

Elearning 2.0 applied to the language learning market

Introduction

Under eLearning, it is generally understood the educational methods, where computer is used as the instructional medium. It is a planned educational experience, involving both teaching and learning, using mainly IT technologies to reach its audience. The European Commission and the Elearning Action Plan (2001) defined it as: "The use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration."

From elearning to elearning 2.0

The process of adapting traditional methods of distance learning was one of the logical foundations for eLearning, being the other the programmed computer based/supported learning.

Distance education has since its very start always represented an alternative to traditional forms of education and training, and therefore has had to battle for recognition and consequently early developed procedures for demonstrating quality.

The convergence of both traditional and computer based learning methods has organically evolved thanks to the parallel evolution of the primitive online world into the so called web 2.0. giving birth to the concept of eLearning 2.0. Terms like wiki (a hawaiian word for "fast"), blog, social network, podcast and feed, are by now familiar to million of internet users. They have become the ones who generate, use, share and remix the content, mutating from their previous passive role to a definitely hyperactive one. The internet has changed dramatically in the last years, and so has changed with it the average user.

The democratization of the online world, has provided the culture medium where users, regardless their interests, have found the way to connect the dots with like minded people around the globe. They have taken the creative role reserved previously to University professors and researchers, who already had the chance to network in such a manner during the past decades. These changes can be regarded as a social revolution, more than a merely technological one.

File-sharing, free and open-source software, Creative Commons licenses for content are already viewed not only as necessary but as essentials for the creation of current and future learning networks. Such a prestigious institutions like the MIT, has launched big efforts in this direction, providing online resources through the "Open Courseware Project" (by the way, using Creative Commons licensing). It is a Web-based publication of the educational materials from virtually all of the MIT faculty's courses enabling the open sharing of the faculty's teaching materials with educators, enrolled students, and last but not least self-learners around the world.

E-learning offers significant benefits and some unique attributes compared with traditional course delivery, such as: time and location shifting, flexible sequencing, wider access and increasing diversity, access to extensive resources, and improved communications and acceleration of feedback. On the other hand, removing completely the social element linked to knowledge Acquisition, regarded as fundamental, seems to be the biggest danger if eLearning is to be considered individually.

The human touch, as the social creatures that we are, should always remain a basic factor, as part of the learning experience.

The key word here seems to be "blending". The power is in the mix, getting the best of both worlds, to achieve a required balance between the needs of students to socially interact with other students and teachers, not only through the new web 2.0. technologies but also in the old real world.

Considering second language learning, many "blending" models have been suggested.

A good approach is the one proposed by Daniela Munca. She considered the specific problem of how to design task-based instruction for teaching grammar using Wikis.

She followed Chapelle approach, implying that task-based language teaching should be devoted to opportunities for subconscious acquisition rather than conscious learning.

In this manner, she combines both syntactic and semantic methods to produce linguistic output out of closely related tasks to the learner's actual communicative needs. A practical example of this, was to engage learners in exchange of comments, using the "thread communication" feature present in the wikis.

Since all posts referring to a grammar unit were posted on the same page, every student in the class can access the entire work of the whole group, enabling a great environment for collaboration, feedback and similar interactivity.

After this stage, she designed “goals” regarding specific outcomes which diverged to the „input“ stage were learners could process the multimedia info provided, using each wiki unit as background support to find more resources for deeper processing. The final stage is considered by Daniela Munca as „procedure“ regarding to what learners will actually do with the input of the learning task. She allowed to practice several skills at the same time, reinforcing the output through this new chance to stabilize the recently acquired knowledge.

As we can see, what happened is that primitive “delivered” learning (one-directional learning software and similar “chalk and talk” strategies) has become a content-authoring tool, where learning is “created”. Instead of reading content, it is now being used, more likely to be produced by students than by course developers.

The next big question is how to assure quality in eLearning. To overcome the barrier of filtering the excess of information and bad content. Ehlers (2004) argues that of all the dimensions and aspects of e-learning quality the perspective of the learner is probably the most important. Education differs from other products in that learning is not a product that the consumer buys, “...learning rather constitutes a process that they (the learners) have to carry out by themselves.”

Brief Case Study: palabea.net

Let's consider the approach to quality in eLearning, considering a brief case study of palabea, elearning 2.0 language learning platform.

1. Community of Practice: According to Etienne Wenger, in the world of eLearning, a community of practice is the closest to a social network. It is characterized as a shared domain of interest where members interact and learn together, developing a shared repertoire of resources. With this idea in mind, palabea has incorporated this concept into its platform, creating a language learning community of practice, where users are able to create the learning content in their desired language thanks to a broad choice of technologies which combines both formal and informal eLearning.

2. Cooperation and communication in the course: The online eLearning course can focus on social interaction through discussions, or focus on discourse of controversial topics and knowledge creation in argumentative and collaborative settings. Palabea also offers an „offline language exchange“ feature where users can find native speakers in their hometown, enabling the unique „face to face“ social experience.

3. Technology: palabea's e-learning platform has the possibility of adapting to the users' settings and provides thanks to the „virtual classrooms“ feature the possibility of starting where the user finished his last learning period.

The platform has the possibility of synchronous communication (through a communication tool enabling text-chat and video-chat), as well as asynchronous communication (through e-mail, forums, i-Paper generated documents, comments to podcasts and video-lectures).

The content may be available in different formats and the learner may be able to download course materials on his/her own computer, available for offline use. It is also possible to link and embed to the virtual classrooms videos, podcasts and all kinds of multimedia content.

4. Costs – expectations – value: The cost and effort the learner has to invest in the course relative to benefits and outcomes are important. Expectations towards online learning may be that it is flexible in time and individualized in course structure regarding content and support. Non-economic costs relate to the effort it takes to learn and to concentrate on the course within an individualized learning scenario. Palabea's learning platform is free of cost, but it offers also the possibility of booking “in situ” courses from well accredited language institutions worldwide.

5. Information transparency: Counselling and advice before entering the course can be an important dimension of quality. It may also be of importance to learners to be able to access information about the course, the tutors and the institution that provides the course. Another important dimension for learners is access to detailed information about the course.

Palabea's network of language schools provides all kinds of detailed information regarding their courses and offers. Users have also direct communication to the language schools, for any concrete questions they may have.

6. Course structures: This field contains the learner's requirements concerning the structure of an e-learning course. Some learners see presence (face-to-face) periods (blended learning) as important, while other learners prefer pure online learning.

7. Didactics: This field contains dimensions such as preference for access to background materials related to the e-learning course content, and also the use of multi media and several types of enrichment media. Other quality dimensions are whether the course is structured in a goal-oriented way, whether it includes support in gaining learning literacy (learning to learn) and life-long learning skills, whether tests and exams are integrated in the learning materials and whether the learning tasks are designed to fit the individual learner's needs.

Being totally aware of the importance and the future impact that the use of collaborative tools will bring. Prospective educational models will need to contain in their designs the existence of learning activities where interaction, collaborative work and self-learning should be basic features.

The major future challenge regarding eLearning is the integration of learning activities into every situation of our life, synthesizing learning with living, and above all how to use all the available resources to improve the most important skill we possess, the ability to communicate.

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