Chapter III
Open and Distance Learning Tools and Strategies

Cristina Girona
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

INTRODUCTION

There exists nowadays an enormous variety of models of e-leaning, from the technological, methodological and management perspective. At the university level, but also in company-training, in schools and formal education institutions, the different educational models appear, moving in a continuum from those who use technology as a complement or support to traditional attended sessions, to those that base the teaching and learning process in completely online environments. They try a variety of teaching methods while using differing degrees of virtualisation in the organisation (Bates, 2005).

Years ago, when ICT in education started to be widely used, the success of the e-learning experience and the institutions themselves depended on their technological means; the platform was the most important of the model adopted by e-learning institutions. Initial efforts were put in market analysis aiming at finding out which was the best platform developed by ICT providers. Major investments in economical terms were dedicated to the acquisition of what was considered "the best" platform.

Some years later, it was seen that institutions were different from the rest, and that not all educational platforms could cover all their needs. They realised that the success of their educational offer could not only be based on technology but in the learning materials provided. At that moment, the industry of online resources and hypermedia materials for educational uses grew up quickly. For some years, the success of e-learning mainly depended on the quality of the online materials provided, and that distinguish one institution from others.

However, it came out soon that users did not value an online experience only by the quality of the materials provided, but by the closeness of a tutor, his or her capacity to guide the learning process according to a teaching and learning plan, the competence to provide feedback as subject matter expert and the flexibility facilitated when needed along the course.

Nowadays, quality in e-learning focuses on an intelligent combination of the perceived coherence

among technology, Web materials and teaching action, together with the facilities and services offered by the e-learning provider, from a client perspective. In that sense, quality e-learning universities and educational institutions should guarantee personal attention and commitment to the task of taking care of adult learner with specific characteristics and lifelong learning needs.

These become the key factors of all those who challenge getting into the e-learning market. Nowadays, evaluation of e-learning models, in general terms, incorporate them as indicators (C. Carreras, Chapter V).

The present chapter attempts to show how some of the agents in e-learning (students and tutors) interact in the virtual environment of UOC (Open University of Catalonia), and how some of the most important elements (online materials and resources) are designed and developed according to quality criteria.

AGENTS AND ELEMENTS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

Beyond the ideas about the curriculum (teacher-centered vs. student-centered) from the point of view of the role of the teacher and the use of resources, there exist significant differences between face-to-face and distance education by

Table 1. Differences in face-to-face and in open and distance learning

Traditional Education	Open and Distance Learning
Agents of the teaching and learning process sharing time and physical space. Immediateness of relationship.	Agents of the teaching and learning process relate independently of time and space
Contents to transmit are structured and organised in the way the trainer plans and decides.	Contents must be structured previously to the starting of the course.
Rhythm of work and sequence of the course are distributed in sessions.	Rhythm of work and sequence of the course might be more flexible.
Voice and body language are the main communication means.	Voice and body language are replaced by other non face-to-face means, or are registered to be displayed and transmitted under a different time and space coordinates.
Conversation is the mean to control and drive the training action.	Differed conversation is needed.
The use of new technologies puts up the cost of training (more equipment and maintenance needed).	The use of new technologies might be more cost-effective.
The use of new technologies has been always perceived as a long term challenge.	The evolution of new technologies facilitates communication among agents and subjects, so that they are incorporated very quickly.
Apparently, to work collaboratively is easier and of a higher immediateness.	To work collaboratively requires planning and establishment of working procedures.
The level of reflection and contributions in class are highly improvised.	Participating at a distance makes necessary a previous reflection.

Related Content

A Method for Generating Multiplatform User Interfaces for E-Learning Environments
Juan Manuel González Calleros, Josefina Guerrero García, Jaime Muñoz Arteaga, Jean Vanderdoncktand Francisco Javier Martínez Ruiz (2010). *Multiplatform E-Learning Systems and Technologies: Mobile Devices for Ubiquitous ICT-Based Education (pp. 90-111).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/method-generating-multiplatform-user-interfaces/36074

Social Justice, America, & African American Children: 21st Century Challenges of Disparities in Health Care and Education
Mary S. Jacksonand Heather M. Jackson (2011). *Handbook of Research on Transformative Online Education and Liberation: Models for Social Equality (pp. 126-144).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/social-justice-america-african-american/48868

Teaching a Socially Controversial Scientific Subject: Evolution
Hasan Deniz (2013). *Approaches and Strategies in Next Generation Science Learning (pp. 52-63).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/teaching-socially-controversial-scientific-subject/74090

Using Activity Theory to Guide E-Learning Initiatives
Neal Shambaugh (2010). *Cases on Successful E-Learning Practices in the Developed and Developing World: Methods for the Global Information Economy (pp. 259-274).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/using-activity-theory-guide-learning/40581

E-Assessment: The Demise of Exams and the Rise of Generic Attribute Assessment for Improved Student Learning
Darrall Thompson (2006). *Self, Peer and Group Assessment in E-Learning (pp. 295-322).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/assessment-demise-exams-rise-generic/28808