

Beyond e-learning: from blended methodology to transmedia education

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Abstract

Nowadays, at the time of convergence culture, social network, and transmedia storytelling – when social interactions are constantly remediated – e-learning, especially in universities, should be conceived as a sharing educational activity. Different learning experiences should become smoother and able to fade out the closed learning environments (as software platform and classrooms (either virtual or not)). In this paper, we will show some experiences of the Communication Sciences degree program of the University of Cagliari, which is supplied through an e-learning method. In the ten years since its foundation, the approach has evolved from a blended learning with two kinds of traditional activity (online activities and face-to-face lessons) to a much more dynamic learning experience. Many new actors (communication companies, local government, public-service corporations, new media and social media) – indeed – have been involved in educational and teaching process. But also these processes changed: collaborative working, new media comprehension, self-guided problem solving are examples of the new literacies and approaches that can be reached as new learning objectives.

Keywords: *e-learning, social media, blended, transmedia storytelling*

Introduction

In this paper we will describe some experiences of blended learning in the Communication Sciences degree program of the University of Cagliari, in which the teaching strategies – in the last ten-years – evolved towards more and more open educational activities. While at the beginning interactions were mostly limited to online and face-to-face delivery activity, now teachers, tutors, and educators, tend to mix up most of the factors (institutional, educational, working, playful media environments) in which students learn.

State of the art

Usually, the term 'blended learning' means a particular form of teaching with technology. More specifically, 'blended' is typically referred to a mixture of e-learning and more traditional forms of learning (Holden et al. 2010). Nevertheless, as it happens to many terms within this field, it remains ambiguous and ill-defined. The most commonly accepted meaning, however, sees the blended learning as a combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005; Bonk and 2006). The blended learning is most widely used within the training tradition, rather than within public education; there its importance arises from the failure of purely online learning to meet the training needs of organisations (Driscoll, 2002).

1. The experience at the University of Cagliari

In this paper we will follow a pragmatic approach that refers to a twofold aspect: 1. a curriculum that includes portions of traditional classroom instruction with other portions accessed on-line (Driscoll, 200); 2. the use of multiple media – synchronous or asynchronous – to achieve an integration of instructional methods. These

factors have been changed over time on the one hand as the effect of evolution of technology and on the other hand as the influence of technology in social interaction and communication activities (Dron and Anderson, 2014).

In particular, the birth and explosive spread of new media and social networks (Ranieri and Manca, 2013) has had a very strong impact on the evolution of the Science of Communication degree program of the University of Cagliari, which is supplied through e-learning methods (Favrin and Gola, 2011; Gola and Favrin, 2011). At the beginning (2006–2009), teaching courses were structured into two distinct kinds of instructional activities: multimedia online products/videos and off line face-to-face lessons. Furthermore, the Moodle platform represented a closed system: its boundaries corresponded to the boundaries of learning possibilities. This approach was successful, but the program was mainly drawing the interest of adults and working students, which both like to have fixed materials and rigid planned activities. Until 2010, when new media and social network became widely popular, things evolved and changed a lot. Year after year, the learning environment started to spill over its boundaries to reach other effective external learning. First of all social networks became an important component of the learning environment: we activated and constantly we manage four social network accounts: an youtube channel (ScComuUnica, since 2009) a facebook page (com.unica, since 2010)); a twitter account (ScComunica, since 2012; an instagram account (com.unica, since 2014). Through these media we work to create an open community, in which teachers, students, other persons interested to communication theme can interact together.

In addition, real world institutions and companies started to bring teaching outside of the university walls. The first step in this direction has been a sort of internal stage (Progetti 'CaT' – Crediti a Tempo), in which students have been involved in 'job-like' tasks. The interesting aspects of these projects have been mainly two: on the one hand the interaction through the platform that allowed the organisation of activities; on the other, these projects realised specific goals – such as organisation of events, preparation of advertising material, functions of the press office and public relations for the course, video recordings of seminars and interesting events, functions of social media team – in which educational contents have been implemented in real assets.

These opportunities, which were designed to enhance the skills of the students, gave them a way to be involved in live real activities, which were managed through the virtual environment: registration, submission of their applications, compensation with college credits (CFU) – similar to those obtained with the external training, assigned in proportion to the effort expended in assigned tasks – are all aspects that an exclusively online or a traditional face-to-face teaching would not have allowed. The management of interpersonal relationships, the need to structure an organisation to carry out the task and contact with faculty outside of the standard relationship teacher–student have proved very important for the education of students. Eventually these factors lead, almost naturally, to the integration of the Moodle platform with the social media toolkit.

For all these reasons, in the 2012, when we designed a short course and a master's degree, we decided to develop an integrated learning environment, in which the virtual platform was not a self-contained and closed environment, but rather, a starting point for the whole educational path.

We have reached this goal both by increasing the number of CaT projects and by transforming them from simple collaborations in the internal activities of the course degree, in a true task force of students capable of supporting all the initiatives related to communication in the territory.

In this way, the course was able to follow out systematically:

Conferences promoted by the University: six editions of 'Com.unica senza frontiere' festival dedicated to support the degree course; international research conferences including the RaAM's world biennial conference 'Metaphor in Communication, Science and education'. In these cases, the students' task was not only to cooperate in logistics but also to narrate the conference using different types of social networks and all available media; workshops and specific lessons were organised to train the students in the most effective use of social networks.

Some local and national events related to communication and valorisation of cultural heritage: the event '#Invisibili', exhibition of illustrations created within the project of rewriting on Twitter (twitteratura) Calvino's novel *Le città invisibili*; 'L'invasione digitale dei Giganti di Mont'e Prama', guided tour of the nuragic sculptures exhibition located at the Archaeological Museum of Cagliari and, at same time, related by the students with images and text on social networks; '#NBTW' ('La notte bianca digitale'), organised by 'Invasioni digitali' and the influencer @insopportabile: dedicated to the culture and tourism under the slogan 'The culture never sleeps'; the cultural event 'Monumenti aperti' promoted by the Region of Sardinia and many other associations: on this occasion the students, in addition to social and content curation, made an experiment in transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2007; Giovagnoli, 2013), by producing videos and digital stories to promote the cultural heritage of Cagliari area.

From the educational point of view there were major positive side effects, as well as the skills acquired by the students in conducting the activities related to the events. Above all, there was an interaction among university

courses of different degrees (graduate degree and postgraduate short course in management of communication products and services), among students from different profile (youth, adults, workers) and among teachers of different subjects that integrated knowledge and skills for the realisation of a specific goal.

The design of the courses in communication area at the University of Cagliari followed a strategy, which is similar in its structure to a transmedia storytelling process. There is a narrative 'core' (the Moodle platform with its clear terms) and educational goals, from which many storylines originate (learning paths). Students can freely select among the available storylines, depending on their personality, their preferences, and the skills that they possess or wish to acquire. These storylines, indeed, are available in every media and students can follow a storyline alone or can integrate them: orality (F2F lessons, lectures, seminars or events), writing and reading (activities related to journalism and publishing), audiovisual, social networks and gamification (activities related to film-making and communication of cultural heritage, etc.). Structured this way, the course offers students a real media education, which, for an undergraduate degree in Communication Sciences, should be a major objective. In any case, the more classical activities of e-learning do not disappear, especially because of students who are already employed, as they do not, usually, have time to participate in the collaborative activities.

2. Conclusions

This integrated and open learning environment has produced very important results for the whole educational offer in Communication Science:

While in the early years of the degree the strict mode of delivery in e-learning especially attracted the attention of adult and worker learners, starting from academic year 2010–2011, the number of enrolled young students has increased. Indeed this has coincided with a positive trend in absolute terms in enrolments between 2010 and 2013 (fig. 1).

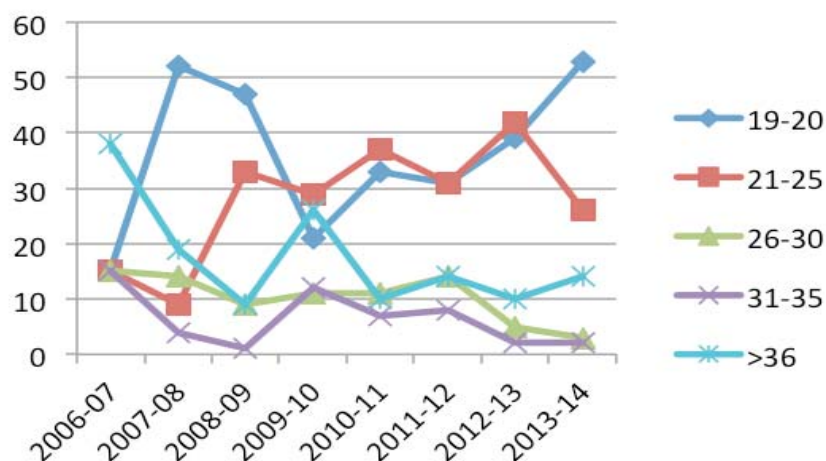


Fig. 1 Trends in age of students.

A shortening of the distance between university education and lifelong learning. This distinction initially had the disadvantage of creating 'ghettos of learning' (student workers and not, young and adult students; learning for pleasure or necessity, etc.). Furthermore, a positive side effect has been an easier and fruitful exchange of information and expertise between the courses and the categories of learners.

A close relationship with partners in the business world and the needs of the market. Through the many initiatives that the course organised and participated, the students had:

The opportunity to meet and approach – in a collaborative and creative way – communication companies, local government, public-service corporations, since the first year of the course (fig. 2).

The opportunity to know and use new communication tools web based, thanks to the collaboration between 'adult' students and 'young' students.

The opportunity to test immediately – on the field – the theoretical tools learned during in-class time or through the knowledge content accessible in the platform, making a concrete experience of 'cognitive apprenticeship'.

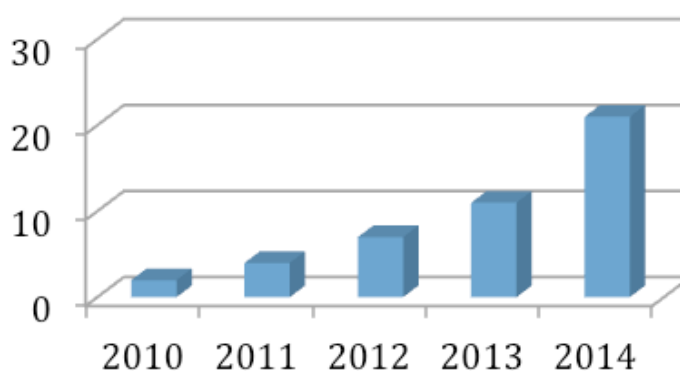


Fig. 2 Increasing of activities for companies and organizations.

Thus, the meaning of the term 'blended' assumes a wider and smoother sense than the traditional perspective that put together the two separate dimensions of online and offline. This widening of the meaning has been mainly caused by the increase and growth, in these last years, of web interactive media (Ragone et al. 2011).

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