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USING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS IN ADULT EDUCATION

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***Abstract:** Information explosion in recent years has resulted in changing the context in which learning takes place with online education as a consequence of the emergence of the virtual classes.*

Virtual education describes education that takes place online in virtual environments, where courses are broadcasted on learning platforms, using the Internet.

The paper is focused on the theoretical aspects of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). Few characteristics of teaching-learning are presented.

In this type of learning, the roles of learners and tutors are also changed.

The advantages of the integrated online tools in a VLE from the tutor perspective are discussed.

Keywords: *Virtual Learning Environments, education, e-learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although they had been initially created for distance/remote education, the virtual learning means - Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are nowadays used as auxiliaries to the traditional teaching activities, also known under the name of de Blended Learning.

In the virtual learning, based on the resources made available to them, the students can perform activities similar to those in the traditional learning, involving however a certain degree of personal effort: they can independently study contents, solve exercises, analyse case-studies, etc..

The Virtual Learning Environment includes the following elements:

- Administrative information including the venue (location the event takes place), conditions for enrolment, information concerning

the number of credits awarded to the course;

- Basic materials for teaching the course (full contents of the course, if we are to speak about distance learning, copies of supporting documents, etc.);
- Additional resources including links, virtual libraries, etc.
- Self-evaluation tests;
- Evaluation procedures;
- Electronic communication space (e-mail, chat);
- Different access rules for the teacher and for the students.

A feature of the Virtual Learning Environment is the capacity to host several courses, so that the students and teachers (tutors) may go from one course to another both within the institutions, and between institutions. Most of the study programmes use e-learning platforms: blackboard, dokeos,

efront, joomlams, moodle, sharepointlms, webct, wiziq).

The moodle platform, used more and more often in Romania, comes to support the educators aiming at increasing the quality of online courses.

Moodle - modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment - is a free e-learning platform used worldwide by schools and universities, companies of independent teachers. Developed by Martin Dougiamas, the platform is based on interaction and collaboration in order to build contents and with the aim of performing a continuous evaluation.

The use of online learning platforms has a series of advantages for all the players involved in the training processes: students, teachers, organisations.

Thus, the students can enrol for online courses, learn in virtual classrooms, watch a series of tutorials online, fill-in tests and access a series of learning resources.

The teachers teach in virtual classrooms, learn more about how to teach online, improve their knowledge and adapt their teaching styles depending on the trainees' demands, create online tutorials, and apply tests.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VIRTUAL EDUCATION

The virtual education has a series of particularities, which differentiate it from the traditional education. Amongst these, the following can be noticed:

- **It encourages the student - tutor contact**

Through the communication tools in the virtual environment, the student – tutor contact is made more easily. The students can post messages at the time and moment they choose to.

- **It encourages cooperation among students**

The discussion tools can be used to encourage cooperation among students, in small or large groups, face to face or online. Communication areas can also be created whereby the students can share the results of their work. For instance, the student groups can be made

available a private space where they will develop the group presentations.

- **It encourages active learning**

A careful designing of the course, with a focus on the activities performed by the students, encourages the active learning. Before uploading the materials onto the platform, thorough thinking must be put into what the pupils are asked to achieve and into how such activities will contribute to achieving the learning results.

- **It provides immediate feedback**

The evaluation tools and questionnaires can provide feedback within due time. Not only can the pupils be informed whether the answers are correct, but they can also provide clues, suggestions and advice necessary for continuing the study, as well as links to further information.

- **The accent falls on achieving the task and not on doing the research**

Having the links, and online resources available to them, the students will use time more effectively, performing learning activities, instead of surfing the internet. Therefore, they are more likely to focus on achieving the task, rather than on obtaining the materials for the work task.

- **It adapts to the different learning manners**

The online discussion area can be used to build a trainees' community where the abilities of each trainee can contribute to the learning process of everyone else involved in the learning journey.

3. THE TUTOR'S AND THE TRAINEES' ROLES IN THE VLE

In this type of learning, a change in the teachers' (tutors') role, as well as in the students' role, can be noticed. Thus, the Teacher:

- shifts from the role of orator, lecturer that it has in the traditional learning, to that of tutor, consultant, guide and resource provider, in the online learning.
- will particularly concentrate on how the work tasks and questions are formulated, rather than being concerned about the answer provision.



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- designs (builds) the students' learning experiences, instead of directly providing them with the contents.
- encourages creativity and helps the trainees orient in performing the task.
- can present the topic from different perspectives, focusing on the important aspects.
- ceases to be a solitary element, and becomes a member of a learning team.
- stops holding full control over the learning process, and shares the responsibilities with the students, becomes a learning partner, a colleague.
- accent is placed on the elaboration of effective learning strategies (both individually, and in collaboration);
- the students have wider access to resources;
- a change in the student's role is noticed, from that of information receiver to information user;
- discussions between students are encouraged, as well as the presentation of their results in front of everyone.

Obviously, together with the change in the teacher's role, in the process of learning using the virtual environments, a change can also be noticed in the students' role. Thus:

- from the passive reception of knowledge, the students become the constructors of their own knowledge (they participate in building the knowledge);
- the shift from memorising information to involving it in the creation and solution of problems can be found;
- the students can have multiple perspectives on the topics;
- the students formulate their own questions and look for the answers themselves;
- the students perform collaborative activities, and cooperate within the group, which leads to a significant increase in the interactions between them;
- learning in the virtual environment leads to raising the degree of multi-cultural awareness;
- the students become more independent, more motivated, turning into managers of their own learning process;

For many teachers, the shift from traditional education to the use of new learning environments can be quite difficult. The application of new working methods, the use of online resources, and the need to acquire new teaching conceptions may scare and inhibit them. For others, however, these changes are challenging and exciting.

The exchange of information between the teachers, and the dissemination of experiences encountered in the online learning process may have a positive impact on all the teaching professionals who should encourage the use of the Virtual Learning Environments, either independently, or integrated in the traditional teaching process.

4. THE ADVANTAGES OF USING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The use of the Virtual Learning Environments can contribute to improving the learning experience by using the resources within the platform, but, at the same time, it supports the tutors in organising and delivering the online courses.

- Traffic monitoring

The tutors benefit of a series of platform traffic control tools. Thus, information is provided regarding the frequency the platform is accessed with by the students, the date they accessed it and the length of time they spent solving the work

tasks. The online learning platform can also provide information on the students' readings, in the online discussion area.

As regards the distance learning students, the tutors can monitor whether they involve in the online communication and study the materials made available, as resources. The evaluation section allows a virtual evaluation of the students.

- Collaboration and communication

VLE provides the tutors with tools encouraging the collaboration and communication. For example, a virtual space can exist on the platform, where the students, teachers or other specialists can initiate and participate in discussions, interact, share ideas and materials, and work together on case-studies.

- Active involvement

Unlike the face to face sessions, where it is difficult for each student to participate in the discussions, because of the time limits, the initiation of online discussions allows the students to actively participate and involve in the learning process, within the time and space chosen in agreement with the tutor.

The learning platforms offer common working spaces for all the students, without them physically attending the spaces.

- Creation of a virtual community

As a result of such collaboration and communication, a unique space can be developed where the student group builds its own identity and community, a learners' community.

- Effective use of time

The students no longer waste time copying information, since they can be directly transferred on the platform. Once online materials are created, they can be easily updated, by several mouse clicks. The addition of a new online resource, of a clearer picture, or of a new relevant case study can take several minutes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The increase in the VLE use by universities and other continuing education institutions is a reality and it will have a particular impact on the learning process. Amongst the multiple advantages of using the learning environments we presented in this

paper, we mention hereinafter several, which support this way of learning turning into an alternative to the traditional learning:

- Teaching time saving for the teachers, especially when they are also involved in administrative or research activities.
- A provider of services for the students using the Internet as a means to find information and obtain access to a series of resources.
- The Virtual Learning Environments allow the distance education be correlated with the traditional education, as well as the connections between the various universities.
- The increase in education quality and efficiency by means of the computer as a instrument of collaborative learning.

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