

## EDUCATION IN FINLAND AND ROMANIA. A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on education, training, teachers and students starting from a general perspective in order to discuss two specific case studies. The article aimed to define education and the role of the teacher and of the learner, moving on to the greater than ever need for e-learning (virtual modules, electronic resources, online learning and teaching) and ending with the case studies of Finland and Romania. Based on my personal experience as student and teacher in Romania and the chance to experience Finnish educational services as an Erasmus teacher, this paper analyzed both theoretical and practical aspects related to: education, teaching, learning, e-learning, developing and maintaining a sustainable platform and adapting to new teaching and learning models. Additionally using theoretical sources, the current research considered the similarities and the differences between the two education systems and emphasized the importance of incorporating other countries' experience into Romania's brighter future.*

**Key words:** education, e-learning, Finland, Romania, teaching

### INTRODUCTION

“Education”, “teaching”, “learning”, “teachers”, and “students” are the words that inspired this paper which aims to compare the education systems of two countries, Romania and Finland, with a particular focus on the role of e-learning in the future of education. My own background as a student and teacher, and my personal experiences with the latest trends in technology are used to demonstrate the rationale behind this paper. The article proposes a general-to-specific structure, starting from theories regarding education and the role of the teacher and of the learner, moving on to the greater than ever need for e-learning (virtual modules, electronic resources, online learning and teaching) and ending with the case studies of Finland and Romania. Experiencing the Finnish higher education system as an Erasmus teacher and having been teaching in the Romanian university system for thirteen years enabled my research at both theoretical and practical level.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “education is a discipline that is concerned

with methods of teaching and learning in schools or school-like environments as opposed to various nonformal and informal means of socialization” [11]. It is the method used by societies to share their accumulated values and knowledge enabling their citizens to gain “greater understanding and control over oneself and one’s world” [9]. In addition, it is a lifelong and comprehensive process, involving body and mind, being characterized by continuous development and change.

Ryan and Cooper make an important distinction between education and schooling, a distinction which, as teachers, we are all aware of. Education is “much more open-ended and all-inclusive”, knowing “few bounds” [9] compared to the formal system of education which implies schools, students, teachers and textbooks. “[T]he whole universe of informal learning” [9] does not necessarily require a standard classroom; instead books, movies, the parents’ example, our friends’ and colleagues’ gestures and actions can all influence our development and personality, as “[p]eople are engaged in education from the cradle to the grave” [9].

In my capacity as teacher, I do not

underestimate the power of any of the two forms of teaching and learning. I truly believe in the vocation of a good instructor, in the role model and inspiration they can offer to their students, in the desire that one has “to aid in the renewal of society”, in the “nobility of the teacher’s work” [9]. The power that this profession can offer should be used wisely, and considering the topic of this article, the act of good teaching can be highly influenced by the methods, the tools and the resources the trainer uses in their teaching activities. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the widespread use of virtual modules, electronic devices, and online resources requires even more innovative working methods and a complex educational design in addition to an adapted content design. This new challenge has to be considered thoroughly in order to be included in the teaching and learning methods characteristic to a modern system of education.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

I would like to begin this part with a quote, expressing the starting point of my research. “As many other people in my generation, my lifetime has spanned so far over two drastically different political regimes and the ending of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. But more than anything, what we have all witnessed and has profoundly affected our societies and ways of thinking is the electronic revolution” [4]. Under these circumstances, it would be fair to remark that I first became aware of a Virtual Learning Environment in 2009 at the *University of Birmingham*, United Kingdom, in the capacity of Visiting Research Associate. Doing research for my Ph.D. thesis I had access to the WebCT environment of the University, I joined discussion boards, had access to the syllabuses of the courses of the Department of American and Canadian Studies, or submitted short assignments. Coming from a very traditional system of education, it was a challenging step towards the virtual world that I was not very familiar with.

The second major contact with e-learning,

actually e-teaching, was my encounter with the Finnish system of higher education as part of an Erasmus Staff Mobility – Teaching Assignment in 2012. The last day at *Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences* surprised me the most when I was invited to give a lecture in front of the microphone of a computer for remote students, while some others were watching and listening to me from the class, including my hosts and fellow teachers.

Thirdly, the topic of e-learning and virtual methods for teaching has been one of my academic interests for the past three years which resulted in two articles that will also be referred here.

Conceptually speaking, two Romanian authors, Ghilic-Micu and Stoica start their analysis from the very basic assumption that the rapid development of ICT gave birth to a new type of economy, i.e. the digital economy. As information is tightly connected to education, the access and transmission of knowledge has been changing over the years. This can be seen in the system of education as well. Considering the previous shift in education from the former classical emphasis on teaching and the teacher to the focus on learning and the student, what changes drastically in the virtual world is “the role of the educational institutions in the transfer of knowledge, skills and values [7, *my translation*] that ICT-based virtual environments require.

The next issue I would like to focus on refers to some of the technicalities of e-learning and the specific tools used in the process. I would like to begin by briefly defining e-learning. The specialists Clark and Mayer define e-learning as “instruction delivered on a digital device such as a computer or mobile device that is intended to support learning” [3]. Two main aspects characterize e-learning according to Ghilic-Micu and Stoica: firstly, the online access to information that facilitates distance learning, without the physical presence of the students in the class, secondly, the access to knowledge by means of tools that the modern classroom provides [7]. Moreover, a few requirements should be met: the possibility to store and/or transmit

lessons on CD-ROM, servers, Internet, etc., learning-focused content based on the stated objectives, instructional methods based on exemplifications, practical activities, feedback, and the use of media elements, such as “text, graphics, or sounds used to convey lesson content” [3]. Moreover, its most important aspects are facilitating the assimilation of “new knowledge and skills linked to individual learning goals” [3] and the fact that it can ensure an enhanced level of the organization’s performance.

All these aspects facilitated by the new technologies and the easy access to information are to be found in the instruments that have been employed in e-learning, such as: CAL (computer assisted learning), ICT (information communication and technology), (VLE) Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment), WebCT (Course Tools) or Blackboard Learning System, iLinc, Media Wiki, WordPress, Mahara, OpenMeetings, etc.

One should also differentiate between the two types of e-learning: “synchronous e-learning” and “asynchronous e-learning”. When the learning process is led by an instructor, “available to geographically dispersed learners at the same time” and delivered by means of specialized softwares, this is called synchronous e-learning, Virtual Classroom or Webinar [3]. Asynchronous e-learning implies individual study, and the learners, at their own pace, can access the “instructional resources intended for self-study” “any time and any place” [3].

Besides these structural distinctions, the content of online courses differs structurally from that of traditional ones. The courses are created in web page format, which besides plain text, include images, sounds, films, and links to further sources or activities. The conclusion of each chapter should include multiple-choice activities which facilitate a better understanding of the lessons, as well as the possibility to re-read the chapter facilitated by the HTML pages that each student has access to whenever they need [7].

An important aspect that Ghilic-Miccu and Stoica draw our attention upon concerns the

four requirements that the transfer from the classical format to the virtual format have to meet. The first one concerns “clearly defining the policies and strategies regarding ICT by the educational establishments”. Secondly, the two authors mention “developing an adequate infrastructure for the usage of the new ICT”. Thirdly, “redefining the role of the teaching staff” should be considered and the last but not the least priority is: “ensuring the Internet access of the institutions involved” [7, *my translation*].

Inquiring even further, one should analyse objectively, both the strengths and weaknesses of e-learning. Clark and Mayer consider that the greatest advantage of e-learning is “tailoring content and instructional methods based on the work roles and learning needs of individuals (particularly their prior knowledge)” [3]. As mentioned above, the students’ constant “engagement in learning” [3] is an essential feature. The third point that Clark and Mayer emphasise is the “use [of] a combination of text and audio, as well as still and motion visuals to communicate your content” [3], which can be challenging if we think of the way these tools should be balanced. Clark and Mayer’s fourth advantage refers to the scenarios and computer simulations that can be used in various domains and which can “immerse learners in job-realistic environments requiring them to solve infrequent problems or complete tasks in a matter of minutes that could take hours or days to complete in the real world” [3].

On the other hand, the two authors analyse as well the “pitfalls of e-learning” and the traps that teachers and learners might fall into when employing e-learning. Facing numerous electronic instruments and attempting to do more, teachers might sometimes have the tendency to abuse the multimedia, instead of following a simple guideline for the process of instruction, where “less is almost always more” [3]. Not only that more is not good, but also less can be harmful and boring if the students are faced with screen after screen of words or interactivity is omitted. Furthermore, “highly exploratory learning environments” do not help the users as “discovery learning rarely works” [Mayer 2004 qtd. in 3] and both

young students and adult trainees need structured, tailor-made e-learning lessons which to provide the required guidance.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Moving on to the next part of my article, I would like to refer to **Finland**, a pioneer in distance learning (since 1986) and e-learning (web-based education since 1998), that can be a good example of best practice, a brief outlook on the Finnish education system offering valuable insights.

Lying in the north of the European continent, Finland covers 390,903 sq. km., a surface populated by only 5,426,674 inhabitants. Education is an important issue on the Finnish governmental agenda, its source going back to the 1860s, the Lutheran Church playing an important role in literacy, similar to the one of the Orthodox or the Catholic Church in other European countries.

Probably one of the most expert opinions is Pasi Sahlberg's book entitled *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?*. However, in order to understand "what the world can learn from Finland", I would like to refer to a certain aspect of the Finnish personality, so that we can further understand Sahlberg's vision of the education system. In her book about the Finns, Tarja Moles narrates the following tall story:

"A Frenchman, a German and a Finn were in Africa and came across an elephant. The Frenchman looked at the creature and straightaway started thinking about the variety of culinary delights he could cook from it. The German pondered the animal's potential as a vehicle on the savannah and how its performance compared to that of his Jeep. The Finn's immediate thought was: 'I wonder what the elephant thinks of me?'" [8].

Reflecting on the joke in retrospect, Sahlberg's title might surprise us: a Finn bragging about something? Even if Sahlberg's modesty impedes him from telling us that Finland has the best education system in the world, he does impart valuable knowledge that could improve Romania's education system.

Firstly, I consider that one of the most important words in Finland is "equity", education serving as an "equalizing instrument for society" [10], as stated before in another article [4]. According to The Finnish National Board of Education [12], equity implies free education for all the children and teenagers between 7 and 16 years old, the right to educational support, the encouragement of a mixed system, where students with special needs become part of mainstream education and are helped by teachers and students at the same time. Moreover, Finland supports their minorities' mother tongues, thus diversity [13]. Secondly, Sahlberg points out the fact that more than 80% of the Finns belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, the Lutheran beliefs encouraging equality of opportunity and hard-work ethics, as demonstrated by the educational system, too. Thirdly, the Finnish system of education is based on "trust and responsibility", the State and the local authorities sharing the liability for funding, autonomy and quality assurance. Focusing on lifelong learning, Finnish education encourages and financially supports both students' and teachers' development, providing for their individual needs [4]. As regards the students, the most surprising aspect worth mentioning is the lack of school inspections, standardised curricula, or national testing systems, the Finns building their quality assurance on "steering instead of controlling" [13]. When we refer to the teaching staff's training, starting with the late 1970s, all the teachers were required to obtain a master's degree at the expense of the state, a regulation still in force nowadays. Being considered a "prestigious profession", "those who are lucky enough to become teachers normally are teachers for life" as the system demonstrates they have chosen an autonomous profession where relevant professional development is required and encouraged [10].

Furthermore, the educational system proves highly competitive, as Finland has consistently come at the top of the test devised by OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

entitled Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The findings of 2012 demonstrated that Finland recorded results above the average for all the three tests assigned to 15-year-old teenagers, i.e. reading, mathematics, and science. Finland scored 524 for reading literacy, compared to the average of 496 points, for mathematics they scored 519, the mean score of OECD countries being of 494 points, and for science the difference was between 545 and 501 also in favour of Finland [14] (See below the comparison with Romania).

In this context, I would personally add that e-learning is an important factor in the increasing quality of the Finnish system of education. All the academic or applied sciences universities or vocational schools advertise their online component, attempting to attract people to their study programmes, irrespective of their place of origin, financial status, physical ability, age or employment. "E-learning increases accessibility of education (in terms of time and space), efficiency (in terms of costs, and not only) and motivation, especially for those mentioned above, sometimes faced with the risk of exclusion" [4].

Based on my experience and the information that the eLearning Centre kindly provided, at *Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences*, the first Finnish university I visited in 2012, all study programmes employ online tools, "from a mere support environment for classroom courses to full-time e-learning, covering almost 100% of the people involved in the process of education. Interestingly, even full-time students benefit from online education, allowing teachers a better time management of the most important activities to be performed in class, leaving aside the ones which can be solved at home, individually by each student in front of their laptop" [4]. In addition, the necessity for e-learning has become even higher in the northern part of the country, a colder region with remotely populated areas, where, pressured by diverse factors, the functions of universities based in three different towns: Kemi, Tornio and Rovaniemi merged on January 1, 2014 to form *Lapland University of*

*Applied Sciences*.

In order to speak with objectivity about my own country, **Romania**, I consider appropriate to start with a brief description of the Romanians' personality, connecting (or not), the two chosen countries mentioned in the title. Although some of the features mentioned by the historian Lucian Boia in his controversial book *Why is Romania Different?* might lead to similarities between the Romanians and the Finns, the facts and figures might be contradictory. According to the historian, Romanians suffer from "the inferiority complex", "the 'insignificance' of a small nation lying at the others' mercy" [2, *my translation*], furthermore emphasised by perceiving the relations with foreigners as ranging between "admiration and hostility ... sometimes with combined attitudes" [2, *my translation*]. So far, the two nations seem to have in common the vicissitudes of history, the constant oppression of the more powerful neighbours and the resulting preoccupation with identity, nationality or independence which sometimes leads to the self-critical obsession with *nave gazing* [8]. Unfortunately, unlike the Finns, at a certain moment in time, the Romanians seemed to fall prey to reflection, motionlessness and disappointment which can still be observed at all levels of the society.

In statistical terms, Romania is a South-eastern European country, its population reaching 19,942,642 (according to the latest census), the total surface of the country being of 238,391 km<sup>2</sup>. In terms of its population, Romania ranks 7 among the European Union countries, although we do not take pride in the decreasing demography.

The need for modern education is both a national and a European priority for the member states, our country following the Community laws. For example, Romanian students did not obtain such great results as the Finnish students at the PISA test, unfortunately not even the average. Comparing the results with an international average of 500 points for all the three tests, Romania obtained 428 points for reading literacy, 426 points for mathematics and 441 points for science [6], which are disappointing

scores. And if we were to quote the headlines, then education would be metaphorically associated with “a boring and not a bit promising Cinderella” [6, *my translation*] and the most common attributes describing the system of education would be: “inefficient, irrelevant, inequitable” [6, *my translation*] even in the words of politicians, the quoted author being one.

These are some factual details about the Romanian system of education, a system I have known as a student and a teacher for 29 years (without including kindergarten). Going back to the question what can Romania learn from Finland or Europe in general, as a matter of fact, I will have a look at the measures in force nowadays. Compulsory education in Romania starts at the age of 6 and ends at the age of 16, the system offering both public and private institutions at all the levels. Unfortunately, the primary and secondary education in Romania are extremely standardised by means of national curricula, national testing systems and various other factors which create significant differences between schools and even classes. Another particular aspect is the politicization of the system in spite of all the efforts made by the teachers and of the European regulations, an aspect which again imbalances the society, instead of being an equalizing instrument.

For the modernization of its system of education, Romania passed a new National Education Law in January 2011 (with its subsequent amendments) strengthening the legal and institutional framework, creating a coherent and transparent national framework, open to the recognition of its stakeholders.

As regards the ICT (Information and Communication Technology), although the internet network is considered more modern than in other European countries, due to its more recent installation, in May 2013 the e-learning portal of Romania was still lobbying for the access to internet for educational purposes, particularly broadband internet in schools [15]. Interestingly, the results of the European Schoolnet Survey (2012) showed that Romania was behind the European average if we take into account the number of computers, 13 students using one computer,

compared to 5 in Europe (and Finland as well), while the connectivity rate of the schools in Romania and the broadband internet usage were almost similar to the European average [15]. According to the 2011-2011 country profile [16] for the Digital Agenda for Europe, the percentages of teachers using ICT equipment in 25% of their lessons were slightly lower or equal to the European average, for grade 8, Romania's percentage being higher than the European average (35% vs. 32%). Students at grade 8 and 11 also took part in the survey, their usage of various items of ICT equipment in class for learning, be it the school computer/laptop, their own laptop or their mobile phone, being above the EU mean, particularly the 11 graders and their use of school computers.

The greatest novelty of 2014 in terms of schoolbooks for primary schools is the digital component which is introduced, saved on a CD and available on the platform of the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research. Starting September 15, 2014 (unfortunately, there were some delays), first and second graders have presumably had access to the various types of educational resources offered by these new materials: text, photo, audio, video, and interactive, for an enhanced learning environment for two subject matters: Romanian Language Communication and Maths and the Exploration of the Environment.

At higher education level, I would like to refer to the case of the Business English seminars for University students. Given the necessary technology, we use online quizzes during the seminar, as a form of practice or review, or even as a form of assessment. However, the types of activities used online: single answer, multiple choice, matching or fill-in [17] have been part of the students' paper-based evaluation for the Business English seminar for quite a long time. Probably the most commonly used methods for the study of a foreign language are the genuine audio-video materials, even if the ones we use are not provided by an e-learning platform. The main aim is to expose students to varieties of English and natural

spoken language and in most of the cases the task is to listen for specific information. A wide range of sources can be used in this context, offering the students the chance to listen to various speakers of English: courses of English accompanied by CD, British Council examination samples, online sources (from music to conferences), videos created for academic purposes, and mobile applications for learning languages. As demonstrated previously in a 2015 article, some of the sources that I use could be: the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, TED Conferences, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish>, <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-learn-english.htm>, Duolingo, etc. [5].

My students also benefit from the characteristics of the social networks, my professional Facebook account providing for them articles on various topics, famous quotes, descriptions of historical events, book or film recommendations, encouraging them to be in contact with English all day long, to develop their own interests, and to improve their language skills in their own terms.

Combining classical teaching methods with simulations, case studies, role plays, images, animations and photos, represents a step further to a virtual environment, so that the transition is made smoothly.

## CONCLUSIONS

Allow me to conclude by emphasizing the importance of teaching and learning in all the possible forms. The European context favours the development of all its member states, and the fact that countries can collaborate for the purpose of education, research and development is extremely encouraging for newer EU members like Romania. It is a great advantage that we can benefit from the expertise of partners and things are changing for the modernization of teaching and learning methods in Romania. If the Romanian results are not always as good as the Finnish examples, and the use of technology is still insufficient, then, it means that much more efforts should be made. However, with a

younger generation whose “habits of mind [are] associated with these technologies” [1] due to their early exposure, with a younger generation able to obtain the wanted information in seconds and ready to assimilate it fast, the success is almost guaranteed. As an adult and a teacher, I should confess it is challenging but for sure not impossible to imagine a virtual learning and teaching environment. And as sentimental and common as it might seem, the future is ours and we should be prepared for it!

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