

Training the eTeacher: a Challenge for the University of Milan

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to illustrate several models for training eTeachers that the University of Milan has designed in the last few years. The discussion seeks to present the context, the educational demands, and the consequent methodological features of such models. We will not touch upon aspects related to the evaluation of the courses and their *ex post facto* repercussions in the training project, since these processes are still in progress. Such themes will be discussed in future work.

Introduction

From the moment in which the University of Milan moved from eLearning experiences based on projects associated with single pioneering teachers to structured initiatives that involved many teachers or entire departments, we witnessed, in the planning of such experiences, the evolution from an empirical, experimental approach to one necessarily more systematical (Pinelli, Esposito, Santandrea, 2003). Therefore, on the one hand, we compared the problem areas and critical aspects that came up during the projects to similar experiences (conducted in university and non-university settings), and on the other, we took into consideration guidelines and standards to assure the quality of these projects.

In response to reflections that emerged from the completed experiences and in keeping with the literature on the subject (NEA, 2000; AFT, 2000), it was considered of primary importance to develop a specific and structured plan for *Faculty training*. Indeed, in the transition from a conventional type of teaching to this innovative sort, university professors are required to have specific technical and methodological skills: not only is the work of planning their own courses modified, but they also find themselves collaborating with new professional figures (instructional designers and tutors) in order to design online teaching activities, forms of interactive communication and modes of evaluating learning with which they often have had no previous experience.

The enhancement of the quality of teaching through the use of new tools and methods is an ambitious goal and is attainable only if teachers become advocates of their own professional development. The principal need is to identify a method of training teachers that will provide them with the necessary skills to understand whether and how to use educational technologies in the academic program.

Conceptual Framework

Although complementary, the skills required of the eTeacher go beyond those necessary and sufficient for planning conventional teaching activities. Berge (1995) focused on four skills that the eTeacher should possess: *pedagogical or intellectual*, the eTeacher uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills; *social*, the eTeacher involves the creation of friendly and comfortable social environments in which students feel that learning is possible; *managerial or organizational*, setting learning objectives, establishing agendas and deadlines for learning activities, clarifying procedural rules and decision-making norms; *technical*, possibly the most daunting for academics, involves becoming familiar, comfortable and competent with IT systems and software that compose the eLearning environment.

Once a plan of action for the training of the eTeacher is set out, how should such skills be prioritized and how should the *ad hoc* teaching plan be organized?

In their models, both Gilly Salmon (2000) and Derek Rowntree (1995) identified a learning curve that students learning online would normally face and they suggest ways of assisting students along the way. The competences outlined in their models are organized chronologically and according to increasing levels of complexity: technical tasks; reading, writing and discussing tasks; time management tasks; and interactive tasks.

Level I	Level II	Level III	Level IV
Computer skills	Literary/discussion skills	Time management skills	Interactive skills
Is at least equal to:			
Ability to: -use a word processor -use a browser and navigate in a multimedia environment -use an e-mail software program -use an internet conferencing environment (chat rooms and discussion groups)	Ability to: -read messages from others and formulate appropriate responses -identify the direction of messages, organize ideas, focus on key points -appropriately interpret messages where face to face contact is not available	Ability to use time in a planned but flexible and opportunistic way in order to: -regularly check e-mail -decide how and when to look into discussion groups -regularly check how the project and collaboration are proceeding -complete assignments while respecting deadlines	Ability to: -respect netiquette -share created resources -work together to resolve a common problem -encourage others in the group -adjust attitude in an online discussion in order to respect the perceived needs of others

Table 1: Necessary skills according to Rowntree’s learning curve (1995)

Departing from these considerations, the training model for the eTeacher was laid out on the basis of a careful apportioning of actions on distinct and parallel levels: technical support actions; intellectual actions; organizational actions; and social actions.

Programs Implemented

Most of the eLearning educational offerings at the University of Milan are based on a web enhanced model (250 online courses as a support to traditional lectures by December 2003). The Ctu-Center of Technologies for Learning of the University of Milan began in 2001/02 to deal with the complex problem of training new teachers by offering, and refining along the way, two different types of courses:

a) *Workshops: face-to-face and for all teachers*

In this kind of course, teachers spend about a half-day in a computer lab. The sessions are open to all teachers, and are in fact obligatory for those who want to set up an online teaching environment. The workshops are offered periodically, usually at the beginning of a semester. The goal of these training sessions is to provide teachers with basic skills for autonomous use of the teaching platform; i.e., communication, publication and self-assessment tools. These would be Level I and, in part, Level II skills outlined in Table 1.

b) *Online courses: distance learning for defined projects*

This type of course guides teachers through a distance learning experience to train them in the new role of eTeacher through a participant involving method. The training objective is self-management of a virtual classroom at an upper level and integration of teaching practices in virtual and real classrooms. This modality is quite demanding, both in terms of planning and management, and is therefore advised for well-defined projects with groups of already-organized and motivated teachers. The skills taught, in reference to Table 1, would be from Level II to Level IV.

In this paper we will present only this second model.

Online Course - Identity Card

The online courses, with variations due to specific training programs, are generally set up in similar ways. The following tables illustrate two actual courses:

Number of students	6
Number of tutors	1
Length of course	3 weeks
Structure of course	-one F2F meeting at the beginning -3 online modules (1 per week)
Commitment per participant	15 to 21 hrs. for the whole course (5 to 7 hrs. per module)

Table 2: Example of tutor training program in the *Labsol Project*

Number of students	10 to 15
Number of tutors	1
Length of course	3 weeks
Structure of course	-one F2F meeting at the beginning -3 online modules (1 per week) -decompression week to reflect on the experience -one F2F meeting at the end
Commitment per participant	15 hrs. for the whole course (3 to 5 hrs. per module)

Table 3: Example of the eDocente program in the *Campus Medico Online Project*

Online Courses – Methodological Set-up

University teachers are involved in professional, teaching and research activities; they have limited time available to attend courses to update their teaching and their attendance is not always accompanied by a positive and motivated attitude. Immediate results and clear benefits are demanded: therefore the course must be engaging and useful. For this reason, we opted for a methodological setup based on an inductive-deductive approach for our online courses. During the course one learns through direct practical experience, and concludes with theoretical reflection (during the decompression week, if provided, and the final meeting); therefore the theoretical reflection will accompany and support the *ex post facto* phase wherein teachers, who during the training course had been students, must now take on the new role of eTeachers, for which they have just been trained. To quote Jay Cross (2001), “*All of my fellow eLearning gurus will tell you that learning is the important part of eLearning, not the “e”. I say: no! What’s really important is doing.*”

The online courses are organized into teaching modules that particularly concentrate on the acquisition of those abilities needed for managing online communication environments (Levels II, III and IV in Table 1) which are considered difficult and at the same time crucial. According to the type of online course, the three modules can be entirely devoted to managing communication processes and on the ways technology changes the practice of teaching, or one of the three modules could be dedicated to creating content (i.e. the revision of teaching materials). If we look at the skills required to manage computer conferencing environments, two levels of increasing complexity can be generally singled out:

a) *Basic level: information and counseling*

The skills acquired in this level are linked especially to communication and social aspects: the teacher learns how to write a welcome online message to his or her students (set up of the communication environment), how to respond to students who are struggling and need to be encouraged to participate, and at the same time, acquires sensitivity in identifying underlying tones and emotions in the messages.

b) *Advanced level: handling of learning activities*

The skills acquired in this module concern the creative use of computer conferencing, as a tool for dialoguing, socializing, and discussing to create content. The activities in this module are generally of the cooperative and collaborative type, with special emphasis on experimenting with role playing (for example experiencing the methodology through solving international intrigues or writing a fairy tale).

Conclusion

We have provided online courses as a method of training teachers in various disciplines (approximately seven editions so far). In all the courses, after an initial phase of skepticism and disorientation, the teachers gradually gain confidence on both the technical level (Level I) and the methodological level (Levels II-IV) and they finally understand, especially through activities of role playing and simulations of situations, where they experience a creative and dynamic phase, that teaching technologies can be used at the service of their own educational objectives, and not vice versa.

Drop-outs are minimal: one or two at the most out of 15 people, and they usually occur within the first week of the course. This fact seems to confirm our decision to conduct the online course model only on demand and within the context of well-defined projects with groups of already-organized and motivated teachers. The aspects that seem to be most appreciated are learning how an online course works through practice and not theory. In this way, participants understand from their own experience some of the possibilities, both benefits and limits, offered by learning technologies. Negative reactions have to do with the realization of the required workload and the deadlines that must be respected, even though are necessary. On the other hand, an unexpected positive aspect was the acceptance and enthusiastic participation in the role playing activities which were initially only experimental: learning by playing is very helpful! Quoting a teacher: “*Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci¹: If I hear, I know; If I see, I understand; If I do, I learn!*”.

Several issues that arose from these training projects remain open: what kind of relationship could be established between the organization of these courses and the preparation of other tools (i.e., online guides and tutorials) to support teachers in using modern technologies? how can we adapt these training methods to the educational needs of various disciplines? how can we extend a model such as the one presented here to serve both small numbers of teachers and much larger ones? we will seek to answer these questions in our continuing work of research and development.

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¹ Anything that mixes business with pleasure is an asset.