

Chapter 57

Blended Learning towards Social Capital in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on blended learning towards social capital by showing the experience of Methodology of Social Research II, the blended learning training course held at the Faculty of Education of the University of Genoa (A.Y. 2010/2011). Blended learning engages disciplinary, technical, and relational skills so that human capital and social capital are empowered. The evidence is that in higher education blended learning empowers teaching/learning processes and student achievement providing active student engagement into participatory processes promoted in educational and evaluation activities, involving students in balanced relationships with peers and teacher facilitated by new technologies and tutorship.

INTRODUCTION

In higher education and lifelong learning, e-learning and new strategies of teaching/learning develop with the promotion of the new information and communication technologies (ICT). This chapter focuses on the relationship between blended learning and social capital by showing the experience of Methodology of Social Research II, the course held at the Faculty of Education of the University of Genoa (A.Y. 2010/2011). The formative objective of the training course is to examine in depth the evaluation of public policies and the active engagement of citizens in

decision-making and evaluation processes. The final assessment is done either through an oral examination about theoretical issues (traditional assessment) or through the assessment of complex artifacts realized by groups of students such as evaluation reports on policies selected spontaneously by students. The course has been blended learning since the Academic Year 2008/09, when an experimental project, so called Web Enhanced Learning (WEL), was promoted by the Institute for Educational Technology of the National Research Council (CNR), in collaboration with AulaWeb, the online platform for education of the University of Genoa. This was to assist teachers in achieving

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skill in applying methods of instructional design in pedagogy.

The aim is to show that blended learning engages disciplinary, technical and relational skills so that teaching/learning processes and student achievement are empowered.

In the course we are examining here, blended learning enabled pedagogy based on the active engagement of students in their formative process and in balanced relationships with peers and teacher made fluent and symmetrical by the implementation of new technologies and tutorship.

In the A.Y. 2010/2011, the training course was blended learning, managed by the teacher and facilitated by two tutors with technical and disciplinary skills. The teacher decided to teach the theoretical issues by face-to-face meetings and to allow students do practical blended activities to realize an evaluation report for the final examination. Particularly the work of peer-groups was facilitated by the use of the interactive tools (forums, chats, wikis) provided by the Moodle platform.

Evaluation was participated. An evaluative brainstorming was conducted where students selected the criteria for the final examination. Two boards, the first composed by the professor and the tutors and the second composed by students, were realized to assess learning performances of students. This activity was very much of the formative approach and allowed students understand the role of learning assessment.

The students, the teacher and the two tutors of the course were involved in the formative process. Usually the classroom of Methodology of Social Research II is not so numerous (more or less 30 students from the third year of the university) that it is possible to promote experimental activities of collaborative blended learning.

BACKGROUND

Blended learning mixes different learning environments combining traditional face-to-face methods with computer-mediated activities. The introduction of blended learning changes the formative environment, suggesting the use of knowledge acquired in other contexts (problem solving transfer) and the sense of community (Hoehn & Rietsch, 2008). Blended learning can promote mutual collaboration, exchanges and reciprocity to follow shared learning goals, also between students who are geographically far.

Moreover social capital is relevant in term of processes and outcomes. There are various definitions of social capital; here the assumption is that social capital is a resource realized through relationships (Coleman, 1988), characterized by two dimensions that are stressed by Torrigiani (2010:87): relational (the relationships that tie different individuals within the context) and cognitive (knowledge and information about the problems that individuals/groups have to solve, including the heuristic aspects, such as the cumulated experience and sharing of common meaning). Social capital is based on relationships between individuals and consists of informative contents and interpretative codes provided by these relationships.

The social-cultural constructivism is the framework (Wilson, 1996): knowledge is not given but co-constructed by students actively engaged in practical and problem-based activities; learning is embedded and develops formally, non-formally and informally (Tipeil, 2009), also through tacit skills, such as to be able to work in group, to be competitive and to be goal-oriented.

In the traditional pedagogy teacher/learning processes are perceived such as top-down and the assessment is mainly one-to-one (teacher-student) (Tipeil, 2009). While in the collaborative approach, learning is co-constructed because is based on the relationships between participants. The evaluation, particularly the participatory

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