

Using Technologies to Develop Skills and Autonomy in Foreign Language Teachers

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Abstract

This study focuses on the peculiarities that training courses mediated by technologies need to feature to positively affect the motivation and the building of metacognitive and didactic competences in teachers of foreign languages. What is especially highlighted is the fact that the advantages of these courses are closely related to the variables internal to the virtual environments that put the participants in control of their own learning process. With this in mind, two areas are taken into consideration, the constructive-interactional approach regarded as a model to design virtual learning environments on the one hand, and on the other the characteristics of e-learning tools and web-based tasks that help teachers acquire and refine metacognitive strategies, critical thinking and digital practices useful for their professional development.

Keywords: training and learning online, formal and informal learning, multimedial environments, web tasking, digital practices

1. Training and Learning Online

Buttriss and Callander (2008) argue that the use of technology has become strategic in responding to a vast set of needs when it comes to setting up meaningful educational and training experiences. In order for this to happen, the platforms used in administering these courses need to be diversified according to the learning objectives sought after. According to studies by Galloway (2009), these same learning objectives entail the choice of multimedial systems that target specific training needs and the acquisition of content.

Dugard and Hewer (2003) believe that technology-based training, by being multiple-channelled, goes beyond temporal and spatial limitations and offers participants specific advantages, such as:

- a) interaction and communication;
- b) cognitive growth and effective learning;
- c) socialization; and
- d) a multi-sensorial experience capable of increasing the emotional impact of the learning experience.

Mc Coll (2005) points out that multimedial environments have the great advantage of making information promptly available to all participants, of allowing easy access, of offering different channels to acquire content, and of finally guaranteeing real-time learning.

Tisseau (2001) offers the notion of these virtual environments having a trifold character; he regards them as a place where a mediation between senses, decisions and actions takes place. With regard to this, Carter (2005) argues that these learning environments feature a specific conceptual framework that allows participants to handle the complexity of the learning experience in relation to its objectives; in his view, the development and contextualization of knowledge unfolds in four stages. Firstly, tutors assign a task where participants collaborate to analyse an issue, then follows a phase of observation, followed by a stage of experimentation and then the drawing of final conclusions on the learning cycle in order to confirm the effectiveness of the methodology employed with considerations on the advantages perceived by the course participants in the course of didactic tasks.

Online training experiences are meaningful when providing immediate, real-time learning within an experience that gives room to exploration and research and allows course participants to:

- a) be independent in handling their own learning process (Grant & Basye, 2014);
- b) monitor the progress of their own acquisition in relation to how much they contribute to the course, how well they carry out tasks and what grades they obtain (Murphy, 2007); and
- c) acquire the competences that are needed for their professional profile.

Institutions administering online programmes – such as teaching licences and training and master courses – as well as course participants need to keep updated on the latest information technologies so that training experiences become ever more effective in allowing teachers to use the latest didactic strategies in their day-to-day professional contexts.

2. Using E-Learning 2.0 to Train Teachers of Foreign Languages

The pervasiveness of information technology has become crucial, on the one hand, in multiplying training and refreshment courses in glottodidactic for teachers of foreign languages, and on the other in allowing to establish new working procedures, both multi-modular and multi-cultural, typical of the virtual environments the training is being administered within.

The handling of digital languages and practices has become for language teachers a fundamental competence in order for them to carry out their job professionally and be able to design educational projects suitable to the communicational needs of their students. These objectives can be reached only if teachers continue their training in terms of life-long learning taking full advantage of the true potential of information technology. According to Shetzer and Warschauer (2000), this approach allows teachers to widen their teaching methodologies by including in their network-based language didactics an “electronic literary approach” (Luzón et al., 2010).

In order to guarantee the development of metacognitive and digital competences, a new form of glottodidactic training has been developed with focus on the:

- a) design of the platform and virtual environment;
- b) social character of the platform;
- c) selection of the e-learning tools according to how intuitive and suitable to the didactic activities they are; and
- d) multi-modular nature and access to multi-linguistic resources (Abbott, 2007).

The use of information technologies within glottodidactic learning has redesigned the methodologies and strategies put in place to train teachers. The objective is to design online didactic activities with the characteristics of:

- a) flexibility, so that tasks are effectively carried out and completed;
- b) productivity, in the sense that, on the one hand, users refine their metacognitive strategies and simultaneously strengthen their understanding, exploration, experimentation and evaluation of knowledge, and on the other, incorporate technology into their learning process; and
- c) professional advantage, meaning users understand how information technology is useful for self-training and daily teaching activities.

Such an operational framework with the help of the latest technologies adds new perspectives to learning compared to traditional training and has additional value as it allows to develop a social theory of learning with precise objectives and different levels of interaction.

3. Different Typologies of Online Learning Processes for Language Teachers

Applying technology to online learning contexts allows to build learning processes tailored on the needs of the end users with the advantage of lowering costs compared to face-to-face courses. There is a specific market demand coming from professionals who are looking for the flexibility and accessibility delivered by technological means in order to gain methodologic and content training.

With regard to this, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) distinguish two different types of online learning: formal and non-formal.

Formal learning takes place within a structured context administered by an institution belonging to an educational system. Within this framework, the learning process is linear and bridges the theoretical with the practical; this linearity entails procedures that at times affect the regular, natural learning processes that students in real life are accustomed to.

A formal online learning project can therefore be administered only institutionally (Alexander, 2006). These contexts are characterized by openness, connection, social networking and personalization, and are managed by the institution where the three aspects of social cognitive learning outlined by Schmidt (2007) are detectable: information, identity and relationship management. Within such a context, the tutors belonging to the institution represent institutional figures and are in charge of organizing the learning experience; they assume the role of facilitators and handle the educational tasks and in doing so choose the most proper e-tools and produce didactic activities so that the participants can acquire new knowledge and competences. Courses are therefore designed to address the objectives for course participants who can organize their own learning thanks to social-media tools and multi-faceted technologies.

Course participants therefore can acquire certain professional skills by knowing how to use online educational tools to produce detailed and quality-oriented contents and by developing competences within the learning community. They also become technologically educated so that they are naturally oriented towards organizing, sharing and creating contents within the learning space.

There are other two elements that distinguish these virtual environments, namely the service being offered and the issuing of a certificate at the end of the course.

As to the service, the institution administering the course, on the one hand, wants to support participants in their learning process by supplying a customer care service so that those who are experiencing technical difficulties can overcome obstacles and keep on track with the course timetable, and wants, on the other, to monitor the quality of its service thanks to contributions to forums and to manage or readjust didactic activities (Valjataga et al., 2011).

The second feature of the course, extensively described in studies by Mc Gloughlin and Lee (2010), is the release of a certificate at the end of the course itself. This last institutional step tends to give closure to the entire learning process.

After the first kind of formal learning, comes the second type which is the non-formal. It is carried out in environments that go beyond the boundaries of traditional educational institutions and do not issue any kind of certificate at the end of a supposed cycle. Attwell (2007) highlights the characteristics of this kind of online learning, carried out by asking questions and by observing colleagues while doing activities that most of the times are uncoordinated and independent of each other. From an operational point of view, there are no immediate solutions to the particular needs of single participants; rather, thanks to the circulation of information, what is offered are certain operational models, meaning that the online tools are designed to support the learning process so that, through reference materials supplied online, participants have the chance to interact and communicate with colleagues to produce knowledge and experiment with its application. It is therefore a pragmatic and tangible type of learning that focuses mostly on problem-solving processes (Conner, 2004).

After considering the two different kinds of online learning, Cross (2007) argues in fact that, more than dichotomy, there is continuity between the two different kinds of processes. In this sensibility, Hall (2009) advances the notion that learners actually learn more and better when they are involved in both formal and informal learning contexts.

Although not institutionalized, informal learning experiences should however be structured according to deadlines, objectives and motivational levels, mostly if the need for these experiences stems from the teaching community itself (Xiao & Carroll, 2007).

4. The Role of Technological Tools for E-Learning

Erben and others (2009) define information technology in education as the use of any electronic tool in any given classroom, be it for the tuition of students or the training of teachers. Technological tools are therefore not an end in itself but rather a means to an end, carefully chosen by the teacher to improve the learning process of students, be it for languages or any other subject matter.

In this sensibility, Rogers (1995) highlights the peculiarities of new technologies selected according to the configuration of the working spaces, the needs of the learners, accessibility and how well these tools allow users to share information and resources.

According to Warschauer (2003), within online training, e-tools need to be consistent with the ecology of the learning environment and be user-friendly in order for members to achieve certain results. Lafford (2009), in fact, argues that these tools are crucial in increasing the temporal-spatial dimension of the learning experience, not to mention the human dimension based on the interaction among community members and the personalization of the virtual environment.

Because of this multi-dimensional space, a pluri-modular design becomes a requirement to increase the variety of uses of the working space, to help develop different communicational practices and to allow for the realization of highly-interactive didactic activities.

Multi-modularity within the learning space for teacher training allows to respond to the needs of different participants encouraging them to give their own personal contribution through the channel they most prefer. In this view, the support coming from technological tools is intended to help increase the sustainability of the communicational process and allow to easily transfer resources. According to Jewitt (2009), these factors become relevant in online learning for teachers as they can interact with the platform and be in control of it by using the tools they have at their own disposal.

With reference to the human dimension of the learning space, a case study carried out by Levy (2009) underlines how the availability of different channels must be based on a solid pedagogical and glottodidactic structure so that course participants may:

- a) balance their analysis and glottodidactic reflection, during their research-action learning process, with the practical experience of teaching;
- b) increasingly participate and steadily exchange content and knowledge with other course members;
- c) take more and more part in the communicational and sharing processes of the course and feel a sense of belonging to a learning community; and
- d) fully exploit and reuse the course materials, contents and technological tools in their daily teaching activity.

Information technology, in the end, does not simply represent a means of communication, but rather a set of specific features consistent with a paradigm that is able to generate that same technology. In this sensibility, Moore and others (2011) share the notion that the design of different virtual environments must be functional to objectives and contents established by a certain educational course. To this end, virtual learning environments need to be modelled only on what is needed to effectively and timely carry out certain didactic activities. According to Eady and Lockyer (2013), a virtual setting must be designed in such a manner as to reduce to a minimum the mnemonic work of participants and allow them to rather build mind-maps and interdisciplinary connections. This means that all those tools, channels and resources that are not functional either to the taxonomical principles that have generated the course or the activities entailed by it, must be ruled out. Course participants need to be guided towards the final purpose of the learning experience thanks to user-friendly tools that guarantee inter-operativity and knowledge acquisition through mind-mapping and connections. Tools such as Wiki, Mindmeister and blogs allow to personalize the learning experience and create personal notes and mind-maps to design methodological and operational solutions to resolve questions and issues submitted by tutors.

However, it must be pointed out that the use of e-tools can cause problems to those participants who are less familiar with technology. According to Picciano (2009), one of the

weaknesses in online training and, in general, in the use of software such as Wiki, is the lack of familiarity with technology on behalf of those users who tend not to understand the characteristics and advantages of these operating system nor the value of the interaction that such environments allow; another weakness is due to the fear on behalf of the same users of publishing and sharing materials and so possibly losing face as they regard themselves as unfit in carrying out tasks collaboratively and in elaborating critical responses to problems needing well-argued solutions. In these cases, Wood and others (1976) together with Reynard (2009) agree on attributing importance to the tutor in building a scaffolding for the entire learning and interactional process.

5. The Role of Tutors in E-Learning

With regard to the role of tutors in e-learning, different theories have been offered in glottodidactic literature and one of the most authoritative is the concept of *teaching presence* advanced by Anderson and others (2001) intended as:

“one of the three constitutive elements of the Community of Inquiry model [...], one of the most prominent conceptual frameworks used to explain and identify the elements that are crucial prerequisites for a successful higher educational experience. [This model entails] a collaborative constructivist perspective on the teaching and learning transaction. This perspective views an educational experience, in its best manifestation, as a collaborative communication process for the purpose of constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge. Collaboration is seen as an essential aspect of cognitive development since cognition cannot be separated from the social context.” (Garrison & Archer, 2000).

In this sensibility, the same authors (Anderson et al., 2001) refer to the figure of the tutor, first, as a

“designer of the educational experience, including planning and administering instruction as well as evaluating and certifying competence; second, as facilitator and co-creator of a social environment conducive to active and successful learning; and finally, as a subject matter expert who knows a great deal more than most learners and is thus in a position to ‘scaffold’ learning experiences by providing direct instruction.” (2001: 2).

The didactic and ethical presence of a teacher online, both in formal and informal contexts, is therefore the result of an organizational, didactic and evaluative process bound to highlight the experience of both the tutor and the course participant in the view of an interactive, collaborative and on-going learning experience.

Following this perspective, two aspects become fundamental. The first concerns the technology being used to set up the virtual environments and carry out certain working methods consistent with the objectives of the curriculum. In fact, Kelm (1996) points out that the make-up of such a learning environment needs to allow the tutor to work as a mentor and facilitator in order for the learner to be fully involved in the process of knowledge build-up through research-action, collaboration and team-building.

The second fundamental aspect concerns the methodology adopted by the online tutor who designs his activities by keeping in mind specific glottodidactic features, such as:

- a) the quality and quantity of input;
- b) the means through which materials are conveyed;
- c) the type of web tasks assigned;
- d) the working methods adopted;
- e) the different stages of work needed to achieve a level of learning of superior quality by having students become more and more aware of the contents they are acquiring; and
- f) the use of search tools and net-tools that allow students to interact with other members of the learning community and share materials.

This model is consistent with the theory of language education outlined by Balboni (2007) according to which language and knowledge acquisition is the outcome of an interactive process among students, tutors and their learning environment. Tutors therefore represent a support system to the learning process as they co-manage the experience of knowledge building together with the students (Gray, 2001). According to these principles, tutors choose e-tools that help students throughout the whole span of the learning process by establishing favourable conditions for the understanding of the content and knowledge being built, by giving positive feedback on the progress being made, and finally by following up on issues pointed out by students in the course of their learning experience (Bullock, 2004; Gruba & Hinkelman, 2015).

6. Tools and Digital Practices

Online learning environments that specifically address teachers of foreign languages are especially based on the active participation of course participants. Vandergriff (2016), in fact, suggests a virtual model that allows online students to cooperatively create and share materials, new information, links and the evaluation of contents rather than simply limit themselves to downloading and reading materials from an online platform. To be able to encourage the exchange, sharing, interaction and collaboration among users, the learning environment must help single participants get in contact with each other and become part of teaching-learning community. According to Gold (2001), this objective can be reached thanks to a constructive and interactional model of knowledge given that it is based on the cooperation among learners, recalling a scenario where the protagonist of the knowledge building process is the community of learners itself that takes advantage of interactions and forms of collaboration to establish a sense of identity and belonging in the development of new digital practices (Johnson, 2006).

If the human dimension is the main factor to keep in mind when designing learning environments, the operational platform must avail itself of the latest e-tools in order to give support to the different kinds of interactional tasks and activities that course participants are engaged in (homepage, chat, forum, wiki, etc.).

Herring (2007) distinguishes between e-tools that are synchronous and others that are a-synchronous. The former include audio clips, chats and video chats, whereas the latter include blogs, gift-emails and newsgroups. It is, however, important to underline that each of these tools, within its own system, has developed forms of hybrid, multiple-layered communication methods.

According to Thornbury (2016), each tool within its online learning environment becomes a meta-message bound to affect the interactions, strategies and forms of communication among its participants.

Compton (2009) takes into consideration a wide variety of criteria to properly design e-tools. They must in fact:

- a) be user-friendly;
- b) feature functions that users can intuitively learn and memorize (Orr, 1990); in fact, each tool is associated to specific learning contexts, system languages or work methods that require users to adopt different kinds of learning and operational strategies (Eady & Lockyer, 2013);
- c) allow for the personalization of the learning space; and
- d) be multi-sensorial; in fact, these pluri-faceted tools encourage the creation of meaningful learning because of their catering to the different learning styles of the users.

The learning environments featuring these kinds of e-tools, therefore, generate effective learning as the activities and materials employed need to be carefully considered, developed, negotiated and followed up on as belonging to a system where the focus is on the training teacher, his or her emotions, learning style and knowledge-acquisition process. All these factors allow the professional teacher to re-qualify and re-tune his or her competences and know-how both theoretically and operatively (Luzón, 2006). From this perspective, e-tools therefore must be conceived so that contents are tackled through different acquisition methods and become then part of the learner's newly-arranged mind-map.

7. Web Tasking

Dodge (1995) underlines the fact that an ever increasing number of foreign language teachers appreciate the potential offered by technology applied to teaching in general and to professional training and upgrading in particular. Within online courses designed following the glottodidactic and pedagogical principles outlined in the previous paragraphs, different kinds of tools and activity planning can be put to good use in building knowledge and developing digital and didactic competences in teachers. From this point of view, the creation of open tasks becomes crucial. Segers and others (2010) point out that open tasks lead to better results, in terms of both research and content, compared to closed tasks. In fact, the former are related to the "Cycle Expansive" concept advanced by Egenström (1987) and later re-adapted by Hakkarainen (2008) for which open tasks present a recurring and cyclical structure. Within the working space of the learning community, the learner tackles the object of study using different strategies in order to reach, together with his or her team, a

transformation of the initial subject matter turning it into meaningful content acquisition. In fact, what is outlined initially is the object of study or research, then instructions are offered as to how to carry out the assignment with indications on which digital tools need to be used. Possible contradictions or dilemmas resulting from the course activities, online discussions or particular issues resulting from the tutor's questions need to be timely taken into consideration and resolved. What then follows is cooperative work in order to find solutions to the investigation questions at hand and create new forms of shared knowledge, making sure that the glottodidactic processes are consistent with the strategies and practices used to find solutions to the initial problems. These open tasks, therefore, encourage the active participation of learners in order to tackle and find solutions to the investigative questions assigned by the tutors. These activities are, in fact, designed to guide learners towards in-depth knowledge that entails the use of different digital, communicational, evaluative and meta-relational choices bound to increase the motivation of the course participants and allow them to strengthen their own autonomy and raise awareness towards the methodology and tools they have been employing.

Fine examples of open tasks are Web Quests in that they perfectly embody the cyclical model advanced by Egenström (1987) and Hakkarainen (2008) where course participants become the centerpiece of the learning community in that their learning strategies and research efforts become crucial to the accomplishment of a given task.

Peterson and Koeck (2001) point out that the structure of a Web Quest must allow work groups to carry out both research and in-depth studies and extend their investigation towards other disciplinary areas and connect them to the ultimate objectives of the learning project. The model that a Web Quest refers to (Merrill, 2003) must allow work groups to carefully describe the project they are working on and properly showcase their results. A Web Quest therefore is regarded as a truly authentic task (Nunan, 1989) as it connects education professionals with their working environment, puts together the experiences of single group members, gives space to metacognitive observations, and allows to re-arrange and re-structure the course's initial inputs offering therefore new perspectives on the objects of study. Another advantage offered by Web Quests is that the contents of the course and its input are entirely web-based and, consequently, as outlined by March (2004), training teachers can acquire digital skills useful for both their school planning and their professional presence in classrooms.

Some of the web tasks that are considered authentic, socially-contextualized and based on constructivism principles are the ones for which participants need to activate their pre-existent knowledge by using meta-competences, social skills and problem-solving. These are tasks that require evaluation information and the summary of multiple texts: course participants here need to identify and be able to explain key concepts connecting them, along with personal observations, to their daily professional experience (Lai, 2013). Other activities entail online research to detect specific texts that course participants need to explain the importance and pertinency of. Still, other activities involve the critical analysis of a previously recorded lesson where specific critical issues are highlighted according to the focus of the course module and the didactic objectives established by the task. Even activities

of self-evaluation are taken into consideration (such as e-learning, diaries and blogs) so that course participants can monitor their own learning process and become aware of the methodology they are employing when making progress, and finally become independent in researching, selecting, producing and evaluating didactic materials.

8. Learner Autonomy

Teachers currently need to acquire a new role in today's educational scenario. Studies by Brown (1996) highlight three main factors that push teachers to want to increase their level of professionalism through ongoing training: there is first a need for personal growth, secondly the will to become more aware of which methodologies are effective in class through theoretical and ethical models for lesson planning and activity evaluation, and thirdly the need to have one's own professionalism acknowledged.

In this sensibility, one of the main objectives that training and refreshment courses need to set, especially in the case of language teachers, is the professional development of the participants so that they may acquire new competences or refine or retune pre-existing ones in order to become autonomous in resolving problems connected to language issues regarding their students or other operational problems connected to their day-to-day teaching activity. To phrase it in the words of the scholar Little (1990: 4), autonomy is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action."

Two conclusions can therefore be drawn on autonomy: firstly, that it is strictly connected to an intrinsic will of the teacher to continue his or her own professional training by participating in upgrading courses so that he or she can better master his job and working context (Davis & Wilson, 2000), and secondly that it is closely linked to the ethical dimension of teaching for which a teacher needs to have suitable professional practices in place in order to respond to the needs of his learners.

As to the issue of autonomy in the case of online courses, what needs to be recalled is the socio-constructivist perspective advanced by Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1984). In their view, autonomy concerns the cognitive and socio-relational sphere of the learner who interiorizes the knowledge and contents he or she uses. In fact, Lantolf (2000) argues that the learner has to construct his or her own knowledge and develop skills which are relevant and appropriate.

According to Warschauer (2002), autonomy should lead learners to strengthen not only their sense of self-efficiency but also their motivation to continue to learn contents that are functional to their future training and professional needs. Such interpretation is in line with the studies conducted by Villanueva, Ruiz-Madrid and Luzón (2010) according to which autonomy needs to strengthen the metacognitive competences of teachers undertaking online training courses. According to Cook (2003), the metacognitive competences of learners must not simply lead to the repetition of input coming from the teacher, but rather a modification and personal acquisition of that input based on co-constructive strategies within a context of social learning. The learning that therefore results has a social value as it is the learner

himself who is in control of the process, and reverses in doing so the traditional manner in which knowledge is transferred (Dam, 1995).

Bailly (2010) points out how, in general, the complexity of training courses based on information technology may be regarded as an important limitation, and that therefore it is up to the tutor to create the best conditions possible for participants to build competences; in this perspective, autonomy becomes the ultimate objective of a process of scaffolding put in place by the individual himself through cooperation, exchange and negotiation with other participants. This process coincides, according to Zimmerman (2000), Lai and Gu (2011) with the individual's own self-regulation and self-evaluation experiences.

The points of above should ultimately favour a learning environment where the learner carefully analyses, monitors, verifies and plans a series of unprecedented didactic actions that call upon an entire new set of knowledge acquisitions (Strother, 2002).

9. New Research Perspectives in the Field of Online Training Courses for Teachers

This study has given the chance to focus on how to design virtual environments for the training especially of foreign language teachers. What prevails is the idea that the building of knowledge is dependent upon a learning environment that features both learning objects and people. In online contexts, the learning process coincides with the creation of meaning and acculturation. According to this paradigm, technologically-based contexts are regarded as technological spaces where the sources of the learning are functional to the formative and didactical objectives of the learning experiences and to the operational methods deployed in such environments based on research-action. Thanks to a web-based approach, learners, on the one hand, use research tools to carry out experiments, analyses and observations on didactic issues, and on the other, obtain evaluations from tutors and also independently evaluate themselves. In doing so, trainee-teachers become capable of facing the complexity of multimedial texts, of drawing conclusions and prioritizing contents, and of finding connections useful to the extension of their knowledge into fields they are not familiar with thanks to the intelligent use of e-tools and effective strategies for the solution of problems. They ultimately become more and more technologically educated to the point that technology results naturally integrated into their personal upgrading and their day-to-day teaching activities (Teo, 2010).

In conclusion, by using new technologies, the same definition and vision of learning has changed. This means that teachers in general, in particular language teachers, need to continue their personal training and upgrading in order to better understand the evolution of technologies applied to education (Vermesan & Friess, 2014). This entails becoming aware of the fact that communication in a foreign language can be delivered, channelled and multiplied in many different ways thanks, on the one hand, to student interaction, and on the other, to the interaction of the same students with new textual formats, multi-literacy competences and interdisciplinary connections. In the end, it is a process based on an on-going search for new pedagogical and glottodidactic models in order to build metacognitive abilities and relational strategies suited to allow teachers to handle the complexity of the learning experience and transform it into a multi-functional interpretation

of new information. In this perspective, Salmon (2002) and Osarumwense (2016) argue that both online tutors and classroom teachers need nowadays more and more competences in order to carry out their jobs as facilitators, guides, mentors, councilors and even technology experts when it comes to selecting learning objects functional to the virtual space certain activities are accomplished in, or even online course managers when it comes to planning educational platforms, designing specific tasks and managing the learning and evaluation processes of course participants. These views are also confirmed by a recent survey conducted in the United States (2017) by “The Chronicle for Higher Education” by Maguire Associates that points out that there has been a significant increase in the number of online courses being offered by university institutions and training agencies compared to three years ago, and that the level of customer satisfaction has remained steadily high. All these data seem to prove that by lowering tuition costs and focusing on the quality of the service, institutions offering online educational services have been strategically able to cater to the needs of a wide range of individuals in search of professional improvement.

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