Cultural capital, learning and ICT in a southern Italian university

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Abstract

In the university setting, e-learning courses represent a flexible resource that can tackle a range of difficulties pertaining to primary degree courses and post-graduate qualifications. With reference to the teaching of Social Science Methodology within a primary degree course in an Italian university, this article suggests that e-learning can help new students with weak cultural capital to overcome some of the difficulties that can often lead them to drop out of university.

1. Introduction: E-learning and quality

With reference to other industrialised countries in Europe, Italy has relatively low rates of educational attainment. In 2007, half of the Italian population between 25 and 64 years of age had only a lower intermediate Secondary School qualification, placing Italy at the bottom of the list of European countries. Sadly, this percentage is even higher in the South of Italy (OECD, 2007; Istat, 2008).

As far as the secondary school and third level education systems are concerned, although the percentage of people with higher qualifications is increasing, Italy remains below the European averages (OECD, 2007).

Efforts to increase the educated section of the population encounter difficulties which cannot be described fully in this article. The quality of teaching (understood as involving the quality of the courses themselves as well as the means of communication used to transmit the contents of these courses to students) undoubtedly plays a crucial role. The "quality challenge" is equally relevant to traditional as well as online teaching, although we will only refer to the latter in this work.

In the context of online teaching, the scientific debate has emphasised the role of context and the specific needs and profiles of students, encouraging us to avoid overly-general discussions and to assume a more specific approach (E-learning papers, 2007; Ehlers, 2004; Ehlers et al., 2005; Trentin, 2008). For university teaching specifically, it is important to refer to the distinction between the primary degree cycle and post-graduate degree courses introduced by the most recent reform. In fact, quality can assume different meanings at these different levels, given their different learning objectives and the different needs and profiles of their students. As far as the Humanities, Social and Political Science are concerned, university teaching often has to deal with the weakness of students' cultural abilities (reduced reading and writing skills, poor general knowledge, a lack of specific knowledge about the area of study, weak study methods). This situation powerfully conditions the transition from school to university, a critical passage that has been characterised as being largely based on self-reflexive processes and practices (Coulon, 1997). Becoming a university student implies a continuous work of *bricolage* concerning the rules, a work of sedimentation and reorganisation of meaning and new experiences and an integration of new methods for the comprehension of social life (Coulon, 1997). The cultural inadequacy of students often translates into a strong sense of disorientation, which has been identified as one of the most typical characteristics of students during their first experience of university life (Portelli, 1995); it hampers, also, the establishment of relationships with fellow students and teachers and entering into

university life as a whole. Over time, these behaviours can decrease or even disappear or they can lead students to drop out university or to adopt a lower profile of work and expectations.

The teaching objectives of the primary degree courses, specific as they are, cannot bypass this situation. At the post-graduate level, however, the lecturer must seek to trigger a deeper understanding of research activities and to foster applied knowledge. In order to confront these different challenges, it is necessary to construct different kinds of courses at each level.

2. The student's cultural capital in a southern Italy university

In this article, we will try to reveal the logic which we referred to when constructing a course in Social Science Metodology within the degree course in Sociology at the University of Salerno. The course in Social Science Metodology, one of the first to be attended by students during their first year, poses specific challenges. These depend on the very nature of the discipline, essentially involving "meta-skills" (Meraviglia, 2004), as well as the many references it contains to the history, epistemology and philosophy of the social sciences.

These difficulties are much more serious where students are lacking an adequate preparation for third-level study. Here it is relevant to refer to the concept of cultural capital, comprising different forms of knowledge, skills, education and advantages (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970). As indicators of such capital for our students, we used:

- Their parents' educational attainments
- The students' final mark in their secondary school diploma
- The students' geographical area of origin

As a result of this research, it is clear that our Sociology students have a very weak cultural background. In only 3.6% of cases, both parents have a university degree, while 38.5% of students come from families where both parents have, at most, a primary school education.

As regards the school experience of students, 34.6% of students received a final mark below 70 (out of 100). A more careful reconstruction of the educational background of Sociology students in relation to the type of school attended and the mark received by the student (which studies have shown to be strongly linked to the success of the university career (Diana, 2004) shows that only 7.4% of students can be referred to as *high profile* (having received a high school mark above 90 out of 100 from one of the prestigious "licei" secondary schools). On the other hand, 13.4% of Sociology students may be described as *low profile* (with a mark of 60-70 out of 100 from a less prestigious technical or professional high school) (Based on our own analysis of data from the SEDA UNISA system, 2006-7 academic year). The geographical and urban distribution of the student population, investigated in 2001, underlines that many students come from the interior rather than coastal areas, from small or very small towns rather than cities (Errichiello, 2004).

To this we must compare the statistics on early dropout. With reference to students entering the university during the 2005/6 academic year, early dropouts accounted for no less than 42% of students (Our analysis of data from the SEDA UNISA system, 2005-7), not far from the figure registered by Sociology students years earlier, and similar to that indicated by Fasanella in relation to 2003/4 for students of Sociology in southern universities including Napoli, Lecce and Catania (Fasanella, 2007).

Such high dropout rates can be explained, in our opinion, also as a consequence of the distance between university standards in relation to knowledge acquisition, modes of communication and social interaction, on the one hand, and the cultural capital possessed by many students, on the other.

3. Teaching Social Sciences Methodology online: a report from a primary university degree course

The idea of supporting traditional lessons by using online courses developed amongst sociologists at Salerno on the basis of these kinds of considerations. This initiative was linked with broader considerations regarding the characteristics of the student population, including differential and irregular rates of attendance at lectures and the widespread intention to increase attendance rates in order to improve quality (D'Esposito et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the context described above also played un important role.

From 2001 onwards, online teaching has developed along two different trajectories which were subsequently generalised to the university as a whole (Vento et al., 2008): blended courses (with online schedules, calendars, course materials and exercises), and truly online courses, to which belongs the Methodology course. Its design, with teaching staff playing the most important role, has been developed by singling out teaching aims – general as well as specific (in this article, however, we will only illustrate the former) – and the subsequent choice and implementation of specific solution.

Both are summarised in the following table:

General objectives	Solutions
• to create a community and networks between students	• asking students to represent themselves in the course using words, images, and audio files • offering a student communication space (online café)
• to create structured pathways of studying	• dividing work into modules and units • scheduling of course activities • general structure of pages
• to foster regular and continuous relationships with teaching staff	• mail • forum • occasional recourse to simultaneous online teaching
• to foster acquaintance with the wider academic community	• short video interventions by qualified sociologists on specific topics • audio files • identifying and visiting the best professional and academic web sites
• to stimulate student activity • to connect the student to the wider web learning society	• forum and collaborative tools • encouraging frequent research on the web
• to overcome reading and writing difficulties by using multimedia approaches	• asking students to frequently produce short papers on all kinds of subjects

Table 1: Objectives and resources employed by Methodology's course

One of the aims at the centre of the planning process was to create, via the web, a social context of learning that connects different students, that brings students and lecturers together within the context of the wider scientific community (Siemens, 2008), helping them to overcome their educational weaknesses and to acquire scientific methods and a shared professional identity.

In addition to the specific solutions outlined in Table 1, great emphasis has been placed on designing user-friendly pages for each "lesson", in order to provide a pleasant and supportive study environment, with the aim of encouraging, by their design, regular work habits and stimulating the autonomous search for new knowledge (see Figure 1). In fact, each page contains links to different kinds of materials – written articles, exercises, online resources – which are organised in different sections. We also rely on written as well as visual and audio communication.
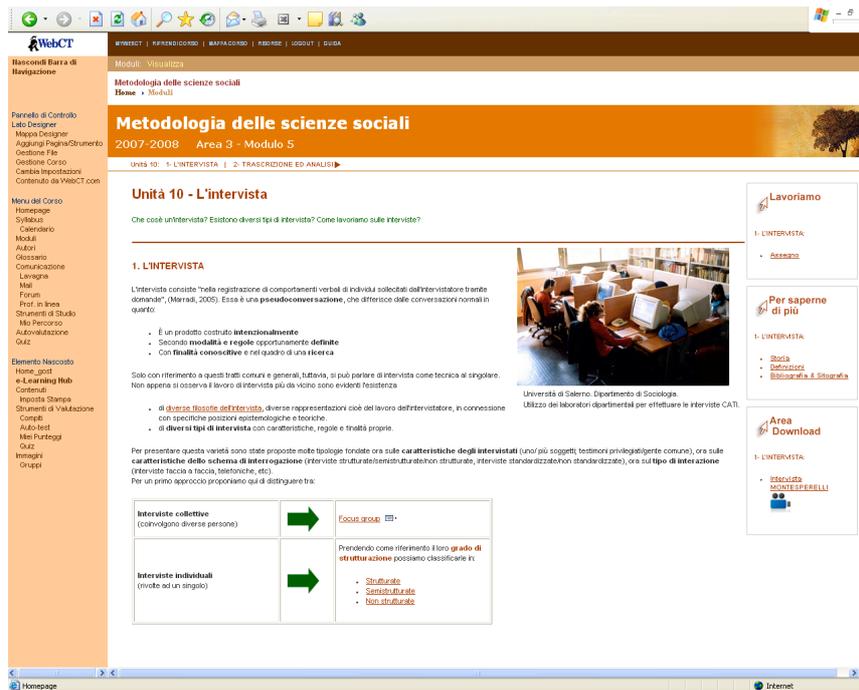
Figure 1: A page from the online Social Science Methodology course

Concluding these brief observations, and as an indication of the results of our work, we merely note that the monitoring activities carried out since 2001 have revealed the consolidation and stabilisation of a real student "learning community" which has demonstrated the capacity to generate a significant improvement in communication with lecturers. In any case, the exam results for the online Methodology course have been broadly satisfactory.

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