Chapter 2
Customizing and Personalizing an Adult Blended Course:
An Italian Experience on Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter, by combining research-based results and theoretical principles, analyzes how it is possible to integrate teaching models and use of new technologies in an adult blended course, and to adapt training experiences to the target group, in order to offer a course that may prove personalized as much as possible. Basing on the results of an evaluative study, some improvement factors and best practices are discussed at the end of the chapter, as well as some identified weaknesses, with a view to learning environments that, making use of specific strategies, online tools, and educational contents, are capable to reach high levels of accessibility, adaptability and personalization in training paths specifically tailored on students' actual training requirements.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have allowed testing new methods in teaching and learning process organization, especially in terms of time and space independence (Stigmar & Sundberg, 2001). These changes depend on the way in which educational contents, online tools and environments are designed, developed and provided to those who wish to learn.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61692-791-2.ch002

This chapter is particularly focused on the main characteristics of the "PuntoEdu ATA" blended adult training course, an online platform devised and developed by the National Agency for School Autonomy Development in cooperation with the Public Education Department, and presents the main results achieved through evaluation activities. In particular, the chapter describes the PuntoEdu pattern, its educational contents and available online tools, and reports e-tutors' and learners' opinions (obtained through a web-survey and online focus groups) concerning both its technical and training characteristics.

The chapter mentions the main theories developed in the last few years within the pedagogical mainstream which have influenced learning environments design, regardless of their setting (whether real or virtual). Particular attention is paid to those related to the constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978) and to the learner-centred model (Ardito et al., 2006), deeply analyzing the elements characterizing a Personal Learning Environment (Tosh, 2005). Basing on PuntoEdu learners' characteristics (i.e. adult workers) the chapter aims at underlining two important issues stressed by andragogy (Knowles, 1984): on one side, the influence of the context (whether social, cultural, organizational, or professional) in defining the learning process (Barab and Duffy, 2000); on the other hand, the necessity to adopt particular strategies and methods to include in it specific situations where learners can face real problems (Alvino and Sarti, 2006). This leads to determine the aspects to be developed in order to establish a flexible learning model (Holmberg, 2006). This should be capable to allow each student conforming his/her training path to his/her personal requirements. In order to make this model effective, it is necessary to enable each student to choose among different subjects and various online tools. This would help student to succeed in managing his/her own learning process in a variety of contexts throughout his/her lifetime (Bentley, 1998).

This chapter aims at verifying how far these theoretical principles can be applied in a real blended course, in order to provide a training path that may result as much as possible accessible, adaptable and customized. In particular, the purpose is to investigate different aspects. First of all, it has to be explored the different chances in combining technology and teaching opportunities (how). Still, it has to be defined the contents (what) and the pursued objectives (for what), while, at the same time, explicating the reasons (why), and the timing sequence of the educational path (when). Lastly, it has to be considered the resources (how) and the agents (who) involved in the process (Moreno and Bailly-Bailliere, 2002).

BACKGROUND

In the field of the latest studies dealing with the ever-increasing use of new technologies in teaching and learning processes, we can note a growing interest in combining specific technical aspects with pedagogical perspectives. In particular, those who plan training courses supported by new technologies seem to centre their efforts on an analysis of how educational contents, as well as their related tools and environments, should be designed to conform to the particular needs of each student.

This requirement results from an awareness that - as the constructivist approach (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978) has widely underlined - when the educational content is far-away from personal interests and a subjects' involvement in the proposed tasks is limited, learners have no motivation to build their own knowledge and to transfer it to new situations. This is connected with three basic characteristics shared with the constructivist theory, which prove that learning is a social and personal phenomenon (Jarvis, 1987): (a) knowledge is not a product to be accumulated, but an active process where the learner attempts to make sense out of the world (Alexander, 1999); (b) people adapt their knowledge in a personal way, that is, they acquire knowledge in "*forms that enable them to use that knowledge later" (*Grabinger, 1996, p. 669); (c) the construction of knowledge is based on the collaboration and social negotiation of meaning, so that "*common understandings and shared meanings are developed through interaction among peers and teachers"* (Grabinger, 1996, pp. 669-670).

The Soviet psychologist Vygotsky, developing the concept of the proximal development zone (ZPD) in 1934, is considered the founding father of the socio-anthropological constructiv-