

A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY OF LEARNING: THE CASE OF EL-GATE

*António Teixeira, Universidade Aberta & Centre for Philosophy – University of Lisbon,
Maria do Carmo Teixeira Pinto, Isolina Oliveira, Universidade Aberta, Portugal*

How can the learning experience of an on-line training course become a sustainable and enduring educational experience? How can onsite continuous training become more engaging and rewarding for the student? A possible solution for this is put forward in the study case of the EL-Gate on-line course and Community of Practices (CoP). In this paper we present and reflect on the main results of this experience.

EL-Gate – European Latin American Universities Cooperation Gate is an EU-funded project in the framework of the ALFA II programme, which aims at helping Latin American universities design and implement more effective and efficient university cooperation models fully integrated in the university organization charter and in the university development strategy, based on European best practices. To be able to reach its goal, the project team has developed a 120 hours fully on-line course in “University International Department management” with a 40 hours assisted project-work. Over 60 students working at IDs of European and Latin American universities and coming from 38 universities in 13 countries were accepted in the course, which counted also with 8 teachers and 5 tutors. The course was complemented by a web-based thematic CoP of IDs managers and staff from European and Latin American universities.

As part of the course design, a specific pedagogical model was developed and approved by all partners. This was a reference paper establishing a common pedagogical framework, given the much diverse pedagogical traditions and learning cultures involved. It defined common methods and selected typical tools to be used in the training course, favouring interactivity and cooperation. Being student-centred, the EL-Gate pedagogical model favoured each student would choose the best way to use available resources and to plan the study work, controlling both the pace and the progress of learning. Independent learning was complemented in each unit by peer learning and student assessment was based on a continuous assessment approach, complemented with a final team project. The online pedagogical approach used in the EL-Gate training course was also quite flexible, setting a preference for the extensive use of asynchronous communication tools available on the LMS Claroline. Forums were critical tools, because it allowed for the development of critical thinking skills and the sharing of knowledge and resources with peers. As facilitators of the learning process, teachers and the tutors were able to help the students in organizing their work and stimulating cooperation within the learning community.

Due to the very nature of the target group – active ID managers, most of the students did face many difficulties to complete assigned tasks within schedule, thus following very diverse work schedules from one another. In order to cope with this problem, it was experimented with success to redirect of the learning path so that it became adjusted to the diverse learning stages of the different entrants. This redirecting occurred at two levels: by introducing methodological changes in the course and by advancing the creation of the on-line CoP, which was foreseen to start only after completion of the course. In fact, from the start a great focus was attributed to guarantee the long-term sustainability of the learning process. This was to be assured by a CoP, which is itself based on the development of the co-ownership sense among the members and the promotion of their control taking. Critical to this timely decision was the close articulation between teachers, tutors and the manager of the course in monitoring student’s learning performance and pace.

Thus, by moving the entrants in the course to the CoP, it was possible to resume the rhythm of the activities and to ensure the course was sustainable, with its entrants becoming involved again. We may state that migration to CoP reactivated the involvement of the enrolled students and recovered for the training students who were at earlier stages of the course. In accordance, this mixed approach we have used close articulating a structured learning path and open social networking contributed to assure a more sustainable learning experience especially when dealing with working student groups. In our view, this continuum between a close and open virtual learning environment is particularly well suited to lifelong learning contexts.