ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

Year 5 - number 145 Wednesday 10 february 2021

Ideas for making distance learning work in schools

Why has distance learning in schools not worked and, more importantly, what are the ways to make it work?

Without going into the political debate and the different approaches between Government and Regions, and taking for granted the need for students to confront themselves with their peers and teachers in a real classroom, the question we want to analyse here is why **distance learning** has not fully worked. What are the major problems? In addition, millions of schools around the world have adopted eLearning as a single tool, as in the UK, or in **blended mode**, in some areas of the US, to provide education: what lessons can be drawn from these experiences?

Why distance learning has not worked well: lack of training and digital divide

The most obvious reason for the flop of distance learning for schools (pointed out by many) is the lack of preparation on the part of teachers, despite the plans for **digital transformation** and the refresher courses provided after the first Covid wave. Judging by the experiences described on the network by parents, some teachers continued to have difficulties with the use of the videoconferencing software they used, mostly Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom. Complicating matters, despite investments in computer equipment, was the **technology gap** among students. For some, smartphones remain the only device with which to connect to the virtual classroom, and broadband is not always available for uninterrupted videoconferencing.

Inadequate eLearning tools

Of all the public school-funded equipment, perhaps the most essential part of a coherent eLearning programme has been missing: investment in an LMS and an authoring tool. Although the free platforms of international IT giants help to some extent to recreate the classroom situation, they leave uncovered the programmability and coherence that a **proprietary LMS** can provide:

- designing a learning path that adapts to students' needs
- having a tool with which to prepare teaching materials in different formats: video, quizzes, audio, games
- accurately track student participation and achievement through LMS statistics
- provide social learning tools with forums and challenges among students
- giving the possibility to follow lessons more flexibly, perhaps when computers at home are available

Lack of methods for distance learning

The main problem seems to lie in the **approach to distance learning**. According to the survey conducted by the research institute Indire on 3,700 teachers in schools of all levels, there was a dichotomy between those who opted exclusively for **synchronous lessons**, i.e. videoconferencing platforms, with at most some calendar options to facilitate classroom management, and those who decided to remain anchored to **asynchronous lessons**.

In the latter case, teachers had to work overtime to prepare the teaching material by photocopying worksheets, doing exercises from the book, recording video lectures sent via a YouTube link and taking days to manually correct each individual paper.

Again, what is missing is a coherent system that takes full advantage of the potential of eLearning and its playful character. In particular, what is missing is the flexibility to use an LMS and an authoring tool to activate a virtual classroom with live lessons and reinforced with tools for autonomous and group work: quizzes, simulations, role plays, challenges, podcasts. All of this with specific tracking of each student's activities, which makes it possible to intervene in time to support children in difficulty and prevent them from dropping out of school.

Distance learning in other countries

Also in the **UK** distance learning is mostly left to platforms like Google Classroom. The main difference is in the planning of the day. Live lessons are always interspersed with independent work to be presented before (flipped classroom) or after the lesson; the school day includes specific times for breaks and lunch. In the **United States**, schools integrate eLearning platforms and videoconferencing tools with a variety of tools for creating online courses, games, group work not necessarily in real time, educational websites. **Germany**, which is also struggling with eLearning, is trying to respond by buying laptops for students and drawing inspiration from the models applied for years in Denmark, Estonia and the Netherlands. However, according to an article in Deutsche Welle, even in these countries there are difficulties not so much in the use of technology as in the design of engaging courses.

In much of the world, schools are experiencing difficulties in distance learning. Without the use of specific tools and methods for eLearning, such as an LMS or an authoring tool, distance learning will continue to fail and remain a transposition of face-to-face teaching on Zoom, reserved for students who can afford a good connection and computer and have the assistance of parents to upload their paper exercises to a class register. Basically, investment, support and planning are needed to provide teachers with ongoing training in **eLearning design**, students with access to technology, and above all, to encourage the exchange of good practice and the circulation of ideas.

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