A Shift in Learning Culture; Rethinking the Teacher-Learner Relationship in the Digital Era

GEORGETA MARGHESCU
Department of Social-Human Sciences
ION MARGHESCU
Department of Telecommunications
"Politehnica" University of Bucharest
Splaiul Independentei, 313
ROMANIA

Abstract: The acid test of the contemporary educational system resides in its capacity to face the technological challenge. To introduce new technologies – especially digital ones – without an adjustment of the whole educational system means to risk either to robotize the teacher-learner relationship, by exclusion of the human element, or to adopt the new technologies as external, juxtaposed elements with an insignificant impact on the educational process. The alternative could be an authentic integration of the new technologies in the learning process so that a new learning culture emerges.

Key-words: learning culture, teacher-learner relationship, learner centred learning

1 Introduction
Knowledge society, information society, instant culture, new media culture are only a few of the labels used over the past three decades in order to define the changed conditions of the way information and knowledge circulate in the technologically sophisticated 21st century. As observes Kumar, “the new society is now defined and named, by its novel methods of acquiring, processing and distributing information” [17]. The emerging society and culture – whatever their name would be – have a set of characteristic features linked more to the handling of information than to the production of goods (Shrivastarva, 1998).

In this context we are witnessing a radical break from previous forms of thinking education. The authority crisis of schools and education, on the one side, the dominance of new communications and information technology, on the other side, have put pressure on the discourses and practices of education. Therefore, its nature, finality, content and methods are investigated and questioned as far the new media are implemented in education. This education rethinking process is, in fact, the expression of awareness of a new learning culture.

An assessment of the emergent learning culture requires the consideration of the new technological context of learning and teaching. There is a very close relation between “the high speed bullet train of changes technology has brought to education, the strategies employed for coping with these changes”, [8], on one side, and the emergence of the new learning culture, on the other.

2 Learning culture in the new technological context
Learning is not an autonomous and isolated subsystem of culture. Nowadays the entwining of education and technology is frequently revealed. In fact, culture as a whole, not only the contemporary technologies are in a complex interdependence with the educational system.
There are cultural differences in teaching and learning: different cultures have different perspectives and expectations concerning the educational process.

The modern rationalist culture had accredited the idea of the universal rationalist model of education. Cultural anthropology brought a decisive contribution in order to highlight the inconsistency of this idea. The field researches of cultures afforded to emphasis the plurality of educational paradigms that supports different learning cultures. The shift from the rationalist dichotomist and hierarchical paradigm of modern culture to the new paradigm of postmodern culture includes a corresponding shift at the level of education whose result is a new learning culture.

The emergent learning culture is structured in dependence to the preeminence of information and communications technologies in the nowadays society. “We do live in a world saturated with information and communication” [11], which is the result of the emerging knowledge based society, rise in value added knowledge, increasing information volume, accelerating knowledge change. It is a world of permanent, instant, constant, and immediate communication made possible by wireless access: Internet, e-mail, online chat, instant messaging, mobile telephony are among the most important of this instantaneous and immediate communication. Our culture is defined, therefore, as instant culture [8,169].

The new technologies of information and communications are rapidly enough integrated in the educational process thus contributing decisively to its profound change. As a matter of fact, this “consumption” of information and communication technologies engendered the entwining of education and technology and, consequently, the gap between modern and emerging learning culture. Learning is becoming more and more E-learning.

The E-learning knew a very rapid development entering 21 century, in connection with the spreading of the computer network infrastructure. Usually, E-learning is divided in cyber space based learning, on line based learning, web based learning and learning based on remote distance. Among its features the most significant are: rapid spreading and developing of education contents, expanding of a democratic learning as a result of changing the role of education staff, expanding of interactivity and mutual understanding between teacher-learner, learner-learner, learner-learning resources based on network and cyberspace, creation of an open education environment with unlimited time and space.

The “consumption” of information and communications technology focuses the attention of researchers; in change, the social processes and political decision involved in the production and “consumption” of information and communications technology in education had been largely ignored [8]. The stake involved here is the minimization of the role of human resources in the learning process. Computer-assisted learning, E-learning, M-learning reconfigure the teacher-learner relationship. To reconsider the teacher-learner relationship in these conditions became urgent. A triadic relationship – teacher/calculator/learner - is about to substitute to the traditional teacher/learner relation.

3 The teacher-learner relationship

Essential in the educational process, the teacher-learner relationship focused the attention of researchers. In the traditional learning culture authority dominated the “tabula rasa” concept of education.

An obvious dissociation from this model was realized when Rousseau highlighted the active role of the child in education. The learner is conceived, consequently, as an active learner. A step away from the tabula rasa concept of education was later taken by Dewey and Whitehead. They critiqued the conception that the transmission of “mere” facts was the goal of education. But, a strong critic of this model was realized by Paulo Freire. He called it the “banking” concept of education: the learners are viewed as an empty account to be filled by the teacher. According to the founder of critical pedagogy, the dichotomy teacher-learner has to be completely abolished. This dichotomy must be replaced with a deep reciprocity. Therefore it is necessary, considers Freire, to think in terms of teacher-learner and learner-teacher: a teacher who learns and a learner who teaches. The dialogue is essential in education, in the relation teacher-learner: it supposes respect. The educational process should not involve one person (teacher) acting on
another (learner), but people (teacher and learner) working with each other. Too much education involves, according Freire, the educator making “deposits” in the educated. In fact, educators have transformed transfer of information into “a real act of knowing” [5]. Freire highlights the contrast between the education form that treats people as objects rather than subjects and explores educations as cultural action [18].

The approach of Freire has a deep significance by its dissociation from the traditional learning culture. But, what is claimed as libratory practice may be, on close inspection, rather close to banking than we would wish [18]. According to Tylor [20] “the rhetoric which announced the importance of dialogue, engagement, and equality, and denounced silence, massification and oppression, did not match in practice the subliminal messages and modes of a Banking System of education. Albeit benign, Freire’s approach differs only in degree, but not in kind, from the system that he criticized.

Teacher-learner relationship is becoming nowadays the privileged concern of the researchers in the context of recent developments of educational technologies and of e-learning. We could wonder about the capacity of the new educational technologies to realize the objectives foreseen by Freire: the abolition of the teacher-learner dichotomy and the transformation of the transfer of information into an authentic knowing act. We should wonder still if the failure of Freire in attaining the foreseen objectives is, at least in part, a question of availability of the necessary means. And, finally, we would wonder about the opportunity and efficiency of educational technologies to support a break with the traditional educational paradigm. Without any doubt, a lot of expectations are related to these new technologies. The intensive use of virtual learning strategies - audio/video recording – and the managing of digital multimedia contents lead to a triadic interaction: teacher-learner-technology. This interaction has as a result the emergence of new cultural patterns within the teacher-student relationship and their relationship with technology. So a new teacher-learner relationship is fostered: a learner centered learning. We are witnessing today a shift from the teacher centered learning to the learner centered learning. The first is associated with the content oriented conception, while the second is associated with the learning oriented conception [10]. Other names used to define this emergent learning model are flexible learning (Taylor, 2000), experiential learning (Burnard, 1999), self-directed learning. The term student-centered learning was coined by Hayward and Dewey, but Carl Rogers is the one who contributed to expanding the use of this term in the theory of education. The founder of the client-centered counseling emphasizes the necessity of the shift from the expert teacher to the student learner. His argument is that in the traditional educational process “students become passive, apathetic and bored” [16]. The teacher-focused/transmission of information formats have begun to be increasingly criticized and this has paved the way for a widespread growth of student-centred learning as an alternative approach [14]. The first focuses on the teacher transmitting knowledge, knowledge transfer from the expert to the novice, while the last focuses on the student’s learning given that important is “what students do to achieve this, rather than what the teacher does” [9].

The student-centeredness is defined as the possibility that students might choose not only what to study, but how and why that topic might be an interesting one to study [1]. The contrast between student- and, respectively, teacher-centred learning is emphasized: activity versus passivity, process and competence versus content. The students negotiate with the teacher the decisions concerning learning: “What is to be learnt, how and when it is to be learnt, with what outcome, what criteria and standards are to be used, how the judgments are made and by whom these judgments are made” [7].

The student-centered learning presumes active-learning, deep learning and understanding, increased responsibility and accountability of student, increased sense of autonomy, interdependence between teacher and learner, mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship, a reflexive approach to the teaching and learning processes on the part of both teacher and learner [12].

Therefore, the student centered learning is defined as an expression of the student’s capacity to choose – high level of student choice -, to do – active student -, and of its power – power is primarily with the student – in the relationship between the student and the teacher [14].
A team of members of the teaching staff of University “Politehnica” of Bucharest have carried out a survey among the students of the University “Transilvania” of Brasov and “Politehnica” of Bucharest regarding the students’ perceptions, expectations and attitudes related to e-Learning. The research aimed also to check the profile of the student with access to this form of education. Mainly, our approach concerned the relation between the increasing amount of e-learning and the level of the students’ active implication in the learning process. We realized an exploratory analysis based on quantitative and qualitative methodology – questionnaires and participant observation. The preliminary results of this inquiry – part of a more comprehensive project – highlight the changing roles in the learning process.

The students perceive themselves as more stimulated to active engagement in acquiring knowledge and skills. They are increasingly aware of what and why they have to achieve, realize in the learning process. Much more, they want to be consulted to a greater extent concerning both curriculum and assessment. In view of that, according to the respondents, an increasing feedback from the students is necessary. And, finally, they perceive themselves as more responsible for their learning correspondingly to their increasing implication in curricula and assessment modalities’ choice. They give a significant appraisal to what is called by Black [2] self-assessment – able to stimulate students to “take control and responsibility for their own learning - and formative assessment – which promotes feedback to students on their learning. The increasing role of students in choice and assessment is perceived as a premise for more respect for the student in the relationship with the teacher. Thus, learning becomes more exciting, interesting and, in the same time, has as a result an increasing self-confidence.

The answers of ours subjects highlight, on one side, their conviction concerning the necessity of student oriented learning. On the other side, students complain in regard to the decreasing face-to-face communication in their relation with teachers. They seem very interested about the implementation of new media in education. Their availability in understandable given that they are part of what was defined as “digital native” generation [15]. Also, they are stimulated by their participation in the choice of alternatives concerning their training. But, in the same time, they are aware of the disadvantage the lack of direct dialogue in the learning process implies.

4 The student-centered learning assessment
The shift from the teacher-centered to the student-centered learning is the result of some convergent tendencies concerning the content of the educational process, the role distribution of the educational staff and the nature of the teacher-learner relationship:

- The educational process tends to convert from a knowledge transmission process to a knowledge production process.
- The teacher looses the knowledge monopole and becomes, at his turn, a learner whose role is that of a learning catalyst; the learner becomes more autonomous, active and responsible.
- The hierarchical authority relationship teacher-learner is substituted by an interactive and respect based relationship.

Therefore, student-centered learning is considered as a viable alternative to the hierarchical, dissociate, distributive, authoritative traditional relationship. The researches concerning student-centered learning highlight that students developed better study skills and understanding and had increased participation and motivation. They felt there is more respect for them and this boosted their confidence [12].

Placing “learners at the heart of the learning process”, student-centered learning meets their needs and so “is taken to a progressive step in which learner-centered approaches mean that persons are able to learn what is relevant for them in ways that are appropriate” [3]. The learner-centered learning has as incontestable gain in the adequacy of learning to the learner’s needs, interests and purposes. But, in what is the strong point of this approach, we find also its potentially weakest point. The price of individualization in the learning process could be the isolation from other learners. In other words, the social context of learning and the interaction
with peers are in danger in the conditions of “focusing completely on the individual learner and taken to its extreme…. if each child is unique, and each requires a specific pedagogical approach appropriate to him or her and to no other, the construction of an all embracing pedagogy or general principles of teaching become an impossibility” [17].

5 Conclusion

Among the pervasive changes engendered by the new media – and especially by the birth of Internet – one of the most significant is the entwining of technology with education. A shift in the learning culture from teacher-centered to learner-centered learning has resulted. The question of benefits and limitations, advantages and risks, opportunities and dangers as we end up with this educational transformation remains open. Three stances are frequently sustained in the assessment of the relationship between new media and education: techno-utopia, critical theory of technology, postmodernism [8]. According to exponents of techno-utopian, technology offers the greatest potential to right what’s wrong in education. Implemented in education, technology of information and communications contributes to the transformation of teaching and the improvement of the learners’ achievement. The critical theory of technology highlights the growing sense of isolation on the part of both teachers and learners. Also, the expensiveness of access to Internet – correlated with income, education and race – is emphasized. Finally, the postmodern stance points out that the constant communication, instantaneous information and immediate feedback, that characterizes contemporary society, are not able to assure authentic communication. Lives have become more separated and more isolated and private. So, online classes reflect this dichotomy: students can access class at all hours of day or night yet they are increasingly isolated from their peers by an “electronic curtain” [13].

As a result of the implementation of new media in education we are witnessing the emergence of a new learning culture. A maximizing of the technology’s role and a minimization of that of the human resources are among the mainstay of this learning culture. The teacher becomes a moderator, a guide, an observer of activity. The price of the opportunity that the students have to be actively involved in their own process of training resides in the increasing calculator mediated communication in the detriment of face-to-face communication. A quantitative increase of communication is correlated with a depreciation of communication’s quality. The complexity of this phenomenon engendered controversies.

From a techno-utopian perspective the substitution of the traditional classroom by the virtual context – what is named the learners’ disembodiment - is viewed as a chance for eradication the classrooms pathology. In the absence of the body, online distance learning becomes “race-neutral, location-neutral, income-neutral, disability-neutral... The consequence is that student participation in the discussion is greater than in our face-to-face classes, given to “some kinds of personal warmth which is more freely exchanged in the absence of bodies” [19]. But, the same absence of bodies, of the face-to-face communication are viewed by the exponents of critical theory of technology as being at the origin of the isolation, of a certain “deterioration” of the teacher-learner relationship, derived from the lack of direct interaction between teacher and learner and, respectively, from the prevalence of calculator mediated communication. The above deterioration is, in the same time, a result of the tendency to transform teacher-student relationship in one of service and demand in the context of the more consumer-client centered contemporary culture. Much more communication – 24 hours, seven days a week – and much more isolation – this seems to be the paradox of today’s instant information culture.

Faced with this contradictory situation we are not in position to choose between alternatives – education with or without the new technologies - but to “focus our efforts on sustaining dialogue that has always been at the heart of educational experience”; if we can make that “the technology holds great promise; if not, then we face a great threat” [4].
Acknowledgments: This paper was supported by the Romanian UEFISCU in the frame of the project Cognitive Radio Technology and the Efficient Usage of the RF Spectrum.

References: