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CAN MANAGERS ACCEPT THAT EMPLOYEES TRAIN IN E-LEARNING?

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SUMMARY

E-learning was initially considered as the “silver bullet” of training. This new education pattern would allow to go beyond the limits of more classical "classroom-based" training sessions. However, it seems to us that one characteristic has not been considered well enough. Employees in e-learning train in the workplace, often on their own computer. Such a situation generates a role ambiguity: is the employee training or working? This is delicate for managers to handle, since in the first case, they exercise no direct hierarchical authority, whereas in the second case, they must.

First we have reviewed the literature to analyse the complex relation between e-learning and hierarchical responsibility. It shows that the question of socialisation has clearly been identified as being a major obstacle to the development of e-learning. Most authors thus plead in favour of a change from e-learning to blended learning, which means developing training processes that combine e-learning sessions with more classical “classroom-based” sessions allowing trainees to exchange ideas and help one another. However, the literature does not mention the question of the relation existing between trainees and their own manager. We have then analysed the literature on organisational socialisation to try and find an answer to this question. Though this notion is rapidly developing nowadays, we noticed that it had not yet considered this theme.

Thus we end this article by offering a specific conceptual framework allowing to analyse it and do a first test from data collected in four major French banks. This exploratory work therefore leads to the idea that managers' positioning towards e-learning is a question that is to be taken into account if we really wish to develop e-learning in organisations.

Key words: e-learning, blended learning, socialisation, manager

Introduction

To try to fully participate in the improvement of firms' results, the Human Resources Management (HRM) has been trying hard to develop new tools for a few decades (Lawler, 2005). Among them, e-learning appears to be one of the most promising tools. It is used in more than 60% of French firms (Club défi, 2004). A review of the literature clearly shows that the interest in e-learning comes from the fact that it is able to target tailored contents to each and every trainee's needs.

However, it seems to us that the effects of this new tool have not all been studied in detail yet. An e-learning course allows all employees to train in the workplace directly, most often with their own computer. This can thus lead to a possible confusion. An outside observer can find it hard to differentiate an employee training in e-learning from an employee carrying out his everyday work. This ambiguity particularly seems to be a problem for this employee's direct manager. Indeed, if the employee is really training, he is not strictly under his manager's hierarchical responsibility anymore. On the other hand, if he is carrying out his everyday work, he is under his responsibility. On the basis of the literature review and exploratory work, we are trying to show that the question of managers' position towards e-learning deserves more consideration.

The review of the literature shows that e-learning was first considered as the "silver bullet" of training (Neville *et al.*, 2005). By offering a new educational pattern, it seemed able to go beyond the limits of the classical "classroom-based" model. But this work also allowed us to note that e-learning deprives trainees from a resource which is particularly necessary for them to take full advantage of their training course: contact with other trainees. Today, all the literature leads to the idea that it is necessary to shift from e-learning to blended learning, that is to say combine purely virtual training sessions (e-learning) with more classical training sessions in classroom as they allow trainees to socialise.

Though it is well developed, the literature on blended learning seems too focused on one single type of socialisation: relations between trainees. While it brings perfectly convincing results, it seems important to us to state that employees participating in a training course are also employees included in a team which is subject to a hierarchical authority, has objectives to achieve, etc. We will try and show in this article that it seems necessary to take this type of socialisation into account as well as doing a complete analysis of the effects of e-learning. Literature on organisational socialisation is rapidly developing, but we assume it does not allow us to make a satisfactory analysis of the specific case of the relations between the employees training in e-learning and their hierarchy. We will end this review of the literature by offering to build this theoretical framework on the work developed by Claude Dubar (1993).

At the end of the review of the literature that will lead us from e-learning to blended learning (1.), we will present the design of our research (2.) and use Claude Dubar's concepts (1993) to analyse the situation of four major French banks (3.) Therefore we will show that the position of the employee in e-learning, that is to say training in the workplace, generates a role ambiguity (is the employee working or training?) that must be taken into account to understand why it is so difficult for e-learning to spread in organisations. In terms of managerial recommendations, identifying this ambiguity clearly encourages suggesting the

development of blended learning processes that would also allow anticipation of the complex phenomena of e-learning employees' socialisation towards their hierarchy.

1. Review of the literature: From e-learning to blended learning: what socialisation needs for in-house trainees?

Over the past few years, publications on e-learning have considerably developed (Neville *et al.*, 2005). This kind of distance training knows undeniable success but also comes up against an important limit: it unsettles trainees by depriving them from any socialisation with their peers. Researchers and practitioners have developed the notion of blended learning – e-learning sessions combined with more classical face-to-face training sessions – to find a way to solve this problem (11.). Research on socialisation in the learning process is well developing today. However, it seems to us that it must still be studied in greater depth to be completely effective, particularly by adding a notion that has barely been taken into account by literature so far: socialisation of trainees in relation with their colleagues and hierarchy (12.)

11. From e-learning to “blended learning”: towards taking the socialisation question into account

The whole literature agrees that the major interest of e-learning is its ability to offer a new educational pattern that seems capable of going beyond the limits of classroom-based training courses (111.). However, the implementation and thinking of this new educational method have allowed to highlight the fact that it showed disadvantages in the “socialisation” field. Authors and practitioners have tried hard to answer such difficulties by offering an e-learning method that takes socialisation more into account: blended learning (112.).

111. E-learning, an educational pattern that adapts to trainees needs

The American Society for Training and Development’s e-learning glossary defines e-learning as “a wide set of applications and processes, such as web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration” (Kaplan-Leiserson, 2002). E-learning thus pools all the tools enabling someone to train learners at a distance (Harasim, 1990). But this definition shows that behind this single word, there are very different tools giving birth to uses that do not necessarily have the same impact on individuals’ learning processes (Federico, 1999). However, beyond such diversity, the literature agrees that some characteristics are specific to all processes. E-learning allows to bypass the problem of unity of time, place and action, which is an extremely structuring characteristic of classical training patterns: a training period occurs at a definite time and place, with the same content for all trainees.

E-learning allows all apprentices to train whenever they want, when their own professional and/or personal constraints allow them to do so with the greatest effectiveness. It thus allows asynchronous learning (Selix, 2001). E-learning also enables learners not to train systematically with a group and at the same place (McCormack et Jones, 1997). It is therefore particularly interesting for training of a small number of people spread all over a country, a continent or even the world (experts, for example), or on the contrary train a great number of apprentices who are part of a network (e.g. ticket clerks of a bank network). Finally, above all e-learning allows to offer trainees a training content tailored to individual needs (O’Connor, 1997; Sulcic and Lesjak, 2001). Partly placed under their control (DeRouin, Fritzsche and Salas, 2004), these tools enable them to decide what knowledge they want to develop and what knowledge they think they already master. E-learning offers the possibility for trainees

to be very autonomous in the construction of their own educational development. It also allows training officers to determine, answer and even anticipate trainees' needs (Neville *et al.*, 2005) and thus avoids a major disadvantage of classical training: their alignment on the "average" learner, which very often corresponds to none of the trainees really present in the group one faces (O'Connor, 1997).

More fundamentally, e-learning thus appears to be the solution allowing to bypass the obstacles imposed by classical classrooms and go beyond the problems linked to traditional learning patterns. Traditional teaching has always been strongly criticised (Cuban, 1993; Neville *et al.*, 2002) as the classroom-based pattern is fundamentally considered as dysfunctional (Banathy, 1994; Reigeluth, 1994). It is indeed characterised by structured teaching by the trainer who plays a prominent role in the learning dynamics and the control of the information that is "sent" to trainees (Huddleston and Unwin, 1997; Holmes and Abington-Cooper, 2000). This pattern therefore barely takes their expectations into account. On the contrary, e-learning offers a learning pattern focused on trainees who can thus learn how to develop their ability to find the knowledge they want by themselves and get problem-solving skills that will be directly useful in their professional life (Relan and Gillani, 1997). In this work, it clearly appears that the major interest of e-learning is its capacity to impulse a new conception of training which allows to go beyond the limits of the classical training pattern.

112. Blended learning: a solution to the limits of e-learning?

The benefits expected from e-learning have ensured its very quick development in firms. A survey shows that 67 % of French firms have developed e-learning modules (Club Défi, 2004). However, from 2001 on, a report of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) written by Mark Van Buren (2001) and quoted by Reece and Lockee (2005) indicated that the rate of e-learning adoption by U.S. companies fell significantly short of industry projections. These projections, made three years out, declined from 23.0 percent for 2000 to 19.8 % for 2001 and to 18.2 % for 2002. This decrease can be attributed to the fact that e-learning still costs a lot in terms of investment but also system maintenance and updating. However, this author also notes that this decrease is closely linked to a significant increase in classroom-based training as well! Nevertheless, he says that it does not mean that firms have simply got rid of e-learning. They have noticed that distance training causes a loss of contacts and interactions with peers that trainees perceive as unsettling. While continuing e-learning, they have progressively re-introduced moments within their training courses when trainees physically meet and have real interactions with their peers. So they are gradually turning from pure e-learning to blended learning to try and answer their trainees' socialisation needs.

Mantyla (2001) defines blended learning as the use of two or more presentation and distribution methods for the purpose of enhancing both the content and the learners' experience. Blended learning utilizes a variety of approaches, including print-based materials, instructor-led training and web-based training for example. In a certain way, we can say that blended training has always existed, since the emergence of the first training technologies, training officers have always tried to find an effective compromise between sessions requiring these technologies and more classical face-to-face teaching sessions. (Fallery, 2004). However, beyond this notion in common, blended learning should be analysed in detail to identify to what extent it is able to meet the increased socialisation needs that appeared to be necessary when e-learning was implemented.

Blended learning is characterised by an almost infinite variety of opportunities (Reece, Lockee, 2005). Technically, everything seems actually possible. Classroom-based training sessions can rely on work carried out in e-learning from instructions specified to each trainee according to his original level, his expectations, etc. On the contrary, e-learning can be made more effective by setting up a “classical” training session specifying for example the training objectives and means to trainees. The advantages of blended learning then appear to be considerable. Beyond the simple need trainees have to talk about the training system itself, it allows trainers to concretely notice how diverse the participants’ training needs are. The pertinent use of different tools and materials also often allows trainees to acquire more knowledge in an often shorter time (Hamburg, Lindecke, Thij, 2003). The almost infinite variety of possible links between sessions allows expectations of an almost perfect adaptation to all the socialisation needs trainees might express.

12. Thoughts on in-house trainees’ socialisation

The fact that blended learning technically allows all types of associations is very encouraging. Indeed, we can see the way to meet the trainees’ needs in it, whatever they are. However, it seems that the technical solutions can be successful only if the objectives targeted have been well identified first. Before answering the question “How can we meet the trainees’ socialisation needs?” it seems necessary to specifically answer the question that logically precedes it: “What precisely are the in-house trainees’ socialisation needs?”

It seems that literature has not yet offered a completely satisfactory answer to this question so far. We can first note that most publications on e-learning speculate about the socialisation of individuals as trainees whereas they are also and mainly employees (121.). Then we can note that the considerable literature that exists on organisational socialisation has never been used to analyse this question of e-learning trainees’ socialisation in depth (122.). Therefore we will end this literature review by presenting the theoretical framework of the double identity transaction (Dubar, 1993) which partially answers the question of interest: What is at stake in the socialization of e-learning trainees? (123.)

121. From trainees’ socialisation to training employees’ socialisation?

Although e-learning has been put into practice within firms for a few years, most research articles on the theme are published in the education-specialised press and rather by researchers aware and interested in educational issues (Reece, Lockee, 2005; Singh, 2003; Hamburg, Lindecke, Thij, 2003; Salomon, Perkins, 1998; Russel, 1998). These articles are often very detailed and even sophisticated. In his synthesis of the literature (2004), Fallery shows that the question of trainees’ socialisation is very old and widely studied in educational sciences. There are then several types of answers. They are opposed on the question of socialisation since they are undecided upon the most adequate learning theory to report the phenomena observed.

The oldest trend is “behaviourism”. It considers that “knowing is an organised accumulation of associations and components of skills” (Greeno *et al.*, 1996, p.14). By considering learning as a series of associations between notions, concepts, etc., it considers that a training process is effective if it allows all trainees to benefit from regular feedback from the tutor or training officer on the answers they individually provided according to the questions asked. This approach thus does not give much space to socialisation since it does not consider for example that the interaction between the trainees themselves is a source of learning. Even if it is relatively old and criticised, Fallery (2004) underlines that this conception of learning is the theoretical basis of the great number of user’s guides we can find on the Internet or in e-

learning modules. Among many cases, Russel (1998) gives the example of the National Centre for Supercomputing Applications which offers "A Beginner's Guide to HTML" (National Centre for Supercomputing Applications, 1996) that aims at guiding the learner through a series of short successive steps, each of them using what was acquired in the previous step and finalized by the creation of a personal home page on the Internet. It clearly localises the idea that learning is a "routinisable" series of associations between different elements.

This concept has been strongly criticised by the "cognitive" approach. Indeed, from his first pieces of work, Piaget (1969) tries to prove that taking the learner's cognitive environment into account is crucial in understanding the development of a learning process (Ducret, 1990). He also shows that the learning process does not really correspond to a series of associations between elements but rather the resolution of successive problems for which the learner mobilises all the resources available in this cognitive environment. This approach is the theoretical foundation for all "computer information processing" (Russel) which aims at creating a cognitive environment where trainees understanding of the problems to solve can emerge. Russell (1998) quotes Anderson, Corbett, Koedinger and Pelletier's article (1995) as a document reporting more than ten years experience and thinking with this cognitive approach to learning. With such an approach, the socialisation question is clearly more present since learning does not occur, as the behaviourist approach considers it, in a training officer-trainee pair, but in an interaction between a trainee and an environment. We can assume that this environment also includes individuals who are less explicitly present in Piaget's classical cognitivist approach (Ducret, 1990).

The third type of approach to socialisation – the pragmatic trend (**called "pragmatic/sociohistoric" by Russel**) – tries to fill this gap (Fallery, 2004). On the basis of Vygotsky's work (1978), this trend claims that all forms of knowledge include an interaction between two people (and mainly interactions between the trainees themselves). This point of view is certainly a little extreme since it is probable that the two other approaches can also bring relevant elements concerning the analysis of the learning processes. However, it has the interest of highlighting that learning is also a social process where trainees do not learn alone, not only thanks to the trainer or the resources they can mobilise in their own cognitive environment, but also in contact with other trainees around them, among others those who participate in the same training course as them. This approach considers the question of socialisation as crucial in the analysis of the learning process. Beyond a training guide or even a cognitive context including many resources, communication among the trainees themselves is the one that is considered as the major learning factor.

The concrete implementation of this type of theory can be found in Hamburg, Lindecke and Thij's work (2003) for example. Indeed, in this article, the authors directly justify the shift from e-learning towards blended learning with the fact that trainees feel the need to talk with the other trainees to learn well. They even quote a trainee interviewed by Salmon (2000) who, to learn well in e-learning, says he firstly needs to realise "that I am not alone in the problem I encounter (...). Through reading the other messages you quickly find that whatever is concerning you, others have faced the same problem and that gives you confidence to carry on". Therefore, they present trainees as individuals mainly guided by the need to exchange information with the other trainees on what they have learnt, help one another, etc.

This analysis seems very effective to us but if we widen the perspective by remembering that these trainees are indeed learning things but also, and mostly, are employees paid by an

employer who imposes objectives on them most of the time, etc., we can question to what extent this analysis remains totally relevant. Indeed, we are wondering, can we assume that employees, because they are in the middle of a training course, forget all about the logic that guides their action as employees (achieve goals, make reports to their managers, etc.) and fully dedicate themselves to the learning logic (like exchanging knowledge, helping one another, etc.)? Even if we do not doubt the fact that this learning logic is actually present, it seems to us that it should at least be combined with a more “classical” logic that guides the employees' action in their everyday work. We think that it is this association that today's literature (i.e. the above-mentioned research) has not made yet. To do a proper analysis of the effects of blended learning, it seems to us that it is necessary to develop thoughts on the socialisation of the trainees who consider themselves not only as learners but also employees.

122. What does research on organisational socialisation develop?

Currently, there is extremely active literature on a theme which seems very similar to the following one. Indeed, today the work on organisational socialisation is developing considerably. Initially, this work seems extremely interesting for our analysis. The literature on organisational socialisation actually tries to identify the mechanisms that allow employees to integrate a company, a team and a job. In his founding article, Schein (1968) defines organisational socialisation as “the process of “learning the ropes”, the process of being indoctrinated and trained, the process of being taught what is important in an organization or some subunit thereof” (Schein, 1968, p.54). *A priori*, the notion of organisational socialisation thus seems capable of answering our first question on the employees' concrete socialisation needs in a company. Indeed, the amount of work done in this field has enabled to go beyond the image of an all-powerful organisation that would oblige employees to play a role that would have been totally defined outside their control as individuals (as it was the case in Schein's above-mentioned definition and also Van Maanen's (1978) and Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) work) to shift towards a more balanced analysis where individuals and organisations both intervene to co-create this social process together (Louis, 1980; Morrison, 1993; Saks and Ashforth, 1997).

Today, organisational socialisation can be considered as corresponding to “a double process of interactions between an organisation and an individual in an organisational transition stage” (Lacaze, 2005, p.274). We should theoretically be able to study it all along the employees' life during different “organisational transition” stages they might experience. But even if the above-mentioned research acknowledges that studies could be carried out to do a better analysis of what happens during promotions (Hall, 1987), most of the work focuses on one single professional transition: the arrival in an organisation (Lacaze, 2005). Obviously, integration is undoubtedly the “professional” transition stage where the gap between before (e.g. the roles played by an individual at school or when unemployed) and after (the roles played by the employee in the company) is the greatest. It is indeed the situation in which researchers are most likely to accurately analyse the different aspects of this socialisation process. The research focus on only this type of organisational transition stage can however do harm to our own work. Indeed, it is very likely that what happens when integrating a new employee in an organisation is quite different from what happens when an employee is training by e-learning. Today, it seems to us, therefore, that a complementary field of research on organisational socialisation is to be developed on this specific training theme.

123. Conceptualisation variables on in-house trainees' socialisation

The notion of organisational socialisation was first imported from sociology. Since the beginning, this science has indeed set itself the target of clarifying the nature and determining

factors of the socialisation processes. Therefore, it seems relevant to us to mobilise this scientific field once again to try and complete our conceptual framework insufficiently developed to consider trainees' socialisation in a company. Among all the research developed in this field, it appeared to us that Claude Dubar's work could help our thoughts to progress. While identifying the socialisation processes prior to entering professional life (primary socialisation), the author set himself the task of better understanding how the socialisation process comes into the picture and changes all along an employee's professional life (1993, 2000).

The first important result produced by this author is that, like integration or promotion, a training course, if it is long or if it concerns important topics for the employees' professional life (like their own management techniques for example), can be considered as a real "professional transition stage". Also, he showed that training courses are extremely particular moments in the employees' career. They are not only moments when they acquire new knowledge but also moments when they "socialise", which means when they make their social and professional identity evolve (1993). At the end of a training course, they know a bit more on a given topic, but also know about themselves and others. Therefore, they have evolved. In accordance with what the pragmatic approach assumes, it notes that this change in the social and professional identity does not occur through individual reflexion alone but also, consequently, through interactions with the others.

To detail how these interactions occur, Claude Dubar (1993) specifies that training is a socialisation process which is composed of a double transaction:

- with oneself, known as biographic, where individuals think about themselves and try to link their past (before training), to their present (what they are acquiring through training) and future (who they will be or want to be after training); and
- with the others, called relational, where individuals develop their own vision of themselves with the representations of themselves others reflect back to them. Most of the time, this task is delicate since the "others" often have a distorted image of what people consider themselves to be (Mead, 1934). Training widens the gap since it makes the individuals' knowledge, representations and identity evolve (the biographical transaction contributing to make them imagine other future possibilities) whereas the others do not evolve. As often they do not participate in this training course or another, their own identity does not evolve. They are not likely to change their representation of the individual training either. Training thus often contributes to widen the gap there is between the way individuals see themselves and the way the others see them.

In the relational transaction, the only support which is really effective for every individual is the community of the trainees themselves. Even if all do not follow the same socialisation paths, most of the time trainees find within the group of trainees someone or several people who are experiencing the same type of identity evolution and the same type of gap - often painful - between what they think they have become and the way the others consider them (Dubar, 2000; Dejours, 1998).

It seems that Claude Dubar's conceptual framework (1993) has given rise to a new stream of thought on employees' socialisation which is not only limited to existing phenomena occurring when integrating the company. Moreover, as it has also been designed to analyse the interactions between working times and training times, it seems particularly relevant to us to carry out an analysis of socialisation in e-learning that would try to consider the fact that

individuals are not only trainees but also employees, and as such they are subject to a hierarchical authority, objectives, performance constraints, etc.

2. Research and methodology design

Neville K., Heavin C. and Walsh E. (2005) remind us clearly that e-learning has been considered as the « silver bullet » of training for a long time. It was not simply considered as a new support of training among others, but more like a tool allowing to extinguish the traditional model of training because it was perceived as more efficient for the education of the trainees. Those expectations, certainly too excessive, have been replaced today by blended learning, that is to say a more realistic conception of e-learning that attempt to take into account the needs of socialisation of the trainees in a better way.

The review of literature on socialisation presented above leads to the idea that Claude Dubar's « double transaction » theoretical frame (1993) seems to be the best option to allow an accurate analysis of the interaction between e-learning and hierarchical responsibility. Indeed, it establishes that identity transformations of the trainees are realized, among others, due to the confrontation, transactions with others. However, it voluntarily leaves the following question completely open: Who are the others with whom the transaction is going to happen? For this author, each individual is, as a matter of fact, completely free to « choose » the others with whom the interaction is going to be established. Generally, this is structured with the trainees from within the same group, however the others may possibly be the spouse, the partner or even another member of the family (having followed a training or not) (Dubar, 2000).

Even without taking into account those relatively specific conditions, e-learning is a kind of training that makes it difficult to answer the question: who are the others with whom the trainee establishes his identity transaction? First of all, in e-learning, the trainee group is a virtual group. As literature has mentioned several times, that lack of physical contacts often creates a feeling of emptiness for the trainees. There are several ways to account for this difficulty however, just like the other conceptual frames, Dubar's concepts (1993), show that the trained group constitutes for every one of them a resource because it brings a re assurance in view of the unsettlement that can constitute a training program.

It seems to us, however, that those other theoretical frames do not sufficiently take into account the fact that if within e-learning, the trained group is relatively absent, the group of work colleagues, instead, is much more present than in a traditional training. Indeed, thanks to e-learning, a worker is able to learn in his work place, at his work station, that is to say close to a work colleague. As opposed to a traditional training which corresponds to disorientation in relation to the work location and constitutes a distance with work colleagues, e-learning leaves the group of work colleagues completely present next to the trainee. This situation clearly creates a real problem to hierarchical responsibility: when a worker is using e-learning at work, is he still considered to be subjected to hierarchical responsibility? Or else, does he partly escape it while being eventually subjected to the responsibility of the training organiser?

In order to thoroughly investigate every effect of e-learning and to offer a complete analysis of socialisation phenomena at work in this kind of training, it seems relevant to us to discuss the relationship of the trainee (this has been extensively developed in the literature), but also we will discuss the existing relationships between an e-learning trainee and his hierarchy.

Dubar's theoretical frame seems relevant to us as it brings the first fragments of an answer to the question: Does blended learning destabilise hierarchical relationships?

In order to answer this question we have analysed the usage of e-learning tools developed by 4 major French banking establishments. As far as training is concerned they have always had particularly demanding policies (Brun-Hortado, 2005). For a long time, they have thus recruited candidates with a low level of education and offered them various internal training courses allowing them to acquire the knowledge of the products and give them the specific culture in order to integrate each different company and, in fine, offered them spectacular career progression. During the last twenty years, those French banks have progressively increased the level of diplomas required for recruitment (bank tellers are recruited with a two-year undergraduate degree), however the training policy is still equally present (Brun-Hortado, 2005). This is rather interesting in order to study the recent effects of e-learning tools.

Two of the investigated banks belong to the traditional private sector. The other two belong to the mutualist sector. The most important one has 58000 salaried employees in France while the smallest one has only 14000 workers. Concerning e-learning they have carried out experiments, sometimes long and often rich in information. Bank B (mutualist sector) is the one that benefits from the most interesting experience as far as e-learning is concerned. Even though it remains relatively traditional, regarding contents (training in banking, office skills and management) concerning techniques it seems that they have tested the whole range of possibilities. Since 1997, they have tested a « PowerPoint » training module and forums (themes are chosen by the instructors, such as sandwich courses for instance).

More recently, they have developed « virtual classes ». Instructors and trainees are connected, the trainees can see the documents used by the instructors simultaneously on their screens. Instructors and trainees also have white sheets of paper enabling them to draw charts, graphics and diagrams. Then, they are all linked with a « chat » and microphones. « Interactive television » media has also been tested lately. Thanks to the use of web cams, instructors and trainees can see each other. When that technique was first tested it was quite a disappointment because sound and picture quality was low. The network flow volume necessary was important and financial cost would have been far too important (it still actually is). Surprisingly, it has been observed that trainees used to focus on the picture (« *the small square on the top left corner* » (bank B, e-learning project manager)) to the detriment of the PowerPoint on the screen.

Bank D (private sector) is interesting because it is particularly representative of what can be expected regarding blended learning. Indeed, as well as usual training courses (English, office skills) that bank has developed a blended learning management course. Between two face to face training sessions (3 days then 2 days), a month and a half gap is scheduled allowing the trainees to acquire 5 training modules taught in e-learning (the themes range from « time and team management » or « TIC project management »).

Bank c (mutualist sectors) has organised its e-learning sessions in order to obtain a diploma certified by the French national education board (bachelor's degree in banking) which is rather demanding as far as required knowledge is concerned. Then, bank A (private sector) seems to be the last one in its experimentations. E-learning training is both traditional in its form (PowerPoint) and in its content (banking skills, office skills, lotus notes, foreign languages but also presentations).

It is also likely that « virtual classes » or « interactive televisions » mentioned before would not have been possibly analysed in every economic sector. Thanks to those different studies we are able to analyse the most advanced effects of e-learning and thus we can anticipate on the effects it could have in the future in other types of activities.

In order to collect the necessary data for this study, formal interviews have taken place with training managers from various services and the major actors in charge of e-learning projects of those companies. The main results of this research from interviews are shown below (15 persons in all). The advantages of the interviews carried out by the services managers and the project managers are clearly identified. They supply interesting information because their position within the companies enables them to have a clear vision of the technical, social, financial and strategic stakes linked to those tools, (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). Semi-directive interviews have been used for this study because it allows for better analysis of the context and the actor's logical line of argument (Bouchard, 1976; Stone, 1978; Burgess, 1982). In order to deal with those interviews, we have used classical encoding methods. We have identified eleven themes and despatched the data between those different themes (See appendix A). During this post-coding, the author has realised a certain numbers of changes in the list of themes. This step is indeed an interactive process where themes can emerge from the interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994). A first level of encoding has been used to reduce the diversity of the data and to sum up important parts of the interviews. Then, the encoding has enabled the identification of the main themes met during the interviews (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The following chapters bring a few elements of the description of the socialisation process that takes place between e-learning trainees and their hierarchy.

3. Empirical results regarding socialisation in e-learning

Our research is exploratory. It will be necessary to widen the scope and the accuracy by developing a quantitative study. Our first results, although partial, enable us however to point out phenomena which were poorly identified by the literature and that seem relevant.

First of all we have noticed that in those four banks, n+1 subjects express a feeling of dissatisfaction towards e-learning. This is sufficiently important for the training project manager to consider and try to find solutions. (31). There are multiple solutions because they do not identify the same problem as being the origin of the dissatisfaction. The theoretical frame of the « double transaction » (Dubar, 1993) enables a complementary explanation which offers new possibilities, for training managers, to tackle the issue (32). In conclusion, our first results clearly suggest the process development of blended learning that takes into consideration the issue of the relationship between the trainees and their hierarchy.

31. Hierarchy criticises e-learning, companies are looking for solutions.

In the four interviewed banks, our interlocutors from training departments have mentioned the fact that hierarchy (n+1) did not quite appreciate that workers train on the workplace, most of the time with the same computers with which they usually work. A representative from bank C has clearly stated:

« ...We have had feedback mentioning that n+1 are constantly checking on their employees when they are learning on their computers within the agency. They insist on having their employees welcoming and dealing with customers instead of learning. »

Considering that training is not a directly productive work, n+1 considers training time as a real loss of productivity, at least from the manager's point of view, whose job it is to achieve team objectives.

Bank b training manager also observed the following:

« This is a real recurring issue for a training department. It is always difficult for a manager to let an employee go and train. They often say: training's all right but work comes first! With e-learning it becomes even more difficult. Since the employee does not physically leave the branch, n+1 has greater difficulties in accepting that situation... »

It is obvious here that, according to n+1, short term benefits that could be brought by training (even in terms of efficiency during customers appointments) are far less important than immediate benefits resulting from a productive and direct relationship of customer service.

The paradox is even stronger than that. As the same e-learning project manager from bank C highlights:

« ...It could have been worse to have employees leaving the premises for their training, we often point out to managers. The employee would have been absent from his work for a whole day, or even more, considering the journey to go to and from the training centre. However this is what they prefer. When the employee is not in the branch at all there is not much to do about it, however, when he is there, but learning instead of working, then it is a great deal more difficult to accept. »

Those difficulties are pushing n+1 to adopt a paradoxical behaviour: because of performance objectives they prefer a training mode out of the branch, which results in employees being absent for one day (mainly for transport reasons) although it is detrimental to the objectives they have to achieve... It is rather difficult to explain this paradox. Furthermore, this paradox is being felt at various degrees in each bank studied. It seems to be taken into consideration. Besides, the investigated companies have clearly identified the matter as being a major obstacle in e-learning development as they try to solve the problem.

Some of them have created what they call « resource centres » that is to say a place located out of the branch where employees can get connected to computers and follow their courses. Thus, bank D training manager stated that:

« ...We have created resource centres. Employees can go there when they wish or when they have an e-learning session work. Most often this is what we do for office skills training and English training. »

This e-learning is therefore realised at distance for employees who may be geographically spread in the whole country but not necessarily on their work place. This solution makes e-learning lose a part of flexibility which represented its prime interest (for example, one could train 20 minutes a day from his own computer depending of the daily workload) it has been more acceptable however to manage training that way for n+1 who were having problems accepting that their workers were training « in front of their eyes ». Team managers being subjected to the very strong pressure of sales objectives in which training time was not considered whatsoever.

Other companies, such as bank A, have another strategy. Their training manager points out that:

« ...We have started training n+2 in e-learning. In that way, we are hoping that they will discover the interests of this formula by themselves and that they will call for it with n+1. We hope that they accept to give more time to their employees in order to train in e-learning.
« ...Training is a management act! When n+1 validates a training course for someone, then it's up to him to make sure that the time required for it is allocated! »

This bank uses personal experience and role modelling examples in trying to convince hierarchy of the importance of allowing staff to train using e-learning. The logic is the same as that developed above: Training on the work place is important enough to be worth studying in order to find solutions (even if they are diversified)

32. The roots of dissatisfaction must be more thoroughly analysed

Companies have globally attempted to answer the question by developing blending learning instead of e-learning alone. Most of them have adopted the same discourse which is clearly in favour of blended learning. Bank D training manager also stated/

« ...Long distance training is just a complement to traditional training. It does not represent in any case a complete substitution to it. »

Bank c training manager mentions that:

« ...The objective is not about doing e-learning all the time. The proportion has not been clearly defined yet (15%, 20%, or more?) but in any case we will never go to 100% e-learning. »

It seems, however, important to us to mention that many interlocutors clearly reject « full e-learning » they often do it for many reasons, sometimes contradictory ones. For example, bank A's project manager rejects « full e-learning » because he considers that:

« ...certain training, such as behaviour training, can not be done with e-learning. It can only be done in resource centres... »

As we have stated above bank B and D opted e-learning for their management courses (which contain many behavioural dimensions).

Therefore, considering the major rejection of « full e-learning », our interlocutors do not share the same point of view. Our hypothesis (which must be confirmed by other research) is that those different points of view can be explained by the fact that our interlocutors do not clearly see the same source of their difficulties. They attribute it to questions of content (some content may be fine for e-learning, others not, but they do not agree what contents could be fine or not). However, Dubar's theoretical frame (1993) incites us to investigate identity and social phenomena that can be at stake in the process of training.

Beyond the role of support played by the group of trainees, it seems that n+1 dissatisfaction may also be explained by the fact that they confusingly perceive that e-learning employees are out of their hierarchical control. When they train they partially extract themselves from the

working group of their colleagues, from the group of employees who are subjected to the direct manager's hierarchy, can enter a new group, the group of trainees. The fact that team members train on the work place using their own computers, among the colleagues creates ambiguity (the employee is there but he escapes from the hierarchical control, he integrates the group of the trainees while being physically with the work colleagues group). This ambiguity can be difficult to deal with.

In the transformation of the social link brought on by e-learning training, the existing social link transformation among trainees must be taken into account, however, it seems that the evolution of the social links between hierarchy and the work group must be considered equally.

Conclusion

E-learning is a new tool available for HR departments in order to respond to internal customers demands; it helps make HRM really strategic. In its development within companies, it encounters difficulties because the trainees are deprived from the support offered by the links and relationships they can have with other trainees, especially in a « classroom training course ». For several years, researchers and instructors have tried to solve this problem by developing blended learning processes, that is to say, training which alternates long distance and « classroom » training.

However, according to the literature analysis, this reflection on socialisation may be too focused on the sole development of the links with trainees. It seems that this reflection must be applied to the analysis of existing social links between hierarchy and workmates. Indeed, as for e-learning, a trainee learns on his very own workplace; it is also necessary to take this dynamic into account. Theoretical reflection, regarding this theme, seems yet to be developed. Indeed, the literature dealing with organisational socialisation (although developing rapidly) is not yet adapted to the analysis of this type of situation. The theoretical frame of « double transaction » proposed by Dubar (1993) could be useful for this conceptualisation. It still has to be perfected and needs to go in depth in order to completely analyse this type of social dynamic.

Despite those limits, we have managed to mobilise it to analyse the positioning of e-learning in four major French banks. The interviews realised here have shown that e-learning was directly limited in its development by the dissatisfaction it created among the direct managers of the concerned employees. This problem is important enough to entice companies concerned to try to find a solution. Solutions remain varied and they are not quite efficient enough. It seems to us that those difficulties come from the fact that companies have objectives to try to improve socialisation among trainees whereas our theoretical studies show that existing social relationships must be taken into account between trainees, hierarchy and workmates. Those results, although limited, seem to demonstrate that there is a real theoretical research direction; and also, there are practical solutions in the making of a process regarding blended learning which would allow to deal efficiently with issues of socialisation between the trainees group and issues of socialisation between the trainees group and their hierarchy and/or their colleagues.

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Annexe A

Table used to encode the interviews

(Name of respondent). (Name of the interview).

This section was used to collect the main information about market characteristics and evolution, corporate strategy, HR policies, etc.

It was also used to trace the path each respondent followed as well as his or her level of knowledge and know-how in relation to e-learning tools, objectives and results.

Main points identified

This section summarised the most striking elements brought up by each respondent.

Interview encoding

The main themes extracted from the interviews were organised using the following codes:

HRM	human resource management considerations
TP	training policy considerations
DDC	design and development considerations
SC	support and commitment in the implementation of e-learning tools
FF	features and functionalities of e-learning tools
L	limitations in the use of e-learning tools
E	Effectiveness of e-learning tools
EWD	Effects on work shift dynamics
F	Future developments of e-learning tools
FLS	First Line Supervisor reactions to the use of e-learning tools
RT	Roles & Transformations linked to the use of e-learning tools