

PLAYING TOUGH AND TENDER: TUTORING STRATEGIES IN A UNIVERSITY MASTER.

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Summary : This contribution describes the *Master in Traduzione Giuridica Specializzata* (Specialized Legal Translation), an initiative of the Foreign Language Faculty of the University of Genoa, with particular reference to the organizational and educational model embraced by the tutoring team. After a general description of the master, the roles involved in the tutoring activities are discussed, in the framework of a learning model based on identity construction. A few problems that emerged are presented, in relation with the specific approach and measures the tutors adopted. Some considerations are proposed that could address those problems that are still open.

Keywords : tutoring role, tutoring strategies, team teaching

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1 - GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTEXT

The *Master in Traduzione Giuridica Specializzata* (Specialized Legal Translation, SLT in the following) is a fully online, post-degree specialization master that was created by the Foreign Language Faculty of the University of Genoa. It is mainly aimed at developing a substantial body of competencies and skills in the SLT field for translators who work in local and international organizations, companies and translation agencies. Other aims include the development both of skills in the usage of computer and telematics for networking, and of collaborative attitudes in the context of the participants' professional activities. The course is based on innovative educational methods that promote constant interactivity and tutoring, exploit situational simulations and adopt working procedures that allow for flexible participation within clearly defined boundaries.

The attendees typically earned a degree in humanities, economics or law, in particular foreign languages and literature, translators and interpreters. The following courses are to be attended by all the participants:

- Terminology
- Italian and French Culture
- Italian Law 1 and 2
- French Law
- Italian-to-French Translation
- French-to-Italian Translation

Some courses are optional:

- British Culture
- British Law
- Italian-to-English Translation

The first edition of the master has been delivered in 2003; currently the second edition is being delivered.

ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The organization of the master is based on the coordinated work of a number of teachers and tutors. Each teacher is responsible for at least a course, and is in charge of preparing the learning material, planning the activities, offering subject matter support and assessing the learning outcomes. The tutors should, in general, support learners in organizational matters (deadlines, reminders, issues on online learning) and maintain the social dimension of collaboration: foster interaction, grant social presence and fight the "lost in cyberspace" syndrome that jeopardizes distance education initiatives.

For each course a dedicated *virtual room* is available; other virtual rooms host specific group activities. The *tutor room*, in particular, is devoted to the interaction among students and tutors. Each virtual room is endowed with asynchronous (*forums*) and synchronous (*chat*) discussion tools, as well as with functions for document sharing (shared documents are typically translations, either group-developed or peer-reviewed).

Besides, the e-learning platform offers a variety of further tools: a notice board for urgent communications, a shared diary for planning meetings and deadlines, an annotated collection of web links, the list of participants to the learning community, a space where you can download the learning material (lecture notes, texts to be translated, detailed instructions on how to access and use the platform itself, etc.) and an environment for self-assessment, where learners can go through formative and summative testing.

The master calendar spans over 25 weeks in the period March-December, with a summer break. Courses are articulated into *assisted theoretical modules* and *practical modules*. The former require that learners study the material prepared by the teachers and be involved in some individual offline and online work; the latter are mainly related with individual and group translation work. Learner participation is completely carried out online

through the e-learning platform: the collaborative work is mainly hosted in forums.

To foster interaction, collaboration and a positive attitude towards distance learning, students are required to take part in a simulation where they face authentic (i.e., resembling real world complexity) problem situations. To this aim learners are grouped to form *virtual translation agencies*, where they work as if employed in a real company, meet in dedicated virtual spaces, fight external competition etc.

The final exam is the sole activity that is planned to be carried out face to face, and consists in translation tests and in the presentation of individually developed glossaries.

At the beginning of the master participants are given a *vademecum* (i.e., a handbook) that details the organization of the activities and acts as a *formative contract*, where the reciprocal commitments of both the learners and the Faculty are made explicit.

DESIGN ISSUES AND PROBLEMS THAT EMERGED

The Faculty of Foreign Languages heavily invested in the master, as this was its first edition, and a relevant amount of human resources was assigned for the delivery phases: 12 staff people, versus 32 enrolled students. The staff includes 7 teachers and 5 tutors; since the beginning, and throughout the master, the tutor roles varied on grounds of contingent needs, individual background and personal attitudes. For instance, a tutor covered a role of control and keeping of commitments (the *tough* guy), thus assuming sometimes an unpopular attitude; another tutor, on the contrary, played a mediation role (the *tender* dame), always showed herself extremely flexible and helpful, ensured continuity in the virtual presence with very short reaction times and fostered, not only in the beginning, the emergence of a familiar and friendly atmosphere in the community. Yet another tutor exploited his technological skills by providing the participants with support on the platform usage. Other tutors preferred to stay available to student requests in the scheduled timetable, observing more or less rigidly the planned consulting hours in the tutor room.

An organization of this kind show pros and cons at the pedagogical level. By diversifying roles you can adequately meet a broad range of needs, which a single tutor, even working full-time, could never cope with; the initial community establishment allow the participants to start the construction of their individual identities: according to Wenger (1998), collaborative learning is founded on a process of identity building in which the learner comes up with her own path from the periphery to the centre of the community (*legitimate peripheral participation*). As tutors are, to all intents and purposes, full members of the learning community, the explicit definition of their identities adds to this process. The disadvantages of the approach lie in the fact that, especially in the first edition of a master, little can be planned in advance, and many design decisions have to be taken underway: this requires strong coordination inside the tutoring team, and may cause the emergence of conflicts within the staff, in particular when decisions produce a shift from what planned in the formative contract. These clashes should never emerge in the community and should be settled shortly, lest the learners feel abandoned in a decisional vacuum that could give rise to a process of re-definition of student and teacher roles, and to a loss of trust in the reliability of the master. Specifically, in the first edition of the master a critical situation occurred when the final exam details were notified to the learners: following an in-progress adjustment, the exam procedures that had been described in the *vademecum* had been slightly modified. Although marginal, such change, which probably would have been accepted without discussion in a traditional face-to-face course, raised the participants' strong opposition; the tone of some messages got out of hand, infringing many netiquette norms. To settle the conflict between students and staff an unplanned face-to-face meeting had to be called, which in some way can be considered a failure of the distance learning methodology, and anyhow shows a limit of such an approach.

The difficulty of elaborating a detailed design-time plan of the learning activities is somewhat inevitable, and calls for frequent adjustment of the activities; among the factors that can only be evaluated during the process, the most relevant are probably the social, temperamental

and cognitive characterization of learners, both as individuals and in the context of a work group.

In spite of the broad range of roles covered by the tutoring team, a need sometimes emerged for proposing to the community considerations and hints that would be more effectively and easily accepted by the participants if produced by a student rather than a tutor. In this perspective, since the beginning of the master the staff gave voice to a fictional student, who was embodied by a tutor but was perceived by the students as a peer learner. This fictitious character showed up in the forum and broke the ice at the very beginning of the master, stimulating the self-presentation of the colleagues. Subsequently the same “virtual” student placed himself on a slightly different level than that of the others, claiming to be a doctorate student in Communication Science, with the task of observing and studying the communication dynamics that would occur in the master forums. In this way the presence of an observer would be more easily accepted in the community, and it would probably limit its negative interference with the learning processes. In the course of the master this virtual character did his best to settle conflicts by providing hints “from the student part”, helped in mediating critical situations, put forward an acceptance questionnaire... he became, in the end, a full member of the community. Besides, as the character was in different moments embodied by different tutors, in the staff emerged the feeling that he was progressively modelling an identity of his own, something that tended to elude control: to keep his coherence the character develops a particular way of communicating, interacting, a sort of independent life.

The invention of a virtual participant is only one element of a more general set-up of the online activities strongly oriented towards simulation. In the “virtual agency” context which we already mentioned above many organizational and strategic aspects play on the dichotomy *real vs. virtual* to involve the student in authentic situations that stimulate interactivity, group collaboration and a positive attitude towards working at a distance. For instance, learners are enticed to create individual identities that stimulate themselves to operate more effectively in the given scenario; even tutors are known in the

community through an identifier that resembles the person’s role rather than his or her real name: the name of the tutor with the control role is *StopHalt*.

Here again the adopted methodological approach, in spite of its sound motivation, shows some drawbacks: working from behind the shield of a nickname can significantly foster the growth of friendly and unstructured relationships between tutor and learners, and minimizes the (almost always) negative effects of authoritative and hierarchical bias. Nonetheless, there are cases in which it is necessary to resort to the authority principle, in order to ensure the fulfilment of the general aims of such a complex training initiative as the master.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

At the end of the first edition of the master the questionnaires filled by the participants highlighted the importance of the role of the tutor, whom all the learners considered as a fundamental and irreplaceable actor in the learning process. In the second edition of the master the tutoring team adopted a more precise time sharing among the individual tutors, with consulting hours that are being observed more accurately than in the first edition. A role share-out still remains, that is implicitly defined during the first few weeks and is never explicitly presented to the learners. After this second experience, which announces itself as significantly different from the first, the tutoring team intends to explore other strategies of role and task sharing, that exploit to a greater extent the simulated framework of the master.

REFERENCES

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