Chapter 19

Learning across Multiple Spaces:
An Integrated Approach to Formal Online and Face-to-Face Contexts[1]

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter deals with four different case studies represented by graduate and post-lauream courses run at the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism at University of Macerata (Italy). These cases synthesize the research developed in the last 10 years by the teaching staff who have promoted the activation of e-learning in the institution. The choice to present different contexts, from blended solutions where face-to-face courses are integrated with online environments to fully online courses, is framed in a new pedagogical perspective; that is, the need to focus on the methodologies and strategies recognized as successful in e-learning in order to improve the quality of traditional instruction developed in the presence of higher education institutions. This process shifts attention from "quality of e-learning" to "quality through e-learning." In fact, the differentiated and flexible use of technologies is aimed at helping students become more involved in the educational setting and to help them contextualize their studies more effectively.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The University of Macerata was founded in 1290 and is one of oldest European universities, with a long tradition in Humanities and Social Sciences. It is currently organized into seven departments which offer both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes that include specialized courses, Master's degrees and Ph.D.s. All undergraduate courses administered by the different departments, except for the Department of Economics and Law, are offered both through a traditional face-to-face modality and by using e-learning. Students choose what modality is more suitable for their needs and get exactly the same degree at the conclusion of their studies.

Distance learning is supported by the CSIA (University Innovation Centre) which in 2012 replaced the E-learning, Multimedia and Information Service Centre. From 2005 onwards, E-learning services (teachers' support, online tutors' training, coordination activities) and infrastructures (implementation and development of the Learning Management System) have been supported by those centers whose quality was awarded by EFQUEL (European Foundation for Quality in e-Learning, http://efquel.org/) with the UNIQUE certification (European University Quality Certification, http://unique.efquel.org/) in 2009. The quality review was developed through a comprehensive process which requires a set of iterative steps and implies on site experts' evaluation and both staff and student interviews.

It is necessary to underline that the effort involved in e-learning and the use of ICT in the courses run at University of Macerata covers more than 10 years of research and experimentation. In 2000 the first online course was activated, with a focus on the relationship between didactics and technologies. The interest and the multifaced issues raised during that event involved having a stimulus to go deeper in the design and implementation of online Master's courses in Open Distance Learning and becoming a Multimedia Trainer. In 2004 a specialized online course was activated to train tutors to be hired for the online graduate courses run at the Faculty of Education where 640 students are currently enrolled. In the following years the same faculty (now a department) developed online Master's courses specifically addressed to teachers and covering topics such as the design process in didactics and the use of instructional technologies.

In terms of quality assurance and online course accreditation, the Italian Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Innovation and Technology set the criteria and procedures both in the public and private universities and in the institutions declared capable of delivering university degrees (art. 3, decree 3 November 1999, n. 509).

The "Technical Attachment" of the above mentioned decree states the requisites of the learning process and we believe that it will be useful to underline the sections dedicated to delivery, access, and Tutoring support actions. Since e-learning is meant to be a "synergic process made of integration between didactical materials

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