

Editorial

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"Students are not what they used to be anymore"

While this is often said in a rather plaintive manner, there is some truth to it. First of all, there are many more of them nowadays. In 2010 almost four million more students were enrolled in third level education in the EU compared to the beginning of the new millennium (Eurostat 2012a). But not only the absolute number of students increased, the relative numbers did so as well. While there were 3.30 % of the EU population enrolled in higher education in 2000, this continually rose to 3.96 % over the next ten years (compare Eurostat 2012a/b). This ongoing rise in numbers has already started before the turn of the century. For example, in Great Britain the number of students entering university more than doubled within a decade in the 1990s which Biggs commented on as following: "The brightest and most committed students will still be there, as they have been in the past, but they will sit alongside students of rather different academic bent" (1991: 1). That is, there are not only continuously more students, the range of skills, abilities and possibly aptitude represented by the students is widening.

Another factor leading to an ever more heterogeneous student body is the internationalization taking place in third level education due both to increased student mobility and the fact that many universities actively work towards increasing their intake of international students. For example, in Ireland - where the *First International Conference on 'Mass Customization' in Language Teaching and Learning* took place in 2010 - the number of international full-time students increased by 75 % between 2001 and 2011 (CSO 2012) resulting in a more diverse socio-cultural background of the student body.

Many universities have already reacted to the ever increasing heterogeneity among their students, mainly through the introduction of modularization. Study plans which required every student to take exactly the same courses were abandoned in favour of a more student-centred approach. Students can create their own programme of study by choosing (within limits) their courses from a range of modules of which some might even be outside their main subject area. Students from engineering, law, medicine, business, etc. might now also attend language classes as part of their regular studies. Their reasons for learning a foreign language can be quite different from those of the 'traditional' students who major in a foreign language.

The high number of students to be dealt with – which in general is still continuing to rise further – on the one hand and the increasing heterogeneity of the student body on the other hand create a bit of a dilemma. In industry there were two mutually exclusive approaches to satisfy the customers' needs (Piore/Sabel 1984). These are craft production where "a single product for a single customer" (Boër/Dulio 2007: 2) was made and, emerging out of the Industrial Revolution, mass production which offered a standardized product in large quantities (Pine 1993). While craft production can be tailored to the customers' needs it is rather expensive and not suited to satisfy a mass market. Mass production on the other hand can supply products in large quantities at low prices but the products cannot be customized. What is needed in higher education is an approach that combines the advantages of craft production and mass production making it possible to satisfy a large number of customers with a product that can be customized to their requirements (at least to some extent) without incurring high costs. The solution to such a dilemma emerged in the 1980s, mainly due to the use of information technology, and is called mass customization. Breaking down a product or

service into a range of standardized components keeps costs low while combining those in different ways makes it possible to customize the final product or service to the customers' needs (Pine 1993). Such an approach is needed to cope with the above described challenges facing higher education and this is what this special issue is all about.

The first article, by Conor Geiselbrechtger, approaches (mass) customization on a primarily hypothetical level. It focuses on the situation of language teaching and learning within English studies at German universities and on the possible merits of mass customization for it.

Talking about mass customization in an educational context seems impossible without mentioning learner autonomy. The latter's role is examined by Maria Elena Llaven Nucamendi who also presents the results of a study conducted in Mexico.

As briefly mentioned before, mass customization in the industry and service sector has just fairly recently been made possible through the use of information technology. John Partridge and Susanne Krauß also made extensive use of IT by developing a customizable learning software for German grammar which can be used in its entirety or selectively. Vehbi Turel developed a multimedia learning environment for English on which he shows the benefits such a programme can yield in order to customize computerized feedback.

While mass customization is usually just made possible through the use of information technology, this is not a necessity as can be seen by Marion Engrand-O'Hara's article. She describes how a portfolio of independent study has been used at Royal Holloway International since 2002 which allows the learners to customize and control their learning.

Mass customization can be directly incorporated into language programmes – as described in the previous article – or it can be offered additionally or even independently. How this can be achieved is explained by Frank Farmer who describes how the self access centre at the Universidad de Quintana Roo enables students to personalize and manage their learning with the support of tutors and the materials available in their self access centre.

All the above articles deal with varying degrees of mass customization in third level education. However, language teaching and learning is not restricted to universities, so its mass customization does not have to be limited to this realm either. In her article, Jana Winnefeld focuses on the primary sector and Montessori education describing how task-based language learning can be utilized to customize language learning.

Last but not least, Tim Murphy and Joseph Falout deal with critical participatory looping which has small groups of students analyse and reflect on the results of surveys on their learning in which they themselves and other students participated. They show how education can be customized on a more general level through this approach.

References

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