



ONLINE TRAINING OF TRAINERS FROM THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, PORTUGAL

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Abstract

This paper describes an online training course for trainers in the perspective of new trends in online learning processes. Online training of trainers consists of: training as part of online pedagogical and teaching models, and not only on support and interfaces; discussions about teaching and learning in new scenarios; and online scenarios with the new trends on the development of e-learning in mind. The main purpose of this paper is to characterize the online teacher training course and its innovations within a paradigm referenced by networks, pedagogy of participation and the use of informal spaces in an innovative co-learning environment (Dias, 2012; Okada, 2011). We conducted a brief descriptive analysis supported by bibliographic references, reflections and discussions previously held about the proposal of the course. This paper is part of the work done by the course research team, who is developing a research project for improving innovation in e-learning.

Introduction

Technological progress and the advent of the Internet led to the emergence of a networked society marked by drastic changes in the economy and in the labour market, promoting the emergence of new paradigms, models, educational communication processes and new learning scenarios. Indeed, the relationship between technology and pedagogy substantially changed the paradigm to which we were accustomed, breaking with the tradition of a teacher-centred teaching as the “fountain of knowledge” and in accordance with a predetermined rigid curriculum (Monteiro, Moreira & Almeida, 2012; Anderson & Dron, 2012; Barros et al., 2013).

The introduction of ICTs in different scenarios of human activity, including training, has helped strengthen the design of working and learning methodologies based on cooperation among its members. The acquisition of such collaborative and cooperative skills is of great relevance and must be transposed into different areas, in particular to the labour market, since this is an extremely relevant competence that should be a cross-cutting trend in all walks of life (Dias & Osório, 2011; Aires et al., 2007; Barros et al., 2011).

Using online environments in training has demonstrated its potential. The idea is to now teach students to learn through motivational and flexible methodologies, which embody different teaching resources, dynamic and interactive contents, with different communication channels and ways of working. To achieve this, however, trainers must be able to effectively respond to the challenges placed by the introduction of ICTs. Specifically, by enhancing their skills and their teaching, pedagogical, and technological knowledge about human development (Moreira, Barros & Monteiro, 2014).

In short, to be a trainer in online training scenarios requires the acquisition of new skills, or the readjustment of others, while still paying attention to the more traditional ones. Thus, the aim of the online training of trainers course is to provide trainers with these skills within a framework of change and innovation, in which the Open University hopes to strengthen its position as a public higher education institution of quality and excellence. In this context, the “consolidation and anticipation of new networked learning scenarios” (referred to in the strategic plan of the Open University 2011-2015, (Dias, 2011), requires skills and requirements appropriate to the trainer in today's networked societies (cf. art. 3 of Ministerial Order 214/2011, of 30 May, and IEFP regulation).

Methodological Procedure

The main purpose of this paper is to characterize the online teacher training course of the Open University and its innovations within a paradigm referenced by networks, pedagogy of participation and the use of informal spaces in an innovative co-learning design. The specific objectives are to present the development of the course, its structure, elements, and innovative features, bearing in mind the importance of having research and practices that help us build benchmarks in e-learning in online training.

Based on this framework, we propose the presentation of an analytical study of the first edition of the course in several dimensions - instructional design, dynamics of the learning community.

The difference in this pilot course is that it draws on the open collaboration between researchers, and was a joint effort of the teachers invited to be a part thereof. Against this backdrop, we intend to contribute to the need to change paradigms in face-to-face and distance education and to personal training and development. To this end, the qualitative study, based on a descriptive analysis supported by bibliographic references, reflections and discussions, focuses on the results of the first course edition.

The interpretation of data was based on reference theory on education, e-learning, virtual teaching models, collaboration networks, and online teacher education.

Course pedagogical model

Teaching and learning activities of the course work take the form of distance learning, using an e-learning platform (Moodle 2.0 tailored to the virtual model of the Open University) and other environments and digital tools typical of Web 2.0. The course follows its own

pedagogical model, specifically designed for virtual teaching at the Open University, based on the following principles (Pereira et al., 2007):

- Teaching centred on the student, meaning that he or she is actively responsible for the construction of knowledge;
- Teaching based on flexible access to learning (contents and activities), with no time or space constraints, according to the availability of the student. This principle is underpinned by asynchronous communication, meaning that space and time do not have to coincide, since the student will communicate and interact as and when it is convenient, allowing him or her time to read, process the information, reflect, or dialogue and interact;
- Teaching based on diverse student-trainer, student-student, and student-resource interaction. This principle embodies various communication devices planned and designed by the trainer according to his or her pedagogical strategy;
- Education that promotes digital inclusion, understood as facilitating access to adults who attend a program in a higher institution and who have not yet fully mastered ICTS.

In this model, students are integrated in a learning community that offers permanent access to learning objects (script, audiovisual or multimedia), activities, discussions and exchange of experiences, and will have the opportunity to experiment with various tools and web interfaces. The coordination of each module is ensured by Open University teachers, who can rely on the help of other experts.

Course structure

The course consists of seven modules with a total duration of 150 hours (15 weeks of training), including an online 'get acquainted with' module for students. The following section provides a brief overview of the modules:

The online 'get acquainted with' module is an induction module for students, allowing them to become familiar with the university's learning environment and pedagogical model, and with the skills required to be an online student.

The cross tools module is not intended for assessment, but will accompany the student throughout the course in the event of queries and requests for help on the use of software, applications and other web 2.0 interfaces used in other modules during the course.

- Module 1 will address the contributions of emerging pedagogical approaches based on Web 2.0, and contains some of the learning theories that support these approaches.
- Module 2 highlights some components and principles that are fundamental to the design of online courses, and i) must be focused on learning; ii) must be geared to achieve objectives; iii) should focus on meaningful performances and achievements; iv) should assume that the results can be measured in a reliable and valid way; v) must have an empirical, self-corrective basis; and vi) should be a team effort. At the end of

this module, students are expected to know the components and the key principles for designing an online course

- Module 3 analyzes the processes of communication and interaction, and individual needs of each student. At the end of this module, students are expected to analyze communication and interaction processes in online training contexts; to analyze the characteristics and specific features of technology-mediated communication; and to know about collaborative pedagogic, constructivist and learning models by detecting them in online training contexts.
- Module 4 aims to explore the potential and the pedagogical uses of some of the main tools of web 2.0, social networks, open educational resources (OER) and the possibility of establishing connections between the tools under analysis. At the end of this module, students are expected to know about and use web 2.0 digital-technological tools from an education and communication perspective; to know about social networks and the potential of games and multi-user virtual environments; and to understand the progress made in online training in customized learning environments.
- Module 5 addresses e-activities, which is the term usually applied to the active and interactive online training structure. The e-activities can be used in many ways, but have some common characteristics: i) they must be motivating and with well-defined goals; ii) they must be based on the interaction between the participants of a training course; iii) they must be designed and guided by an e-moderator; iv) they must be asynchronous; and v) they must be easy to arrange. In addition to these features, it is essential to address the different ways in which students learn, so e-activities must contemplate different strategies and activity formats. In this module, students are expected to design and develop e-activities in an online training environment.
- Module 6 aims to give a systematic view of the challenges, contexts and assessment practices in online training environments. At the end of this module, students are expected to analyze assessment concepts and their roles; to know about the implementation of continuous assessment practices, of collaborative learning assessment, the assessment of others, self-assessment, and co-assessment; to know strategies and use tools to implement online assessment practices in both formal and informal online environments
- Module 7 is built around the main axes structuring an online training project – planning, project design and development. At the end of the course, students are expected to be able to plan, design and develop an online training module.

The figure below shows the first course module, called the ‘get acquainted with’ module. The homepage features the learning contract icon, which contains the document that guides the entire learning process. Note that all course modules have a learning contract describing the objectives, skills, contents, resources, and assessment process. This learning contract is a key element of the Open University pedagogical model.

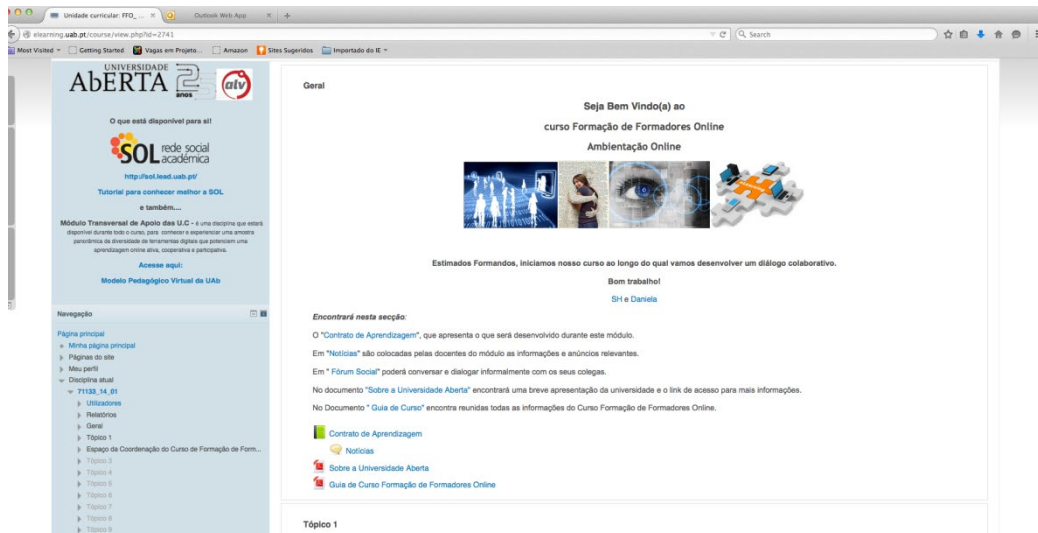


Figure 1. Image of the first course module – Get acquainted with

Each module was structured by an expert in the area, working for the Open University in the Department of Education and Distance Learning. Note that the pedagogical strategies build on the virtual model of the Open University, (Pereira et al., 2007), but are based on recent findings on investigations in the field of online pedagogy.

Benefits and challenges of course innovation

As mentioned before, the course is based on an innovative philosophy focused on the use of networks for the informal development of learning spaces. In line with this philosophy, an additional contact space was provided by the Open University as an academic social network that serves to encourage informal discussions seeking the production of knowledge, further to the modules designed for the teaching of contents.

To facilitate the shared and reflected collaboration of students throughout the course, we also encouraged the development of strategies and tools to promote collaborative work, enabling co-learning among students and teachers, as they are partners in the collaborative learning process, construction of meanings, and understanding and creation of joint knowledge.

In general, we can say that the pedagogical innovations in this course are visible:

- in how contents are organized and offered to students according to the goals and skills to be attained;
- in the interactions with web 2.0 and the virtual environment;
- in the mediated communication forums;
- in other communication spaces that facilitate a dynamic and collaborative organization, implemented in conjunction with the customized UAB platform - twitter, in the academic social network using Elgg resources, for example;
- in the student's critical review of what he or she is learning;

- in the co-learning between students and trainers, supported by a pedagogy of participation (Dias, 2008; Dias et al., 2008; Dias & Osório, 2008; Dias, 2012; Barros, 2012; Goulão, 2012; Okada, 2012).

Final Considerations

The advantages of these innovations offered to students are yet to be assessed, as the first group has only recently completed the course. The most relevant challenge for teachers, however, was that the change in strategies and online tools has indeed enabled collaborative and co-learning spaces.

This paper begins with a brief description of the proposed online training course for trainers its innovations within a paradigm referenced by networks, pedagogy of participation and the use of informal spaces in an innovative co-learning environment.

We then conducted a brief descriptive analysis supported by bibliographic references, based on reflections and discussions previously held about the proposal of the course. The results are part of the rationale for course improvement and its ongoing research.

The course research team working on the improvement and innovation of e-learning will shed light on the progress and possible ways of improving the quality of these courses and of promoting innovation.

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