



T.R.I.e.L., a national partnership for monitoring and promoting e-Learning

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Abstract

The Inter-institutional Board on e-learning supply and demand (TRieL) is an institutional initiative aiming to establish an observatory on the adoption of e-learning methodologies. The network of TRieL is the starting point for the development of a strategy able to support the dissemination of ICT educational best practices. The article reports the activities undertaken by the network, which has been working for some years on the promotion and the spreading of e-learning methodologies. TRieL not only aims to present the state of the art of e-learning national practices, but it also aims to provide policy makers with relevant information in order to guide a quality e-learning system of supply and demand in the whole system of education and training, by emphasizing the reflections and results of a Delphi survey.

Reflections on the applications of e-learning and its strategic role in education are related to the contribution of the European policies concerning the objectives of development, based on strengthening and integrating education and training, focusing in particular on the reasons for action in national politics.

1 New technologies and e-learning: institutional guidelines and new needs

In November 2004, the European Commission introduced the Challenges for the European Information Society beyond 2005, aiming at a greater dissemination and adoption of communication technologies, because of the various advantages they provide:

- in the competitiveness of the productive system;
- in the creation of new sources of employment;
- in the improvement of efficiency and quality of services that governments provide to citizens and companies;
- in the development of new forms of information and communication, that more and more contribute to the achievement of the right of citizenship.

These guidelines are still relevant and present in the European Commission programmes on e-government. Sustaining that the impact of ICT on society will grow together with its increasing usage, the guidelines formulated by the EU in i2010 intend to:

- ensure that ICT bring real benefits to all citizens;
- make public services better, more effective, more accessible and more efficient in terms of cost;
- improve the quality of life of citizens.

Besides the considerable impact on lifestyles and consumption patterns of citizens, ICT has also transformed the way of conveying information and knowledge, enabling the experts in education to innovate models and tools of learning. The creation of learning systems supporting large numbers of students, distributed over a wide territory, mostly responds to the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness of training projects tailored to specific targets, replicable and capable of economies of scale. Moreover, the presence of highly innovative solutions showed, in the experiences carried out, a great potential for a significant change in the systems of education and training.

It is therefore necessary for each country to work in order to provide the same degree of acceleration in all key sectors of society, breaking down the boundaries between sectors and ensuring a homogeneous spread of ICT and activating the same potential of competitiveness and growth.

Contemporarily, it is necessary to keep on researching and developing new technological devices to support innovative services solutions, especially in the field of e-governance, by strengthening democracy and transparency. In order to ensure the usability of services at distance, privacy, network security and a widespread digital literacy must be granted.

The education and training sector at national level, always with an eye on the European context, has long welcomed the European directives that promote quality in the education systems, the exchanges of methodologies and practices within the European Community, the acknowledgement of acquired qualifications and skills, in order to promote the mobility of learners and trainers within the Community.

Among the various challenges at a European level, the education system has strongly worked for the use of ICT: network distance learning is now an established reality in lifelong learning, among private companies, in Public Administrations and in primary education.

2 The Inter-institutional Board on e-learning supply and demand

In 2006 an inter-institutional agreement established a network composed of the most important public institutions and private associations involved in the design, development and production of training solutions using ICTs and e-learning methodologies.

Different public institutions take part to the network, called TRIeL - Tavolo di Raccordo Interistituzionale sulla domanda e offerta di e-learning (Inter Institutional Board on e-learning supply and demand): the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research), the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the Coordination of the Regions, as they work for the promotion and implementation of educational policies in the country. In addition, there are other entities: the SSPA (Secondary School of Public Administration Department) and some private consulting associations and service suppliers, such as ASSINFORM and ASFOR. Other significant associations in the network are SIe-L (Italian Association of e-learning) and Geie Menon (European Economic Interest Group that deals with the promotion of e-learning in collaboration with the EU). Another contribution, especially to study activities, comes from DigitPA (ex CNIPA). The coordination is entrusted to the Structural and Human Resources section in the Training Systems Area of ISFOL.

The purpose of TRIeL is to capitalize the e-learning experience gained by the members of the network and to grasp the specificity of this methodology applied to the integrated system of Education, Training and Employment. The idea of TRIeL came from the invitation of the European Commission to promote e-learning as a factor of development and innovation for the quality of training and work systems, but also the will to support the dissemination of ICT and to contribute to the development of the Information and Knowledge

Society.

TRIEl intends to act at a national level in order to meet the need to compare methodologies, practices, criteria and quality standards, as a necessity felt by the different institutions that have promoted e-learning educational activities so far.

Thus, its aim is to promote a wider use of e-learning by sharing the knowledge developed at a national level and helping to develop a more informed and effective relationship between demand and supply. This constitutes the starting point for reflecting on the preconditions for a new conception of educational policies in e-learning.

One of the first goals, evident to all the Board members, was the necessity to overcome the fragmentation of information assets that characterizes the Italian e-learning market, in order to analyze the state of the art and to identify new trends and opportunities for improvement and implementation. To study in depth the topics of common interest, TRIeL has activated two thematic working groups on Practices and Quality of e-learning:

Group on Case Studies, which identifies, starting from the analysis of e-learning practices, the key elements of success in the implementation of educational paths;

Group on Quality, which seeks to reconstruct the framework of the elements of analysis and evaluation regarding the impact of new technologies for learning, even through the comparison with similar systems in the European scene; it aims to propose improvements in the national education and training system.

The presentation and sharing of the progresses of the two thematic groups became particularly fervid moments, which enabled a quick revision and an effective synthesis of the various positions and field experiences.

3 Common orientations emerged from the work of TRIeL

On average, the TRIeL network meets about 8 times a year; these meetings are the occasion for sharing some views on the issues of interest. Here are the most shared ones.

In the Italian experience, the history of e-learning saw an initial phase of both excessive enthusiasm and resistance; secondly, as a result, a phase in which attitudes and expectations became more careful and conscious about the aspects of quality of experience, initially neglected, and the need to streamline the system.

The first generation of e-learning gave rise to a low-profile consideration, resulting from a heterogeneous and often poor quality of the learning resources and professionalism used and the lack of services in the support of teaching:

this still has an influence on the adoption of e-learning.

It is therefore necessary to advance a perspective for a more ambitious approach in the use of ICT to support lifelong learning, aiming for a change. It seems particularly necessary to understand the extent to which “learning together online” - in companies, public administrations, educational and training institutions, professional communities - is a necessary strategy for the processes of innovation and organizational change, and for sharing the enormous amount of tacit knowledge that can only be shared in a relationship of trust and exchange of knowledge and experience, mostly outside the formal training and organizational systems and practices.

The majority of initiatives and experiences of e-learning - because of the long period of experimentation they have been through - has helped to develop the use of new technologies and the deployment of digital contents in the most common educational and training practices. But the potential, not yet realized, lies in the possibility to implement the e-learning tools in all the big and small innovation projects of governments, public administrations, companies, educational and training institutions, professional communities and, of course, individuals.

Major projects, due to the great number of recipients or the process innovations they try to promote, can only succeed if they pursue a logic of learning designed to support the change; it is also difficult to imagine that learning - not just individual learning but also in groups, organizations and communities - can take place without catching the opportunity offered by e-learning: reaching broad segments of users even simultaneously, using the enormous potential of access to information, educational resources and social events which are currently available to every citizen.

New educational technologies offer a great opportunity for accessing learning (number of users, territorial distribution), in an even stronger way on those targets which are still not yet fully involved in the process of training and education.

The methodology has clearly demonstrated its effectiveness in facilitating the acquisition of basic and technical skills, and, to a lesser extent, cross or soft skills. It is also true that, recently, innovative media such as simulation environments, serious games, the tools of Web 2.0 and social networks have been moving towards the development of those skills that have to be trained and expressed in relational and organizational contexts.

To promote quality in e-learning means today:

- to encourage efforts in the production of functional and appealing learning objects, specific learning support arrangements and monitoring services;
- to consider the final users and the stakeholders in the design phase, in

order to understand the different needs and expectations, the possibility to customize the learning paths and the solutions which can encourage the use of e-learning;

- to focus the research on the best practices, in order to identify the opportunities for improvement in methodology and, in particular, in professionalism involved in the processes of teaching/learning.

Finally, two issues on which TRIEl recommends attention are: the evaluation of the effectiveness of courses and the formal recognition of training paths; these topics allow to look at the same scenario from two different and complementary positions. The first point of view concerns the assessment of the investment by the customer organization (public or private) and the implications in terms of effectiveness, while the second point of view concerns the individual right, the identification of the authorities lawfully responsible for that purpose and, ultimately, the impact on the work system.

4 Some results from a Delphi policy survey and future objectives of TRIEl

The Delphi policy survey, promoted by TRIEl and conducted in 2008 among the institutions participating in the network, aimed to identify some of the dimensions characterizing the national experience of e-learning.

Delphi is a qualitative and participatory method, for forecasting and comparison purposes, which allows to focus the respondents opinions and to point out the tacit knowledge related to any subject. The methodology does not require a large number of interviewees, but representative selected experts. TRIEl constitutes itself a group of experts, therefore an extension of experts in education and business Services has been provided.

The survey aimed to identify the state of the art of e-learning in Italy, the problem areas that emerge from the consolidated experiences of the respondents and the possible solutions.

We report the most shared problematic aspects among the experts in the panel.

The heterogeneous quality of e-learning arouses, in the community of experts and decision makers of territorial organizations and policies, the need to identify minimum standards for initiatives capable of enabling its diffusion, including the aforementioned need to improve technological and network infrastructures.

Another strongly shared issue is the lack of a connection between e-learning and the big projects for innovation and transformation of organizations and work processes. In other words, e-learning is not yet “work-based” and

“project-based”, but it reproduces mere delivery logics of already defined knowledge.

In summary, the recommendations on which the majority of those involved in the survey converges are addressed to the need to encourage educational and training institutions to test innovative models of e-learning and provide training, support and development opportunities for teachers of the public entities.

In order to overcome their lack of visibility, it is necessary to intervene with a project aimed at establishing a network of centers of excellence, capable of activating mechanisms of observation and connection among the various public and private initiatives and implementing Italian and foreign best practices.

In conclusion, the survey highlights the need for action on two main areas in order to fully exploit the potential of e-learning for innovation:

- the systematization and the capitalization of experiences and knowledge developed in the field of e-learning;
- the quality of e-learning services, resources and experiences.

Conclusions

Therefore, TRIeL means to carry out in the near future:

- an organic connection activity of experiences and best practices in order to exploit successful procedures and practices, with a meaningful impact on the system of lifelong learning (for formal and non formal educational experiences) and a positive effect in the management of human resources and in the maintenance/improvement of employability;
- a dissemination activity aimed at exploiting the best methodological solutions in relation to the contexts and the innovative technologies used; it should draw the attention of stakeholders on the contribution of e-learning not only to upgrade the human capital that supports socio-economic changes, but also to support the use of e-learning as a lever to drive change and enhance systems of exchange and joint construction of knowledge.