

E-learning in the Mediterranean area: the MEDA-ETE project*

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Abstract

The use of media languages can not only open new communication ways, but also help societies, present and future, to demolish old and new barriers. This if the media languages are supported by an adequate preparation and by adopting formative strategies and appropriate tools. The article presents the results of the analysis of the "component 4" of the MEDA-ETE project. This is a European project addressed to ten Arabic countries of the Mediterranean area, that has the overall aim of dynamizing the economic and social wellness of the whole region involved.

The component 4, in the form of an e-learning course to train the trainers, has the goal of promoting collaboration and cooperation at a national and regional level among the involved countries.

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1 Introduction

In a society in which information and knowledge are an index of wealth, been excluded from the electronic net in which these information circulate translates itself in social and cultural exclusion (Ranieri, 2007). It is also true that, as Rivoltella underlines, «the training system of the future, using the point of view of its logics of cultural transmission, will more and more resemble the system of media and communication» (2001, p. 101). New technologies may be therefore, in the present and in the future, the trait-d'union between different cultures.

Intercultural education, and in this way a training to other cultures, is based on a relational and interactive setting, and on an intentional confrontation with different cognitive styles and mentalities, which can bring to the recognising and development of common meanings. The MEDA-ETE e-learning project, here analysed using data in the process of elaboration, shows the intention of overcoming the cultural and social barriers that still today bounder the process of democratisation of training, and the possibility of growth, also economic, of many societies. This also using technology to educate and train.

2 The MEDA-ETE project

The MEDA-ETE project (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership's Education and Training for Employment) finds its roots in the 1995 Barcelona process, and in the politic, economic and social partnership that in that moment started between European Union countries and 10 States of the Mediterranean area (Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Palestinian Authority, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). The MEDA programme represents the main financial instrument for the partnership.

The objective of the project is to support the MEDA partners countries in the development and the implementation of relevant politics in the field of education and technical training, that can help to promote the development of human resources and the occupation through a regional dialogue approach between the beneficiary countries. Education and training have been identified in fact as key tools for the promotion of economic and social growth in the MEDA region and for the growth of competitive economies in open markets.

The bilateral dimension of the project considers also the realization, within 2010, of a shared prosperity area, identified in the intentions of the European Commission in the free trade zone «set to become the world biggest marketplace».

The realization of the project has foreseen the implementation, between 2005 and 2008, of four components.

The first one consists in a forum, of annual appointment, as a cooperation frame between the Euro-Mediterranean partners, on the sharing of progress and good practises of the various components of the project.

The second component foresees the creation of a Euro-Mediterranean network of producers of information in the training/occupation systems, to develop the quality of the systems and in view of the future acknowledgements of the qualifications at a regional level.

The third one intends to give support to the young towards the self-employment through the development of training and consultative capacities, to promote entrepreneurship and the creation of the micro-business in the regional countries.

The fourth component (component 4) consists in the implementation of an e-learning course, that intends to give the participants – a target group of 160 people selected among the institutions of training/education in various countries – a deep knowledge on the methodological, pedagogical and technological aspects of e-learning.

The objectives of this component foresee the creation of an institutional regional net of collaboration and cooperation in the field of e-learning, the implementation of the pilot e-learning projects in the two sectors of ICT and Tourism of particular importance for the region, and the validation and popularization of the results of the course in every single country.

The coordination of this component has been given to the ETF, a European Union agency that operates in the field of the development of the education and training systems; the realization of the course itself has been given to GiuntiLabs.



Fig. 1 The Mediterranean States partners of the MEDA-ETE project, and the related number of participants at the e-learning course.

2.1 A socio-political and technological frame for the MEDA region

As shown in the analysis conducted during the design phase of the course¹, and preceding the writing of the syllabus, the MEDA region presents itself as mainly heterogeneous, with a weak regional identity and sensible differences between a country and the other – aftermath of colonial and post-colonial different experiences – in terms of economic structures, market labours and educational levels. The region is mainly characterized by transitional economies, with a high percentage of non formal and non qualified jobs; by a strong dependence from agriculture and a scarce access to education in the rural zones; by a family role strongly directive for what concerns the career guidance and by a job highly determined by gender; by an educational system rigidly hierarchic that defines, already in scholar age, limited professional aspirations. At all these aspects is added a deep life orientation based on fatalism, that influences career orientation in terms of little or none possibility of choice that each one considers to have on their own future.

Penetration of technology in the region has spread quickly, remaining though a challenge in many countries. The matter of digital divide, both for access and for use, has been in fact verified both in the requirements analysis phase to the preparation to the course, and during the course itself (for example for the asymmetry between urban and rural zones, for the high costs of connection, for the use of English as vehicular language of globalization, for the high differentiation by gender, and for the scarce digital literacy).

3 The results of the e-learning course, the fourth component of the project

The net support chosen for implementing the course is the Moodle platform; the course has been developed following the methodological ADDIE model, and presents itself structured with a subdivision in 10 didactic modules, that follow and suggest the socio-constructivist approach. Each module requires the realization of an outcome, each of which contributes for its part to the construction of pilot projects that constitute the tangible output of the fourth component of the project.

The course has been realized in French language for the Maghreb countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and in English language for the other ones. Lebanon could not participate due to political reasons.

The data used to observe the proceeding of the course have been gathered and analysed at GiuntiLabs: qualitative data (such as excerpts of conversations in didactic forums), and quantitative data (such as the ones tracked by the platform). These data have given a photograph both at a regional and national level

¹ Source: 2007 MEDA-ETE Annual Forum.

of the frequency to the course. The surveys have been taken in three different moments and have focused on the use of the net tools that shape the didactic modules (outcome, test, assignment, forum), excluding those eminently concerning the delivery of content (offered in learning object or web page form).

The percentage results obtained, national and regional, show a growing proceeding for all four used tools, with a sensible growth during the third considered period (as an example see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Same results can be read through the qualitative data.

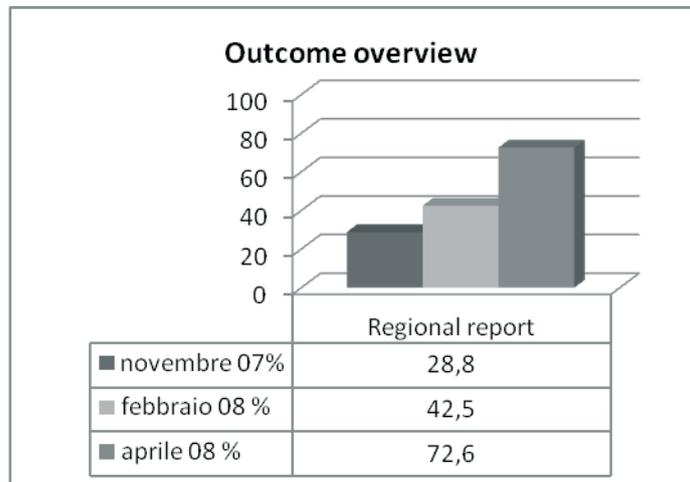


Fig. 2 Regional results of the outcome sent in the three considered periods

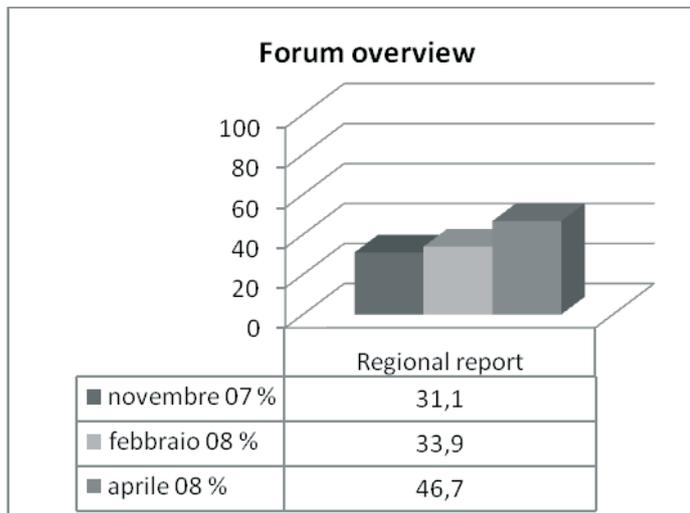


Fig. 2 Regional results of the forum posts sent in the three considered periods

The most evident result concerns the pioneer trait of e-learning in the region. At the beginning of the course it's possible to read in fact a diffuse sensation of discomfort and non confidence with the platform, such as:

[..] I am not sure how the site could be more friendly except perhaps with fewer links and less separate forums.

I feel like I speak alone

I would like if it was more interactions between the trainees. In such a program you must think about the real collaboration between the trainees especially when they are coming from different countries.

This non relational dimension has been maintained up to the moment of the in presence meeting organised in Italy more or less half way through of the course in march 2008. The face to face encounter has in fact given a human dimension to the course, allowing the participants to recognize in it its real side, as is read for example in the following words:

the F2F meeting in Sestri [..] was a great opportunity to put faces to the names we see in the course site and to be able to talk in person.

The meeting has started an unseen dialogic exchange in the virtual spaces between participants of different nationalities – not least the one between Israeli and Palestinian people – as shown also by quantitative data.

Following the face to face meeting the human and relational climate of the platform has become more and more alive, under various aspects: in terms of an augmented collaboration between trainees, highly reinforcing their motivation; in terms of a developed sense of social presence (tangible in the quality of the conversations in the forums and in the growing emotional involvement); in terms of a sense of community that has replicated itself online (in higher level in the French language course rather than in the English one); in terms of a growing satisfaction associated with a learning recognised as meaningful with the passing of time.

Of these aspects it's possible to read the following excerpts:

[..] Je vous remercie vivement pour avoir pris l'initiative de présenter à tous les apprenants des différentes communautés cet utilitaire HotPotatoes qui sera très utile par la suite.

The proceeding of the course shows with the passing of time a positive

judgement of e-learning as didactic methodology, as in the following two abstracts:

I think virtual meeting is good collaborative activity to use because it helps to share knowledge between participants, and I think it helps to find appropriate attitudes to e-learning.

Le partage de culture

Le but de e-learning est de partager ses connaissances avec le monde entier, c'est-à-dire qu'on se partage notre point de vue (les français n'ont pas les mêmes points de vue que les marocains ou les anglais etc...) et notre savoir faire. On est pas forcé de maîtriser une langue pour pouvoir communiquer avec des gens de différente culture, mais avec un tout petit progrès nous pourrions enlever l'idée des "contraintes de langues et des cultures".

The data anyhow show (considering an inevitable portion of drop-outs of about 20% of trainees) also some consequent criticalities. Among these, the matter of the language has appeared to be maybe the most relevant: if the main part of the trainees has done an effort of comprehension, in the case of Syria, that has abandoned the course after a few months, this has determined the exclusion from the training path.

Both kinds of data express therefore the necessary teaching figure, as a quality factor as an explicit request of more substantial presence of the tutor, confirmed as a quantity factor from the data on the forums, which is the one that in proportion grows less among the four considered. This aspect confirms both the basic contribution of the teaching figure to the overall effectiveness of the educational experience (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000), and the key role of this figure (the centrality of the e-tutor had already been agreed in the requirement analysis phase) so that the trainees can get acquainted with e-learning in countries where this still remains a pioneer concept. The substantial modification – in April 2008 – of the tutoring plan of the course confirms these argumentations and embraces the necessary reorientation.

It has emerged from the course the necessity for trainees to anchor more and more the didactic activities to their local concrete context. As an explicit request on part of the trainees, this aspect is also coherent on what Salmon says: «one of the most important lessons about cross-cultural interaction is that tolerance and effectiveness emerge from greater understanding of multiple perspectives and points of view. So e-tivities [...] need to concentrate on surfacing and exploring viewpoints» (Salmon, 2002, p. 23).

4 Conclusions and future perspectives

The positive general proceeding of the online training experience shows recognition on the trainees part of e-learning as efficient for the training/learning methodology, although with a blended type training, at least in a first phase of acquaintance.

It will be possible to verify the results of the course on large scale only in a few years. This after the outputs of the technological dimension of the project will have sided contextual factors of each country during the phase of spreading of results. Only at this time it will be possible to evaluate both the training effectiveness of the e-learning course and the sustainability of the projects developed through the course.

During the second MEDA-ETE Annual Forum, in April 2008, different actions and strategies to adopt at the end of the course have been proposed. Among the realistic options to maintain dialogue and cooperation the creation of a common platform at a regional level has been planned. In it there will be a repository of contents of what has been developed during the course and the project. The creation of a regional virtual forum has also been planned as a negotiation space among all the countries of the region.

By these concrete proposals it is necessary though, along with the challenges emerged during the Annual Forum, a due recognition at an institutional level of e-learning as pedagogical methodology, since at the contrary in the region there is not a clear consent regarding the certification of competences in e-learning. As a consequence, and since the technological development depends on the more general economic development in the various countries, even in this case the institutions should be promoters of the change and encourage it in schools and universities.

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