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Application of Teaching Methods and Techniques at Serbian Universities: Progress Over Time

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The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the results of a research conducted at four biggest universities in Serbia, which refer to the application of teaching methods and techniques used at universities in Serbia. The starting point for this paper is the research that came about as a consequence of a regional research project conducted by scholars of the American Council for Higher Education in 2009; it was the first time that the project participants had conducted a survey among university lecturers of the southeastern Balkans, including Serbia. It was noted on this occasion that the share of information technology, especially distance learning, in teaching is extremely low. We used those results as a starting point for a new research (two years later), this time on a sample of 153 subjects. We have concluded that, even though the situation in Serbia has slightly improved, it is still far from meeting European standards.

Keywords: teaching methods, teaching techniques, distance learning, University of Belgrade, higher education

1. Introduction

The dependence of the students' success on the quality and commitment of the teachers has very often been the topic of discussion (Stronge, Ward & Grant, 2011; Rockoff et al., 2011; Harris & Sass, 2011; Fernandez & Suarez, 2011), and so was the teachers' importance and economic value (Hanushek, 2011; Gikandi, Morrow & Davis, 2011; Gamage, Tretiakov & Crump, 2011). This is why the teachers are obligated to actively follow and participate in a learning process, and to be willing to implement modern educational methods and techniques (Pantic & Wubbels, 2010; Maitles, 2010). Education reforms increasingly include the standardization process that in turn involves raising the level of knowledge that the teachers have to possess, in connection with the very process of student teaching and learning; consequently, the efficiency and quality of the learning process increase (Jianping & Hsieh, 1999; Devas, 2011). The influence of education reforms on teaching staff and their work is the result of global changes, cultural and social influence of the environment the teachers are working in, as well as the higher education institutions (Tatto, 2006; Brereton, 2011).

Introduction of standards in the learning process is especially important and represents an integral part of a quality education system. It gives a clear view of many advantages and positive aspects (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2010) as well as shortcomings that are obvious in education.

Apart from standardization, the new vision of higher education offers an open approach and changes and has a special role in providing economic and social development of the society and social cohesion. The new tendencies are directed towards students, towards different didactical approaches and strategies, a better quality communication between students and teachers, which at the same time points to new, qualitatively different relationships and partnerships in the community (Kennedy, Hyland & Ryan, 2006). International tendencies in education point to the shift of the focus of interest from the 'teacher centered' approach towards the approach that is more 'outcome oriented'. That tendency flourished with the Bologna Process, which emphasizes student-oriented learning and the need for greater precision and clarity while designing teaching curricula, as well as their contents. It is obvious that learning outcomes are crucial for

transparency and scope of qualifications, which also contributes to application of many guidelines of the Bologna Process within European Higher Education Area.

The Bologna Process, as yet another European Union policy, is being implemented slowly in Serbia, sometimes interpreted quite frivolously, but much talked about. It is often forgotten that the Bologna Declaration does not represent a limitation to education policy. Moreover, it opens up space for the development of a national education policy, which is in accordance with the interests of the country in relation to the European Union. It means that, with appropriate partnerships, it is possible to have a more intense exchange of knowledge, teachers and students, to create more opportunities for projects, and especially important, to achieve a better match between the available teacher knowledge and the needs of a higher education institution. Therefore, competence, as well as teachers' methods and techniques at the universities in Serbia should correspond to the competencies of their colleagues at the universities in the European Union. That is exactly what can ensure the university teachers in Serbia engagement at the European Union universities, and enable the students to continue their studies and their degrees to be recognized outside of Serbia.

This paper is divided into several units. The second chapter gives a short overview of the education system in Serbia; it tries to point to the most obvious problems and limitations that the education system in Serbia will face on its way towards the European Union system. The third chapter describes the framework of the research. Since this paper is an extension of the research originally conducted in 2009, the fourth chapter presents the changes at the universities in methods and techniques used. Finally, conclusion remarks are given in the last section.

2. Higher education in Serbia

Serbia stands before a great challenge that comes out of efforts to adopt and implement the European Union education standards, with the goal of joining the common European education area. Therefore, education economy is an important factor in higher education in Serbia, even though in Serbia it most often amounts solely to discussion on sources of financing. Representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science have therefore emphasized several times in the last few years that one of the strategic goals in Serbia is to increase its highly educated population, which at the same time means an increase in financial means for higher education. That is strongly supported by the fact that among the population of 15 years and older, according to the education level and literacy, there are only 6.5% of highly educated people in Serbia (Kutlaca et al., 2011).

Serbia is one of the last countries in Southeast Europe to go through economic and social transformation (Kogan, 2011). If we analyze the investments in higher education in Serbia, it is evident that there is some discrepancy when compared to the EU countries. Between 2005 and 2010, the rate of allocation from the budget for higher education was between 0.55 and 0.67% of gross domestic product (GDP). At the same time, if we look at the rate of budget allocations for higher education in the EU countries, it varies between a minimum of 0.8 % GDP in Bulgaria and Romania and up to 2.4 % GDP in Denmark. The average rate of monetary allocations in the EU is at the level of 1.2 % GDP (Bojkovic & Ostojic, 2010).

Based on these data it is clear that Serbia will have to find additional means in order to achieve at least the lower limit of funds allocated for higher education in the EU countries. However, improvement of higher education does not exclusively mean increase in allocated funds. The teaching process at higher education institutions constantly has to be evaluated by the existing system and institutional solutions, i.e. it is necessary to increase the existing level of knowledge and availability of relevant information in the education process, as well as to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing system.

In recent years, open and distance learning have gone through three generations. The first generation was correspondence teaching where a single medium, such as a text, is used in conjunction with the postal service as a means of delivery. The next generation involved multimedia distance learning, where text-based material is supplemented by interaction with the instructors either in face-to-face settings or via technologies such as electronic mail. The third and most recent generation is interactive multimedia distance education, where heavy emphasis is placed on the use of information technology to facilitate the communication (Petrovic et al., 2011)

However, Students' learning process still relies on the traditional 'ex-cathedra' method, which treats the teacher as someone who passes knowledge, with clearly defined ways of learning – testing – and student evaluation. The learning and teaching process in Serbia is still largely based on acquiring factual knowledge, which discourages student participation in the learning process, as well as any initiative on their part (Klenha et al., 2010). Therefore it is necessary to transform the system 'as it goes along', i.e. to obligate teachers employed at higher education institutions to lifelong learning, i.e. periodical trainings and seminars, and also offer some categories of teachers a longer, more formal education, primarily in the use of foreign languages and information and communication technology and skills (Mujicic, 2011). That is the only way for teachers employed at higher education institutions in Serbia to offer the quality of learning recognized at the universities in the EU and the world, with their knowledge, methods and techniques of student teaching. That is also the only way for teachers from Serbia to be able to go abroad, to ensure acceptance of higher education degrees for students from Serbia, and to improve the learning process, making it more efficient, interesting and easier at the same time.

The aim of the paper is to point to the teaching methods and techniques used by university professors in Serbia, i.e. to the balance between the implementation and use of IT (informational technology) supported methods and techniques and traditional teaching methods and techniques. The starting point for this paper is the research that came about as a consequence of a regional research project conducted by scholars of the American Council for Higher Education in 2009. That was the first time that a survey was conducted by the project participants among university lecturers about methods and techniques used in higher education in some countries of the southeastern Balkans. Serbia is only one of the countries where the research was conducted in 2009.

As participants of that project, we used the results obtained in Serbia as a starting point for this paper, comparing the results from 2009 with the results of a repeated research from 2011. Even though the data were compared from a relatively short time distance, it was possible to draw appropriate conclusions and answers to simple hypotheses defined while writing the paper; those are only partial answers to questions that the project we are currently participating in (Infrastructure for electronically supported learning in Serbia) should answer. The results from 2009 on the application of electronically supported learning were quite worrying, so we wanted to reevaluate the situation two years later, viewing this learning method as only one of the learning methods included in the research.

3. Framework of the research

The research included the biggest state universities in Serbia, i.e. the University of Novi Sad, University of Belgrade, University of Kragujevac and University of Nis. The conducted survey was anonymous. The research strove to get a representative sample, since a large number of teachers (especially associate and full professors) during 2009 were not really willing to participate in the survey. The situation was slightly better in the 2011 survey, although there was a repeated animosity against the research.

The questionnaire used in the research consisted of two parts. The first part included questions of demographic type as well as data on university, faculty, department, research area, academic title, as well as the period of employment at the university. At the same time, it allowed for the researchers to collect information on current scientific degree of the test subjects, as well as the number of subjects and the number of students they teach.

The second part of the questionnaire was related to questions about the frequency of use of some methods and techniques in teaching. The methods that were considered at that time referred to lectures, seminar papers, workshops, case studies, field research, simulation, service learning, distance learning, team projects, group projects, research projects. The techniques that were offered in the questionnaire referred to the use of PowerPoint presentations, overhead transparencies and overhead projector, markers and board, flip chart. The subjects were also asked about the implementation of alternative methods and techniques used to stimulate the students' interest in the subject matter, considering guest professors from other departments/faculties/universities, students' critical opinion, creation of portfolios, collaborative learning.

There were 55.6% subjects from the University of Belgrade, 19.6% from the University of Novi Sad, 14.4% from Kragujevac, while 10.5% of the subjects were from the University of Nis. The duration of employment of the subjects at higher education institutions was between half a year to 40 years of service, with the mean value of 12.16, i.e. $SD=9.51$. Table 1 gives an overview of structural composite of the teachers according to their academic title. It can easily be noted that the assistants and assistant professors responded to the questionnaire in a much greater number in 2011, as they had in 2009.

Table 1. Structure of the subjects' scientific degree in 2009 and 2011

	Scientific Degree 2009				Scientific Degree 2011				
	Total	%	Belgrade	Country	Total	%	Belgrade	Country	
Assistant	75	48.70	47	25	Assistant	81	52.94	48	33
Assistant Professor	43	27.92	32	11	Assistant Professor	38	24.84	22	16
Associate Professor	20	12.99	11	9	Associate Professor	17	11.11	7	10
Full Professor	16	10.39	7	9	Full Professor	17	11.11	8	9
Total	154	100.0	100	54	Total	153	100.0	85	68

Table 2. Teachers' fields of expertise in 2009 and 2011

	Field of Expertise 2009				Field of Expertise 2011				
	Total	%	Belgrade	Country	Total	%	Belgrade	Country	
Social Sciences	136	87.18	83	53	Social Sciences	93	60.78	33	60
Technical Sciences	15	9.62	15	0	Technical Sciences	24	15.69	21	3
Natural Sciences	5	3.21	4	1	Natural Sciences	9	5.88	4	5
Medical Sciences	-	-	-	-	Medical Sciences	27	17.65	27	0
Total	156	100.00	102	54	Total	153	100.00	85	68

From the aspect of the science they belong to, the structure of the subjects is presented in Table 2. It can easily be noted that the sample collected in 2011 is more diverse than the one from 2009, and that there are fewer teachers from natural, technical and medical sciences; still, the percentage of subjects willing to participate in the survey is higher at the University of Belgrade than at the other universities in the country.

4. Results of the comparison

As it has been mentioned, the starting point for this paper is the research conducted in 2009. After the repeated survey two years later, the goal of our research was to determine:

- If there had been any changes in the structure of methods and techniques that higher education teachers in Serbia use,
- If the share of IT-supported teaching methods and techniques increased in Serbia.

The use of IT-supported technologies is one of the basic skills that higher education teachers nowadays should possess. It is certainly necessary because, among other things, it enables a transfer of knowledge outside traditionally established boundaries as well as a regular communication with students that is not limited by time or place. One of the basic assumptions of comparative analysis is that teachers at higher education institutions use IT-supported teaching methods and techniques to a higher degree in comparison with two years before. The frequency of use of teaching methods in 2009 and 2011 is shown in Table 3.

Data analysis shows that there was a slight improvement in 2011 in the use of information and communication technology. While in 2009 only 1.64 % of teachers used distance learning as a teaching method, the percentage went up to 7.84% in 2011.

The frequency of use of teaching techniques in 2009 and 2011 is shown in Table 4. We can note that the percentage of teachers who use PowerPoint presentation as a teaching technique has increased as well. Table 5 presents the frequency of use of alternative teaching methods and techniques.

Since the results obtained in 2009 on the application of IT-supported learning were worrying, we can conclude that, even though it is still unsatisfactory, the situation has slightly improved. In the last two years some faculties have introduced the distance learning system, so this teaching method is slowly entering Serbia as well. The same goes for simulation and research as teaching methods; those include knowledge of information and communication technologies. It can also be seen that the percentage of teachers who use PowerPoint presentations as a concept to prepare their lectures has increased.

Table 3. Comparing the use of teaching methods in 2009 and 2011

	Teaching methods 2009					TOTAL (%)
	Never	Occasionally	More than occasionally, but not so often	Often	Very often/ Always	
Giving lectures	0	1.96	21.57	6.86	69.61	100
Essay writing	7.61	27.17	5.43	38.04	21.74	100
Critical thinking skills in the classroom	33.33	20.59	27.45	4.9	13.73	100
Case studies	15.38	7.69	15.38	17.95	43.59	100
Outdoor lecturing	78.48	15.19	2.53	2.53	1.27	100
Experimental work or simulation of real problem	31.37	20.59	17.65	26.47	3.92	100
Service Learning	72.09	12.79	13.95	1.16	0	100
Distance learning	75.41	8.2	8.2	6.56	1.64	100
Team projects	20.69	9.2	25.29	20.69	24.14	100
Group Projects and/or team - building	23.81	28.57	19.05	28.57	0	100
Research projects	25.74	26.73	13.86	24.75	8.91	100

	Teaching methods 2011					TOTAL (%)
	Never	Occasionally	More than occasionally, but not so often	Often	Very often/ Always	
Giving lectures	1.96	5.88	9.8	17.65	64.71	100
Essay writing	2.61	11.76	15.69	30.07	39.87	100
Critical thinking skills in the classroom	25.49	26.8	17.65	15.69	14.38	100
Case studies	22.22	20.92	11.11	25.49	20.26	100
Outdoor lecturing	56.86	20.92	11.76	3.92	6.54	100
Experimental work or simulation of real problem	38.56	23.53	13.07	13.07	11.76	100
Service Learning	71.24	18.3	1.31	5.88	3.27	100
Distance learning	49.02	20.92	11.11	11.11	7.84	100
Team projects	23.53	22.88	13.73	19.61	20.26	100
Group Projects and/or team - building	40.52	22.22	12.42	13.73	11.11	100
Research projects	31.37	24.18	20.92	16.99	6.54	100

Table 4. Comparing the use of teaching techniques in 2009 and 2011

Teaching techniques 2009						
	Never	Occasionally	More than occasionally, but not so often	Often	Very often/ Always	TOTAL (%)
PowerPoint presentation	13.27	8.16	12.24	24.49	41.84	100
Graphic displays	43.82	26.97	19.10	5.62	4.49	100
Blackboard and marker	38.66	15.13	4.20	7.56	34.45	100
Flip chart	53.47	10.89	22.77	8.91	3.96	100

Teaching techniques 2011						
	Never	Occasionally	More than occasionally, but not so often	Often	Very often/ Always	TOTAL (%)
PowerPoint presentation	6.54	12.42	5.88	16.99	58.17	100
Graphic displays	67.97	12.42	15.69	1.31	2.61	100
Blackboard and marker	18.30	13.73	21.57	19.61	26.80	100
Flip chart	62.09	13.73	17.65	3.92	2.61	100

Table 5. Comparing the use of alternative teaching methods and techniques in 2009 and 2011

Alternative methods and techniques 2009						
	Never	Occasionally	More than occasionally, but not so often	Often	Very often/ Always	TOTAL (%)
Guest lectures	30.92	40.79	15.13	7.24	5.92	100
Critical thinking skills in the classroom	0.00	0.66	4.64	30.46	64.24	100
Portfolio assessments	53.91	17.39	8.70	17.39	2.61	100
Collaborative learning modules	22.54	20.42	22.54	17.61	16.90	100

Alternative methods and techniques 2011						
	Never	Occasionally	More than occasionally, but not so often	Often	Very often/ Always	TOTAL (%)
Guest lectures	36.60	39.87	9.15	11.11	3.27	100
Critical thinking skills in the classroom	2.61	2.61	9.15	27.45	58.17	100
Portfolio assessments	54.25	26.14	7.19	7.19	5.23	100
Collaborative learning modules	33.33	26.14	14.38	16.99	9.15	100

Conclusion

The comparison of the research conducted in 2009 and 2011 has led us to certain conclusions. We think that students' success and achievements depend on the teachers' competence, but also on their ability to implement modern teaching methods and techniques. A lecturer (professor) that continuously prepares for teaching, tries to entertain students, but also continuously learns himself and improves his knowledge is considered a quality professor. Teachers' professional development is essential for the improvement of teachers' quality (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). The results of a research on the influence of professional development on the key aspect of teacher quality showed that teachers exhibit a significant growth in knowledge after the training (Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010).

We believe that the success of students' learning process depends on teachers' familiarity with teaching methods and techniques, and their readiness to implement modern teaching methods and techniques. Knowledge of a foreign language and use of information and communication technologies is often an obstacle for teachers to continuously follow modern trends in the transfer of knowledge at the university. However, knowledge of teaching methods and techniques is not sufficient. It also requires willingness and motivation by teachers to incorporate them into the teaching process. Only competent and educated teachers are an intellectual asset of a university. For such a teacher the notion of 'mobility' is not unfamiliar, since they are trained to teach at any leading university, and, what is more important, to represent their university as best as possible at the world market. This statement is extremely important for students as well, since recognized universities at the world level at the same time mean recognized diplomas for students who graduated in Serbia. The research discovered that both in 2009 and 2011 the teachers from the universities in Novi Sad and Belgrade were more willing to answer the questionnaire. It can be assumed that it comes as a consequence of the fact that these two universities operate in economically developed municipalities in Serbia. Also, the University of Belgrade is the biggest university in Serbia, so, since it is located in the capital of Serbia, it has the privilege of receiving the largest financial support from the Ministry of Science and Education due to its 100-year-long tradition and reputation in Southeastern Europe.

We have also noticed that the 'younger' generation of university teachers is much more willing to incorporate into their portfolio skills and all new methods and techniques enabled by information and communication technologies. The distance learning concept is the best representative of methods based on application of information-communication technologies, which should enable students who are restricted by geographical distance or financial means and are unable to physically be present at classes and practices in university classrooms to study.

The main contribution of this paper is that it highlights the fact that the success of the education process depends on university teachers' competency, which also refers to their specific professional competence, as well as methods and techniques they are ready to implement into the student teaching process. It means teachers' willingness and readiness to be included into this type of teaching. By all means, attention should be paid to teachers who have decades-long pedagogical and professional experience, but who have not undergone continuous education, so they need additional training in order to adjust to the demands and needs of learning more easily. Distance learning is a method that has a potential to increase the literacy levels in Serbia, since it enables education and some types of learning for people who live outside urban centers, or groups of people who, due to other limitations, are not able to be physically present in university classrooms. Even though the situation in Serbia has slightly improved, it is still far from being in a position to meet European standards.

The paper also addresses the needs for additional investments into IT infrastructure. Improvement of higher education process is one of the main tasks for every higher education institution and every Government; therefore, monitoring the influence of teaching methods and techniques at the universities in Serbia will be one of the challenges for us in the future as well.

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