Peer Learning and Peer Assessment to Enhance Participation in Online Courses: A Case Study in Teacher’s Training in Foggia, Italy

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ABSTRACT

The essay discusses the development of a peer assessment approach in an online learning community composed of teachers enrolled in a course on Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). The experience was prompted by the need to promote meaningful learning and online interaction among teachers, then collaborative assessment activities proved to be an efficient strategy to foster engagement.

Keywords: E-Learning, Engagement, Peer Assessment, Peer Learning, Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD)

INTRODUCTION

The course was conducted on an e-learning platform developed in a Moodle environment and active since February 2012. Two hundred teachers participated in this specific edition of the course, in the context of a wider initiative that involved almost two thousand teachers and was generated in virtue of SOSTITUIRE CON following collaboration between the Regional Scholastic Office of Apulia and the ERID Laboratory of the University of Foggia. A web portal and an e-learning platform were created with the educational objective of offering basic competencies regarding Specific Learning Disabilities in order to improve the quality of teaching oriented toward individuals with SLD and to reduce scholastic failure.

The scientific objective, on the other hand, arises from the need of developing an on-line community of teachers that would use the digital resources also after the end of the course in a self-sustaining repository of good practices and learning materials.

ERID laboratory’s expertise in the design and management of e-learning courses for teachers, and generally for adult professionals, proved difficult to achieve the goal in such a compulsory educational setting, based mostly on the external motivation of some kind of certificate to be obtained, valuable for their...
career development. In other similar experiences a firm resistance against communication and interaction was observed via online learning environment tools (forums, chats, messaging) and a general lack of interest in building collaborative practices. A prototypical case of scarce learning motivation were the participants of an online course for health care educators, conducted during the 2010/2011 academic year. This group encountered a series of difficulties in establishing efficient communication that proved compromising to the active participation of the community.

The following are among the principal issues that generated the lack of engagement, as perceived and reported by the participants in response to our questionnaires: the lack of IT expertise of the participants, the absence of a sense of community, the difficulty of identifying the key benefit of the course for each one’s career, and the lack of incentives in favor of communication among peers.

It is important to underline that this course, similarly to the case study further discussed in this article, was also compulsory although fully supported by the local authorities, hence it was particularly complex to activate internal motivations and to foster engagement in the community.

A set of strategies were then experienced to facilitate the participation of this particular kind of adult students in on-line communities. The most efficient proved to be the constructivist pedagogic approaches oriented toward the cooperation and co-construction of knowledge and meaning. Significant improvements in community participation and learning outcomes were observed specifically after transforming all the processes related to learning assessment from a set of final summative assignments to an activating lever for internal motivation and a collaborative learning tool. Commencing from assessment the whole learning experience was progressively re-designed; hence the following case study was set up to observe more closely the phenomenon.

The following are the goals of this intervention research:

1. To foster interaction and communication within an online learning community.
2. To train educators to use an innovative pedagogic model and an alternative assessment method that may be applied in their professional practices.
3. To confirm that through innovative teaching strategies centered around the user and based on collaboration, such as peer learning and peer assessment, meaningful learning is promoted (Jonassen et al., 2008).

In short, a course that fostered participatory and shared assessment procedures among the participants was designed, like the co-construction and sharing of assessment indicators, the promotion of communication aptitudes, as well as, the creation of a community of learners. The on-line course discussed in this article represents an attempt at designing an educational experience based on peer learning and peer assessment that is intended to teach teachers, in regard to not only the principal educational objective of the course (Specific Learning Disabilities), but also at a meta-level to offer basic abilities in teaching methodologies for a learner’s centered approach. The active involvement of the teachers in training became a key element in the co-construction of knowledge during the development of the course (Guile, 1998).

PEER ASSESSMENT AND SELF-ASSESSMENT (PSA) IN ADULT EDUCATION

Participatory assessment (Sluijsmans, Dochy, & Moerkerke, 1999) can stimulate the development of a competency-based curriculum, instead of generating what is otherwise known as inert learning, thus favoring the education of responsible and reflective professionals.

Peer assessment is a specific form of the broader universe of participatory practices in education and it consists of a iterative process of continuous revisions aimed toward providing constructive feedback. It may require the involvement of the group of students in the
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