



Elledueò: Integrating “formal” and “social” in a language learning environment of Italian as a Second Language

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Abstract

Elledueò is the social network of the University for Foreigners in Perugia, created with the aim of uniting the international community of teachers of Italian as a Second Language (ISL) via the web. The network, based on a social learning approach, offers them an environment in which everyone shares resources in learning the Italian language and culture.

Elledueò is halfway between a repository and a social network. The added merits of such a tool is the regular use of web technologies by teachers of ISL and the constant interaction in discussing the use of the teaching tools in the network. Elledueò has other users as well - students of Italian as a Foreign Language. In this environment they have the opportunity to come in contact with teaching resources shared by teachers of Italian through which they can undertake an informal type of learning.

1 An integrated online model for learning Italian as a second language

Since 2004, the University for Foreigners in Perugia (USP) has been supplying teaching material on the web. The first period was focused on university courses (a level one Masters diploma for teachers of Italian as a foreign language, in a blended mode, now in its sixth year) and online training courses (training courses for teachers of Italian as a foreign language and for online tutors). In total we have supplied e-learning material through our platform to students from over 35 different countries. At the beginning of 2008 USP, which for more than 80 years has conducted courses of Italian language and culture to students from all over the world, has undertaken a project to create online courses of ISL, exclusively as distance learning or as blended learning. The range of activities linked to the web design, creation and supplying of online language courses is inherently interdisciplinary and inevitably involves different scientific environments and skills. In addition to those dealing with information technology and language teaching, in fact the following come into play:

- Natural language processing skills, which aim to supply language learning tools which derive from the automatic data processing of language (Spina, to be published);
- skills regarding Web 2.0 and social aspects of learning in the network (Tappscott and Williams, 2006);
- skills on the semantic web and architecture of information, to organise and classify the teaching resources and make them efficient and research-friendly (Rosati, 2007).

In this presentation we will focus in particular on the part of the project which refers to the social media experience, linked to Web 2.0 and its consequences on online language teaching methods.

1.1 Elledueò (L2O): a social network to share teaching material

Project APRIL (Ambiente personalizzato di Rete per l’Insegnamento Linguistico) in addition to a platform exclusively meant to teach ISL, through formal and organised courses, plans to create Elledueò (L2O), a social network for non-native teachers and students of Italian (<http://elearning.unistrapg.it/l2o>). From a technical point of view, one of the objectives we propose is to make the two platforms intercommunicative, in order to be able to transfer linguistic resources and activities from one - the formal one, developed in Moodle (Scolastra and Spina, 2009) - to the other - the social one - developed in Drupal.

The initial goal of Elledueò is to bring together the international community

of teachers of ISL providing them with an environment in which each person can share resources in learning the Italian language and culture, with a social approach (Hinkelman, 2008). Everyone can therefore insert the teaching tools that he/she uses daily (in a real-life situation or in a virtual context) in the network, with the double advantage of:

- setting up a repository of teaching tools classified /labelled in levels (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, Council of Europe, 2002) as well as according to subject and grammatical and communicative functions;
- supply the teachers with a platform in which to discuss, starting from the material inserted into the network, about the teaching methods in which they are used, learning strategies, the objectives that can be achieved through them.

Elledueò is therefore a working environment halfway between a repository (a structured database where you can store and research for appropriately categorised teaching resources) and a social network with all the characteristics (interaction, user-generated contents, strong social imprint) which distinguish this kind of environment. It therefore includes the two elements which according to Lefever characterise network communication: stocks and flows (Lefever, 2009). “Stocks” are units of organised, static units of information, that exist in a certain place and are stable points of reference (in our case the teaching material is organised and categorised in the repository). The “flows” refer to the flow of information produced by the users, linked to the dimension of time and hence dynamic, in constant evolution, captivating from the point of view of participation. The importance of a virtual place in which material and teaching experience can be stored is even greater in the light of the fact that teaching a language as a SL systematically uses multimedia contents: the uncommon wealth of teaching resources that the web offers teachers and students, mixing texts belonging to different codes, all potentially exploitable in teaching a foreign language (Spina, 2007) can be channelled into a single open environment and constantly updated, in which these multimedia contents are stored, labelled and shared. The advantages of such a working tool is that teachers of ISL are thus “pushed” to regularly use the web technologies. They are automatically immersed in the virtual environment that houses the repository, are invited to interact with the teaching community to discuss the use of the contents in the network. They are thus naturally inclined to pass from a “minimalistic” use of the web (for e.g. find, perhaps by chance, a video in Youtube and use it in class) to a “maximalistic” and systematic use of the Internet, which is not experienced as an occasional and sporadic event but as an opportunity to radically renew one’s own teaching method. From teaching through technology one moves on

to teaching in technology (Calvani, 2008).

1.2 Elledueò for students

Elledueò, however, also has other users as well. Students of ISL, those who attend a course in Perugia but also those all over the world who decide to learn or master our language. Along with the formal type of environment of online language courses that are supplied within a platform specifically set up for this purpose (with articulated learning processes organised in teaching units, periodic tests to evaluate the skills, etc.) there is the possibility to benefit from an informal type of environment, collaborative rather than hierarchical, with a network organisation, rather than a structured one. For “informal” we can refer to Kahnwald’s definition.

«Learning or studying, happening in daily life, at work, within family life or on leisure time, which is not structured or organized (in regard to goals of learning, time slots assigned to learning or learning support) and usually does not lead to any kind of certificate. Informal learning may be goal oriented but in most cases happens unintentionally, coincidentally or at random.» (Kahnwald, 2009).

In this environment students have the opportunity to enter in contact with teaching resources shared by teachers of Italian, to use them to improve or simply test their language skills, and also to propose new ones. Informal learning environments, as observed by the (MIT Center for Collective Intelligence) are especially efficient in a concerted construction of collective intelligence because they stimulate innovation and creativity. The student community of ISL, through a social and informal approach thus have the opportunity to actively participate in setting up the teaching contents (Guth and Petrucco, 2009). Therefore Elledueò is an open, sharing environment in which teachers and students of ISL:

- together build a repository of collaborative linguistic resources; compare and discuss methods and teaching strategies;
- work together within the same technical environment.

2 Website designing and information technology of the social network

2.1 Website designing of the network

Elledueò is based on one of the most widespread and supported CMS on the web: Drupal (Hogbin, Kafer 2009). A CMS (Computer Management System) is a system which permits the user to create web pages, without having

to bother with writing the source code. The main reasons for which we chose CMS are:

- it is an open source system;
- deep roles granularity;
- the presence of a large number of add-on modules on the web which enhance the basic functioning of the system.

The fact that the system is open source has permitted us to intervene directly on the source codes of some modules, to adapt them better to our needs. The deep roles granularity has permitted us to create very detailed user-specific roles. We have users who are managers, those with editing privileges, registered and non-registered users. Every user inherits from the previous one the permissions to carry out the activity within the platform, enhancing them with further privileges. Those with editing experience for example are effectively authenticated users with the additional possibility of creating and publishing teaching material within the network. The registered user, unlike the non-registered user, can post comments to separate items of contents or write on the forum, has his/her own user profile and so forth. The presence on the web of a number of additional modules has allowed us to face the problem of the security of the portal. One of the many problems to resolve is the publication of damaging contents in the network. In an attempt to reduce this risk we use the modules “Captcha” and “Mollom”. The former in the registration stage of a new user and in the stage of publishing material, in cases considered to have a risk factor, adds a further check before the final commit, to verify the validity of the content and the real presence of the one who inserts it. The latter takes advantage of an online system that intercepts spam (Mollom) to block possible attacks by automatic systems.

2.2 Towards a social network

The functions to render Elledueò a social platform were added taking recourse to the huge community of Drupal developers in the world. The ever increasing availability of bandwidth and computers, client side and server side, has in fact permitted us to set up more articulated modules rich in new social functions, making the old tools of interaction appear outmoded, obsolete. We will now take a brief look at which modules have been chosen to render Elledueò “social” and their specific functions on the platform.

2.2.1 Additional modules

Comments and FiveStar Rating: these two modules are very important sin-

ce they permit users to rate or make a suggestion on the contents of teaching material present in the platform. In particular with Comments you can leave comments on the page, while with Five Star Rating it is possible to rate inserted contents. The rating, as the very name of the module suggests, is based on five stars ranging from 1 to 5, respectively representing the rating between Poor and Excellent.

Abuse. The module works parallelly to Comments and permits you to inform an administrator if the content of a comment is offensive. In case the administrator considers the comment unsuitable he can definitively eliminate it from the platform.

Embedded media field. Through this model you can create specific fields in the pages of the portal, where you can insert audio and video clips and images present in other Internet sites. It is enough to insert the html embedding or URL code of the page in which the chosen content is present and the module automatically incorporates it in the desired page.

User profile. Through this module you can personalise the fields of the user profile, adding spaces for specific information. In our case for e.g. we have added “Whom I teach” and “Where I teach”, etc.

Relationship, Who’s online, Facebook Style Status and Private Message. These modules are very important for the direct interaction among users of the network. The Relationship module allows users to make friends, Who’s online shows users who are connected which of the other members are online at that moment. Facebook Style Status allows you to customise your own personal status giving users the possibility of sharing personal thoughts with others and Private Message allows the exchange of private messages among users.

Share and Service Link. If the content is particularly interesting and you want to share it with other friends on another online service (Facebook, Google groups) it is possible by using these two modules. There is a “share button” on each page which allows you to publish the pages onto the web.

Invite. Through this module a user who finds Elledueò interesting can propose it to a friend, by simply indicating the e-mail address. The module generates an e-mail message of invitation and sends it to the receiver.

2.3 Content management

Elledueò was created to share teaching material and teaching/learning experience. To obtain this we have integrated a few specific functions to our CMS. According to the type of material you wish to insert, Elledueò has a specific function of insertion, management and organisation of the contents. The platform provided for two types of contents: video and teaching material. The first one allows you to insert material by using embed (Google video and

Youtube) through a direct URL or through a film upload that can integrate texts or images. The teaching material on the other hand provides for the insertion of images, incorporating them from Flickr or adding them directly within the platform, the possibility to write texts and attach a file. Both types of contents can be categorised into Content, Topic and Level. These functions to manage contents have been added to the portal, taking advantage as in the social learning aspect, of a few additional modules:

- Tagadelic: allows you to add tag contents;
- MP3 player: allows you to insert audio files and reproduce them using a Flash Player incorporated in the platform;
- Video: incorporating or uploading videos as contents;
- View: allows us to create web pages providing a flexible method to control how lists and tables of content are presented. It is very simple to generate the query and it can be done graphically;
- Newsletter: at pre-fixed intervals of time all registered users will receive an e-mail with the latest contents inserted in the platform;
- Feed RSS: allows you to update in real time all the contents present on the platform.

2.4 Organisation of contents

All new contents of the platform are visualised on the homepage, adding as in a blog, the new material at the top of the list. In this manner every user immediately sees the most recently inserted topics. To facilitate the navigation of all the contents of the portal we also use additional functions, like research and tagging. It would not be practical to have to scroll the page looking for a particular item of content. As for research, it is made possible by a continuous and detailed indexing of contents, that allows you to search for any term with three or more characters. The research can be made advanced, by selecting for example only the type of material or a specific language level. The system of tagging provides three types of different tags, to be inserted in the publication stage of new material: Level, Content, Topic. It is obligatory to insert the Level tag based on the relevant Common European Framework language levels (A1, A2, B1...). The Content tag is obligatory and provides for the tagging of teaching material indicating the type of material (video, images, texts). The Topic tag allows you to indicate the key words of new material (from a grammatical, communicative point of view or simply the topic of the material). All three types of tags have multiple selection i.e. the selection of more tags for one single piece of material, if for example the content is both in video and text form, it will be possible to select both video and text in the Content tag.

Conclusion

Elledueò is therefore a network open to the collaboration of teachers and students of ISL. The former, radically modifying their teaching methods, share and collectively set up their teaching material on the web. The latter can participate in this joint venture and use the teaching and language resources contained in the network in a perspective of informal learning.

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