

Review of the doctoral thesis

'Crowd-learning as a method of improving vocational skills in the Information Society by following the example of Poland'

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An individual searching for self-improvement can hardly belong to the crowd. But he/she will not know the content of improvement, the concept of competences if he/she will have nobody to compare his/her knowledge with and to discuss; if he/she will not be among other people pursuing vocational development. In the chain of social civilisations, teaching and learning are the ultimate goal, by which values are defined, for which technologies and models are developed.

By comparing the experiences of different cultures and regimes, scholars can suggest solutions. Stating that their recommendations are always followed in the policies of education and science would be incorrect, but spread of sharp insights is communication: it helps societies to make critical judgements on the achievements of certain generations and to discuss the perspectives.

That makes the doctoral thesis of Sylwia Przybyło socially relevant, creating new scientific value. After reading the thesis, it can be stated that it is more than a doctoral thesis with statements and results that need to be defended, it also has to be an inspiration for seminars, conferences on exceptionally important topic for society.

The structure of the dissertation is consistent, the topic is examined in detail.


The author brings lots of social issues together, creating a chain between e-learning, lifelong learning, collective learning, collaborative learning, crowd sourcing and crowd learning. Such analysis gives an opportunity to the reader to compare not only the terms but also the learning methodology, sources about the interrelation between education and communication.

After reading the thesis, I would give the following motto to the thesis based on one statement in the project: 'Wisdom of crowds depends on people making totally independent judgements, which remains a hard thing to achieve in today's world of social media'. This thesis by Ms. Przybyło, is like a search for an answer what the wisdom of the crowd is and how to create effectively the system for such wisdom in Poland.

If the thesis was boring – disputing, asking questions that would encourage the author probably to stand firmly for her study findings, and probably to change the attitude in some cases would be meaningless. Thus, I will give my observations which not necessarily all have to be accepted equally.

The thesis makes us think about searches of society for the mode of vocational improvement which would be sufficiently effective to make an individual feel competent. The author states: 'They learn individually, but in the collective, they use the wisdom of the crowd to facilitate knowledge'.

Examining the crowd-learning, the author as if omits the significant thing: how the problem of an improvement-pursuing personality in society is handled. Does this learning mode overshadow

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individuality, ability of independent consideration of ideas? I remembered handling of the problem in the following aspect: 'The experience both of being exposed to unfamiliar systems and places and of being an anonymous face in a large class can be not just alienating for undergraduates, but antithetical to effective learning,' states the authors of the 'Teaching the Unfamiliar to a Crowd' article¹. Any teaching is communication, which has ties with psychology peculiarities – in particular ... crowd psychology².

The author of the doctor thesis did an immense job – the huge volumes of examined theoretical materials impress. It shows that the colleague is definitely an expert of the problem. Nevertheless, I asked myself: what is the theoretical access? In other words, what forms the theoretical foundation of the work. I do not argue that the theoretical access can be described as eclectic – it does not mean a shortcoming at all.

'The Main Problem' chapter lacks clear definition of the scientific problem. The reader can perceive it only from five given questions. The problem cannot be defined by the first statement written by the author that 'this work is interdisciplinary'. At least the reviewer understood that the key problem is the lack of definition of the crowd learning in Poland as a learning model or as a part of the educational studies or as a part of the education policy. Seven hypotheses formulated as the statements describing favourable crowd learning situation immediately make think that the author is likely to deny the hypotheses by her study.

I think in the beginning the author chooses to compare the broad decision – to discuss various communication interpretations by various sources. I could summarise it according to the author's observation: according to D. McQuail and S. Windahl communication 'can be any or all of the following: an action on others; an interaction with others, and a reaction to others'. Such reviews testifies the author's knowledge acquired by extensive reading, on the other hand, this chapter – without an interpretation by the author – does not give any novelty to the thesis. Some insights in the review of sources by the author – for example, insights about the 'information capitalism' by M. Castells are highly valuable for these problems, they explain complexities of teaching and learning development, only they should be linked with the study more bravely.

I think examination of the issue directly related to the theme starts from Section: 1.3.2.2. Communication means sharing knowledge – modern models of communication. Communication, as the object of information, knowledge spread, in particular, is a significant matter for this theme.

The reader of the doctoral thesis comes across the Sharing Communication Model suggested by the author. The author of the doctoral thesis should be congratulated for showing herself as an independent researcher of communication sciences, who bravely suggest the solution when facing information spread challenges. The defined model should be linked by the reader with the focus test as a part of social campaign 'Dni Uczenia się Dorosłych 2019' ('Adult Learning Days 2019') conducted by the author, which was called 'uczenie (się) poprzez dzielenie' (learning

¹ Katherine Tniby, Meredith L. Weiss and SUNY David L. Rousseau. Teaching the Unfamiliar to a Crowd. In: Political Science and Politics. Vol. 47, No. 1 (January 2014), pp. 189-194.

² Le Bon Gustave. La psychologie des foules [The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind], 1895.

through sharing) and is described on page 252. The author reasons the sharing knowledge as an important motif for an individual to find other people for sharing his knowledge.

I believe, one of the most complicated tasks is to ensure proper feedback – it would be expedient for the author to search for an answer through further researches – probably suggesting a new and more accurate model scheme?

When reading the thesis, the reader comes across an unexpected but fully reasoned passage about Jesus Christ's teaching 'face-to-face'. Indeed, many highly valuable things for information spread can be found in the communication of that time: even origin of journalist report genre³. After reminding this, the author consistently discusses the development up to the creation of distance education and e-learning system. However, the mentioned example keeps making us think whether it is not the most effective in the development of civilisation. Especially – as I already mentioned – in respect of communication psychology.

True, 20 years ago we already were 'captured' by the idea of e-learning method, to understand which seminars were organised, technologies were adapted, however in most cases the usual teaching method, in other words, 'face-to-face' teaching was and still is recognised as the most effective learning. The author states that 'incidental e-learning rose in line with internet evolution'. But up till the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic we could actually feel a certain confrontation of teaching methods, supporting the approach that direct audience involvement is superior than involvement through media: various well-paid projects of qualification improvement, public lectures usually were based on organisers' events, to which the audience was invited to take a physical part in. In the context of this chapter, I can make an observation that internet offers an excellent opportunity to provide necessary information, that technologies allow access to the sources, but an individual needs a discourse with the other person, which allows to feel the value of argumentation through meetings rather than simply hearing them. Of course, the arguments that e-learning removes geographical barriers, allows to save time, accelerates information spread are known for a long time. However, do we have an answer how learning and institutional communication would be effective if e-learning was predominant method of learning?

It goes without saying that 'a study is a real experience' – we can state that about every learning method, not about e-learning only. On the other hand, the author consistently describes the advantages of e-learning, among which I would distinguish family involvement, because this factor in particular allows resuming discussion about knowledge for people of different generations. When the author refers to the COVID-19 situation as the proof of advantage, of course, we have to agree: 'Overnight, educational institutions were forced to introduce remote learning immediately'. But remote learning by pupils, students in the quarantine context requires separate and deep analyses: at least in higher schools, information provision in some cases can be described as an advantage but also as a shortcoming. That is why we have to agree with the resume made in one of the chapters 'That means we are still under construction'.

³ ('Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour. There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink (...)' John, 4:6.

Of course, the COVID-19 context is too 'hot' to be thoroughly discussed in the present doctoral thesis. However, I have a discussable question for the author: which theoretical insights of e-learning, crowd-learning could be linked with remote teaching implemented in Poland during the COVID-19 quarantine? Does the situation give ground for positive assessment only, or does it give a chance to see the problem of social exclusion?

The author collected a lot of valuable data, compares them, and in this respect it is highly significant information. However, when analysing the Polish data, sometimes the reader is as if left on his own to form his opinion about the situation, which, at first, looks comparatively bad. When the author mentions some Polish data, she leaves them without thoroughly discussing them (see p. 118), however we find the reaction of the state regarding them and decisions much further in the thesis (see pa. 158).

Adults' participation in e-learning and lifelong learning system is discussed very diligently by the author in terms of statistics. She gives the data of international organisations and national data. True, in some places earlier data (e.g. data of 2009-2011 in 'Percentage of the population aged 25-64 (...)', p. 154) and latest data are later provided and compared from different organisations (see p. 173). Finally, we read: 'According to the latest data coming from 'Education and Training Monitor 2018 Poland Factsheet' conducted by the European Commission, in the majority of benchmarks set for 2020, Poland has good performance or fast development (...)' (p.188). The author summarises that actually 'Poland remains in a group of countries with the lowest indicators'. Was it worth leading the reader for so long to the assessment of the latest data? I think the Chapter concerned has a certain 'hole' of text which needs to be filled in. At such moment, one wants to get totally different – the story of political decisions on this subject, which would be contextual information by appropriate periods back from 2004, i.e. from accession to the EU. Besides, it would have been valuable to compare the policies of Estonia and Poland – maybe it would allow making certain insights. The author not only shows data of Polish population's failure to participate in teaching processes – but – it is in particular important – explains the reasons: 'Many workers in Poland do not engage in training because they do not see benefits for their labour market situation. It turns out that more than 60% of adults do not want to participate in training in comparison to the average of 40% in European countries'.

In comparative approach, the examination of different Crowd-learning platforms is valuable.

I was surprised by some categorical statements in the beginning of the thesis: 'Polish society is not fluent in foreign languages'. In such case, the source of data must be specified. Only, further in the text we find the answer: '44% of adults aged 25-69 know one foreign language but only 10,1% declare fluent knowledge of a foreign language. A high level of foreign language skills is declared by young people living in urban areas' (see p. 183). On one hand, it seems that the reader must understand that it is not an acceptable situation, however, on the other hand, we know that otherwise the native language would lose the value of the education and teaching language. The following statement is contained at the same place: 'a leading language of the future crowd-learning platform should be native (Polish)'. And finally, the author herself says in the first recommendation of the thesis: '1. A crowd-learning platform should function in a native language in order to be available for everyone. Statistics show that only about 40% of Polish society can speak one foreign language' (p.264). If it is the key recommendation regarding

successful crowd learning, then how should we understand the fact that the author wrote her thesis and especially recommendations in English? I would like to draw the attention of the colleague regarding the fourth recommendation, that the scholars themselves do not have sufficient powers to develop crowd-learning, politicians of education and University administrations should rather be addressed here.

Besides, the author of the doctoral thesis set herself the task: 'systematizing the definition of crowd-learning, as this term is not common in the Polish language'. The author consistently examines the concept of 'information society', but did she manage to 'systematise' the definition of crowd-learning to make it comprehensible and suggested as the definition in the Polish language? On the other hand, I question its expediency in the thesis in English.

The other linguistic aspect was suggested regarding the 'collaborative learning' term, where the described problem, as far as I understand, is of minor value. Same root word in different languages not necessarily has to have the same meaning. Therefore, it would be worth from the word 'kolaborowac' move straight to the other version, e.g. 'wspólne uczenie się'. But in general, should the problem of terms in Polish be discussed in this doctoral thesis written in English?

In some chapters, introductory text of several sentences between the name of the chapter and sub-chapter would be welcomed (plg.: 2.3 and 2.3.1, also elsewhere).

Since the author argues the relevance of the thesis also by the electoral programme of Ursula von der Leyen, an adequate question should arise for the reader also about the electoral guidelines of the Polish Government, President, majority of the Parliament on that subject – irrespective whether and how it is reflected in political texts. I believe this observation would be important in respect of the recommendations.

Without questioning the value of the doctoral thesis and the conducted research, in particular, I recommend this thesis for defence and I believe that the author, as a young scholar, will achieve success.



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