Chapter XII

Experimentation and Challenge: Online Criminology at the University of Bologna

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Abstract

The online course on criminological topics carried out in an undergraduate course for “Security and Social Control Operators” (Faculty of Political Science “Ruffilli,” University of Bologna) represented a real challenge for three different reasons: (1) it was inserted in the syllabus of a three-year undergraduate course that was the first university course in Italy intended for the training of operators to carry out an activity that calls for being able to manage modern investigative, security, and control strategies; (2) it dealt with the teaching of criminology, and it is useful to emphasize that, in Italy, criminology has a difficult time freeing itself from similar disciplines (legal medicine, criminal law, sociology, psychology), even while knowing that it has to maintain a good relationship with them; and (3) it dealt with one of the first online courses activated at the Faculty “Ruffilli.” The case study describes and critically analyzes the implementation of the online criminology course.
Introduction

In Italy, there are 79 schools between state-recognized universities and institutes of higher education of which 53.2% are small (fewer than 15,000 students), 35.4% medium-large (between 15,000 and 60,000 students), and 11.4% large (more than 60,000 students) (Liscia, 2004). University studies have been reorganized on the basis of Ministerial Decree No. 509 of 3/11/1999 (“Ruling attributed to the regulations concerning the didactic autonomy of universities”), which has brought about some notable changes with respect to the past:

1. A different organization of degrees: the achievement of a degree (triennial or first level) is foreseen with which one can enter the work world or continue studying toward a biennial specialized degree or do further study through a first level Master’s degree. A specialized degree insures advanced level preparation for the exercise of high level professional activities in specific areas. Subsequently, education can continue with a second level master’s degree or PhD.

2. A system based on credits, which are the unit of measurement of the overall involvement of a student.

3. A greater impulse for diverse typologies of didactic activity, such as, for example, stages, laboratories, group work, practice, seminars, and also e-learning.

Therefore, an additional milestone was reached with a decree on telecommunication universities on April 17, 2003, signed by the Ministry for Education, University and Research and by the Ministry for Innovation and Technology, which also regulates the institution of the Open University.

The author’s triennial experience as the head of an online course in criminology at the University of Bologna, Faculty of Political Science “Ruffilli” was embedded within the limits of this scenario of intellectual, reform, and experimental ferment at various levels. It is important to specify that the University of Bologna is defined as a large university; in fact, according to the statistics reported in the University Yearbook for the academic year 2001-2002, there were 102,856 students enrolled. In regards to the online course of criminology in particular, we dealt with a laboratory-type educational activity provided for in the first level degree course in “Security and Social Control Operators” and which, following an oral final exam, awarded three credits to the student. The online course, which the author organized and ran for three academic years (from 2001-2002 to 2003-2004), as the teacher responsible and the e-tutor, was certainly both an experimental activity, new for the degree course into which it was inserted, and a permanent educational offer given that, until the moment of complete deactivation of the entire degree course, it was regularly inserted into the activities provided for in the syllabus. It is also important to point out that the online criminology course assigned to me represented one of the first initiatives of this type in the panorama of Italian academics in regards to criminological science.