SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT E-LEARNING IN TEACHING INTERNATIONAL LAW

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Abstract: This paper deals with the use of e-learning in the teaching of law at the Private College of Economic Studies in Prague. The paper first provides some basic terms concerning e-learning, e.g. distance learning, off-line education and on-line education. The author then describes his experience with e-learning courses, specifically International Law in the Economy and Law in International Security. This article also includes some of the author's ideas about the role of e-learning in the teaching of law.

Resumé: Následující článek se zabývá využitím e-learningu ve výuce práva na Soukromé vysoké škole ekonomických studií v Praze. Příspěvek nejprve vymezuje některé základní pojmy týkající se e-learningu, např. dálkové studium, off-line vzdělávání či on-line vzdělávání. Dále pak autoři popisují své zkušenosti s e-learningovými kurzy, konkrétně mezinárodního práva v ekonomice a práva mezinárodní bezpečnosti. Článek obsahuje také některé úvahy autorů o roli e-learningu ve výuce práva.

Key words: e-learning, distance learning, international law.

On the authors:

In 2006, the Private College of Economic Studies (PCES) received a grant from the European Social Fund for the development of e-learning courses and their implementation in the teaching process. Within Project CZ.04.3.07/3.1.01.3/3153, titled "Development of e-learning at Private College of Economic Studies", 11 learning courses were developed. This article deals with one of them, specifically International Law in the Economy.

The above-mentioned grant was followed by Grant CZ.2.17/3.1.00/31075, titled "Development of Educational and Teaching Potential of Private College of Economic Studies", in November 2008. Within this project, 13 e-learning courses were developed. One of these courses, Law of International Security, covers the area of international law.

223

Introduction

In the following deliberations we would like to a) examine the experience obtained during the "pilot" use of these courses and b) generally reflect on the possibilities of using e-learning for teaching law at various schools.

E-learning means computer supported education[1] and is one of the forms of distance learning. E-learning enables both off-line learning (teaching via CD ROM, i.e. various teaching textbooks, and on-line learning[2] on the Internet using various world-wide-web sources and instruments, the Internet and Intranets. The courses developed within the PCES project are on-line courses.

In general, e-learning instruments can be used

- for teaching exclusively in the form of distance education
- for teaching via a combined form of education
- as support for the full-time form of study,

they can be used in degree courses as well as in life-long education courses.

Distance education is a form of supervised study where adult participants study independently on the basis of a multimedia presentation of the subject content and where contact with the teachers/tutors/consultants is provided through technical communication means. The multimedia presentation uses various forms of information transfer. In e-learning there are interactive computer programs and various communication means, mainly e-mail. Studying under the system of distance education is therefore individualistic and takes place beyond the physical facilities of the teaching institution, which offers students supportive educational services in consultation centres.[3]

The European Commission defines distance education as any form of study in which the student is not under the constant and direct supervision of his tutors but nevertheless uses the curriculum, the leadership and the consultations of a teaching institution. Distance education is characterized by independent study (self-study) and is therefore highly dependent on a didactically flawless design of materials, which have to replace the interactive communication that takes place between the student and the teacher in traditional, full time forms of study. Such self-study is always accompanied by the support of the tutor and by other support services which are ideally provided by a regional study centre and which make ever greater use of modern means of communication.[4]

Our courses, i.e. the above mentioned law courses, were designed as fully distance courses. However, at PCES, two forms of study are accredited:

- the full-time form of study

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[1] Srov. J. Hán, Vybrané výsledky hodnocení realizace elearningu na ZČU. Sborník příspěvků konference Klady a zápory e-learningu na menších vysokých školách. Praha : SVŠES, 2008, s. 85.

[2] Srov. L. Rohlíková, Úvod do distančního vzdělávání. Plzeň : Západočeská univerzita v Plzni, Ústav celoživotního vzdělávání, 2006, studijní článek: E –Learningové nástroje.

[3] Srov. L. Rohlíková, ibid, studijní článek : Vymezení pojmu distanční vzdělávání.

[4] Srov. L. Rohlíková, ibid.

- combined study, where students come to the teaching institution regularly and also study independently

E-learning courses of law are aimed at students using the combined form of study (and they were also tested mainly on them). However, full-time students also became involved in the courses.

E-learning courses titled International Law in the Economy and Law in International Security

The objective of the International Law in the Economy course[5] was to teach students

- the basics of international civil law
- the basics of international public law
- the basics of the law of international trade
- and to demonstrate the inter-relations as well as the differences between these areas of law which all bear the adjective "international"
- to acquire a basic orientation in these areas of law and the practical implications of the acquired knowledge

The course includes various activities

1. learning article – text
2. comprehension questions
3. exercises
4. auto-tests
5. tests
6. obligatory and voluntary tasks
7. final evaluation questionnaire

To make the tests more lively and to enhance the clarity, each learning article is accompanied on the left side of the screen by various graphical elements. These include pictures, animations, charts and also photographs etc.

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5   Srov. J. Ondřej, Mezinárodní právo v hospodářské praxi: e-learningový kurz (on-line), 1 Praha : SVŠES (2007). See: http://elearning.svses.cz/course/view.php?id=147.

Comprehension questions are found at the end of each learning article. After reading the question, the student answers the question and can then compare his answer with the correct answer, which appears at the click of a button.

Successful completion of the course requires obtaining a certain, previously specified, amount of points. As the course was used for the students enrolled in the combined form of study, the completion of the e-learning course was necessary for admission to the exam in the International Law in the Economy subject and the corresponding criteria were set in view of this.

Thee maximum amount of points which could be obtained was 122, the minimum amount was 62 points. The points could be achieved by correctly solving the 7 obligatory tasks but also by solving 6 voluntary tasks. Students had to pass two tests.

All students enrolled in the course passed it successfully. The 52 hour time period designated for the work to be performed on the course turned out to be adequate, even though it is a relatively extensive course. One student remarked on this in the final questionnaire: "the fact that the course was extensive motivated me to study regularly. Thanks to the course I acquired the basics of international law that I hope

will serve me well in my Master's degree studies".[6] Another student reaction taken from the final questionnaire: "I was afraid at first but it was great in the end and I learned a lot. I would welcome this form of study in other subjects as well. Thanks"

Another opinion: "reflecting on the course after some time, I appreciate the obligatory and voluntary tasks the most."

Students ultimately evaluated the course in the sense that the 52 hours of time required for the course was adequate and concentrated in the last month before the exam. However, they did not include in the calculation the time devoted to the relevant tasks and tests nor the time required to actually prepare for the exam. The tasks and tests played the main part in mastering the subject, namely the obligatory and voluntary tasks were the best way for verifying that the subject matter had been mastered satisfactorily.

The course was created in the Pro-Author system (The University of Western Bohemia in Plzeň) and Rentel, plc.[7] It was then transferred (imported) into LMS Moodle and in this form it was used in the teaching process. Each participant has on-line access to the course as well as the off-line version (the so-called eBook) which lacks only certain of the feedback elements (tasks discussions, questionnaires). The eBook is a system of HTML pages which uses the HTML technologies of XML, JavaScript and Flash. It is optimized for Internet Explorer. It can also be used without problems in Mozilla Firefox, from the 2.0.0.0 version upwards. LMS Moodle is an OpenSource solution for e-learning which uses HTML, XML and PHP technologies and the MySQL database server.

The animations were created in Adobe Flash 8, the graphical elements in Corel Photo Paint 11.

The results of students' evaluations are presented in the following graphs (below). These graphs contain four questions:

1) Did you learn what had been described in the course objectives?
2) Does the professional standard of the course correspond with the latest state of knowledge?
3) Does the content of the course reflect what is required in practical professional life?
4) The division of the content into chapters and subchapters suited my needs.

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[6] Srov. In: M. Hála, J. Helmanová, Projekt Rozvoj e-learningu na Soukromé vysoké škole ekonomických studií. Sborník příspěvků konference Klady a zápory e-learningu na menších vysokých školách. Praha : SVŠES, 2008, s. 15.

[7] RENTEL, a. s.. Autorský nástroj ProAuthor pro vytváření eLearningových kurzů [online]. [2007] [cit. 2007-05-20]. See: <http://www.rentel.cz/rentel/rentelweb.nsf/All/45C479A8F7A3825EC1256EEC0 04FD602>.
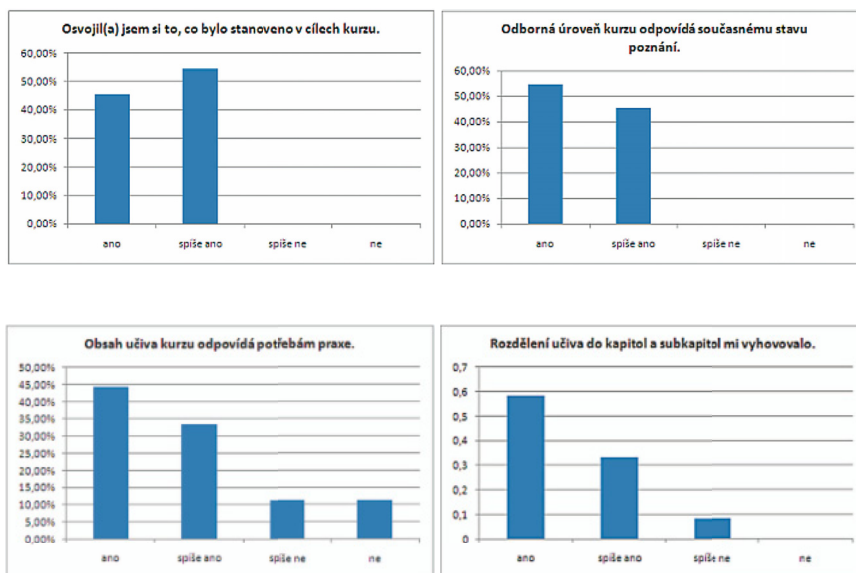
From the evaluations of the course expressed in the final evaluation questionnaire it is evident that the elements that the students used the most frequently were the feedback elements: text frames in learning articles (see above), then the auto-tests and to a smaller degree also the exercises.
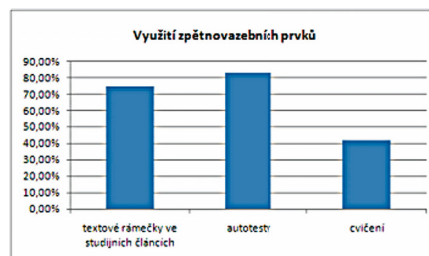
Law in International Security course

The objective of the course is to help students familiarise themselves with the following:

- definitions of the terminology: security, international security, collective security, collective self-defence
- threats to present day international security
- legal components ensuring international security
- types of rules in international public law
- relationship between international public law and the legal system of a particular country
- legal consequences of an infringement of the norms of international public law
- Charter of the UN and the principles referring to international peace and security
- prohibition of the use of force and the threat of force
- prohibition of improper involvement in the internal affairs of other countries
- obligation of states to resolve their disputes by peaceful means
- role of the UN in safeguarding international peace and security
- role of regional bodies and organizations in maintaining international peace and security
- role of NATO and the European Union in maintaining international peace and security
- the right to individual and collective self-defence
- other examples of the use of armed force by states

Despite the fact that the course is being developed within the framework of the second Project CZ 2 17/3.1.00.31075, titled "Development of Educational and Teaching Potential of Private College of Economic Studies", the above-mentioned information remains valid for this course as well and involves the same kind of activities as the previous course.

Characteristics of the course

The course is aimed at the basics of Law of International Security, which is part of International Public Law. International Public Law essentially regulates relations between states and from these relations, other relations evolve. The objective of Law of International Security is to maintain international peace and security. Apart from the introductory chapter, which concentrates on formal aspects, the course is divided into three parts and the conclusion. Students first learn about the basic terminology of Law of International Security, and also the principles of International Public Law, and then they learn in detail about issues relating to maintaining international peace and security. At the end, students can test their acquired knowledge of the subject in the final test.

Successfully passing this course is a necessary requirement for being admitted to the exam. Students have to successfully fulfil seven tasks, pass the test and obtain at least 50 out of the 67 points possible.

The e-learning course titled Law of International Security will be incorporated, in its pilot version, into the teaching process in the summer semester of the 2009/2010 academic year, within the course curriculum of Security Management.

Possibilities for using e-learning in the teaching of international law

As to the possibilities of using e-learning, J. Pěkná[8] believes that e-learning can support the creation of additional didactic materials which can contribute greatly towards improving the work of teachers and towards a better understanding of legal terminology by students. She also states that "during the lesson, students can follow the particular basic material for the lesson and can at the same time listen to the specific lecture or explanations from the lecturer, which provides the student with a higher amount of information."[9] In her opinion, it is necessary to supplement the course with illustrative examples so that the students, being non lawyers, can better relate to the legal terminology and to the application of law in real life.

The author perceives e-learning to be more an addition to a full-time course of study. The question is whether it is really possible to provide education in law entirely through distance learning, through e-learning. I believe that it certainly is possible in the case of colleges and universities where law is not the major subject, as well as at secondary and higher professional schools. In my opinion, this method is suitable for students who need to learn the basics of law and obtain a general orientation in legal subjects. The reason lies in the conception of e-learning courses as such, such courses cannot serve as a complete, extensive textbook of law. The scope of the separate texts is rather limited, due to their form of presentation, extensive texts would be unworkable. However, the various activities and graphical elements (pictures, animations etc.) used in an e-learning course can help students significantly.

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[8] Srov. J. Pěkná, Možnosti e-learningu při výuce práva. Sborník příspěvků konference Klady a zápory e-learningu na menších vysokých školách. Praha : SVŠES, 2008, s. 182.
[9] Ibid, s. 183.

The use of e-learning for students of law faculties cannot, in my opinion, be ruled out. Given the vivid and objective approach associated with e-learning, I believe this method can be successfully applied mainly at the beginning of students' studies, i.e., during the first two years. The use of e-learning in later grades cannot be completely ruled out either, but there it could be used as an addition to the full-time or combined forms of study, since e-learning links theoretical knowledge to practical examples. Particularly the feedback elements could be very useful.

The ideal application of e-learning is in the area of life-long learning courses. That is why immediately after their pilot application in the teaching process, e-learning courses are offered to the general public.

And finally, a selection of the messages students sent to their tutor in the course:

- "Dear Sir, thank you for your demanding and time-consuming but very clear and understandable e-learning course. This form of study helps us students use our time more rationally and economically. We can obtain access from anywhere and we do not have to carry our textbook all the time. Once again, my warmest thanks."
- "While doing the obligatory and voluntary tasks, I found it very convenient that the questions had the correct answer available right below. I see this as a great advantage."
- "My initial distrust of this form of education was replaced by absolute enthusiasm. I find this form of testing perfect because it is completely anonymous and provides instant results. Some younger colleagues are upset when they discover that their score is lower than that of others, without realizing that they have put in too little effort of their own to improve and succeed."
- "For many years, both in my private and professional life I have encountered the failures of law in the real world, inactivity on the part of the courts and unprofessional attorneys – this naturally influenced and influences my attitude to the law because I learn how things are supposed to function but find that the situation is frequently not like that in reality."
- "I consider the e-learning programs to be very useful for us students using the combined form of study. The content is presented in digestible form and this helps us find our bearings in the Code of Law and in the textbooks and it saves us time. Thanks to the practical examples, some of the "dry" concepts are more understandable. I am in favour of e-learning programs."
- "I really do appreciate the e-learning form of study. For me, a student using the combined form of study who lives outside of Prague, it is an excellent solution. I also appreciate the form of the lectures conducted by the tutor, docent Ondřej, where I could actively participate in the discussions."
- "I would like to thank you for your prompt responses to my, often almost fault-finding, questions during the lessons and your unceasing effort to engage us students in the discussions."