

E-learning and the development of new training skills

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Introduction

The change in society over the last few decades has resulted in people facing new economic and cultural contexts and technologies. From various points of view, the needs of the players and methods for satisfying these needs have changed.

The way organizations think about people has changed, but also the way people think within the organization and the vaster social context.

The quick succession of changes in market trends and the recent worldwide economic crisis have emphasized the necessity of people being able to and having to use new skills and abilities to face the continuing requirements of a constantly evolving market. From this viewpoint, new generation technologies are becoming the engines of an advancing society and indispensable tools of communication between promoters of the development. Here it is useful to point out how each party able to access the Internet is a potential user and provider of learning, through the two elementary functions of uploading and downloading.

Places of learning and new technologies

Today, anyone dealing with training would have difficulty in not facing the existence of new technologies. At the same time, the interest people have in updating their own knowledge store may not disregard technological developments. For example, the market is constantly proposing new tools supporting communication, tools that can be used in professional and personal circles: from television to writing systems, from cell phones to multi-function systems, and from wireless to Voip systems, to name only a few. Everyone knows that the started up process cannot be solved by people simply learning to use it.

Knowing how to use something does not always guarantee a motivation for using it. Knowing the mechanisms for surfing the net does not necessarily coincide with a reason for using an e-learning platform to develop knowledge. As trainers we are very interested in this issue.

We believe that in e-learning, too, the relationship between knowledge and new technologies should not be underestimated; we believe this relationship can be monitored and guided within an e-learning platform.

The purpose of tutoring, for example, can be effected in such a way as to cover this.

Work, citizenship and identity – the three macro areas identified by ACDE¹ - represent the spaces for expressing learning and ways of experiencing new ones. We agree with the members in saying that if the predominant image of the old economy was the factory and the smokestack, the image of the new economy is the worker sitting in front of a computer screen. Places of knowledge and learning also change. Over time, traditional classrooms fill up with tools that allow for remote participation, the on-line sharing of materials and new classroom layouts make way for virtual classrooms. In collective representation, the idea of the Web is slowly taking the lead as one of the main forms of a learning space.

The same relationship between working, learning and innovation, as suggested by Aceto and Dondi (2009), can be seen from different analytical points of view: the innovation required for the successful introduction of e-learning, and the innovation that e-learning helps develop in working

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¹ Australian Council of Deans of Education - the peak organization representing the deans of faculties of education and heads of schools of education in Australian universities and other higher education institutions.

processes.

If it is true that the ability to access information and the possibility of communicating move at the same pace as the development of new technologies, it is likewise true that people will have to deal with and integrate traditional methods of learning with different learning processes.

Change, motivation and sharing in e-learning

Experience in the field of e-learning suggests that technical skill is not enough to guarantee an effective outcome; experience with web 2.0 suggests the importance of the use of criteria (predefined or to be built up along the way) for selecting information to make headway on the web. By analysing the relationships among lifelong learning, e-learning and innovation, Aceto and Dondi (2009) identify the emergence of some failures in organisations that tested innovative training methods. Within the contexts reported by the authors, the failures of e-learning concern the fact that e-learning may become a given practice poorly motivating both the sharing of experiencing and learning.

In this scenario “biological companies” (Carneiro, 2006) gain importance, which adapt their own style of management to the variability of the environment. Intellectual capital (Stewart, 1999) becomes the element that steers organisational development through learning and continuous refresher courses for people in the organization.

Speed, interconnection and immateriality become the focus of this new way of viewing the market, increasingly mediated by the indispensable presence of Internet. We are witnessing the passage from the integration of new technologies into pre-existing systems to the organization of production activities, starting from the use of new technologies. This change generates new needs and certainly requires taking on new “relational” prerequisites in managing and using the market and knowledge.

Let us return to the use of e-learning platforms: one ought to keep in mind that change, motivation and sharing have always been important concepts in training procedures. They strongly influence the results of e-learning: change understood as use of the results of e-learning; motivation understood as an active attitude during the learning process and; sharing understood as overcoming individualistic behaviour. We consider important monitoring progress within e-learning platforms that provide for the tutoring of learning.

At this point, we wonder if e-learning can effectively start up innovation processes. In what way? With what support?

Web 2.0 and the relationship between new society and new learning

Keeping in mind the technical, social, cultural and economic transformations traceable in the literature and mentioned in the paragraphs above, we would like to focus attention on the joint relationship between technologies and tools, such as web 2.0 and an e-learning project, developed beginning with a European programme (Grundtvig) on the subjects of AIDS and HIV. Some organisations from various European countries have taken part in the project, which were interested in discussing and comparing new ideas on managing and supplying training. This collaboration resulted in an e-learning platform with some very particular features, which will be referred to below to better clarify some of the ideas presented in this article.

Web 2.0 represents the start-up of the interactive web.

Prompted by the words of Bartolomé (2008), we can state that web 2.0 does not constitute a technological revolution of the foregoing one, but rather an integration of new technologies and new tools into the existing ones. In short, web 2.0 proposes a different conceptual view of the potential use of the resources available to the user. E-learning courses are an excellent example of the integration of different technologies and tools. E-learning platforms can avail themselves of Wiki, blogs, RSS reader pages, web office, social bookmarking, video repositories, such as YouTube, shared documents and podcast, video streaming on-line, social network and group work spaces. This is how, on a practical level, the relationship between new society and new learning takes shape.

The prospect of new learning also suggests that sites for e-learning constitute a possibility of

training/refresher courses from the point of view of lifelong and life-wide learning.

Platform for e-learning and building up knowledge: marginal notes of an experience

From the standpoint of a person interacting with a space, structurally connected to countless contents through infinite links, an e-learning platform is only one of the many contents that can be accessed.

From this point of view, a specific e-learning platform constitutes a cluster of web contents. The reliability of the criteria is, for example, proportional to the reliability of the platform manager, who selected them (and organised the platform based on them).

An e-learning platform can be seen as both a space limited by the contents and tools that compose them at a given time and as a junction in a network that can open up and guide towards new paths for the user through tools and contents.

We would now like to propose reflecting on some points starting from experience accrued during the construction of the e-Aids platform. Briefly, we can confirm that the platform, which originated with a European project² through the collaboration of various partners, provides the possibility of planning training programmes with a specific duration, at the end of which it is hoped that the learner has acquired the contents proposed and developed the skills for being able to steer through the net and keep him/herself updated independently.

E-learning platforms may refer to different learning processes: experiential learning and action learning (Simons, Van der Linden, & Duffy, 2000). In experiential learning teachers / trainers help learners to learn from experience without asking or stimulating them to plan the goals and strategies of learning explicitly. Instead they now ask them to focus on action and to reflect on action afterwards. During action learning the learners are asked to plan learning process by defining goals and strategies explicitly.. We find that the integration of both processes constitutes a possible development of e-learning platforms. Of course, the tools and technologies made available on the net can become a resource to be drawn on for implementing the potentials of the platforms and learning process.

Learning Objects

One of the most relevant issues a trainer faces while setting up a training course is the creation/selection of objects and activities useful in reaching a certain goal. Technicians in the sector generally speak of a "learning object" (LO), i.e. a unit with a complete teaching content, centred on a learning objective and aimed at offering a well-focused concept.

An interesting aspect of learning objects is the possibility of combining them. Hodgins (2002) defines them best in his metaphor as "bricks" of knowledge that can generate a variety of fact-finding paths when organised in different ways. The e-Aids platform is consistent with this aspect in that it is structured in such a way as to offer each trainer the opportunity to group learning objects according to their own criteria.

The number of LOs varies at the discretion of the trainer and their contents can be created by the trainer or chosen from those available online. The e-Aids platform was studied in such a way as to allow the trainer to insert his/her own LOs or use those already created by other trainers. Thus, each trainer can use not only his/her own material, but also integrate it with material steadily made available by the community. This way each trainer can personalize the course in terms of the specific target and objectives.

The position of the trainer in the process of e-learning

² Project coordinated by the Dolj (Craiova, Romania) section of Save the Children, the participants of which were from institutions from: Italy, Spain, Czech Rep., Poland and Romania.

E-learning platforms support the sharing of subjects treated, issues raised and exchanges of knowledge and experiences among professionals.

These exchanges require motivation, opening up towards others, flexibility and the ability to assemble criteria for selecting information. The mechanism, by which a trainer can easily pass from a position of organizer of a course to that of user of a platform to acquire knowledge, is a web potential already recognized and appreciated for some time. With some highly interactive platforms, the position of the learner becomes indistinct, since he/she can also become a source of information and knowledge. In addition and in line with what has been said, by assuming the function of e-moderator, the trainer may urge the students to increase their interactive learning through, for example, on-line interaction among the various members of the group.

Support to the trainer

The www.e-aids.ro platform guides the trainer in setting up the course. The group working on the e-Aids platform chose to take great care in training the trainer. This was not due to the difficulty in creating the course and carrying it out (the testing done in this direction confirms this), but because the approach given to learning was found to be innovative. Training in the use of the e-Aids platform, suggested to the trainers, through the use of both manuals published on line on the platform and face-to-face training days, takes into consideration the learning of criteria to plan an e-learning course, by creating and selecting the contents. However, it also proposes ideas to trainers on how to manage virtual classrooms, as well as when and how to implement contacts among the students and between students and trainer, all this being relative to the subject being studied. It also offers indications to trainers on how to use platform tools for monitoring the motivation, sense of belonging to the learning group, the employment of what is learned.

The platform further shows how one can guide the choice of contents depending on the needs of the target group and the objectives to be reached for that target. A guided course leads to the identification of the target group, definition of its needs and selection and setting up learning materials consistent with it³.

E-learning platforms as junctions of a network

The testing and inspection of the www.e-aids.ro platform were organized through setting up the contents that would not be limited to the LO. LOs were also used as holders of connections to resources outside the platform. This system was created starting from the idea that the platform could mediate the relationship of its users to the infinite information available on the web. It was also a chance for the learner to become familiar with other resources on the net. In this sense, e-learning platforms can be considered as a junction on the net, rather than the more traditional view as closed containers with limited outside interference.

E-learning and Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) skills

The value added of each e-learning platform is given by the growth of navigational skills and use of the web by the user. The idea is that, this way, the skills related to PKM (Dorsey, 2004) defined as the set of abilities and skills that sustain, feed and support lifelong learners in a continuous process of building up digital knowledge (Pettenati, Cigognini, Guerin, & Mangione 2008) .

Evaluation and self-evaluation

Evaluation of the results attained by the learner on the [www.e-aids](http://www.e-aids.ro) platform occurs by means of two different methods that support the evaluation of learning related to content as well as the evaluation of the acquisition of skills. For each LO, the learner is evaluated on content by means of

³ <http://e-aids.ro/download/Outputs/Training%20course%20support.pdf>

a closed-answer test that allows for self-evaluation of the level of learning. In addition, the filling out of a "worksheet" is requested that will be sent to the tutor/trainer, who will supply feedback about the work carried out. This is the point at which we thought about interacting with the student in developing skills linked to PKM. In fact, the worksheet can request that the learner find a product useful in evaluating the skills and abilities acquired. For example, one might ask him/her to carry out research on a specific subject on the net, so as to evaluate how the person manages to find, evaluate and organise new information. The evaluation, above all in this case, has a training value and the verification the tutor/trainer gives the learner can be articulated in various ways. The evaluation of abilities is also steered by the objectives of the training course, structured, as stated above, on the basis of the needs of the target.

Setting up contents and information exchange in e-learning

The www.e-aids.ro platform permits the structuring of an e-learning course, more or less oriented towards discussions among the participants, the idea being to support collaborative learning, but also an awareness of the difficulties this results in for those not trained in this direction (both teacher and student). It is thought that collaborative learning can be a point of arrival for a group involved in e-learning, but rarely a starting point. Tools such as Forum, mailing lists or personal e-mail are available to all users. LOs can be set up with less structured contents that ask and stimulate the learners to exchange information as well as to build it up jointly. This does not exclude the opportunity to place the main focus on the contents, if the trainer deems it useful to the learners' needs. In any case, we find that setting up a learning group should be followed and supported since it is closely linked to the results of the training process. The web gives us the tool to work in this direction.

Conclusions

In our opinion, a link among all these factors is tutoring, directed towards motivating and building consistency among the objectives and process, depending on the variability of the participants.

We can conclude that e-learning platforms constitute a good starting point for beginning new learning processes. Refresher courses for accessing these innovations depend on both the trainer and student in their new capacity of "e-prosumers" (producers and consumers of knowledge within the web), both united as users of the web. In addition, and this, to us, is the most relevant aspect, also supported by web 2.0, e-learning incites both trainer and student to reassess their respective premises towards learning.

The prospect facing us is that of a progressive "marginalisation of institutionalised learning" to benefit personalised, social, open, self-managed learning spaces, accessible at any time and in any place, in which daily use shall be mediated by the personal motivation of the learner in participating in the social construction of knowledge.

From this point of view, a thought about setting up criteria for exploring and selecting information on the net constitutes, in our opinion, a field of extremely important research.

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