

# Comparison of Technologies and Methodologies in the E-Learning EXPO Experience

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## INTRODUCTION

Making an effective presentation of the scientific activity that took place in the context of the E-Learning Expo, through a significant analysis, is a welcome but complex task.

The E-Learning EXPO is an experience that has occupied CARID (University Centre for Research, Teaching Innovation and Distance Learning) University of Ferrara, Italy for the last two years in the creation of an environment in which demand and supply, theory and practice of e-learning could successfully meet up (Frignani, Galliani, Giacomantonio, 2005; Poletti, 2006).

The intention of CARID, as creator and scientific director of the event, was not merely to provide a showcase, but an event packed with conferences and debates aiming at taking stock of the state of the art, not only as regards methodological reflection on e-learning, but also as regards the application of e-learning as a method to be used in a variety of public and private sectors, ranging from school and university to professional and corporate training, from enterprises to banks, from environment to education, from the health service to public administration, as far as e-government and e-democracy.

But why the term “welcome but complex”, which would appear to express a dual state of mind vis-à-vis this experience, the growth and development of which Ferrara has witnessed over the last two years?

“Welcome” because the level of scientific contributions presented at the conferences, and the quality of the presentations made at the plenary sessions—which saw representatives of the worlds of academia and production coming to grips with one another—have grown, both as regards quantity and quality, attesting to the path that has been undertaken as a result of profound reflection, a path along which we continue to advance,

deepening our knowledge still further in an attempt to provide increasingly more concrete and efficacious applications on the topic of e-learning.

“Complex” because it is impossible to measure the complexity which has undoubtedly been generated by the state of transition which e-learning is currently experiencing.

Indeed, e-learning seems to be going through an almost adolescent growth crisis in which, subsequent to the initial spontaneous and enthusiastic response accorded to it (or rather to the advent of multimediality and the Internet in the world of education) from traditional learning institutions (schools, universities, and vocational training bodies) and business environments alike, it has now become necessary to make of this tool something which is innovative but which, at the same time, has a distinct character—not an alternative tool but a synergic tool for use in the lifelong learning sector.

## THEMES AND CONTEXTS

The EXPO experience has undoubtedly brought to the fore an interesting point which appears to be the key element of experiences of this type, that is, beyond the specific fields of application which have with e-learning overlapping areas involving greater or lesser shared areas, the main characteristics of which were highlighted at this conference, general attention seems to be focused on the method and consequent impact produced by e-learning—both from an organizational and from cultural standpoint—to a degree which is directly proportional to the extent to which this phenomenon has gained ground within the teaching systems.

In this sense, the words with which Professor Fredric Michael Litto, President of the Brazilian Association for Distance Learning opened his presentation on the

2005 edition of the event—“*students and the discovery of knowledge*”—are paradigmatic (Litto, 2005). He pointed out how technology and e-learning are the precursors of a “*totally new reality*” which cannot be divorced from technology, virtual communities and multimedia knowledge, but must be considered in an intercultural approach.

A concept, this, which is not applicable exclusively to the world of education and student training but has the potential to become a new way of structuring and sharing knowledge and the culture from which such knowledge derives.

The presentation given by Jeffrey Merriman of MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Project Manager of OKI (Open Knowledge Initiative) was along the same lines. In a similar context he proposed a paper with a title which highlights the perspective that this experience was intended to offer: “*Open Source or Vendor Driver Solutions? Integrating the best of breed of both worlds via Standards based Open Service Architectures.*”

The main consideration on which the EXPO experience focused, a consideration which seems, moreover, inevitable for the growth and integration of e-Learning in learning and teaching processes, derives from the concept of interoperability and structuring of knowledge as a methodology for encouraging a sharing culture, as this is the added value which e-learning can and must offer to the society of knowledge (Poletti, 2006).

A consideration of such proportions leads to the perception that e-learning is about to experience a period in which the enthusiasm typical of youth and the initial phases of any innovation should not be abandoned but upheld through contemplation of its own role and the development of its own strategies which increasingly portray it as a structural, and not a substitutive, element in the learning processes.

And here we have the complexity factor that emerges in the course of this consideration: e-learning seems to present new functions and new possibilities in all of the environments in which it is incorporated, at the same time, it cannot be structurally incorporated and interact with an environment, be it a learning or a business environment, without changing and giving rise to new perspectives in the setting in which it is integrated.

It is clear from the considerations that the presentations and meetings which EXPO hosted and for which

it acted as a sounding board, that e-learning is coming closer to and interacting more and more with *knowledge management*, indeed the overlapping of these two areas is such that is difficult to draw a clear separating line between them.

It may be clearly deduced from the speakers’ presentations that, in view of the fact that this methodology concentrates attention more heavily on the concept of learning as opposed to teaching, the need to structure knowledge cannot be disregarded to enable profitable use through the semantically and ontologically valid construction of individual if not personalised learning paths.

The suggestions that emerge from a reflection on the topics covered in the course of this event are many and varied, and they are determined by factors whose importance is further heightened by the fact that they are transversal to the areas in question, that is, that they are to be found in worlds that, for reasons related to both culture and tradition, appear to be distant.

The development process that e-learning is undergoing is an explosive factor both in the world of education and in the professional training sector, as in the university and lifelong education. The same applies to the world of business and finance, public administration, the health sector and the world of sport all of which are witnessing the development of projects of undeniable value, attesting to the growth of an online and distance learning culture.

The duality between technology and methodology seems to be the driving guideline of research on e-learning. EXPO has highlighted the need for the tools typically used in e-learning to be made the subject of methodological reflection.

The first tool which, in this context, should be made the subject of reflection is the e-learning platform inasmuch as it embodies this constant duality between technology and methodology, a duality that gives rise to a question around which a debate evolves, the purpose of such debate being to define which type of education and which teaching methodology is being developed, which Learning Objects and for what learning purpose.

E-learning, and this EXPO experience is the demonstrative proof, must get methodologists, technologists and communication experts working together in a virtuous circle.

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