. Budka 2006, Pink 2004).
To provide all those requirements, the project ‘Strategies for Networked Learning: A Learning Environment for Methods and Fundamental Knowledge’ was initiated in the beginning of 2006 at the Viennese Department by an e-learning experienced team of social anthropologists. Even though this project is the first strategic e-learning project at the Department, it is important to note that there are a couple of examples which illustrate quite nicely that ICTs have been continuously integrated at the Department in different contexts. First, the number of anthropology courses, which make use of the e-learning platform WebCT Vista is continuously rising: from one course in the winter term 2004 to seven in the winter term 2005. Second, the Department has been using a ‘virtual info centre’ to administer students and courses via its website for some years now. And third, students have established an electronic forum with more than 1.900 members who discuss and exchange all kinds of anthropology related information (http://www.anthropology.at.tf/).

The e-learning project ‘Strategies for Networked Learning’

The e-learning project ‘Strategies for Networked Learning’ aims to develop strategies to include selected e-learning instruments, methods, and technologies in the most useful and efficient way into the teaching and learning of undergraduate social anthropology students. The project’s didactical concept comprises a web-based hypermedia content pool open to all users, which contains interconnected learning materials as well as the official e-learning platform of the University of Vienna – WebCT Vista. Both elements are combined in several blended learning scenarios. Blended learning in the context of e-learning means the meaningful combination of ‘traditional’ face-to-face classroom learning with online phases, which for instance can be accomplished with an e-learning platform.

To produce sustainable content and to give consideration to existing and future curricula at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, the learning material, which is being created within the project correlates with the structure and content of selected introductory lectures and proseminars. Consequently, the project intended to win over the teachers of the corresponding courses to create what we call ‘learning units’. On the one hand learning units are produced for methodological proseminars: ‘Social and Cultural Anthropological Working’, ‘Social and Cultural Anthropological Writing’, ‘Qualitative Research Methods’, and ‘Quantitative Research Methods’. And on the other hand such material is being created for introductory lectures: ‘Kinship Studies’, ‘Introduction to the Anthropology of Religion’, and ‘Introduction to the Anthropology of Organisations and Business’. In addition, this learning material will be linked with already existing learning units in other free and open learning systems. Again these units correspond with lectures at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, namely ‘Introduction to the Anthropology of Latin America’, ‘Anthropological Study of Myth’, and ‘Introduction to Economic Anthropology’. These already existing learning materials were produced in the e-learning projects ‘Latin America Studies Online’ (http://www.lateinamerika-studien.at) and ‘OEKU-Online: A Transdisciplinary Content Pool on Economy, Culture, and Ecology’ (http://www.oeku.net).

Keeping in mind that most of the teachers who are involved in our project had no or few experience with producing learning materials for online usage on the World Wide Web, we introduced them to a special authoring tool, which was used and evaluated in previous projects. This tool – the MindManager Pro6 – allows for the creation of mind maps, which on the one hand enhances creativity and enables the setting up of a hierarchical structure in a

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1 See Fillitz (2003) for a detailed discussion of the features of the curriculum at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology in Austria.
highly visual format. On the other hand authors can link text modules and textual elements, creating this way a hypertextual structure without necessarily knowing HTML (Budka et al. 2005). Of course the authoring tool is also able to integrate visual elements, such as photos and graphics. In addition the MindManager is capable of producing website prototypes as well as Word, PowerPoint, and PDF documents. Thus authors are always aware of how the final product will look like and are able to apply necessary changes in an early stage of production. To optimise this production process and to keep the frustration in the initial phase of the project low, the authors were trained in workshops to write for the World Wide Web and to efficiently use the authoring tool. These forums were also utilised to discuss problems and to reflect on accomplished and future tasks.

Basic principle of the hypermedia content pool is the interconnection of different dimensions of the learning subjects at several levels: within the single learning unit textual elements are linked with each other, the single learning units are linked with each other to create a bigger knowledge structure, and finally learning units are linked to selected external recourses on the World Wide Web and with already exiting learning material in different contexts. In the case of social anthropology education, hypermedia have, according to Sarah Pink (2004), the potential of enabling students to create their own learning paths through the meaningful interconnection of texts, pictures, videos, and audio material.

One of the main challenges in putting intellectual property on the World Wide Web is the question of copyright. Within our project we have decided to rely on the initiative ‘Creative Commons’, which offers the possibility to ‘reserve some rights’ for texts, pictures, videos or educational material in providing legally binding but easy to understand licences. Users are for instance only allowed to copy, distribute and display content of a website for non-commercial purposes or by giving credit to the authors (see: http://creativecommons.org/). Thus content is not free to use but also not strictly protected by copyright.

Experiences with a blended learning scenario

Since the implementation of the produced learning material within blended learning models is just starting in the upcoming winter term, the project team tested and evaluated instruments and strategies for blended learning by using already existing content. The lecture ‘Anthropological Study of Myth’, taught by Elke Mader in the summer term 2006, was selected for creating such a blended learning scenario. In doing so, three e-learning instruments were used: the learning unit ‘Anthropological Study of Myth’ (http://www.lateinamerika-studien.at/content/kultur/mythen/mythen-titel.html), the learning platform WebCT Vista, and a specially constructed Wiki system.

The lecture ‘Anthropological Study of Myth’, which is non-compulsory and directed towards third year students, was attended by 50 to 70 students from March to June 2006 for two hours a week. Here it is important to note that there is no compulsory attendance for lectures in Austria. Right at the beginning the students were introduced to the blended learning model, its e-learning components, and the team of tutors. In terms of blended learning one lecture at the beginning and one lecture in the middle of the semester were exclusively used to train and introduce students to the e-learning elements, to prepare assignments, and to receive and provide feedback respectively. The whole implementation process was surveyed and evaluated by a MA student in close cooperation with the project team (Prilsauer forthcoming). Thus students were obliged to fill out questionnaires at the beginning in the middle and at the end of the semester. To provide an even better support, the tutor team
established a weekly consultation hour, which could be attended by students in case of problems and in need of help.

The learning platform of the University of Vienna – WebCT Vista was used to provide basic information about the lecture, such as a schedule, frequently asked questions, instructions for using the different components, and further reading and hyperlinks. To access that material, students were required to sign into the platform with their student ID and password. Only those student who signed into WebCT Vista were provide with the necessary information to sign into the Wiki system, which was not part of the University’s official e-learning environment. In this Wiki system – the probably best-known Wiki system is the Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/) – groups of students, which were established in one of the first face-to-face lectures, were provided with selected mythological texts. Each group had their own text, which they should collaboratively analyse according to certain criteria (e.g. actors, structure, and motives) established by the teacher and the tutors. Wiki systems allow for the collaborative and easy creation of texts on the World Wide Web and therefore are perfect tools for learning to work in teams and to produce knowledge in an interactive manner (e.g. Münzer & Linder 2004). The second feature that makes Wiki systems great learning tools is the possibility for each user – students, tutors, and teachers – to check for the changes other users have made to the page. That way the history of a Wiki page and its content can be retraced right to its creation. In a further step students had to comment on the texts written by their team mates. This could be done either by using the ‘comment’ function on each Wiki page or by contributing to the discussion forums in WebCT Vista. The assignment was completed when the group had agreed on one coherent analytical text, which considered the given analytical criteria. To prepare for the final exam at the end of the semester, students were provided with didactically structured learning material in form of the learning unit ‘Anthropological Study of Myth’ and with the PowerPoint slides used by the teacher during the lecture.

First (very) basic results of a survey

Within the e-learning project a survey was carried out with the objective to systematically analyse students’ changing attitudes towards e-learning during the lecture ‘Anthropological Study of Myth’. This survey has been conducted by Katrin Prilisauer, a student currently working on her Master’s thesis about e-learning in social anthropology (Prilisauer forthcoming).

First basic results of the survey indicate that students (N=66) at the beginning of the lecture considered e-learning in general and within social anthropology as something rather meaningful. This slightly changed during the semester when students (N=42) agreed on a slightly higher scale about the usefulness of e-learning in social anthropology education. The results of the last questionnaire round, which due to low participation (N=15) had to be extended to the beginning of the upcoming winter term, could therefore not be considered yet. Concerning the students’ experience with the e-learning tools that were part of the blended learning model, a small majority of students already had used the e-learning platform WebCT Vista but only few knew what a Wiki system is and almost no one had ever used such a system before.

Evaluating a non-compulsory lecture over a certain period of time when the attendance of students fluctuates from one week to the other, turned out to be very hard to accomplish. Also the utilisation of the learning platform to send out the evaluation questionnaires in electronic
format didn’t obtain the desired results. Thus to gather richer data a last round of questionnaire evaluation as well as a more detailed analysis of the different e-learning environments including different forms of documented discussions will be necessary.

Conclusions

So what are first conclusions of the e-learning project ‘Strategies for Networked Learning’? What are the lessons learned so far?

First, it is of outmost importance to include teachers and students into the designing and implementation of blended learning scenarios. This is in particular true for educational environments where people are ICTs sceptical and have only little experience with e-learning tools. In addition teachers need to be trained in producing e-learning material by providing them with a reliable authoring tool and permanent support (e.g. workshops).

Second, these blended learning models need to be very well planned and evaluated by considering the format of the course. Group and team building as well as permanent evaluation go not together with non-compulsory attendance lectures (see e.g. Budka 2006). Within such courses, learning platforms and open learning systems are optimal tools for providing didactically prepared learning material. Web based self tests, for instance interactive multiple-choice, crossword, matching/ordering or gap-fill exercises, and learning paths which are implemented within a hypermedia content pool allow students to learn in a self-directed manner. Thus students are encouraged ‘to become reflexive, self-conscious learners’ (Pink 2004: 109). Collaboratively team working activities, e.g. in Wiki systems, fit probably better into courses with compulsory student attendance, such as proseminar and seminar.

The production of an open and free to use hypermedia content pool allows for an easy integration of new e-learning material and the interconnection with other online learning systems. It is therefore on the one hand possible to expand the learning environment constructed within the project to similar e-learning systems at European universities and departments. On the other hand evaluated and tested blended learning models could be exported, in close cooperation between teachers and students and after overcoming the language barrier, into similar settings at European social anthropology departments once comparable standards are implemented in the ‘European Higher Education Area’. Thus the project fulfils the requirements of the eBologna initiative by enabling the mobilisation of ‘virtual’ courses. In the Austrian context the developed models and material can be easily adapted to the changes the curricula of all departments at the Faculty of Social Sciences currently go through. Actually, the framework of the project has been included into the proposal of a new e-learning project at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

Considering e-learning and e-teaching as a process that is slowly but steadily becoming part of social anthropology education’s every day life, it is important to listen to the voices, which are concerned that the European ‘harmonisation’ of education will result in the loss of national educational identity. On the other hand it is also important to start shaping this unstoppable process according to the needs of the discipline. And this is exactly what the e-learning project ‘Strategies for Networked Learning’ is aiming to do.
References


