Eutopia-Mt. teaching mediation skills using multiplayer on-line role playing games

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Abstract

The last twenty years have seen the development of best practices for teaching and developing mediation skills. Role-playing is a widespread didactic methodology in this context. In this way, mediation skills learning process comes through an experiential dimension (Learning by Doing). Nevertheless there are some problems not yet overcome: a) knowing the identity of those who are involved in the role-play may influence the scenic action; b) the emotional involvement could be elevated and invalidate the learning process; c) the organization of a role-playing session could mean high costs expenditure.

EUTOPIA-MT (Miglino et al., 2008) is a European research project that aims to overcome these limits through a MORPG platform employment. The effectiveness of this solution has been tested in three situations of inter-community conflict, respectively in Cyprus (an international conflict acting in the city area between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots), Northern Ireland (an urban social conflict coming from an international conflict between Protestants and Catholics) and Southern Italy (an urban social conflict between native and immigrant communities). In this paper we illustrate the project outcomes.

Keywords: Mediation; Role-playing Game; MMORPG.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Europe has been the theater for a growing number of inter-community conflicts related to poor integration of immigrant population and new immigration from the developing countries. In this situation a steadily growing number of professionals come into contact with inter-community conflict in their daily work, but in many cases they lack the skills to perform their work effectively.

The main objective of our project has been to develop a training system that could facilitate mediation skills improvement.
EUROPA-MT (European Training Organization Programme for Innovative and Alternative Mediation Skills) has employed an e-learning platform and a teaching methodology with the objective of making it possible to conduct mediation role-playing games at a distance. The teaching methodology exploits a specially developed technology platform allowing a small community of players to communicate interact and play on-line.

The larger and more important effect of our activities is to make this kind of teaching available to much larger populations than is currently possible. Given the political and social impact of inter-community conflict this is an extremely important goal.

The recent past has seen the development of best practices for teaching and developing such skills. The research identifies that there is a diverse range of mediation training available in the different countries.

Nowadays very few of the potential beneficiaries have access to this kind of training. Though Dewey (1938) described learning as “intelligently directed development of the possibilities inherent in ordinary experience” (he believed that learning through experience was the “progressive” alternative to more traditional education), the experiential dimension offered by learning by doing process proves to be difficult for different reasons, such as the potential influence of knowing each others’ identities, or the learning process slowdown caused by emotional involvement, or even high costs in the training organization, EUROPA-MT project aims to use technology to make mediation training available to far larger populations than is currently possible.

The “learning by doing” strategy was the starting point of the entire project. Learning through experiences and field involvement gives people much more possibilities to build their knowledge than theoretical and traditional methods.

In order to disseminate and test the new training models and the new tools, we organized three pilot experiences in three different Countries of the European Union (Italy, Northern Ireland and Cyprus). We checked our didactic goal creating training classes in three different conflict contexts: 1) an urban social conflict (Naples), 2) an urban social conflict coming from an international conflict (Belfast); 3) and an international conflict acting in the city area (Nicosia).

The target group was made up of young professionals interested in mediation strategies.

2. Eutopia Platform

EUROPA is an on-line platform that allows the production of a particular type of serious game: an educational Multiplayer On-Line Role Playing Games (MORPG). Besides it is an extension of a light version called SISINE (Berruti et al., 2007; Miglino, Di Ferdinando, Rega, Ponticorvo, 2007; Dymowski & Moldawska, 2007).

By a formative/teaching view, EUROPA has the role to transfer the methodological tradition of the Psychodrama (Moreno, 1946) from the real world to a virtual 3D world.

The platform provides the normal functionality expected by players of Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (Madani, Chohra, 2008), as well as additional functions that allow a trainer to set up games, intervene during game play, record specific phases of a game, annotate recordings and discuss them with the players.

Teachers can write scripts for on-line multiplayer games. In designing a multiplayer game they can choose the roles, goals, bodies and personalities of individual players. Once the game is in progress, they can watch what is going on from any viewpoint, intervene at any moment, send messages to players, or activate special “events”. When it is over, they can become critics, leading a group discussion and analysing the strategies adopted by the players. This step of debriefing becomes fundamental for the learning process.

Learners reach the virtual stage-set where they can interact each other controlling a virtual alter ego, the avatar. Once logged in, they join a 3D graphical environment in which they are represented by avatars, and can use them to explore the environment. Players communicate via short texts and various forms of paraverbal and non-verbal communication.

Starting from a script chosen by the tutor, each participant plays the role of one of the characters, associated with an avatar.

3. Teaching methodology and activities features

The aim was to develop a new integrated training mediation model (with a strong prevalence of on-line activities) in order to improve people’s working skills in this field.
Models and tools have been designed to comply with the needs of professionals operating in mediation/negotiation field, who wanted to improve their performance, as well as the organizations they belong to.

The training has been organized in a sequence of activities:

- Design of the simulation environment.
- Training of tutors.
- First face-to-face meeting, introducing the goals, contents, methodologies and tools of the project and finalizing the “learning agreement” with the participants.
- Remote simulations, using an on-line platform for synchronous group interactions in a virtual interaction environment.
- Second follow-up face-to-face meeting for a final evaluation test.

Four sessions have been scheduled: each one consisted of a simulation meeting and a follow-up meeting. Participants, divided in subgroups, simulated a conflict situation and the linked mediation process, supervised by their tutor. The system gave the tutor the chance to choose the "script" for the session.

The goal of the online training is to let participants get in touch synchronously in verbal (textual) and non-verbal mode within a predefined communicative scenario (script), in order to test participant communication strategies. All activities are followed by a tutor, who provides feedback on strategies and evaluate outcomes (how far the group has achieved its own specific goals, how far it has achieved the general goals of the exercise).

4. Conclusion

Data come out from the trial (questionnaires analysis and interactions observation) highlighted that almost all people lived strong emotions while playing the session, like anger and frustration, and that they managed to learn new communication strategies.

From tutors’ point of view, three main factors have been highlighted: a) debriefing tools seems to be very useful (Susskind, Corburn, 1999); b) our tool can be used according to different modalities, both at a distance (different geographical locations) and in the same place (safeguarding anonymity), this aspect can be well applied in the blended training class’ organization, where both theory and practice take part; c) EUTOPIA seems to work well in such controversial situations, where it could be useful to have a filter instead of direct contact; trying to achieve a negotiate working through an on-line tool could help people involved to cool their emotional dimension, while working around a table could sometimes exacerbate the discussion. In other worlds, the distance (that initially seemed to be a barrier in relational dynamics) may function as a positive factor in a learning mediation skills process.

At the moment, we are testing EUTOPIA applicability also to disaster readiness training (see DREAD-ED project, www.dread-ed.eu), in order to help those at risk to learn how to react to specific events. People involved in risk situations need “soft skills”, such as communication and understanding of information under conditions of stress, problem-solving with partial or contradictory information, decision-making in the face of competing demands. Another evolution of the project could be also the applicability of the software at the job-organization world, improving overall effectiveness and efficiency as well as performance of individual workers within small and large organizations in both the public and the private sector.

EUTOPIA-MT represents one of the first attempts to apply on-line role-playing game strategies to vocational training and educational psychology. Although it has been designed to be used in mediation/negotiation field, EUTOPIA-MT shows a high level of applicability to other kind of scenarios.

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References