

# “MANAGING INFORMATION ON THE WEB” AN ONLINE TRAINING COURSE FOR SMES' STAFF

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## Abstract

This article presents a series of reflections on online training starting from the experience of a course addressing staff of small businesses, designed and delivered as part of a European project named SME 2.0. The strength of the model lies in the spirit of cooperation that the course has been able to develop and support.

**Keywords** – e-learning, online education, SMEs, web 2.0, information in the web 2.0, collaboration.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

We have a long experience of online courses addressing teachers. But can a model that has proven successful in updating teacher be transferred to the staff of micro, small and medium-sized companies? This is the question that we asked ourselves in designing the course "Managing information in the web", developed in the European project named SME 2.0 [1].

We had already implemented online courses for teachers in previous European projects such as Sofi@net, SOLE, SiR2, APE, SLOOP [2] and Sloop2desc [3].

In all these cases, the model was based on collaborative learning: a learning path that a group of students begins and attends supported by two or more teachers/tutors mainly committed to solve technical problems, to answer questions, to monitor activities, to stimulate discussion, and to promote - if any - the collaborative activities of the group.

Sometimes we have difficulty to make stakeholders understand this kind of model because most of them have in mind a model of e-learning in which learning essentially occurs in a self-training mode: there is the trainee, there are instructional resources as well as a tutor who essentially provides some technical help or performs a sort of "control" while the other participants largely remain strangers to one another. In short there is no interaction between them. And so while we speak of a relational environment most people often think about those, very limited, interactions on platform where one is actually left alone with the studying material provided.

This year we, AICA and ITSOS Marie Curie Cernusco, have promoted a course, entitled: "Teaching in Web 2.0", for the teachers involved in a regional programme called Web Generation. A great success, especially because of the "community" effect the course has been able to create among the participants. Therefore, a model that works with teachers. But can it also work for the staff of small businesses?

SME stands for small and medium-sized enterprises. SME 2.0 - [www.smepro.eu](http://www.smepro.eu) - is the name of a European project promoted by the Hungarian organization PROMPT, now IT Study ([www.itstudy.hu](http://www.itstudy.hu)).

In 2008 PROMPT developed a project within Leonardo da Vinci programme designed to prepare teachers to work with students belonging to the Net Generation: *Tenegen* ([www.tenegen.eu](http://www.tenegen.eu)) - *Connect the teachers to reach and teach the net generation* [5] - an innovation transfer project based

on the results of another two previous projects: SLOOP and Netis [6]. Hence the adoption of a common web-based training model including:

- the use of Moodle as a learning environment;
- the design and implementation of courses based on:
  - multimedia learning resources, short but significant (often video-tutorials), where available found on the net or otherwise produced ad hoc,
  - individual and/or collaborative activities focusing on "learning by doing",
  - discussion and debate areas;
- the mixture of Moodle activities with other 2.0 tools (personal blogs, SlideShare, YouTube, Drive, ...);  
a constant presence of teachers/tutors.

In our previous experiences, the courses in Sofi@net, SOLE, SiR2, APE projects were developed and delivered through First Class that encouraged the communication and interaction between people. Then, in the Sloop project, we switched to Moodle that makes easier the creation of a learning path comprising internal and external resources and activities, including those of interaction. And Moodle has also been adopted by PROMPT and by TENEGEN partnership.

The idea behind Tenegen was: "as the students are on the network, let's help teacher to be on the network as well so that they can meet their students there". That is: we teach teachers to get familiar with web 2.0 environments to use them in their teaching (which is precisely what we have been doing in our course "Teaching in Web 2.0," and what we will be doing with its new edition in 2014).

The idea behind SME 2.0, a project in which AICA is the Italian partner, is that companies, especially small businesses, would greatly benefit from the use of web 2.0 environments and open source software and that also in this field people need to be helped to manage such new technologies. And the project is played on the bet that the training for the staff of small and very small enterprises can be provided with the same methodology used for teachers.



**Figure 1 – The logo of the project**

The project - after an initial phase of investigation in Hungary and Italy [7] - is developing and testing four training modules:

- Information Management.
- Online Marketing.
- Project Management.
- Human Resources Management.

At the end of the project material for each of the above mentioned module will be available (both in English and Hungarian) as follows:

- A PDF text, of academic nature, as a reference for the design of the courses.
- The four courses developed in the Moodle environment.
- The teaching resources assembled and developed, freely available on the platform [SME 2.0 Source](#).

The pilot phase of the project has focussed on the *Information Management* module that has been the core subject of three different courses in Hungary, two addressing staff of small and medium-sized companies, one addressing college students.

The above mentioned module is the only one which is expected to be translated, adapted and piloted in the Italian context, even if the good results of the pilot phase - which will be described in the next paragraph - shows that it would be advisable to translate and adapt also the other modules, at present in Hungarian, in order to be able to offer a comprehensive training path.

## 2 THE PILOT PHASE IN ITALY

As already mentioned, the project required that only one of the four modules was to be translated and delivered in Italy. However, translating a course like this does not mean merely turning in Italian what was originally in Hungarian (perhaps by passing through an English translation). All the links to existing resources in the network had to be replaced with similar resources in Italian.

The video-tutorial, then, had to be redone from scratch: it was not enough to replace the spoken or insert subtitles, because the screens in Hungarian couldn't be maintained. The work of translation/adaptation involved safeguarding the same teaching objectives, respecting the selection of topics, providing meaningful activities, in short rebuilding the entire course carefully selecting other resources. Luckily the net offers plenty of choices; in fact lots of video tutorials in Italian on web 2.0 tools exist.

Nevertheless, in the Italian course we allowed ourselves here and there a few deviations from the original, for example, by adding Facebook and Doodle, making the course longer of a week and also modifying the order of presentation of the modules.

This is, in our opinion, one of the great advantages of this model of course, namely the flexibility and the possibility of introducing progressive changes. From the pilot course Sloop, for example, to Sloop cascade courses, to the project Sloop2desc and its cascade courses, up (for now) to "Teaching in Web 2.0" we always started from the back-up file of the previous course. The fifth generation of these courses does not retain almost any of the resources and activities of the first, but each time the task of designing the course has been made easier by the fact that it proceeded from an existing course.

Surely one must give up the idea of homogeneity of screens, templates, as well as of language and approach that many eLearning courses offer. The result is a patchwork that looks like more a bazaar than a cathedral, to use Eric Raymond's happy definition [8]. But, in our opinion, we have earned both in flexibility, ease of development and interest of the trainees in fact the homogeneity factor can easily become boring while diversity maintains the trainees' attention more alive.

And here's what the Italian course looks like, after being translated and adapted



The screenshot shows the user interface for the course "Gestire le informazioni nel Web" on the SME 2.0 platform. The header features the SME 2.0 logo and the text "Sei collegato co". Below the header, the course title is displayed, followed by a breadcrumb trail: "Home > GestireInformazioni". The main content area is titled "Il corso" and contains a paragraph explaining the course structure: "Il corso è organizzato in settimane, ognuna dedicata ad un argomento e con una specifica attività. Questo primo blocco contiene la presentazione del corso e gli ambienti di interazione. Qui trovate anche il manuale (in inglese) prodotto nel progetto che è il riferimento culturale alla base del corso." Below this text are several links with document icons: "Programma del corso", "Obiettivi e struttura del corso", "Agora - Ambiente di discussione", and "Tutti i blog aggregati in Netvibes". Further down, there are links for "Information Management Book (in inglese)" and "Valutazione del corso". At the bottom, a navigation bar includes buttons for "Avvio" and "Sett. 1" through "Sett. 6".

Figure 2 – The Italian course

As you can see, there is a "general" area containing the programme of the course, a detailed explanation of the objectives (expected results), the area of discussion called Agora, an aggregation

page with the trainees' blogs, the reference book mentioned before, the final questionnaire and finally the weekly-based course.

Here is the six-week programme.

	<b>Content</b>	<b>Resources</b>	<b>Activities</b>
Start-up	Information on Moodle platform	Video-tutorial on Moodle: personal profile and parameters to be set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Filling in one's own profile</li> <li>• Introducing themselves in the Agora</li> </ul>
1st week	The blog (Blogger)	Blogs and business blogs Video tutorials on using Blogger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a blog</li> <li>• Sending posts to Agorà and commenting on blogs</li> </ul>
2nd week	Sharing and editing (Drive)	Video tutorials on using Drive (documents, forms, spreadsheets, presentations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entering data in a shared file</li> <li>• Creating a document and a questionnaire</li> <li>• Sending posts to Agorà and commenting on blogs</li> </ul>
3rd week	Internet search	Video-tutorial on Google (searching, image searching, Maps Alert)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carrying out Internet research activities, and researching images</li> <li>• Creating a map</li> <li>• Using Google Alerts</li> <li>• Sending posts to Agorà and commenting on blogs</li> </ul>
4th week	RSS Channels and aggregators (Netvibes)	Video-tutorial on RSS feeds and using Netvibes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing the trainees' blogs aggregated with Netvibes</li> <li>• Creating one's own portal in Netvibes</li> <li>• Sending posts to Agorà and commenting on blogs</li> </ul>
5th week	Facebook	Facebook for Businesses Video tutorials on using Facebook and creating pages and groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyzing a FB company page or of a group of companies</li> <li>• Creating one's own FB page</li> <li>• Discussing in Agorà and commenting on blogs</li> </ul>
6th week	Online calendar (Google calendar) and surveys/polls (Doodle)	Video tutorials on using Calendar and Doodle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating a private calendar</li> <li>• Creating a public calendar</li> <li>• Creating a Poll</li> <li>• Sending posts to Agorà and commenting on blogs</li> </ul>

The task of the first week was to create a blog, which was intended to represent the main thread of all the other activities. In fact each participant was asked to insert both comments on the activities of the week and the several resources searched/developed (e.g. the image to choose in the third week, a map, a calendar, the link to their FB page, ...) in their own blogs. And so Netvibes and RSS channels have been presented both as a way to aggregate resources and to have all the different blogs collected in one place.

Figure 4 shows what the first week of the course looks like, and likewise the others.

The Italian edition of the course was held from mid-May to late June, leaving the trainees another two weeks to complete their work in case of delay.

The course was advertised on the net, with targeted e-mails and news on the AICA site on LinkedIn and Facebook. 23 people accepted the proposal to free participate in the course, without exactly knowing details of it and without any commitment with their organization or with those who proposed the course. It is not unexpected, then, that seven people abandoned almost immediately, between these two managers over 70 who got stuck in front of the creation of a blog.

Another trainee left at the third week, another three are (as I am writing) a little "late" but they could catch up during the two extra weeks we have granted. Twelve have attended the whole course carrying out all the proposed activities, interacting in the Agora and updating their blogs. The percentage of attendance is over 50% (a percentage which will grow if the "laggards" complete) and is, in the given conditions, a positive result.

The responses to the evaluation questionnaire, which had also been voiced in the Agorà, are very positive: *"I believe that the success of the course (because I think it was a success!) is mainly due to*

our two tutors ... The way in which they have been able to get us involved, also urging us when needed, as far as I'm concerned, was the key for my active participation ". "... really thank you ... you have been able to guide us without BOREDOM in an interesting path that differently might have been sterile".

"... and it was a thrilling experience that made me rejuvenate and rediscover the joy of studying with a group of motivated and collaborative people". "... I think that the course is really interesting and useful for business owners/managers of SMEs. Using the tools proposed in the course, we can, even without a lot of computer skills, create a website/blog and to promote our company employing targeted marketing and advertising strategies. Thanks to these open source tools it is possible to manage, in-house, virtual 2.0 channels and interact with all stakeholders in the supply chain and in particular with customers. Listening to suggestions/advice of consumers we can improve our products/services on the market... In this context, as pointed out in many video lessons, the key concepts to bear in mind are sharing, collaboration and exchange of information. Thanks", "Thanks also for the tutors' valuable support and patience". "The course has been made even more interesting by the added value represented by the two tutors!!". "The course was interesting and useful and the tutors prepared and always present! "I also feel that this pathway triggered in me a spark of evolution of the species! Thank you so much!".

## Il blog



Impariamo subito cos'è un blog, a cosa può servire nella realtà aziendale e come si apre e gestisce. Partiamo da questo perchè lo useremo quale luogo dove svolgere alcune delle attività proposte nel corso.

 [Attività della settimana 1](#)

### MATERIALI DI STUDIO



-  [INTRODUZIONE: differenza fra blog e sito web \(video 15' 48"\)](#)
-  [Facebook, Twitter o blog: per un'azienda cosa è meglio fare?](#)
-  [Storia di Google Blogger](#)

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-  [Creare un account in Google](#)
-  [Creare un Blog: impostazioni](#)
-  [Creare un Blog in Google: confermare il profilo, dare un nome al blog](#)
-  [Creare un Blog: pubblicare post, inserire immagini, statistiche, layout](#)
-  [Creare un blog: funzionalità avanzate](#)
-  [Creare un Blog: lingua, formattazione, metatag](#)

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-  [10 buoni motivi per usare il blog in azienda](#)
-  [Il Blog Aziendale](#)
-  [Come scrivere un blog velocemente!](#)
-  [Come Creare un Blog di Successo: 7 Elementi Essenziali](#)

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### CONSEGNE



-  [Attività 1: crea il tuo account Google](#)
-  [Attività 2: crea il tuo blog](#)
-  [Attività 3: commenta sul tuo blog](#)

Figure 3 – The first week

We have chosen to report wide excerpts of the trainees' comments because reading them all together allows you to highlight what has been most appreciated of the course: the cooperative atmosphere. The course, apart from good counselling and tutoring, has been able to trigger a real participation among the trainees. As written by a participant who apologizes for having had several impediments that did not allow him to carry out the activities: *"I have not been a disciplined user ... I peeked here and there, however, both the content and the various problems faced by the group and you were all amazing and very close (which is rare...)"*.

In our experience we had already verified several times that this collaborative model works with teachers. But teachers, even though they come from different schools, live more or less the same problems, they are accustomed to confront and discuss it, so it was easier to turn them into a real community. We were not sure it would work in a context of people engaged in small and medium-sized companies that are obviously different from each other. But it has worked (even in the pilot phase carried out in Hungary). And a participant has given us an excellent definition of our course model:

- *"simple, immediate, funny lessons in pills, (in fact it is known that attention is maintained for a short time);*
- *practical exercises useful to apply what one has learned, easy and designed to be applied to everyday life (so the exercise becomes something practical, suitable to be used in daily activities);*
- *sharing of results and of the process of learning (so one can also learn from the experience of others);*
- *participation and encouragement on achieving results;*
- *a lot fondness that makes studying, learning, getting engaged and involved a pleasure ... "*

### 3 CONCLUSIONS

This model of collaborative learning, based on fostering a sense of community is therefore feasible not only in the school context, but also in the business field. With a difference: in the school context it is easy to find teachers who work in the same place and teach the same discipline, so it is possible to define which products are to be developed - a single learning object, a video tutorial, a Moodle course - and which are of common interest and can be used with students. On the contrary it is rather difficult to think of products that could be useful and valid for different companies. Nevertheless, we are glad of having verified that our model is suitable also to other contexts, specifically the one of in-service training.

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*Note: references to web sites have been visited 10 July 2013.*