

Enterprising Institutions: Creating Relevancy for Industry

Interviewer: Lyn Smith

Lyn: As an academic working in the area of e-learning, could you tell us a bit about how you've come to be involved so intimately with industry in e-learning as a relationship?

Martin: I can understand that people raise the question why academics in fact are interested in the issue being relevant for industry. Well, it's quite easy because the research area we are working on in our department is e-learning, the bow for higher education, university level and higher professional education. Then all of a sudden you are confronted with an audience that is really rather competency oriented and then your traditional ways of teaching and learning don't work anymore. And then you need, in fact, new solutions.

Lyn: OK, how do you know it works?

Martin: How do you know it works? Well, the thing is the competencies of students have to be at the real focus, in fact, of your teaching and learning experience. So what we try to do is, by using e-learning, in fact, bring in authentic learning arrangements to a teaching and learning situation. So, the nice idea is that right from the start, students see the reality they will be working for in the future. And that's also the thing industry really likes.

Lyn: Can you give us an example of that?

Martin: Oh, there are plenty of examples, although you still *have* to understand that the numbers of fantastic examples are still limited because traditional institutes still have to change towards these new models, but a perfect example is, for instance, a higher education institute in Tilburg in the Netherlands, where the school itself owns a hotel, two restaurants, tourist agencies, a bakery and so on. And all the students, in relation to their teaching and learning experience, also work, in fact, in these real life companies. The same happens also, for instance, in Ecuador then, even at university level and also for higher professional education, where the institute owns 20 companies on the campus of the university and the higher education institute, and all the students work there. It's a double solution, it's a solution to have a relevant curriculum for industry, but also help poorer students earn some money to, in fact pay, for their education. Oh, you can do part of it face-to-face of course but the real thing is that the documenting of all the work you do is also very important. In the traditional model you had an evaluation at the end of the process, now in those authentic work situations, imagine for instance teacher training, OK, the student is already working in a school, well they video-tape their own experience, they put them online, they are being assessed by their peers, it stays there as a documentation, as a proof in fact of their competency. So, that's why you need, in fact, new kinds of e-learning environments that help you document the process, to track the process and so on. And we call this the e-portfolio movement in higher education.

Lyn: How do you help institutions to make that shift though? It seems to be a big conceptual shift to start thinking that way.

Martin: OK, the big change for the institutions is, well, there are two ways. The first one is the big quality push of politicians. They say 'OK this higher education, it costs a lot of money, it has to be high quality, there must be relevance for the industry'. But also the

industry, and there we talk about profit organisations, but also non-profit organisations, they are also pushing higher education towards competency-based education, and they really want that the students that arrive in their companies, in their organisations, in the hospitals and the schools, are actually able to do things. So it's in fact the quality control that pushes institutions to look for new models, new approaches.

Lyn: What are some of the traps in the system for moving that way for institutions?

Martin: OK, there are some traps, there can be problems, for institutions if you adopt this model of the virtual companies, the micro-businesses you start up in a school, that it still has to be education and training, so if you only focus on the limited set of professional skills and competencies you want to develop, there is a danger that you train people for a certain existing 'nowadays' company organisation or institute. You really have to educate them also, critical attitudes, in fact they have to look at the future of their job. So don't in fact limit everything, don't downgrade, in fact, the higher education toward only training.

Lyn: Can you give us another example of another successful way that this has worked?

Martin: Successful things, you can have a big variety. In fact the nice thing that you see, especially in Europe, it already starts in primary schools where they have little businesses starting up selling soap, selling fruit, selling biscuits and so on. And then it evolves towards secondary education and higher education and that's quite a nice idea, in that you'll, in fact, develop inside the curriculum, integrated in the school life and school activities, a kind of atmosphere of business, it's a part of your life, being active, taking initiative, taking responsibility for your future professional life is being developed right from the start when you're in a school career. So we have that already I think in the Netherlands, in France, in UK, about 25,000 micro-businesses in primary schools. It's difficult to trace them because they are small-level initiatives. The same happens in secondary schools especially when you have an economics-oriented program or a language-oriented program. Again there are thousands of them and they start and re-start every year. But a very nice example is, for instance, in a school where in their seventh year, they simply stopped teaching. And all the kids, in one year, with their own money, by the way, so in fact they make shares and go to a bank to get a loan, and with those shares they start a business in a shop, in one of the very nice streets in the city. And they run with that money, with 25 students, they run that shop for a whole year. This replaces mathematics, language, moral education, legal education and so on. And this was a solution, not only to be relevant for industry, but also to become relevant for the kids. Because they had problems with drop-outs, early school leavers, kids disliking, in fact, school. So there are a whole variety of examples already at lower educational levels too and I think that's the important thing. Start at the early level and then build it up to higher professional education and university level.

Lyn: It would seem, too, that industry has a responsibility in there as well. There is an aspect of partnership, is there?

Martin: There are many examples in which industry is part, in fact, of the game. For instance, the data you use to run a business, for instance a virtual company, there is a huge world-wide network of virtual companies. None yet in New Zealand, but there are already I think 240 in Australia. Well the data they use come from industry, and industry really likes them to use these data because students get to know those companies, the

profile of those companies, maybe that's the company they want to work for in the future. Then you have others where students already started working in that company and then they come, a little bit, interns in the company, they participate in a peripheral way, and those companies again like this idea, because those students are a little bit helpful and sometimes critical and so on. The students earn a little bit of money. There is no abuse there of students because there is a lot of investment by the industry there too. But that is a more difficult model, because there you easily see that education is being replaced more and more by the standard training unique to the job in that company. So it's good to have a continuous relationship also with the institute.

Lyn: *Can you tell me a little bit about what would be involved in starting up this approach and these elements?*

Martin: You have to understand that starting this up is not easy. The big problem is that the existing organisational structure of the existing institutes are a little bit counter-productive as to working in this way, and especially the curriculum structure. We still have a curriculum structure where you have specific topics, subjects with specialist teachers. This is impossible to work in that way, if you want to become, well, a virtual company or start up these businesses in schools, so you have to re-think the curriculum. And there is one first condition that, it's not a job for a single, isolated teacher or expert or (?) person. No, it's something that the school or the institute as a whole has to adopt as an idea and it has first of all to re-think their curriculum. And that's part of the key, especially focused on how to develop a competency-based curriculum where instead of those subjects like geography and mathematics and accounting, you rather look at tasks that students can take up, can solve can execute in view of a clear list of objectives that then we call competencies. And you have general competencies that are really relevant in all kinds of professions, so there is the educational part of it. And then you have more specific professional competencies. And this re-thinking of the curriculum, with a clear balance between the task you set for the student, the competencies you want to pursue and then the prior knowledge base you still have to develop in your students, don't understand me wrong, it's not a case of putting students immediately in a bakery. No, you still have to give them the basics of the knowledge, the skills, the attitudes, but they are being developed in more authentic learning arrangements. So the big job for institutes is to sit together with all the staff, the teaching staff, the support staff to first of all re-think the curriculum and then get in touch in fact with industry, companies, shops in the neighbourhood, or maybe start up a partnership with a company and then try to, well small-scale for instance in a first year program or in a last year program.

The examples I know for instance in Canada they especially start in the third year. And they start up with incubation centres, and they gradually go back in the curriculum structure to the second year and the first year. But it's a big challenge, but it's challenging and fun too.

A big challenge next to developing a new curriculum structure and then the partnership with industry is also the assessment. We used to assess students especially at the end of the process. Now what happens here, in this situation, is that the actual performance of students during the process is mostly now the base for the assessment. So that's why we move towards more portfolio-oriented evaluation in which the performance is documented with documents with witnessing of other stakeholders in the companies, the tutoring people, maybe also peers OK. And next to that, you still can have your traditional assessment of the knowledge base.

Lyn: *What makes this education good education?*

Martin: It's a question being raised all the time about 'is this still quality education and training?' And then I would say this is a very right question to ask. So our proposition would be that, next to setting up these new kinds of virtual companies, micro-businesses, incubation centres in the school environment, that next to that, for instance research institutes would start up a parallel, in fact, research activity, to back up in fact, this process. Also in view of a kind of in built quality control, quality assurance thing, and also it will help to give credibility to the new initiatives and help to answer also the big questions that people might raise in society.