

WHY, WHAT, WHO, HOW: BUILDING UP ONLINE COURSES A REPORT FROM A SOUTHERN ITALY UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This work is based upon an online experimentation realized by the didactical area of sociology at the University of Salerno (Italy). It seeks to identify its points of strength and of weakness and to establish guide lines for further planning. In particular, it systematically describes and compares two courses which have used different approaches, methodologies and platforms and their results. To conclude the authors underline the importance of the study of the context, of giving an active and significant role to the students as well as to the teachers and of building up a dialogue between traditional and ITC-based tools.

Introduction

This work reflects on some aspects of the online experimentation conducted from 2001 to 2008 at the University of Salerno, in the three yearly studies course in Sociology. The success of the initiative amongst teachers and students determined the on setting from 2008 of the entire three yearly online course, alongside the more traditional teaching (http://www.lettereonline.unisa.it/Sociologia_online/index.php).

Through the systematic comparison of two courses, suitably selected, we endeavour to identify both the weak and strong points within such an experience and to establish guide lines as to improve further courses, making them more consistent to the needs of the students. We also hope that our experience will be of interest to other teachers in different contexts.

Before we go into the specific course's description, it's important to offer some brief considerations on the context to which the courses belong and on the students for which they were created.

The quality of a learning product, that will bring us to a better learning, it is the result of the confrontation and negotiation with specific users and their needs, and specific contexts (Elhers, 2007, p. 8).

The Context

During the academic year 2006–07 the University of Salerno offered to its students 31 first level degree courses, 24 second level degrees, 29 doctorships of research, and 10 first and second level masters.

In the same academic year the students enrolled were 39,029 (2.6% of the Italian university students). The Sociology degree, which belongs to the Faculty of Arts, registered in the year 2006–2007 230 students within the first level and 46 students in the specialist degree.

In the University of Salerno the dropout rates between the 1st and 2nd year have grown over time, from 23.1% in the year 2001–2002 to 30.1% in the year 2006–2007.

For the students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts in their first and second year, the average dropout rate is of 22%. By the third year, however, abandon a further 15%. For the Sociology students drop out rate are still higher, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students Enrolled in Sociology Courses (2001–2004):
Early Dropout Rates

	Enrolled	Not enrolled 2°year	% early drop out
a.a. 2001-02	418	151	36.1
a.a. 2002-03	315	124	39.4
a.a. 2003-04	275	129	46.9

These difficulties are much more serious where students are lacking an adequate preparation for third-level study. Here it is relevant to refer to the concept of cultural capital, comprising different forms of knowledge, skills, education and advantages (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Considering as indicators of this capital, parents' educational attainments and the students' final mark in their secondary school diploma, it results that our Sociology students have a very weak cultural background (Arcangeli & Diana, 2008).

Two Courses in Detail

To locate the weak and strong points in the produced experience we confronted two sociology courses, one of which was a methodology of the social sciences and the other the sociology of organization. Both teachers agreed that learning must be a collaborative process and that the students must be at the center of it, but their courses were different under certain profiles. They in fact:

- are addressed to students belonging to different years of the three yearly course in sociology (and partly also to those students belonging to other didactical courses).
- have privileged different priorities and objectives.
- have been built, thanks to a certain freedom of experimentation left to the teachers, on different platforms.
- have produced different results that concern the entire didactical experimentation.

For each course the more general logic will be described clearly and the different needs to whom the teachers and designers have tried to respond and the results of their work. Then, comparing the two courses, conclusions of a general nature will emerge.

The Methodology of the Social Sciences Course

The first course we will discuss is the Methodology of Social Sciences course. This begins on the first year of the Sociology degree. It was proposed to the students in the years from 2001 to 2009, both in the classroom, blended mode, and online (Arcangeli & Diana, 2009). In this section we will dwell only on this last experience even though the parallel running of the two courses has constituted an important experience that profoundly changed our teaching methods and would deserve further discussion, since it would also be of interest to those colleagues that have had no online experiences.

Table 2: University of Salerno, Sociology First Degree. Methodology of Social Sciences Course

Course Title	Methodology of social sciences
Year	1
mode	Online
	Blended
Time	2001-2009
Adressed to	First year sociology students
Number of online students (average)	30/40
Total number of students enrolled	200
2001/09	
Platform used	WebCT
Teacher	Bianca Arcangeli - Paolo Diana
Tutor	1

The course designers were aware that the scheduling of the course at the beginning of the university curriculum implied some general and specific difficulties that needed to be confronted for their significant relapses on the students learning.

As far as the general difficulties were concerned, it was necessary first to confront the disorientation, typical of many students in their transition from school to university (Coulon, 1997), often resulting in the dropping out from the course or in a significant reorganization of the expectations and activities to a medium or lower level. To the “regular” student, entering the university way of schooling and to the working student, to whom particularly the online courses are addressed and also generally lacking reference and support points in the university context, it was necessary to offer simple, meaningful, easy accessible learning contexts and pathways, and the possibility to develop good communicative and collaborative networks with the students and the teachers.

Secondly, the course had to confront the reduced abilities in logical conceptual organization, in writing, in the learning methods, the bad reading habits that were common to many students. It was therefore necessary to produce clearly scheduled learning routes, enriched with the support of reference texts, glossaries, dictionaries etc., but especially to favour the regular, creative, individual and collective use of these tools, building also opportunities for interaction between traditional and multimedia documentation.

Among the problems singled out there were those related to the discipline itself. They stemmed from the “metaskill” character of methodology (Meraviglia, 2004), from the continuous references that it operates in history, epistemology, in the

philosophy of the social sciences, that put into difficulties the students who do not possess expertise in these areas.

Other difficulties arose finally by the fact that students must assimilate the language and the theoretical heritage of the discipline and to be able to translate it into operative choices tied to the empirical experiences (Bruschi, 2005).

The course should therefore foster familiarity with disciplinary language and tools and encourage the growth of the disciplinary identities, but also offer to the students the opportunity to put into practice, with some simple exercises, the acquired knowledge.

To achieve the above mentioned program, teachers and designers decided to place the student in the centre of the course, to connect him to collaborative social and learning networks (Siemens, 2008), and on the other hand not to forget the role of the teacher. The latter was considered in fact a central figure in course's content production and design, as well as organizer and manager of individual and collective communication and guidance in the processes of internalization of knowledge.

The online course was organized with reference to a printed Introduction to social sciences methodology. It was first of all divided in areas, modules and units to develop or integrate the manuals subjects and to organize and facilitate the students work.

Particular attention has been dedicated in establishing regular and structured study habits and practices.

A key role in this direction has been attributed to the unit's working page realized on the Web CT platform which has been adapted, as you can see in Figure 1. The original text, enriched with images, animated figures, audio files, graphic images is configured in the two lateral bars that allow and guide the students activity, proposing on the right side the work to carry out, possible web research on the subject, downloaded materials, spot video conferences, on the left side, the access to the general resources of the course (glossary, syllabus, etc.) and to the communicative instruments (mail, forum, chat, virtual class, virtual conference).

Amongst the work instruments the asynchronous ones, like forums, have been privileged, while not excluding an occasional use, for particular topics of the virtual classroom.

On the whole the results have been quite satisfactory, both for the high rate of passing the final exam as for the low rate of drop outs (10%).

A crucial role was played in this direction from the formation of a compact virtual community that has accompanied the students also from one course to another and helped them to overcome individual difficulties.

It may be noted however that this community was rarely able to move beyond forms of encouragement and support to become an effective learning carrier. A limitation that we feel is due to an inadequate attention in the design, to the construction of specific collaborative processes supported by appropriate tools.

Figure 1: A Page from the Online Social Science Methodology Course



The Sociology of Organization Course

The Sociology of Organization course is foreseen from the Faculty of Arts educational disposition on the second and third year of the sociology primary degree. It is also borrowed from the Communication Course, at the postgraduate level, and from The Faculty of Public Administration in his primary degree. This attendance of students from different faculties, from diverse types of degrees, from different ages represents one of the course more interesting characteristics. The course has been offered from 2005 to 2009 in the “blended” and “online” modality. This double teaching experience however suggests that in the growth of the class as a learning organization, (Argyris & Schon, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi,

1997; Chun Wey Choo, 2006) the division between teaching in the classroom, (with the blended learning activities) and teaching online loses much of its relevance and can be considered as referring to learning contexts and environments rather than teaching, to usages rather than methodologies.

What we seem to learn from all of this is that the key words to learning are exchanging, communicating and sharing (Siemens, 2004, 2006). To each student, whether in blended or online classroom, should be afforded the opportunity to take an active part in class, to develop his skills /learning opportunities through interaction, collaboration, participation. In this context, the open source (in the specific case Moodle) seems to favour the constant evolution of the internal and external resources available (You Tube, Facebook, Twitter, Business Exchange, etc.).

Table 3: University of Salerno, Sociology First Degree. The Sociology of Organization Course.

Course Title	Sociology of Organization
Year	2°/3 Sociology primary degree 3° Public Administration. primary degree 2° Communication course, secondary degree
Mode	Online Blended
Time	2005-09
Adressed to	Second and third year sociology students Third Year Public Administration students Second year Communication course students
Number of enrolled students (average)	25/35 (Online) + 40/50 Blended
Number of enrolled students from 2005/09	120 (Online) + 180 Blended
Platforma	Moodle
Teacher	Vincenzo Moretti
Tutor	1

Characteristics of the Online Course

The online course is divided into three modules each of which is divided into 11 didactical units (UD). The first and the second modules are for everyone's use, whereas the third is for sociology students only.

The main page of the course is divided in three parts. In the central part there are three modules and areas and interactive tools referring to methodology (questions of method), to the contents (adesso forum, adesso wiki etc.), to communication (adesso chat, adesso news), to the evaluation (adesso posso).

On the right side of the page we find, for student's service, calendars, the different course programmes for students belonging to different areas, activities, users profiles etc; on the left hand of the page, instead, a group of containers/contents (think thing, I am a blogger, in the past, to look at) to encourage interaction and participation.

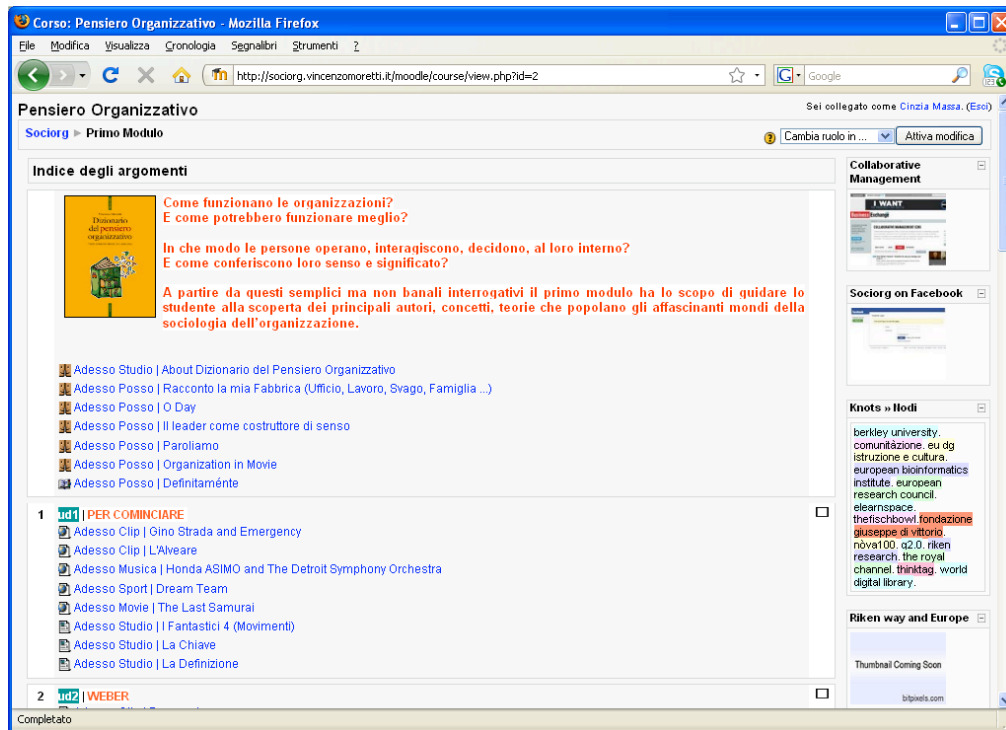
As far as modules are concerned, the page is divided in two parts.

In the main part the course is presented and a guide to the reading and the studying of the text books is offered to students. The contents also of these books and the diverse activities are critically analysed. Finally the contents of the 11 UD are proposed and the different interaction tools regarding the basic texts study (adesso studio, about), its contents (adesso forum, adesso chat), the learning verification (adesso posso).

In order to stimulate the student's curiosity, interest, motivation, their ability to establish relationships and therefore to learn, each UD is opened by a film, video clip or songs linked to the proposed contents. Those latter, also, are structured in such a way to prompt questions, interest, curiosity, interaction and to yield more profitable the study of text books (which still remain an essential component of the learning process). The ultimate objective is to enhance the knowledge and skills of students and to support their capacity to apply to social world what they have learned.

It's with respect to this broader context that find their meaning the lessons, mostly in an asynchronous format and enriched by files, videos, mp3, the weekly discussions on chat with the teachers and tutors and the exercises designed to give students the tools to connect with each other, to contextualise the content of modules and units, to identify causes and consequences of each of them, to establish relationships between what is studied and what happens every day in family, work or social worlds. On the right of the page are proposed instead some containers and contents and some service functions (search in the site, tasks, user profile, etc.).

Figure 2: A Page from the Sociology of Organization Online Course



Results

Together with the specific knowledge, the course has encouraged the acquisition by students of tools useful for their knowledge and understanding of learning, to enhance their identity, to improve their ability to problem solving, to seize the opportunity and then multiply them, to activate a process of conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge (Chun Wey Choo, 2006; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1997).

A paradigmatic example is that of the AM, a working student, who in the face of the request by the manager of his office to settle “quickly and well” the still unsettled affairs demonstrated that within the decision-making process doing quickly can not be an alternative to doing well and that if you choose to do soon regardless of doing well the outcome of the administrative action can not legitimately be called a decision.

(<http://www.eformazione.unisa.it/mod/resource/view.php?id=1690>)

Conclusion

This discussion highlights the importance of some points that must be placed on the base of our future planning for the three-year degree. Generally, at the primary degree level, good teaching and good learning seems to need:

- an accurate analysis of the context.
- simple didactical pathways enriched with visual aids, clearly structured, enabling regular and methodical studying and working habits and continuous assessments of ones own learning abilities.
- support instruments such as glossaries, dictionaries etc. combined with creative exercises.
- the development of a collaborative learning processes within the classroom, between the students and between students and the teacher and the tutors, as well as outside the classroom by the identification of qualified landmarks into the web.
- the building of a systematic integration between the traditional and new forms of communication based on ICT to facilitate the growth of skills in both areas.
- technological choices based on technology's ability to give voice to the need of relating, connecting, constructing, participating and therefore learning by the people, and to respond to the specific objectives set by the teacher.

On the other hand, it seems important to try to building up new products that achieve, if compared to the examples presented, a better balance between:

- the focus placed on the student in the learning process, on his practices and processes of internalization of knowledge (with all the consequences that this implies for the course structure) and
- The awareness of the central role to be attributed to the teacher, and of its many dimensions. The teacher in fact can not be regarded only as a content's producer or as a regulator of collective communication, but rather as: 1. a producer of contents that are conceived and designed according to the specific needs of users, both in language and in the exposure and that must to be translated into activities, thus requiring a continuous and creative relationship with the designers and multimedia

- 2. an organizer and facilitator of the collective communication
- 3. a fundamental guide to the acquisition and internalization of knowledge of individuals and groups.

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