

Electronic Content in Education – “Media Culture” With(out) Media?

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Summary

“Media culture” is a course intended for the students of Information Sciences. It includes two different types of knowledge – knowledge of the subject itself and knowledge of one’s personal experience with media. The 21st century is changing the learning process in its essence. The traditional classroom teaching is now replaced by the new way of learning - which means developing competences and collecting information and knowledge concerning current problems. This kind of learning is more likely actualization of knowledge from different data bases, than learning for future, or collecting knowledge for possible cognitive challenges. This way the teachers may become some kind of guides and mentors along the learning path. The paper illustrates our way of combining those two types of knowledge. We present the results of our recent research about the use of electronic content in media learning today.

Key words: media, media culture, electronic content, media learning

1. Introduction

Electronic contents in the study of Information Sciences at the faculty have successfully been used for a long time as an essential part of the teaching process. Students and teachers can use the computers and the internet at the faculty. Evaluation of e-learning systems started in 2002. Moodle was chosen and has been in use since 2005 with great success. Computer logs for “Media Culture” course has been analysed in search of students learning patterns. Every teacher collects his/her own experience during a course which (s)he rarely or never exchanges with other fellow teachers. This conference is a good opportunity to hear the experiences from our colleagues in Croatia and from other countries.

2. Why "Media culture"?

The implementation of the Bologna process started in the academic year 2005/2006, so we started a new elective course named "Media culture" for the first year students of Information Sciences and for the other interested students. Why "Media culture"? The media are in the focus of our life in the new millennium. Our students live in a rapidly evolving media environment. That course should provide students with the skills and understanding necessary for their media future. How to do that? We combine training in critical thinking with instruction in how the media function. The students should find out what happens in the "real media world"! Some graduates will find work in the media and cultural industries, in the world of business, the government, education etc. They will take up jobs that don't even have their names yet.

"Media culture" as the course was organized in total of fifteen meetings, we met once a week, one period of lecture and one of seminar. We should emphasize, that there was no strict boundary between the two. We prefer learning in an active way, because it is more effective than a passive receiving of information. This kind of learning and practicing competence requires a new form of didactic, which is not a scholastic one, meaning acquiring the necessary knowledge and its permanent improving, but a didactic of accessibility, which allows a fast integration into the current working process and the exact achieving of the desired aim. The traditional classroom teaching is now replaced by the new way of learning, which means developing competences and collecting information and knowledge concerning current problems. This kind of learning is more an actualization of knowledge from different data bases, than learning for future, or collecting knowledge for possible cognitive challenges. This kind of teaching demands new specific conditions: limited number of students in a group, large amounts of lessons and the appropriate electronic environment.

3. Electronic learning environment at the faculty

3.1. E-learning on Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

History of e-learning on the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of University of Zagreb starts in 2002. with a project of Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport and Department of Information Sciences aimed at investigation and selection of the most appropriate course management system (CMS) among ones available (LearnLoop, ZOPE, WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle). Moodle had been chosen for its set of features and availability and has been installed, customized and translated to Croatian for the use in academic year 2004/2005 under the name Omega (<http://omega.ffzg.hr>). Acceptance among teachers gradually increased so on August 2007 more than 200 professors from 23 Faculty departments had prepared and used 220+ courses (most numerous among departments being the Department of Information Sciences with 69 courses, followed by Department of English with 22 courses, Department of

History with 20 courses, Department of Sociology with 19 courses and Department of Croatian Language with 15 courses). Total of 3300 students are being enrolled into courses in August 2007.

3.2. “Media Culture” course in numbers

The teacher has chosen to publish a sketch of the media characteristics and let students learn from investigation of suggested sources, preparation of public presentation and discussions with fellow students during the presentations. Students were obliged to upload their presentations to the Omega system, where both teacher and other students can find and use them. The Omega system logs all the student and teacher activities, and some of these are shown here in an attempt to illustrate patterns of use of the system. There were 3,913 logged activities on the course (from enrolling and unenrolling to the course to viewing the course description to enrolled student list to downloading course description and fellow student presentations).

Submission of student presentations took part from December 2006 to February 2007 but students continued to (rarely) visit the course area throughout the academic year. Teacher and student activities form a recognizable pattern regarding an hour of a day: a steep rise in the morning hours with peak just before the lunch time, continuing after the lunch break from 5PM and slightly declining till 1AM (Chart 1).

Of total number of 3,913 activities recorded in log files, 823 took place from computers installed on the Faculty, 1,410 from the CARNet network (with most of them probably from the students dormitories in Zagreb, which are connected directly to the CARNet network) and 1,680 from other places on Internet (Chart 2).

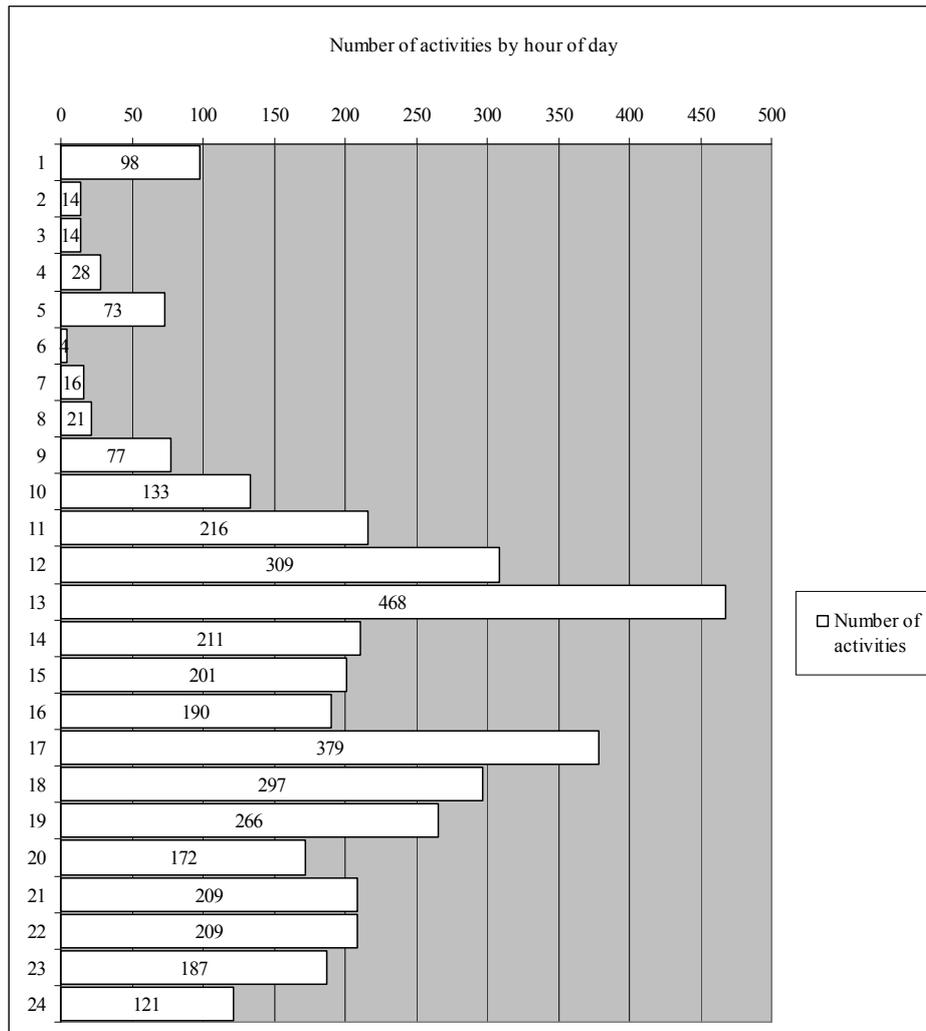
It is interesting to note that attractive theme and lively discussion in the classroom result in an increased viewing rate of some student presentations stored on Omega. The most viewed was Anime, presentation on Japanese animation, followed by Ads, Film and Media role in the consumer sociology and other. The following chart shows number of resource view activities by resource viewed (the first item is the teacher’s course description) (Chart 3).

3.3. Future

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences does not have enough space to provide students with quiet place to use the Omega system and do the research of course resources. That is expected to change with the new library building where some 100 new publicly accessible computerized workplaces are planned. Future expected enlargement of server capacities and Internet connection speeds will enable both teachers and students to produce more interactive material (which may use much more space on the server). However, there is a need for a support team which would not only support the Omega server but work on im-

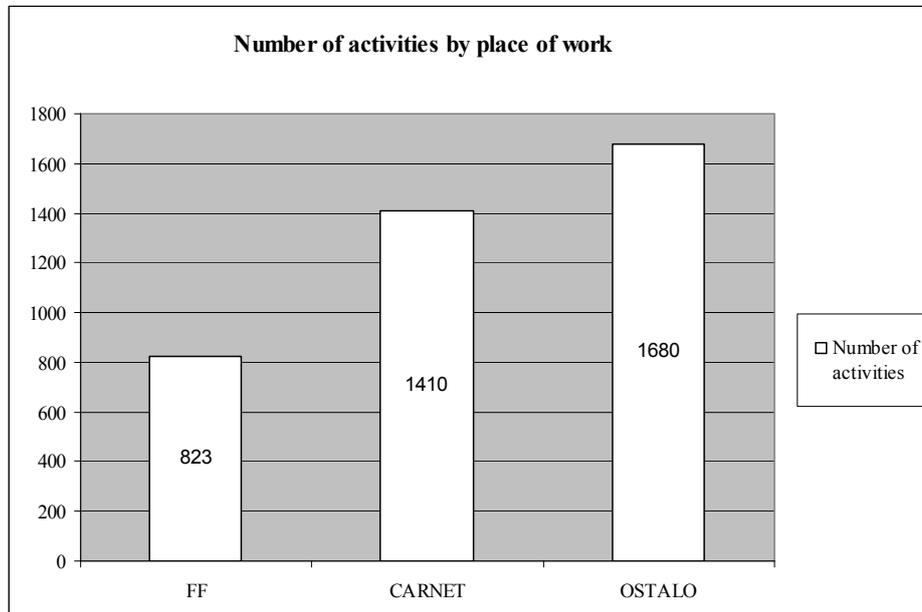
provement of teacher's use of ICT and assist teachers in production of courses, possibly of more complex and/or multimedia type.

Chart 1. Number of activities by hour of day



Source: computer logs from Omega system for "Media culture" course

Chart 2. Number of activities by place of work



Source: computer logs from Omega system for “Media culture” course

4. Learning in an active mode

We shall present here only one part of the experience that we had doing in the academic year 2006/2007. Our intention is to show, which themes the students chose, which multimedia content they often use and the problems they encountered.

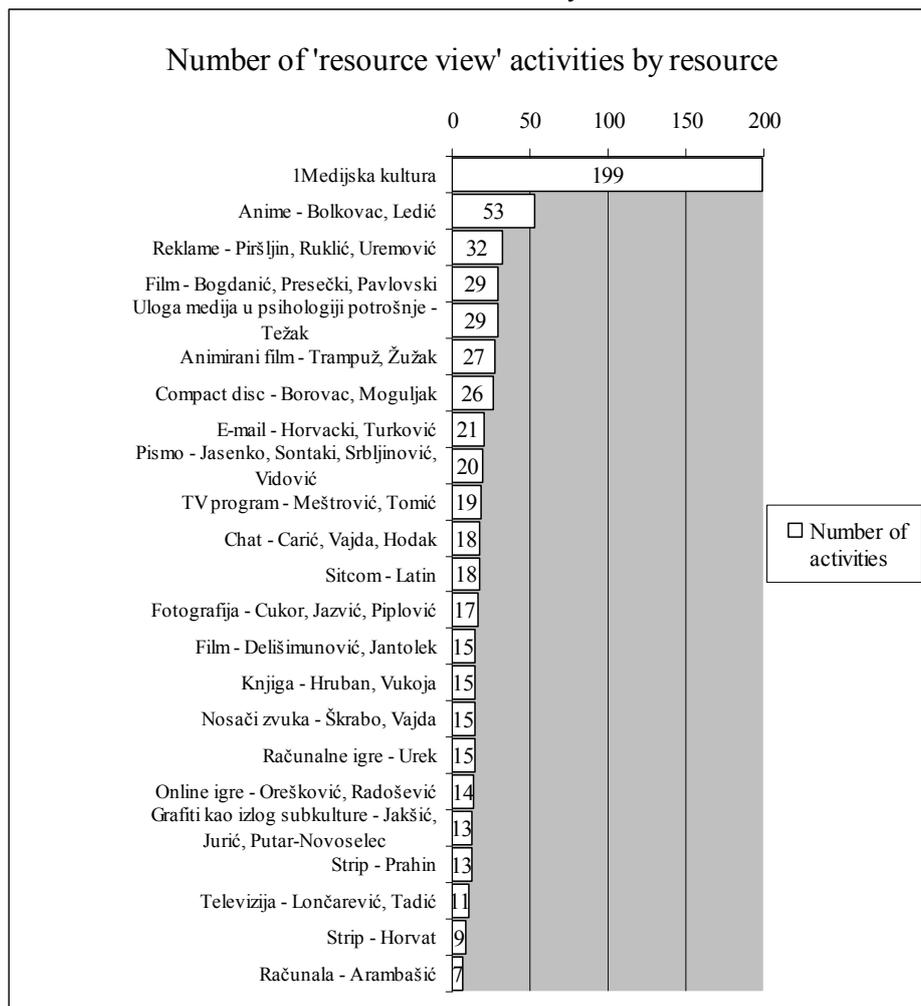
The course “Media culture” includes two different types of knowledge – the knowledge of the subject itself focusing on traditional and digital media and the knowledge of one's personal experience with the media. The teacher will make students more sensitive to the media, they should become aware of the media and develop critical appreciation of the media position in their life today. We prefer an authentic learning method and the learning in an active way. So teachers become guides and mentors along the learning path instead of mere instructors.

4.1. Themes

In the framework of the course students, or a group consisting of three to five students, chose as a theme one kind of media, traditional or digital, of their own choice, and their task was to write a seminar paper or to hold a presentation in front of the class, using some of the popular programmes for creating a multi-

media content - audio, video, text, graphics, animation¹ – for example Microsoft PowerPoint, Macromedia Flash etc. All the students agree they could not imagine their life without the media. The students strongly condemned all kinds of media misuse. They spoke in favour of the need for media education since early childhood.

Chart 3. Number of 'resource view' activities by resource



Source: computer logs from Omega system for "Media culture" course

¹ The presentations displayed in Omega don't give a real picture they had to be shortened due to space restriction.

4.2. Electronic content

Most of the students chose the presentation. The presenters and the class show great interest in such presentations and the discussions are sometimes quite heated and full of controversial opinions. The students chose most often one of tertiary or one of digital media², which they wished to present. The most popular media-themes are CDs and computers (electronic mail, games). To present these media they used usually audio, text and animation. They presented not only the media evolution and its current usage but also their personal positive and negative experience in using them.

4.3. Problems

The students varied in their competence in using computer technology. They ranged from real beginners to cyber kids, total computer addicts. Because of that the problems which arose while preparing the presentation were very different. Some students complained about the impossibility to do the presentation at the faculty, while others complained about the modest i.e. insufficient presentation possibilities in the classroom. Many were unhappy because they had to give up some great solutions which they had created on their computers at home. Different levels of technological equipment sometimes even caused unpleasant situations when some groups felt being discriminated against. The reasons are: the modest electronic environment at the faculty, too many students in a group and insufficient number of lessons.

5. Conclusion

The online availability of learning resources is much better now with the Omega system than several years ago. Fully functional Omega system allows the encouragement of production of digital learning material and e-learning courses in a standard way which is situated on a standard place and usable in a standard way. This definitely eases the efforts of student learning for both students and teachers.

Our experience has shown that electronic contents in the “Media culture” course are used mostly in two ways. One way is using the Omega system, which is used for communication and the other is the individual work of our students outside the system. Electronic content is not sufficiently present although it plays an important and indispensable part in the process of higher education. We have a dream: smaller groups, better conditions concerning the equipment, reciprocal help, active anticipation in occasional projects at the faculty and “Media culture” with media.

² There are numerous media classifications. Here we use Faulstich's classification.

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