

Distance Education and Didactic Quality. A Possible Aim for the University Future

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We want to show that distance education, appropriately set into educational paths offered by the University, may develop innovative processes that improve the didactic quality. However it's necessary to get out of the market logic and the efficiency spurs.

It's reductive to think that e-learning is only a perfect solution for reaching an otherwise unreachable audience; as well as it's reductive to use on line education in order to solve logistic problems.

On line learning should be legitimated independently of functional urgencies.

If still today many go on asking "What's the use of e-learning?" and if others ask "Whose interest does it serve?", this is the time for changing the basal question: "Why is it necessary?"

We hope to prove that, following appropriated pedagogic criteria, the right integration among the traditional didactic and the on-line learning may offer important elements of quality to the whole distance education.

Keywords Pedagogic criteria; University Education; Didactic Quality; Blendend Learning; Didactic Management

The institution of distance education, in the Universities, has been usually considered as a new fecund opportunity in order to solve some logistic problems: to facilitate the students' attendance, to make the admission to the superior study levels possible, also to those who are usually excluded because of job problems or physical handicaps, to recover unreachable bodies of consumers, are the principal aims that e-Learning has pursued and pursues still today with increasing efficiency and efficacy [1]. At the same time, it has given the possibility to offer support and didactic help to those who, although attending with regular attendance, needs a deeper knowledge or learning guides.

However, in the universities, we can find forms of interference between distance education and conventional education in presence, which haven't yet received the right attention and in which some causes of disease or discomforts or privations, but also some potential resources are hidden.

Surely, the whole e-Learning framework is not helped by this kind of separation between superior education and research activity, which is what better characterizes university didactic. At the same time, there's the effort of those who considers e-learning as something modulated by the same procedural terms that are used to create didactic sequences destined to other education levels. In fact, if you consider all the themes and the problems to be solved by an e-learning manager/planner in the University, you can realize the importance of the issues concerned with the courses plan, the learning organization, their experiences with laboratory training, didactic management problems, that usually need much more attention than other contents or technologic matters.

On the other hand, if E-learning institution can be considered as an instrument for learning facilitation [2], it's right to consider it above all as something that, inside the framework of the University, better adapts to the institution or to the study level and, therefore, to the aspects that didactic keeps and provides maintenance with the research activity.

It's not possible to imagine the University education without a kind of didactic directly connected with the research activities, both those conducted by university docents, both those conducted by the students

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that attend university. If this is the most important – and unrenounceable – aspect of university didactic, it follows that E-learning proposed for this study level has to make it - this indissoluble connexion between didactic and research- visible, clear and enjoyable.

In this way, we're borrowing a previous intuition, already developed in the researches of 80's and deepening it in order to point out the idea of *management model*. This thesis was often reduced to its administrative matters, while it should be better consider in its great potential importance in the didactic field.

When we create new paths for distance learning, the planners have to answer a lot of questions concerning curricular theories, learning models, valuation criteria, organization of contents, the choices of the principal aim to reach, ect. All this, in the specific field of university education, requires an important change of point of view: we have to turn our attention not only to the field of disciplines but towards didactic management too.

The idea of a didactic management is the primary and most important contribution led by the e-learning institution to the university education, with a renewal work of didactic methods which, although sometimes unknown, has led important consequences in different fields, such as the following ones:

- a) Didactic planning of the matter;
- b) Control of educational communication;
- c) Learning verification
- d) The institution of valuation procedures, scientifically controlled.

The problem in hand is that the didactic in presence has never considered adequately these important aspects. Although it's not possible to compare the conventional didactic and the distance education, at the same time it's should be useful to consider these problems of didactic management also in the field of the conventional education.

The so-called "Bologna Process" [3] has been often considered in a reductive way, as a system of measure- fixed in European ambit - to facilitate students' mobility. We didn't realize that that process and the following sweeping reforms require a new didactic management and scientific criteria for the curriculum organization. But, these are the themes and problems a didactic manager is forced to face as soon as he starts organizing didactic.

If the University - the conventional one, based on the didactic in presence- becomes aware of the tasks and demands of the didactic in presence, it can receive an helping- hand, a stimulus to renew the didactic management of the conventional courses [4]. On the other hand, the planners/managers of the distance education courses should consider both the issues concerning University context, both those concerning learning. So, we can think about new learning strategies that require the institution of didactic investigation processes open to research. And, we can think about real research experiences too.

The most careful observers detect the gradual devolution of research experiences in universities and, in some distance education proposals, the risk of losing the important relation between lesson and research activity developed by the docent.

Following this path, the University didactic needs to recover its own identity, safeguarding some basic points, both concerning with the didactic in presence, both with distance didactic:

- a) University teaching has to be in concert with, not at the expense of, excellence in research. University lesson proves and shows all the competences of research.
- b) The young student's learning occurs in contexts of great and continual problems, constantly open to critical comparison and to the instruments of scientific investigation.
- c) The university education develops in scientific workplaces. This need to reduce the distance between the school-room (real or virtual) and the laboratory(real or virtual too).

In substance, we have to consider an important issue of the last years about the progressive transformation of the University into "community creating knowledge", and which turns to community even when it uses forms of communication mediated by advanced technologic instruments. These instruments seem to offer important possibilities to create new places for the distance education, created on purpose

for the superior education, overcoming the issue about the relation between education and new forms of didactic communication. We have to focus our attention on the nature of the interaction between student and docent (mediated by the computer or not) and to understand, to explain, to quantify what returns in terms of innovation to the whole field of university didactic and the didactic management [5].

Following this path you can realize how deceptive the idea of keeping the distance education in an ancillary position is. On the contrary, redeeming its important role in the education strategies, it interferes positively with the systemic structure.

At the same time it's deceitful the thesis of those who emphasize this role so much that the distance education is considered a model of excellence that education in presence should adapt to.

In our opinion, between the distance education and the education in presence there's in the University a circular relation, where the one's contributions help the other one, according to interchange forms that point to *integrated models*.

The prospective of integration is not a vague horizon, but a new tendency line already present in a lot of previous experiences. In order to make it evident, it need further investments in the field of the pedagogic nature of the problem, considering at least four different issues:

a) *What kind of integration.* The two experiences (didactic in presence and distance didactic) are two distinct things, but one of them interlaces with the other one.

In order to make this useful and special interchange really possible, it's important to recognize the lines of difference and the ones of integration, without using rigid and permanent schemes.

Certainly, it's not useful to the comprehension of the issue the thought of a distance learning in order to reach lost consumption of the learning in presence. Indeed, this happen and will still happen in the future, but it isn't its basic function.

Better to see the distance as a measure in order to permit, in a moving and flexible society, a bigger distribution of the consumption inside of the territory and its resources, which represent a natural researching laboratory.

Equally, those who attend distance learning must think to the presence, not as a way of recovering and offsetting, but as a projectual co-operation and as a sharing of complex scientific deposits.

b) *What kind of relation.* These two kind of learning (distance and in presence), fulfil just one training proposal. A training model with two different routes and two different training proposals, would be unjustified and illegitimate. If this could happen, it must be considered as a temporary phase, linked to contingencies to overcome especially using the integrative models mentioned before.

c) *Training and research.* The strong relation between training and research is the decisive element. It awards unity and integration and brings different systems towards the most evolved *integrated models*. Even E-learning can be organized in order to ensure a learning based on a researching modality, opened to the documentation, to the critical comparison, able to support personal experiences of scientific investigation.

d) *Didactic and technologies.* It's important to underline that Distance learning doesn't mean using technologies. Obviously in today's E-learning the impact of the didactic with the most refined and progressed technologies is considerable and qualifying. But the use of these technologies doesn't belong only to the distance learning [6]. We must immediately face the problem of the right relation among teaching, technologies and learning [7] (certainly not only with economy and market tools, but especially with pedagogic research tools).

This issue cuts into both learning in presence and distance learning. Here some examples of issues that must be examined closely in order to benefit the whole University, therefore both distance courses and courses in presence: analysis of technological architectures for classrooms, management of classrooms (real or virtual), recording of available resources and creation of virtual campuses, re-definition of roles and specific tasks, as the classroom tutor, and of functions, as the students' reception, development of didactic laboratories, management of trainings, access to complex scientific deposits.

e) *Training objectives and skills development*. The process of review of the didactic orders started in Europe at the beginning of the third Millennium is interesting and excellent.

The discussion and the initiatives adopted regard to the tool called *diploma supplement* brought the whole attention on some curricular issues, first among these the one concerning the training objectives of an academic course and the one concerning the skills to achieve (or develop).

Skills must be understood as *structures*, therefore as dynamisms of the training of the subject, exposed both to the didactic proposal and to other experiences that need to be linked with the training proposal.

In short, the complex picture of the initiatives developed by the distance learning must be leaded to unity. Its undeniable relation with the learning in presence must be re-meditated.

Integrative lines between the two models must be searched and leaded to a coherent training project; this according to circular models clearly containing the integrative possibilities (and the differentiation ones), the links with research, the connections with technologies development, the opening towards the territory and the whole needs of the person.

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