

The History of Blended Learning at Universidad Católica de Santa Fe

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Abstract

This work introduces a personal view about the inclusion of educational technologies and the way to blended learning at the Universidad Católica de Santa Fe, in Argentina.

Words will be as objective as possible; keeping in mind that the writer herself is involved on the told history.

First of all, it is necessary to make a description of geographic and socio-economic aspects of the institution in order to establish the context where this work is being developed. Below at the timeline, three events or milestones that marked the decisive moments of this journey are shown. To conclude, an essay of the future situation was made in order to assess whether these changes are profound modifications or just shape changes.

1. Contextualization:

This work is a result of my experience at the Universidad Católica de Santa Fe, in Argentina, hereafter UCSF (www.ucsf.edu.ar). The UCSF is an institution of higher education, private management public that belongs to Roman Catholic Church and according to the ecclesiastic structures its major authority is the Vatican. It recently has completed 50 years of existence in the city and has a very large experience on training professionals.

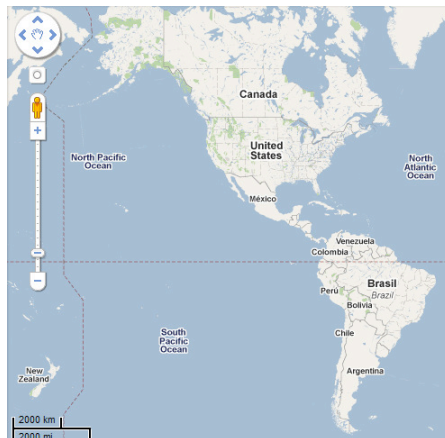


Figure 1: American Continent (USA and Argentina)



Figure 2: Argentina (Santa Fe)

The work will have a lot of information, some of it could seem to be useless, but one of the aspects we have to care the most at the time of helping each other is to place ourselves in someone else's place to understand their reality and from there to generate a fruitful aid.

Argentina was a very rich country and with significant differences within its regions in regard to education, health, natural resources and infrastructure. Characterized by a large working middle class, with good cultural training and acceptable wages, with two groups at both ends: “rich and poor”; much smaller. However, nowadays in Argentina we have severe problems in all these aspects, now resembling the common denominator of Latin America. In other words, we count with an each time bigger minority of people with access to every resource and basic services; and a very large and growing low class without pay and no chances to access anything.

An interesting program, completely financed by “UNESCO” and “OEI”, is “SITEAL”. The “SITEAL” (Information System of Educational Trends in Latin America) exists since 2003, and it’s macro objective is to observe and analyze statistically and permanently “the deep economic and social transformations that are occurring in Latin America, to contribute to the development and strengthening of the social and educational policies that ensure a high quality education for all of us” (www.siteal.org.ar). Its databases are free published full text through the website. The same “have as objective to give information to the Latin America countries about the relation between education and society, and to monitor evolution of educational trends and social gaps in the region.”

Argentina has 23 provinces and the city of Buenos Aires that has autonomy (www.buenosaires.gov.ar). The UCSF is located in Santa Fe. This is the third province of the country in terms of population (approximately 400.000 inhabitants) and productive activity, after Buenos Aires (www.gba.gov.ar) and Cordoba (www.cba.gov.ar). And its principal activity is farming, both through agriculture and livestock.

To contextualized is necessary to clarify that the higher education system in Argentina is comprised as is stated in the report of the Secretariat of University policies of the Ministry of Education of the Nation (www.me.gov.ar/spu).

There are 40 Public National Universities where students don’t have to pay to study. The National Government through its budget for education pays for them.

However, the supporting of an education system like this means to assume a cost that it is not able to be paid by an emerging country like Argentina.

On the other hand, there are 45 Private Universities. To enroll, the students have to pay their tuition rates. This income is the only resource that these universities have to overcome all of their academic processes.

As these funds are frequently inadequate, in most cases it is imperative to use fundraising from private companies. This involves assuming a known risk.

The UCSF is a private university and has fixed its tuition and fees for the academic year 2010 in \$5.200 Argentinean pesos (1.350 USD). These fees are extremely low comparing with the one of universities located in developed countries. However, in our city a middle class family must make a big effort to afford them. In the capital city of the Country, Buenos Aires, there are private universities in which tuition and fees can be three times higher than Santa Fe’s. For example Universidad de San Andres (www.udesa.edu.ar) and Universidad de Palermo (www.palermo.edu).

According to the report of university statics that are published annually by the Secretary of University Policies (www.spu.edu.ar) the UCSF had in the 2008 a total of 6675

undergraduate students enrolled, and 320 students in their graduate studies. With an annual average growth rate of 3.4% in the range 1998/2008.

2. Three facts

A personal view.

2.1 – I.A.E., the seed.

Following the Steve Jobs's idea "the first story is about connecting the dots", is necessary for the history to begin from a data that a priori would seem not to be related at all. In 1991 I was a young student of Educational Sciences who got married with a young System Engineer student. Being both students, one day I spoke to my husband and told him that we needed to buy a typewriter for the University tasks. In that moment I saw in his eyes that my request was wrong. In a few words he explained me that the technology of a typewriter was obsolete, he added a lot of reasons of why we should buy a computer instead. In love and with admiration for his knowledge I accepted immediately, although I didn't really understand what a computer was, because during the secondary school I didn't get any information about those new technologies. We saved money until we reached 1000 USD and then we bought our first PC.

Once home, my husband installed on it a text processor and I started to use my typewriter "with screen", DOS system (yellow matchstick!!!), etc. On September 1992 I graduated at the UCSF. In those days I had been getting on my own some extra knowledge from my college mates... I knew what a PC was, and even knew how to manipulate it. Immediately I started to work and tried to become a lifelong learner. I enrolled a graduate program of distance learning in the UNED (National University of Distance Learning of Spain www.uned.es). I studied from 1993 to 1995 and got my postgraduate title of University Superior Specialist of Educational Informatics, after that I went to Spain to do a teaching exchange at Universidad de Murcia.

Passing the year 1996 the College of Humanities, inside UCSF, began a changing process of its curriculums. I was involved in those changes as a specialist in education and new technologies of information and communication. Among several changes, my contribution was decisive to include in the training of future professionals in science of education, a curriculum space about new technologies. My arguments were convincing and since 1998 students have a course dedicated to studying the impact of new technologies in education. The hardest part was finding an agreement as to the minimum contents as though the intention was to study Informatics Science Applied to Education (IAE). During the first years we could not reach our goals because we had to start from the very beginning in terms of concepts. Today, after ten years of work, we find in the classrooms, students that are IT literate, this allows us to delve into the possibilities that information technology can offer to education.

Professors at UCSF just connect to their students in the classroom during their classes; we had no offices and other times at university. In the late 90's this generated on me a necessity of having another kind of contact with my students in order to give us more possibilities to teach and learn. After that I included the email in my classes. Then our educational relationship did not depend on weekly meeting at the university but remained open over time and distance. It was a seed sown into blended learning.

The interest and enthusiasm of the students was remarkable and their desires to go further delivered us to the incorporation of a second course curriculum in 2002 for Educational

Technology studies. This course is focused on didactics with digital technologies. Nowadays this course is dedicated specifically to teach about Distance Learning.

2. 2. “Blended Learning”, the germination.

The Universidad Católica de Santa Fe, awards annual competitions to get grants for research and development projects. In 1999, I presented a project that was approved about the development environment for Distance Learning.



Figure 3 – “UCSF Blended Learning Environment”

It was decided at the time a completely web-based development. Satellite classrooms and other methods of access or connection were not considered. It was a self developed system. The environment was conceived, designed and implemented having in mind the characteristics and particularities of this university. We considered a variety of details to make it friendly for students and teachers. As it can still be read on its website (<http://teleformacion.ucsf.edu.ar/historia>) the concepts that we trust from the beginning are about to get the best of two worlds; the best part of traditional classes and the best part of virtual classes. From ever we trusted in Blended Learning.

This environment had, among other virtues, consistency and connection with the Academic Management System (AMS). AMS is the computer system that records every single action of the student's academic life at UCSF. This student data could be read as complete information from a single data system. A breakthrough.

We began to train teachers informally, through speeches, invitations, demonstrations, etc. Gradually, very slow, we were starting to warm them up. And after a year of that work we had our first's virtual classrooms.

So far, we did not do distance learning, but moved for the same reason that teachers do not have student service offices, or while in college outside class time, they began creating virtual classrooms to support traditional classes.

We can say that we never wanted to do blended learning, but blended learning found us naturally and spontaneously and opened lots of doors for us to continue our way there.

Some things that may be considered problematic in this step was the lack of an area inside the university dedicated to organize, manage and guide the process of blended learning. In other words, “Blended Learning” was the "thing" within the organization. Almost everyone knew someone was talking about it (almost like a preacher!) But “Blended Learning” did not have an entity of its own within organization chart.

However, very important and interesting steps were made. Steps by which it was necessary to pass by to build the present stage.

2.3. WEB, flowering

When the year 2008 begins, the University's organizational structure gets modified; this formally originates the Department of Blended Learning, with its own authorities and covering the whole university.

Besides that, a new program for Teacher Categorization is implemented. Within the scope of the evaluation for teacher performance system, the requirement is to be trained in IT and use it in its classes.

Our own blended learning environment, which main feature was to work in an integrated way with the AMS, was shut down. A bad decision!



Figure 4.a: Moodle Environment at UCSF (Home Page)

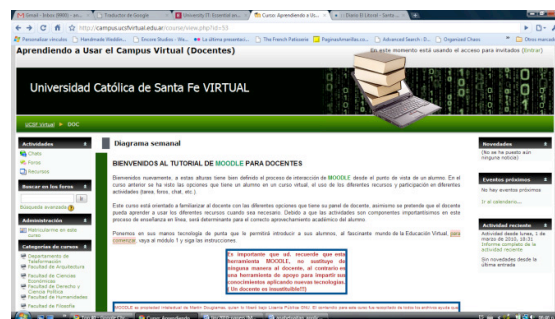


Figure 4. b: Moodle Environment at UCSF (Free courses of Moodle for Students and Teachers)

Today all of our courses offered for blended or distance learning, are MOODLE based. Among the main reasons of its choice is that in addition to being a very good resource, as virtual learning environment, is free and has a strong team behind the work who is constantly adding and improving its functionality.

In 2009, for first time, student admissions were open at UCSF for a distance bachelor degree. The program is a Bachelor in Gerontology. The people who aspire to be a student of this program must have previous university studies in a similar subject. The experience was highly satisfactory at that moment. We had about 50 adult students attending to a complete process of distance education under Moodle environment. We had interesting opinions and experiences of students, teachers and tutors.

The UCSF web site, from 1999 to 2008, was a traditional brochure but digitized. In 2009, it evolved into an IT mass media. Today students and teachers begin to interact outside the classroom, through virtual classrooms and other social networks like facebook, twitter, buzz, etc.

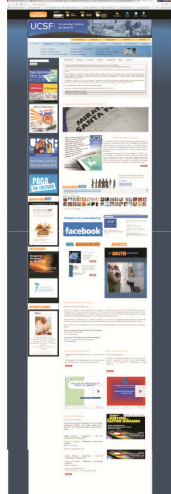


Figure 5 – Actual web of UCSF

3. A future, final essay

The road has been long and slow. The changes have been just a few. But all of them have been done seriously and precisely. This is a map of the narrated road:

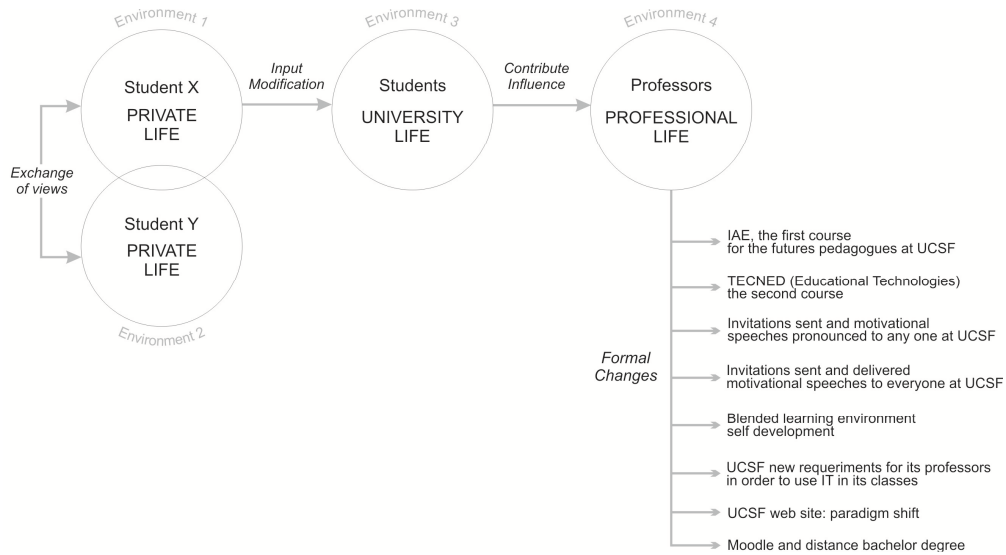


Figure 6: A concept map of the road traveled

Teachers who have used MOODLE and discovered and understood its benefits for education, don't move back. In turn, when these teachers talk about their experiences they say they are happy for them, this is a good way to show new teachers what this change is about and the benefits of mobilizing to it. Young college students, most of them belonging to the NET generation, are the fuel that keeps the whole system to move forward without pause.

In other words, if we need to do a concept map of our situation, could be this:

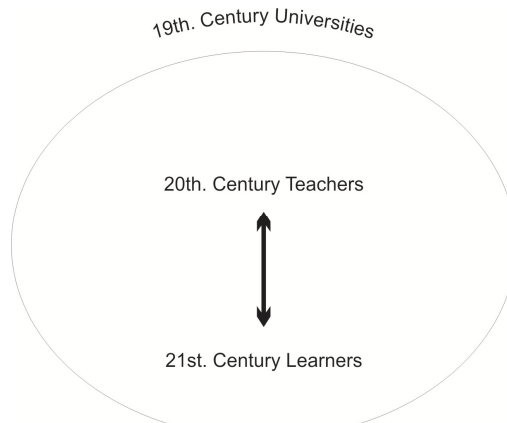


Figure 7: Today's Teaching and Learning environment at Universities

The final words of this work have to do with the working premise of LINC: "With today's computer and telecommunications technologies, every young person can have a quality education regardless of his or her place of birth." (<http://linc.mit.edu/about.html>)

If we believe that education, at any age, is a process of building learning among at least 3 actors: a teacher, a student and a content, and, if by the Information Technology, these actors are present in the process of distance education, then we can assume that just because there is access, that means quality assurance.

However, if we believe that formal education occurs inside a pedagogical system, then we have something pending before talking about quality. This topic is called "social and cultural context". Beyond the extensive literature on the importance of school (Elementary and High) for cultural preservation, when children learn "remote", my concerns have to do with the university. By now, I do not care about how to preserve the culture in college; I do care about how to generate it. So my question is about the possibility of transferring the experience gained through distance learning process and OER, to the social and cultural context, nearby and itself.

If Learning is the modification of existing structures due to the development of new structures of increasing complexity; its anchorage must be occur in the whole person. Like individual and social being. It is the own environment who enables or not the transfer and the learning.

Thanks to the advanced development of the IT available to education, we can deliver training to any place in the world. No distances and no differences. But: Can we speak of equal quality in learning among young university of U.S. and their counterparts in Argentina? I think we cannot. Even in the case that they are studying, with the same professors and books would not be the same. The ability to do referencing, sharing, replicating, recreate and transferring, is not the same. We should do a comparative study with control groups.

The main aspect to consider has to do with the digital divide. When a university student learns with a foreign teacher, whose reality is different from that of their students, and then he wants to apply sharing, replicating, recreate and transferring the learning to their own reality, the problems are so many that often the solution most frequently is emigration. They are being finally a great human resource for other countries, but no for their own.

Despite my concern, I reaffirm the statement in the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta: "What we do can be a drop in the ocean. But the sea would not be complete if it lacked that drop."