



E-learning in prison: a proposal

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Abstract

Distance learning is beneficial not only to those students who encounter difficulties when attending courses, but also to "weak" individuals such as women, immigrants and prison inmates. This article discusses several aspects of a distance learning programme for the inmates of ICATT in Eboli (SA), which is still being carried out, focusing on both the various institutional actors and the main choices made. These include, in addition to the option of e-learning, the offer of continual learning paths at secondary school and university levels, in line with the average educational rates of the Italian prison population. Finally, the article provides several details about the didactic organisation of the lessons within the online course.

1 Introduction

Online learning, in its various forms, has been widely interpreted not only as beneficial to “regular” students who encounter difficulties in attending courses, but also as a valid tool in favouring the education of “weak” individuals, such as women, either within a domestic or care-taking context, immigrants as well as prison inmates. There have been several significant studies in recent years relating to the latter, the differences between them being in part based on the various interpretations and definitions of online learning and in part on their specific contexts and objectives. In Europe, due to European funding¹, the theme of prison education, both traditional and online, has been the basis of numerous projects whose results will be compared and evaluated at the “European Conference on Prison Education” organised by the European Commission of Education and Culture in Budapest, from the 22nd to the 24th of February 2010. In addition, there have been, in particular for online learning, projects at a national level, including those carried out in Germany by the “Tegel” penitentiary in Berlin in collaboration with the FernUniversität in Hagen, as well as in Italy, in Bollate, Reggio Emilia and Porto Azzurro. In the penal institute of Bollate in 2005, the inmates, using a blended-learning model, completed the Cisco “Networking Academy” Ccna programme becoming the first trainers to be trained in prison. In a second case, thanks to the agreement between the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the Department of Prison Administration, the prison inmates can attend Bachelor degree courses in Communication and Marketing. Finally, in a third case, thanks to an agreement between the Regional Administration and the Regional Prison Administration, the prison inmates have access to resources financed by the Trio Project.

2 Our proposal: Its characteristics

The distance learning experience presented in this paper is still under construction as well as the methodology and the techniques implemented. However, it presents several specific characteristics that make it particularly significant in relation to the specific users, the contents and the project proposers.

The project would like to offer prison inmates, initially those of the ICATT under test conditions, but with the perspective of a wider public, an alternative to professional training courses (computer studies, gardening, plumbing, carpentry, etc.)². This includes education from secondary school to university

¹ The participation of the Department of Sociology and Political Science of the University of Salerno and the ICATT – Eboli at the Learning Partnership Grundtvig 2009 entitled “E-LEARNING EDUCATION FOR PRISONERS AND PRISONERS PROFESSIONALS” will make an interesting and significant contribution.

² From the data supplied by the DPA, 293 of these courses were activated in Campania in 2008 with 3570 students enrolled. In addition, the Administration of the Campania Region has invested 2 million Euros for the professional training of prison

levels, in line therefore with the general European recommendations on life long learning education.

The choice seems particularly important in relation to the average educational rates of the Italian and Campania prison population, which for Italy in 2008 was estimated at 58,127 units, with 7,185 units in Campania (source: Dpa, 2008) and in rapid increase (Castellano and Stasio, 2009), with a male population of 95.7%.

In fact, in 2008, as highlighted by the data in Table 1, the most frequent qualification present in Italian prisons was the middle school leaving certificate (55.1%), followed by the primary school leaving certificate (25.2%). In 2008 in the Region Campania, with 12.4% of the Italian prison population distributed in 17 penitentiary institutes varying in size and function³, over half of the inmates (53.5%) had a middle school leaving certificate and approximately a third had only a primary school leaving certificate. Approximately 11% had qualifications that were higher than the compulsory school leaving age.

TABLE 1
INMATES IN ITALIAN PRISONS ACCORDING TO REGION OF DETENTION AND EDUCATION LEVEL,
YEAR 2008 (VAL %) - Source: D.A.P – Office for the Development and Management of Automated
Information Systems

Region of detention	Educational level							Tot.
	Degree	Secondary School Leaving Diploma	Professional School Leaving Diploma	Middle School Leaving Certificate	Primary School Leaving Certificate	No Academic Qualification	Illiterate	
ABRUZZO	1,2	8,6	1,5	50,5	31,3	4,5	2,4	100,0
BASILICATA	1,7	12,7	1,7	47,9	27,9	4,5	3,7	100,0
CALABRIA	0,8	10,0	2,1	50,6	28,3	5,2	3,1	100,0
CAMPANIA	1,5	8,3	1,5	53,5	29,5	3,8	1,8	100,0
EMILIA ROM.	1,8	8,2	1,9	58,3	19,8	6,1	3,8	100,0
FRIULI VEN.G.	1,9	6,2	1,9	62,8	22,5	2,5	2,3	100,0
LAZIO	1,9	11,2	1,8	49,5	19,3	13,3	2,9	100,0
LIGURIA	1,7	7,7	0,4	62,7	17,3	8,2	2,0	100,0
LOMBARDIA	1,8	9,6	1,3	58,9	22,7	2,8	2,8	100,0
MARCHE	3,0	9,5	2,7	58,3	21,7	3,4	1,5	100,0
MOLISE	0,8	5,6	1,6	57,0	31,5	2,4	1,2	100,0
PIEMONTE	1,5	5,9	1,5	50,3	20,6	17,9	2,2	100,0

inmates.

³ See Tab. 2 that highlights the presence of mega-prisons such as Poggioreale and Secondigliano as well as smaller institutes such as ICATT in Eboli, C.C. Lauro and C.C. Sala Consilina.

Region of detention	Educational level							Tot.
	Degree	Secondary School Leaving Diploma	Professional School Leaving Diploma	Middle School Leaving Certificate	Primary School Leaving Certificate	No Academic Qualification	Illiterate	
PUGLIA	0,9	5,4	0,7	57,1	32,1	2,2	1,5	100,0
SARDEGNA	1,3	5,0	1,2	55,2	29,7	4,7	3,0	100,0
SICILIA	1,4	5,8	0,9	50,2	32,6	5,6	3,6	100,0
TOSCANA	1,7	7,0	3,1	54,0	24,1	8,2	1,9	100,0
TRENTINO A.A.	1,5	16,1	4,4	58,0	15,6	0,5	3,9	100,0
UMBRIA	1,9	7,4	2,1	56,7	26,0	5,1	0,8	100,0
VALLE D'AOSTA	0,0	4,2	0,0	46,3	27,4	18,9	3,2	100,0
VENETO	2,6	8,2	2,7	66,6	16,3	1,5	2,1	100,0
Total Italy	1,6	7,8	1,6	55,1	25,2	6,1	2,6	100,0

The second characteristic of our proposal is the choice of the online modality to supply the courses. Through this methodology, supported by frontal lessons, it is possible to overcome the difficulties encountered in the carrying out of traditional learning paths in prisons, relating to the lack of space as well as to the difficulty of regular and intensive academic assistance.

TABLE 2
INMATES IN INSTITUTIONS IN THE CAMPANIA REGION ACCORDING TO EDUCATION LEVEL,
YEAR 2008 (A.V.) - Source: P.R.A.P. Campania

Institute of detention	Educational level					Tot.
	Degree	Secondary School Leaving Diploma	Middle School Leaving Certificate	Primary School Leaving Certificate	No Academic Qualification + Illiterate	
C.C. ARIANO IRPINO	1	10	75	52	33	171
C.C. ARIENZO	0	2	30	30	40	102
C.C. AVELLINO	0	1	123	41	39	204
O.P.G. AVERSA	3	49	135	46	23	256
C.C. BENEVENTO	2	36	166	97	79	380
C.C. CARINOLA	2	34	190	90	54	360
C.R. EBOLI	0	0	31	10	1	42
C.C. LAURO	0	5	31	4	0	40

Institute of detention	Educational level					Tot.
	Degree	Secondary School Leaving Diploma	Middle School Leaving Certificate	Primary School Leaving Certificate	No Academic Qualification + Illiterate	
O.P.G. NAPOLI	4	9	18	50	0	81
C.C. POGGIOREALE	3	17	624	1594	162	2400
C.P. SECONDIGLIANO	4	66	483	447	149	1149
C.C.F. POZZUOLI	2	12	47	79	50	190
C.R. S.ANGELO L.	1	9	90	61	14	175
C.C. SALA CONSILINA	0	6	21	8	2	37
C.C. SALERNO	0	30	110	160	140	450
C.C. S. MARIA C.V.	5	84	412	198	175	874
C.C. VALLO LUCANIA	2	3	32	9	3	49
Total Campania	29	373	2618	2976	954	6950

Thanks to e-learning, it is therefore possible to elaborate a proposal, which can not only be evaluated in terms of efficiency and efficacy, conforming to the general regulations in penitentiary subjects, but which also concretely favours the right to study of the inmates. It makes it possible to develop and maintain the teacher-student relationship while promoting the learning activities of the prison inmates.

Finally, among the various possible uses of e-learning, our study adopts a collaborative and student centred learning model and fosters an intensive use of various types of images and multimedia tools, as a rich potential resource in support of educational activities (Chaplin, 1999; Arcangeli e Diana, 2009).

3 Our proposal: who are the users

The test phase of our project addresses the prison inmates of the ICATT in Eboli. In 2008, there were 42 inmates in the penal institution. 31 had a middle school leaving certificate and 10 a primary school leaving certificate (Tab. 2). It is worth noting how the distribution according to qualification was not different from the other penitentiary institutes in Campania, as noted in Table 1.

The inmates detained in the ICATT in Eboli have voluntarily chosen to take part in a particular treatment-therapeutic program and therefore are already willing to participate to activities promoted within the institute: gardening,

furniture restoration, pottery workshops as well as music and theatre classes.

In relation to this program, the e-learning project intends to make a significant contribution by attempting to recuperate the dimension of study and learning that for many of the detained inmates, as they recall in a series of biographic interviews, has been so far a rather accidental or marginalised path.

Its however a proposal aimed principally at either Italian prison inmates or those who have lived a significant part of their lives and education in our country. A linguistic-cultural pre-requisites tests will have to be carried out for those foreign inmates who have recently arrived.

4 Our proposal: the institutional actors

The promoters of the project “E-learning in prison” are the Department of Sociology and Political Science (DISSP) of the University of Salerno, the Secondary school “Liceo Scientifico Enrico Medi” in Battipaglia and the ICATT in Eboli. As described in the agreement drawn up between the partners in 2008, due to their different nature, they provide the indispensable competences in order for the initiative to obtain a good result.

The ICATT is a “Minimum Security Institute for the Treatment of Drug and Alcohol Addiction”, with a treatment-therapeutic aspect. The prison sentence is carried out with the aim of treating the drug-alcohol addiction and reintegrating the inmate into society. It detains inmates aged between 19 and 40 who are not a security risk, resident in the Region Campania and have no psycho-physical problems. The Institute has a multimedia classroom with 10 computer stations, which the inmates are allowed to use 4 hours a day. It has members of staff with information technology skills as well as some with e-learning teaching experience (Limoccia e Lombardo, 2008).

The DISSP and the didactic area of Sociology of the University of Salerno have been carrying out online courses for many years (Arcangeli & Diana, 2008; Vento *et al.*, 2008), and have acquired considerable experience in this area. The University offers the inmates the courses that are already online (the entire three year Bachelor degree course in Sociology as well as several courses of the Faculty of Literature), which can be accessed through the WebCT platform. It also offers all the competence and support required for the design and realisation of new courses of any level, with the specific aim of promoting the growth of secondary school level learning paths.

The Liceo Scientifico “E. Medi” contributes with its didactic experience to the initiative, proposing an experimental course set-up that is based on the National Programme of Information Technology (recently abolished by the Gelmini Reform) as well as the ordinary syllabus. It also includes the opportunities allowed by the norms on autonomy on the use of a quota of the institutional

hours for activities coherent with the final objectives of the school. This relates to the more detailed study of information technology, which today is considered to be indispensable in every sector, with many of the inmates having already expressed an interest in this subject.

In light of the regulations dealing with scholastic autonomy that allow part of the institutional teaching hours to be used with the aim of fulfilling the particular needs of its users, the didactic proposal includes obtaining qualifications that can be subsequently used in the labour market (e.g. ECDL), as well as a connection between the secondary school courses offered and higher courses (IFTS) with the aim of promoting the possible reintegration of the inmates. English is also studied with the possibility of obtaining Cambridge ESOL certifications.

5 Our proposal: course structure and content

The on line course, which has applied for ministerial recognition, will last three years instead of the usual five. The first year, divided into two semesters, will correspond to the first two years of secondary school. The second year therefore corresponds to the third year, while the third year prepares the student for the final State exam. The compacting of the learning path does not lead to a lowering in the level of the studies: a reduction of the contents, in fact, can occur with compliance to the suggestions already stated for the individualized syllabus. The essential parts of the various syllabuses will be identified in order to reconcile the needs deriving from a condition of objective learning difficulty with those of the learning path indispensable to the obtaining of a recognised and useful qualification. The general aims of the Italian school system will also be adhered to and in particular those relating to the Secondary school, with particular reference to the “Liceo”: maturation of the student, acquisition of a method of study, critical formation, etc.

On the other hand, the correspondence of an hour of online teaching to four hours of frontal lessons allows a proximity to what is proposed in the classroom, when also considering the time required for tests (in the case of e-learning, this should be considered separately) as well as for other types of school activities (psychological support, assemblies, guided visits, school educational trips, etc.). Even though they are a precious and integral part of the learning process, they do not always transmit the specific contents of the syllabus. There seems, therefore, to be an extremely rigorous and adequate correspondence between any form of minimum syllabus that is already being used and the compacting set out in “E-learning in prison”.

As with traditional teaching, teachers still remain the central and key figure in the learning process of online teaching. They set the learning path, divide

it into Modules and Didactic Units, with each one corresponding to a certain number of scholastic credits, elaborate and select the contents, explaining them in a language that is accessible, with the support of graphs, images as well as sound (Chaplin, 1999; Arcangeli & Diana, 2009). They also help the tutors in assisting the students with their studies and finally, verify, both online and face to face, the level and quality of learning.

On the other hand, the students have an active role in the virtual classroom, being considered the central element in the production of their own culture and understanding. In every lesson, they not only encounter learning paths that offer the possibility to study various aspects in greater detail as well as tools to monitor their own understanding but also continuous indications of further material that lead to the fundamental unity of knowledge.

A test unit of the online course has been set-up, based on what has been previously discussed. This includes a week of lessons and will be tested before the summer by the inmates of the ICATT in order to obtain further elements that can be useful in the construction and final setting up of the on line course.

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