Chapter 5.12
PLE:
A Brick in the Construction of a Lifelong Learning Society

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ABSTRACT

The attainment of lifelong learning objectives is being mediated by a complex process of innovation in education and society, by the integration of institutional actions and by the major role of coordination that university has assumed. The revolution that technology has engendered in every field has flowed into a rethinking of knowledge, knowledge management, teaching and learning, networks and the individual. The knowledge society requires new roles and skills, new forms of communication and a new awareness as "active citizens". Consequently, the shifting role of education systems in networked organizations is decisive in order to support learners in forming diverse personal learning networks to deeply understand complex fields. This chapter aims to discuss consistency (i.e. solidity and reliability) and effectiveness (i.e. success, usefulness and value) of a personal learning environment as a new learning space and to highlight its contribution and relevance to lifelong learning. PLE critical points and approaches will be discussed exploiting three case studies.

INTRODUCTION

The only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn […] how to adapt and change […]. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than upon static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world. (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 2002, p. 304)

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The introduction of lifelong learning objectives and policies has poised us on the threshold of major change in education and society. By now, learning to learn and learning have become the first motivation towards development, empowerment, continuity and generation of value, with the help of Web 2.0 tools.

The implications of the adoption of a lifelong learning paradigm, which is strongly supported by the use of new technologies, are profound and they have already impacted on all aspects of educational institutions. Undoubtedly these are exciting, but challenging times. The revolution that technology has engendered in every field has flowed into a rethinking of knowledge, knowledge management, teaching and learning, networks and the individual. The knowledge society requires new roles and skills, new forms of communication and a new awareness as "active citizens". Consequently, the shifting role of education systems in networked organizations is decisive in order to support learners in forming diverse personal learning networks to deeply understand complex fields.

This process is catalyzed by two dimensions: the learner's awareness of the importance of a personal approach to knowledge, beyond fixed educational paths; secondly, the learner's interaction with a learning community capable of stimulating, negotiating and validating personal modes of knowledge management in a knowledge-sharing environment. In this perspective, education in general and eLearning in particular have become strategic. But which eLearning? Today designing online adult education means being able to build modules or courses which favour generative learning, a personalised and shared construction of knowledge: the learner needs to interact, together with his/her peers, with a system in which he/she can act as a co-protagonist in the construction of his/her knowledge. New teaching strategies have to be adopted to achieve this aim. Accordingly, it is necessary to move from a transmissive approach to a constructivist one, from a linear learning system to a networked one, from an individual vision to a cooperative one, from a fixed programme to a project to be organized.

All this is possible if to the two levels of planning, teaching planning of modular learning objects and technological planning of the communication environment, a third level is added, that is informal eLearning. The adoption of online learning tools and methods should be preceded by the distinction between formal teaching spaces and the spaces agreed in the learning communities. Formal teaching spaces are defined within LMSs. Spaces agreed in the learning communities, instead, are to be used by social software (dynamic platforms, blogs, wikis, e-mails). They are aimed to build networks of virtual identities and to define personal learning environments of dynamic contents, based on continuous accesses, validations, dialogic exchanges. As a consequence, the process by which technologies, used by communication experts, impose learning within prescribed interactions is inverted; social software allows the learner to the fundamental use of technologies as means to represent, connect and express his/her knowledge.

In my experience as a teacher, a student and an individual, lifelong learning paradigm and social constructivism respond effectively and coherently to the need for greater emphasis to be put upon flexibility, transferability, individualisation, modularisation and mobility in education. However, are teaching and learning developing to make these changes possible? Can we really speak of "new" learning environments? Are learning tools and support adequate (availability of technology-based tools, open and distance learning methods access, teachers/trainers trained)? How does the teacher's role change when technology is used? How does the learner's way of working change? Which learning strategies are useful in technology-enhanced environments? What are the changes and the expectations when conventional class activities are, partially or completely, shifted into a technology-rich learning environment?