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Virtual classrooms: what they are and what advantages they offer

Thanks to technology, education is moving from physical classrooms to virtual classrooms. Let's find out what they are, what they are for and what advantages they offer.

The classroom is the teaching place par excellence. What it usually looks like is the physical classroom, consisting of desks, chairs, a table for the teacher and sometimes a blackboard. New technologies, however, have changed the world of learning, allowing access even remotely and from anywhere. Thus, the tools and features related to teaching have also become digital and the traditional place of learning has been enriched or, in some cases, replaced by what are called virtual classrooms.

What is a virtual classroom?

A **virtual classroom** is a **digital environment** that allows knowledge to be exchanged between users, making teaching and learning possible. A virtual classroom uses digital tools, such as e-learning platforms, where pupils and course teachers share information in real time, interact with each other and ask questions related to the lessons. In addition, teachers can assess their pupils remotely.

The traditional classroom coincides with a physical space, whereas the virtual classroom is accessible from anywhere and has no time limits. Wherever he or she is and at any time, a user can access the classroom and attend the lesson.

Basically, the virtual classroom consists of four elements:

1. The **virtual environment**, i.e. the platform that connects the trainer to the course participants, also using tools such as videoconferencing, sharing slides, audio, video or image files and exchanging comments.
2. The **trainer**, who organises and delivers the individual lessons.
3. The **users**, course participants, who represent the set of people to be trained.
4. A **computer** or other digital device, connected to a network, which enables surfing the Internet and accessing the various contents.

In order to be able to participate in a virtual class or lead a lesson, it is necessary to possess and use a computer with a good Internet connection, which enables all possible functions to be carried out quickly. This is enough to allow interested users to participate in the course, from anywhere in the world. Therefore, digital learning has no physical or (usually) time limits: this is one of the great advantages of virtual classrooms.

It is not necessarily the case that the trainer uses the virtual classroom as the sole learning tool: it is possible, in fact, that the trainer decides to include the virtual classroom as a complement to a frontal lesson.

Why use virtual classrooms?

Digital classrooms are usually used by training platforms, which offer **online courses**. But that is not all. They can also constitute a complementary learning to the traditional one, with the aim of encouraging direct contact between the teacher and the student, since they represent a particularly suitable place for interaction: the user, via chat systems or forums, can ask questions to his or her teacher, comment on the lessons, solve his or her doubts.

This type of class also allows a continuous exchange between the students themselves, who can meet virtually after the lesson to carry out any exercises together and prepare for assessment tests. The possibility of constant and continuous interaction is encouraged by the use of certain tools typical of the digital environment. Among others, there are chats, forums and video conferences, which are useful for quick and direct communication.

Using a virtual classroom can also be useful for remotely monitoring students' progress during the course and assessing their learning through exercises, tests or verifications.
These possibilities offered by the new technologies make it possible to implement a direct and effective learning method, which enables the use of content that is easily accessible to all and available anywhere.

The 5 advantages of virtual classrooms

Compared to traditional teaching, virtual classrooms have several advantages, although they cannot boast of in-presence interaction and relationships, an important aspect of learning and society.

However, there are five advantages associated with this teaching methodology. Indeed, virtual classrooms allow:

1. The elimination of **geographical barriers**, which are cancelled out by the use of digital tools. These, in fact, allow users to access content from anywhere in the world and share knowledge with other cultures. In this way, they can also connect with each other. The only prerequisite is the presence of an Internet connection and a digital medium.
2. The removal of **time restrictions**, so that lessons can be attended at any time and content can also be consulted several times. Students have no time limits and do not have to observe specific school hours, because the virtual classroom allows for a lot of time flexibility.
3. Lower **training costs** make learning accessible to all. Course organisation is also cheaper because the courses are conducted online, so all costs related to renting locations or travelling are cancelled.
4. Access to materials of **different types and formats**, from written texts to images and videos. In this way, students have a range of content accessible in different ways, allowing users to choose the format they prefer.
5. Differentiated and **flexible learning**, ideal for facilitating the assimilation of content, while maintaining a high level of attention.

A virtual classroom allows, therefore, continuous interaction and develops in students a sense of learning responsibility, because it is up to them to decide whether or not to access the content on the web platform, organising themselves autonomously and flexibly. The learning and testing modes are freer and also innovative, providing users with a new way to learn and apply their knowledge.

The virtual classroom also encourages the creation of original experiences that are often not present in traditional learning. An example of this is the implementation of the flipped classroom: new technologies lead to an overcoming of teacher-student roles, flattening the vertical hierarchy. This opens up the learning mode, allowing pupils to learn from each other. Another feature of the virtual classroom is the focus on the user, which is not always present in traditional classrooms. There, in fact, the intensity of learning is the same for everyone and the pace of teaching by the teacher is uniform. Online training, on the other hand, favours adaptive learning that is tailored to the user, who can access the different contents according to his or her needs, making him or her the protagonist of the learning path. Digital learning platforms are often focused on merit, because they precisely define the user's activity, against which students' abilities and potential are assessed.

The tools of the virtual classroom

A virtual classroom, to be such, cannot do without certain tools, which are useful for obtaining good results. Among the various **tools** are

- Audiovisual materials, different according to the subject;
- Internal messaging, such as chats, which allow students to exchange information with each other and ask their teachers for clarification, with an interactive virtual exchange system;
- Discussion forums for exchanging ideas and content and for organising different activities.
- Documents containing materials for students, also available to be downloaded and consulted at any time.
- Tests and assessment methods, useful for evaluating the teacher's learning in the various lessons of the courses.
- Certificates or diplomas, which can be downloaded by the students and which constitute a certificate of participation in the course and the eventual achievement of the teaching objectives.
- Grades from assignments, assessments or examinations, which are available on the online platform and can be easily consulted by each student.

- Videoconferences, linking teachers to students for real-time intervention, with the possibility of interactive intervention at the moment, with questions and clarification of doubts.
- Regularly produced reports, which provide a comprehensive overview of student progress, providing useful feedback on a regular basis.

In addition to these materials, there are fundamental tools without which a virtual classroom could not exist. These are a digital medium, such as a computer, tablet or smartphone, a webcam (not necessary, but potentially useful in some situations), a headset with a microphone, in case there is the possibility of immediate and vocal interaction.
Virtual classrooms are thus an important tool of digital learning and represent the online training environment par excellence. Digital training, however, is not always an end in itself and, indeed, hybrid trends are developing, aimed at combining traditional and online methodologies, so as to create mixed classrooms, which allow access to knowledge both remotely and in presence. These are mixed classrooms, where the teacher-student hierarchical pyramid is no longer a rigid mode of learning, but where peer relationships and the sharing of experiences is encouraged.