

Defining a quality model for Blended Learning course for adult learners: the experience of Patronato EPASA CNA (Italian National Confederation of the Craft Sector and Small and Medium Enterprises)

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A new education model for Patronato

In order to improve the quality of the training process of their employees the Patronato EPASA CNA started a experimentation of a new model of training.

The needs of the patronato were to:

- To develop a training system for a large number of learners, geographically distributed throughout the country, which is economically sustainable
- To develop a training system that meets the needs of learners with different levels of skills and knowledge.
- To develop a training system that enables the assessment of the effectiveness of the training and monitoring the level of learning for each individual operator.

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A new education model for Patronato

For these reason the EPASA started the organization, of a first Blended learning pilot course that started in November 2013. The pilot course allowed the organization to :

- Evaluate the pertinence of the didactical model chosen, the tools and instruments that fit to the organizational structure of the Patronato EPASA
- Organize and optimize a precise workflow of the whole process of a blended learning from the production of e-learning didactical materials to the course publication
- Organize and define roles of all the actors involved, planning personalized educational paths where needed.

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A new educational model for Patronato

The definition of the didactical model, the development of the process of implementation of the courses and the technical realization of the learning materials took place in collaboration with the Interdepartmental Research Centre DigiLab of the University of Rome "La Sapienza".

DigiLab is active as a Centre of expertise about quality and effectiveness of e-learning and blended learning courses and as specialized Centre in planning and evaluation of training, educational systems provided in e learning and blended learning mode.

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A new educational model for Patronato

The organization of a blended course in a complex organization that for the first time approaches this educational model required to consider the “quality issue” not like a fixed framework, established once for all but like a dialogue process between the learning goal and learning process coherence and quality and the organizational impact on a precise corporate context.

In line with what it has been said, for example, Ehlers (2007) “quality of development is a constant negotiation process in which all stakeholders should participate in a common effort to define and implement quality in a continuous, improved way”.

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A new educational model for Patronato

For this reason it has been created a mixed project team that involved external professional competences specialized in e-learning, i.e. the University, and the national direction of Patronato, the education office, Directors and Regional Coordinators of the organization as well.

The aim was to organize, through blended learning, a new educational model, **flexible and tailored** on the organizational needs of the patronato.

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A new education model for Patronato

The working group took care of the following aspects:

- Organizational issues: enrollment procedure, course calendar, logistic, etc. taking care that instructions, course's informations and documents were clear and easily accessible to learners
- Course Goals, contents and assessment procedures.
- Tecnological issues: e-learning platforms used, technical requirements, etc.

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A new educational model for Patronato

The didactical model chosen for the course was a assisted self training in blended e-learning mode, in order to offer appropriate assistance and enforce learners engagement during the course's attendance.

The contents were organized in a hierarchical and modular way. The course was in fact divided into two training modules, composed each one by 3 (the first one) and 4 (the second one) Didactic Units, in order to give a clear and easily understable structure of the course's contents.

Self evaluation tests were pre placed at the end of any didactic units and in particular special excercises where prepared at the end of any training modules.

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A new education model for Patronato

A particular attention was dedicated to the preparation of the learning contents. Considering the fact that the learners were not students but workers that had to attend the course during their working time, a particular format was developed: learning “pills”, i.e. video lessons with an average duration of 3 – 5 minutes maximum. Any pill was made as a *self-consistent learning content* object that describes a complete topic or sub topic.

The lesson was based on a video format inspired on the teacher non-verbal communication as a complement to spoken language, i.e: Kinesics (body language), Proxemics, Vocalics, Posture etc. in order to enforce learners engagement involving their “emotional intelligence” in the learning process.

The course delivery involved 12 classes, for a total of 276 students distributed throughout the national territory.

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A new education model for Patronato

A central role in the preparation of the learning contents was covered by the “Area Direzione Normativa”. the Patronato National office that has the task to offer the interpretation of the laws related to the Patronato activities and a centralized advice service for the Patronato network.

The experts of this office were the teachers of the first course and the other course, their presence and competences were crucial for the success of the courses itself.

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The role of the e-tutors

A crucial role was covered also by the e-learning tutors. The presence of tutors was chosen as a **strategic quality asset** for the new educational model of patronato.

As stated by Salmon (2000) and Ehlers (2007) the tutors have a central role in order to determine a successful experience of an e-learning course; based on the background, the working group selected was 12 e-learning tutors by the Patronato personnel.

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The role of the e-tutors

- The reasons to select tutors among the staff and not from external institutions were the following:
- The tutors should also be people that know very well the organizational structure of the Patronato (many of them were chosen among the regional coordinator group or had a leading role inside the organization)
- As leading member of the Patronato the tutors covered a role of sponsorship of the new educational model among the Patronato personell and the territorial structures of the organization.

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The role of the e-tutors

- The tutors were trained with dedicated courses organized by DigiLab in order to give them all the complex competences (technological, psycho-pedagogical, communication skills, etc.).
- The training course for tutor was organized in several theoretical and practical workshops in presence and of training sessions dedicated to train them to the use of the e-learning platform
- The tutors were not content tutor (they had no expertize on the course's content) but they covered the role of "Tutor of Process" i.e. The professional who supports users in the use of technological tools and training resources available, following them throughout the course, supporting the motivational level and monitoring the timing of fruition. It represents the main point of reference for the individual and the classroom.

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The role of the e-tutors

As “process tutor” the e-tutors had many duties and many activities to perform, complex and rich of nuances:

In the course fruition they had the following functions:

- **Process Facilitator:** which refers in this case to the functions of methodological and organizational support that the e-tutor plays in the context of a on line course, to the ability to give directions and tips useful for learners in order to improve their time management and to any advice on "how to study "or on the strategies used to achieve the objectives.

- **Advisor / Counselor:** it means the role of e-tutor as interface between the learner and the organizational structure, in practice as interpreter of the needs of students compared with the the institution that manages the course.

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The role of the e-tutors

Technologist: this function refers to the e-tutors as professional adequately competent of the e-learning platforms technologies, being this the way the course is delivered and managed, to the ability to give advice and tips to the users about their use

- In particular, in the experience of Patronato Epasa the tutors had a pivotal role in the organization and successful fruition of the course, being the main connection between the organization, the help desk and the experts of the contents and the individual learner and the classrooms.

They had also the important role of monitoring the progress of the course and to had to make the reports.

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The role of the e-tutors

- The importance of tutors for learner's motivation and engagement **and** for a significant reduction of the dropout rate, a risk for a first experience of e-learning course in a context of adult working learners, cannot be denied.

It is important to underline this figure cause it is strongly related with quality criteria and quality issues of a blended learning course as:

- A clear Documentation and information process about the course (assessment rules, course duration etc.)
- Information about course structure and (necessary) resources
- Use of technology
- Getting students engaged
- Maintain enduring engagement
- Re-engaging students who drift away or fail to engage, etc.

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Why Blended learning?

- Blended learning was the second pillar, in the case of Patronato EPASA course, crucial for the quality of the overall course and the learning experience. **This method was adopted and adapted in a creative way** since it has to be applied in a context of not higher formation institution and had to be confronted with the needs of a particular kind of organization.
- **Why blended learning?** As a first Impression of the organization blended learning represent an increase of the cost (logistic, organitazionale work, equip classroom in any region of the national territory etc.) compared to pure on line courses. The EPASA choose blended learning method, also if more expensive, for the following reasons:

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Why Blended learning?

- **Change management:** the lessons in presence were used to introduce and explain to EPASA personnel a deep change of the organization in which education processes had a pivotal roles: in this case blended learning was effective cause it helped to:
- Propose the course and the new educational process like the first step of a long travel of changes for the Patroto. Lesson in presence was at the same time: a discussion about corporate identity, about the role of education in this process, about new roles, rules and duties (for example, the training becomes a part of their daily working life for months...) And further on to listen and take notes of suggestions and doubts of the working personell
- The lessons in presence helped teachers, tutors of patronato, ambassadors and actors of this inner process to reach **its** objective and make this change happen

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Why Blended learning?

So if from one hand blended learning means an initial increase of cost from the other hand it represented an effective solution for many organizational needs.

The presence helped to **motivate** learners for changes, to help the corporate communities to share and to discuss about the new model and of the starting course as well (to socialize it) , and to give teacher a tutors a leading role in the general project and in the particular course as well.

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Why Blended learning?

Blended learning was effective for the **overall course's quality process**:

- Motivate learners
- Socialize the new educational paths
- Socialize organizational change
- Clarify doubts and give clear information about the process
- Communication between classroom the teachers and the tutors giving them the authority to lead the changes, the course, etc.

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Project results

At the end of the course was delivered a Learning Satisfaction Questionnaire using a valid scientific Model (the Questionnaire was an adopted and adapted version of the questionnaire prepared for the Italian National Agency to evaluate learning quality in Higher education institutions and Universities (ANVUR):

The Questionnaire was made of 18 questions and was used a Likert scale for the answers. The questions were divided in 4 macro areas:

- overall course structure (i.e. Assessment criteria, length of the course, didactics goals, learning contents, etc.);
- teachers and tutors;
- e-learning platform; logistic,
- classrooms equipment, organization (enrollment procedures, etc.), logistic services, etc.

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Project results

The next slides shows an elaboration of the questionnaire data for the first and the following course of Patronato EPASA. It was delivered to more then 400 workers for the 3 courses represented in the following tables. Here are reported the most relevant question for our reasoning.

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Compared to traditional methods of training the new mode (blended learning) it is more effective and responsive to your learning needs?

| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Immigration | - | 2,44 | 4,88 | 35,37 | 57,32 |
| Job injuries | 0,54 | 3,80 | 10,87 | 47,28 | 37,50 |
| Pension | 0,37 | 2,59 | 6,67 | 37,04 | 53,33 |
| Total | 0,37 | 2,99 | 7,84 | 40,30 | 48,51 |

The assistance of the tutors was helpful for the a succesful course attendance?

| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Immigration | - | 2,44 | - | 25,61 | 71,95 |
| Job injuries | 4,35 | 1,09 | 4,89 | 30,98 | 58,70 |
| Pension | 1,11 | 5,19 | 14,81 | 35,19 | 43,70 |
| Total | 2,05 | 3,36 | 9,14 | 32,28 | 53,17 |

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Project results

The introductory lesson in presence has provided all the elements necessary to the understanding of the course (method, duration, assessment, etc.)?

| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Immigration | - | - | 2,44 | 31,71 | 63,41 |
| Job injuries | 1,09 | 1,09 | 4,89 | 32,61 | 60,87 |
| Pension | 0,74 | 0,74 | 1,48 | 33,33 | 64,07 |
| Total | 0,75 | 0,75 | 2,80 | 32,84 | 62,87 |

The presentation of the course's topics in the learning pills was clear and interesting?

| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Immigration | - | 1,22 | 4,88 | 28,05 | 65,85 |
| Job injuries | 4,89 | - | 15,22 | 39,13 | 40,76 |
| Pension | 0,37 | 0,37 | 0,74 | 30,37 | 68,15 |
| Total | 1,87 | 0,37 | 6,34 | 33,02 | 58,40 |

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Project results

The learning goals and the structure of the course did you consider clear and suited to your learning needs on this topic?

| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Immigration | - | 2,44 | 9,76 | 35,37 | 52,44 |
| Job injuries | 1,09 | 1,09 | 13,59 | 46,74 | 37,50 |
| Pension | 1,85 | 0,74 | 4,44 | 41,85 | 51,11 |
| Total | 1,31 | 1,12 | 8,40 | 42,54 | 46,64 |

Topics covered in the course are of your interest? They are relevant for your working activities?

| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
|--------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Immigration | - | 2,44 | 4,88 | 26,83 | 65,85 |
| Job injuries | 0,54 | 1,09 | 2,17 | 31,52 | 64,67 |
| Pension | 0,37 | - | 0,74 | 20,74 | 78,15 |
| Total | 0,37 | 0,75 | 1,87 | 25,37 | 71,64 |

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Project results

| Tests and exercises prepared were functional for the assessment of your learning process? | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
| Immigration | - | 1,22 | 3,66 | 32,93 | 62,20 |
| Job injuries | 0,54 | 0,54 | 9,78 | 47,83 | 41,30 |
| Pension | 0,37 | 1,11 | 5,19 | 43,70 | 49,63 |
| Total | 0,37 | 0,93 | 6,53 | 43,47 | 48,69 |

| The e-learning platform used for the course was easy to use? | | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Course topic | No answers % | Definitely not % | More NO than Yes % | More Yes than NO % | Definitely YES % |
| Immigration | - | - | 1,22 | 23,17 | 75,61 |
| Job injuries | - | 1,09 | 2,72 | 23,91 | 72,28 |
| Pension | 0,74 | 0,37 | 2,96 | 28,15 | 67,78 |
| Total | 0,37 | 0,56 | 2,61 | 25,93 | 70,52 |

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Project results

The following table shows the dropout ratio for all the courses of Patronato, that was delivered in blended learning mode and the data of courses of other organization **delivered in e-learning mode and without tutors**. It was used the same platform and some of the tools, contents and models, that were already experimented with Patronato but a blended learning model and other quality issues was not considered.

The dropout ratio raise from the **3%, 5%** of Patronato to the **40%, 50%** or even more for external organizations.

Blended learning as the table shows, and the consideration of quality issues and criteria it is crucial to have a succesful and efficient education model that it means also on the medium and long terms an increase of competitiveness and efficiency of an organizations.

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| Organization | Method of delivery | Course title | Participants To e-learning sessions | Learners that received the course diploma |
|-----------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Patronato EPASA | Blended learning | La disciplina pensionistica dopo la riforma Fornero | 279 | 271 |
| Patronato EPASA | Blended learning | I permessi di soggiorno dei cittadini extracomunitari | 98 | 84 |
| Patronato EPASA | Blended learning | INAIL | 231 | 191 |
| | E-learning | | 771 | 366 |
| | E-learning | | 1.964 | 1.203 |
| | E-learning | | 1.933 | 743 |

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Project results

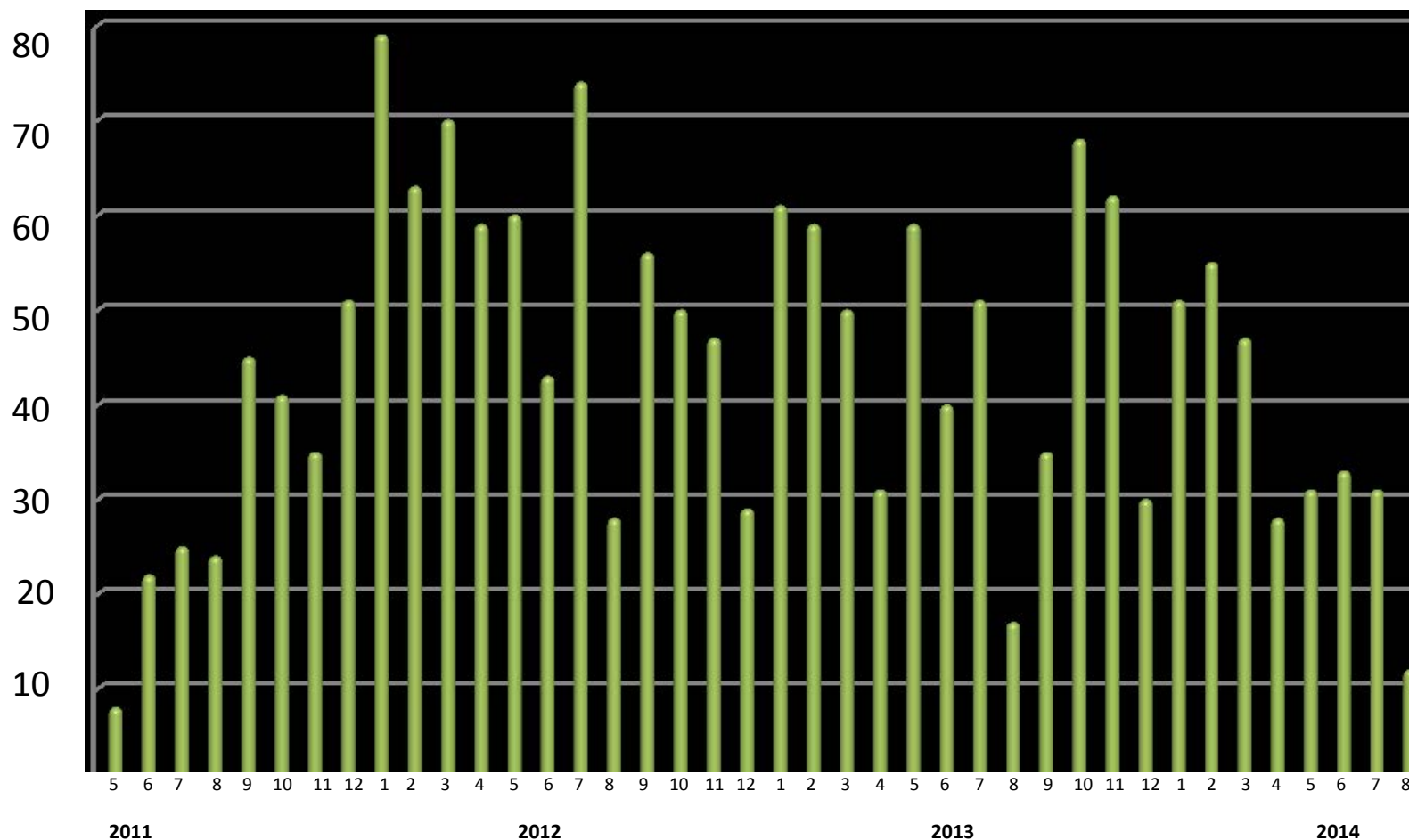
The impact of the first year of blended learning course was not only measured by inner factors (i.e. course's data) but from one more crucial way of measure the result of a quality course: it means an improvement and an increase of quality in the daily working activities of the organization involved. The chart in the next slide shows the number of questions and request of assistance for each month (on the same topics of the blended learning course) that were made by EPASA personell from 2011 to 2014 through a web based services called "on line expert".

After the end of march 2014 when the course finished, the numbers of requests from the Epasa personell fall down in the next months, for about the 30%.

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Blended learning quality

In conclusion, outside higher formation institutions and schools there is a vast continent of learning needs and a strong demand for effective learning paths that have a real impact on the knowledge and the organization of a corporation.

There is a strong demand for Blended learning

There is a strong demand of Quality

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