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COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

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Abstract

The innovative pedagogy is enhanced by learning and teaching or training programmes focused on social innovation and social entrepreneurship. In this context, the academic capacity building represents a fundamental element. This paper aims to present a framework of developmental traditions that have a great influence on collective learning in order to be used as a way to boost social innovation. It shows the literature that focuses on collaborative learning and how it can be used as an instrument to boost social innovation. The methodology used to carry out the research is both bibliographic – opting here to study the work of specialists in the field, authors from Romania and abroad, and empirical – thus the theoretical approach is supported through relevant case studies from the European context and conclusions. The present and future generations will make a difference in the society they live in, with the help of the academic learning and teaching courses, when more institutions oriented on education take into consideration this type of development process. The results of this paper will show that social media tools have an important role in this context, therefore educational institutions should build spaces adapted for community learning, by using platforms and fields to which students, local communities, different stakeholders, public and private organizations have access and through which they can have the possibility to organize meetings of common interest regarding the education issue. We have identified that although technology is a main element in all life's activities, there should also be taken into consideration the capability and willingness of individuals and institutions to cooperate and innovate, not only by electronic means, but also through traditional ways of participating in the development process of a society.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, social innovation, social entrepreneurship, education, digital era.

1 INTRODUCTION

Education has always been in a continuously developmental process. This process emphasizes the importance that education has regarding solutions for understanding and solving social, cultural, politic, economic and environmental issues, therefore problems regarding all aspects of life. Education has thus an essential role in developing knowledge and intellectual skills, but also in creating proper attitudes, values and soft skills among learners. Through improving education, states can ease national and international cooperation and support social innovation for creating more inclusive, sustainable and safe environments and more open-minded, peaceful and fair citizens [1].

The education today is focusing on training individuals, starting from an early age and during the course of life, on matters such as skills, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours needed in order to be well-informed citizens, involved in the social life and empathetic with the rest of the population. For this purpose to be carried out, it is necessary that education is made through collaboration, shared learning, cooperation and also collective responses and these latter can increase by growing the interconnectedness. In this regard, information and communication technologies (ICT) and social media play an essential role [1].

Therefore, in order to better understand the way in which collaborative learning can be used as an instrument for enhancing social innovation, we found it necessary to define the two concepts and the connection between them.

Collaborative learning is constituted by a situation in which interactions among individuals take place in various forms, this leading to learning tools [2]. In other words, collaborative learning is represented by “a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together” [2]. Thus, this definition can be exemplified by a couple of people that learn to solve common problems through an intensive synchronization. It can also be explained by student groups that use the e-mail during a semester or a year course for learning purposes or even by groups of professionals that have the aim of developing a particular culture across generations [2].

It can therefore be understood the fact that a collaborative learning situation is, in a way, a social contract between the learners or between the learners and the instructors – in this case, it is a contract of didactic type [2].

The concept of social innovation is stimulating individuals to create and put into practice new ideas and solutions on the way in which a society can deal with various challenges [3], the education system quality being one of them and a very important one. In other words, social innovation is focused on increasing the welfare of individuals and communities, whether they are consumers or producers [4] of the public services.

There is thus a systemic connection between collaborative learning and social innovation. This link can be supported through social learning which is understood as a change in understanding of individuals, being made across wider social units or communities of practice. It can be made possible through social interactions that occur between the parties of the process within social networks or through direct interaction or by using social media [5].

Today we live in a digital era therefore education instructors have a very important role in helping individuals achieve the ability to innovate and implement new innovations [6]. In the public sector, most innovations have, in their composition, an ICT element which has a great importance by the fact that information and the possibility of communicating it are fundamental for offering public services, putting into motion public policies and developing projects and programs [6]. Thus, we can understand that ICT has an innovative potential which is determined by the fact that they have “the ability to process big data and to communicate beyond the temporal, functional and geographic borders” [7].

By using social media along with their collective, connected and creative characteristics, the learning process emphasizes the transformation of individuals’ way of being into a more flexible, fluid and rapid one [8]. Hence, by using social media for collaborative learning, individuals (and especially the younger generations) tend to increase their multitasking abilities, relying more and more on carrying out activities in a digital way and also being able to make commitments [9]. Social autonomy is another characteristic of these technologies, young individuals of today being used to have a greater control over what, where, when and how they achieve certain actions. Social media users are therefore more able to organize themselves and to get the services they need [8].

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this research paper can be structured into two parts. The bibliographic one resulted from a synthesis of the literature on the various hypotheses of the connection between collaborative learning and social innovation and their impact on the educational field. The empirical part aimed at designing an example based on an experience from a European country (namely Romania), referring here to supporting the connection between collaborative learning and social innovation through distance learning programs of The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA) in Bucharest, Romania.

The novelty of this paper resides in the fact that the interaction between collaborative learning and social innovation is not researched at a great level when it comes to education institutions of the Romanian public sector. Therefore, this emphasizes the importance of carrying out more research activities on this topic.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The processes of internationalizing the values of the European administrative space have begun to be constituted as a process of promoting social innovation, especially of administrative nature [10]. At the same time, administrative innovation becomes, in turn, a component of the administrative convergence [11].

In many democratic states across the world of today, social innovation is seen as the main objective in order to reach development of the human resource. For this purpose and not only, a strategic correspondence is beginning to take place in the partnership between collaborative learning and social innovation [12]. The connection between the two concepts helps in developing skills for individuals that, by using social media and ICT, begin to ask for high quality services from the institutions that provide educational services to them [12].

“Social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations” [13]. We can understand, just by defining the concept of social innovation, that it is strongly linked to the collaborative learning process, as though they both affect social interactions, especially when referring to the education field.

Specialists in the field consider the learning process as being a collaborative one given the fact that it provides a dynamic knowledge achievement experience. Experts providing the education services have to develop a proper environment through which they can give more power to learners and also create structures of social nature that will meet their needs and requirements. To have a collaborative experience means, therefore, to closely work with one or more learners, having the purpose to achieve a mutual objective, which has as basis more various objectives, set before the learning process [14].

“Social innovation is an initiative, product, process or program that profoundly changes the basic routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of any social system. Successful social innovations have durability and broad impact” [15]. The successful examples of social innovation are emphasizing the fact that collaboration, in all activities of life (this including the education field), is a very fundamental part of actual effects of the innovation process [16].

“Social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social” [17]. In this regard, collaborative learning is understood as a normal step in the successful process of implementing innovative educational ideas. Furthermore, collaboration is seen as an essential element for the ideas’ development, prototype and pilot-making phase [18].

4 CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF INTERACTION BETWEEN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND SOCIAL INNOVATION

In this section of the paper, we want to present a conceptual model of the interaction between the two concepts discussed, interaction that takes place through social learning and by using social media. This model is mainly a scheme with dual sense that presents the cause-to-effect implications of the interaction mentioned above.

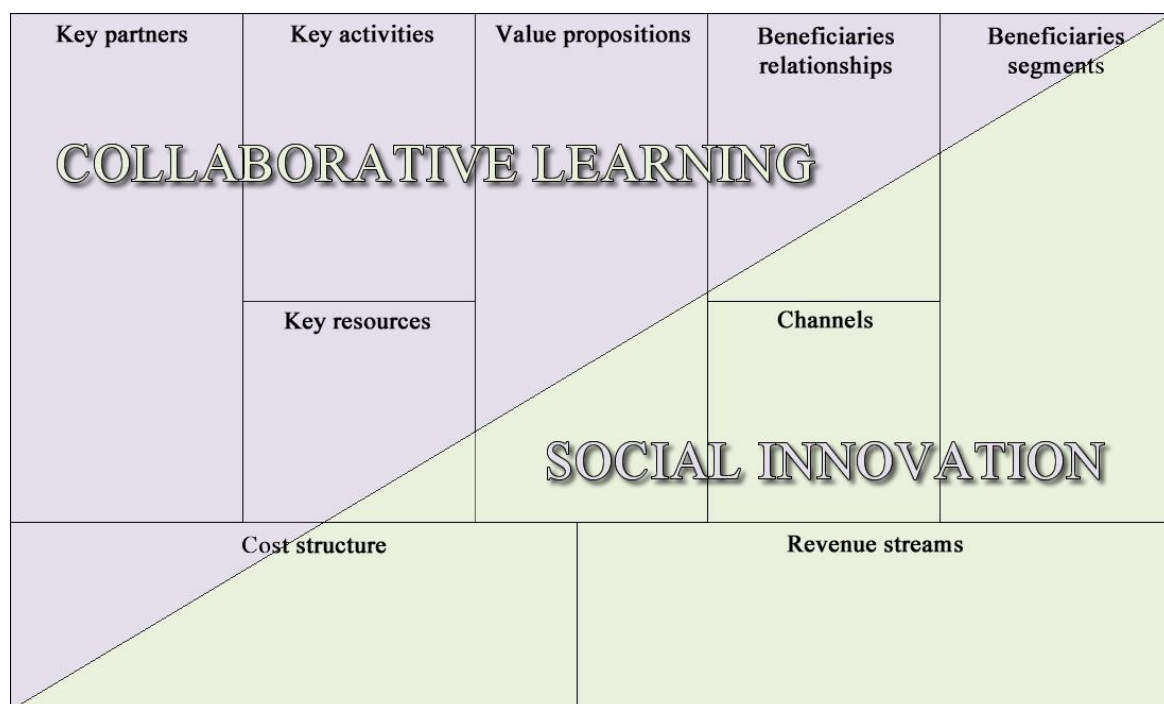


Figure 1. Model of interaction between collaborative learning and social innovation [19]

Therefore, in the section of **value proposition**, the important element is what are the effects generated by the collective learning and social innovation, and also the beneficiaries of these actions. It emphasizes the importance of finding a solution for needs and requirements of the educational

services' beneficiaries. In other words, it is about the services provided. In this case, the technology through which the services get to the beneficiaries has not such a greater impact. The important aspect is to solve their problems or needs.

The next important thing of the model is focusing on the **beneficiaries segments** of the interaction between collaborative learning and social innovation. It is important to know who they are and why do they want those products or services resulted through this interaction.

The **channels** through which the products or services created in the value proposition section get to the beneficiaries are important too, and in the case of collaborative learning interacting with social innovation, we have said in this paper that social media is one of them. Therefore, new technologies can be of great help, making the distribution process easier, cheaper and faster.

The **beneficiaries relationships** section is correlated to the other above mentioned sections. It is focused on the ways of involving people in the interaction process, of keeping them satisfied and motivated and helping them grow. The digital relationships are different from the physical ones.

Revenue streams section refers to the way in which the education institutions or the social innovations get benefits (in the private sector, mainly economical ones) from offering the products or services to the beneficiaries segments. It is about the value that the beneficiaries are in a way paying for (scholar taxes, training courses costs etc.).

The section of the **key resources** refers to the essential assets that are necessary in order to make the interaction model work properly. These resources can be financial, physical, intellectual, but the most important are the ones of human nature.

It is also important who are the **key partners** and providers of the collaborative learning and social innovation processes that are needed to make the interaction model work. In this respect, the focus is also on the resources acquired from them and the activities that they carry out.

The **key activities** consist in the most important things that the providers of education and social innovation need to do in order to make the model well-function. They can be centred on problem solving, production of social innovation or even supply chain management.

The left side of the model adds up to the **cost** of the **structure**, which is not represented only by the evident costs, such as buildings, human resource or materials used, but also by the costs of operating the whole interaction model.

Moreover, authors in the field propose the so called FAL model for which, beside the collaborative learning concept, the social accountability is also taken into account because, for this model, the accountability element is of great value due to its public features. This model is represented through the connection between three essential processes for social innovation: accountability, learning and feedback and it was established by the European Union, in the basis of the research project "Learning from Innovation in Public Sector Environments (LIPSE) [20]" [21]. This model is also relevant for this section as for it has the design that is necessary to follow a new approach in which the education process is focused on innovation, approach of which institutions of higher education should be most interested in [21].

5 HOW DOES ROMANIA SUPPORT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING AND SOCIAL INNOVATION?

In this section, we chose to present how our country contributes to supporting the connection between collaborative learning and social innovation in higher education. This study case is focused on our university, The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), in Bucharest, and how this education institution of the public sector supports this connection through distance learning programs. Throughout this case study, we will refer to the elements that constituted the conceptual model of interaction between collaborative learning and social innovation, previously described in this paper, in order to emphasize the level of involvement of SNSPA in strengthening the relationships between the academic body and the beneficiaries of the services it provides – its students.

Established in 1991 as a university for governing and training of specialists in the most fundamental areas of the society, The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration represents a reference point in the academic field of Romania [22].

SNSPA's commitment towards education makes this institution to be distinguished among all the profile high education public institutions and emphasizes its purpose, namely to find innovative solutions to problems of today of national, regional and even international level. The university offers various study programs, at all university training cycles and forms, the entire structure being compatible with the Bologna program [22].

The mission of The National University of Political Studies and Public Administration is represented by the process of efficiently and constructively combining the academic side (the education side) and the features of the scientific research which is particular to the university's areas of activity [23].

Moreover, its purpose is oriented towards three main actions: a) to create and share research results of international relevance, b) to form leaders for both the public sector and private sector and c) to produce social change and educational innovation [23]. By carrying out these actions and achieving its main objective, SNSPA is thus emphasizing the **value proposition**, by generating effects through its actions and offering of services and by practically defining who the beneficiaries are – the students and, implicitly, the whole civil society. In this case are also presented the **beneficiaries** segments of the interaction between the university and the interested parties, which can be individuals from both the public and the private sectors.

As a public institution of education, we can understand that SNSPA is very oriented on social innovation and the role of social innovator that the university assumed was, from the very beginning of its establishment, a key description element of the programmatic documents that supported the strategic development of the university [23].

Networking with citizens and especially students is a very important aspect for SNSPA, this emphasizing the relevance and significance of supporting and making use of the connection between collaborative learning and social innovation, by using **channels** via which the educational services can be distributed to beneficiaries of the learning process (we will give some examples below).

In order to achieve good and efficient **beneficiaries relationships**, SNSPA has also established numerous scientific research centres [24] and groups focused mainly on the organization of activities of research, development, consultancy and expertise in the fields that the university is distributed into, the students being able to be volunteer members, thus having the possibility to be active citizens, to be involved in the interaction process, these aspects motivating them and helping not only their professional growth, but also the personal one as for being part of the carrying out of these activities, they will learn how to be good and efficient individuals, focused on common goals and learning through collaboration.

As an example, we can refer to the year of 2012 when SNSPA established The UNESCO Chair for Policies in Science and Innovation, with the aim of developing and consolidating education and research activities from the areas of politics, innovation management and science. This Chair provides consultancy and assistance for the formulation and evaluation of public policies created for processes of research and development and also innovation. It also observes the evolutions and trends of the science and technology fields and of the innovation systems, generating forthcoming analyses and offering recommendations for the strategic decision making process [25].

Apart from the lessons held by specialised professors in physical classrooms, SNSPA provides, for the students of distance learning programs (and the entire academic community of SNSPA), a digital platform as a mechanism of free access to electronic data bases of international use and relevance. Therefore, through the e-nformation platform [26] (Project co-funded by the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation, through the Capacities Program, which can be seen as a digital **channel** through which the process of interaction can take place) established by the Anelis Plus Association (Association of Universities, Research and Development Institutes and Central University Libraries of Romania; this would be a **key partner** of SNSPA), the interested parties of the education process can have access to articles from scientific journals provided to the following data base platforms: Cambridge Journals, EBSCO (Academic Search Complete), Oxford Journals, ProQuest CENTRAL, ELSEVIER ScienceDirect, SPRINGER Springerlink, SAGE Journals, Wiley Online Library. Moreover, SNSPA also provides free access to two well-known bibliographic and bibliometric databases: Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge and Elsevier SCOPUS [27]. These data bases can be understood, according to the conceptual model of interaction between collaborative learning and social innovation, as **key resources** that are necessary in order for the model to function (we must also mention the administrators as human resources and the articles found on these platforms as intellectual ones).

The **cost structure** is covered by Anelis Plus Association and the **revenue streams** of the association are represented by the financial benefits that it gets from collaborating with the university, and for the university, they are constituted by the taxes annually paid by students and, apart from the economical ones, we can also mention the influence and image growth of the institution among the other top public education institutions in the country. The **key activities** in this context are represented by all the activities that the university carries out in order to keep alive the collaboration with the association providing access to the data bases mentioned above.

For a better understanding of the support that SNSPA provides for the connection between collaborative learning and social innovation, we will next present the case of administrative sciences domain, as this is the area of our faculty, which is the Faculty of Public Administration (FAP). The same model of interaction between collaborative learning and social innovation can be used in this case as well.

This faculty is best described by the following three keywords: professionalism, innovation and talent, as for it provides support for every student in order to become an active member of a community that puts value on competition, but also thinks of teamwork as being important (**value proposition**). The main objective of the faculty is to form and train current and also future civil servants from the public administration's central and local level [28] (**beneficiaries segments**).

The Faculty of Public Administration has an online platform called "apcampus [29]" (**channel**) which is a project (Inovativadmin project – "Curricular development and increase of relevance of study programs in the public administration through innovative methods of blended learning and correlation with the labor market POSDRU 156/1.2/G/133208") co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007-2013 (**key partner**: EU). On this website, the academic community of SNSPA (**key human resource**) can post materials for courses of all higher education levels – until now there are published only materials for bachelor and master programs. It also presents a notice board section for presenting information about the events that will take place in the faculty, for grades and all data related to the faculty's activities (**key resources**).

The platform can also give to the faculty's students the possibility to enroll to online courses, as it is for example the case for the course offering essential information on how to properly use the Moodle platform [30]. It can also give the opportunity to participate in campaigns, such as if for example the Campaign "Learn with Modern Methods!" which aims at promoting, among students of the faculty, the benefits of blended learning methods versus the traditional face-to-face learning methods [31] (**beneficiaries relationships**).

The Council of the faculty also publishes its meetings on the platform and for each member of the Council, there has been made a profile which describes the courses they are currently teaching in the faculty, with the possibility to access the materials uploaded for each course [32] (**key activities**). Moreover, for each course, the students and the professor have the possibility to have a news forum – where relevant information on the course can be posted, and an online activity of communication boosting the cooperation between professor and students (**beneficiaries relationships**), this emphasizing once more the collaborative learning aspect to which SNSPA gives such great importance.

The website also provides the possibility of communicating on a general blog [33], where the students can post different question or information and they can receive answers from either the professors or the administrators of the platform (**beneficiaries relationships**).

The **revenue streams** section of the interaction model is, in this case, represented by the fact that the faculty collects taxes from students and, more importantly, that it keeps its learners motivated, therefore they can promote the image of the university among the communities they live in. The **cost** of the **structure** is supported by the budget that the faculty has allocated for its activities.

6 RESULTS

"Higher education and research are [...] essential components of cultural, economic and environmentally sustainable development of individuals, communities and nations" [34].

Therefore, in order for individuals and communities to reach an efficient development, education plays a very important role as it is the catalyst of all areas of activity. For the purpose of education to be achieved properly, we have seen that it has to acknowledge the importance of understanding and

making use of the connection that is created between collaborative learning and social innovation and the fact that, in this case particularly, social media can be used as tools of helping the interested parties get the benefits resulted through this connection.

In this case, we can easily understand that higher education institutions have to create spaces which are properly adapted for supporting the community learning and they can achieve this goal by using specific and user-friendly platforms and fields to which they give free access to students, the academic body, and maybe also local groups of people and different interested parties in the collaborative learning process and creation of social innovations. Thus, by using these digital instruments, they can organize meetings of common interest regarding the education matter.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This paper has the aim to show that the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning processes can get benefits from the connection that is created through the interaction of collaborative learning and social innovation processes that use digital technologies in order to generate solutions for meeting social needs and requirements.

The use of social media in the learning process represents a fundamental element for making individuals and especially the young generations' access to information cheaper, easier and faster, by offering them the possibility to interact with the educational institutions and, moreover, with the society that they form. Systems of education have therefore to implement policies on the role that technology has in the development framework of national level.

Through the use of social media, the social software stimulates the creation of virtual spaces in which people have the possibility to share information, collaborate, explore and also create new ideas. The instruments of social networks are helping individuals to have a creative and innovative thinking. Thus, by considering the technological approach, we can see that social media is shaping both society and culture by changing concepts such as privacy, friendship, information exchange, teaching and learning, public speech and even self-expression, being of great help for the support of the connection between collaborative learning and the creation of social innovations.

Practices that make best use of the benefits of collaborative learning emphasize pedagogies that privilege collaboration, sharing, problem-solving, communication and risk-taking approaches, this leading to a greater student engagement and sustained concentration, these two being key elements of achievement.

But even though technology is the main element in all activities of life, there should also be taken into consideration the competence and will of individuals and public education institutions to cooperate and innovate, not only through electronic means, but also by using traditional ways of participating in the development process of a society.

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