DIGITALIZATION OF TEACHING ROMANIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN SWEDEN

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Abstract: Sweden has already had an established experience in e-learning, so that the burst of worldwide pandemic restrictions and reformulations did not emerge as a stressful surprise. Despite the fact that Sweden did not impose facemasks and plenty of restrictions common in EU, the educational system reacted promptly to the online transfer where the case was. At Lund University there is the only Romanian Chair left in Scandinavia. For more than twenty years now, there have been used on-line platforms in teaching Romanian and they cover both e-learning and m-learning. I had the opportunity to teach using all three of them: Luvit, live@lund, and Canvas. There has been a crescendo in the communicational and IT facilities secured by these platforms. Finally, Canvas came up with numerous educational resources. Students and teachers have the possibility to generate videos and audio content, to inscribe videos with their own message, and to use this platform for unmediated communication instead of Zoom, for instance. Under these technical circumstances, communicative approach, mentoring, and negotiation were more feasible and the educational input experienced a high degree of resonance and impetus.

Keywords: E-learning; educational platforms; negotiation; content generation; Swedish education; Romanian studies.

1. Introduction

At Lund University, teaching foreign languages has been practised for a long while now. In this respect, e-learning is conflated with m-learning (mobile-learning). This means that besides classical educational platforms, there is one platform that comes also with a phone application (Canvas app). Moreover, teachers are in constant contact with students on various means of communication: Skype, e-mail, WhatsApp, Facebook, personal blogs (with the help of roll blogs) and so on and so forth. I shall discuss here the ensuing advantages and disadvantages of the three e-learning platforms I worked with since 2017. The pandemic context is also considered with its unexpected developments. Mention should be made, however, that Romanian studies at Lund University accomplished a piloting mission in implementing on-line courses with some 20 years before some other humanistic specialties.

2. *Luvit* Platform

Regarding Romanian language, the first e-learning platform used was *Luvit*. This was characterized by an enhanced teacher's independence in generating a peculiar structure with modules, sub-modules and *ad libitum* fora/forums. It was easy to build the skeleton

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and to enhance it continuously, but media usage was rather limited. *Luvit* was abandoned in 2018 when *live@lund* platform was implemented.
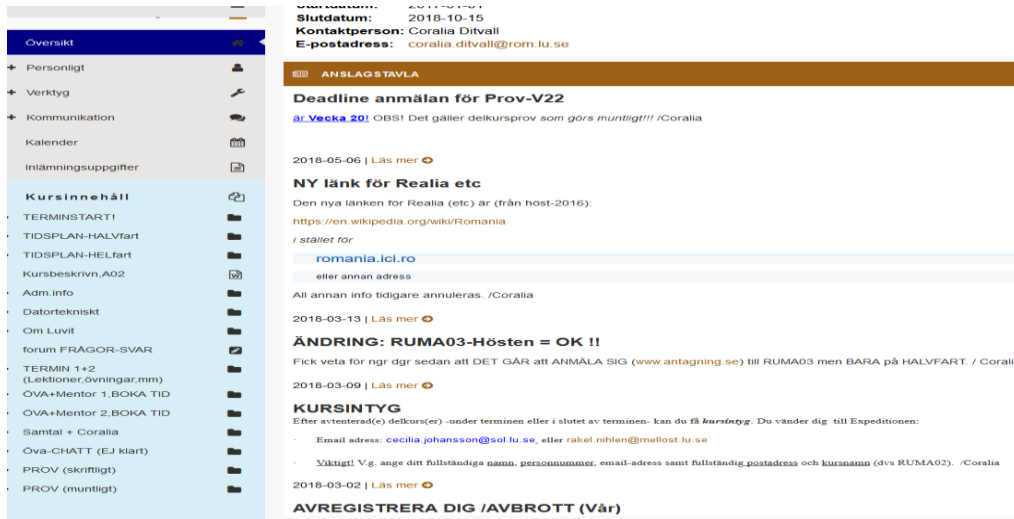

Figure 1. *Luvit* sample as it was built by Coralia Ditvall

3. live@lund platform

live@lund platform offered a superior assimilation of media options when compared to Luvit. It was also possible that the entire content for one year of study to be transferred to the platform for the following year. The Romanian language teacher worked and still works simultaneously with eight platforms, as the studies take place in *helfart* (full-time) or *halvfart* (part-time) mode. This means that students can graduate one year of study in just one semester (*semester* means "holiday" in Swedish, *tid* is the right equivalent, the basic meaning being that of "time").
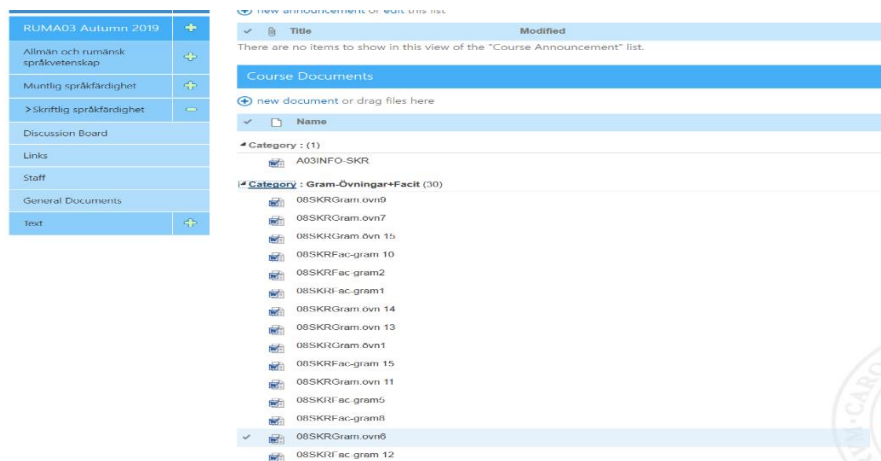
Figure 2. live@lund for the 3ʳᵈ year of study, RUMA03. It is complicated to arrange documents in numerical order
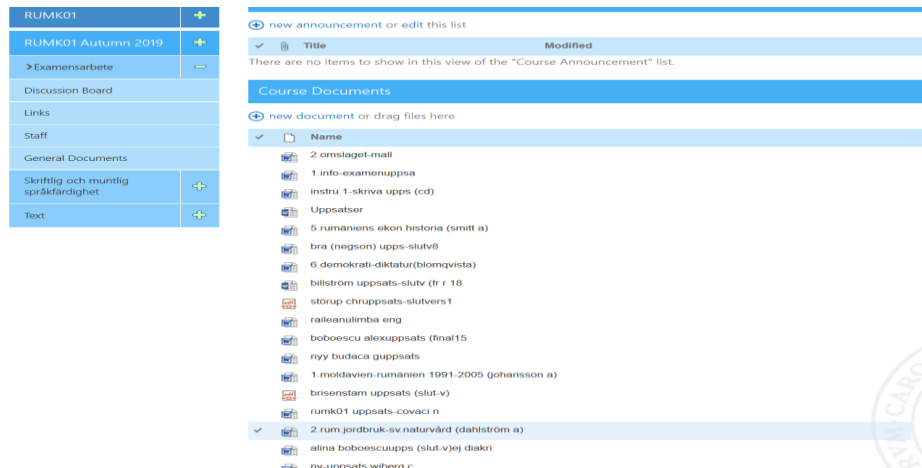

Fig.3. live@lund for the 4ᵗʰ year of study, RUMK01. It is complicated to arrange documents in alphabetical order

The disadvantage is that this platform (*live@lund*) proved rigid in terms of generating customized modules. Worse, the already uploaded documents could not be accessed directly on the platform, but they had to be downloaded first. Uploading and ordering documents was also difficult, as that required accessing special options with complicated menus. One advantage was the *Flöde* (Flow) button that allowed the user to visualize quickly every message posted on *live@lund* platforms, so that the teacher might have simultaneous access to one aspect of the various platforms. Real-time communication is crucial to the advance of knowledge and to the fast correction of possible mistakes, so that students should not consume gnoseological effort in vain.

4. Canvas platform

Since the academic year 2019-2020, at RUMA01 level, the beginners' course (linguistic level A1-A2), there was implemented *Canvas* platform as a piloting enterprise. Canvas offers a series of advantages over the previous platforms. First, the teacher has greater freedom to generate modules and to change the order of documents inside these modules. Second, documents, links, video and audio files can be uploaded easily. In addition, the uploaded materials can open right on the platform, without the need to download them to the user's personal computer.

The teacher has special sections where s/he can trigger discussions, surveys, quizzes etc. that students can then take further among them. There are options to visualize clearly who responded in due time. The platform is also accessible via an application that can be downloaded on the mobile phone. Mobile learning (m-learning) is crucial in Sweden as there are many students who commute. In the Romanian studies, it is quite common to allow students to take part at courses or even to take their exams while they are on means of transportation, while they take care of their kids, or while they are relaxing at a pub with friends. The thirst for knowledge should be incentivized

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irrespective of the less academic environment. Educators are supposed to spread university, not to barricade it. Especially that in Sweden citizens are motivated by the state to assume a life-learning strategy instead of being overtaxed for their educational efforts. In this respect, students can easily connect themselves, owing to the application, or to Zoom interaction platform. However, *Canvas* contains the necessary media for conveying the courses itself, without externalizing them to Zoom, Teams or some other software.

5. Content generation

Another interesting option on Canvas is *Studio*, wherewith teachers and students can edit and inscribe video files with text, thus making the learning process both spectacular and interactive. Educational content can be improved, but also generated with the help of Canvas itself.

> "The integration of ICT tools in the teaching and learning process would facilitate the change of the five dimensions of teaching to become more student-centered. For instance, the content may be discovered by the students under the teacher's guidance and modelling. Depending on the response of the particular group of students or individual student, interactive graphic and video materials may play on students' most commonly preferred learning style – the visual one. Also, the technical capability for manipulating the content and simulating different scenarios by altering the parameters empowers the students both in terms of experiential learning as well as reflection and assessment. Last but not least, the accessibility, interactivity and flexibility of the content creates opportunities for students to participate actively in the course decisions, including by generating their own yet relevant exercises and tests" (Ursache, Dan and Creţu 2013: 2).
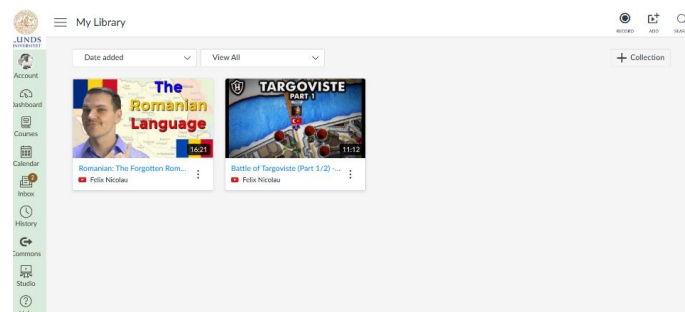

Figure 4. Studio section on *Canvas* platform

This complex requirement became possible only with the implementation of *Canvas* platform. Canvas provides plenty of technical facilities for experiential learning and content generation with the help of students.

6. The Communicative Approach

The communicative approach claims that, to the maximum extent possible, decisions should be left in the hands of the individuals involved in the educational process. It therefore sees the simultaneous existence of interculturality and pluriculturality as offering a greater range of options and therefore greater freedom (Castells & al., 1999:

75). This is possible with the introduction of Canvas as an interactive and non-hierarchical e-learning platform.

7. Mentoring

Swedish educational system encourages self-study and critical thinking. This equates to students being considered as/prompted to become adults. However, one should take heed to the fact that in Sweden the state encourages and supports those who are willing to enhance their academic training. This is the explanation for the great number of middle-aged or third-age students enrolled in various forms of learning. This aspect allows professors to transfer part of their teaching activity to students themselves.

Education is better accomplished when it is realized among peers, of course, under the supervision of an expert in the taught field: "Sharing expertise and mentoring others is an adult activity. Ultimately, the sharing of knowledge, and the training and development of other professionals, is an adult activity since it advances knowledge in a professional field" (Theodore E. Stone in Liebowitz, 2011: 22). During the 19th century in Romania, this type of mentoring was resorted to on a large scale.

At this point, it is important to mention that even during their high school interval students are trained to resort to self-study courses (*själv studie kurser*) and critical thinking. Unfortunately, genuine theoretical developments are underrated, whereas ideological aspects and political correctness are held in high esteem.

Michael Thomas highlighted another tricky facet of the online approach. With the help of mediated communication, students can benefit of the experts around the world, but without the local and localized guiding of a tutor the classroom atmosphere, even virtualized, becomes impersonal and pulverized.

> "Moreover, in a connectivist online environment, with an emphasis on informal learning and the possible individual's choice of engaging with experts outside the classroom, this critical localized influence could be lost completely. The lack of critical engagement by a tutor, on top of the diminishing level of control by the institution would also imply a high level of learner autonomy." (Thomas 2011: 64)

This comes as a suggestion in favour of mixing the old type of education with the newest technical and communicational possibilities. The result can be an improved blended educational approach that will not dispense with the successful experiments in the past.

8. Communication technology

Online education can increase the adroitness of students in the IT environment, but there are fields of knowledge where the hybrid system is more suitable. An abrupt change of paradigm could enhance certain qualities while disaffecting others. On-line education is able "to produce graduates who are better prepared to take up jobs in a knowledge-based environment characterized by a pervasive use of information and communication technology (ICT)" (Bodomo, 2010: 133). Basically, students assimilate a second qualification in this way.

On the other hand, there are so many testimonies about the longing after the non-mediated type of education. *Lundagård*, students' magazine at Lund University offered such points of views even in 2020, although in Sweden there have not been as many

restrictions as in other countries: "2021 vill vi inte längre hålla avstånd. Vi längtar efter tredimensionella umgängen. Efter månader av isolering är vi less på våra digitala bubblor, vi vill vara nära på riktigt, utan vare sig filter eller skärmar emellan. Vi skiter i gillningarna när man, i stället för en mobil, kan hålla en annan människas hand" (*Lundagård,* 2020: 25)[i].

This means that many persons involved in the educational process still realize that we live in and for a three-dimensional world. We may plunge for a while in virtual bidimensional or make-believe three-dimensional universes, but once we lose our three-dimensionality, we risk deviating from our human essence. Normally, education as a whole, apart from sectorial education, should mould enhanced natural beings, in elevated contact with nature and species, not effective and lucrative mutants.

9. Negotiation and the new subjectivity

Negotiation is lucrative especially when students are well read and free of fossilized pseudo-knowledge; ready to accept the limitations and perishability of various results or theories.

> "La négociation est une formule de travail en équipe très efficace pour susciter la motivation des apprenants, parce qu'elle met d'abord l'accent sur leur intérêt. En effet, dans une négociation, les individus sont amenés à confronter des intérêts totalement ou en partie opposés et à convenir entre eux d'une décision qui satisfasse optimalement ces intérêts. La stratégie type d'une négociation est donc une stratégie de « gagnant-gagnant » par laquelle chacun essaie de satisfaire ses intérêts en reconnaissant à l'autre partie le droit légitime de poursuivre le même but. Il en résulte une dynamique interrelationnelle où l'affirmation de soi et le compromis cherchent leur point d'équilibre dans la rencontre avec autrui. En classe, la négociation peut se dérouler entre équipes ou à l'intérieur de chaque équipe. "[ii] (Proulx, 1999: 103).

Giving free way to negotiation as educational strategy and as scientific approach simply stimulates research and heuristic questions. Especially in higher education where students are more exposed to epistemological uncertainty as pre-condition of comprehending phenomena and analyses, negotiation with the help of the digital "might develop new forms of subjectivity that accommodate states of almost perpetual liminality, or, at least, quickly shifting provisional stabilities" (Land and Bayne, 2011:69).

10. Conclusions

Sweden is a spearhead in terms of on-line education, but this fact does not represent a success in itself. This depends a lot on how the leadership of universities and professors themselves know how to implement a flexible and interactive educational process. Students are supposed to learn how to use and benefit of the vast quantity on information at their disposal on internet archives. This means that they may need the help of their teacher in order to select information and process it in order to gain access to culture. Culture is neither a chest-of-drawers filled with data, nor some algorithms to apply almost mechanically. Culture means capacity of comprehension and interpretation, old hermeneutical ideals.

In Sweden, there is the habit of having a student as opponent when one colleague defend her/his graduation paper (*kandidatuppsats*). The motivation for such a kind of board is that students have to learn how to cope with judging and assessing situations.

Although I am a great supporter of students to monitor between themselves, I find this approach far-fetched, as graduation papers are realized under the supervision of the teacher, so it would be difficult for a (young) fellow student to offer qualitative criticism and stimulating input at this level. That is why I always preferred to invite two academics to be part of the board so that they can come in advance with valuable suggestions to the research.

Overall, the Swedish educational system is very well prepared for the on-line approach and with a few improvements regarding quality and avoidance of ideology, it may prove very rewarding for students and teachers together. Romanian Studies at Lund University strove to reach these academic targets over the last four years.

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[i] "In 2021, we no longer want to keep our distance. We long for three-dimensional interactions. After months of isolation, we are tired of our digital bubbles; we want to be really close without either filters or screens in between. We shit on the likes when one, instead of a mobile, can hold another person's hand" (my translation)

[ii] "Negotiation is a very effective teamwork formula for motivating learners because it emphasizes their interest first. In fact, in a negotiation, individuals are led to confront totally or partially opposed interests and to agree among themselves on a decision that optimally satisfies these interests. The typical strategy of a negotiation is therefore a "win-win" strategy whereby each tries to satisfy his/her interests while recognizing the other party's legitimate right to pursue the same goal. The result is an inter-relational dynamic where self-assertion and compromise seek their point of balance in the encounter with others. In the classroom, negotiation can take place between teams or within each team" (my translation).