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SHORT COMMUNICATION

ÁNGELES HUERTA*

VIRTUAL EDUCATION IN REAL SPAIN

Just as everywhere else in Europe, many Spanish Universities are developing original e-learning projects. The study of these particular initiatives could probably bring some light on what kind of communicative problems we are likely to run into in electronic contexts. Actually, the linguistic and institutional complexity of Spain is a good example of how virtual education is often related to the construction of a certain identity. As for the theoretical side of the article, even though my main goal is to offer a merely descriptive state-of-the-art, I dare to suggest an unusual way to approach to the topic: through the narrative construction of the self.

Keywords: e-learning, identity, narrativity, dialogism, Europe, Spain

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A joke

“The best thing about Internet is that nobody knows you’re a dog”. This is perhaps the most popular joke in the world about on-line communication. From a logical point of view, this statement is based on a form of argumentation studied by Charles S. Peirce: *abduction* (Barone & Luker 1999). Like deduction, abduction can be easily explained as a process that connects a single fact to a general law. But *unlike* deduction, there is *no necessary* relationship between *that* single fact and *any* general law. In the case of abduction, the individuals that take part in the communicative act must fill the gap by themselves. In fact, abductive statements only make sense if the speakers are able to find a link between a certain proposition and a suggestively probable law. In the sentence “the best thing about Internet is that nobody knows you’re a dog”, the general law that sets in motion the mechanism of abduction is a generalist and well-extended background assumption: the story of the dog takes for granted that the World Wide Web is a neutral space populated by anonymous beings. And for the same reason, this joke is also related to the idea that on-line education “neutralise certain types of biases found in the traditional classroom setting (such as cultural, ethnic, gender or age biases)”¹. This article is a response to this particular background assumption. In other words, the aim of the following pages is to show that when you are wired—and no matter how hard you try—there is no way to hide the fact that you are a dog.

There is still very much to be done before we can propose a solid theory about how we construct our identities in the new media. The development of new tools in the field of communication technologies seems to be an ever re-shaping process, which is far from being closed. On the contrary, it gets faster and faster, and we have no reason to believe that it might be otherwise in the near future. But technology is not the *real* problem. The “real problem” has more to do with our understanding of the new communication patterns that have risen in electronic contexts. Our task as semiotists is to build a bridge between the rationalisation of the system and our ability to act within that system, both as individuals and as members of a cultural community. And today more than ever, the

¹ “Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis (...) Deduction proves that something must be; Induction shows that something actually is operative; Abduction merely suggests that something may be” Peirce (1934:106). See also Núñez-Ramos and Lorenzo (1997).

social impact and enormous possibilities of Internet call for an interdisciplinary approach to this new object of research.

What we are about to examine is *not* a *detailed* report of *all* of the on-line educational experiences that are being developed in Spain. It is not even a study of all the psycho-social implications of these experiences. Taking into account the complexity of the issue, I have opted to focus my attention on two of them: the e-learning model of the Open University of Catalonia (*Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*, therefore U.O.C.), and the e-learning model of “AULANET”, a common project elaborated by a group of seven Spanish Universities. Each of these models is the result of certain political and economic necessities and, as a consequence, it has its own technical and communicative characteristics. The use of new media in education is undermined by all sort of discourses, in which we can perfectly track down *who*, *why* and *for what* reason supports that new pedagogical construct. At least to some extent, the shape of that learning space depends on these discourses. As far as virtual education is concerned, internet is anything but a neutral space.

1. E-selves in e-contexts

Interactive electronic environments in classrooms are nothing new for many American children. In the last years, the use of MUDs (“Multi User Dimension”, a program based on the continuous implementation of texts, which was originally inspired by the role-game “Dungeons and Dragons”) has become a reality all across the USA. Children simply enter one of these MUDs –like PUEBLOMOO, a learning environment designed by members of Phoenix College’s Department² of Virtual Education, or any of the possible themeworlds of MUSEnet², a group of associated text-based virtual worlds for educational goals—and develop, while playing, all sorts of linguistic and emotional skills. The main advantages observed by the teachers involved in these learning environments can be a surprise for those who consider new media a source of alienation and a potential danger for kids. Instead of describing a picture of “emotionally numb” teen-agers, e-teachers praise the virtues of MUDs in terms of “emotional stability” (Chalmers, 1998).

There are many evidences that prove the benefits of such e-contexts in the socialisation of children. For instance, there is an American project

² Multi-User Science Education Network. These are the MUDs mentioned by CHALMERS (1998) in an article about virtual education in American schools

that encourages the use of MUDs by boys and girls whose parents work in the army. The Defense Department is worried by the negative effects that the continuous transfers might have in their education and self-confidence, and they seem to be convinced that MUDs can help DOD children to grow up without traumas. Thanks to new communication technologies, they can keep in contact with their old friends and school teachers and –most important—*they can keep on playing the role* they had chosen in the MUD. Obviously, if the adoption of interactive learning environments is highly recommended for uprooted children, there may be a good reason for that. Apparently, new media play an important role in the birth and development of identity. In spite of all our background assumptions about e-contexts, there must be something in the new communication technologies that *helps us to be ourselves* in a completely different and brand-new way.

The question of identity is one of the most polemical issues of our time. The interest of communication scientists in the study of the self is not an occasional academic fashion. It is rather the response to the tragedy of millions of people who are trapped in all kind of conflicts related to identity. In our world, we have to count on a wide range of political problems that are confusingly entangled with all sorts of discourses about identity. The analysis of these discourses and their feed-back effect is open to many different approaches and scientific disciplines³. In order to suggest a preliminary hypothesis about the specific role played by new media in the way we perceive ourselves and the others, I am going to propose the study of virtual educational environments under the light of one specific conception of identity. But before I introduce the state-of-the-art of e-learning in Spanish universities, I just want to point out to one theoretical possibility: the study of identity in terms of *narrativity* (Ricoeur, 1990).

In Ricoeur's hermeneutics, "identity" is what stays identical to itself in the flow of time. The reasoning is very easy to understand: what do we need if we want to distinguish a single person from the undifferentiated mass of the common people? We need to locate in his/her character visible signs of coherence and stability. In everyday life –as in theatre—we expect some kind of logic in people's behaviour, as well as a reasonable fi-

³ Indeed, identity has not only been studied as a linguistic phenomena, linked to deixis and other pragmatic strategies of representing the self (Lyons: 1982, Holloway: 1999). Recently, it has also been studied under the light of new psychological and sociological concepts (Gackenbach: 1998, Bandura: 1999).

delity to one's word. But the only way to find out such a coherence in someone's behaviour—as in one's own—is to recognise the causal links between a relatively closed set of values and an open set of facts. And *this* model is not only suitable for personal identities. This ideal of veracity and stability that we have just described applies also to the construction of *collective identities*. If *personal identities* have to do with our capacity to narrate ourselves to the others, collective identities must follow a very similar pattern.

At least in theory, *collective identities* should be the result of some universal community of dialogue, as described by Jürgen Habermas (1981). The construction of social identities should be a collaborative process, open to the participation of all of the members of the community. But we all know that, in the real world, things are never that easy. It might be true that cultures tend to represent themselves in history like fictional characters. According to the semiotists of the Tartu school, we can understand *historical reports* as a special type of narration whose highest value is the permanence in time. Nobody can deny that, in this type of text, cultures become narrative instances. As a matter of fact, cultures in history books could easily be described like actors in a play. Now, we have to admit that the “script” is not the result of an open process of dialogue. Most of the time, it is rather an exercise of power. Besides, the personification of collective identities has other disturbing implications. Even if we accept that personal identity is the model of collective identities, there is still an outstanding question waiting for an answer: what happens when personal identities are in crisis? The technical means and, hence, the *communicative patterns* we had always used to narrate ourselves are no longer the same. As a preliminary conclusion we will have to admit that today more than ever, the construction of the self seems to be a matter of poetics.

Let's take, for instance, the case of Europe. EU educational policy for European integration is probably the best example to illustrate the virtues and the dangers of e-identities. The European Union is actually encouraging the spread of all sorts of pedagogical initiatives that involve the use of new technologies. One of them—the so-called *Euroliterature* project (www.euroliterature.uib.no)—seems to be specially related to this “poetics of the self”.

The aim of this particular project, born in 1997, was conceived the creation of a European resource for the adoption of new technologies in literary studies, as well as the mapping of literary studies in the old continent. But going beyond these theoretical goals—and thanks to the E.U. funding—a large number of European Universities were able to offer the

same courses in the most distant places⁴. The inclusion of real time video-conferences in graduate and undergraduate programs allowed, for instance, that students gathered in a classroom in Granada could virtually attend to a lesson held in Leuven. This was surely the most fertile and innovative side of the project. All the actions included in *Euroliterature* were originally intended “to raise the awareness within academia of the potential of literary studies to contribute to the process of European integration”⁵. But this is an old and repetitive topic in every initiative that, in the too often forgotten field of humanistic studies, tries in every way to get the financial support of the administration. The political value of the project, in this case, were the media used for that “*promotion of awareness*”. Now, what is the meaning of this political expression?

Strangely enough, the ideological discourse of the UE recalls very often the Aristotelian concept of “*anagnorisis*”⁶. The education policy of Brussels seems to be determined by the obsession of reminding the citizens of some mythical time when they knew *for sure* that they *actually* were Europeans. It is not a question of building a new identity, but rather of making Europeans aware of something that they had forgotten. “*Euroliterature*” is not only a project about European literatures. It is a project *about* European literatures *in* new media. At this point, the aim of the initiative appears in all its ambition: If we Europeans build our own e-context, we will be creating a common identity. In this case, the E.U. integration policy doesn't rely so much on the invisible chains of tradition, but on the adoption of certain communicative patterns. According to our narrative approach to the question of identity, such a policy can only succeed if the actors—that is, the European Universities involved in this electronic context—manage to invent a credible character called “Europe”.

For quite obvious reasons—such as the actual need of creating a sense of community in a traditionally nationalistic Europe—scientists involved in virtual environments supported by Brussels tend to make a point out of questions that are normally forgotten, when similar experiences take place in one single country. In any case, it is not very difficult to understand that the risks described by Domingo Sánchez-Mesa in the analysis

⁴ In Spain, the project was adopted by the University of Granada and the University “Carlos III” (Madrid).

⁵ <http://cwisdb.cc.kuleuven.ac.be/research/P/3H99/project3H990290.htm>

⁶ There's a good English translation and commentary of Aristotle's *Poetics*, published in 1987 in North Carolina.

of his own experience in European projects are very likely to be the same in Spanish, Swiss or Italian projects:

A previous ethical statement might be uttered at this stage: a dialogical balanced mode of cultural and linguistic management must nourish our ODL projects, whenever we intend to contribute to avoid the risks both of an excessive standardisation (with its potential reproduction of neo-colonial bonds) and of the ideology of identity (whose consequences in terms of dismissal, negation and even obliteration of the other are daily experienced in our continent, being extremely and blatantly displayed in the recent Balkans war)” (Sánchez-Mesa Martínez, 1997:30).

But multilingualism is not the only ethical option that is worth defending in a world that has already accepted the dictatorship of English as the only possible *lingua franca*. Of course, in countries like Switzerland or Spain where one single state enjoys the richness and complexity of a multilingual tradition, there is a rank of problems related to translation and intercultural communication that should not be ignored. But the risk of standardisation and imposition of a certain “ideology of identity” cannot be overcome by the rethorics of “ethnodemocracy” (Pym, 1995). Real dialogism—in its purest bakhtinian sense—is something very difficult to reach. It is not only a question of opening the channels to every language in the world. As long as these channels are exclusive for the members of a certain linguistic community, we will have to assume the risk of repeating that “ideology of identity” at a smaller scale. The challenge (and the threat) of new media is as simple as this: is there any reason to hope that new technologies can help us to re-build old identities—that is, to represent ourselves to the others in a *new narrative*—, so that we can keep a “dialogical balance” between our own tradition and the voice of the other?

2. Two models of distributed learning: AULANET and the UOC.

The preliminary sections of this article are devoted to fix the theoretical principles that could feed a certain approach to the topic of e-learning. These principles are basically two:

1. The new electronic contexts are a new locus enuntiationis, a different space for the construction of new identities (or the re-formulation of old ones), and
2. Nevertheless, the means of this construction continues to be linguistic, and this is why we can still think about e-identities in terms of narrativity.

Of course, this category has to be reviewed under the new conditions set up by new media: interactivity, non-sequentiality, non-conclusiveness, but this can well be seen as a (not at all) simple matter of poetics.

These points seem to be reasonably popular, at least among those semiotists who have ever stopped to consider the topic that we want to discuss in these pages. But the question I want to focus in this paper is something much more simple, from an intellectual point of view, but too often neglected in this kind of study: what we can call the “materialistic side of the problem”. Scholars seem to be too busy describing the indeterminacy of time and space in electronic contexts to see what lies beyond the screen: the political and economic forces that support those contexts and, therefore, *determine* the linguistic actions that create them. Putting it clearly, if we really want to elaborate a scientific model for the study of communication patterns in new media, our first commitment should be getting to know well “how it all works” in the real world.

According to this last statement, our first task will be to choose a discrete part of that “real world”. And of course into a world that we all perceive as a “global village”, we cannot fall in the paradox of formulating provincial theories. In the title of the article I have already announced that, for practical purposes, I am going to talk about Spain. The question is that, virtually speaking, Spain is only a small number of links and websites in a world whose dimensions we cannot foresee. But even if we focus our attention on Spain, we have to put up with a couple of examples. Unlike real Spain, virtual Spain is also a changing world of undefined limits. In such an unpredictable world, a comparative approach to different models of virtual education might be the best way to show a general view of the situation.

The models we have chosen are the one initiated by the Open University of Catalonia and the virtual program developed by a particular group of Spanish Universities: the “G-7”. “Aulanet” –which is the name of this virtual program— is an example of the changing landscape of Spanish higher education: an inter-University project that seeks to adapt old institutions to new times. On the other hand, the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) is a fully virtual University, which insists proudly on the heritage of a secular tradition in distance learning. The main reason to give this relevance to these particular initiatives could easily be the sophistication of both models, and not only in the technological terms, but also in terms of “communicative ambition”. And above all, this option is also inspired by a declared interest in the different discourses that we can find behind each of these projects.

“Aulanet” and the U.O.C. are the most extremely different cases of study that we can find on the Spanish virtual scene. This scene is not detachable from who supports these initiatives, nor from certain social or/and economic objectives. Unfortunately, such a position makes many people think of a mechanical and one-way correspondence between a material base and an ideological super-structure, which is of course out of the question. The relationship between language and society is always a complex one, no matter what kind of discourses or which media give it shape. The following description is only an account of the features that should be considered in a proper analysis of whatever e-context. Let’s try to identify the two projects that I have chosen, just by answering three simple questions: *who*, *why*, and *how*.

2.1 *Who*

The project “Aulanet” started in 1999, and it is just one of the common strategies planned by the so-called “G-7”. This name –openly ironic—⁷ refers to the seven Spanish Universities of the seven Spanish regions⁷ where there is only one centre of higher education. The G-7 is composed by the University of Oviedo (in the region of Asturias), the University of Cantabria, the University of the Basque-Country, the University of Navarra, the University of La Rioja, the University of Zaragoza (in the region of Aragon) and the University of the Balear Islands. We are talking of a large set of regions, each of them conditioned by its own social, economic, demographical and linguistic environment. The most important link among them is the fact of having just one public University in its territory. This is why in “Aulanet” there is no place for an over-all discourse about identity like the one that we are going to see in the Open University of Catalonia.

The “Universitat Oberta de Catalunya” (UOC) was founded in 1995, by initiative of the Catalan government (the “*Generalitat*”). As we can read in its website, the UOC “forms part of the public University system of Catalonia under the legal formula of private law”. This means that the UOC is supported (in the broadest sense of the word) by a special Foun-

⁷ We use the English “region” for a Spanish political reality known as “comunidad autónoma”. A “comunidad autónoma” is a political and administrative demarcation, not very different from a federal state. Actually, some “comunidades autónomas”, like Catalonia or the Basque Country have even a higher degree of self-government than -for instance-many German “Länder”.

dation, constituted of the Catalan government, the Catalan Confederation of Savings Banks, the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce, and several Catalan media (such as publishing houses, radio and television channels). Each of these public and private institutions has its own speakers in the Board of Trustees that governs the Open University of Catalonia. This flourishing and well organised network of economic resources has nothing to do with the financial background of AULANET. Conceived as one single activity (and not as a whole University), it can only count on a small part of the general budget of those Universities involved in the project, as well as with the financial and technical help of a small group of sponsors (such as Microsoft or IBM).

2.2. *Why*

“Aulanet” is presented as an example of cooperation among different Universities, and as a vehicle of exchange and mobility for people and ideas. But at the same time, neither the Rectors of the G-7 nor the intellectual leaders of “Aulanet” have ever hidden the economical side of the project. Considering the dramatic loss of “clients” that is already affecting the Spanish Universities, due to the low birth rate and to other social circumstances, a solid offer of virtual education does not seem a bad idea at all. Faculty and administration members are linked to these Universities as civil servants, and it is very easy to understand that –in the long run—the authorities will have to think of new tasks for all these people. It is not only a question of re-organisation of human resources. The interaction between the new media and the new shape of society in Europe should lead to a different conception of work, a different conception of instruction and –above all—a different conception of time. “Aulanet” is a first step towards this general re-organisation.

From a purely pedagogical point of view, the UOC can only be understood as part of the educational policy of the Catalan government. The *Universitat Oberta* is literally described in its web site in the following terms: “The UOC is rooted in Catalonia’s cultural, social and linguistic reality, where it was conceived as a key element to drive the University system and it is linked to the industrial, commercial, artistic and service needs of the region”⁸ But this is something we can only read either in the Catalan or in the English version of the site. Actually, there is a non-corre-

⁸ http://portal.uoc.es/portal/e/catala/universitat_fs/Universitat/Nou/Principis/principis.htm

spondence between the Spanish and the Catalan version of the site. If we compare both versions, the one written in Spanish is remarkably smaller. There are many links in the original Catalan version that simply don't exist in the Spanish one. More than a translation, the Spanish site seems to be different from the Catalan site. This particular question wouldn't demand our attention if the English web-site of the U.O.C. was also presented in a different and merely functional way, without ideological references. But the thing is that *there is* a correspondence between the Catalan and the English version of the site.

In the introductory web pages of the U.O.C., the visitor who has chosen either English or Catalan as linguistic code may see to one perfect example of what I have previously defined as "the narrative construction of identity". As in traditional folk-tales, the Open University of Catalonia appears as a fictional character defined by a noble and distant origin⁹ and by the spell of longevity. Thanks to this narration, the institution can figure out a *nexus* between a new set of social practices and an accepted tradition. In other words, it introduces itself as a coherent and stable character:

The first distance university services were begun in Great Britain at the end of the 19th century and were aimed at professionally qualified sectors of the working class and exported to the rest of the developing world.

In 1916, under the presidency of Enric Prat de la Riba, the Mancomunity of Catalonia created the Technical Teaching Extension (TTE), based on a project of the Industrial Engineer Cèsar Molinas. The TTE was founded with the aim of alleviating the lack of specialised technicians which Catalan industry was undergoing at that time. It was the result of the Mancommunity's strenuous efforts to promote technical teaching although it had no authority in other educational areas. (...)

The Primo de Rivera dictatorship, which began in September 1923 did not affect the TTE until May 1924, when it was closed.(...) During this period it undertook *a Catalan correspondence course project which increased the number of students considerably*.

In January, 1931, The Barcelona local government re-established the TTE. In April 1931, the local government was dissolved and the TTE came under the responsibility of the Generalitat Government of Catalonia. At this stage, the TTE underwent *a period of growth thanks to the creation of the Language Commission for Primary School Instruction*.

⁹ According to the Tartu-Moscow school, this mention of the origins is very important in the presentation of a certain culture: in old Russian texts, everything that has had an origin pretends that it will have no end. (Lotman, Uspenskij & Piatigorskij, 1975)

The TTE's activity was affected by the breakout of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936. Furthermore, *it was flooded by the increase in Catalan course applications and the total exhaustion of educational material* as various schools of the Generalitat had adopted the books published by the TTE.¹⁰

Any external observer with no particular knowledge of the Spanish political context would have serious difficulties in finding an explanation for this lack of correspondence between the Spanish and the Catalan version of the site. The question becomes specially polemical, once we have checked the English version, and therefore rejected the hypothesis of a simplification in the translations for technical or economical reasons. The role of "Catalonia" and other national cultures and their relationship to this other fictional character that we recognise under the name of "Spain" is definitely too complex to sum up in a couple of lines. But still, we can suggest two considerations with only the authority of common sense:

1. If the leaders of the UOC have chosen not to translate into Spanish all of the links that compose the original Catalan, there must be something in those links that—in their opinion—could somehow offend the rest of the Spaniards.

2. If there is nothing in those links that could *objectively* offend the rest of the Spaniards (and I do believe *there is nothing at all* that could offend anybody), there must be something in the current dialogue between Catalonia and the rest of the country that systematically creates *noise* in the channel and distorts communication.

3. It does not matter whether 1 and 2 are true or false. The translation policy of the UOC proves that multilingualism is not a question of using traditionally *peripheral* languages instead of traditionally *central* languages. From a semiotic point of view, centrality is always relative, and in this case there seems to be just a reversal of linguistic values.

2.3. *How*

This tale I have just quoted about the origins of distance learning in Catalonia might be understood as an example of how we narrate collective identities in new media. But indeed there is absolutely nothing about online communication in what I have just shown. The text I have reproduced could have been published in a book, in a newspaper, or just writ-

¹⁰ http://portal.uoc.es/portal/e/catala/universitat_fs/Universitat/Nou/Origens/origens.htm. All the italics in the text are mine. I have used them in order to underline the importance of language in all discourses related to the question of identity in Catalonia.

ten on a wall. On-line communication is not simply a question of using new media for the diffusion of old texts. New media must be the support of a new form of narrativity, very different from what we all were used to. It seems obvious that, if the “defeat” of oral cultures by written ones came along with a serious change in the way we had to narrate ourselves, or if the printing press caused such a revolution as defined by McLuhan (1967), new media must necessarily walk hand in hand with definitely new communicative patterns. And basically, these patterns should be defined by two items: interactivity and non-linearity. To what extent do these e-learning projects participate in new forms of narrativity? To what extent do they change the roles of the actors involved in the learning process? These are the questions that we have to answer, in case we want to say something relevant about e-selves in e-contexts.

Distance Universities have been a reality in Europe for at least the last fifty years. Nowadays, the old Distance Universities born in the twentieth century encourage the use of analogical materials, in addition to the old ones. For instance, the National University for Distance Education (“*Universidad Nacional de Educación a distancia*”, U.N.E.D.) is already going through such a process of up-dating. Parting from the old model of distance learning based on books, television and/or radio conferences, as well as a system of “tutors” that guide the students all around the country, the U.N.E.D. is moving towards a model based on the use of new technologies. The U.N.E.D. is following more or less the same path being followed by other “old” European institutions, like the *Fern Universität* in Germany or the *Open University* in Great Britain. Obviously, this challenge of adapting old structures to new times does not exist for those Universities whose “*raison d’être*” is actually the construction of a distinctive e-context. But apart from a more rational and effective structure... is there any difference between those Universities that have changed the old methods for the new ones, and those Universities that were born along with (and *because of*) the new media? As long as the University limits itself being the provider of educational materials, the fact that many of these materials are multimedia cannot make such a big difference. The *real* change comes when the educational model becomes basically on-line and the process of learning takes place in an interactive virtual space. Only in this case can we talk of a new communicative pattern in distance education.

If we only consider “virtual education” the process of learning on-line, we will have to admit that the model of the U.O.C. is not fully “virtual”. Of course, it doesn’t mean that the U.O.C. has ever ceased being one of

the most innovative experiences in the Spanish educational panorama. The number and the quality of the activities promoted by the U.O.C. and developed fully on-line (like discussion groups, student clubs, cultural or political associations...) provide an example for the rest of the country. But the quality of the pedagogical materials produced by the U.O.C. doesn't imply necessarily a higher level of interactivity. Besides, the *Universitat Oberta* organises attended meetings twice a semester. There is one introduction at the beginning of the semester and one "round-up session" at the end, where all the doubts can be cleared up personally. In spite of being, in theory, a fully virtual University, the U.O.C. needs this network of support centres for the success of its learning model. As for the new figures that should play the role of the professors in traditional Universities, the UOC is based on a system of *tutors* and *advisors*. The latter are supposed to help the students with general orientation throughout their entire stay at the UOC. The former are their counsellors in each particular subject.

This specialized or diversified management is very different from the way things are done in "AULANET", where interdisciplinary teams of 10 people work together in the elaboration of the materials, as well as in the monitoring and evaluation of the students. The learning process is organized around "virtual units", that include unicast- and multicast- video conferences, a big choice of interactive exercises, as well as different activities related to Intranet and Internet materials. Even though "AULANET" is a project elaborated in the frame of traditional Universities, in which the learning method is presential and sequential, the set of courses offered in this project seems to involve a higher level of interactivity than the ones offered by the U.O.C.

In the "virtual classroom", the e-context created by the "G-7", the student can visualise a number of different activities, and decide—at least to a certain extent—the order in which they have to be done. There is a kind of index card that identifies those parts of the unit that are optional, and also those that are compulsory. Normally as the first step, the student is invited to watch a video (normally lasting 15 minutes), where different members of the project introduce the main contents of the unit, synchronised with slides. This video is received by a procedure of "streaming", so that there is no need for the student to download the whole file. After that, the student can choose among the different activities organised in the "virtual unit". There is also the possibility of addressing questions to the person responsible of the course, as well as discussing eventual doubts

with other students. The most interesting thing is that these exchanges are always on-line. It is true that both the students and the professors may share a same physical context in everyday life. But they can also live hundreds of kilometres away. "AULANET" gathers the members of the so-called "G-7" only in learning space. This context gives the opportunity to the students of –let's say– Mallorca to follow a course designed and organised by an academic and technical team that works, for instance, in Santander. And there is no CD Rom and no semestral meeting. Everything is on-line.

3. The mirages of the virtual world.

In the very beginning of this article, I mentioned the danger of background assumptions in the study of electronic contexts. Specifically, if our interest has to do with the construction of identity, we have to preclude two powerful risks. First of all, we will have to look for the *really* new communicative patterns, and this includes a big effort in terms of abstraction, in order not to be blinded by old presents packed in new envelopes. But secondly, we will have to make another effort, in order not to be blinded by the shine and the enthusiasm produced by new communicative patterns. In the real world, people need more than a new channel of expression –no matter how free and innovative– to feel they belong to a certain community. The construction of new collective identities by electronic means will still take years. At the moment, the fact is that new e-contexts (and not only educational) are basically reinforcing identities that are independent of these contexts.

It doesn't matter how technologically or communicatively developed is the learning model of the UOC. In terms of community, the Open University of Catalonia counts on a number of identity items which exist beforehand and don't need to be created by new communicative actions. Of course, many people can say that there is no need for this sense of community in higher education. According to a certain school of "educational marketing", Universities should only be distributors of knowledge "ready-to-be-consumed". If this is acceptable, we shouldn't worry about the construction of learning communities, neither virtual nor real. But if we still think that higher education must also include an ethical engagement in the promotion of free and self-informed citizens, we will have to work on the clarification of concepts such as "e-identity" or "virtual community". Sooner or later, we will have to decide if we want to build up a labyrinth

populated by anonymous dogs, or a set of clear channels populated by defined and responsible selves.

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