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How to create an effective Personal Learning Environment (PLE)

The use of technology in education has led to the creation of student-centered learning environments. Here's what they are and how to build them

The introduction of ew technologies into the world of learning has created changes of all kinds. From teaching and testing methods to the upheaval of the traditional classroom, the Web has paved the way for online courses, remote lessons and new interactive tools. The change has also involved the learning environment, which has gone from physical to virtual, giving more space to digital tools, without limiting itself to the traditional classroom.

Thus, the following have been tested:

- the **Virtual Learning Environment**, which unites students and teachers in a virtual space
- and the **Personal Learning Environment**, a learning space based on the student's personal preferences.

The result is the creation of a flexible environment, which reflects the user's needs, so that it becomes the center of each phase of the learning process.

What is a PLE?

With **PLE** we refer to a personal learning environment. It is the space created by an individual to support their educational and professional growth. According to the definition of the Treccani Encyclopaedia, the term indicates "particular technological environments that individual learners can use to enhance their personal learning and reflection path".

A PLE, therefore, consists of **various digital tools available online**, such as social media, blogs and management systems, which allow users to connect with each other and provide an infinite series of resources that can be consulted and retrieved by students in any time and from anywhere. Thanks to new technologies, the student not only has the traditional education systems, but also has the possibility of interacting with an environment that is always connected, containing infinite information resources that are continuously updated and available to users. This type of environment welcomes many people who, in turn, can be an important source of learning.

The goal of a PLE is **to provide students with control over their own learning process and access to a variety of educational resources**, to enable them to achieve the desired educational and professional outcomes.

The Personal Learning Environment represents an **environment completely centered on the student**, who is placed at the center of the learning process and who becomes the main player in his or her training.

For this reason, the PLE is usually perceived as in stark contrast to traditional training and online courses based on an LMS platform managed mainly by the teacher. However, it is not said that the various types of learning can meet and intertwine to create an interactive space that incorporates Web resources and more traditional tools. Although with PLE we mainly mean an online environment, the use of other types of resources is not excluded, used by students to interact with each other and develop their own educational and professional process.

Pros and Cons

One of the main characteristics of the PLE is the centrality of the student, which distances the idea of learning environment from the model that sees students using textbooks or individual platforms to gather information.

With the creation of the Personal Learning Environment, the learning method takes on the contours of an engaging action, which leads students to select the necessary information and organize it according to their needs. This type of training space provides several advantages:

1. Promotes authentic learning. The PLE, in fact, allows you to include feedback from experts in the field among the activities, which represents an important resource for the student. In this way, in fact, the user will be able to verify his own learning thanks to the return of a competent person.
2. Puts students at the center of the educational process. The protagonists of learning become the users, who can decide their own training path and interact with other colleagues or with the trainers. Furthermore, the student can autonomously access the resources present in the learning space, according to his or her needs.
3. Turn learning into collaboration. In an environment where information is omnipresent and only needs to be located, teaching can no longer be reduced to a simple transmission of data. Instead, it is a process of collection, integration and recognition of data useful for the construction of one's own knowledge. For this to be done effectively, however, it is essential to collaborate. A PLE is equipped with the technologies necessary for communication and collaboration, so as to make dialogue between students and the exchange of ideas easier and more immediate.
4. Increases student motivation. The Personal Learning Environment allows users to tailor their learning experience according to their interests, needs and goals. The personalization of the training process can be a source of greater motivation, because the student is driven by a desire to learn that derives from his personal needs and not from the decisions of others.

As we have said, a Personal Learning Environment places the student at the center of the training process, making him the main actor in the collection of information. This involves a constant and continuous commitment on the part of the student, who must autonomously collect and organize the information he needs: it is **self-directed learning**, which requires awareness, concentration and willpower on the part of those who decide to undertake this type of training course.

The flip side of the coin represents one of the major disadvantages of the PLE: the need for users to take a particularly active role in the learning phases can be a very difficult operation. This can happen to those who lack self-management skills. In addition, the use of technology may drive students towards the **digital distractions** that the Web brings.

How to create an effective PLE

A Personal Learning Environment represents a revolutionary environment for learning. But how to proceed with its creation? First of all, for a PLE to be effective, it is good to follow a few steps, which allow you to build an adequate personal environment imbued with the advantageous possibilities offered by new technologies. Here are the main steps:

1. Establish **learning areas** and training objectives based on educational and professional needs. The PLE can include any type of interest and leaves room for sharing and learning of all kinds of concepts, in different ways.
2. **Determine which tools to use**. With the PLE it is possible to create a personalized and customizable virtual learning space. In this environment, the student can act dynamically, collecting content and information and developing new knowledge using different technologies and comparison with other people. The PLE, in fact, implies sharing and communication with others, as well as collaboration for the creation of new content.
3. **Create a map**, which can help visualize a complete picture of the objectives of the learning process and the tools identified as means to achieve one's objectives.

For a PLE to be effective, it is good to include a series of tools of different nature within it. In the first place, the means that allow the student **to access the various information in an orderly manner** are fundamental. Furthermore, useful moments of reflection can be included in the training course, which could be stimulated by environments that offer the possibility of transforming the information collected, based on the student's thinking. Finally, the relational characteristic of the PLE requires the presence of inclusive, **sharing and collaboration** tools, thanks to which the student can relate to other people, from which he can learn new things.

Additionally, an effective Personal Learning Environment should enable students to:

- **Understand and correct your mistakes**. For this reason, it is important to provide the opportunity to obtain feedback on an ongoing basis, so as to allow users to take note of their difficulties and efforts and quickly correct their shortcomings.

- **Establish your learning goal**. If the student decides his own learning path he will be more motivated to pursue it. For this reason, a training environment capable of leaving users the possibility of self-management can be very effective, provided that students are able to organize themselves.
- **Access frequent assessments**, which are not only used for testing, but can be integrated into learning. The assessment test can be a useful tool for learning and should not necessarily be reduced to a mere verification for students who have already learned the knowledge related to the course.
- **Go at your own pace**. The possibility given to students to organize their own training process allows individual users to access learning on the basis of their needs, without forcing or slowing down the path.

The PLE represents a major change from more traditional training, where students access information using tools that are fixed and thought of by someone else. This type of learning environment, on the other hand, allows for the creation of connections between different subjects and between students, who are directly involved in finding, organizing and learning information.

The PLE, therefore, **combines tools and people**, who can thus create a unique and personal educational environment, in which the student can learn according to his own needs and objectives.