E-Learning in Portugal (in Portuguese E-Learning em Portugal)
(Book review)

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Textbook details:
E-Learning in Portugal (E-Learning em Portugal; original text in Portuguese)
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FCA – Editora de Informática, Rua D. Estefânia, 183, 1º E., 1000-154 Lisboa, Portugal (http://www.fca.pt
Up to date web-site: http://e-learning.douto.com
Details: 9 chapters, 194 pages, glossary, appendix 1 (who is who in the e-learning market in Portugal) and appendix 2 (cognitive resources online).

Introduction to the book and author

Let me start with a brief note on the author: José Machado is responsible for the organization of several events for the promotion of e-learning and has extensive experience in Internet based markets, related to companies such as Algarvenet, IP Global, Novis Telecom, 20/20 Multimedia and Arthur Andersen. He is also the Founder and President of the Algarve Digital (Association of Networks and Contents).

Based on the experience of the author, the book E-Learning in Portugal provides an analysis of the Portuguese market in Internet-based distance learning, aiming for the attention of potential trainers and trainees interested on the subject.

The book itself chapter by chapter

The book starts with an introduction to the history/background/context of e-learning, where the author states that this might represent a guide into the available Internet-based learning projects in Portuguese language, that place Portugal side by side with the most advanced countries in e-learning innovation. Along with this statement, we get a clear view of the objectives of the book, that go much further than just providing information on the e-learning market in Portugal, including reflections on the political, social and economic actions, aiming to promote the investment in e-learning by the actors of the digital economy.

The second chapter is about defining e-learning. Machado provides his own definition of e-learning, as ‘the use of Internet based technologies to provide a set of solutions for the improvement or acquisition of knowledge and its practical deployment at distance’. Along with this definition, through the chapter you may find several, more or less technical, definitions of e-learning. In the last pages you get an idea of the interest raised about e-learning in Portugal, through a list of brief descriptions of events that occurred in Portugal from 2000 to the date of publishing. Thus, these events are becoming more popular along with projects aimed at exploiting market niches, which may be considered an indicator of a promising future for initiatives of e-learning in Portugal.

The advantages and benefits of e-learning are listed in the third chapter. Machado pinpoints several advantages of the use of e-learning, from low cost to customisation, usefulness of content and building of communities. According to him, the major benefit of e-learning to users is the promotion of auto-learning, which seems to develop the capability of learning and of creating knowledge from information available anywhere anytime, enhancing the collaborative construction of knowledge and transferring the responsibility of learning to the individual. E-learning also reveals potential benefits to professional training, in what concerns the continuous development and improvement of the academic training of an individual, with the perspective of lifelong learning.

Case studies are available in the forth chapter. The author goes through the major Portuguese e-learning projects, like AcademiaGlobal.com, Evolut.com and Estudar-na.net, providing detailed information on these initiatives.
AcademiaGlobal.com was created in 2000, specializing in an integrated offer of Internet based content and services, in the areas of education, corporate training and citizenship, and aims to involve, in a further phase, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese communities across the world. Provides synchronous and asynchronous learning. Uses several collaborative web-based tools and involves several distinct Portuguese and international partners, from institutional to corporate and academic partners.

Evolui.com was formally created in 2000, counts over 9000 registered users and promotes 45 pay courses and 12 free cost courses. Students may choose between group-based classes with counselling trainers or individual classes without counselling.

Estudar-na.net was created in 2000 and offers more than 100 courses. The courses cover a broad range of themes, mainly directed to high school subjects (e.g. chemistry, Portuguese language, French language) and informatics.

On the next few pages of the chapter you can find a brief description of Cisco e-learning programs, such as Cisco Networking Academy, Cisco Field E-Learning Connection, as well as several web-based learning services provided by Cisco like modular instruction, zone of communities, virtual labs and simulation, empowerment, learning management systems and personalization. At the end are some bibliographic references, mainly referring to Cisco. I think it might have been of greater interest to the trainers and trainees if there was further explanation of the Portuguese projects.

The fifth chapter develops on the existing market of e-learning, specifically the academic and the organizational, national and international, providing some references for further consultation. It goes through the academic market in Portugal, providing a brief description of the main e-learning programs offered by Portuguese academic institutions, such as: UNAVE, Universidade de Aveiro, Universidade Aberta, Mutate (Multimedia Tools for Advanced GIS Training in Europe), Universidade Fernando Pessoa, PROF2000, Instituto Superior de Gestão, IDITE-Minho, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Formedia, Instituto Europeu de Formação de Empresários e Gestores, Rede SocraTESS, Centro Naval de Ensino a Distância, Cidade Médica Virtual, European University. A longer description is available for the UNAVE, Mutate and PROF2000 programs; the first two aim at professionals and professional training, the last one is specifically oriented for teachers training with technologies.

The brief international academic market section is mainly devoted to the Jones International University (JIU), characterized for only providing courses on-line. Apart from a brief description of JIU, Machado pinpoints some other international examples of e-learning academic providers, but offers no further description or explanation.

The last part of this chapter is about the organizational e-learning market in Portugal. Descriptions of some of the e-learning initiatives carried on by Portuguese companies are provided along the last pages. Ecademy, BusinessAcademy, Instituto de Formação Bancária, Instituto Virtual, SicOnline, are some of the companies presented in this chapter, mainly, they offer courses on subjects like finance and organizational sciences for graduate students trying to improve their careers, employee recycling and professional training.

‘Challenges’ is the title of the sixth chapter, which presents a prospective view about e-learning in Portugal and the importance of e-learning as a preventive measure against functional technologic illiteracy. Mainly, Machado discusses the desired goals, the available paths and means, for the effective implementation of e-learning projects in Portugal. These subjects are addressed through three vectors: innovation for trainers, contribution for national development, and the European context.

The first topic enhances the importance of e-learning for trainers or educators as a new and different medium for education and training enabling for several improvements in the educational field, such as: continuously updated learning materials, updated learning content, continuous training for a larger number of individuals overcoming geographical barriers, access to communities of learning. Thus, emphasizing the need for the assimilation of several requirements, mostly pedagogic ones, for an effective implementation of e-learning: shared pedagogic management and organization, specific learning content and materials for the course, specific evaluation methods and the creation of motivational techniques and tools for increasing learner’s commitment.

National development will benefit from the contribution of e-learning projects by increasing the investment in industrial and academic research and exporting Portuguese subject matter expertise. Moreover, the Information Society Operational Program (2000-2006) establishes as priority the ‘learning society’, by stimulating and supporting initiatives for the valuation of education professionals on the subject of technologic literacy and advanced communication technologies. Examples of these initiatives are: the TRENDS (Training Educators
through Networks and Distributed Systems) project, involving five other European countries, and the PROF2000 project (derived from TRENDS).

Intrinsically connected to the previous topics is the major role of e-learning development in the European context. Since 2000, the European Union (EU) has been committed to the success of the ‘e-Europe Action Plan’ program as the basis for a cohesive and integrated Information Society, enhancing the role of the EU in increasing employment, economic reform and social cohesion, supported by an economic structure based in knowledge. This program has four vectors: provide multimedia computers to all EU schools, train teachers for the use of digital technologies, develop European wide software and educational services, and to speed up and increase access to Internet connections by schools and teachers. Basically, this topic introduces us to the European goal of turning the EU into the ‘most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world’ through investments in education, training and e-learning.

On the seventh chapter, Machado presents examples of what he considers to be good practice in e-learning. He refers to the importance of learning from previous experience and of distinguishing the basic provision of information from online training and knowledge management; thus, knowledge management should be the basis for supporting e-learning. Inofor, the first example of this, cooperates with different organizations in the creation and simulation of e-learning courses. Cisco is another example of good practice, with teams cooperating with organizations in the optimisation of the e-learning architecture and a model of e-learning that coordinates a faster distribution of content with the priority on updating content while still not neglecting the evaluation and empowerment of the students.

Chapter eight goes through several technologic platforms for e-learning, such as Centra, WebCT, Blackboard, Tutornet and others, providing a brief description of such platforms and their main features. Basically, the chapter emphasizes the advantages of using multi-platforms - that adapt to any operative system.

A prospective view of e-learning is presented on the last chapter. This chapter reflects on the increasing number of Internet users and of e-learning initiatives, and on the future of e-learning in Portugal. Machado claims that quality will be the criteria distinguishing between successful and non-successful initiatives. Private initiatives are expected to maintain leadership in the Portuguese market in the areas of content creation, technology development and services providing. Portuguese projects will still require improvements in the subscription or registration phase and the payment methods, and time spent on the creation of learning content will prove to be a sign of quality. The author presents an interesting idea, of implementing the tracking of learning courses taken by individuals, in the form of an individual learning portfolio. Customisation is another interesting point raised in this chapter, referring to the expected increase in personalisation of content, bringing trainers and students closer and creating content more related to the needs of the student. These last words lead me to the conclusion that Machado envisions the future of e-learning as very promising if user oriented in all aspects, from the technologic to the pedagogic, requiring the active and pro-active intervention of all members of our society.

The final part of the book contains two appendixes. The first appendix is a list of the most important names related to e-learning in Portugal, the ‘Who’s Who in the e-learning market in Portugal’ list of names; the second is a list of ‘cognitive resources online’, that is, a list of useful addresses about e-learning, from experts that provide information to electronic publications on the subject. Finally, there is a glossary of terms found through the book.

An overall consideration

This is an easy to read book, actually, you can read it in a couple of hours. It is written in a simple, straight form accessible to all. I enjoyed the book in general, but I think the subject could be further developed.

Basically, this book gives you an overview of what is going on in Portugal in e-learning; the events, the projects, the companies and the people. It is a useful book if you are looking for a guidebook, for a repository of information on the e-learning market in Portugal. In my opinion, the book would benefit from a more reflective or critical discourse rather than the descriptive one it adopts.

The strongest features of this book are the simple language, the references at the end of each chapter and the continuously updated web site.