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## An emigrant teachers' excursion in the world of digital native students

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### Abstract

This paper does not aim to reflect an enquiry based on a cognitive or theoretical interest, but rather a pragmatic interest, the interest taken by two “digital immigrant” teachers in the world of “digital native” students with the declared aim to use e-learning to develop new educational activities in order to improve the quality of the students’ learning experiences. We developed an empirical inquiry based on a questionnaire applied to students from University of Bucharest. Its main objectives were: identifying students’ perceptions regarding e-learning; identifying some of the e-learning practices used by students in different learning contexts; identifying some digital technologies that are currently employed in higher education.

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*Keywords:* e-learning; higher education students; digital technologies; questionnaire-based inquiry

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### 1. Higher education - trends and tendencies in adopting technologies

When we started thinking about this article, strangely enough we were both reading *Out of Our Minds: Learning to Be Creative* by Sir Ken Robinson, the 2011 edition. This was only a trigger for some long time reflections in the field of education related to the mother of all questions in the field today: education ... where to? Well, this question seems quite general and covers just about anything. So we started to narrow our field of inquiry and decided to try an attempt to approach a subject not so much in our reach so far.

Rather experts in curriculum and in the field of teacher training and not so much in the field of technology and e-learning, we thought that this would be the opportunity to start an inquiry in this buzz-area of education today ... So we decided to focus on the way in which higher education (HE) students incorporate e-learning and all the

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digital technologies and software in their learning process, understanding this might help us become better teachers much more in touch with their needs and developments in the field. We can state that our development highlights a pragmatic interest. It is the interest of some digital “immigrant” teachers in the world of “digital native students” (Marc Prensky, 2001). Leaving aside the debates either in favour or against such a delimitation, it is quite obvious that students today seem to be “native speakers” of the digital language of modern technology and all the facilities since early childhood with certain impact on their thinking and processing information, but also on their communication and socialization process. Most of the present teachers came in contact with technology at some later point in their lives and although they adopted many aspects of the new technology there can still be sensed the lack of a “natural” approach to this field. This leaves us with quite a daunting dilemma: how digital immigrant teachers, who speak an “outdated” language, sometimes adapted, but still not natural, are aiming to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language?

True to our professional training and to any scientific endeavour, the first step we was that of document analysis that focus on the trends and developments in the field [6], [7], [8]. This led to the primary conclusion that there are many interesting points of reflection and experiences on how much (formal) education (especially at HE level) has already changed and should still change while facing the challenges of the present society. Other reports as well as documents of policy education support the idea of digital media literacy and its continuous rise in importance as a key skill in every discipline and profession. They underline the fact that the digital literacy is less about tools and more about thinking, namely about our dispositions and capabilities to search for, make use and create new information making good use of this technology. Also, the increasing awareness regarding an education customized to each student’s unique needs is driving the development of new technologies that provide more learner choice and control and allow for differentiated instruction.

## **2. E-learning in HE - an overlook on students’ learning**

The e-learning market is now more than 15 years old, as the word “e-learning” was coined back in 1998. Since then, e-learning has continued its rapid evolution and radically changed the education and training industry ... Browsing the literature we identified a set of powerful stats [1]: e-learning is the second most important training method within organizations, with companies increasingly moving towards blended learning and e-learning; 4.6mil. college students are currently taking at least one of their classes online and by 2014 this number will increase to over 18.5mil. By 2019, half of ALL classes will be done online; e-learning is generally shorter than classroom training by up to 25-60%; e-learning is proven to increase knowledge retention by 25% to 60%.

Without aiming at a comprehensive definition of e-learning or a list of the definitions in use, in the present paper we define e-learning as the effective integration of all new technologies or applications which encompass a range of media, tools, and environments across all areas of learning as they affect the manner in which learners actually learn, the speed in mastering a knowledge or a skill, the degree in complexity of the learning process and content; and, equally important, the sheer pleasure taken by the process of learning.

While the declared aim of the authors is to use e-learning to improve the quality of the learning experience, we have to assume that it might be hard to grasp the essence of the technological innovation to divert it towards its use in a formal context and related to specific learning outcomes. This means that we have to build the means for e-learning to evolve and mature as part of the educational change process, so that it achieves its promise of an improved system of HE. The first step should be to understand the areas where these interactive technologies might be supportive for our activity. The specialty literature identified many different types of capability supported by technology: access to on-line versions of documents, transcripts, video or audio registrations, etc. unavailable locally; access to different services; interactive diagnostic or adaptive tutorials; interactive educational games; personalized information and guidance for learning support; communications tools for collaboration with other students and teachers; virtual reality environments for development and manipulation

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