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Best practices in university e-learning centre

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Abstract

The paper describes how to administrate e-learning courses in University. Macerata University offers online courses since 2005, when CELFI e-learning centre has been established. Since then, administrative, methodological and IT services have been systematically implemented to faculties and to external institutions in Italy and abroad, and quality procedures have been established. Administrative services goes from tutor selection, contract to course budget. Methodological services mainly consist in teacher and tutor training, student support, course organization. IT services goes from multimedia recording and post production, LMS management and tailoring, student enrolment database management, activity tracking and monitoring. Thanks to the balance of all services, positive results have been reached, costs have been optimized and administration time has been reduced.

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1. Introduction

“In today’s knowledge economy, the role of higher education is being redefined. Hilton (2006, as quoted in Reushle 2010) suggests that it may be viewed as “a perfect storm, born from the convergence of numerous disruptive forces... and as the dawn of a new day, a sunrise rife with opportunities arising from these same disruptive forces”. How an institution chooses to respond to the disruptions can shape its future direction” (2010, Reushle). The University of Macerata was founded in 1290, it has a humanity setting and it provides courses in seven faculties, namely Law, Political Science, Cultural Heritage, Education Science, Humanities, Economics and Communication Science. The first five faculties of the list offer both traditional and online courses. In 2009-2010 enrolled students were 11348, among which 1185 are online students, so e-learning has been chosen by 1 undergraduate student out of 10. About postgraduate online courses, 220 students attended 4 Master, 185 students attended 4 Courses. CELFI structure started with four people and now involves more than 15 people, online tutors are about 60 external collaborators per year in undergraduate courses. Each online course is activated and delivered by Faculties in collaboration with CELFI, the university e-learning centre.
2. E-learning Services

According to Reushe, shared vision and institutional response are relevant aspects in innovating higher education (2010, Reushe). Experience shows that often e-learning activities activated in a single faculty and extended to a larger structure are not functional. Since its beginning, CELFI services goes from administrative, technical and organization support to the whole university, for undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Among the provided services, the paper will focus on the following ones:

- management of online tutoring;
- faculty online learning environment setup and multimedia service;
- research about pedagogical models and technical tools with International partners.

The e-learning centre organization chart is described in fig.1. It is important to point out that in each faculty, we have a contact team for online issues and students. According to our vision, this is a good practice, as the e-learning centre answers to technical questions about online models and dispositifs, while the faculties give details about specific courses and disciplinary issues. Moreover, CELFI has a more direct dialogue with online tutors, while the faculties deal often with their teachers and students. This choice allows us to train a small group at the beginning of activities, inform them about platform update or changes. A second main issue is the presence of contact persons for undergraduate and postgraduate courses, because their structure is rather different in terms of timeline, number of students, types of activities. In CELFI, coordinators have didactical expertise and technical skills: they filter requests to the technical staff, elaborate improvement proposal, support teachers in didactical design, answer to general technical issues. Thanks to this structure, the technical staff is not constantly involved in the front office and it’s possible to design improvement paths with a general vision of works in progress, not considering only technical issues.

3. Management of online tutoring

In both undergraduate and postgraduate courses, online tutors cover a relevant role. Since three years, a comparative procedure is organized to select online tutors. One call is published according to the faculty requests, qualified tutors are evaluated according to the disciplinary, relational and technical competencies. In other words, selections are organized for different didactical area and we have qualified candidates in different areas, as international law, didactics or English literature. After the selection, CELFI administration office follows all steps for tutor contracts and, in the same time, the coordinator group organizes group training sessions according to the faculties. The budget for tutor contracts depends on the number of online students of each faculty. At the beginning of each academic year, CELFI administration office and Faculty staff elaborate the budget, according to which contracts are arranged. In other words, tutors are external collaborators of the University. About the themes of the initial training, they include how to facilitate online interaction, how to use efficiently the platform, which dispositif should be employed in different learning situations. In addition to the training organized before the beginning of the academic activities, since 2005 CELFI and Education Faculty have been organizing a post degree online course for tutor online, which didactical plan includes also multimedia design, psycho-social aspect of online interaction, evaluation and self-evaluation. Next paragraph will focus on the set up of the online learning environment and multimedia services.

4. OLAT at Macerata University: integrated and personalized LMS

Didactical models and tools research is always in progress, the design is carried out by a team, where faculties, didactical experts and technicians work together. Thanks to this practice, decisions are not taken only considering technical aspects, but solutions should be technically valid. Undoubtedly, the LMS choice has an essential role. In 2005, we started with an LMS based on UPortal, in 2008 the need of a new system that could manage new tools and more users could not be postponed.
To achieve the best results, in terms of costs, flexibility and didactical effectiveness we chose to integrate different services to the main LMS. In our installation we used OLAT, a Java Open Source LMS Server developed
by University Of Zurich (Rossi et al. 2010) for the following reasons: the didactical structure is flexible, rich with tools, the course structure can be visualized and it describes the course path at the best. As an open source, it ensures high chances of personalization. The LMS is integrated with Acrobat Connect that we use for synchronic classes in audio-video-chat. For LMS tailoring, technical staff works in collaboration with Zurich University and BPS. We personalized OLAT, in order to have it dialoguing with our student enrolment system database: in this way, as soon as enrolment fees have been paid, the online students enter automatically in the online platform. As the integration (fig. 2) has positively worked for undergraduate students, we have extended it to all 2010 courses. A second relevant aspect of our personalization consists in the tracking and monitoring service. We developed a custom web service, integrated with an extension in OLAT that provides the data to the LMS. The data is rendered in a graphical form into the LMS using the Protochart open source JavaScript library, to give a high quality graphical representation of usage data. Even without technical expertise, teachers and tutors can access the tracing data and understand how much students are working into the platform. The Tracking and Monitoring tool is very important for our teachers as it represents a great support to the evaluation of student work (Rossi, 2010). The third aspect about the online platform is the learning object quality improvement. CELFI coordinators have been working with teachers and tutors to improve different learning objects. They selected standard elements which must be included in all didactical modules: introduction, description, aims, task explanation, timeline, map of materials. About video lessons, we often use synchronization among text, slides and video. We tested different formats, some of which in collaboration with Universidad Politecnica de Valencia (Rossi et al., 2008) during the EU Streaming Media Project. The experimented model resulted in a new type of learning object characterised by a conceptual space-time, a conceptual dimension where objects, players and ideas are not confined within hard-defined borders but interact together within a learning scene where time is marked by a sequence of concepts. The video stream – with its time code providing the basis for synchronisation to all components of the artefact – can be traversed in two modalities: by timeline (seconds) or by slide (cue points).
5. Research and International Collaborations

Together with standard services, CELFI develops researches about e-learning and multimedia. The major research themes concern instructional design, environments and tools for online education, online course monitoring, evaluation tools, tools for learning personalization, use of AI in e-learning. About intelligent tutoring system, CELFI works with Palermo and Udine Universities in Italy and OUN in The Nederland to support self regulated learning and reflection. In 2007, the University obtained the ISO9001:2000 certification of global quality. Macerata University is one out of seven higher education institutions that last September, 24th 2009 in Helsinki received the Unique award for quality in ICT and e-learning by the Eifqque-L network for quality in e-learning. Collaboration with OLAT developers mainly in Europe and the one with Valencia about Streaming Media training are two examples of our international activities. At the moment, we are working at a project of a post graduate international course for teachers and tutors online training: the course will be activated by us and our four partners in different countries: it will be totally online, with joint activities in English. The international dimension of the course is a relevant aspect, because it will offer the chance to student of comparing online approaches and tasks with their colleagues. Moreover, it’s important for us to evaluate didactical models, procedures and dispositifs in a European context, as in this way CELFI can constantly provide services, offering technical and methodological innovations.

References