

Professions and methodologies in e-Learning: evolutionary profile and survey of recent cases

Purposes

This research project had two fundamental aims. The first need was to record in the most complete way the number of new and old professions in managerial education that have emerged and been transformed after the evolution of e-learning. The attempt to arrange the data proceeded at the same pace as the attempt to precisely understand the effective nature of the new emerging roles (fundamentally tied to the new forms of tutoring, the new methodological needs imposed by systems and, obviously, to the guarding of new technologies). This general aim has also brought to light some substantial transformations which are moving towards the traditional roles under various titles which exist in the managerial training field: teachers, ‘designers’, consultants, etc.

Alongside this first aim, the research project also had the purpose of sounding out the transformations that e-learning has provoked in training processes and in learning design methods. Such a survey draws attention now more than ever, in that the relative maturity of technologies and the experience in their use on behalf of companies is creating a progressive unification and standardization of e-learning design systems.

The structure

Following the impulse given by these two aims, the project is divided into three forms of research and analysis:

- The ‘history’, or a reconstruction of the evolution of Distance Learning and e-Learning,
- The ‘stories’, or the detailed and documented account of two recent e-Learning projects in large Italian organizations,
- The ‘annotations’, or a series of interpretative inspirations from the stories told.

History. The historical path proposed is an attempt to read the summary of the evolutionary process that represents an inevitable forward to the current scenario: in fact, we feel that one cannot speak about e-Learning without being aware of the experiences and experimentations that have led to the rudimental experiences (looking back on them today, at least) of Distance Learning and self-learning in the tumultuous entry of information technology and communication. We cannot speak about e-Learning without reflecting, albeit briefly, on the psychological and learning models created by these experiences.

The stories. Through narration, one can get to know and communicate and in this sense a narrative approach is able to offer “complex metaphors for complex phenomena”, without the claim of competing with the logical and scientific approach, but with the

hope of telling a “good story”¹. Narrating a story in this way can help us to understand the complexity of the events and the phenomenon we would like to investigate: from the stories and the ways in which they are narrated the position the writer has taken emerges, there are already – implicit or explicit – annotations and comments, interpretations and judgments, betraying the spirit of a narrative approach. Often, however, the original artifacts are also available to the reader, in which the original datum can be found and autonomously evaluated.

The annotations. First of all, the most correct expression would be note, but today the term has been connotated with a meaning, above all in its glossary derivative, which is little different from the original one, that is indicating a simple collection of definitions for complex terms. As it is known, *note* – or annotation – was originally an interlinear annotation or a margin placed on a manuscript to illustrate or comment on its content. A form of exegesis that reached the height of its development with the Bolognese jurists in the XII and XIII centuries: from the simple explanation of a term to the critical interpretation of an entire legal text, the annotations of Bolognese notemakers revolutionized law and the system of juridical sources in Europe, in what was defined a *legal Renaissance*. The objective of those pages is therefore to “annotate” some e-Learning stories, placing brief annotations alongside the reading of original documents concerning e-Learning projects but also short “treatises” commenting on and interpreting the text. The hope, however ambitious, is to contribute to an e-Learning Renaissance with these notes.

The results

The evidence emerging from the longitudinal research of two recent “stories” about e-Learning projects effectively contributes to enriching the taxonomies which are by now consolidated in the literature on profiles and learning methods mediated by new technologies, but above all they bring to light some criticisms that have not yet been solved by the adoption models in use.

In particular, the current unbalance of a ‘technology-driven’ model emerges (the technological platform determines the entire life cycle of on-line learning, including learning methods and objectives) to the detriment of formulas that are more attentive to learning and the capability of a pragmatic re-elaboration. This unbalance proves to be more dangerous as such platforms ascribe more managerial training plans, and not only technical training ones, to themselves.

Like the dog that bites his tail, the same technology proves to be extremely burdensome in terms of costs, often inducing companies to look for efficiency and standardization levels that heavily damage the same learning objectives the technological investment was meant for.

The same convergence of LMS (Learning Management System) toward the atomization of skills, the definition of shared planning standards and the emphasis on the concept of

¹ Introduction by Silvia Gherardi and Barbara Czarniawska, *Narrare l'organizzazione*, Edizioni di Comunità, 2000: pp. 3-12.

‘modularity’ and reusability appear in the cases examined as extremely complicated to put into effect and not as effective as expectations had led to believe.

Furthermore, the proliferation of new roles at the border between training, learning methodology and technology generates a great deal of difficulty in the understanding and alignment of the respective languages.

The analysis of the use modalities proved to be particularly interesting, in which perhaps the greatest hiatus between the majority of e-learning available on the market today and the expectations of its users is registered. If, in fact, on one hand the mediation of technologies offers the user greater autonomy and more space to move compared to traditional learning, on the other hand the systems in force seem purposely planned to reduce this discretionary space as much as possible, sacrificing an effective investigation into learning needs to the methodological imperatives of the platforms. A considerable difficulty in guaranteeing participation results and, if this occurs consistently, also in measuring effective learning.

Finally, the cases show that the expansion of professional figures involved in training processes consequent to the introduction of the technological medium pose a double challenge to traditional learning: on one hand it imposes the need to contrast the reduction to a mere function of ‘content development’, which means the anteroom of a more definitive exhaustion of the role; on the other hand, it asserts the need to confront ourselves with the new technological learning formulas and formats with greater competence and integrative capability: an essential qualification to reassure the balance between ‘technology driven’ and ‘learning driven’ training.