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FACILITATION OF LEARNING AT A DISTANCE TRAINING PROGRAM

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Abstract: Education experts pay more and more attention to the concept of life-long learning correlated with the e-learning and distance learning programs. Facilitating learning during a distance learning course requires a series of simultaneous and different processes which take place in a virtual space, wherein there is intervention and exchange using ICT between the defined and shared learning objectives, the tutor service the individual learner and the participants amongst themselves. The present paper addresses to all those education experts (researchers, teachers, counsellors and psychologists) who ask themselves questions about how to improve the actual context of education and training, contributing to the development and implementation of the "learning facilitation" concept. The paper's aim is to present an overview on this concept related to the learning environments and to the authentic assessment in the context of distance learning. Moreover, we propose an outline of a development of a distance training program in the e-learning context in order to offer the learners an integrated and comfortable environment in cognitive, operational and socio-affective terms, thus allowing them to experience success in their learning.

Keywords: distance training program, facilitation of learning, e-learning, learning environments, authentic assessment

1. E-LEARNING – A FREQUENT ALTERNATIVE FOR A BETTER EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

Learning is the key to productivity, competitiveness and prosperity, overcoming the barriers of opportunity, resource capacity, and accessibility. Such a society, which is called also an "E-Learning Society", would be enabled through a distributed, standards-based repository system linked by ubiquitous broadband networks, complete with appropriate tools, applications, and standards.

In a lifelong learning society, learning itself is perceived as a process that transcends work, home or school; it can happen anywhere and is essential to our personal development. Learning is also critical to our ability to adapt and compete, especially in the digital economy.

According to this society's challenges, an adequate approach to learning and educational assessment will take into consideration new opportunities for a better continuous professional development. This approach will measure accurately not only outcomes and curricular standards, but also will help drive

the system as a whole; towards increasing effectiveness taking into account the challenges of the knowledge based economy and society.

Taking into account all of these, education experts pay more and more attention to the concept of life-long learning correlated with the e-learning and distance learning programs. Facilitating learning during a distance learning course requires a series of simultaneous and different processes which take place in a virtual space, wherein there is intervention and exchange using ICT between the defined and shared learning objectives, the tutor service the individual learner and the participants amongst themselves [6].

The present paper addresses to all those education experts (researchers, teachers, counsellors and psychologists) who ask themselves questions about how to improve the actual context of education and training, contributing to the development and implementation of the “learning facilitation” concept. The paper’s aim is to present an overview on this concept related to the learning environments and to the authentic assessment in the context of distance learning. Moreover, we propose an outline of a development of a distance training program in the e-learning context.

Most of us still think of effective learning as taking place with learners and experienced teachers interacting face-to-face, perhaps ideally one-on-one or in small groups. Whether such an approach is ideal in every situation can be debated. For example, in post-secondary settings, on-campus students will sometimes opt for online learning activities in preference to those of the classroom. Regardless of its theoretical limitations, reliance on face-to-face instruction is an expensive model to implement and is often not feasible for learners in remote locations or in dispersed groups. Nor does it reflect the realities of available space in schools.

When face-to-face learning is not possible, not affordable or not sufficient to meet the educational goals, e-learning and distance learning can provide a cost-effective complement, provided we understand when and how best to use them alongside other modes of learning. Escaping the constraints of

time, location and physical space is sometimes the key to learning experiences that go well beyond what is possible in the classroom. For example, innovative use of online simulations can greatly reduce the cost and time to learn complex skills, as when a medical student practices procedures.

One specific dimension of scientific and technological progress that is already having a strong effect on the tertiary education sector is the information and communication revolution. Today, technological innovations in informatics and telecommunications are once more revolutionizing capacity to store, transmit, access, and use information. The accelerated pace of technological development has made access to knowledge a crucial requirement for participation in the global economy. The impact of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has significantly changed the speed of production, use, and distribution of knowledge. The co-ordination of these processes and the different learning activities derived from them implies managing the e-learning and distance learning environment by the tutor support service. Managing the e-learning/distance learning environment involves [1]:

- a) putting the learning,
- b) support and monitoring strategies into practice,
- c) blending how these works together in order to offer the learners an integrated and comfortable environment in cognitive, operational and socio-affective terms, thus allowing them to experience success in their learning.

2. FACILITATION OF LEARNING IN THE DISTANCE TRAINING PROGRAMS

2.1 Authentic assessment issue facing the e-learning approach. Many claims have been made in recent years about the potentially positive effects of new forms of assessment on the quality of the teaching and learning process and the standard of outcomes produced by the process [5]. It is argued that the quality of teaching will be improved, with respect to both curriculum coverage and teaching methods, if higher-order skills and



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competencies such as problem-solving, investigation and analysis are included in what is to be assessed. Thus assessment is being identified as a key mechanism for monitoring and intervening in the educational process, with attention being paid to the role of assessment in the education system as a system, and with key research questions being framed less in terms of the extent to which assessments measure what they purport to measure and more in terms of what impact assessment might have on the instructional process.

By definition, authentic approaches to assessment will engage students in more complex tasks than extended assignments which might involve the investigation of a problem and the production of essays or reports, charts, diagrams, practical artefacts and so on [1]. Some of these tasks and products could be set and marked by agencies outside the school, but this would leave them at a level of artificiality, which would deny the more ambitious claims for authentic assessment. In line with all of these, leaving unassessed the processes of investigating, analyzing and problem-solving which points out the importance of authentic assessment.

In the e-learning approach, taking into consideration the preparatory phase of the course, the implementation of the formative assessment activities and setting-up what type they will be is mandatory. The carrying out of these activities should comply with certain conditions in keeping with the concept of facilitation of e-learning and with the terms of the learning contract.

Some suggestions for carrying out formative assessment in the e-learning context [1]:

- *Opportunity for information.* In the phase that provided pre-course information about

the program to the learners, aspects concerning formative assessment should have a predominant place. The participants must be informed about how assessment will be carried out, and the dates when it will take place. Moreover, in the induction to the course, the tutor support service must make certain that the assessment objectives have been understood both as a learning situation and source of information about what the participants are learning.

- *Clarity of activities.* In setting out the activities, the transparency of what is being assessed and the basis on which a judgment is made are essential premises so that the formative assessments comprise an important source of information for the learner. From this point, the need to include the anticipated performance as far as knowledge, skills and attitudes are concerned and a description of the criteria that will be applied to grade the results as satisfactory become clear. It is therefore necessary to take two steps:

- a) describe the objective being assessed; the competences related to it, the assessment criteria (with the levels of anticipated outcome).
- b) when introducing the activity, it is not sufficient to announce the topic and describe the activities that the participant should carry out. Rather it is necessary to specify the performances. Even when the assessment of knowledge is emphasized, when formulating a question it is fitting to provide appropriate indications so that the interpretation of what it is claimed is being assessed is indeed correct.

- *Opportunity for implementation.* Formative assessment activities form a

continuous process from the start to the end of the course. During the delivery of a program, the learner needs to have opportunities to gather evidence which shows what their progress is like towards the anticipated performance. It is for this reason that in programs with fixed timetables it is advisable to carry out the assessment activities in line with the plan which was ratified by the participants in the induction process. Any modifications to the assessment schedule owing to unforeseen institutional circumstances, or to extension of the delivery time for the course must be agreed upon with the participant as far in advance as possible.

- *Type of activity.* Right from the start opportunities must be sought for learners to check that they have acquired knowledge, that they can practice new skills and that they are capable of demonstrating the required performance. Therefore, the formative assessment activities must not be tricks to catch the learner out. The evidence that the learner gathers can be written documents, physical products, supervisor testimonials or even when dealing with demonstration of processes, the practical activities can be recorded on video, audio-cassette, etc.
- *Authorship.* Considering the current discussions on the validity of distance learning assessment and the difficulties that can occur in guaranteeing the identity of the author, some institutions believe it advisable to apply authorship control procedures by contracting with local professionals who act as supervisors during the carrying out of the assessment activity.
- *Recording of results.* A rigorous record of the formative assessments contributes to the transparency of the criteria applied. This record facilitates tracking work and support needs and also makes possible a subsequent review of the results when the learner wishes to appeal against the

conclusions of the tutor. The record of results must guarantee the required level of confidentiality.

2.2 Learning environments in distance training. To summarize, it is hopeless to try to describe and analyze all kinds of different learning environments that are currently in use in distance education and training contexts. However, taking the risk of over-simplification and of overlooking some possibly important cases, we present the following arrangements for learning environments, as Adelina Guastavi has described [1].

Each learning environment analyzed has specific features which influence not only the conditions for learning, but also the quality of training, as a whole:

a. home-study environment

This is the more clear-cut situation for the so-called «pure» distance education learning regime: students use their homes to study their learning materials, to watch and listen to video and audio didactic units, to operate their computer equipment and related courseware, to write assignments, questions or comments to be mailed to the teaching system. The current improvement in quality and diversity of telecommunication services may contribute to reduce even more the need for physical displacement to contact the teaching system: instead of attending face-to-face tuition sessions, the distance education student may have access to the same kind of information through fax, e-mail and computer conferencing; the same means may be used to provide horizontal contacts with other students following the same courses, as well as for contacts among the members of the teaching staff.

Keeping this kind of limitations in mind, it is generally accepted that, despite the very significant costs associated with the production of quality, specific distance education learning materials, one of the major advantages of a home-based learning environment is its resulting comparatively low per capita teaching cost, as it does not require a permanent allotting of physical areas, proportional to students numbers, dedicated to presence learning activities.

b. training- or study-centre environment



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In many educational or training situations it is necessary to provide a dedicated space for collective presence- learning activities, even if a distance education-like methodology is in use. This may occur for different kinds of reasons, such as: the need to provide a technological environment for the learning activity itself; the need to provide a meeting place for students in a distance education regime, wherein they may find guidance and tutoring provided by the organization itself, as well as some complementary facilities (library, databases, viewing and communication equipment, etc.); when dealing with in-service education or training, where some part of the current working time is made free for educational purposes.

c. hybrid environments

A number of educational organizations operate in the so-called «dual-mode» regime, whereby distance education as well as conventional presence learning methodologies is used, either within the same program or, alternatively, at different types of programs; this situation occurs in many higher education institutions, as well as in professional training organizations. The dual mode of operation tends to stimulate some degree of mix (either conceptual or practical) between methods, materials and learning environments.

From a different point of view, we think that conventional education, based on a significant amount of interaction between teachers and students taking place in school like environments, will evolve in the sense of encouraging the students to include an increased component of self-learning activities in their daily routines, as well as introducing more flexibility in curricula, assignment schedules and progression rhythms.

In the learning process, the specific environment plays an important role in terms

of features influencing the building of good relationships in distance learning, or supporting individual or group distance learning processes. In an attempt to compare the characteristics of the traditional and the new learning environments (Table 1), we present a summarization based on the information included in the Adelina Guastavi's paper, "Deliver a training program. Module 4: Facilitate the distance learning" [1]:

Table 1. Learning environments 1

Traditional learning environments	New learning environments
Trainer-centered	Learner-centered
Single method	A combination of methods
Single media	Multimedia
Information delivery	Information exchange
Passive learning	Exploratory learning
Factual learning	Critical thinking
Reactive response	Proactive reaction
Individual work	Collaborative work
Isolate, artificial context	Authentic, real-word context

3. THE OUTLINE OF A TRAINING PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT IN THE E-LEARNING CONTEXT

Given the complexity of distance learning courses, and the relatively limited experience of Romanian education institutions in the area to develop and implement *long and mid-term training programs based on a major e-Learning component*, a team approach should be used. Experts in education, in curriculum development, in the different subjects approached and in DL courses, internal and external, have to work together for developing the curriculum framework, the distance education guidelines and the DL courses itself.

The programs' design should be based on a *competences-oriented approach*. The curriculum framework of the training program defines:

- Methodological principles;
- General framework for defining teaching profession related competences;
- A set of specific competences for each subject;
- Principles for defining study plans;
- Study plans (subjects, number of hours and type of didactical activities, number of credits, evaluation);
- Outline of subject, structured, mainly, on: identification data, general presentation, specific competencies, content, evaluation, methodological approach, bibliography.

The content covered by the training materials has to be relevant to the training needs of the participants. Along with the traditional content, the courses have to include specific modules adapted to the training needs of attendants, referring to the residential area (rural/urban, local specific), the status of participants (level of experience in particular fields), status of the training program (professional development/professional reconversion) etc.

Taking into consideration the specific of the training program carried out at distance, we expect that participants start reading the training materials, once the courses' study had begun. From this perspective, estimating this participants' behavior, at the end of each chapter, throughout the different units, it will be a good idea to insert a text-box with 'key points for reflection/action', stimulating the participant to undertake small research and apply the concepts outlined in the chapter to their country/working situation. Such short activities are not explicitly part of formative assessment, but their accomplishment puts the participant in an advantaged position for the successful completion of their final assignment.

On the other hand, participants might not have yet read the assignment question, and read through the learning material overlooking

the importance of such short activities. In such case, when starting the preparation of the assignment, they might realize to have many questions and doubts and very little time to seek support before the deadline.

However, encouraging the accomplishment of the short activities could help participants to come across questions and doubts gradually along the learning process, and to get to the end of the reading phase with solid bases for the preparation of the assignment. If such encouragement is carried out through the Forum, using the e-learning platform, all participants can benefit from questions and clarifications arisen in the discussion.

Therefore, the training materials should be adapted to distance learning technology. Each module's design need to include at least the mention of the following aspects:

- introduction: is orienting the participant in what it concerns the learning and evaluation activities specific to the module;
- learning objectives, that a participant must attain for successful completion of the module;
- the content of the module;
- auto-evaluation tests (with feedback loops to the textual materials);
- assignments, required for participants to complete and send to the tutor, allowing the continuous evaluation during the program;
- application, study-cases and simulations, as appropriate;
- additional readings, either attached to the basic materials or as referrals in a bibliography;
- a conclusive evaluation mechanism for the participant to demonstrate completion of the module (may include tests, a portfolio, a presentation etc.).

Beside the elements of content presented above, the modules may contain icons, illustrations, graphs, etc. and have to be formatted in such a way in order to assure an easy and attractive pathway for the reader.

The modules may be provided to the participants into printed and/or CD-ROM format. An e-learning platform for trainers and



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trainees' use could be also developed in order to host, not only the modules' content and bibliography, but also the applications, the trainer's feedback, a forum for discussions etc.

As far as the individual learning is concerned, the addressing of expressed needs – such as queries, doubts, and information requests – through the tutorial service and individual e-mail correspondence should be given specifically to the context, keeping in mind the criteria for constructive feedback, and empathetic listening.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper builds upon those issues concerning the e-learning environment, proposing an outline of a long/mid-term training program based on use of e-learning capability to support anytime, anyplace, life-long learning and universal access to high-quality e-learning content, overcoming the barriers of opportunity, resource capacity, and accessibility.

Managing the e-learning environment involves putting the learning, support and monitoring strategies into practice, blending how these works together in order to offer the learners an integrated and comfortable environment in cognitive, operational and socio-affective terms, thus allowing them to experience success in their learning [1].

Putting the above-mentioned strategies into practice in a coordinated way means bringing into play the classic skills of implementation and supervision that a training program requires, such as:

(i) having clarity about the direction of the processes and the objectives of the activities;

(ii) implementing the learning and support strategies in such as way that they contribute

to the average successful performance of the participants;

(iii) intervening in problematic circumstances and contributing to the resolution of individual and group difficulties;

(iv) working in co-ordination with other professionals and members of the team;

(v) introducing modifications in the learning and support strategies, based on information generated by the monitoring process.

In reviewing the conditions under which measurement might have most impact on education and training, we could also explore the role which authentic assessment might play in our definition of high standards. From a training program's perspective, a special attention should be paid to both the theoretical problem of adequately conceptualizing and articulating how it is that higher-order skills and understandings can be taught, and the practical problem of whether or not trainers are able to implement new teaching methods and explore new contents. There is also the question of trainer involvement in the assessment process itself.

In this context, the proposed framework of a long/mid-term training program at distance describes an alternative learning approach, using the benefits of e-learning specific technologies. Moreover, the impact of these kinds of educational experiences requires by stakeholders and end-users an increasing awareness of the professional training meaning, contributing to the specific skills development, but using a collaborative e-learning environment.

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