Portic.ol: a quality oriented University student community

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Abstract

The article describes an on-line collaborative learning pattern capable of developing a double process of skills evolution. It concerns the three main dimensions of collaborative learning: the theoretical, methodological and social ones. The benefits and characteristics of the educational strategy are based on consolidated academic methods on the one hand, and on an empirical field experimentation on the other. The field experimentation is a collaborative learning community composed of students and trainers (academics and professionals) of the Human Resources Training and Management Course (http://www.comunicazione.uniroma1.it/porticol/) at the Communication Sciences Faculty, «La Sapienza» University in Rome. The Portic.ol student community realizes the learning pattern and develops an interesting didactic experience for the practitioners. The pattern, based on a blended approach, allows the balance between face to face learning and on-line learning to take place. The Portic.ol student community's learning path has been planned by a focused design activity which is based on three things: design usability, develop common practice, and plan sociability.

1. The University faces new challenges

Learning means changing. Change of convictions, enrichment and development of competence, acquisition of new knowledge, of course not only for the learner: in view of rapid changes in the University World the methods of teaching have also been renewed, to reach new exigencies and educational strategies with adequate skills of teaching and learning. In this way university fields that are alive and attentive to the external and internal signs, can assist the experimentation of new didactic and learning patterns.

At the University, as has been so widely discussed, different reasons exist to adopt e-learning methods and tools. In a Communication Sciences Faculty there is another: it is educating students in new communication technologies and collaborative learning in a direct and active way, an experience which literature and experts recommend. A University Faculty is of course both a place of education and research, that is why for some years in the Communication Sciences Faculty of Rome different ways of doing e-learning have been experienced: the Laboratory of online writing, the supply of entire distance degree courses with the Nettuno's syndicate platform, the fruition of single distance courses of teachers with the contribution of Cattid., the realization of seminaries on assigned platforms, the online activities that accompany higher level training courses and masters, and finally, the experience of Portic.ol, the online portico for the collaborative learning of the Human Resource Training and Management Course.

Each of the experiences that we have written about has its own educational strategy and objective, according to the research autonomy and didactics of the teachers that have organized it. I am convinced, however, that the most adequate choice to a university course is blended learning, with an integration of presence and distance methods. That is why we prefer to speak about «the distance learning too», it widens the educational possibilities, multiplies the spaces and improves the relations of the learning community.

Portic.ol is exactly this: a learning community, where you can have times and opportunities to make a lot of questions and receive and give some answers, a social-technical system for education, an education that is concentrated on a collaborative learning, that is made of open source technologies that are experienced and developed in the Communication Laboratory of the Sociology and Communication Department.

2. University online collaborative learning: the Portic.ol experience

2.1 Why the Portic.ol of Communication Sciences?

The Communication Sciences Faculty of the University «La Sapienza» of Rome counts about 12.000 students that are more than the availability of the physical

structures that they need for their appropriate training. That is why every teacher has the problem of supplying quality education to a large quantity of students, a problem that for a course called Human Resources and Training Management becomes itself an object of training.

The response from this Course has been Portic.ol, the online Portic.ol of via Salaria. Portic.ol is an educational strategy, a didactic methodology, a flexible technological solution: that is why every academic year is newly planned to follow the changes, such as the oscillation of the students that attend the courses, the student's typology, the quantity of those who choose to major in this Course.

The first version of Portic.ol was in 2002-2003 academic year, with a construction of an internet website and a virtual forum space for collaborative learning. According to that first experience and its success the following 2003-2004 year Portic.ol has changed technologically, while the educational strategy and the objectives of the Course have not: an innovative training on the managerial themes of people in complicated organizations, their development, and the ways through which they can share the most precious gift that they possess, knowledge.

The Portic.ol community is divided into two parts:

- Portic.ol A: 120 students that are attending the course for the first time. These students are divided into 20 learning groups, to exchange knowledge about themes that have been discussed during the lessons and read in the exam books;
- Portic.ol B: 20 students choose to attend a second more intensive research course. These students are divided into 4 research groups, that were selected from all those who requested the second course. In addition to this, these «biennial» students are mentors of Portic.ol A students, they use and consolidate the skills that they have acquired during the previous academic year.

To plan and conduct the Portic.ol three dimensions were made: the theoretical, the methodological and the social. To describe them we show the case of Portic.ol B in particular, without forgetting to point out the connections between the two learning communities.

2.2 The theoretical and methodological dimension

The basic philosophy of the Portic.ol experience is the choice to personalize every didactic solution about the educational needs of the learners. This choice regards in an integrated way, both the learning course and the particulars of the technological platform.

The first reference is to the collaborative learning theories (Kaye, 1992; Bruner, 1984), that includes, in particular: the sharing of different perspectives: the solicitation to explain and communicate to the others your own knowledge and your oral or writing comprehension (Vygosky, 1962; 1978); and the motivation value of being part of a lively group (Rogers, 1970). Finally, an essential reference for us

is the knowledge creation model of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), or rather «the knowledge spiral», which has oriented all the fields of the virtual space, that have been realized to simplify the sharing of knowledge through socialization activities, clarification, and the sharing-internalization.

The planned and used learning model is based on a blended approach, of balance between the in presence learning (face to face lessons and meetings in small groups), the online learning (on dedicated environments) and the «to take the field» (with the gathering of empiric data).

We can see it in detail:

1. *in presence learning (face to face lessons),* allows a direct contact between teachers and learners, it simplifies the acceptance of the basic inputs about the themes that are discussed. In this case learning is the result of a communicative transmission between the teacher and the learners (usually one way, the teacher to the learner) and it is supported by the construction of the knowledge that arrives from the acquisition and revision of the information by the individual;

2. *the online learning,* as it is planned, makes possible the deepening of the received in presence inputs through both the comparison between teacher and learners and the comparison among the learners themselves. The planned technological field supports the supply courses and the sharing of data and the information, the development and the management of the interaction for the creation of the knowledge during the theoretical study and the empiric research phases;
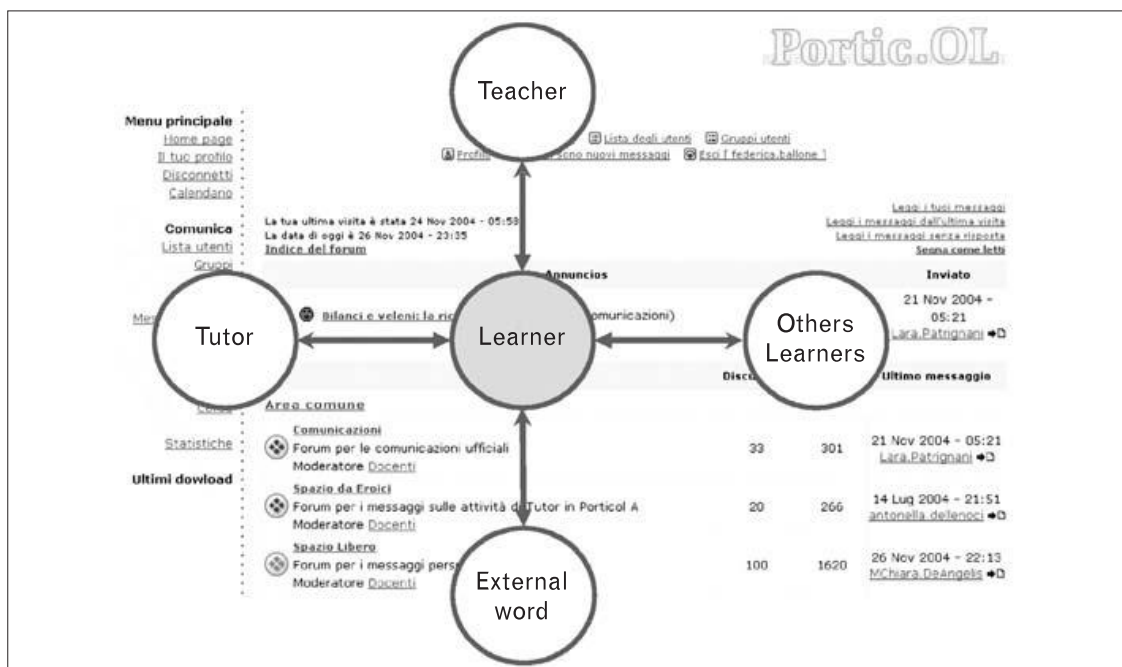

Figure 1 The didactic approach that is adopted in Portic.ol B; in the background there is an image of the virtual space.

3. *the «to take the field»* represents the learner's action, or the experimentation of how they have learnt specific work skills during individual or group study: the Portc.ol learning experience is not closed inside this Course and the University, but it is connected to the outside. Students have the opportunity to meet companies, public administrations and experts/specialists. They have the possibility to make interviews, case studies, valuation of works' hypothesis and comparisons. In this case the learning that takes place in the field, is strongly motivated, innovative and enjoyable.

The chosen learning model individualizes the components and the dimensions of the course, that means all the elements that connote the whole project. It derives from the project that is used during the academic year, which basically has two fundamental methodological inputs:

1. the reference to an online community model that has been consolidated in literature;

2. the reference to a competences model that has been inspired in a «company» way.

The model to which Portic.ol refers (Preece, 2000) defines «an overview of the community-centred development (CCD) process» or rather an involvement course of an online community that is represented in the following figure 3:
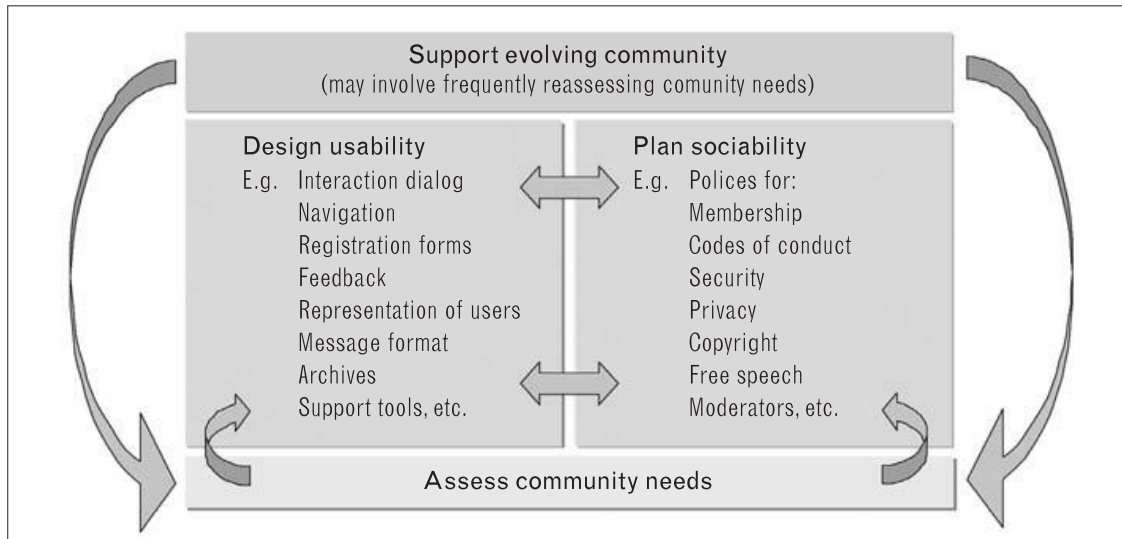
Figure 2   The Community-centred development model (Preece, 2000).

The model presents some interesting ideas that are later resumed in the Portic. ol model:

a) it is a process model that represents the evolution and the development steps of a community;

b) it puts the community's needs at the base of this process;

c) it individualizes the exact dimensions of the community's success (Design usability and Plan sociability), it details the single internal components.

The competences model that we use is another of (maybe the most important) Portic.ol's point of reference. Its choice starts from a question, that seems apparently expected: What do we want to(and can) give to the students? What are the learning needs? The Human Resource Training and Management Course, which is made of professionals and consultants who work in this field, can of course transfer the theoretical knowledge, but it can also do more than this. It can propose to the students to measure themselves with themes, problems, the typical interaction methods of a real work team. It can simplify the construction of a people community that studies interesting themes, not only about literature, but also about the world of real organizations. So it is natural to refer to a learning model so widely shared between experts and the company training operators that sees competences as:

• to know something «the quantitative leaning of data, knowledge, notions and conceptual elements» (Quaglino, 1998);

• can do something, «the qualitative learning of particular abilities (...) that are required to run out a particular work or to deal with problems that are connected to a particular institutional or professional rule» (Ibidem);

• can be, «quantitative and qualitative learning, intensive improvement of your own knowledge elements (...) personal evolution and approach to different relation problems (...) in a social field in general or in groups, organizations and institutions» (Ibidem).

From these methodological arguments we can obtain this model of online collaborative learning on which Portic.ol B is based.
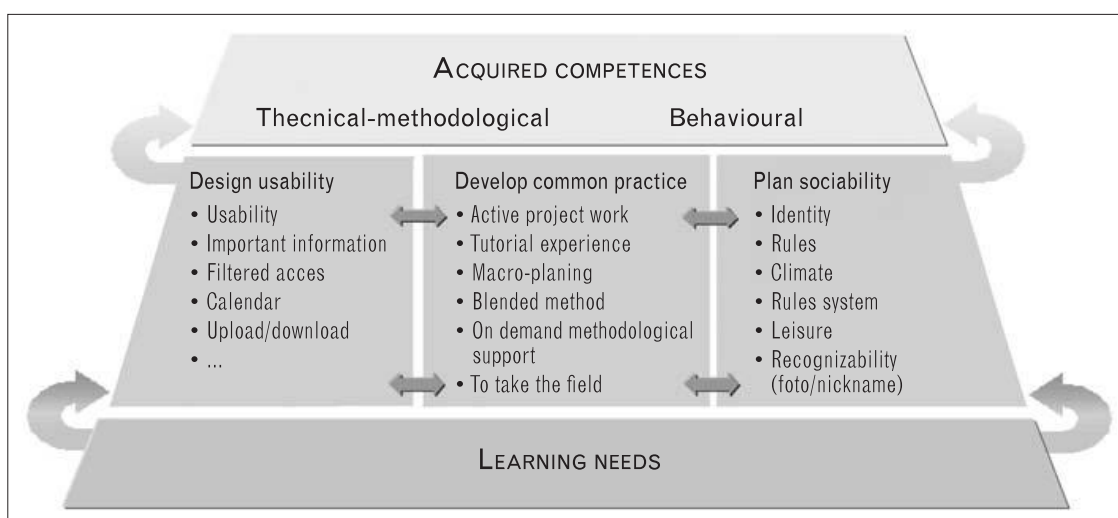

Figura 3 The online Portic.ol collaborative learning model.

This model integrates three dimensions:

Design usability: Portic.ol is a technological environment that has been studied according to people and to their learning course. The platform, whose access to contents is filtered according to the registration rule (visitor, student, teacher), consists of a forum model, that is used to guarantee a wide use to all those that don't have a solid web knowledge.

Plan sociability: Portic.ol is a social environment that has been studied to maintain the «spontaneity» of the interactions and to assure easy involvement.

It evolved gradually thanks to some features that the platform permitted: the recognizability of people, the use of emoticons, the construction and the alimentation of «open spaces» of the forum for different subjects. But more than the technology, the planning has allowed the construction of the Portic.ol 's people community: the individualization of collaboration rules that are born and shared by people themselves, the definition of rules that are formally (teachers-coordinators, tutors, students) and informally recognized (spontaneous leaders) and the construction of work subgroups.

Develop common practice: Portic.ol is first of all, an environment of common practice (learning environment), that has been studied to share objectives, to realize in presence and online activities, with a continuous monitoring of activities and feedback between teachers and learners and learners themselves.

The possibilities for training looked for a good balance between the student's autonomy and the support by the teachers, teachers that have participated in the macro planning of the activities and for the eventual methodological supports during the project work. However the students had the opportunity to measure themselves with concrete professional activities, tutorship and project work and experience in the field of specific research methodologies and planning management.

2.3 The social dimension

Portic.ol B is structured for online work and with shared space and reserved access to registered users. At the «heart» of Portic.ol are the forums, that are articulated in a moderate, Common Area by teachers and /or assistants in a space that is dedicated to the activity of project work. Projects in which students share documents, knowledge, experiences, progress and definitive outputs.

The educational and learning process inside the Portic.ol experience has different phases that are illustrated in figure 4.

We can briefly see the learning objectives that are pursued in single phases.

1. *Socialization*, the construction of the «Portic.ol's people» identity: the first activity of the Portic.ol process is the construction of work groups and the creation of the first contact on the platform, to acquire familiarity with the technological
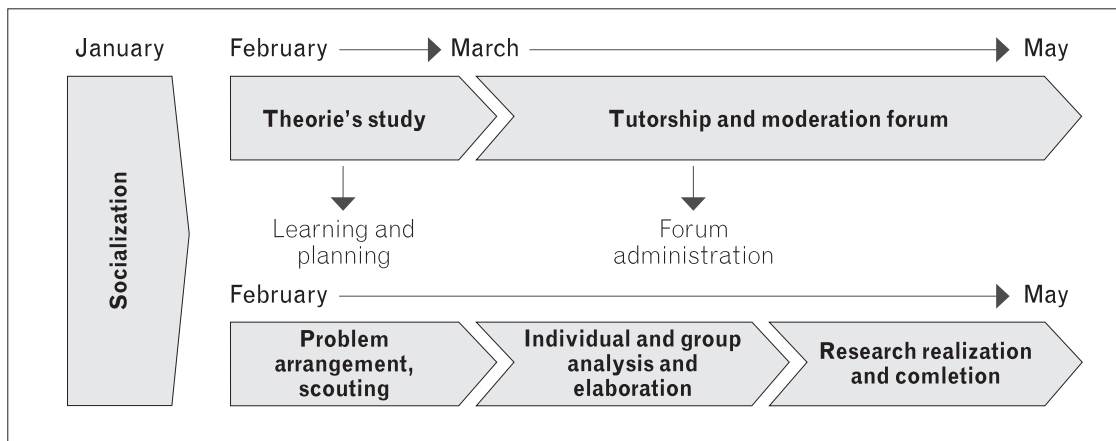
Figure 4 The Portic.ol B process.

functions, to start to explore the tools that are offered by the online environment, but in particular to create and develop the group's identity.

2. *Learning and planning* of the courses: once the groups are formed they enter the learning process (February 2004). They plan, mainly on-line, their own research course and arrange their theme of development. Through an attentive theoretical study on the themes (theme/problem arrangements, scouting of the sources), the groups individualize the inquiry typology (empiric or theoretical) more appropriate to reach objectives and start the first course of analysis. The next phase (march-may 2004) consists of work groups that are involved in deep analysis and individual and group elaboration of the arguments. The groups have different kinds of activities (delphi analysis, *case study*, macro planning of a distance learning course, interviews, qualitative, quantitative and documental analysis) and all the phases of the distance research course and learning of the groups are always supported by the interaction with the Tutor and with the Teachers; The sharing and exchange of knowledge about the process and contents is done daily and is shown in the appropriate virtual space.

3. *Forum Administration* of Portic.ol A: while students realize the research activities in their groups, they are mentors for the learning groups of their younger Portic. ol A colleagues, that are always supported by the teacher's team.

3. Conclusions

The Portic.ol experience has allowed the students to reach different objectives:

- contents: this has permitted the deepening of the Course themes, that are relevant for the research and work world: conciliation of life and work times, intellectual capital, e-learning and collaborative learning knowledge management;
- methodology: this has given the students the opportunity to experience by themselves the online distance learning process. A process that has been supported by

new technologies, and it has allowed the students to experience all the particular phases of a research project;

- socialization: the Portic.ol experience has given the students the possibility to experience the external world (companies, research centres, no profit organizations, public administrations) and the internal world (the other students, other important university people, teachers and assistants).

The main points of this educational experience are the following:

- the opportunity that students have to realize an integrated training course in three years: in the first year they should deepen and share the Course themes, in the second year they should realize a complete research group activity and in the third year they should choose and realize a thesis project. Any of the students can of course stop attending the training process whenever he/she wants;
- the choice and the sharing of the students of an educational strategy with an explicit learning accord: at the first meeting with the students a course structure is presented and an educational strategy is explained. The objectives and the results that are expected, the responsibilities, the competences that should be acquired, the most important values and the behaviour rules of the community are indicated;
- the voluntary adherence of the students to the system experimentation: the students are not obliged to attend the courses, but once they have chosen the Portic.ol course an active involvement is required;
- the choice of the technology that is used, first the educational strategy, then the objectives and the results that are expected, and then every year the most appropriate technology is chosen;
- the visibility of the group activities to permit the sharing of the experiences, and avoid the creation of reserved or closed spaces: each of those involved can observe the other group's work, but they cannot participate in it: however, for sharing, other adequately equipped spaces exist, where communication is more or less formal;
- innovative themes that have been chosen for project work: every year no traditional themes are chosen and presented for the research activities, this avoids the risk of replication and comparison with previous groups;
- a strong collaboration in the course organisation and planning team. This team consists of professionals that work together on training, research, and organization and university consulting.
- the existence of an activities monitoring system and valuation both during and at the end of the courses. Valuations that can be made also by the learners;
- the creation of an internal community: not only a educational experience, but also a creation of an individual and group identity (the Portic.ol's people of Communication Sciences);

- the acquisition of the online tutorship experience by the students. Experience that can be immediately used in the work place;
- positive effects on the quality of the thesis of the students majoring in the Human Resource Training and Management course: innovative themes that are chosen, exact methodologies and a scientific interest in the results.

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