blended learning quality

Criteria for an eLearning Platform

Work Package 4 of the Project

Blended Learning Quality-Concepts Optimized for Adult Education

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Content

CRITERIA FOR AN E-LEARNING PLATFORM (WP4).

1. Introduction

The objectives of this work package is to create a list of absolutely necessary features for the eLearning platform (LMS) used in a blended Learning course. These features will be focusing on the technical and pedagogical background as well as on the learner's situation. Also, in this WP will be defined additional recommends for useful features and tools that will be used either inside the LCMS or as additional tools. The target of the blended learning platform should be the provision of high quality learning that will lead to the development of the 21st century skills. These are characterized, according to Kong et al.(2014), of three emphases:

Fist emphasis is skills development in both formal and informal learning contexts (Cox, 2013: Huang. Kinshuk. & Spector. 2013). The learners will be engaged in a seamless learning environment to coherently apply various generic skills for in-school teacher-led learning process initiated in digital classrooms and after-school learner-initiated learning process in social learning platforms/tools according to individual needs (Milrad. Wong. Sharpies. Hwang. Looi. & Ogata. 2013: Otero. Milrad. Rogers. Santos. Verissimo. & Tones. 2011: Wong & Looi. 2011).

Second emphasis is skills development through both individualized and collaborative learning approaches. On their own or with peers, learners will take responsibilities to apply various generic skills for planning goals, implementing tasks, monitoring progresses and evaluating outcomes in their learning process (Kicken. Brand-Gruwel. Merrienboer. & Slot. 2009: Norris & Soloway. 2009). The feedback for learners will be in a minimal but sufficient amount for identifying individual needs and directions for future improvement (Caballero. van Riesen. Alvarez. Nussbaum. De Jong. 2014: Sims. 2003: Van Merrienboer. & Sluijsmans. 2009).

Third emphasis is skills development supported by evidence of improvement and awareness of progress. The learning process in the e-leaning environments can be designed in a range of activities in authentic learning contexts. Rich evidence of improvement and productive failure could be collected from learners performance dining the learning process of which can be indications on applying 21st century skills for processing real-life information, reflecting on problem-solving ways, articulating tacit knowledge and negotiating multiple analysis perspectives for knowledge construction (Herrington & Kervin. 2007: Niederhauser & Lindstrom. 2006: Zualkeman. 2006). Learners and teachers would then have many opportunities to look into evidence of improvement and reflection on awareness of progress in the e-leaning environments which include all and more than those formative assessments in a continuous manner across the learning process and the summative assessments at particular stages.

2. Definitions

According to the "Guide for designing and developing e-learning courses" (FAO , 2011),a learning platform is a set of interactive online services that provide learners with access to information, tools and resources to support educational delivery and management through the Internet.

Usually, there are 3 kinds of learning platforms:

- Virtual learning environments (VLEs),
- learning management systems (LMSs) or
- learning content management systems (LCMSs).

These definitions have no clear limits and are often used interchangeably. There are certainly differences between them but some of the features of these platforms are common.

2.1. Virtual learning environments (VLE)

These are learning platforms used to simulate traditional face-to-face classroom activities and facilitate teaching and learning. Their main characteristic is their strong collaborative component. The most well known VLEs are "Moodle" and "Blackboard".

2.2. Learning management system (LMS)

Using this kind of learning platforms, we can facilitate the delivery and management of all learning offerings, including online, virtual classroom and instructorled courses. It also automates the learning course, delivers easily the training, manages learners and keeps track of their progress and performance across training activities, which reduces administrative overhead (FAO, 2011).

The differences between VLE and LMS comes more from the setting in which they operate. LMSs are primarily for training while VLEs are primarily for education. The well known Moodle platform is considered to be an LMS within corporate e-learning, but it is referred to as a VLE in the education sector where it promotes a communicative and collaborative approach.

An LMS is used by training administrators to manage all aspects of learning and development, such as skill/competency, personal development plans, learning content management, reporting and workflow.

A VLE, instead, supports facilitated online learning within education institutions and allows tutors and students to share content. This means that VLEs do not necessary contain all the content within them – they may only provide links to content outside. VLEs are increasingly being adopted as LMS replacements; products like Moodle or Blackboard originally adopted for the education institutions are now widely used by the corporate market for online and blended solutions delivery.

2.3. learning content management system" (LCMS)

The 3rd type of learning platform, the **"learning content management system" (LCMS)** – focuses mainly on creating elearning content. So, it is used mainly by developers and administrators to create content material for e-learning and blended learning courses. This material includes articles, tests, games, video and small units of digital content, called content chunks. In this way, these components can easily assembled and reused into different courses according to learners' needs. LCMSs reduce development efforts and allow digital content to be easily repurposed.

3. Students Needs for the e-Learning Platform.

Students' needs for the e-Learning platform were derived from the speeches presented in the conference "Quality in Blended Learning" that was held in Wiener Neustadt, Austria during 21-22/02/2014. Also some of the conclusions were taken from the EDRASE experience in the field of distance learning.

3.1. On Technical Issues, a learning platform should

- Have a user friendly design
- Be working even will low internet speed connection.
- Have many communication tools.
- Have many collaborative tools (for example wiki, Google docs).
- Be customized, according to the trainees' needs.
- Be stabilized, not presenting any technical problems.
- Have continuous updating and compatibility with previous versions.
- Be provided with a continuous technical problem solving forum.
- Have the possibility of splitting the trainees into virtual classes.

3.2. On Aesthetic Issues, a learning platform should

- Have a welcoming atmosphere with attractive pictures and friendly greeting texts so as to motivate and guide trainees conduct toward style.
- Have an introducing pace that indicates important milestones or tasks.
- Provide trainees with high demands on transparency of information regarding the course organization and the course schedule.
- Have structure, which allows a rapid orientation to all participants and corresponds to the concept of the offer. Have structure is not too complex, eg the list of folders should not get longer or a nested system should have subfolders.

3.3. On Pedagogical issues, a learning platform should

- Have interactive educational material.
- Have many small activities on a weekly basis, so as to check the trainees' progress.
- Have activities should be clear and enhance active participation.
- Have weekly deliverables.
- Have teamwork activities, wherever in necessary.
- Have the trainees informed about their progress in due course.
- Provide justified feedback, in a short time.
- Provide educational material that satisfy the trainees' real needs.

- Have a structure depended on contemporary teaching methods like team working, questions/answers, discussions, brain storming, role plays, study cases.
- Have a structure that gives the trainees the feeling that they belong to a virtual classroom and not been isolated.
- Have a structure helping the formation of trainees' subnetworks.

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