

E-learning 2.0 for supplementary teaching

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to point out the achievements and the drawbacks of the integration of LMS (learning managements systems) with the tools of the participative web 2.0 through the account of a supplementary online course that has taken place in an Italian secondary high school. It can be considered an innovative experience from many different viewpoints and can be regarded as an example of how the world of traditional teaching can meet the demands of the so called e-learning 2.0, in the broader landscape of the development of a digital competence and lifelong learning.

1 The idea

The idea of creating an online supplementary summer course in English as a foreign language through the use of the web was born in June 2007 as a response to the learning needs of some eighteen-year-old students who had to improve their school results in English language and literature by the beginning of the following school year. It was decided to exploit the availability of an open source LMS from another school¹ and the presence of a popular online helpdesk for English as a foreign language carried out on a blog² plus a podcast³ to organize the activities. The students with learning problems in English were invited to choose between the supplementary summer learning activities traditionally offered by the school and, as an alternative, the participation to a distance course on the web. All the students of this class decided to enrol in the distance course, maybe encouraged by the presence of their teacher as an e-tutor. After the attendance of a trial lesson of technological familiarization with the tools and the resources available on the platform, the students drew up an “educational agreement” with their class teacher in which they accepted to participate actively and responsibly to the remedial activities, to interact in group work and agreed that their works were published, shared and assessed within the project.

The objectives to attain by the end of the course were the following:

- to revise the syllabus and improve the students’ abilities and competence in English language and literature;
- to overcome the learning difficulties in some language strategies;
- to recognize the importance of cooperative learning in one’s own growth;
- to acquire new learning tools for writing in a cooperative way;
- to help the students become active and co-participative involving them in group work;
- to stimulate peer confrontation and horizontal scaffolding.

2 Organizational aspects

A pragmatic approach was chosen. The project was developed through the exploitation of the technology and resources already available at school with tools, materials and activities freely available on the Internet besides some personal materials to enrich on the basis of the students’ needs. Then, a repository of lessons was created with an individual login for the participants. The following phase was the preparation of the school documents and the information of the school community.

The initial idea was to motivate the students in trouble to use the web to solve

¹ www.liceodaprocida.net

² <http://sportelloing.blog.tiscali.it>

³ www.quadripodcast.it

their learning problems preparing some modules where the students were guided gradually in their recovery process aimed at the acquisition of the knowledge, competencies and abilities that are necessary to interact in a particular communicative situation or to attain a specific learning objective. This kind of activity demanded a well organized and complex work, with problems of time, localization of the resources, availability, adaptability of the various materials, learning management problems and so on.

Another important consideration stemmed from the awareness of how, after the success of the so called web 2.0 that is characterised by a more and more active role of the users in the production of contents, some authors have started to criticize the distance learning approach based on the exclusive use of LMS and foster new types of approach (Cross, 2006). The objective to attain for an effective e-learning is the integration of different kinds of knowledge acquisition, from formal to informal, as it happens in traditional learning. So, it was chosen to integrate the experience of the online knowledge management and formal e-learning activities with others deriving from informal e-learning because of the strong motivation that drives towards what has come to be called “e-learning 2.0” (Downes, 2005). E-learning 2.0 requires a new way of considering online learning. It is not a technical question but rather a methodological issue, in other words it deals with the opportunity of becoming authors in the web as well as readers by means of the creation of blogs and podcasts, photo and document sharing and so on through any kind of social interaction. Thanks to the tools of the web 2.0, the traditional distance practice based on the transmission of contents is turned into a more stimulating, appealing interactive process, an aspect of great importance in one’s own learning.

For all these reasons it was decided to prepare only a small number of modules and a few activities focusing the attention on the needs and difficulties on which the students were most in trouble and set the other problems aside. This choice proved to be appropriate, and in fact it was appreciated in the feedback about the project.

The easiness of use of the technologies employed to carry out the project fostered an immediate involvement and a different role connotation of the actors involved in the learning interaction.

3 Teaching activities

Besides the teaching materials uploaded in the repository of the platform, the course was enriched with some posts on the blog and several individual and collaborative activities, chosen by the e-tutor with the aim of arranging some assessment tools to use both during and at the end of the learning process. The students were asked to interview their colleagues who were taking the final diploma exams about the foreign language test, answer a questionnaire about their communicative needs in foreign language learning, re-think about their metacognitive abilities through

a comparison of anonymous papers about the same subject but with different organization, structure and language qualities using the class evaluation grid, to do guided compositions aimed at the revision of the written expression from three different angles – contents, semantic-lexical field, morphology-syntax – to favour the development of specific language strategies. Each activity was revised, shared and discussed in the appropriate thread that had been opened in the forum. The platform⁴ has a memory of the time when a file has been uploaded and allows the e-teacher to send his feedback about the students' work also privately.

Various kinds of documents were uploaded on the LMS: texts, audio files, videos and presentations, not simple video transpositions of papers but materials that try to exploit the new opportunities offered by multimedia. As Donath points out, “the task of teachers is to create a multimedia learning environment which means to structure and to organize the learning process” (Donath, 2008, p. 100).

As regards the creation of communicative virtual places, the forum and the blog were widely used. As often happens, the forum soon became a virtual place of formal discussion and sharing of problems and tools for peer and vertical assessment of the work. The platform provides an e-mail notification of new posts in the forum.

The use of the blog, instead, met the demands of an informal learning environment where further peer interaction is allowed, something that is particularly appealing and motivating for teenagers, many of whom are passionate and experienced bloggers. By the use of both technologies, the condition for effective e-learning through the integration of the formal and informal dimension is fulfilled.

4 Project results and evaluation

In accordance with existing Italian regulations, the results of the experience were assessed through a traditional written and oral test carried out at school together with other students who had to take an extra exam before the attendance of the following school year. However, this experience gave the opportunity of assessing not only the students' final preparation after the course, but also their learning process through the monitoring of their activities on the web. Four out of five students got positive results and did not show any problems in the study of the foreign language in the following school year, only one did not show any appreciable improvements in his preparation.

For the assessment of the project by the students, a questionnaire was provided online⁵ using an online questionnaire generator implemented by prof. Roberto Trincherò at the FAR (Formazione Aperta in Rete) at the University of Turin.

The evaluation of the project was largely positive. Besides the recognition of

⁴ www.horde.org

⁵ http://www.farnt.unito.it/trincherò/qgen/ricchiama.asp?codice=elspad_rec

the validity of such a kind of learning experience as an alternative to traditional teaching practice, it was suggested to extend the experience to the rest of the class during the following school year as a form of integration of traditional teaching activity and revision for the final diploma exam. The request was immediately granted, and the new project involved the whole class with other two classes from other two secondary schools from other parts of Italy⁶. Only one student did not see any utility in such a project and another did not consider the quality of the expression clear enough.

The feedback from the whole class about the new project at the end of the school year in June 2008⁷ was even better, as shown in figure 1.

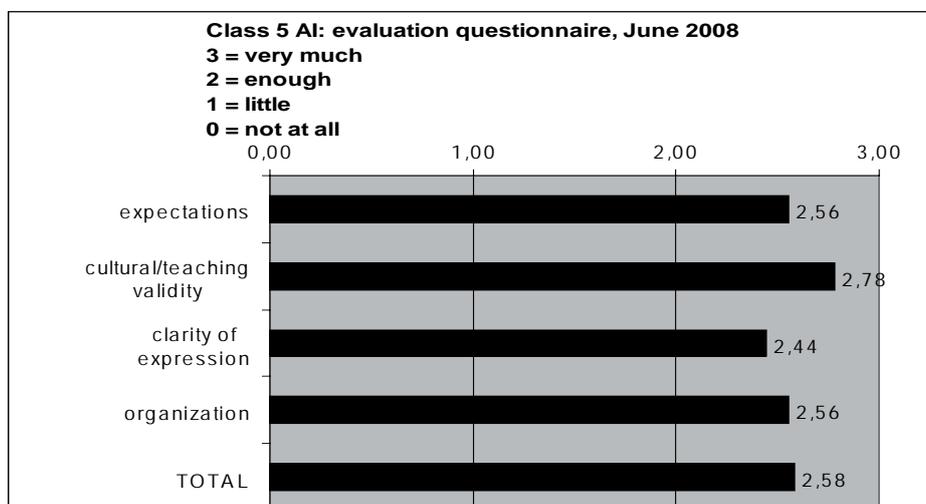


Figure 1 Evaluation of the project “Cooperating through the web”

5 Conclusion

Without pretending to offer a universally valid answer to the problem of the effectiveness of the use of LMS and the web 2.0 in teaching practice, the experience described in this article points out that their progressive introduction can represent a further learning opportunity in both teaching and learning. This does not imply that being able to use the new technologies leads automatically to the acquisition of an effective digital competence as the one recommended among the key competences for lifelong learning by the European Parliament (EEC, 2006), but the use of ICT can offer some opportunities that can be seized in the same way as a rich semantic-lexical competence can favour deeper

⁶ <http://www.liceodaprocida.net/users/cooperareconilweb/spazioweb/>

⁷ http://www.farnt.unito.it/trincherogqen/ricchiama.asp?codice=elspad_coop

thinking abilities. The success and the effectiveness of the online activity have gone beyond my expectations, the challenge is now to keep the students' interest towards this learning experience alive, perpetuating it in time and adapting it to their educational needs.

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