

Centres of connected knowledge. 21st century universities as lifelong learning providers

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Centre for teaching development and digital media

The purpose of the future university

Philosophy of higher education conference

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Centres of connected knowledge

21st century universities as lifelong learning providers

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This working paper addresses the following topics:

- higher education curriculum and teaching and learning practices
- the ontology of the university; being and becoming of the university

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Historical definition of university and instrumentations of the network of institutions

Renaut (2015) describes how universities were born within a medieval conception of a geocentric universe, where everything would rotate around a single axis (*uni-verse*). However, European universities were, since their foundation starting in the 13 and 14th centuries, included in a polycentric network (of towns). They therefore constitute a *multiverse* as contemporary astrophysicists describe macroscopic realities.

The social reality of a *concentration* of scholars and erudite persons is not reserved to the Western world and can be seen in other civilizations (Dodge, 2011). There is, however, a debate to define whether we are talking, like in France, of a corporation of students and masters constituting the university, or, like in Germany, of a rotating system of abstract knowledge. In any case, the first function of these institutions, born in between royal secular powers and catholic spiritual influences, was for academics to research and teach knowledge.

It is later that these institutions were instrumented, by the military state administration, like the Napoleonian imperial university and the *grandes écoles* (Bourdieu, 1996) in France, or the industry in the Germany of Humboldt. In the two last centuries, the United States innovated in a new form of instrumentation by capitalist society (Barrow, 1990): the

university was monetized and commoditized (Shumar, 1997). This neoliberal attitude, putting forward economic liberty, was to threaten the very European cradle in the late 20th century, especially in countries where the State holds a strong social position.

What is « knowledge » ? A perspective on continuing education in a lifelong learning society

The knowledge searched and taught at university may be useful to a career in civil society, or may not. But *what* is knowledge is defined at university (Reboul, 2010). It is within this institution that one learns what is to be learnt, how, when, where, with whom and by which means. Then, after this initial education, one is free to continue one's curriculum in the so-defined realm of knowledge by self-developing one's perceptions and conceptions as one has been taught.

Within the society of knowledge defined by Unesco in a 2005 report, as well as from the perspective of the European policy of life long education, we can however present a critical view of this idea of continuing education. Is it all about continuing in the same direction given by initial education? Coming back to university as an adult is also a mean to recycle one's definition of knowledge (therefore it is no longer a straight linear line of knowledge development but rather a loop or cycle). For example, someone who learnt humanities in the 1980ies and who would go back to university in the 2010ies, instead of continuing to learn with the same methods, would have to redefine what is to be learnt in the age of digital humanities – as well as how (with the internet), when (during connection times, wherever it is), and by which means (in terms of software such as Moodle).

The connected university within the society of knowledge: on, mediatised, distance and mobile learning

We saw that universities where proposing new forms of knowledge in a connected society. They act as centres of numeric knowledge. We can here take the example of the Massive Online Open Courses (Mooc) that redefine the activity of learning. They are short cycles (6 weeks, about 1 ECTS each), constructed with a programme-approach by a team of teachers sometimes belonging to different universities. The teaching assistants are no longer PhD students mentoring degree students but shorter cycles where motivated students who have already learnt a bit more will help the beginners in the forum.

These connected courses begin to be recognized and included within broader curricula – and we can think about the "mini-masters" for their recognition by professionals. In the

future university, we can hope for the recognition and development of full distant education with three or four years curricula, self-constructed and presented at university for a final and substantial recognition around a defended dissertation thesis giving sense to it (including the set of chosen Moocs within professional, personal and academic curriculum, past and future).

We therefore see how connected universities would play a major role in distant education as providers and recognition institutions. The very notion of mobile learning would be changed: it would not only be about a trip across different institutions – like Erasmus in Europe. It would be about geographical mobility (for trips, works and residences) free from the sources of learning (each and everyone being connected to a bunch of knowledge providers, sourced in different universities).

New boundaries and perspectives

Therefore future universities appear as centres of connected knowledge, providing mobile students with individualized curricula. The main frontiers are the languages in which knowledge is delivered – and no longer the former geographic limits.

In such a world, already concerning part of the millennium generation, both postcolonial and gender conscious, a challenge would be age-free norms allowing a young generation to teach to elders from their perspective.

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