

Open Distance Education at Southern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences: Some Results and Reflections.

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Abstract:

The new university of applied sciences of Italian speaking part of Switzerland (SUPSI) is developing a multilingual open distance learning environment. Within the framework of the Virtual Campus Switzerland Programme we are participating at several projects in order to set up a virtual campus with strong local roots and with closed relationships to other universities of Switzerland and of the close foreign countries. The main objective of these activities is to expand the offer of modular courses, to make them available anytime and anywhere for more interested people and thus to set-up a life long learning platform for continuous education. We attach great importance to the media didactic aspects, the multilinguality (the support of some courses will be available in different languages) and the integration of on-line courses into the existing master curricula offered, until now, only in face-to-face modality. For this reason, we started useful collaborations with other institutions with competence in didactical aspects and communication issues. The result of these collaborations is a strong partnership among institution of the same region with the main goal to establish a common open distance learning curricula.

The University of Applied Sciences of southern Switzerland

The 'Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI)' is the University of Applied Sciences of Southern Switzerland. SUPSI was established in 1995 as the successor institution of the former technical college of Southern Switzerland and is situated within the region of Tessin. The overriding goal of SUPSI is the promotion of technological development and technological transfer. Today SUPSI consists of five departments and three institutes. The basic educational programs lead to a three year bachelor degree. Starting from 1999, the very large postgraduate courses offer of SUPSI has been enriched with two master programs partially offered in open distance learning mode.

Within the same region, SUPSI is collaborating very closely with the other university of Italian speaking part of Switzerland that is the 'Università della Svizzera italiana (USI)', established in 1996. These two universities are collaborating in several projects, and share some services. For instance, the research service department and the IT services and the

postgraduate education service are structures common to both institutions. These two institutions moreover take advantage of other high qualified institutions actives in the field of the higher education: the federal institute for professional pedagogic (ISPPF) and the Swiss center for scientific calculation (CSCS), both based in the same region of southern Switzerland.

Virtual Campus projects

The Swiss Virtual Campus programme is a government founded project which aims at setting up a nation wide open distance learning environments for university students. Within the framework of this programme SUPSI, in collaboration with USI and other several Swiss universities, started several projects in order to set up a virtual campus with strong local roots and with closed relationships to other universities of Switzerland and of the near foreign countries. Goals of these projects are to create an open distance learning environment for students in this region, especially to expand the offer of modular courses in the postgraduate studies program and to make it available anytime and anywhere for more interested people. Currently SUPSI is participating as active partner in 7 different projects within the framework of the Virtual Campus Switzerland Programme.

Among these we head the MACS project, which aims at transforming the postgraduate education programme 'Master of Advanced Computer Sciences' offered by the SUPSI into distance education mode. Within two pilot courses we are testing different concepts for establishing a logistic, pedagogic, and methodological structure that supports open distance learning in an appropriate way. The first course, prepared for an Italian speaking target audience in Ticino and northern Italy, started on March and ended on May 2001. The second course on the other hand will be prepared for a multilingual (Italian, German, and French) target audience and will be offered in every region of Switzerland and probably in the closed foreign countries.

Other two important projects are SWISSLING and Forum new Learning. The former is headed by university of Lugano with the collaboration of other four universities in Switzerland (Basle, Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich). The main objective of SWISSLING is to set-up an introductory course in linguistics targeted to university beginners in human sciences (linguistics; communication sciences; literature and languages). The infrastructure project 'Forum New Learning (FNL)' originally was proposed by the university partnership *eduswiss*, at which SUPSI participate. FNL is designed as a future teacher and student support system that make available tools and information, provide training and education for teachers, and that set up a support network focussed on technical and in particular didactical issues.

Pedagogic features

We attach great importance to the media didactic aspects of open distance education. Right from the start of our activities, we use the corresponding findings of former projects elaborated together with the pedagogic institute of Fribourg University. Moreover, we elaborate appropriate communication strategies, thanks to the competencies the faculty of communication sciences of the University of Italian Switzerland.

In collaboration with these institutions, we decided to adopt the following concepts within our distance courses:

- The courses are only in part carried out virtually. Face to-face meetings are organised in each case at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of a course.
- A schedule of the course, so-called 'fil rouge', leads the students through all course documents; it provides information on learning aims, required learning time to the students and a range of dates within each didactical unit have to be studied.
- A collection of quiz and assignment helps both student and teacher to better estimate the

learning success.

- Use strategies of co-operative learning: students have to build and strengthen on-line learning communities. For this reason, we organised a discussion forum, where students and teacher can debate on topics of the course. We also formed groups of students composed by 3 or 4 of them, and we assign to groups some exercises where all students of the group have to collaborate to solve.
- Avoid that the student feels alone. For this reason, we organise weekly chat session where each student can participate.

Some assessment activities are planned after the conclusion of each course, in which the students that have participated in the course will have a central role for our analyses. These activities of evaluation will be conducted in collaboration with our partner experts in aspects of pedagogy and formation to distance of the “Istituto svizzero di pedagogia per la formazione professionale” and the institute of communication sciences of the University of Italian Switzerland.

Administration

One of the most important issues that must be evaluated when organising a distance learning environment is the choice of the software platform to be used in order to carry out the course. Our partners and we decided to use WebCT, that is a platform that enables teachers to put course contents (documents, articles, curricula, etc.) on Internet in a very simple way. In fact, WebCT is the today most used tool worldwide and it was evaluated as the best by the Swiss university council.

We started a broadly designed campaign offering daily seminars introducing WebCT for our and our partners teaching staff. On the other hand we are on analysing the communication structure of university administration so that we optimally can represent it within WebCT. This way not only the course content and the course realization but also administration becomes virtual. All single components elaborated within the projects presented above will grow to a comprehensive virtual campus.

Conclusion

The process of building an open distance learning environment in our university is actually ongoing, and we just completed our first prototypal on-line course: “*Introduction to Java programming language*”. With this course we had the opportunity to draw some positive and encouraging observations, some of these are available in [9] and [10]. The use of the new educational technologies leads us to a reassessment of the didactical behaviour of every involved person in a comprehensive way and involves a radical afterthought of the role of the teacher and the school.

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