Quality Education in Algerian Universities Torn between Traditional Teaching Practices, Unfamiliarity with Information Communication Technologies and E-Learning

جودة التعليم في الجامعات الجزائرية بين ممارسات التدريس التقليدية ,عدم الإلمام بتقنيات اتصال المعلومات والتعليم الإلكتروني

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Abstract:

This article aims at exploring quality education in Algerian Higher Education focusing on teaching practices, attitudes towards technologies, and acquaintance with e-leaning usages. To collect data, a questionnaire was administered to twenty teachers of different subjects. This methodological tool targeted three main aspects which directly influence quality education: teaching practices, technology, pedagogical beliefs, and perceptions of e-learning. The findings revealed that the status quo of quality education in Algerian universities is torn between traditional teaching practices and unfamiliarity with information communication technologies, namely towards e-learning. This paper, by means of highlighting the already-mentioned shortcomings, tries to suggest certain propositions to affectively and appropriately use e-leaning platforms so as to assist quality education in Algerian Higher Education.

Keywords: Quality education; e-learning; information communication technologies; traditional practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It would be logical to suggest that education strives to achieve various objectives and goals which mainly relate to processes of learning and clear-cut ends as well. However, effective education in the postmodern and technology- based world underscores the same mechanisms and endeavours prioritizing quality as the main feature to be sought. Despite this promising statement, quality as a concept and a process triggers certain controversies as to what it means and how it can be measured and maintained (Becket and Brookes 2006). Thus, the review of the literature exhibits a lack of consensus as to the identification of quality within cultures and among students, teachers, policymakers, the business community, unions, etc. Following this line of thought, it would be necessary to delimit the nature of quality and its feature and, then fetch for befitting measures to implement and assess it as well.

2. Understandings of Quality

The review of the literature of the concept quality documents a lack of consensus as to its exact definition. Despite this fact, certain understandings have outlined key features of quality in education. According to Green (1994); Westerheijden (1999), it is "a philosophical concept that lacks a general theory in the literature" (as cited in Kahsay, 2012). Gibson (1986); Neave (1986); Scott (1994) argue that quality is "notoriously elusive" (as cited in Kahsay, 2012). Hammond (2013) suggests that quality education embraces many aspects, among them are the following ones : learning resources, technology, programme followed , lecturing methodology, attachments, qualifications, co-curricular activities, performance awards, students and lecturers perspective in the institution operating management also their opinions and appraisal toward education'. According to Sallis (2002), quality in education is a multi-dimensional concept with different components. Harvey 2005 (as cited in Brucaj (2014) argues that quality relates to excellence, perfection, value for money and

fitness to purpose. Among the illuminating definitions of the concept of quality is the one advanced by Coombs in his book 'The World Crisis in Education: The View from the Eighties' and which goes as follows:

> ..Qualitative dimension means much more than the quality of education as customarily defined and judged by student learning achievements, in terms of traditional curriculum and standards. Quality (.....) also pertains to the relevance of what is taught and learned - to how well it fits the present and future needs of the particular learners in question, given their particular circumstances and prospects. It also refers to significant changes in the educational system itself, in the nature of its inputs (students, teachers, facilities, equipment, and supplies); its objectives, curriculum and educational technologies; and its socioeconomic, cultural and political environment. (Coombs, 1985, p. 105).

3. The Significance of Technology for Quality

Despite the lack of consensus as to the exact meaning of quality, its significance in relation to 21st century higher education objectives is a fact that cannot be denied. That being said, it may be suggested that seeking quality and maintaining it are the target of many educational institutions. Therefore, applying its traits would be mandatory. But, before that, one should outline that quality had accompanied the technological boom which makes it self-evident that any process of quality education should account for technology. This rapid technological metamorphosis in the teaching-learning process initiated endeavours aiming at improving the quality of education. In connection with this, Godfrey (2001) argues that technology via the flexible environment it displays to its users, allows them to embrace multiple perspectives. It also accounts for learners' differences. Following the same line of thought, seekers of quality in education be they teachers, learners or administrators, need to develop positive attitudes towards technology and a mastery of its use so as to enhance their

practices, to feature quality.

4. Technology, Pedagogical Beliefs and Attitudes

Developing quality in education requires generating positive attitudes towards technology. The concept of attitudes outlines various definitions (Ankiewicz et al. 2001; Ardies et al. 2013). However, the commonest understandings emanate from the traditional approach to attitudes which identify cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of the concept (Breckler 1984, Fishbein & Ajzen 1973, Ostrom 1969). The multidimensional nature of attitudes suggests that the rapport between attitudes and science may not be straightforward as unitary construct (Osborne et al. 2003; van Aalderen-Smeets & Walma van der Molen, 2013).

In connection with the above-mentioned understandings of attitudes, the use of technology in the classroom is, to a great extent, determined by teachers' attitudes towards technology (Kumar, Rose, & D'Silva, 2008). These attitudes, Atkins & Vasu (2000) argue, exercise a significance influence on the use of computers (technology) along teaching practices. Therefore, establishing a positive attitude in teachers towards technology would undoubtedly contribute to developing quality in education. Despite the tight link outlined above, the use of technology among teachers remains questioned and chastised with regard to various variables other than teachers' attitudes (see the sections 2 and 3). Plair (2008, p.70) stated that : "Despite a steady wave of how-to workshops and some longer-duration seminars, infusing technology into curriculum and teaching practices remains elusive for many teachers." Following the same argument, Ertmer (2005) adds that teachers are at ease using technology for individual needs, but its integration in the classroom, she argues, would be questioned.

5. E-Learning and Quality Education

Indeed, technology has metamorphosed education to certain extremes that had been unthinkable prior to its emancipation. Technology has transformed teaching/learning practices in ration to the content of the processes and the locus they happen to take place in. Nowadays, e-learning substitutes traditional classes as it redefines the concepts of time and place. E-learning develops many boons that can be explored by both teachers and learners, and as such enhances quality education. It does since it allows flexibility of learning and facilitates access to information resources, and most importantly, it contributes to develop innovative and easy ways of learning, interacting, sharing resources and knowledge among the users.

E-learning (electronic learning) as a concept is defined differently by different scholars. Golden et al., (2006) outline it as "instructional content or learning experience delivered or enabled by electronic technologies". Other understandings differed in relations to how inclusive or excluding they are. While the latter sees e-learning as the delivery of the content via Internet, the former (inclusive) underscores its interactive qualities and identifies the following elements as part of it: the use of the internet, intranets/extranets, audio- and video-tape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, and CD-ROM. Following this line of thought, Luskin (2003) says that the "e" should be interpreted to mean exciting, energetic, enthusiastic, emotional, extended, excellent, and educational in addition to "electronic" that is a traditional national interpretation.

The significance of e-learning can be identified in relation different advantages. To begin with, it has transformed teacher-centered learning into student-centered processes of instruction. In addition to this, it surpasses the frontiers of the traditional classrooms and as such allows learning to take place anytime and anywhere via virtual learning environment

(VLE) (Okhovati, et al., 2005). In addition to this, e-learning is believed to enhance interaction and collaboration between the teacher and the learners. It also develops learners' interest in the subject to be learnt. Moore & Kearsley (2004) argue that studies have shown that learners who receive online courses are more likely to connect to the subjects more than those who are instructed in a traditional way. The speed of learning is another quality that is distinguishing in e-learning.

6. The Aim of the Study

This study explores quality education in higher education. It acknowledges the fact that quality is not any an easy target to be reached since it outlines many aspects and elements that need to be taken into consideration. For validity and reliability, this study limits its scope to quality education, technology and e-learning. It suggests that quality education in Algerian universities is obstructed by various hurdles such as traditional teaching practices, attitudes towards technology and unfamiliarity with e-learning. It also showcases the cursory understandings teachers develop towards technology-based concepts.

7. Methodological Framework

7.1 Tools

To investigate the status quo of quality education at the Algerian universities and teachers' perceptions of it in relation to the significance of technology and e-learning in particular, a questionnaire was administered to twenty teachers of different subjects. This methodological tool targeted three main aspects which directly influence quality education: teaching practices, technology and pedagogical beliefs, and perceptions of e-learning.

7.2 Participants

The participants in this study are twenty university teachers from the University of Abd Elhamid Ibn Badis (Mostaganem). These teachers represent both sexes (males and females) though, females outnumbered the male category given the fact most of the teachers are female teachers. The interviewed teachers represent different age categories (26-40) and different teaching experiences. They teach different subjects including the following ones: phonetics phonology , morpho-syntax, oral-expression, child psychology, educational psychology, ESP , French, research methodology, history, grammar, written expression, linguistics, academic writing, translation, semantics, didactics, intercultural studies, among others .

8. Results

8.1. Section One: Teaching Practices and Quality Education

The first section- entitled teaching practices- of the questionnaire comprises various questions whose common purpose is to identify the main features of teachers' teaching practices and to see whether or not they enhance quality education, the pursuit of higher education in the 21st century.

Quest 1: Teaching materials

To begin with, quality education requires updated teaching materials, new approaches and methods of teaching and innovation, among many other pedagogical tools. The participants have been asked about the teaching materials they use in English classes. One of the teachers claims the use of traditional materials as he suggests: "Traditional ones such as pen and board and sometimes, some hand-outs". The analysis of the data collected from the first

question identifies two main categories of materials: traditional and technology-based ones. The former, teachers explained , includes the following: hand-outs, worksheets, board, books, textbooks, pen, dictionaries, documents, articles. The latter embraces the ensuing tools: games, authentic materials, data show, laptop, visual aids, audios, videos, PowerPoint, templates, sites on the web a personal computer.

Quest 2: Teaching approaches, methods and techniques

Quality education also suggests the adoption of updated and befitting approaches, methods and techniques of teaching. Teachers mentioned that they use competency-based approach, learner-cantered approach, active learning and, thematic, and stylistic, holistic approaches. As to the methods, they put the following ones forward: eclectic method, hybrid teaching, and direct method. However, when analyzing teachers' techniques, they had been stratified in relation to traditional and updated ones. The first category involves: students' obligatory participation on the board, delivering the lecture then asking for participation, and delivering the lesson then giving activities. The second group of techniques echoes updates techniques of teaching such as: group work, pair work, classroom discussion, and peer-correction.

Quest 3: Objectives/Goals of teaching

What objectives and goals do teachers at the university set and aspire to achieve? Are these objectives cantered on quality as the end of learning? The answer does not meet quality expectations as most of the teachers outline certain objectives that meet the needs of the lessons and courses only. For example, some teachers underscore the writing skill and claim: "to make students able to write coherent paragraphs and essays". Others focused on developing learners' skills as it is shown in this comment: to teach students concepts and give

them the possibility of developing their skills. Involving learners in the classroom had been among the objectives teachers try to achieve. A teacher said: "my objective is 'engaging the learners in the learning process". Nevertheless, the minority of teachers have pointed at some objectives that can align with quality education as developing critical thinking, made clear in the following phrases provided by the teachers: develop critical thinking, critical awareness how to analyze , synthesize these concepts. Under the same line of thought, some teachers underscored using the acquired knowledge in real situations, a feature that is essential for quality education.

Quest 4: Traditional vs. Updated Teaching Practices

The next questions aim at identifying teachers' awareness about their teaching practices as either traditional or updated (technology- based). The data retrieved displayed three main categories: traditional teaching practices, updated ones, and both traditional and updated ones. Most of the teachers who claim their teaching practices to be updated underscored novel techniques employed in the classroom. A teacher says that: "I always try to find a new creative updated way to teach the content matter. Another suggests: "I give room to individualized learning, engage learners, motivate learning and encourage communication between me and the students". Other teachers conceived updated teaching practices along the use of technology. A teacher puts his comment forward: "I use videos from YouTube". However, the second category of teachers deemed their teaching practices traditional due to a lack of materials. A teacher adds: "I would say traditional since updating them needs materials and novel means". The third category of teachers suggested that their teaching practices are both traditional and updated depending on many variables. A teacher says: "honestly more traditional in the sense that students can follow; but with autonomous

students I prefer modern. Another teacher adds: "both of them traditional in terms of material yet updated in terms lesson plan".

Quest 5: Innovation in Teaching

Innovation is believed to be among the salient features of quality education. The teachers had been asked whether or not they are innovative in their teaching practices. The stratification of teachers' answers identified various understandings of innovation. There are some teachers who linked it to technology. A teacher says that they use innovation by "using computer-mediated communication". Another teacher adds: "I use videos from YouTube. Some understandings outlined innovation along creativity and personal teaching styles. A teacher suggests: "I try to implement some creative techniques/methods to improve the teaching/learning process". Another comment holds the view and goes as follows: "I develop my own way of teaching". Other teachers claimed the targeted feature along the use of excerpts from newspapers, articles, newspapers, books.

8.2. Section Two: Technology, Teachers' Pedagogical Beliefs and Quality Education

The aim of this section is to identify teachers' beliefs and attitudes as to the use of technology in teaching the English language. By the same token, it attempts to portray teachers' familiarity with certain key concepts in relation to technology use such as information communication technology, technology integration, technology education, information culture, and information technology. This part, too, outlines the link between the before-mentioned criteria and quality education.

Quest 1: Teachers' Understandings of Technology Education

The first concept that teachers had been asked to define was technology education. It is suggested that teachers' development of accurate understandings are likely to allow them to embrace effective practices of using technology in classrooms and as such contribute to quality in education. Richey, et al. (2008) define technology education as : Educational technology is the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using and managing appropriate technological processes and resources. The analysis of the data revealed some understandings were closer to the mentioned definition as they outlined effective and appropriate use of technology. A teacher suggests: 'It is a field of study that explores the effective ways to use and integrate in the teaching process. However, other cursory understandings focused on the use of technology. This idea goes along the following comment by a teacher: 'It is the study of technology mainly the practice of technology.

Quest 2: Teachers' Understandings of Technology Integration

The rapport between technology and quality education should be mediated by the dichotomy: technology use and technology integration, with the priority given to the latter in relation to quality assurance. The teachers were asked to provide their understandings as to what technology integration means. Before dealing with their answers, the quote by Dockstader, Jolene (1999, 73) seems illuminating as to the meaning of the debated concept:

> Technology integration is using computers effectively and efficiently in the general content areas to allow students to learn how to apply computer skills in meaningful ways. Integration is incorporating technology in a manner that enhances student learning. Technology integration is using software supported by the business world for real-world applications so students learn to use computers flexibly,

purposefully and creatively.

The analysis of teachers' answers revealed a confusion between technology use and integration. Most of the teachers claimed the former to be synonymous with the latter. A teacher says: "Incorporating technology (material approaches) in learning. Another teacher adds: The use of technology tools in education". The minority of teachers identified some key features of technology integration such as effective use. A teacher elaborates the points suggesting: "The effective use of it in any field".

Quest 3: Teachers' Understandings of Information Communication Technology

The concept of information communication technology is also of due significance as to seeking quality education along effective integration of technology. According to Young (2012), information communication technology (ICT) is a term that describes types of technology that are used specifically for communications. It is like Information Technology, but ICT focuses more on technologies that deal with communication, like cell phones, the Internet and wireless networks, among other things. As to teachers' understandings, one may notice that some of the teachers tend to group all technological devices under the heading of ICT, an idea that seems generative if compared to the one advanced by Young (2012). A teacher says: "(ICTs are) all the technological tools that are available". The other category of answers tends to relate the concept to teaching. The following comment elucidates the point: all the tools that help you teach effectively. The third group of answers depicts it along technological devices. A teacher adds: "devices systems applications tools and devices used in technology and computer /phones, video conferencing".

8.3 Section Tree: E-learning in higher education and Quality Education:

The third section of the questionnaire digs deeper in the rapport that links technology integration and quality education with e-learning, a teaching practice that enhances the targeted quality when implemented effectively. This part targeted teachers' understandings of both distance and e-learning, the importance of e-learning in teaching English as a foreign language and the rapport between e-learning and quality education.

Quest 1: Teachers' Understandings of Distance Learning

Teachers had been asked to define distance learning. Before dealing with their understandings, the following quote by Honeyman and Miller (1993) is worth mentioning. According to them, distance learning is "a process to create and provide access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both". Teachers' answers mainly focused on the fact that distance learning does not take place in the classroom. A teacher clarifies: "The fact of studying from one place without necessarily being in a classroom". Other teachers underscored the use of Internet in this practice. This is made clear in the following comment: "Learning that takes place unconventional way, not in classrooms, but through the internet".

Quest 2: Teachers' Understandings of e- Learning

E- learning, too, is believed to enhance quality education. To explore, teachers' perceptions of the teaching/learning practice, their definition had been analyzed. Here is a

definition provided by Koper (2007) e-learning: "can be defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate and enhance learning and teaching" (Koper, 2007, p. 356). Some of the teachers outlined e-learning that takes pace via Internet. A teacher says: Learning that is conducted on the internet. Other teachers relate it to the use of technology as it is clear in the following comment: "Learning based on the use of technological tools". However, the minority of teachers were able to define it along the use of information communication technologies.

Quest 3 : The Importance of e-learning for English teaching

The teachers were asked to identify the importance of e-learning in teaching English. Most of them stressed the significance of the virtual practice at different planes. Some teachers linked it to enhancing the learning process. A teacher claims: "It improves learning through improving the quality of understanding and explaining the course". Others pointed at motivating and involving the learners in the learning process. One comment along this idea goes as follows: "It is very effective for it allows learners to be free and more interested for it is manageable". Another category answers focused on the flexibility of the practice. A teacher adds: "e-learning has left no geographical barriers, easy access to materials, flexible space, and immediate feedback". Some teachers referred to time saving in relation to e-learning.

Quest 4: The significance of e-learning for quality Education

The last part of the questionnaire attempts to identify teachers' awareness about the role e-learning plays in quality education. Though this online practice has benefits for both teachers and learners, most the interviewed teachers mentioned its significance for learners. A teacher says: "it helps students to improve their potential". Some teachers pointed at its

significance for information management. Another teacher adds: "Because of the profuse amount of information students can become experts in the subject matter". A category of answers identified the features of e-learning as follows: "interactivity, flexibility, adaptability, manageable especially time".

9. Discussion

The study is an attempt to shed light on the status quo of quality education in Algerian higher education with the focus on technology and e-learning as two essential elements for its maintenance. It has been suggested that quality education is torn between teachers' cursory understandings of technological concepts and certain traditional teaching practices.

It becomes clear that quality education in Algerian higher education is obstructed by various hindrances that stem mainly from the traditional teaching materials that teachers have access to. Technology- based materials, which are believed to enhance quality, are not available. This lack makes teachers' teaching practices limited to computers and video projectors. Despite this fact, teachers tend to use updated approaches and techniques of teaching that support learners' autonomy such as competency-based approach, active learning, among others. Nevertheless, most of the goals and objectives that are designed by the teacher are limited to lessons and courses. The quality feature is not among the concerns of the interviewed teachers. As to the teaching practices, here, three main camps can be identified: some teachers align themselves with the traditional perspective as they believe updated teaching practices needed materials unavailable at the university. The second camp argues that their teaching practices are updated as they rely on creativity and personalized ways of teaching. The third group suggests a mixture of both traditional and updated teaching practices. Nevertheless, teachers tend to be innovative despite the scarcity of

technology-based materials.

Quality education is tightly linked to technology, in particular information communication technologies. This sound argument suggests the developing precise and accurate understandings of technology-based concepts and practices are more likely to support effective use of technology in education and as such enhances quality. Despite this fact, most of the interviewed teachers develop certain cursory understandings of technology education. Moreover, they tend to consider both technology use and integration as synonymous practices. By the same token, information communication technologies are grouped randomly under ten heading of 'all technological tools'.

E-learning, too, develops quality education as it enables various advantages with regard to teachers and learners and the whole process. However, the analysis of the third section of the questionnaire identified confusion as to how different distance learning and e-learning are. Most of the interviewed teachers tend to develop broad understandings and both practices to be the same. As to the importance of e-learning in relation to teaching English as a foreign language, teachers identify its significance for learners and sidestep other advantages that can relate to them directly. The rapport between e-learning and quality education is not clearly identified as teachers focus on teaching to meet the objective of learning; they limit it to learners' understanding an acquiring knowledge merely.

10. Conclusion

The conducted study has shown that the status quo of quality education in Algerian higher education is not thoroughly explored as teaching practices are limited to short-term objectives. By the same token, technology and e-learning in particular are not instrumentalised effectively due to unfamiliarity with technological devices and their scarcity in these academic institutions. That being said, quality needs to be given a merited locus as it

is the target that enables both learners and teachers to attain a professional status, a necessity of 21st century. For it to be fomented, information communication technologies need to be available at the universities. The same applies to e-learning which left unexplored. It is only when teachers get the chance to experience e-learning that a criticism can be find room, a logical thought, I believe.

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