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15th International Conference eLearning and Software for Education

New technologies and redesigning learning spaces

Volume I



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eLSE 2019

Editors

Ion ROCEANU

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eLSE 2019

The 15th International Scientific Conference "eLearning and Software for Education"

New technologies and redesigning learning spaces

Volume I

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A Full Spectrum Lifelong e-Learning Project for the Army

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Abstract: Nowadays a large organisation requires a solid and efficient system for managing the learning process of internal organisation in a lifelong learning perspective. The Italian Army decided to boost the lifelong learning concept for military personnel in a modern and digital way by using the elearning environment. This decision was based on the long experience of the Education and Training Command and School of Applied Military Studies (COMFOR-SA) Virtual Learning Centre (VLC) and its cooperation with the University of Turin in the field of e-learning. This cooperation allows to adopt innovative teaching and learning methods and enhance the internationalization program of the Bachelor and Master Degree in Strategic Sciences attended by Officers and civilian students. In order to reach the entire potential target audience, composed of all categories, such as Officers, NCOs and Volunteers, and to maximise the use of e-learning for different didactic purposes, a full spectrum lifelong e-learning project was developed. Initially, the focus was based on the development of a special Hub composed of the Portal for Self-Paced Courses in combination with the Portal of Knowledge and the Support Portal. Then, the User's E-portfolio and the Language Portal were added. The Hub expanded its area of competence and additional portals were created. All e-learning resources and activities were properly reorganised and structured in a full spectrum new concept for a more effective e-learning experience for all military education and training purposes. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the structure of the project in terms of contents, design and solutions adopted.

Keywords: Army; E-learning; Life Long Learning; Military Education; Military Training.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, large organisations cannot avoid dealing with themes like the education, the transfer of specialized and sectorial knowledge, the professional updating and the spreading out of information linked to a specific working environment and job profile, to all internal personnel in a lifelong perspective. In other words, the permanent learning that accompanies the individual during the entire working life and not only. Consequently, the focus is moving to how it is possible to make the lifelong learning process more efficient and effective than we realize and how to use modern technology to make its use easier and define a more attractive way for it. When the potential target audience involved is extended and widespread within the country, and sometimes even abroad, the situation requires a model based on quality, functionality and efficiency. In this way, it is possible to merge the easy way with the modern time frame to use it (when and where). The Army is a large organisation with all the above mentioned requirements and, some years ago, it started to invest resources in e-learning as a key factor for enhancing the internationalization process, for having a modern didactic and recently also for an effective permanent learning. The IT-Army Education and Training Command and School of Applied Military Studies with its Virtual Learning Centre (VLC)

initially satisfied the educational needs by using e-learning as a distance learning tool before the residential phase, and later, in cooperation with the University of Turin, it started a new program for enhancing a modern quality didactic by using new technologies in support of all courses provided in face to face modality., [4], [6], [8]. In order to reach the entire potential target audience, composed of all categories, such as Officers, NCOs and Volunteers, and to maximise the use of e-learning for different didactic purposes, a full spectrum lifelong e-learning project was developed. Initially, the focus was based on the development of a special Hub composed of the Portal for Self-Paced Courses in combination with the Portal of Knowledge and the Support Portal, [7]. Then, the Hub expanded its area of competence and additional portals were created. All e-learning resources and activities were properly reorganised and structured in a full spectrum new concept for a more effective e-learning experience for all military education and training. The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the structure of the project in terms of contents, design and solutions adopted.

I. THE STATE OF ART

The learning needs within the Army are grouped in two different types. The first group is composed of all needs as an education and training provider, since the Army is responsible for enrolled personnel and giving them initial, basic and advanced education and preparing them for the specific tasks (specialization). It is also responsible for whenever a transfer between categories occur including high level education. At the same time, it is necessary to train and qualify soldiers, NCOs and officers before they become committed for specific tasks in missions and operations in Italy or abroad. In all these cases it is necessary to reach and maintain high quality standards, to invest economic resources in the best way possible and to ease the achievement of all goals by using all available instruments and tools.

The second group is linked to a general necessity for every single person who works in the Army independent of his/her position within the organization: Soldier, NCO or Officer. The individual during his career will be involved in different commitments, in several situations, often in a complex environment. Thus, he requires to be updated quickly and whenever he is deployed when he recognizes to have some gaps and he consequently needs to find technical information and regulations. He has to have access to colleagues with similar job profiles and specialized personnel with whom to collaborate and share solutions and best practice. We also need to add the natural desire to enlarge the personal knowledge in order to progress in their careers or reach a better position.

In order to satisfy these requirements the Army initially requested to an external company to provide an e-learning platform, but without the necessary flexibility and with a budget consuming way. Later on, it opted for an open source Learning Management System (LMS) and at the same time it obtained to value internal personnel and develop their competencies in cooperation with the University of Turin. In this way it was possible to use e-learning not only for distance learning but also for blended courses, also in post-degree learning activity. These opportunities enriched the regular face to face courses [4]. Consequently, the demand arises to redesign a new model in order to be able to reply globally to all possible learning requirements and necessities.

Other military institutions have similar requirements but none create a global solution able to reply to a large spectrum of learning requirements. All of them moved to an open source LMS but with tailored solutions for a specific need.

II. RESEARCH QUESTION

The main research question is how it is possible to satisfy all military learning requirements in a global way, or, in other words, how to create a learning model able to:

- alternate collective learning moments to individual ones;
 - provide an active tutoring service and at same time an adaptive path.

The person is the centre of the project independent of his function as student or teacher. Moreover, the model was conceived in a multiform and easy to use way in order to avoid efforts being cancelled out by difficulty-of-use and the individual is the only one responsible for his learning, methods, way and time for realizing it.

III. THE FULL SPECTRUM LIFELONG E-LEARNING PROJECT

E-learning is the instrument identified as able to realize the lifelong learning project with the idea to provide all personnel with an effective and modern tool. In this way, it is possible to contribute to a development for the entire military community based on knowledge. The main concept is based on the idea that in adults' learning (knowledge, skills and competencies) the key word is a constant and lasting engagement of every individual during the entire career in the organization. The project adopted the e-learning definition given by Clark and Mayer in [2] "as instruction delivered on a computer with the following features:

- includes content relevant to the learning objective;
- uses instructional methods such as examples and practice to help learning;
- uses media elements such as words and pictures to deliver the content and methods;

• may be instructor-led (synchronous e-learning) or designed for self-paced individual study (asynchronous e-learning);

• builds new knowledge and skills linked to individual learning goals or to improved organizational performance."

In other words, e-learning represents one of the possible answers that education could offer in a changing environment: the physical distance between teachers and students where interactions with computers and tutors, collaborative learning in a virtual environment, simulation in real time, as experimented in [5], flexibility, timely updating and accessibility are reality. With the e-learning, it is possible to manage the entire didactic process with several aspects such as provision, fruition, interaction, evaluation, tutorship, collaboration, self-management and self-determination of personal learning.

3.1 The instructional Design Framework adopted

In order to foster learner engagement in online learning, the E-Learning Engagement Design (ELED), described in [3], was adopted. ELED is a procedural framework that applies many of the common steps of instructional design models to the question of how to incorporate best practices for student engagement in online learning.

The methodology consists of four phases.

- In the first one, we identified the instructional needs using the class observations made by teachers, test results, questionnaires and interviews to personnel. The characteristics of the learners were described in order to better understand their instructional needs. The learner analysis was considered important because their experiences, motivational beliefs, and self-regulatory competence in online situations are relevant factors for a positive impact in their online learning and performance [1].
- Using the results on instructional needs, goals and objectives of each portal were defined (phase 2). Different methods were adopted in order to reach the goals. For instance, as for the activities in which the learner is not helped by a tutor, many activities with immediate and interactive feedback were adopted; moreover, the objectives to be achieved and the mandatory contents were indicated in each unit.
- In phase 3, the Learning Environment was developed, integrated with many tools, with particular attention to online learning activities as online discussions, online lab activities, problem solving activities, peer evaluations and formative assessment, in order to allow learners to check their preparation.
- Finally, in the fourth process phase of ELED, summative assessment activities covering both learning and instructional effectiveness assessments were inserted, such as tests, assignments, and questionnaires.

3.2 The integrated portals

The entire system has a structured net composed of ten portals where the LMS is MOODLE, the Content Management System (CMS) is Joomla, the e-portfolio is a Mahara platform and a OSTicket platform exist. In the phase 0 of the Project the Portal for Self-Paced Courses was created, in combination with the Portal of Knowledge and the Support Portal, and afterwards the User's Eportfolio and the Language Portal were added. This allowed to verify that the entire system works.

The Portal of Self-paced courses

The Self-paced portal has the function to guarantee continuous education for dependent personnel and it is for all categories, Officers, NCOs, Volunteers and civilians. The platform hosts courses in the e-learning format and can be attended at any moment during the career. It is possible to create a specific and personalized learning path and some steps will be compulsory in case the individual wants to upgrade. The educational progresses are highlighted by competencies obtained (clearly described in each course) and electronic badges will testimony them. In this way, it is possible to profit by using the capacity of MOODLE LMS for designing specific competencies that can be outlined and planned in a centralized mode.

The Portal of Knowledge

The Portal of Knowledge has the task to provide a multimedia library with all military publications and videos for all disciplines. It was created with the idea to set up a sort of circle of readers where users can have access to required contents and eventually confront with subject matter experts in an interactive and multimedia environment. Virtual classrooms are available, where it is possible to provide short lessons for deepening classes by using webcam and microphone. The direct link between users and experts is allowed. The MOODLE Database resource allows the creation of a repository of publications in order to speed up the research of topics and issues. The system is indexed by using keywords. This way, an important evolution is obtained: from all MOODLE platforms it is possible to link to the publications, to update them, etc.. Everything is transparent to the courses because the link is preserved. If in a specific course there is a link to a publication and this publication will be updated there is nothing to do.

The Portal of Foreign languages

The Portal of Foreign Languages has the purpose of providing in e-learning format Foreign languages courses. Due to the complexity of the discipline it requires a lot of plug-ins available on MOODLE and a dedicated platform was created. The high specialization of this platform permits to have a peculiar environment tailored for deepening a foreign language with multimedia resources. This platform is managed by IT-Army School for Foreign Languages and will host courses for keeping and updating the NATO Standard Joint Forces Language Test (JFLT).

The E-Learning Portal

The E-learning Portal was created for hosting all courses with a tutorship service, virtual classroom and teachers' availability. The difference between the portal described as above and this one is that here courses are under teachers' control with the help of tutors and mentors and students have to fulfill required tasks and may have synchronous or asynchronous meetings with them. For these reasons, this portal will host all distance phases organized as mandatory or optional parts of a residential course.

The E-Portfolio

This platform, based on Mahara but fully integrated with Moodle, provides the environment where learning and sharing are combined and it is possible to create a net of contacts by using the social aspects of Mahara. Every person can upload achievements, paper works, studies and materials and then share them with other experts or interested people.

MOODLE Support Platform

This portal, based on MOODLE integrated in the portal system, has the task to support students and teachers in the use of MOODLE. The goal is to create an integrated environment where it is possible to overcome technical or didactic problems with the supervision of experts of e-learning and technician. Teachers can request a specific space where it is possible to evaluate and test MOODLE plug-in, resources or activities. MOODLE mini-courses are available for users so they can familiarize and explore all potential resources in MOODLE environment. A dedicated space for MOODLE Administrators is available for technical discussions and forums.

The Ticketing Service

The Ticketing Service was created as an integrated part of the system and it is possible to have access with the same authentication procedure. Every user identified in the system can create a ticket and request help for solving his problems. The problem will be solved by the right Administrator (course or platform) with a potential reduction of waiting time. The ticket is limited to malfunctions, help request for registration and identity problems while for learning how to use the platform the Support platform was created.

The E-learning Service Portal (Portale Servizi ELEarning dell'Esercito - SELENE)

This portal has a double purpose. The first one is to create and manage the federate account to the E-learning system. By using SELENE, the personnel can create his own account and use personal data in line with new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), consequently he can manage them (change password, etc.) and eventually send specific requests according to the GDPR. In order to research a course in all portals a keyword research is available. All courses are listed in a dedicated Hub that provides course descriptions and all related info. The registration of every course within the Hub is fully automated and the activation is demanded to the teachers by clicking a specific button.

The Multimedia Portal

The Multimedia Portal is the entry point for the e-learning system. This portal contains all the info for a proper use of the system and allows to consult all categories of courses provided by the entire system. This way, users can have an idea of how to reach the right course, search and choose the right path for looking for or creating a specific course. It is designed in order to ease the access to all multimedia video resources (like Youtube).

The Portal of Virtual Classroom

The Portal of Virtual Classroom is based on Software Open Big Blue Button (BBB) and allows to create virtual classrooms within regular courses, if activated by teachers. It will be possible to virtually take part to the courses by using webcam and microphone. Students can participate during the lesson by using whiteboard and chat communication systems.

3.3 Contents

The contents produced by teachers and experts and uploaded to the system can be grouped in three different categories, related to the different military education needs:

- Contents for self-training: all contents created for this group are available to be attended by students whenever and wherever they can or need. These courses are provided in a self-paced mode and the positive end of the course allows the participation to higher level activities. Normally, this type of courses are not mandatory but they can help personnel in future applications for specific positions;
- Contents for supporting face to face didactics: all resources and materials that can be used in order to deepen topics developed in regular courses (face to face) by providing additional items such as didactic materials, lessons, slides, multimedia objects, videos, automated tests and everything that can be provided by teachers in order to better prepare students for the regular lesson. The best practice requires that materials are provided before the lesson for a better preparation or/and at the end for deepening topics for additional tasks or the final exams;
- Online Module: they can be provided within the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) with the support of tutors. During the participation to the course, users can be monitored by teachers or other people with the authority like tutor/mentor. Internet Distance Learning (IDL) phase or international module that are delivered partially in IDL can be considered in this category.

IV. ANALISYS AND DISCUSSION OF THE PROJECT

4.1 Technical solutions adopted

The portals, mainly based on MOODLE, have an organization of back-ends for the link among them that grant the essential features listed below:

- self-registration to the portals due to the numbers of users (up to 100.000);
- identity security for personnel when they register;
- SSO integrated environment;
- beck-end security (database and personal data);
- front-end security;
- online tool authoring implementation.

The graphic below shows interaction between portals created for implementing the project.



Figure no. 1. Portal interactions

All servers are fully integrated in a LAN (Figure 1) and they go online by using a Reverse Proxy on the UNITO Net via GARR. The Single Sign On (SSO) environment is granted by GLUU, it permits through a SAML2 Protocol the interconnection between all MOODLE applications with the internal LDAP in GLUU. This last one is synchronized with the external LDAP, where all utilizations are managed and where the initial registrations of users are realized. A self-registration procedure is managed by a dedicated MOODLE application (SELENE Portal) that allows the accounts management under every aspect (creation, modification and cancellation) with a plug-in of self-registration via email. The mail procedure is linked to the personal domain of the person who wants to have access. This is the only application outside the SSO because it has direct access to LDAP Directories for their maintenance. In addition, this portal is configured as MOODLE HUB for the registration of courses. In this way, the search procedure for course is transversal on all platforms: the research is given by key word for every course available on each platform.

Database and MOODLE-Data are hosted on a SAN realized ad hoc, they are replicated on several NAS as snapshots of virtual machines and as master-slave technology. Due to the Reverse Proxy, all machines are linked in a load balancing and so they are able to face malfunctions of back-ends or front-ends.

The Multimedia Portal has a specific catalyst and switching functions and it works as a container for SELENE application by JOOMDLE plug-in. The portal works as an information center for all info (like opening new courses, forwarding news, etc.) and offers research procedures because it is interconnected with the SELENE Portal. It also offers the collection of all didactic videos published on all platforms, VOD created ad hoc, the possibility to create a personalized playlist e due to a link with a dedicated WOWZA server gives the possibility to attend in streaming meetings, interviews, cultural activities, etc.

4.2 The VLE users' community

Since the opening of the first group of portals and after first operators' MOODLE courses, we can affirm that a military MOODLE community was created. Now, they work in autonomy and they exchange information. There are 5700 users, 129 courses are uploaded and used, 13 of them are dedicated to foreign languages. Currently, 1540 people have attended courses for peculiar training. Initially, there was a shyness during forum sessions and uncertainty before uploading courses and materials. The tutors' presence during basic and advanced MOODLE courses helped a lot in the first case while for the second one it was offered the opportunity to participate to a course for instructional designers. It helped to think about contents and modalities and on how to prepare Learning Objects ready to be used and shared. This model was tested in several courses for basic education by using MOODLE platform for Military personnel, some of these courses were at university level, especially for scientific disciplines, for young Officers and in some specific exercises for post-graduated Officers at level of Captains and Majors.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE

The challenge is to create an effective and useful lifelong learning process for the Organization and the personnel involved in the learning process by using this specific model.

The feedback and results of the pilot experiments were extremely positive and pushed the organization to invest more resources in this field. In the next future, we are going to collect additional data in order to understand how it is possible to move on from this stage and trying to evolve the entire process. For instance, we are interested in studying the learning analytic for improving didactic but also for understanding the difficulties of the learners and intervene whenever necessary, in enhancing the internationalization process and helping small entities (like small units and barracks) and encourage them to use the system for several different activities.

We think that the model could offer new educational strategies coherent with future changes and needs.

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