The Moodle course management system and its e-learners’ needs

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Abstract

Some interesting e-learners’ needs were observed during the study of the data provided by the course developed by the Transfer of Innovation project: “T&T – Telework and Training: Work at distance to Teach at Distance”. The trainees were teachers from Pre University and VET schools and students from POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest. The age of the trainees and their educational development were indicators for the prognostics about: their success in finalizing the course and the values of their homework tasks. Other important parameters were their ability in using computers and their social positions.

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1. Introduction

In the years 2008-2010, the Transfer of Innovation project “T&T – Telework and Training: Work at distance to Teach at Distance” (code: LLP-LdV/ToI/2008/RO/028), was financed, to the Centre for Advanced Technologies of POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest (CTANM - PUB), (Romania) by the E.U.’s Lifelong Learning – Leonardo da Vinci Programme. The project aim was to update and to promote the results of a former excellence project, realized in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme- Second Phase, the TES (Telework Education System) project (code: I-00-B-F-PP-12078)

The partners involved in T&T project were: from Romania (Centre for Advanced Technologies of POLITEHNICA University of Bucharest (CTANM - PUB), Teacher Training Centre of Bucharest (TTC Bucharest) and Institute for Educational Sciences (ISE)), from Greece (Allweb Solutions), from Spain (Vocational training school “Porta da Auga” (CIFP)), from Italy (Information Society Laboratory Ltd (SILabo) and Consortium "Centre of Excellence on Methods and Systems for Competitive Firms” – CEMSAC). During the project, three e-learning training courses had to be design and organized using the updated training modules developed in TES project. Also, in the languages of the partnership, the translation of the updated TES project training modules had to be edited and published as a book, both in hardcopy and e-Book format. The Romanian courses were designed for the Moodle
platform because the Centre for Advanced Technologies (CTANM) had a good experience in the design and the management of the courses on the Moodle platforms developed on their servers. The courses were: T&T – Telework and Training for students, T&T – Telework and Training for trainers (teachers), T&T – Telework and Training for decision makers and managers. It was difficult to register to different courses the teachers and the decision makers and managers because some of the trainees involved in this course had a lot of specializations: they were school or high school managers, adult’s trainers, and school or high school teacher or school counselors, in the same time. That was the motivation for the decision to design a blended training course containing modules both for trainers and decision makers and managers In Figure 1 it is represented the Syllabus of the training courses.

2. Methods

From May till November 2010, on the T&T project Moodle Platform, at the courses organized we had registered 22 students and 96 teachers (42 school counselors and 54 teachers from pre university schools and VET high schools), participants as e-learners. We expected to obtain important data from the expert opinion of the school counselors, who were both trainers and graduates in Pedagogy (from the Romanian old Faculty of Sociology, Psychology and Pedagogy or from the new Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences). In Table 1 is displayed the distribution of learners on courses.

2.1. The course for students

The Syllabus of the course for students had 9 modules (as are presented in Figure 1). Due to the university activities schedule, the students started their training in August 2010 and finished it in 30 September 2010, in their summer holyday. For this group of e-learners, there were not organize face to face (FtF) training activities, because at the university, they had participated to other courses associated with the activities on the Moodle platform. They did not complain about the login to the web site of the course. Till 10 November 2010, there was planned an outstanding exam period for the students who had problems with the access on the Moodle platform. Finally, 12 students succeeded to fulfill the course requirements. The students’ assignments were not designed for obtaining remarks regarding the course design and management.

2.2. The course for Romanian Trainers

16 modules were designed for this course (see Figure 1). It started in 13 May 2010, it finished in 15 October 2010 and it had an outstanding exam period till 30 November 2010. In the summer holyday, there were not activities in this training. The course for Romanian trainers began with 12 hours of FtF training activities, in 2 days (6 hour/day). These activities were dedicated for presentation of the course Syllabus, for study of the module “The T & T Moodle platform” and for assisted activities on platform such as: login, the forums activities, to find resources on Internet, to access and to download the module resources, to upload a homework in text, RTF, Microsoft Word 98-2003, Microsoft Word 2007, Power Point, PDF or PNG document file format. The others 15 modules were studied on the T&T Moodle platform.

The teachers and school counselors had to express their opinions about T&T course as a homework essay posted on a Moodle platform, hosted by CTNAM server. All of them were trainers for FtF sessions. Also, the Romanian teacher trainees offered their expert remarks about the course both on module forums and in text, RTF, Microsoft Word 98-2003, Microsoft Word 2007, Power Point, PDF or PNG document file format. The Romanian organizers wanted to summarize all opinions and for that they had not preferred to use a questionnaire. The statistical interpretation could not be realized because the words used for expressing the same opinion were not identical and they appeared in different homework task of our e-learners. All participants were treated as partners in the management of the course and their remarks had helped to find both the strengths and weakness points for the e-learning course. This collaboration was very useful. Some of their opinions regarding their needs as trainees are presented below.
This paper sample was 76 learners both graduated and un-graduated. (see Table 2). The data regarding the other 32 trainees from the 118 registered, were lost after they un-enrol themselves from course activities.

### Results and Discussions

The number of items analyzed in the homework tasks has an average value of 18.8 items for the whole sample group, with a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 47. Only 60 trainees (79 % of the sample) offered information about their age and their average value of items analyzed number was 19.8 items, with a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 47. The 16 trainees (21 % of the sample), who did not offered information about their age had an average value for their items analyzed in the homework tasks of 15 items with a minimum value of 2 and a maximum value of 33 analyzed items. In Figure 2 it is presented a chart for the number of items analyzed in the homework task depending on the age of students. A Romanian and French language teacher succeeded to analyze a maximum number of items 47. The skills for computer utilization did not depend of the trainees’ age. The specializations of the trainees group were representative for almost all categories of Romanian teachers (Figure 3). The specialization obtained after graduation of the university studies is a good indicator for the quality of the e-learning activity of the trainees (Figure 4). The specialization in computer sciences is associated with bigger average values of the analyzed items than the medium value of the sample. Also, the teachers with mathematics or engineering degree were able to discuss a number of items greater than the medium value of the whole group. Unexpected are the good results of the teachers of language and literature or Romano-catholic theology, although they had not a specialization in computer sciences. Their results are connected with their communication skills. The school counselors have degree in pedagogy, psychology, sociology-psychology, and “psychology and education sciences” and in this sample their results are below the average value of the group. Although, they did not analyze a great number of items, their opinion regarding the psychological needs of an e-learner have to be studied.
Six of the trainees had the wish to express their major need about study time asked by the course design. They presented this need in different words, but it may be put in the statement: “When are designed such courses, it is considered as a priori that, always, the e-Learners have at disposition all the time of the world ONLY for this course. Nobody was thinking that each one had to do other duties, also.” The management of the didactic, learning processes, educational planning and specially its time management are difficult issues both in FtF activities and in e-Learning ones (D’Angelo, G. (2007), pag. 21-37 and 64 - 71, D’Angelo, G., Savu, T., Dumitrescu, A., (2010), pg. 13-35 and 95-105). The feeling of wasting time of the e-learners was generated by their very busy schedule and their competences (they knew very well about 50 % of the course knowledge content). As students, they hoped to find online solutions to save time and not a new time-consuming (Internet search, search libraries, problems with the long time needed for downloading the course materials, etc.). Also, four trainees underlined the idea that “the course should have a minimal support, with a minimum necessary bibliography, and the learner had to search only for extensions and other punctual development interests”. This remark is very well known by the researchers of the adult education area: “the student is suffocated and he will abandon the courses, because he has not received answers to immediate needs” (Siebert, H., 2006). Nowadays, adult students are easily provoked, but easily they are lost as a course participant, even in FtF programs, not only in the e-learning courses. In order to develop to the student his senses of "researcher", this online program, like other Learning Management Systems (LMS) enables accessing documents that allow simplification of the learning process, but also requires individual activities for finding new references. The learner motivation in LMS is limited by the lack of FtF communication. The design of
the Moodle courses have to take account that the student must be challenged and not bored with computer lessons, same to those exposed in a classic, old style, to the class.

The data regarding the headmasters of schools and high schools did not have a statistical significance.

“Why is it necessary, to give to the student all the information? Do not forget: there are in discussion these lessons with electronic on-line support. They are designed in furtherance of a depth study, and a direct research, allowing the real-time communication: teacher-student / s, student-student”. This subject is a challenge in all education types for the course editor, because the learners’ motivation for training divides them in two groups with opposing goals: to become experts in that field in short time or to have a specific answer, to solve of a problem.

Some of the trainees showed their needs fulfilled by creating a course on the Moodle platform: establishing the work time intervals anytime: day / week / month; possibility to work simultaneously with more than 20 students, as would fit in a cabinet; checking homework can be done in real time, during of session, and also in a short period at the end of the course; saves the time spent in traffic, the downtime in traffic is avoided; saving money, usually at school you have a particular outfit, which it is not needed at home; possibility to respect meals schedule, and to eat healthy; the teacher may require a new solution or give a subject more accessible if students have not resolved the issue properly; the teacher can continuously monitor the students’ access and activity in the course.

3. Conclusions

The management for a Moodle course is an activity very complex and delicate, both in educational and computer programming level. The feedback observations highlighted problems concerning: the time management of the course, the Internet connections, the minimum and maximum amount of homework tasks, and to meet the student expectations. The percent of course graduation was 56.8 %. It is due to the technical problems regarding the trainees’ poor Internet connections possibilities and motivation for course finalization. The students using this platform have a lot of needs, diverse and contradictories, and appear the necessity to create a compromise to answer to each one of them. Another compromise needed, is that between the quantities of information, differed asked by each student, for solve punctual problems specific to each one or for become experts in that field in short time. The computing science, mathematics, engineering and physics teachers have better tasks for follow an e-learning course on the Moodle platform. The school counselors’ professional advices and expectations help to improve the design of the course.

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