

Chapter 8

The Perfect Blend?: Online Blended Learning from a Linguistic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tackles the implementation of the way online courses of English language are structured within the on-line degree courses of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in Italy. Moving from a double theoretical framework grounded on the links between e-learning and communication and between e-learning and multimedia learning, The author will outline the basic features of the course the author is currently teaching. Besides the standard tools provided by the university platform (the course portal and forum and the course content slides), he has added some 'external' tools to offer students further possibilities to interact and take an active role in the learning environment which thus becomes actually 'blended.' By making practice of the language through posting comments on a dedicated blog and by exchanging impressions and making queries at a number of Skype-mediated meetings, instructor and students can further interact and create a stronger 'studying community.'

INTRODUCTION

This case deals with the online degree courses of the Faculty of Communication Sciences and Economics of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia where I am currently working as a contracted professor in charge of two courses in English Language.

A few years ago, the notion of “online universities” (in Italian, *università telematiche*) began to take shape and today there exist a number of such institutions. Their main characteristic is the fact that the courses are exclusively taught on line, while exams are taken in the venue of the university. These universities are extremely new and lack the history of more ancient, traditional universities. Nevertheless, they are official institutions providing higher education.

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The same could be said for the so-called “traditional” universities which, due to a reformation of the Italian university system of about a dozen years ago, are now in the need of attracting students as though they were private institutions rather than state-owned places of culture.

Leaving aside any political and educational comment on this aspect, it is now a fact that most universities in Italy (not to say all of them) are offering their students some form of online learning. In most cases, it is not a whole substitution of traditional, *in praesentia* courses for e-learning programmes, as traditional teaching is still practiced (and so far it is the dominant method of teaching at universities). The novelty is that many information and parts of the programmes are published on the university’s platforms for e-learning. The downside of this aspect is, though, that often it is just a sort of “cut-and-paste” procedure which leads to the sharing of very simple files to the community of students who can access online material.

This technological, advanced form of “note taking” cannot be considered as “real” e-learning. Nonetheless, a growing number of faculties are offering their students actual online courses whose contents are devised for distance teaching/learning.

BACKGROUND

The University of Modena and Reggio Emilia was one of the first to opt for this kind of distance learning courses which it has been offering its students through dedicated, Moodle-based platform and portals (see <http://www.laureaonline.unimore.it>) since 2002. Since then, it has been the policy of the University to offer blended e-learning courses for its distance learning programmes. The reason behind this choice is the belief in the need to provide actual, physical links between teachers and students so as to prevent the creation of learning environments lacking the ‘human touch.’

The standard structure of online courses at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia consist of (1) opening meeting where teachers explain details of the programmes to the students (before the academic year officially begins); (2) first meeting between the teachers of each course and their students (namely, the first lesson); (3) a set of ten video-lessons (once a week, usually from 7pm to 8pm); (4) closing meeting between teacher and students; and (5) examinations.

Events (1), (2), (4), and (5) take place in the rooms of the faculty in Reggio Emilia. All the meetings, though, are broadcast live via the Web and the corresponding files are published to the portals so that students may download them for their convenience.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the importance attached to its e-learning programme by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, readers should be made aware of the existence of a department dedicated to online teaching which was set up thanks to the joint efforts of the existing structures (i.e. the departments and the faculties involved in the project). Their common goal was to create a structure which could be made responsible for everything concerning and related to e-learning with a reference person (in this case, the head of the department) and a dedicated team of technicians and staff of secretary to cope with the more and more demanding tasks of the whole e-learning system of this university. The department is called Centro e-Learning di Ateneo (CEA) (the University’s e-learning centre) whose Web site can be reached at the following address: www.cea.unimore.it.

The aim of the work done every day by the people involved in this and in similar projects at universities scattered throughout Italy (and not only Italy, of course) is to make clear that the lack of classroom interaction in online education is basically a way of enriching and enhancing learning, rather than being considered a limit to that.

Technology must be matched by the quality of the information provided, the skill of teachers

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