

# **Formal, non formal and informal learning at UNINETTUNO: a lifelong learning strategy in a multicultural context**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we provide a critical discussion of the usefulness of the capability approach in discussing the potential and the threats connected with the development of distance learning educational interfaces that goes together with the expansion of knowledge economies and societies. We also discuss these issues with reference to lifelong learning, which is an essential component of a fully articulated knowledge society and economy. Subsequently, we analyze a case study, that of UNINETTUNO International Telematic University in Rome, to illustrate of capability-building focused distance learning strategies may prove to be effective in a culturally and ethnically diverse context such as that of the Mediterranean basin.

## **Keywords**

*Distance learning, capability building, lifelong learning, technological interfaces, learning platforms.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Albeit distance education has been an existing option for a very long time – in fact, for 250 years at least keeping into account correspondence learning (Valore and Diehl, 1987; see Keegan, 1990, for a critical discussion), the last waves of the IT revolution have opened up formidable opportunities for new, technologically mediated forms of learning (Dede, 1989), in terms of richness of educational offer, articulation of the educational interfaces, speed and intensity of teacher-learner interaction, and so on. Distance education proves to be especially helpful for subjects who have objective difficulties to access traditional, physical educational venues, e.g. people with physical impediments (such as motion impairments), people belonging to socially vulnerable groups, or people living in remote areas (Ommerborn, 1998; Young, 1998; Alamgir, 2000). But actual accessibility of distance learning platforms is far from granted and must be the object of careful design and assessment (Schmetzke, 2001; Thompson and Burgstahler, 2003). Moreover, distance learning clearly poses subtle and complex behavioral issues with respect to traditional forms of face-to-face learning interaction – in terms of self-evaluation, isolation, inexperience, lack of support, motivational failures, and so on (Galusha, 1997), and therefore the eventual success or failure of a given distance learning environment depends on a plurality of factors that have to be carefully screened and evaluated (Sherry, 1995).

Experimentation, design and evaluation of innovative platforms for distance learning environments must be considered with special interest from the point of

view of capability building issues, in that the manifold complexity of contemporary societies and economies constantly poses new challenges (and exposes new, subtle forms of poverty and deprivation) that in several cases might be potentially addressed through a suitably crafted distance learning interface (for a survey of techniques see Belanger and Jordan, 2000). In spite of this, in the current literature there is to our knowledge no specific treatment of the relationship between distance learning and capability building issues, and as a consequence, there is a gap in the perception of the potential of distance learning in the design of development strategies.

The aim of this paper is to fill this gap, and to illustrate the potential of distance learning in development strategies. Our argument is twofold: On the one side, we discuss the main theoretical issues that arise when matching the two concepts within a common conceptual perspective. On the other side, we discuss some practical implications taking as a reference example a real case study, that of the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (UTIU) in Rome.

The structure of the remainder of the paper is the following. In section 2 we discuss distance learning in a capability approach perspective. In section 3 we present and discuss the case study of UNINETTUNO. Section 4 concludes.

## **2. Distance lifelong learning in a capability approach perspective: Challenges and opportunities**

Distance learning (DL) is usually defined as a process that creates and provides access to learning opportunities in contexts where the source of information/the teaching central and the learners are separated by time and space, or both, and which can be classified and segmented in a variety of different ways (Keegan, 1990; Holmberg, 1995).

The crucial concept in DL is the creation of an educational experience which ought to be qualitatively as good as an education given within a physical

classroom characterized by face-to-face interaction. Despite of the fact that the physical distance can be considered a weakness that makes the educational experience just a virtual or a solipsistic one, several uses and applications of the distance learning tools, thanks to the new forms of interaction provided by technological progress, can nowadays be recognized as elements of a brand new toolbox that not only allows a better fulfillment of specific educational needs, but even permits to address issues that were at least partially unattainable in physical, direct interaction contexts. For instance, in an epoch where on-line friendship and community making modes are booming even for people who have ample opportunities for face-to-face interaction, and seem to produce effective forms of social ties (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007), and where cohesion and social interaction in physical classes is increasingly an issue due to growing cultural and ethnic diversity in classroom settings (and especially so for persons with various kinds of physical and psychological impairments; see e.g. Odom et al., 1985; Gurin et al., 2002), it is an open issue whether technologically mediated interaction may facilitate under certain conditions community building processes in distance learning classes. Preliminary evidence is in fact encouraging in this respect (Brown, 2001), thus suggesting that indeed distance learning may be regarded not simply as a way to fill a gap, but as a brand new land of opportunity that is at least potentially delivering useful educational services to virtually anyone (Harasim et al., 1995).

Among the many possible new routes being opened by a forward-looking conception of distance learning we can mention, just to limit ourselves to a few telling examples, many typical developmental strategies of a learning economy (Lundvall and Johnson, 1994), such as the international networking of educational skills, resources and platforms; the development of communities for the social learning of certain technologically-intensive skills; the development of learning communities of high skills, highly specialized professionals and practitioners; and all forms of learning-focused wkinomics (Tapscott and Williams, 2006). Interestingly, none of these applications focus upon marginalized or weak social targets, although quite certainly the new possibilities unleashed by innovative forms of distance learning may imply a giant leap forward in many respects for many such categories on a variety of different levels – and this is especially true, for instance, for those internationally focused, highly networked organizations

which operate at the intersection between developmental and educational issues such as many NGOs (Madon, 1999).

Cost-benefits evaluations of DL programs highlight somewhat typical pros and cons (see e.g. Tibi and Tibi, 2009, for a more extensive discussion). Focusing upon some of the major, more characteristic ones, we can list the following advantage factors:

- **Flexibility.** Distance learning platforms provide students with full course work discretion in terms of location, time, mode, pace, etcetera, provided that the platform is easily and effectively accessible (e.g., in the case of web-based distance learning, provided that the internet connection is powerful and speedy enough, that the online interface is well designed and educationally proficient, and so on).
- **Diversification.** Removal of physical limitations allows potential users the access to a great variety of competing platforms and providers, with the possibility to explore, compare and evaluate them, thereby building up their optimal portfolio of learning resources and opportunities, tailoring it to their own learning needs, however particular and specialized. As a consequence, learners may experiment a dramatic expansion of their educational resources menu, including educational resources provided by otherwise highly competitive, high-tuition educational institutions such as some top US universities.
- **Lower tuition costs.** Tuitions are generally cheaper than on-campus; moreover, learners have access to a quantity of free educational resources, including some from high-tuition educational institutions, without the need to formally enroll – which however generally implies self-teaching, a mode that need not be proficient for any typology of learners.
- **Other cost savings.** Distance learners save on a variety of costs connected to physical attendance, such as transportation costs from commuting, costs of outside meals (most often more expensive

than home meals), and so on. Moreover, distance learning allows to save a considerable amount of time if compared on physical on-campus, that can be usefully devoted to learning activities or to other productive or recreational activities.

- **Potential for lifelong learning.** Given the growing relevance of lifelong learning in advanced knowledge economy contexts, and given that most of the targets of lifelong learning are full-time workers with serious time and attention constraints, flexible, easily accessible distance learning formats may prove to be an ideal solution for massive implementations, or at least for hybrid models that combine on-site, physical learning modes with distance, virtual ones.

On the other hand, there are some typical weaknesses that may be effectively addressed by suitably designed platforms, but require on the other hand a purposeful customization:

The pedagogical literature underlines some weaknesses and troubled sides of DL such as the necessity to adapt to technology, the difficulty in the testing and evaluation phases of the educational experience, and the risk of a lonely, not shared education. Distance Learning disadvantages can be summarized as follows:

- **Lack of social interaction.** As already emphasized, the most typical forms of distance learning imply a solipsistic interaction, which may imply direct feedback from teachers and tutors (and even voice contacts), but very limited or not interaction at all with fellow students. This may be very penalizing for learners, in that they may have difficulties in establishing meaningful benchmarks, they have no opportunity of exchange and comparison of learning skills and modes, or of discussion of controversial issues with peers, and to develop relationships of friendship, solidarity, and mutual encouragement. When this happens, the social component of learning (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988) is almost completely wiped out.

- **Format not fitting equally well for everybody.** Distance learning formats and modes may be very user-sensitive in their appropriateness, and thus in their effectiveness. Most of the freely available resources, however high the quality of their contents, generally present a very low level of customizability. The higher the pre-existing capability level of learners, the easier and more proficient their access to the less customizable resources. The less skilled the learners and the more specific their needs, the more they will need a highly customized format – which, as a rule, will require access to more intensely supervised, more costly platforms. Here we thus find a typical capability problem: The more serious the lack of capability of learners, the more specific and tailor-made need the platform be. Most likely, inclusive platforms for learners with serious capability building gaps and low purchasing power will call for external subsidies both in the development and in the implementation phase.
- **Online degrees are not accepted by all employers and are often associated with a lower educational quality than traditional degrees.** In formal educational programs that give a final degree, completion of a distance learning program may imply some competitive disadvantage with respect to holders of traditional degrees, insofar as educational attainment is taken as a signal of the level and quality of skills of the prospective worker. This is because it is difficult to find distance learning providers in the top ranks of educational institutions. In some countries (for instance, Italy) where all degrees granted by publicly recognized institutions have the same status for the sake of public contexts, this discrimination may not be allowed at least in some cases, but in fully competitive contexts distance learning must still fill a substantial reputation gap.
- **Technological literacy requirements.** Proficient use of distance learning platforms typically calls for non-trivial levels of technological literacy, which again may be a major barrier for



subjects with substantial capability gaps. And until appropriate technological literacy skills are acquired, educational activities aimed at filling such gaps must be carried out through more traditional, face-to-face interaction.

A proper integration of DL within a full fledged developmental program requires that any of the above criticalities (plus possibly a number of context-specific ones) are successfully conceptualized, addressed and managed. For instance, as already hinted at above, the relational shortcomings of traditional forms of DL may be compensated by a sophisticated use of social networking devices and resources, which however is a far from mechanic task. Typically, well performing DL formats will imply a fair mix of technological, socio-relational and educational components, emerging from an in-depth analysis of, and direct confrontation with, a given educational challenge.

In order to understand the impact of DL from a capability building viewpoint, we recall some basic tenets of Sen's capability approach. The capability approach has been used in the Human Development Reports (UNDP, 1990-onwards) to introduce the "human development perspective" in socio-economic theory and policy. Sen's thought doesn't provide an applicable toolkit for development, but the essential value of this approach lies in its usefulness as a "mode of thinking". As a brief introduction to the capability approach, an essential analytical distinction is that between the means and the ends of well-being and development (Robeyns, 2005). Sen (1999) argues that individual substantive freedom – to lead a life we have reasons to value – is both the primary end and the principle means of development. Economic measures are merely the means to this end. The two key concepts of Sen's capability approach that we need to introduce are the two constituents of the capability approach: Functionings and capabilities. Functionings are the "beings and doings" of a person, which determine his/her level of well-being: Social relationships, mental and psychological states, work conditions, health, and so on. The range of functioning's is potentially immense, and includes very basic ones, connected to a person's basic physical and social survival, as well as highly sophisticated ones, implying very high and specialized levels of skills. A person's capabilities are "the various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Capability is a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another

(Sen, 1992, p. 40)". In other words, capabilities are the abilities to combine available functionings in such a way that the person is able to state and to pursue effectively his/her life goals. Expanding a person's capabilities means both being able to access a wider range of functioning's, and being able to combine them in more articulated, fulfilling ways to pursue more sophisticated and specific goals. The wider the set of a person's capabilities, the higher his/her substantive freedom. Learning is one of the most direct and effective ways to acquire new capabilities and to be able to better orchestrate one's own functionings.

In which sense, then, DL plays a special role (if any) in the capability building process? Our thesis is that distance learning represents a distinctive capability building tool, which specifically reinforces 'constitutive capabilities' (such as knowledge, literacy and social relations) as it focuses not only on highly structured information acquisition (formal education), but also on the formation of individuals' critical and imaginative capacities in the wider sense. But the differential characteristic of DL with respect to more traditional forms of learning is that, whereas in specific cases where the provision and satisfaction of basic educational needs is limited, DL can partially support and replace them, more generally, multimedia distance learning may end up representing the *typical* learning mode for a time- and attention-constrained knowledge society insofar as informal and lifelong learning goals are concerned (e.g. Pea, 1994; Martin, 2005), the more so the more generalized the social access to basic IT literacy skills (and the more the social standards of basic IT literacy shift upward; Hayes and Harvel, 1999). This is in fact already happening in high tech niches of traditional training programs (see e.g. Salzmänn, Gillet, and Huguenin, 2000). It is the expanding scope of digital citizenship that is laying the ground for an increasing social and economic relevance of distance learning (Kukulka-Hulme and Traxler, 2005). The more the acquired familiarity with sophisticated information processing techniques, the more people will find it easy and rewarding to make use of platforms that rely heavily on such skills (Lee et al. 2003). For instance, for the new generations of digital natives, once highly sophisticated and specialized skills (only accessible to high-end professionals) such as creative digital processing of audio and video footage, are becoming skills that are easily and almost painlessly acquired in the early years of schooling thanks to the currently available software (Ohler, 2005; McLester, 2007), and therefore platforms that make a sophisticated

use of multimedia contents and tools will be relatively easily accessible and usable for a quickly expanding pool of users (Prensky, 2005). This would imply, for instance, that online platforms for foreign language learning are going to allow an increasing number of digital natives to undertake self-learning of unknown languages at home or at workplace (e.g. Kern, Ware and Warschauer, 2008), while having at the same time the possibility to directly interact online with teachers and mother tongue speakers for conversation, spell and pronounce check, and so on, while carrying out most of the more mechanical work (acquisition of writing and grammar skills, etcetera) by means of non-human expert systems.

Insofar as learning becomes a regular and pervasive component of life (and thus of active citizenship and even of well-being), the creation and implementation of more and more pervasive platforms that remove all possible spatial-temporal constraints to access to learning resources enjoy a competitive advantage upon more severely constrained ones (Turoff, 1997), and especially so insofar a substantial components of social interaction itself takes place online (Hoffman, 2009). In perspective, once new platforms delivering more and more immersive enriched reality simulations become available, the very distinction between distance and face-to-face learning and even between formal and informal learning could become increasingly blurred (Trinder et al., 2008), and would possibly overcome the classical psychological and motivational barriers to distance learning through highly entertaining interfaces (Pan et al., 2006) – and in fact, already at the current status quo, the very notion of distance learning seems to call for a terminological and conceptual restyling (Eisenstadt, Komzak and Dzbor, 2003).

From the above discussion, then, it is clear that the capabilities to make an integrated and articulate use of technologies in learning processes is a key asset in DL, and an important pre-condition for its effectiveness: From multimedia publishing (including blogging, micro-blogging and creative social networking) to audio/video broadcasting and teleconferencing, computer aided learning, e-learning/online-learning, podcasting, etcetera. One should not be led into thinking, however, that technological literacy per se may do the job and that successful DL boils down to transforming everyone into a IT geek. By considering with due attention the relationship between functionings, capabilities and the acquisition of ICT-related skills, we can put technological literacy in the proper context. As Sen

puts it, goods and services are important only insofar as their characteristics enable people to act and live, namely, in terms of the capabilities one can develop from their availability (Robeyns, 2005). The generation of capabilities from goods and services, such as ICT, is influenced in turn by three sets of conversion factors – personal, social, and environmental characteristics (Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1992). Personal characteristics and history, such as mental and physical conditions, literacy, and gender; social factors including the whole ‘software’ of social interaction (such as social norms, social institutions, and power structures); environmental characteristics including key contextual conditions such as climate, infrastructures, natural resources, and public goods: All these factors play a key role in determining the actual success of an educational strategy, and thus we must be careful to escape a straightforward technological reductionism and must keep our focus upon taking into account the whole complexity of the interaction among the many variables that make up a certain learning environment. DL offers many exciting opportunities, but much is still to be done in order to match them properly.

Once we embed technologically mediated distance learning into this broader framework, thus, a few extra points of caution emerge. To name just a couple:

- As to technological literacy and involvement, does it necessarily play a positive role in human development and quality of life, or could it be that, given the social and contextual environment, increasing exposure to technologically mediated interaction may significantly compromise some key capabilities, e.g. one’s ability to engage in face-to-face interaction? There is certainly a big potential value added in developing a full fledged knowledge society, but one should not take for granted that this transition uniformly improves collective and individual well-being whatever the route being taken.
- In underdeveloped socio-economic contexts, where the provision of education is limited, e-development initiatives often stop at the level of provision and uptake of digital technology. From a capability analysis perspective, ICT are a commodity, and not an end in itself; providing access without being equally committed to developing the corresponding capabilities may seriously backfire. In the absence of an expansion of the

capabilities pool, internet access basically boils down to an expansion of the menu of passive entertainment, and may thus even undermine individual motivation to invest in the acquisition of new skills.

The above concerns suggest that, although it is pretty clear that distance learning and the corresponding takeover of technologically mediated interaction may serve the purpose of human development, it is equally important to avoid an uncritical techno-enthusiastic attitude that mistakes the availability of technological connectivity and literacy with the achievement of educational and developmental goals per se. This is in principle far from granted, and keeping a wide focus on the socio-economic conditions for an inclusive and fair production and circulation of knowledge and skills is an essential condition for the social sustainability of the whole process.

### **3. Developing a hybrid platform for distance lifelong learning: The UNINETTUNO case**

The International Telematic UNINETTUNO University (UTIU) based in Rome is an interesting case study in capability building-oriented DL in that it has developed a hybrid learning platform where various forms of technologically mediated learning and various types of educational modes coexist in a highly flexible and context-sensitive way. This case study will allow us both to illustrate the potential of DL in the current educational scenario in a highly international and inter-cultural setting, as well as to address some of the subtleties of context-sensitive design of program and interfaces hinted at towards the end of the discussion of the previous section. In particular, we will examine how UTIU modulates its DL educational menu across three main DL domains: formal, non-formal, and informal learning. By formal learning we mean a highly structured educational program that awards an official degree with wide academic and professional recognition. By non-formal learning we mean a structured educational program which entails some forms of testing and examination and may award some degree, which has however no academic recognition and a

specific professional recognition. By informal learning we mean a loosely structured educational program entailing to testing and examination and awarding no kind of degree.

As many other distance learning universities, UTIU is strongly committed toward the formal learning component of lifelong learning (LLL). Many of its students are professionals in the mature phase of their career, who are interested in getting a degree for various reasons – from those who didn't manage to get a degree in their youth and now want to complete their educational track, possibly to obtain some career advancement, to former graduates in other disciplines who want to expand their competencies and interests, and so on. Specifically, 58% of enrolled students are above 35 years old; 13% lie in the interval 35-39 years old, 30% in the interval 40-49 years old and a fair 15% is above 50 years old. 2% of the enrolled students are studying for their second degree. UTIU first-level (bachelor) university degrees, as well as and first-level and second-level MA courses. Students can enrol all year round: This greatly facilitates accessibility for professionals, and thus increases UTIU's effectiveness in addressing the needs of LLL. In the same spirit, any given course module is offered four times a year, according to a schedule fixed by each Faculty at the beginning of the academic year, and this again suits pretty well the needs of LLL beneficiaries. Also, students have many degrees of freedom in combining modules of the educational menu, so that they can build and customize their study plan according to their actual needs and interests. At UTIU, DL is a highly accessible option. The learning environment allows to use the training materials in any possible context: at home, at workplace, at the university study centres. The lack of space-time limitations and of any kinds of physical constraints to accessibility allow the student to develop his/her own educational strategies by modulating at will the time and pace of learning as preferred (Garito, 2008). During their educational track, students are supported by a tutor in charge of the specific course. The tutor interacts with students through several interfaces of choice: chats, virtual classrooms, forums, online practice. Moreover, tutors can be contacted personally to receive more in-depth feedback on specific points of the learning program, and also face-to-face meetings are arranged whenever needed. We can thus safely regard UTIU as a LLL-oriented university.

### **3.1 Two examples of formal learning practices**

#### *3.1.1 Formal learning in an international, geographically situated context: a Master's course in "Euro-Mediterranean Cultures and Policies"*

The Master's course in Euro-Mediterranean Cultures and Policies takes origin from the Open Sky Europe Project, a EU-funded project within the context of the "Euromed Regional Communication" program. The project was originally aimed at improving communication practices among countries of the Mediterranean basin, with a special emphasis on juvenile targets. Such a project may give a substantial contribution to the development of a truly Euro-Mediterranean cultural exchange area, and particularly so in its current, improved format (Garito, 2007).

23 students from various countries have been awarded a scholarship to attend the Master at distance. International students come from the following educational institutions: University of Batna (Algeria), Helwan University (Egypt), Mukta University (Jordan), University of Jordan (Jordan), Libanaise University (Lebanon), Université Mohamed V Souissi et Salé (Morocco), University of Aleppo (Syria), Université Tunis El Manar / ENIT (Tunisia), EGE University (Turkey): A far-reaching coverage of the variety of cultures and socio-political contexts that make up the Mediterranean basin.

#### *3.1.2 Formal learning in a multilingual environment: A Master of Science in Health Management*

This Master is produced and delivered in English and in Greek, and there are 230 Greek students enrolled. The Master's course lasts one academic year, corresponding to 60 ECTS credits. There are various educational formats: videolections, seminars, exercises, conferences, tutoring activities, research activities and training periods. The completion of the Master requires the attendance of ten modules and the preparation of a research dissertation.

From these two examples already, it is possible to notice that UTIU's focus in the formal learning domain is to make use of DL to build up far-reaching learning communities in the Mediterranean basin, with a special emphasis on countries

where at the moment DL practices are still under-developed. Educational formats and technological platforms are varied and take into account the average level of technological literacy of the representative student from a given geo-social context; calibration upon actual skills and technological literacy levels receives priority upon experimentation of state-of-the art technological interfaces.

### **3.2 An example of a non-formal learning practice**

#### *3.2.1 Non-Formal learning through distance education: professional training course for Football Athletic Trainers*

The educational menu of non-formal learning activities is still underdeveloped with respect to its full potential. An interesting experiment in this field, however, is again a distance education program: a professional training course for soccer athletic trainers, offered by UNINETTUNO in cooperation with IUSM, the Italian University Institute for Bodily Motion Sciences. The program enables students anywhere in Italy to study the training techniques developed by Professor Valter Di Salvo with the Manchester United soccer team. The course consists of 8 live video-conferences in which Professor Di Salvo, together with other experts, delivers multimedia lectures and engage in interactive questions and answers sessions with the students. The video-lessons are backed by related training materials. The course has been running since May 2007. The number of participants as for the 2008 academic year has been 18. From the financial point of view, the course breaks even, as it generates an income of € 59,000 against costs for € 52,000.

UTIU also delivers non-formal professional training courses for lawyers, as well as professional training and retraining courses for teachers.

Even from this brief discussion, the potential for non-formal learning in a LLL perspective becomes apparent. Non-formal learning allows to address learning audiences with both previous academic education and without any previous academic education, tailoring contents and educational platforms on the specific needs of the audiences.



### **3.3 Two examples of informal learning practices**

#### *3.3.1 Informal learning through video lessons: the Arab Language Literacy Programme*

UTIU's activity in informal learning has developed so far mainly through an ambitious, far-reaching project: the course titled "I Learn Arabic-The Treasure of the Letters". It includes 4 texts and 150 video lessons, streamed through television but also available in VHS format, and is based on an innovative pedagogical model especially designed by Maria Amata Garito, UTIU's Rector. The TV program is broadcast by the public Moroccan Television at dinner time, reaching a very large audience at a crucial peak time: The moment of the return from work. The course is targeted to the illiterate adult population, and more specifically those living in the most isolated rural areas, as well as to the female population whose illiteracy rate is very high. Its aim is to develop the skills required for a proper comprehension of Arabic language, and for the active practice of writing and reading. The course is funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and no fees are charged.

#### *3.3.2 Informal learning through the TV channel RAI NETTUNO SAT1*

A most ambitious platform for informal learning developed at UTIU is RAI NETTUNO SAT – "The Television of Knowledge" - a satellite TV channel, targeted at the whole civil society. It is a platform for culture and academic learning taught by experts from prestigious universities worldwide, and reaching the homes of the general TV audience, even of those who are unable or unwilling to attend university. Courses are given everyday, 24 hours a day. The faculty is made of outstanding professors coming from prestigious universities in Europe and in the Arab World, delivering their courses in several languages: Italian, Arabic, English and French, and covering topics in engineering, economics, law,

psychology, philosophy, history, literature and art. The RAI NETTUNO SAT programme schedule offers a wide-ranging approach to the development of knowledge and skills, as it broadcasts not only academic video-lessons, but also special video-lessons delivered by forenames of contemporary culture: Artists, poets, writers, musicians, painters, actors, philosophers, directors, scientists, who are called to present their work, to speak about their creative life, thereby leading the viewer to understand the subtleties of the different forms of expression of contemporary thinking and culture. Among the series of such non-academic video-lessons, worthy of mention is the series where outstanding personalities of contemporary culture and society have been called to present their views on key aspects of human culture and values, touching challenging topics such as love, goodness, respect, differences, religions in dialogue, and so on. Similarly, a parallel series on the topics of peace and ethics has been produced, hosting as lecturers Nobel Laureates for Peace such as Michael Gorbachev, the Dalai Lama, Perez Esquivel, Rigoberta Menchú.

Further cultural initiatives are the partnerships with distinguished institutions and cultural events such as the Italian Accademia dei Lincei, one of Italy's most prestigious literary and scientific academies, the Festival of Mathematics of Rome, and the Massenzio literary festival in Rome, both of which having an international roster of speakers. Building on such an intense program of informal learning initiatives, RAI NETTUNO SAT has put forward a new model of television, turning down the usual mass entertainment contents in favour of a systematic, inclusive, wide-ranging approach to critical thinking and state-of-the-art knowledge: A distinctive contribution to the development of a knowledge society. At the same time, RAI NETTUNO SAT works as a selective, high-standard cultural intermediary that presents to large audiences, who would otherwise have little opportunity to get to know them, distinguished cultural personalities of the European and of the Arab World countries. Finally, the project also contributes to the reciprocal knowledge of the different cultural environments of the Euro-Mediterranean basin, fostering the maintenance and development of inter-cultural dialogue through the respect of cultural diversity, and the in-depth knowledge and mutual recognition of other cultures.

The satellite TV channel broadcasting schedule reflects the terms structure of university courses, based upon a pre-determined academic calendar that is tailored

upon the needs of each faculty, and covers the various languages adopted – 4 in our case (Italian, English, French and Arabic) for each degree course. During prime times (lunch-time and evening), academic programming gives way to cultural programs of general interest such as those mentioned above.

From the two examples cited, it is apparent that informal learning is a diamond-head of UTIU's DL menu, and a domain where a particularly intense effort of innovative design of inter-cultural platforms is being carried out. The fact that some such programs have made it into prime time schedules of major national TV and satellite TV channels across the Mediterranean basin constitutes a promising test of the possibilities of DL in a international, inter-cultural LLL perspective (Garito, 2008).

### **3.4 Discussion**

UTIU's educational menu is currently particularly strong on the formal and informal segments, whereas it has to be developed further in the non-formal one. As far as the key factors of success are concerned (content, pedagogical delivery, and organizational issue), the current educational menu reaches good standards in each dimension. In terms of content, the lecturers involved in formal, non-formal and informal programs generally reach high standards, with peaks of excellence in some areas and programs. Formal education is rigorously certified, and the University is the best brand in a highly competitive national market where several distance learning universities are operating. The brand is even stronger in countries which take part in some programs and in which there is a lack of local DL institutions (in particular, the Arab World Countries). Whether or not the current educational menu really fills the gaps and therefore exploits all the available opportunities is still an open point, although there is room to think that more could be done and new experimental courses and projects could be launched. For instance, this will bring UTIU to expand its menu of courses in English for the Faculty of Economics, covering new professional areas, such as that of the Economics of Arts and Heritage. The level of interdisciplinarity of the courses is relatively high, although this is certainly an area where further

improvement may come. As to the presence of non-academic professionals and creative personalities, especially in the informal learning projects UTIU may be fairly recognized as an international leader in the field. Also the collaboration with stakeholders is proceeding satisfactorily way, often entailing active participation of Italian and foreign Ministries and thus contributing to the construction of better diplomatic relationships between countries, as well as fostering cultural and economic cooperation. The substantial presence of UTIU in the less structured segments of the program, and the attention toward interfaces that may be easily accessed by audiences with poor capability endowment (and especially so in the technological realm) makes it clear that UTIU's strategy is firmly focused upon fostering a basic capability building in the Mediterranean basin – a line of activity that may build the premises for future upgrades, involving increasingly sophisticated interfaces targeted at general audiences.

As for pedagogical delivery, UTIU's model that integrates different formats and interfaces is among the most articulated on the market. The Satellite TV channel plays a basic role in this respect, in that it enlarges the audience considerably and moreover makes the university's brand known and even familiar to the general public – an outcome that would be difficult to attain through other means. There may be some improvement in terms of adding more real-life cases and experiences in the training material, especially as far as formal learning programs are concerned – a weakness that is somewhat typical of Italian university but that can be substantially addressed within this learning environment. Involvement and interaction are secured by the extensive coverage provided by tutors and by the flexibility and variety of the learning formats within the whole platform. In the future, student satisfaction surveys could be conducted to find out areas of further improvement, as well as suggestions for more effective tutoring and teaching practices.

Finally, coming to the organizational issues, the year-round repetition of class modules as well as the full virtual availability of contents allows a convenient time and location planning for students. The helpdesk structure seems to function properly, even if a student satisfaction survey might help to get more precise information. Fees are in an accessible range if compared to average university tuitions in Italy (once adjusted for the infrastructural requirements of distance

learning) and scholarships are available for certain programs, especially those involving students from developing and low-income countries.

Overall, there is much room for further advancement of strategies for improved distance learning in Italy and in Italy-based international networks, but some interesting results have been obtained and there is the possibility to look at future prospects with reasonable optimism and with justified expectations of better quality of courses, of more and better students, and of more resources coming from emerging educational markets in the Euro-Mediterranean basin (and possibly beyond).

## **4. Conclusions**

The nexus between DL and capability building seems to be a crucial one for the building of a robust knowledge economy and society and consequently of a viable, inclusive, sustainable LLL educational scheme. Methodological reflections and analysis of actual case studies is still in its early phase, though. There is a clear perception that the future development of massive learning environments passes through the achievement of targets of mass literacy in IT technologies, but at the same time it is important to stress that technological proficiency is only one of the many concurrent conditions that allow DL programs to function properly and effectively.

The UTIU case study shows us a few promising methodologies to develop workable DL interfaces addressing a variety of audiences with different levels of human development in a vast, highly intercultural area such as the Mediterranean basin, illustrating how a learning platform may even become a sort of cultural clearinghouse to facilitate exchange and understanding between individuals belonging to different socio-cultural contexts which are sometimes divided by mutual suspect and prejudices.

We believe that, to proceed further in this direction and to develop an international database of cases and best practices, the capability building approach represents the most appropriate conceptual framework, both for testing and evaluation of existing platforms and for the design and experimentation of new ones. We look forward to more substantial research in this direction in the coming years.

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